



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF SOUTH AFRICA
ON THEIR AD "LIMINA VISIT"**

Monday, 19 May 1997

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With heartfelt affection in the Lord I greet you — the members of the *Southern African Catholic Bishops' Conference*, representing the Church in Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland — and I thank God for “the joy and comfort of your love” (cf. Philm v. 7). Your *ad limina* visit is a further occasion for us to affirm our collegial communion and strengthen the bonds of love and peace which give us support and encouragement in the service of the one Church of Christ. My prayer is that in this time of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 the whole Catholic community of Southern Africa will be profoundly inspired by “a true longing for holiness, a deep desire for conversion and personal renewal” (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 42). As Successors of the Apostles you have a particular role to play in this preparation. You have to be “examples to the flock” (1 Pt 5:3) and masters of “life according to the Spirit” (Rom 8:5). St Augustine reminds us of the seriousness of our responsibilities when he writes: “Besides being a Christian ... I am a leader also, and for this shall render to God an account of my ministry” (Sermon 46: *On the Shepherds*, 2). Let us pray that the Lord Jesus Christ will not find us wanting in our mission as Teachers, Priests and Shepherds of his flock!

2. Since your last *ad limina* visit, your ministry has had to adapt to radically new social and political conditions. During my brief visit to South Africa in September 1995 I had a firsthand experience of the new spirit animating the country's people and their leaders. While enormous problems still remain to be solved, there is renewed enthusiasm for building a nation of freedom and justice for all. Certainly, the wounds of the past will take a long time to heal and much effort will be needed to bring about a real and transforming reconciliation. An important start has been made, and in this

process the Church has a vital contribution to offer, especially through the formation of consciences in the moral and religious truths and values constituting the necessary foundation of a society which seeks to be worthy of man and of his transcendent destiny. During the *apartheid* era you and your collaborators were often called upon to show that “the word of God is not fettered” (2 Tm 2:9). Now you must continue, boldly proclaiming the “truth of the Gospel” (Gal 2:5) to the faithful and to all men and women of goodwill. Just as in the past you taught that every form of racism is an intolerable affront to the inalienable dignity of human beings, so now you proclaim that peace and justice can be truly established only when the deadly cycle of violence and vindictiveness is replaced by the grace of forgiveness (cf. *Message for the 1997 World Day of Peace*, n. 3).

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa* calls on the Bishops of the continent to ask themselves two fundamental questions (cf. n. 46): How must the Church carry out her evangelizing mission as the Year 2000 approaches? How can African Christians become ever more faithful witnesses to the Lord Jesus? Returning again and again to these same questions, individually in your own prayer and collectively through the reflection and study of your Conference, you will surely conclude with the Synod that *the challenge lies essentially in the appropriate formation of the agents of evangelization*. “The whole People of God in the theological understanding of *Lumen gentium* —this People, which comprises the members of the Body of Christ in its entirety — has received the mandate ... to proclaim the Gospel.... The whole community needs to be trained, motivated and empowered for evangelization, each according to his or her specific role within the Church” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 53). Nothing is more important for the future of the Church and for the service of society than the *sound training of priests, religious and lay faithful*.

3. The laity are playing a more and more active, responsible and irreplaceable role in your particular Churches. *As a priestly people*, they carry on Christ’s redemptive work by offering their lives in worship and self-giving love of God and neighbour (cf. Rom 12:1-2); *as a prophetic people*, they accept the Gospel in faith and proclaim it in word and action in the varied circumstances of daily life; and *as a kingly people*, they serve their brothers and sisters in justice and charity. The better they understand the implications of their Baptism, the more they will see their family and professional duties, their civic responsibilities and sociopolitical activities, as a call to exert an influence aimed at changing ways of thinking and the very structures of society, so that they will better reflect God’s plan for the human family (cf. *ibid.*, n. 54). Continue to inspire the laity to build a society marked by truth, honesty, solidarity and reconciliation. Continue to encourage young people to believe in their future and to build that future in committed service of the common good and involvement in the public sphere, rejecting all selfishness, corruption, and power-seeking.

4. In an increasingly urbanized and secularized society, the lay faithful need special pastoral help in safeguarding *the many positive elements of African family traditions*. Where it has remained intact, the African family is that “community of generations” in which essential human and spiritual

values are handed on, making it the basic cell and building-block of society and the first school of Christian life. Every Diocese and every parish needs *a programme of family apostolate and marriage preparation* in which the full truth of God's plan regarding love and life is presented unambiguously. As Shepherds you must be watchful that the Church's teaching on conjugal love is faithfully taught by priests, theologians and pastoral workers. I strongly recommend to your attention the recent documents of the Holy See regarding those vital questions in which State legislation and public campaigns increasingly clash with Christian moral principles, even subjecting individuals and couples to economic or social pressures, and thereby undermining their dignity and freedom.

This is especially true with regard to *abortion*. As well as being a crime against the innocent unborn, this terrible reality has most deleterious effects on the people directly involved and on society itself, which no longer surrounds life with absolute respect but subordinates it — a supreme human good — to lesser goods or practical advantages. At a time of fresh attacks on the sanctity and inviolability of human life, you have rightly restated the universal and unchanging moral truths and increased your efforts to inspire families and young people to accept their decisive responsibility to sustain, foster and treasure the gift of every human life. I can only commend you for responding with pastoral concern to the harm done by intrinsically unjust laws, and I encourage you to continue to help the faithful in the promotion of social institutions, civil legislation and national policies which support family values and family rights (cf. *Familiaris consortio*, n. 44).

5. The Church's presence in the field of education is a crucial part of her efforts to train the laity. Even during the dark years of *apartheid*, *Catholic schools made an immense contribution to the human and religious formation of children and young people* of all races and social classes. In the presence of policies which could be interpreted as endangering the identity of Catholic schools, it is well to recall that the Church's inalienable right to establish schools freely corresponds to the right of parents to provide their children with an education in harmony with their convictions (cf. *Gravissimum educationis*, n. 8). It is important that the Church should do all she can to provide and maintain schools at every level, but it is also legitimate to hope that the State which ought to represent and foster the best interests of its citizens will support such schools, enabling them to maintain their identity and making it effectively possible for parents to exercise their right to choose the kind of education they wish for their children.

6. Dear Brothers, you are the ones principally responsible for the training of your priests. The formation and Christian life of the laity depend to an extraordinary degree on *the service which only the ordained ministers of the Gospel can provide*. Your quinquennial reports indicate that in some areas the scarcity of priests is making it difficult for every local community to gather for the Sunday Eucharist, the celebration of which is the heart, source and summit of the Church's life (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 11). Where priests are not available, other people, especially catechists, lead the community in prayer, song and reflection. Such gatherings are always held "in expectation of a

priest” (Congregation for Divine Worship, *Directory for Sunday Celebrations in the Absence of a Priest*, n. 27) and are occasions for praying that the Lord will send more labourers into his harvest (cf. Mt 9:38). Great care must be taken to ensure that these temporary measures do not lead to a misunderstanding of the nature of Holy Orders and the centrality of the Eucharist (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 48).

7. The sacramental and Eucharistic life of your communities is guaranteed in fact by conferring the gift of the Holy Spirit through ordination, thereby associating priests, both diocesan and religious, with your own apostolic ministry. The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops laid emphasis on the need for care in selecting candidates for the priesthood (cf. nn. 94-95). “The Bishop should make a point of visiting [his seminarians] often and in some way ‘being’ with them, as a way of giving significant expression to his responsibility for the formation of candidates for the priesthood” (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 65). By word and example the Bishop should help these young men to understand that *the priesthood is configuration to Christ*, Bridegroom and Head of the Church, but also Victim and humble Servant. A seminary and a presbyterate energized by prayer, mutual support and friendship fosters the spirit of willing obedience which disposes every priest to fulfil the pastoral tasks entrusted to him by his Bishop. The mystery of the Church as communion is strengthened when episcopal authority is exercised as *amoris officium* (cf. Jn 13:14) and when priestly obedience is patterned on Christ the Servant (cf. Phil 2:7-8). Furthermore, neither the seminary nor the presbyterate should lead to a privileged style of life. Rather, simplicity and self-denial should be the marks of those who follow the Lord who came “not to be served but to serve” (Mk 10:45). We should note the timely words of the *Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests* (1994), published by the Congregation for the Clergy: “A priest could hardly be a true servant and minister of his brothers and sisters if he were excessively worried about his own comfort and well-being” (n. 67).

The Synod likewise insisted that future priests must understand *the value of celibacy for the ordained ministry* (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 95). Seminarians need a human maturity and spiritual formation which will enable them to be “clear in their minds and deeply convinced that for the priest celibacy is inseparable from chastity” (*ibid.*). Wise Pastors will take special care to impress upon priests and seminarians that filial devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, asceticism, self-sacrifice, generosity to others, and priestly fraternity are essential if a priest is to devote himself to God and God’s work with joy and an undivided heart. Experience shows that opportunities for continuing formation help priests to safeguard their priestly identity, to grow spiritually, intellectually and pastorally, and to be better equipped to build up the communities entrusted to their care.

8. At the same time, the Church in Southern Africa would not be what she is without *the extraordinary gift of consecrated life*. Zealous members of missionary congregations accomplished the *plantatio Ecclesiae* in your lands, and to their number have been added many new institutes of contemplative and active life. The consecrated men and women in your Dioceses depend on you

for guidance in their pastoral activities, and they need your support in living the evangelical counsels. Harmony between Bishops and consecrated persons is essential to the common good of the Family of God. Religious institutes, acting through their Superiors, should always show “a spirit of communion and cooperation” in their relations with the Bishops in whose Dioceses they work (cf. *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 94). Bishops, for their part, should “welcome and esteem the charisms of the consecrated life” (*Vita consecrata*, n. 48) and give them due place in diocesan pastoral plans. It is especially important for Bishops to pay close attention to the formation programmes in institutes of diocesan right. With prudence and discernment (cf. 1 Th 5:21), you should see to it that candidates are carefully selected, and that they receive the integral human, spiritual, theological and pastoral formation which will prepare them for their mission in the Church.

9. In your Dioceses you are the High Priests of sacred worship and “stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1). I am aware of your Conference’s efforts to mediate the authentic inculturation of worship “so that the faithful can better understand and live liturgical celebrations” (*Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 64). The principle is to welcome from local cultures “those expressions which are compatible with aspects of the true and authentic spirit of the liturgy, in respect for the substantial unity of the Roman rite” (*Vicesimus quintus annus*, n. 16). The task however is a difficult and delicate one. It can only be successfully carried out as a process in which every adaptation arises as a deeper assimilation of the Church’s patrimony, completely faithful to the “sacred deposit of the Word of God” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 10), the authoritative interpretation of which is entrusted to the whole Episcopal College with the Successor of Peter as its foundation of unity. As *Ecclesia in Africa* recognizes, this is one of the greatest challenges for the Church on your continent on the eve of the third millennium (cf. n. 59), and it calls for exemplary wisdom and fidelity on the part of the Bishops.

10. Dear Brother Bishops, these are some of the thoughts which your visit evokes. The Solemnity of Pentecost which we have just celebrated urges us to pray in union with Mary for a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Churches entrusted to your pastoral care. Together we ask this same Spirit to enlighten our minds, fill our hearts with hope and give us boldness in our undertakings in the service of the Gospel. Confident that the Lord will continue to increase the fervour of the priests, religious and laity of Botswana, South Africa and Swaziland, and that the good work he has begun in them will continue to flourish (cf. Phil 1:6), I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.