



The Holy See

ADDRESS TO THE BISHOPS OF LATVIA DURING THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

18 September 1999

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!

1. I am pleased to see you again on the occasion of this *ad limina* visit, which gives us the opportunity to spend an intense moment of brotherhood in that fruitful exchange which must mark the relations between the Pastors of the particular Churches and the Successor of Peter, Pastor of the universal Church.

I thank Archbishop Jlnis Pujats of Riga, who has expressed your sentiments of communion. In you I greet the entire Latvian community, which six years ago I had the joy of meeting personally. How could I forget the cordial welcome I was given? I have an especially fond memory of the celebration at the Shrine of Aglona, the Marian heart of Latvia, where we presented the tears of the past and the hopes for the future to the Blessed Virgin. It was the exhilarating moment of the *Magnificat*, after long years of hardship.

Church in Latvia needs new burst of enthusiasm

The ecumenical atmosphere that marked my visit was also memorable. Being able to pray with you and with our Lutheran and Orthodox brethren made me look forward with special longing to the day when our common prayer, through the gift of the Holy Spirit, will blossom into full communion. You, dear Brothers, Pastors of a Catholic community which is a minority among other Christians, are called to promote with special zeal the path of ecumenism which now irreversibly marks the disciples of Christ in the spirit of his priestly prayer: "that they may all be one"! (Jn 17: 11, 21).

2. Together with our Christian brothers and sisters of other denominations, for long years you suffered the harshness of a regime set on building an earthly city without the light of faith. The aftermath of atheistic propaganda is still making itself felt in the generations that were forced to absorb it deeply. On the other hand, the younger people are not much more fortunate, since the arrival of freedom has also brought the influence of the cultural model dominant in many parts of the world, where indifference and religious relativism are often combined with forms of mass behaviour that are totally incompatible with Christ's Gospel. This has affected families, which are steadily losing the value of unity and stability. The very value of human life has also been jeopardized and has become the target of multiple attacks which often are even legalized.

Given these serious problems, you must forcefully teach the authentic humanism based on the universal moral law and illumined by the Gospel message. But - as we know - this means swimming against the tide. How can we make ourselves heard, how can we speak to consciences, when everything seems to be moving in the opposite direction? For this reason the Church needs a new burst of enthusiasm and fervour, letting herself be filled by the Spirit as at the first Pentecost.

3. To achieve this new pastoral impetus, it has proved very useful to restructure the Catholic community following the creation of new Dioceses. With this more diversified organization of her territory, the Latvian Church can increase her presence and action. As the Second Vatican Council stressed, Dioceses are not merely administrative divisions, but true Churches in which "the one and only Catholic Church exists" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23).

We can understand the meaning of the particular Church in relation to the Council's discussion on the "mystery" of the Church, rooted in the Trinity itself. It is a mystery that, although fully expressed in the unity of the universal Church, can also be seen in the individual Churches where people gather round the Word of God in the celebration of the Eucharist under the Bishop's leadership. There is no opposition but rather "mutual interiority" between the universal aspect of this communion and the vocation of each particular Church (cf. Instruction *Communio innotio*, 28 May 1992, n. 8; AAS 85 [1993] 842).

It is a synthesis that marks the ministry itself of the Bishop who, on the one hand, participates in the universal dimension of communion and pastoral service by his membership in the episcopal college and, on the other, exercises his threefold "*munus*" of teaching, sanctifying and leading (cf. *Lumen gentium*, nn. 25-27) for that portion of the People of God entrusted to him. Ever since the Council, the dimension of collegiality has been given particular emphasis and been enriched with new instruments.

In this regard, the *Episcopal Conference*, which helps the Churches of a certain territory constantly to harmonize their pastoral action, has great importance. You can see its usefulness, even in the youthful experience of your own Conference. On the other hand, we must remember that the

Conference does not diminish the ministry belonging to each Bishop, who remains directly and personally responsible for *all pastoral care in his territory* (cf. Apostolic Letter *Apostolos suos* on the Theological and Juridical Nature of Episcopal Conferences, 21 May 1998, n. 20: AAS 90 [1998]).

4. Dear friends, your Church is experiencing a time of change. In the long decades of communist domination you knew the gift of fidelity and martyrdom, which is a great seed of hope for your future. But you yourselves have prompted me to point out some of the negative signs that this long period has left on the ecclesial community. Many Catholics do not participate regularly in the Sunday Eucharist and the sacraments. Some do not even have their children baptized or they postpone their Baptism. Meanwhile the sects continue to spread. These are worrying signs.

The *new evangelization* must therefore become an essential priority. It is a question of presenting Christ to Latvian society and especially to the new generation, so that everyone will know him as the Saviour, the one who has the words of eternal life (Jn 6: 68) and is "the joy of all hearts and the fulfilment of all aspirations" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 45). I am therefore delighted with the effort you are making to improve and increase catechetical instruction, using Riga's Catechetical Institute and its interdiocesan branches. The goal is to enable every baptized person to make his faith a true choice, supported by a catechesis that not only leads to knowledge of the truth, but also to an experience of the mystery and a life in keeping with that faith. Dear brothers, you are "the ones primarily responsible for catechesis, the catechists *par excellence*" (*Catechesi tradendae*, n. 63). Continue your efforts so that individuals, families and society in all its dimensions may receive the word of Christ in its abundance.

5. The acceptance of God's Word leads to a more conscious participation in the liturgy, the "source" and "summit" of the Church's life (cf. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10). We must regard the Council's liturgical renewal as God's great gift to the Church of our time, one that helps our faithful to live it to the full. Of special significance in this regard is the rediscovery of *the celebration of Sunday*, the Lord's day, to which I dedicated my Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* last year.

Every effort must be made so that people fulfil their Sunday obligation, while considering with pastoral understanding the difficulties which the faithful of a given area often encounter. The faithful must be especially helped to grasp the meaning of this day, which contains in synthesis the Christian mystery itself. Indeed, it is the weekly recurrence of the day of Christ's Resurrection, a day on which all creation, redeemed by him, is in some way "reborn" to new life in expectation of his glorious coming at the end of time. It is therefore the "day of faith" *par excellence*: an indispensable day! (cf. *Dies Domini*, nn. 29-30).

6. At the same time, it is the "*dies Ecclesiae*" in a very special way. The Sunday celebration must therefore be conducted in a way that fully expresses a sense of Church. At the "table of the Word" God calls his people to a continual dialogue of love. At the Eucharistic banquet Christ forms this

people into his "body" and his "bride", making himself the bread of life and bond of unity. The Sunday Eucharist is truly a privileged moment for the faithful to perceive their being "Church" and to grow in communion.

By their very nature, listening to the Word and communion with the Body of Christ spur believers to "evangelize and bear witness" (*Dies Domini*, n. 45) in their daily lives. From Mass to mission: this is the natural movement of every Christian community, particularly necessary at this historical moment for the Latvian Church as she faces the challenge of the new evangelization.

7. This can only happen if each baptized person becomes aware of his vocation. The *advancement of the laity* is crucial in this regard. A certain conception of the Christian community often resulted in the laity being relegated to a state of passivity. Painful memories of the past regime in your land, which used some people as collaborators for its harassment of the Church, can hinder one's confidence in giving greater responsibility to the laity. However, it is necessary to look to the future with trust. According to the Council's teaching, the lay faithful, although without ever replacing Pastors, are called to a true and proper "apostolate" which in today's circumstances must be "broader and more intense" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 1).

They can more easily achieve this awareness with the help of Church-approved *associations* and *ecclesial movements*, as long as they are in full harmony with the Bishops and the diocesan pastoral ministry. Besides this "internal" task, the lay vocation is especially expressed in the Church's relationship with the world. "It is to the laity, though not exclusively to them, that secular duties and activity properly belong" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 43). It is above all through the daily witness of the laity that the Gospel becomes a leaven in every aspect of life: from the family to culture, from art to the economy, even to political involvement. "The Christian who shirks his temporal duties shirks his duties towards his neighbour, neglects God himself" (*ibid.* n. 43).

8. Lastly, dear Brothers it is clear that the secret for the enthusiasm and renewal of the Latvian Church is found to a great extent in persons who by a special vocation are dedicated to the cause of God's kingdom. I am thinking of *the men and women religious*, whose presence I hope will be ever more vital and prominent in your community.

But my thoughts turn above all to the *ministry of priests*. In your communities there is an urgent need for a greater number of them to care for the needs of the various parishes. This need can certainly be alleviated by lay participation, as well as by promotion of the permanent diaconate. But the priest is irreplaceable. Indeed, it is his task to act "*in persona Christi*" in the administration of the sacraments; in obedient cooperation with his Bishop, he is to carry out the ministry of proclaiming the Word and of leading the community. The People of God have a right to his service as pastor and father.

Hence the urgent need to be active in *promoting vocations*; these efforts, while relying on prayer to

the "Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (*Mt 9: 38*), must also take responsibility for heightening the awareness of families and of the entire Christian community so that children and young people are helped to open themselves to a possible call from God. We also know well the importance of the formation that must be given to those who are preparing to take on such an important task in the community. This, in fact, calls for a rigorous theological and ecclesial formation that is attentive to human and emotional balance, rooted in sound spirituality, marked by sincere openness and, at the same time, aware of the realities of the world in which we live. The future of the Latvian Church depends in large part on the formation of your priests.

9. Thank you, dear friends, for the joy you have given me by coming here. I would like once again to express my appreciation for all you do and will continue to do for the People of God, even amid the many difficulties you face. Never forget, in the inevitable hours of darkness, that we are not alone: our efforts are sustained by grace and we rely on it.

Take heart then: "*Caritas Christi urget nos*" (*2 Cor 5: 14*). Let us advance, like the Apostle, in the power of this love which surrounds and accompanies us. May we also be spurred by the expectation of the imminent Great Jubilee, which calls us all to a special effort of conversion.

As I call on our heavenly Mother to obtain strength, perseverance and effectiveness for your apostolic work, I cordially impart my Blessing to you and to all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care.