



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF VIETNAM
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Tuesday, 22 January 2002

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

1. I welcome you with joy, Bishops of Vietnam, for you have come a long way for your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* in Rome. By setting out on this pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you intend to affirm your faith and your ministry, to pray for your diocesan Churches and to reinforce the bonds of communion in which you are joined with the Successor of Peter. I hope that the different meetings you have will encourage you to continue courageously your mission of love and service to Jesus Our Saviour, and that they will renew you in your ministry for the building up of the Body of Christ.

I thank Bishop Paul Nguyễn Văn Hòa of Nha Trang, the new President of your Bishops' Conference, for his words of respect on your behalf; he has helped me to share in the signs of hope and pastoral concerns of your diocesan Churches. I also offer warm good wishes to those among you who have recently received episcopal ordination. During this *ad limina* visit, it gives me great joy to be able to meet all the bishops of the Bishops' Conference. I am delighted that together we can all spend this time of intense spiritual and fraternal communion. When you return to your noble country, tell your priests, religious, catechists and lay faithful, especially the young, that the Pope is praying for them and encourages them to take up the challenges posed by the Gospel, following the example of the saints and martyrs who went before them on the path of faith, and whose blood poured out remains a seed of new life for the whole country.

2. Since your last *ad limina* visit, the Church in Asia has been strongly invited to teach the joyful message of redemption in greater depth by addressing *the fundamental question of the explicit*

announcement of salvation to the multitudes in Asia who have not yet heard of Christ. Exactly as the other particular Churches in Asia, the Catholic community of Vietnam has carried on its theological, spiritual and pastoral reflections living the great ecclesial events, like the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops, the rich experience of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and the recent Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, in which some of you had the joy to take part. Christ's love impels the Church to evangelize and incites bishops to promote evangelization, the pre-eminent task and responsibility of their ministry.

3. The Church in Vietnam is called to put out into the deep: thus I would like to encourage you *to have the greatest concern for evangelization and mission in your pastoral programmes*. I know of your zeal and of the difficult conditions in which you have to fulfil your mission. May the grace of the Holy Spirit make your apostolic projects fruitful, renewing your zeal in preaching, catechesis, the formation of priests and religious, the prayer of the faithful, and the apostolate among young people and families! In your dioceses and in the Bishops' Conference, you have at heart the need to propose pastoral guidelines adapted to the situation and needs of your own particular Church, mindful of the human terrain in which you live, a terrain that is easily shaped by the multiple cultures and numerous religious traditions that make up your country's spiritual background. In this spirit, organization of the Bishops' Conference that you have set up, and the creation of specialized commissions, is an instrument at the service of this new missionary dynamism, of which your communities have need.

The urgency of the mission must always inspire courageous decisions you have to make, guided by the Holy Spirit, the principal agent of evangelization, with whose help you will be able to respond effectively to the demands of the announcement of the Gospel.

Your quinquennial reports mentioned several times *the need to develop initial catechetical formation, as well as ongoing formation for priests, men and women religious and the lay faithful*. Long years of war, the spread of Christian communities and an uneven level of the instruction of the faithful have made it difficult to present and organize this formation. I encourage you to promote and support all the initiatives that enable pastors and faithful, by means of an appropriate formation, to structure their faith and live by it, in order the better to witness to it. It is particularly important to offer them sound teaching on the social doctrine of the Church.

4. To perpetuate her mission of love and service, *the Catholic Church is thus invited to share her hope by constantly offering the path of dialogue*, whose origin and fruitfulness are found in the Father's saving dialogue of love with humanity, through the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit. Only a confident and constructive dialogue with all the members of civil society will make it possible to give new hope to the people of Vietnam. For Christians this dialogue, prompted by charity and rooted in the desire for genuine contact with Christ the Saviour, nourishes a living relationship with our neighbour, whoever he may be, in his inalienable dignity as child of God, and especially when he experiences poverty and exclusion. Urge your communities to contemplate

Christ in the face of those with whom he chooses to be identified, inviting them to discern in this commitment the Church's fidelity to her mission!

5. As the Second Vatican Council recalls, "the Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor bound by ties to any political system.... The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields".

Nevertheless, both are called to fulfil their specific mission for the benefit of human beings. However, this service will be all the more effective if "both institutions practise better cooperation" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 76).

In the name of this "better cooperation", *the Church invites all her members to be committed loyally to the growth of all, and to the building of a just and equitable society in the spirit of solidarity*. She does not intend to usurp the place of national leaders or take over the activities of persons, individuals or groups: she only wishes to carry out her specific mission. But through her members, in a spirit of dialogue and fraternal collaboration, she desires to play her proper role in the life of the nation, at the service of the entire people and the unity of society. By taking an active part in the place that is hers and in keeping with her vocation, for the human and spiritual development of the human person, not only does she "communicate divine life to men but in a certain sense she casts the reflected light of that divine life, notably in the way she heals and elevates the dignity of the human person, in the way she consolidates society, and endows the daily activity of men with a deeper sense and meaning" (*ibid*, n. 40).

To achieve this "better cooperation", the Church expects of the political community total respect for her independence and autonomy. The very precious good of *religious freedom*, described by the Second Vatican Council in its Declarations and International Agreements, concerns both individuals and religious communities. To the human person, religious freedom guarantees the right to profess and to practise his religion without constraint, to receive an education inspired by the principles of the faith, to follow a religious vocation and to perform private and public acts that manifest the interior relationship that binds him to God and to his brethren. To religious communities, religious freedom guarantees such fundamental rights as the right to autonomous government; to worship in public without restrictions; to teach and bear witness publicly to their faith by the spoken or written word; to help their members practise their religion; to choose, educate, appoint and transfer their own ministers; to manifest the special force of the social doctrine; to promote initiatives in the educational, cultural, charitable and social domains (cf. Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis humanae*, n. 4). I fervently hope that all the members of the nation will join forces to promote a civilization of love, founded on the universal values of peace, justice, solidarity and freedom.

6. We have to give thanks for the vitality and courage of the lay people of your dioceses, called to live and to celebrate their faith in conditions that are often difficult! By their credible and

enthusiastic witness they are the worthy heirs of those who went before them on the path of the Gospel. I invite them to take their vocation as baptized people ever more seriously and to "assume their proper role in the life and mission of the People of God, as witnesses to Christ, wherever they may find themselves" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, n. 45). Means must be made available to provide them with a formation that will make them witnesses in social, political and economic life.

I warmly greet the priests, your valuable collaborators, who proclaim the Gospel of Christ in the country with conviction and courage. I know how generously and passionately they work to build fraternal communities that bear the witness to a welcoming, missionary Church. They are aware that the task of evangelization concerns the whole People of God and requires new zeal, new methods, and new language. It is up to you to stay close to them, so as to support them in their pastoral plans, to be attentive to their daily life and to accompany them when they are going through the trials connected with their ministry. It is also necessary to put at their disposal a spiritual and intellectual formation adapted to the missionary challenges they have to face.

I rejoice in the willingness that leads many young men in your dioceses to leave everything to respond generously to Christ's call in the priesthood, and thus to become faithful stewards of his mysteries. This is an eloquent sign of ecclesial vitality shown by young men, thirsting for spiritual values that they desire to share with all their brothers and sisters. It is your task *to be careful about the conditions for their formation and sound discernment*, taking care to select for their formation and education those who have acquired human and priestly maturity.

The flourishing of vocations to consecrated life, especially to female religious life, is certainly a magnificent gift of the Lord to the Church in Vietnam, a gift for which you must give thanks and a gift that the Church cannot do without. I encourage all consecrated persons to be firm in their missionary commitment and to commit themselves with renewed zeal to announce Christ and to serve mankind. After the daring witness borne by religious institutes during past centuries, may consecrated persons never cease to let themselves be transformed by God's grace in giving themselves generously to the Gospel!

7. Dear Brothers in the episcopate, I wish to thank you once again for your generosity and exemplary dedication. I give thanks for your perseverance and for your courageous witness. May Christian hope make your apostolic zeal fruitful and give you new strength to announce Christ, the Saviour, who came "so that men may have life, and have it abundantly" (Jn 10,10)!

I entrust you to the intercession of Our Lady of La Vang, whom you celebrated in a special way last year, on the occasion of the centenary of the important Marian Congress of 15 August. I know the filial trust you put in the Mother of Christ. May she light your way! To each one of you, to the priests, to the men and women religious and to all the lay faithful of Vietnam, I willingly impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing.

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