



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL FROM THE WEST-CENTRAL
AND THE SECOND NORTHERN REGIONS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Friday, 7 February 2003 Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,*1. Welcome to the house of the Successor of Peter on your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*, a visible witness of the episcopal collegiality of the Church. I extend a fraternal greeting to each of you and to Bishop Jayme Henrique Chemello, the President of the Bishop's Conference. I warmly thank Cardinal José Freire Falcão, Archbishop of Brasília, for his incisive presentation conveying the sentiments of zeal that motivate you and the pastoral challenges of the West-Central and 2nd Northern Regions. Scanning the map of your States, from Goiás to the international frontiers of northern Brazil, passing through Tocantins, Pará and Amapá, I can imagine the difficulties you encounter in exercising your mission as Pastors of those immense regions. Being a Bishop has never been easy; today it involves obligations, activities and difficulties everywhere and often in unforeseen circumstances that constitute enormous complex and, at times, humanly impossible obstacles. However, it is God who invites you to serve with a sense of responsibility, the people entrusted to your care and he will not fail to support and accompany those he has chosen, in the certainty that the faithful "Under the test of this service ... will glorify God on account of your obedience and acceptance of the Gospel of Christ, and by the generosity of your communion with them and with all" (cf. II Cor 9,13).2. Without denying the specific differences of every diocese, situations and problems exist that demand coordinated pastoral action in order to exercise in loving union "certain pastoral functions ... in view of promoting that greater good which the Church offers humankind ... according to the norm of law ... especially through forms and programmes of the apostolate which are fittingly adapted to the circumstances of the time and place" (Motu proprio *Apostolos Suos*, n. 14). It is a comfort to know that you have experienced this and that it is also a commitment of your Bishops' Conference: *the long and fruitful experience of communion and co-responsibility* is helping your dioceses to join forces to promote evangelization, giving life to an organism of episcopal communion, so that the Pastors of a specific territory will renew their *collegial affection* in the exercise of some functions inspired by their common pastoral solicitude. Since it was created in 1952, the National Conference of the Bishops of Brazil has carried out this mission with many initiatives designed not only to improve its organization, but also *to witness to the presence among men and women of the Redeemer and his saving message*. This observation was made at the end of the celebrations for its Golden Jubilee. The Bishops' Conference has helped the Church in Brazil to remain beside the people, understanding their situation and making their causes her own. This also makes us remember the importance of the fact that, if the Church needs to be close to the people, as Jesus was when he walked the roads of Palestine to meet them, she must also and above all *bring Jesus close to the people*, making him known to them and ensuring that the grace that flows

from his pierced side as a source of living water reaches the hearts that thirst for the glory of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Church, as an instrument of salvation, has received through Christ and his Apostles the vital mission "to go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation", recalling that "he who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned" (Mk 16,15-16). Your mission, therefore, venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, assumes its proper and specific character at the moment you decide on your various programmes for the pastoral mission, and globally, for evangelization. As successors of the Apostles, through episcopal consecration you have received the light that comes from on High. "The Lord Jesus, having prayed at length to the Father, called to himself those whom he willed and appointed twelve to be with him.... These apostles he constituted in the form of a college or permanent assembly, at the head of which he placed Peter, chosen from amongst them. He sent them first of all to the children of Israel and then to all the peoples, so that, sharing in his power, they might make all peoples his disciples and sanctify and govern them" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 19). Through his sacramental consecration and hierarchical communion with the Head and the members, the Bishop becomes a member of the College of Bishops and thus shares in the solicitude for all the Churches (cf. *ibid.*, n. 23), to be the teachers of doctrine, the priests of sacred worship and the ministers of government (cf. *Code of Canon Law*, can. 375). The most important task of the Bishops is in fact that of governing the diocese entrusted to them, knowing that by so doing "they contribute effectively to the welfare of the whole Mystical Body, which ... is a corporate body of Churches" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). However, everyone knows that on many occasions Bishops cannot fulfil their mission satisfactorily "unless they work more harmoniously and closely every day with other Bishops" (*Apostolos suos*, n. 15). That is the reason why today, Bishops' Conferences cooperate with a fruitful and diversified assistance to give life, in a concrete and effective way, to collegial union or *affective collegiality* among bishops. The union with their brothers in the episcopate with whom each one is especially bound, often as the result of geographical proximity or of having many common pastoral problems, acts as a vehicle for the common good of the diocese entrusted to them; if the contrary were the case, the Bishop would soon find it impossible to carry out his mission effectively. I am thinking, for example, of the important matter of the formation of candidates for the priesthood. The need to find sound and reliable vocations has demanded of your particular Churches a renewed effort and output of energy. I express the hope that the *Vocational Year*, promoted by the Bishops' Conference, will be crowned by success; from now on I pledge my support for it, and be sure of my prayers to Almighty God. Work with Bishops' Conference, steer clear of bureaucracy that distracts from needs of diocese

3. It can be said that the pastoral duty of the Bishop in his diocese necessarily includes active participation in the work of the Bishops' Conference but, at the same time, it sets limits: limits on the part of the Conference, since it is concerned with matters it must follow in accord with its Statutes for the good of all the dioceses taken together; and limits for the personal dedication of each Bishop, according to the importance of the problems that must be addressed in the Conference, that is, in proportion to the benefits that will derive from this work for all the dioceses. Keep in mind that an excessive multiplication of organisms and meetings obliges many bishops often to be absent from their particular Churches which, as well as being contrary to the "law of personal residence" (*CIC*, can. 395), has negative consequences both on the accompaniment of the priests and on other pastoral matters, as might be the case of the spread of religious sects. For this reason explicit mention is made of the need to prevent, besides an excessive multiplication of organisms, the bureaucratization of subsidiary organs and committees that continue to work in the period between the plenary meetings; since these organs "exist to be of help to the Bishops and not to substitute for them" (*Apostolos suos*, n. 18). Ecclesiastical structures, serving the Church in accordance with Statutes of Bishops' Conference

4. In carrying out this mission, addressing my Brothers in the Episcopate through the *Motu Proprio Apostolos suos*, I highlighted the fact that the "collegial union of Bishops manifests the nature of the Church" and, quoting from the Second

Vatican Council (*Lumen gentium*, n. 9), since it is "on earth the seed and beginning of the Kingdom of God", is "a lasting and sure seed of unity, hope and salvation for the whole human race" (n. 8). I would also like to recall here, with satisfaction, the spirit that pervades the Brazilian Bishops' Conference as a fruit of the recent revision of its Statutes. Dedicated to "promote sound communion among Bishops ... and their ever greater participation in the Conference" (Chapter I, art. 2), you have wished to reaffirm the apostolic tradition that has always been preserved in the life of the Church since her foundation. I am well aware of the vast size of the Church in Brazil, which is one of the largest in the Catholic world. The 17 *Regions* that make it up, each with a large group of dioceses and at times with prelatures, eparchies, an exarchate, territorial abbeys, a military ordinariate, an Ordinariate for Eastern-rite faithful, and a personal apostolic administration, show us the immense and demanding panorama of work that lies before you, and the continuous concern required to unify the process of evangelization. These structures must be at the service of the Conference and of each of the local Ordinaries, in order to put into practice the decisions of the General Assembly, and when necessary, of the Permanent Council as the "organ of direction and guidance of the activity of the CNBB" (Chapter V, art. 46). I trust in your pastoral zeal that you will be able to avoid any discrepancy with the Statutes that have been approved.⁵ The entire continent of Brazil requires renewed attention, so that all may receive the certainty through which Christ established the People of God "in a communion of life, charity and truth" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 9). The People of God are welded together as a community when the members possess and participate in the same "goods" that serve to identify them and distinguish them from other social groups. St Paul sums up these constitutive goods of the people of God, proclaiming that for Christ's followers there is "one Lord, one faith, one Baptism" (Eph 4,5). All have the right to receive in a unified, consistent way not only the revealed truth, but also the common teaching of the national Episcopate through declarations made in the name of the Bishops' Conference. I therefore appeal to you to be responsible when making declarations in the name of the conference to the media. The fact that a communication is the personal responsibility of a certain person, in conformity with what is stated by your Statutes (cf. Chapter IV, art. 131), does not exclude doctrinal coherence and fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church.⁶ As teachers of the faith and stewards of God's mysteries, you need even greater harmony when it is a question of analyzing, in the various commissions of the Bishops' Conference, national matters that will have repercussions on the various diocesan approaches to pastoral care. "Episcopal Conferences have their own responsibility within the territory of their competence, but their decisions have inevitable repercussions on the universal Church. The Petrine ministry of the Bishop of Rome guarantees the coordination of the Conferences' activities with the life and teaching of the universal Church" (*General Audience*, 7 October 1992, n. 8; *ORE*, 14 October 1992, p. 11). In the range of responsibility of every committee or office that is part of your Conference, it is up to the Bishop to examine the matters submitted to him with diligence and care. He cannot use the excuse of lack of time to avoid making an objective analysis of the issues. Inasmuch as they are "witnesses of divine and Catholic truth", Bishops are "authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 25). Another requirement is the correct application in every case of the norms of Canon Law, both of the West and of the East. If on the one hand, there is a fairly broad theoretical consensus in conceiving Church Law in the light of the revealed mystery, as the Second Vatican Council prescribed (cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 16), on the other, the understanding of a certain legalism still survives that, in practice, reduces canon law to a collection of ecclesiastic norms that are not very theological or pastoral, which in themselves restrict the freedom of the children of God. This vision is certainly inadequate, since, as I have had the occasion to say recently, the canonical norms, refer to a reality which transcends them and include essential and permanent elements in which the divine law is made concrete (cf. *Address to the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts*, 24 January 2003, n. 2; *ORE*, 5 February, p. 7). For this reason, it is necessary

to realize that pastoral action cannot be reduced to a kind of *pastoralism*, understood as ignoring or attenuating other basic dimensions of the Christian mystery, among them the juridical dimension. If pastoral activity waters down a juridical obligation, it relativizes ecclesial obedience and deprives the canonical norms of meaning. *True pastoral care can never contradict the true law of the Church.*⁷ Venerable Brothers, it is a grace to know and feel that you are united and close to one another and determined to work together, especially when one can perceive the many forces that oppose us, forces of division that seek to separate or even to set brothers against each other who have been called to live in unity.

Continue on your way, always seeking fraternal harmony within your Bishops' Conference and with the Successor of Peter who at this moment renews his embrace of communion with all, including those who have come here, starting last year, on their *ad limina* visit. Since you are the last group of Brazilian Bishops to visit, I offer you my best wishes of peace and brotherhood in the hope that *you will continue to build unity in truth and love*, and that you will respond together to the great challenges of the present time. As I conclude this meeting, I turn my thoughts to Our Lady *Aparecida*, Mother of your Christian communities and Patroness of the great nation of Brazil. To her I entrust all of you and your priests, your men and women religious and the lay faithful of all your dioceses, and I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.