



# The Holy See

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APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC (APRIL 25-27, 1997)

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
AT THE MEETING WITH THE MEMBERS  
OF THE CZECH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE**

*Friday, 25 April 1997*

*Your Eminence,*

*Dear Brother Bishops!* I have greatly desired this meeting with you, who have the responsibility of guiding God's People in this land in faith and governing them in charity. I thank God that I am able to be here today with you, in this house which welcomes everyone, since in a way it is the Pope's house. I am grateful for the care with which you have prepared this visit. May it produce abundant fruits of renewal in the Christian life of your respective Dioceses and ecclesiastical circumscriptions, which in a few years have become more numerous since the recent union of the Dioceses of Plzen in Bohemia and of Ostrava-Opava in Moravia and Silesia. I greet each of you with affection, beginning with you, the dear Cardinal Archbishop of Prague and successor of Saint Adalbert, and you, the dear Archbishop of Olomouc, as I recall with gratitude the welcome which you and your faithful gave me during my pilgrimage two years ago. A special greeting also goes to Bishop Karel Otcenášek, in whose Diocese I shall have the joy tomorrow of celebrating Mass for the young people. I am pleased to see the Apostolic Exarch of the new Exarchate for the faithful of the Byzantine Slav Rite living in the Czech Republic. Together with the residential Bishops I also wish to greet the auxiliary Bishops, and among them the two recently ordained auxiliaries of Prague. I am here to give thanks to God, together with you, for the spiritual gifts with which he has blessed the Church in Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia during the Decade of spiritual renewal desired by the unforgettable Cardinal František Tomášek. The Decade was launched when times were still dark, as a means of preparing believers to celebrate the Millennium of the martyrdom of Saint Adalbert.<sup>2</sup> This evening *Saint Adalbert* speaks to us of his life as a Bishop consumed with zeal for the flock entrusted to him and at the same time "seized" by God according to the Benedictine ideal of prayer and activity. The ancient biography sketched by Bruno of Querfurt defines the Bishop's character in a lapidary sentence: *Bene vixit, bene docuit, ab eo quod ore dixit nusquam opere recessit*. "He lived an outstanding life, he was an outstanding teacher and he never departed in his actions from the words of his mouth

- Dobře žil, dobře učil, nikdy se skutečně neodchýlil od toho, co hlásal usty" (Legend *Nascitur purpureus flos*, XI). No less effectively does Bruno evoke Adalbert's virtues as a monk, his love of prayer, silence, humility and withdrawal: *Erat laetus ad omne iniunctum opus, non solum maioribus sed etiam minoribus oboedire paratus, quae est prima via virtutis*: "He rejoiced in every work given him, ready to obey not only his superiors but also his inferiors, which is the first way of virtue

- Radoval se z kazdého, uloženého, práce, ochoten poslechnout nejen starší, ale i mladší, což je první cesta ctnosti" (*ibid.*, XIV). His rich personality, his strong yet gentle figure as a man sensitive to the values of Christian civilization, as a Bishop open to the greater dimensions of Europe, endowed with the charisma of combining in a single zealous apostolate the different nations of Europe, is a model for us. He was an upright and unswerving Pastor who in the face of corruption and weakness remained faithful to the unchanging Law of God. He was a courageous and responsible missionary, called to enlarge constantly the horizons of evangelization and proclamation.<sup>3</sup> In the society of his time, both civil and ecclesiastical, Saint Adalbert faced enormously serious challenges and undertook a significant work which, even if it did not immediately bear visible fruits, eventually produced effects which still endure today. *The challenges* lying before you today, dear Bishops, are no less demanding than those of that time. I think in the first place of *religious indifference* which, as I had occasion to reaffirm in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, leads many people to live as if God did not exist, or to be content with a vague religiosity incapable of adequately responding to the problem of truth and the duty of consistency (cf. No. 36). Forty years of systematic repression of the Church, the elimination of her Pastors, Bishops and priests, the intimidation of individuals and families, weigh heavily upon the present generation. This can be seen particularly in the area of *family morality*, as was shown by some statistical data gathered on the occasion of the *International Year of the Family*. Nearly a half of the marriages end in divorce or separation, especially in Bohemia. The practice of abortion, permitted by laws inherited from the past regime, is showing signs of a slight decrease, yet the number of abortions remains among the highest in the world. As a result, there has been a considerable decrease in the birth rate. For some years now, the number of deaths has exceeded the number of births. Another challenge to the proclamation of the Gospel is *hedonism*, which has invaded these lands from neighbouring countries and contributed to a growing crisis of values in everyday life, in family structure and even in people's outlook on the meaning of life. The spread of pornography, prostitution and paedophilia is also symptomatic of a situation of grave social malaise. Dear Brothers, you are well aware of these problems, which challenge your pastoral consciousness and your sense of responsibility. They must not discourage you, but rather be an opportunity for renewing your commitment and hope. Such was the hope that impelled Saint Adalbert despite trials, even spiritual ones. It is a hope that is born of awareness that *"the night is far gone, the day is at hand"* (Rom 13:12), for the Risen Christ is with us. Present in society are a number of people of good will, many of whom are active in their parishes and are distinguished for their commitment to personal holiness and the apostolate. It is my hope that, with your help, they can always overcome difficulties and obstacles.<sup>4</sup> *The family* must be at the center of your concern as Pastors. As the "domestic Church", the family is the firmest guarantee for the desired renewal as we approach the Third Millennium. I express my appreciation for the numerous programmes and the various family centres which have sprung up in every part of the country in order to help provide concrete assistance to children, young people in difficulty and unwed mothers. The family, profoundly marked by habits, traditions, customs and rituals deeply imbued with faith, is the terrain best adapted for fostering *vocations*. When the voice of the Church's Pastors was forced to be silent, families succeeded in preserving the Christian heritage of their forebears and in providing Christian education for their children, many of whom became priests and Religious. Today's consumer mentality can have a negative impact on the rise of vocations and care for them; hence the need to give pastoral priority to promoting vocations to the priesthood and to forms of consecrated life. The family is also critical for the training of *young people*. The Europe of the year 2000 needs generous, enthusiastic and pure young people, capable of shaping their future. Dear

Brother Bishops, I wish to express my special appreciation for the concern with which you are following the human and spiritual growth of young people. Even in the period of oppression, *a highly-organized network of activities*, led by courageous priests, existed for the training of young men and women. This resulted in activities at all levels on behalf of young people, with reception centres, spiritual retreats and periodic formation meetings. These generous efforts have produced abundant fruit in spiritual maturity. In view of this, encouragement should be given to all volunteer initiatives which can have a formative value for young people.<sup>5</sup> I express lively appreciation of the charitable activities which the Dioceses of Bohemia and Moravia are carrying out through appropriate agencies, especially "Charita". By their presence, these organizations are capable of directing public generosity towards carefully selected and presented objectives. I refer in particular to the aid given to cases of hidden poverty existing within your country, to the praiseworthy work in aid of the people of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and to support for missionary work, for lepers and for the outcast of the whole world. In the diversified presence of the Church in the Czech Republic, *numerous Movements* also have a place. In all fields of pastoral activity, especially that of youth work, they cooperate in the formation of mature consciences. I urge them always to be *in harmony with the Church's Pastors* in an authentic spirit of cooperation, witnessed by a readiness to accept the pastoral directives which they issue in the exercise of their responsibilities in the service of the flock entrusted to them. Dear Brother Bishops, you well know how much the Church esteems and promotes all authentic forms of culture and strives to enter into communion and dialogue with them. The meeting-place between Church and culture is the world, and within it man, who is called to progressive self-realization with the aid of God's grace mediated by the Church, and of all the spiritual helps made available by the cultural heritage of the nation. True culture is humanizing, while non-culture and false cultures are dehumanizing. For this reason, in the choice of a culture man puts at stake his own destiny. Prague has been a beacon of intellectual life of rare prestige. This year marks the 650th anniversary of the foundation of the celebrated Charles University. In the course of the centuries, Czech cultural life has been a crossroads of many, sometimes opposed, spiritual currents, of which indelible traces still remain. Concern for culture must be a constant priority of your pastoral activity.<sup>6</sup> In the variety of your pastoral commitments, *priests are your first fellow-workers*; without them your activity could not be effective. I urge you: love your clergy, be close to your priests who, as I well know, are burdened by immense pastoral work, with the care of parishes, often quite numerous, which demands time, availability and effort. Many of your priests have suffered in State prisons, with effects on their health which are still evident and which age will certainly aggravate. The younger priests, who came out of the seminary with a fervent zeal for the apostolate, can sometimes be tempted to fall into routine, or even experience discouragement as a result of loneliness or the infiltration of certain ideas already widespread in the West. Be close to them. Welcome them as brothers. Make them feel that you love them and that their work is indispensable for you. It is equally important to establish and to cultivate full and authentic cooperation with *Religious communities* of men and women, of both active and contemplative life, and in a special way with those Religious who are ordained priests and who administer with generosity and commitment different parish communities. They are an integral part of your presbyterate. Finally, in your long-range pastoral vision, support and practical encouragement needs to be given to the communications apostolate, especially with regard to the publication of books and periodicals, and to all the many other possibilities for apostolate and witness that the Holy Spirit is awakening in religious families of both men and women.<sup>7</sup> I am aware of the problems which still exist in the relations, otherwise cordial and open, between the Church and the competent State authorities. I venture to mention some of the more urgent matters requiring your attention, not only in the context of these celebrations in honour of Saint Adalbert but also in view of your coming visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. To date no clear guidelines have been established to regulate *relations between the State and the Catholic Church*. Now, almost eight years after the fall of the regime, it is certainly necessary, and beneficial for both parties, to reach the desired definition of reciprocal rights

and duties. The Holy See is committed to seeking such an agreement, in accord with your Episcopal Conference. As is known, the Catholic Church, here as everywhere else, does not ask for privileges or seek to be served, but to serve, according to the example of her Founder (cf. Mt 10:28). She asks to be able to exercise freely and with dignity her proper mission, which is expressed in evangelization and human promotion, and thus in the preaching of the Gospel, religious education, the training of adolescents and young people, pastoral work in universities, and charitable and welfare activities. In this context, the question arises of the *restitution of goods* confiscated arbitrarily during the dark years of persecution. During that time the Church was defrauded of donations coming from private individuals and various institutions and intended for specific educational and charitable purposes. The Church has a right to be independent and, if she asks for these goods, she does so because they enable her to meet the unalienable requirements of her mission. The Church, as has been repeatedly stated since the beginning of the free existence of this nation, is open to dialogue about possible arrangements for the restitution of the goods which were confiscated. For this purpose to be attained, a precise and long-range plan of action needs to be established both by the State and the Church. These problems will then have to be discussed, with objectivity and competence, by a Mixed Commission made up of expert representatives of the State and the Church. On the basis of experience gained in similar cases in other countries, a Commission chaired by the Apostolic Nuncio and made up of an appropriate number of expert Bishops and lay persons, could examine these problems with an analogous government Commission, in order to arrive as quickly as possible at a satisfactory solution of still unresolved questions. Finally, it is urgently necessary that the Church be permitted to be present in fields of a pre-eminently spiritual character, as has long been the case in other countries of Europe. I am speaking of the *teaching of religion in the State schools*, which today deserves to be considered a primary contribution to the building of a Europe based on that heritage of Christian culture which is common to the peoples of Western and Eastern Europe. I am thinking also of *pastoral care in hospitals and prisons*, and, in particular, of *spiritual assistance to the military*, by the presence of properly trained military chaplains. I am aware of a first attempt in this regard among the troops stationed in Bosnia-Herzegovina, which is proving quite successful, and not only among the Catholic troops. If I have mentioned these undertakings, it is also in order to emphasize that the Holy See, with direct knowledge of your desires and needs, continues to be at your disposal to offer you discreet and practical cooperation for resolving these problems.

8. Your Eminence, Venerable Brothers! The Millennium of Saint Adalbert has given us an opportunity to reflect on the problems of the Church in this beloved nation. Certainly such problems exist, and they can also be serious. But they are also proof that the Church is alive, growing, and acting as an authoritative participant in the various movements of spiritual, cultural, social and political renewal marking the present time. After the long years of persecution, the Decade of spiritual renewal has helped clarify, in accordance with the thousand-year-old Christian civilization of your country, the response expected by the different sectors of ecclesial and civil life. Yes, we can say once more that "the night is far gone, the day is at hand". If there remain areas where shadows persist, these are a reason for even greater commitment. In my Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint*, I described the mission of the Successor of Peter within the Episcopal College as that of a "sentinel" who confirms his Brother Bishops so that "the true voice of Christ the Shepherd may be heard in all the particular Churches" (No. 94). And so I thank the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ for having offered us the opportunity to experience our "partnership in the Gospel" (Phil 1:5), and to draw strength and encouragement from one another in accordance with the "immeasurable riches of his grace" (Eph 2:7). I allow myself to ask you, at the culmination of the celebrations commemorating Saint Adalbert: *Custos, quid de nocte? Custos, quid de nocte?* "Watchman, what of the night? Watchman, what of the night?" (Is 21:11). The day must dawn. *The new dawn of the Sun of justice* must come (cf. Mal 3:20): Jesus Christ, God from God, Light from Light, without whom the civilization of love cannot be built. Be sentinels then, pointing out to the flock that better times are coming. Through the harmonious efforts of all who are

sincerely concerned for the good of man, I express my hope for the coming of that peace of Christ which is indispensable for the creation of an order of justice, peace and progress, so deeply desired by this people dear to you and to me. May God bless you and accompany you in your difficult and exhilarating work! © Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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