



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday 16 April, 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. It is a great pleasure for me to welcome all of you the Bishops of Texas, Oklahoma and Arkansas. In you I greet all your beloved faithful and each of your local Churches with all its priests, deacons, Religious, seminarians and laity. I recall with special joy my recent visit to San Antonio, the wonderful welcome given me and the impressive faith of the people. I assure you that I remain close to you in your ministry of faith, as does the Mother of Jesus, la Virgen de Guadalupe.

In my recent talk to your brother Bishops of Region IX, I mentioned a series of related pastoral events that are, in effect, inspired by a single vision of faith and directed to the goals of deep personal renewal and ever more effective evangelical service in the United States. These events include the present *ad limina* visits and those of 1983, the papal visits of 1979 and 1987, as well as the meeting with American Bishops foreseen for 1989.

Today I would like to view in this context still another event – one which concerns the universal Church and therefore the Church in the United States. It is *the great Jubilee of the year 2000*, marking the close of the Second Millennium of Christianity and the inauguration of the Third. This anniversary requires of the whole Church a period of serious preparation at both the universal and local levels. From the beginning of my Pontificate, and in particular in the Encyclical "Redemptor Hominis", I have attempted to direct the attention of the Church to the season of "a new Advent"^[1], which precedes all the grace-filled opportunities and activities which we ardently hope for in the year 2000.

2. *The aim of the Jubilee and of its preparation* is to “recall and reawaken in us in a special way our awareness of the key truth of faith which Saint John expressed at the beginning of his Gospel: ‘The Word became flesh and dwelt among us[2]’[3]” . The whole celebration of the Millennium is meaningful only in the light of the mystery of the Incarnation and of its divine motivation and purpose, which are also explained to us by Saint John, when he says: “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him may not die but may have eternal life”[4]. Emphasizing these truths, the Church strives to provide a *framework of principles* from which she will continue to draw out from her life “the new and the old”[5] in order to elicit the response of faith to the Father’s love and to his Incarnate Word, and to lead us all to eternal life.

By reflecting on the Incarnation the Church of the year 2000 will be able to understand herself ever more fully in her twofold nature – human and divine. She will also understand the sublime union of these two elements in the everyday reality of her life as the Body of the Word made flesh. The Church is convinced that, by placing the Incarnation before the People of God with all the power of her being, mankind will rediscover in this mystery of God’s revealed love the truth that explains and directs all human activity. Only in the light of the Incarnation does all human living take on its proper perspective, or as I stated in that first Encyclical: “Through the Incarnation God gave human life the dimension that he intended man to have from his first beginning”[6].

3. Our present pastoral efforts as Bishops, those envisioned for 1989 and those beyond should be directed to creating that *profound and dynamic vision which must characterize the Church in the year 2000*. The Church of the Millennium must have an increased consciousness of being the Kingdom of God in its initial stage. She must show that she is *vitally concerned with being faithful to Christ*, hence she must strive mightily to respond to the great challenges of holiness, evangelization and service. At the same time the Church of the Millennium must emerge as a *clear sign of her own eschatological state*, living by faith the mystery that is yet to be fully revealed. As she does this the Church must proclaim with Saint Paul that “eye has not seen nor has ear heard what God has prepared for those who love him”[7].

The Church of the Millennium will still be *the Church undergoing purification through suffering* – the salvific value of which she fully knows. Yet in her purifying experiences the Church will still be able to cry out that the sufferings of this time are “as nothing compared with the glory to be revealed in us”[8]. As a Church living in expectation of glory to be revealed she will find ever greater strength *to proclaim the value of celibacy* that is lived for the Kingdom of God, the final state of which is in preparation: “Thy Kingdom come!”.

At such an important juncture of her life, the Church of the Millennium must declare that she is ready at any moment to meet the Lord, just as she is ready to go on faithfully in joyful hope awaiting his Coming. But in both her waiting and her expectation she is reinforced in hope because *she knows that Christ her Head has gone before her* in his Ascension to prepare a place for her. And as she waits, she remembers what he once said to the disciples: “If I go and prepare

a place for you, I will come back again and take you to myself, so that where I am you also may be”[9].

The Church is convinced of her right to be with Jesus, who, seated at the right hand of the Father, has already united her to himself in glory. *The triumph of the Head already belongs to the members* of the Body. This makes it easy for the Church as she lives the new Advent to accept with keen conviction the words of her victorious Redeemer: “Remember, I am coming soon”[10]. During the Millennium the Church is called upon *to remember*. It is also the special hour for the Church *to respond* with fidelity and confidence, proclaiming by her actions and by her whole life: “Come Lord Jesus!”[11].

4. *The Church’s program* for the Millennium and its preparation must be *a total concentration on Jesus Christ*. She must proclaim Jesus Christ as victorious in the Redemption that he brought about in his blood; she must proclaim Jesus Christ, crucified and glorified, the One wearing “a cloak dipped in blood” and bearing the name “the Word of God”[12]. The Church is called upon to proclaim the supreme effectiveness of Christ’s death; to proclaim that the triumph of the Lamb is already operative in the Church for two millennia, and that it belongs to all his chosen and faithful followers[13]. The Church’s proclamation in the Millennium must be the proclamation of her own victory over sin and death accomplished by him who is “the first-born from the dead”[14] and who communicates this victory to all his members throughout the ages.

The Christ of the Millennium is this first-born from the dead, “the King of kings and Lord of lords”[15], the Eternal Son of God, *the Word of God made flesh*, the person who identifies himself as “the One who lives”[16] and who tells his Church: “There is nothing to fear!”[17]. It is precisely this Christ, *divine and incarnate*, that the Church presents to the world as the supreme exemplar of all human life. In this sense the Church makes her own the presentation of Pontius Pilate: “Ecce homo”[18]. *The proclamation of the Millennium* will be the proclamation of *this man Jesus Christ* and in him the exaltation of all humanity. The Word, who remains forever with his Father and as such is the truth and life of humanity, in taking human flesh becomes *the way for humanity*[19].

The Christ of the Millennium is *the divine Christ of the Gospels* who has entered into his glory and who is forever alive in his word and in his Church. He is not a weak and ineffective Christ but a Christ who has triumphed throughout twenty centuries and who remains “the power of God and the wisdom of God”[20]. To those who accept him, moreover, he gives the power to become the children of God, to become by adoption what he is by nature – the Son of God. The Christ of the Millennium is *the Man* who has entered into the history of nations, has uplifted cultures by his message, transformed the destinies of peoples and who, in revealing God to man, has revealed all humanity to itself[21].

5. The Millennium becomes therefore *the hour of our Christian identity in all its Catholic universality*. In order to celebrate the Millennium effectively the Church must recall her *origin* and

reflect deeply on her *mission*. To do this she must retrace the path she has taken up till now, bearing her apostolic message down the centuries, beginning “in Jerusalem, throughout Judea and Samaria, yes, even to the ends of the earth”[22]. It is truly the appropriate hour to foster a consciousness of our Christian tradition and culture. These elements have found expression in the art, architecture, music, literature and other expressions of genius which each generation and all generations together in the Church have created throughout the centuries in the name of Christ. There are many ways to foster this consciousness but certainly the means of social communications at our disposal must be utilized to the full.

6. Living in the Spirit sent to her by Christ, the Church looks forward to the Millennium *as a time of vast internal renewal*. By his power the Holy Spirit is truly able to effect in the Church a new Pentecost. On the part of all of us, however, this requires new attitudes of humility, generosity and openness to the purifying action of the Spirit.

The whole concept of renewal must be seen in its relationship to *Penance and the Eucharist*. In “*Redemptor Hominis*” I emphasized “that the Church of the new Advent... must be the Church of the Eucharist and of Penance”[23]. Only with these means will the Church be herself and have the strength to fulfil her mission. The Millennium is the supreme moment for the glorification of the Cross of Christ and for the proclamation of forgiveness through his blood. I ask all the Bishops of the Church – and today in a special way the Bishops of the United States – to do everything possible, in preparing for the Millennium, to promote the faithful observance of the centuries-old practice of individual Confession, guaranteeing thereby the individual’s right to a personal encounter with the crucified and merciful Christ, and the right of Christ to meet each one of us in the key moment of conversion and pardon[24].

Presiding over every celebration of the Millennium will be *the Eucharistic Lord*, himself renewing his Church and presenting her to the Father in union with himself. It is mainly through the Eucharist that the Millennium will actuate the power of the Redemption. In the Eucharist the Church will find the sure source and guarantee of her commitment to the service of humanity.

From the Eucharist *the Catholic laity* will derive the strength to perform with joy and perseverance their specific role in the Church and in the world. During the Millennium there must be an ever more generous actuation of everything that the Post-Synodal document on the laity will propose for the life and mission of the laity.

7. In all her activities the Church of the Millennium must be totally absorbed with *the task of bringing Christ to the world*. This will require her to understand the world ever more deeply and to dialogue ever more intensely with all people of good will. As the Church does this with *love* and *respect* and as she reinforces her own *meekness* – after the example of the meek and humble Christ – she must at the same time shed any remnant of fear at the prospect of displeasing the world when she presents to it her Founder’s message in all its purity and with all its exigencies.

She must also divest herself of any trace of defensiveness as she acknowledges Christ to be forever “a sign of contradiction”, and proclaims his teaching on issues such as *truth, justice, evangelical peacemaking and chastity*.

The Pastoral Statement of the Bishops of Texas on Human Sexuality represents a much appreciated pastoral effort to present the Church’s teaching on chastity without fear or reticence, with trust in the power of truth and the grace of God.

The whole event of the Millennium is the hour for the apostolic Church to bear witness to the Christ who sent her to the nations, telling her: “Teach them to carry out everything I have commanded you and know that I am with you always”[25].

8. Dear Brothers: what I wish to do today is leave with you and with the whole Church in America, a vision of the Millennium as a *pastoral initiative, an ecclesial event, a response of faith* to the God who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son”[26]. This vision must be captured by the whole Church in the United States and expressed in each diocese, each parish, each community. All the institutions in the Church must be challenged by this spiritual event. The Church’s fidelity to Christ is at stake in the way she will proclaim the Incarnation and the Redemption, in the way she will celebrate, interiorly and publicly, the most important anniversary that humanity has ever known.

Whereas the year 2000 still seems somewhat distant, *the period of “the new Advent” is already a reality for the Church*. Long range preparations are needed now. *Theological reflections* must help to reinforce the faith of God’s people, so that they may mightily proclaim their Redeemer by word and deed in the great Jubilee. Your own pastoral zeal and creativity will help you to prepare worthily your local Churches for this event and to adopt means commensurate with the goals to be attained. All the faithful of the Church must understand the spirit of the Millennium so that they can all contribute to its preparation and celebration.

By their very nature *the seminaries* in your country must fulfill a key role in the renewal required by the Millennium. Together with their Bishops, *the priests* of the new Advent must be able to unite their communities around the person of the Redeemer and to give spiritual leadership in bringing forth *a new Christian humanism*.

The special support of *prayer and penance* must be sought from *contemplative Religious* and that of *salvific suffering* from all *the sick*. *Catholic institutions of higher learning* must contribute with faith by enunciating ever more clearly the Gospel heritage in its relationship to all human learning. All the categories of God’s people must be invited to unite in a great hymn of praise: “To him who loves us and frees us from our sins by his blood... to him be glory and power forever and ever”[27].

May this hymn of praise to the Redeemer, dear Brothers, truly resound throughout Texas,

Oklahoma, Arkansas and the whole United States during the new Advent and in preparation for the Jubilee celebration itself.

[1] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 1.

[2] *Io.* 1, 14.

[3] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 1.

[4] *Io.* 3, 16.

[5] *Matth.* 13, 52.

[6] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 1.

[7] *1 Cor.* 2, 9.

[8] *Rom.* 8, 18.

[9] *Io.* 14, 3.

[10] *Apoc.* 22, 12.

[11] *Ibid.* 22, 20.

[12] *Ibid.* 19,1 3.

[13] Cfr. *ibid.* 17, 14.

[14] *Ibid.* 1, 5.

[15] *Ibid.* 19, 16.

[16] *Apoc.* 1, 18.

[17] *Ibid.* 1, 17.

[18] *Io.* 19, 5.

[19] Cfr. S. Augustini *Tract. in Ioannem*, 34, 9.

[20] *1 Cor.* 1, 24.

[21] Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22.

[22] *Act.* 1, 8.

[23] Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Redemptor Hominis*, 20.

[24] Cfr. *ibid.*

[25] *Matth.* 28, 20.

[26] *Io.* 3, 16.

[27] *Apoc.* 1, 5.

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