



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOPS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
AT THE CONCLUSION OF THE SPECIAL ASSEMBLY**

Saturday, 11 March 1989

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. For four days we have been together. We have prayed, reflected on and discussed our ministry as *Successors of the Apostle, called to be living signs of Jesus Christ*: the compassionate Christ, the praying Christ, the faithful and contradicted Christ, the Christ who came “to preach the Gospel to the poor” (*Luc. 4, 18*). As our assembly draws to a close, I am sure that we share a great sense of gratitude to God for what this meeting has meant for us as pastors, individually and collectively, and for the life of the Church in the United States. Truly, Christ has been in our midst, the Holy Spirit has been our strength and guide, and we have done all things for the glory of the Father. Together we have experienced the joy which the Psalm extolls: “How good and how pleasant it is, brothers dwelling in unity!... For there the Lord gives his blessing, life for ever” (*Ps. 132, 1. 3*).

Our contact during these days has further educated us in *the collegial spirit* and given us a chance to express the communion and solidarity that unite us in Christ and in the Church. A first general conclusion which can be drawn is the usefulness of this type of gathering for understanding on questions or situations affecting the pastoral life of the Church in the various geographical and cultural spheres of her activity.

2. The central theme of our discussions in the general context of evangelization has been *the Bishop as Teacher of the Faith*. It is not my intention here to review the important analyses made of the concrete cultural and social circumstances in which you are called to proclaim the Gospel message as pastors of the Church in the United States. It will be my concern and yours, and the concern of our brother Bishops, to continue this reflection on the relationship between the

Christian message and the contexts in which it is preached and lived.

At this time I refer briefly to the more personal and more basic question of the Bishop's role as Teacher of the Faith as it springs *from the consecration we received with the fullness of the Sacrament of Orders*. Jesus' prayer for his disciples at the Last Supper calls us to consider the radical question of our responsibility for the truth: "(Father) ...sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, so that they also may be consecrated in truth" (*Jo. 17, 17-19*). As Peter in your midst, I must encourage and confirm you and your suffragans and the auxiliary Bishops, and the particular Churches over which you preside, in this consecration to the truth that is the word of God, that is the Son of God made flesh for the salvation of all.

3. In essence, during these days we have been speaking *about faith and the transmission of faith*. Underlying our discussion at all times has been the question of the faith reflected in the particular Churches of your nation, a faith alive in the laity, religious and clergy who form, with the Bishops, the Catholic Church in the United States. With my collaborators in the Roman Curia, I give thanks to God for the faith-filled history of the Church in your country, of which your saints are the most eloquent witnesses. The generous missionary spirit of your sons and daughters – religious, priests and laity – has been and is being evidenced in many parts of the world.

4. You have reflected at length on the ways in which you can better carry out your pastoral service to the *women and men religious of your Dioceses*, sustaining them in their demanding but extremely fruitful observance of the evangelical counsels. You have spoken of the immense contribution of individual religious and religious congregations to the life of the Church in your country, while at the same time recognizing that the state of religious life presents special problems and challenges which require your continuing attention. You have expressed your determination to pursue with responsibility and sensitivity your pastoral service in this regard.

5. Allow me to say a special word about *the priests*. In our discussion on their role as agents of evangelization, many spoke of the devotion and effectiveness of the priests in the United States. It was noted that in some ways they most directly bear the burden of the factors in your culture which clash with their mission to teach and evangelize. With you *I thank the priests of the United States for their ministry*, for all they do to proclaim more effectively Jesus Christ as Lord. As you and your suffragan Bishops gather with your priests for the Chrism Mass this year, please assure them of my gratitude, my affection and blessing. You have brought them even closer to my heart during these days.

6. You have given much attention to the celebration of faith in *the Liturgy and the administration of the Church's sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance*. In fact one of the first requirements of evangelization, one of the very first demands that faith makes on each person who wishes to embrace Christ is penance or conversion. In the opening verses of Saint Mark's

Gospel Jesus himself presents a synthesis of this call to salvation with the word: “Repent and believe in the gospel” (*Marc.* 1, 15). To the Bishops of Region V on their *ad Limina* visits I suggested that “*Conversion as proclaimed by Christ is a whole program of life and pastoral action. It is the basis for an organic view of pastoral ministry because it is linked to call the great aspects of God’s revelation*” (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Allocutio ad quosdam episcopos Faederatarum Civitatum Americae Septentrionales limina Apostolorum visitantes*, 2, die 31 maii 1988: *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, XI, 2 [1988] 1696).

You have discussed conversion in its sacramental form and efficacy. One of the universal needs of the Church which is also among the special requirements of the Church in the United States, is the restoration of the Sacrament of Penance and the renewal of its use (Eiusdem *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 28). Such a renewal will have an important influence on families, the young and on all the laity; its proper and frequent use can profoundly affect religious life, the fostering of vocations, the spiritual preparation of seminarians and the ministry of our brother priests.

7. At this point we return to the difficulty which has surfaced time and time again in our discussions, *the task of handing on the truths of the faith* in a cultural context which questions the integrity and often the very existence of truth. Much of what has been discussed reflects this fundamental challenge to the contemporary Church as she seeks to evangelize. You have pointed to the many ways in which the various agents of evangelization might be helped to proclaim the truths of Scripture and Tradition more effectively. I encourage you to give these suggestions serious consideration.

It is essential that the agents, and in the first place we the pastors, speak the true message, “the gospel of God which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son... through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” (*Rom.* 1, 1-5). We are guardians of something given, and given to the Church universal; something which is not the result of reflection, however competent, on cultural and social questions of the day, and is not merely the best path among many, but the one and only path to salvation: “there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” (*Act.* 4, 12). The People of God and those near and far must *hear the name*. We are all – you and I – bound to make an examination of conscience about how we are fulfilling the task, “lest the cross of Christ be emptied of its power” (*1Cor.* 1, 1). The true measure of our success will consist in *greater holiness, more loving service of those in need, and the advancement of truth and justice* in every sphere of the life of your people and your country. As one of our brothers so rightly said: “Success cannot be the criterion or the condition of evangelization. The criterion and condition of evangelization must be fidelity to mission”.

8. Difficulties will not be lacking. What is important is that challenges or even opposition to the saving truth which the Church professes be met *within the context of faith*. Our Lord and Savior

Jesus Christ in this and in all things points the way for us. Recall Saint John's account of Jesus' teaching which the Church understands as revealing the Eucharist (Cfr. *Io.* 6). Peter's response then must be Peter's response today, a response spoken in the name of the Apostles and their Successors: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (*Ibid.* 6, 68).

In the final analysis, in evangelization we are concerned with proclaiming the truth of Jesus Christ and his Church, the truth that gives life, the truth that alone sets free. Jesus Christ reveals to us the Truth who is God, and the truth that is the totally free human person. The Lord speaks to us as we face our task when he says: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free" (*Io.* 8, 31-32).

9. I am sure that in this meeting we have all become even more aware of the reasons for our *certitude about our mission and its value for today's world*. The source of our confidence is God himself. But we are also deeply encouraged by the holiness and willing service of so many of God's people: young and old, rich and poor, priests, religious and laity. You will go back to particular Churches which are spiritually rich and already possess the resources for a renewed evangelization. You will report to your brother Bishops that the central theme which we discussed in brotherhood and love was the need to be found *faithful in handing on what we ourselves have received* (Cfr. *1Cor.* 4, 2), faithful in ensuring the full and solid formation of seminarians, faithful in ministering to the life and charism of religious, faithful in catechesis, faithful in encouraging the laity to take their proper and rightful place in the Church's life and mission, faithful in upholding the values of life and love in marriage and family life.

As I thank you and your brother Bishops for the ministry you exercise with love and self-giving, and encourage you to pursue further the reflections of these days, I invite the whole Church in the United States *to live by faith in the Son of God, who loved us and gave himself for us* (Cfr. *Gal.* 2, 20).

Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and for the glory of the Most Blessed Trinity, may "the God of peace be with you all. Amen" (*Rom.* 15, 32).

© Copyright 1989 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana