



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER TO THE GERMAN BISHOPS ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT

Monday 15 November 1999

Your Eminence,

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate!*¹ Welcome to the house of the Bishop of Rome, who receives you with great joy because of the bond of communion that unites the Bishops, as successors of the Apostolic College, around Peter. The principal objective of your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles, Peter and Paul, is to rekindle the grace of the episcopal ministry and to draw new energy for your pastoral mission. As the Successor of Peter, it is my task to strengthen you in faith and in your apostolic service (cf. *Lk 22: 32*). At the same time, I have the opportunity, through you, to assure the priests, deacons, religious and laity of the particular Churches entrusted to you of my spiritual closeness: "May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in such harmony with one another, in accord with Christ Jesus, that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Rom 15: 5-6*).

2. Your *ad limina* visit occurs at a special moment. While it is only a few weeks until the beginning of the third millennium, these days remind us of those extraordinary events which 10 years ago marked a turning-point in your homeland. The Berlin Wall fell. The barbed wire was replaced with open doors. The Brandenburg Gate, for decades the symbol of separation, became once again what it had been before: the symbol of Germany's unity. When I see you, dear Brothers, as shepherds of Dioceses in old and new *Länder* gathered around me during these days of your *ad limina* visit, I thank God who guides history with his providence, and repeat a phrase from the Book of Psalms: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity!" (*Ps 133: 1*). The significance of the historical moment we are experiencing prompts me to take as the basic theme of this *ad limina* visit: the Church, which "in Christ is in the nature of sacrament, that is, a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of all mankind" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 1). Later I will discuss further aspects of this theme with the other two groups of your Brother Bishops, but today I would like to look with you at the context surrounding your Church as "the household of God among men" (cf. *1 Tm 3: 15; Rv 21: 3*) in your land. The social reality is certainly too complex to be adequately described in a few sentences. A few clear-cut features must suffice for understanding the essentials.³ The "velvet revolution", which paved the way to freedom without bloodshed, aroused great hopes 10 years ago. Everyone at the time spoke of rosy prospects. But many of those who built castles in the air must be happy today if they can build their lives on a fairly secure basis. You have courageously taken up the

challenges of the last decade and you continue in word and deed to help those who wish to put their lives on a solid footing. For this I express my sincere gratitude to you and to all who support you in this often difficult task. I congratulate you on all the good that distinguishes the Church in Germany. She is socially present, politically relevant, charitably involved and financially generous wherever she is needed. Here I would like to cite one example among many others: the important service that Church counseling centres perform in many areas, especially for pregnant women in distress. Nor can we forget the energy and devotion shown by the association of German Dioceses, despite their own difficult financial circumstances, to support the Bishop of Rome's pastoral ministry for the universal Church. My thoughts also turn to Berlin, where it has been possible to build a suitable structure for the papal representative, thanks in no small way to your contribution. These facts show me that your heart beats for the Successor of Peter, who is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity of both the Bishops and the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). In view of such a firm conviction, we can be sure that the household of God in Germany will also be built on solid rock in the future.⁴ People in your country live in a consumer society, in which the majority of the population enjoys greater material prosperity than ever before. Although this is without doubt an achievement, we cannot overlook its darker side: since the recent turning-point, particularly in the new *Länder*, one can really speak of "consumer shock". In the interests of the economy, many material needs were created and continually increased through clever advertising, giving the impression that one can always have it all. Material goods have often become so paramount, that any desire for religious and moral values is stifled. But in time man senses a lack, if his hands have been filled but his heart remains empty: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (*Mt* 4: 4; cf. *Dt* 8: 3). In this connection, I would like to mention my concern for the meaning of Sunday, which is increasingly threatened with erosion. I appreciate your efforts to safeguard Sunday as the Lord's day and man's day. In my Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini* I developed these points in detail. Moreover, I cannot fail to mention the guidelines you have given on the economic and social situation in Germany, which were developed following a broad consultation process with the Evangelical Church communities and received great attention in public opinion. In so doing you have been prompted by an idea that is very dear to me as well: man, as a person, may never be overwhelmed by economic interests. This is a real risk, because consumer society, in which God is often considered dead, has created enough idols, a particular one being the idol of profit at any cost.

5. Another phenomenon in your milieu is the communications media. In the network of the modern mass media news can be spread across the globe in a matter of seconds. Often the individual is no longer merely informed; he is so drowning in information, as it were, that he can no longer grasp, let alone absorb and select the news. As a result, he becomes lonely, anxious and disoriented. This is because in a pluralistic society whatever promises novelty and sensation is presented indiscriminately. Certainly, there are also valuable programmes of information and entertainment. But people must be taught mature judgement if they are to choose wisely. The information society is thus a challenge for Pastors. On the one hand, efforts must be made to increase people's critical maturity, as I just mentioned; on the other, it is a question of promoting good quality news. The Church is also called to "evangelize" the mass media! If used properly, they can become a kind of "pulpit" for Pastors. You must carefully choose the men and women who have the task of speaking for the Church on radio and television committees and councils. It should be your concern to support young people who wish to serve the truth in the world of journalism! Daily experience shows that the Church is an attractive topic for many journalists. This fact should not be underestimated. Therefore, it is advisable in principle not to avoid them. "Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 *Pt* 3: 15). This, however, does not eliminate the obligation of reasonable confidentiality, required both by due mutual respect and by the need for calm reflection on the problem to be examined. Therefore, you should carefully decide on a case by case basis whether it

is worth appearing before the cameras and speaking into the microphone.⁶ Your mission as Pastors, Venerable Brothers, is carried out in an increasingly secularized society, in which religious values do not have great importance. Many people live as if God did not exist. The economic secularization of 200 years ago has been followed, in the century now drawing to a close, by waves of intellectual secularization, with no end in sight. In your country this process has also accelerated in the wake of reunification. There are many confirmations of this diagnosis: united Germany has not become more Protestant - as was initially thought - but simply less Christian. The fundamental consensus on Christian values as the basis of society seems to be crumbling. The Church must ask herself about her own role in a society where references to God are becoming increasingly rare, because in many areas there is no more room for him. This challenge puts particular pressure on you, dear Brothers. I know the significant historical and cultural role that the Church has played and continues to play in Germany: it is also expressed in a unique legal form and ultimately in the accords between the Holy See and the new *Länder*. On the one hand, I deeply appreciate this great heritage, which should be preserved; on the other, I can well understand your suffering over the numerous defections of the faithful and, as a result, the Church's decreasing influence in the life of civil society. I also know that you are asking yourselves whether the Church's rights and duties in your country will be effectively maintained. This tension is also felt at the parish level, where priests, deacons and pastoral assistants are sometimes forced to perform balancing acts: on the one hand, they are obliged to provide a broad "pastoral service" for a partly indifferent majority; on the other, they must show appropriate pastoral concern for the "Church of the called or committed", that is, to those who really want to follow Jesus. This is not a Gordian knot that can just be cut. It must instead be patiently loosened through assiduous prayer, sincere reflection and the planning of courageous little steps that make the Church's witness to the splendour of truth credible in your homeland. To meet this challenge of secular society, the true alternative is not to take refuge in the "little flock" (*Lk* 12: 32). You must instead be ready for dialogue, that is, for critical and reasonable discussion, enduring the tensions that cannot be resolved at the moment. The Gospel solution is not to withdraw from society! It is instead a question of making yourselves heard - in season or out of season (cf. *2 Tm* 4: 2)! Be involved wherever you think you must speak out for God and man! You are not of the world, but do not remove yourselves from the world (cf. *Jn* 15: 19)! Your voice is needed in a secularized society where there is more and more silence about God.⁷ The conditions surrounding the Church in Germany, however, should not be regarded as simply agnostic or religiously indifferent. Whether excluded or silenced, God is there, and an ardent longing for him is still present in the hearts of many. For, in the end, man cannot be content with what is merely human. He seeks a truth that transcends him. Even if without a clear perception, man searches for this truth, because he realizes that therein lies the meaning of his life. St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, whom I canonized last year and proclaimed a co-patroness of Europe on the occasion of the recent Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, expressed this insight in a saying: "Whoever searches for the truth, is searching for God, whether he knows it or not". Answering the God-question is a great opportunity for the Church. So open the Church's doors to everyone who is sincerely searching for God! Whoever asks the Church about truth should expect that the Word of God written and handed on will be reliably and completely explained to him (cf. *Dei Verbum*, n. 10). In this way the search for truth is protected from the dangers of a confused, irrational and syncretistic religiosity, and the Church of the living God will be seen as "the pillar and bulwark of the truth" (*1 Tm* 3: 15). The truth of faith must be matched with authenticity in life. In her varied activities, the Church is without doubt present in many different areas of society in your country, a fact that is recognized by circles that have no connection with the Church. However, so that this involvement will not harm her true mission, I ask you to examine and, if necessary, to sharpen the Christian image of institutions that work in the Church's name. A purely horizontal love of neighbour must be more and more crossed with the vertical love of God. The Cross, in fact, is not only an emblem that we Bishops wear on our chests. It is the great plus sign that identifies us as Christians.

Therefore, in Catholic homes the Cross should be more than a piece of jewelry or furniture. It should be the trademark of the tireless commitment of the numerous Church workers in the social, educational and cultural fields. Under the arms of the Cross the "culture of life" flourishes, where people are welcomed, particularly those who are usually marginalized all too quickly: the unborn and the dying. Therefore, the spiritual and moral formation of personnel in ecclesiastical or Church-related institutions must be encouraged in every way! For true solidarity with people must be solidly based in God. By sending his Son into the world God showed that he is a passionate "lover of life" (*Wis 11: 26*).⁸ Dear Brothers! I would not like to end these thoughts without confiding something to you. Three times in my Pontificate I have been granted to visit your beloved land as a pilgrim. Among the many moving impressions I cherish is the melody of a song that the faithful sang with great fervour: "A glorious house appears over all the land...". This hymn speaks of joy over the Church and of the pride one should feel in belonging to her. Great numbers of the faithful in Germany are still filled with these sentiments. I am thinking of the priests, deacons and religious who support the Church by the witness of their service and way of life. I am thinking of the many men and women who live their vocation as lay people. They collaborate full-time or as volunteers in the care of souls, or contribute their talents to parish and administrative councils. Nor can I forget the Church associations, some of which resemble mighty trees by their impressive age, and the young spiritual communities, some of which are still tender plants. I would particularly like to mention those who pray in silence and breathe life into the Church's work. Bring everyone my heartfelt greeting! Invite the young people especially to World Youth Day in the Year 2000: the Pope is expecting them!⁹ There is no better way to express my hope for you and all Catholics in your country than what St Peter said: "Like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ ... that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light" (*1 Pt 2: 5, 9b*). Through the intercession of Mary, the "*house of gold*" who is the model of the Church, I hope that in the new millennium the Church in Germany will be and will increasingly become what you sing in your beautiful hymn: "A glorious house appears over all the land". With these thoughts and hopes, I impart my Apostolic Blessing to you and to everyone entrusted to your pastoral care.