



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF PANAMA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Saturday, 3 March 2001

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

1. I am pleased to receive you today, Pastors of God's pilgrim Church in Panama, who have come to Rome for your *ad limina* visit. During these days you have had an opportunity to renew your faith at the tombs of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul, to express your full communion with the Bishop of Rome, with whom you are united in "a bond of unity, charity and peace" (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 22), and to invigorate your pastoral concern for all the Churches (cf. *Christus Dominus*, n. 6). Your contacts with the various dicasteries of the Roman Curia will also have given you support and guidance in the mission entrusted to you.

I am deeply grateful to Bishop José Luis Lacunza Maestrojuán of David, President of the Episcopal Conference, for the kind words he spoke to me on behalf of all, expressing your sentiments of affection and the aspirations and worries that motivate you in your ministry. As Pastor of the whole Church, I encourage the concern you show for the Panamanian people, to whom I ask you to bring the Pope's affectionate greeting; he has not forgotten the intense and memorable day he spent with them on 5 March 1983.

2. In recent years the Lord, who promised his presence until the end of time (cf. *Mt 28: 20*), has offered his Church an experience of his gifts. The Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for America and the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* showed the new context of evangelization, which is less and less restricted by the divisions and barriers that seemed insurmountable, so that a broader and more universal sense of communion can be fostered (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 5).

The celebration of the Great Jubilee, in turn, has been not only an extraordinarily rich ecclesial experience in itself, but also a pressing appeal to all ecclesial communities to be open to what God expects of them at the beginning of this new century and this new millennium. As I said in my Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, "we now need to profit from the grace received, by putting it into practice in resolutions and guidelines for action" (n. 3). I therefore also invite you to do this in each of your Dioceses (cf. *ibid.*, n. 29).

3. Among your various tasks as Pastors of the particular Churches in Panama, you know that the proclamation of the Gospel is the priority in your mission as heads and guides of that portion of the People of God entrusted to you. Indeed, Jesus Christ is the "definitive answer to the question of the meaning of life, and to those fundamental questions which still trouble so many men and women on the American continent" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 10). Jesus himself made this clear when he sent out his disciples, advising them not to take anything with them for the journey on their mission to proclaim that the kingdom of God is at hand (cf. *Mt* 10: 7-14). In this way he taught them that the apostle must put all his trust in the Lord and in the message of salvation he brings, living in him and for him and letting no other human support, interest or criteria stand in the way of his task.

In this regard, it is important for each Bishop to inspire this same spirit in his co-workers, especially his priests. It obviously requires him to be close to them, to their spiritual and material needs and to the often difficult conditions in which they carry out their ministry. In this way the indispensable bond of communion with their Bishop, from whom they expect to receive the encouragement they need to live and generously fulfil their priestly work, will be strengthened.

This will also make a decisive contribution to another of the most pressing priorities in your Dioceses, the fostering of vocations, which demands serious effort on everyone's part. In this area the various programmes must be supported especially by the witness of priests and consecrated persons, who should show unconditional devotion to the Gospel cause. Their very life, "their fraternal unity and zeal for the evangelization of the world are the first and most convincing factor in the growth of vocations" (*Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 41).

4. I know of your concern for some aspects of your people which seem to prevent the Gospel from penetrating their hearts. There are many differences from one region to another, which sometimes have a marked ethnic and cultural identity; some very rapid social changes which are disconcerting to many, especially to young people; and the excessively widespread temptation of a superficial life, of selfish consumerism, of irresponsible sexuality and even of easy recourse to violence.

In this regard, far from giving in to any temptation to discouragement, you must have an attitude of closeness and a word for young people which challenges them directly and without subterfuge, saves them from a superficial or meaningless life, reawakens their enthusiasm for responsibility

and protects them from being beseiged by a world full of deceptive allurements. With St Augustine, we can say of many young people today, "who does not long for truth and life? But not everyone finds the way" (*Sermon*, 142, 1).

There are many ways for Christ's message to reach them. What is important is that it be authentic and transparent, that it be deeply rooted in their being through an ongoing, systematic catechesis, that it fill their hearts with joy and be celebrated in the liturgy, shared in the community and discovered more and more in every person's heart through prayer (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 33).

5. During my pastoral visit to Panama, I had the opportunity to talk about the Christian meaning of the family, which is not only the basic cell of society, but also a privileged place for living and transmitting the faith. The family should therefore hold the pre-eminent place in evangelization programmes, in order to respond to God's plan for marriage and to make homes themselves channels for the spread of Gospel values. On that occasion I remarked that "marriage is a story of mutual love, a path to human and Christian maturity. Only in the person's progressive self-manifestation can a relationship of love be consolidated which involves the totality of the spouses' life" (*Homily at Mass for Families*, Panama, 5 March 1983, n. 4).

This lofty concept of marriage and the family continues to be one of the challenges for the Church of the third millennium which, in your country too, shows the existence of certain attitudes which radically impede the fulfilment of a family project based on the divine plan. I am referring in particular to the scant esteem for the dignity of women and the frequent desertion of conjugal and family duties. Indeed, it is sad to see how at times "women still meet forms of discrimination" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 45). Therefore, family ministry must work to remedy these deficiencies through necessary and appropriate marriage preparation, constant attention to home life, and appeals to the responsibility of public authorities regarding educational programmes and the integration of young people into society.

6. On the other hand, the celebration of the Great Jubilee has made people feel the need for the Church's gaze to be "more than ever firmly set on the face of the Lord" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 16). Moreover, those who have been entrusted with the mission of guiding the People of God receive from Christ the example and best direction for pastoral activity that is selfless and generous to the point of giving their lives (cf. *Jn* 10: 11; *Lumen gentium*, n. 27). The present circumstances, which more and more frequently lead to dispersion and alienation, make it particularly important for a pastor not only to serve his regular faithful, but also tirelessly to seek out those who are confused or distant (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 28).

The Gospel image of putting the lost sheep on one's shoulders (*Lk* 15: 4-5), suggests the ever more frequent situation of many Christians who, although they would like to remain firm in their faith or return to it within the Church, do not feel strong enough to resume the journey on their

own. Thus there is a need for special attention to the weak and to those who, despite their good will, find it difficult to live in full harmony with their baptismal commitment, so that the flickering flame of their faith will not die but burn radiantly.

7. In Panama the Church and her Pastors have a great tradition of assistance to the needy, defence of ethnic minorities, human advancement and promotion of education. I would like to encourage you to continue in this direction and, to promote with "greater resourcefulness a new 'creativity' in charity" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 50), to deal with the magnitude of certain phenomena of social and cultural marginalization, as well as with the new material and spiritual forms of poverty which are emerging at the beginning of the new millennium.

In this regard, it is important to maintain your prophetic voice regarding the continuing situations of discrimination, even when they do not appear to cause social destabilization. However, creativity in charity must aim above all at seeking methods and activities for one and all in building their future and that of the local and national community. The Church, which works to promote the integral good of each individual, and therefore of his social and community dimension, is not satisfied with achieving mere well-being or a comfortable life. She must strive to foster the true dignity of the person, which implies, on the one hand, respect for the individual's fundamental human rights and, on the other, his sense of responsibility, solidarity and cooperation in building a better world for everyone.

This is a specific mission of the lay faithful, who need special pastoral attention to receive strong Christian formation and great strength of mind in their social mission. In this way they will be able to imbue the world of culture, science and politics with Gospel values. Moreover, the unflagging hope that comes from faith and their example of life will encourage others in their commitment to overcome those situations which cause the material and moral degradation that makes women, children and certain social groups especially vulnerable and leads to crime and violence.

8. At the end of this meeting, I would cordially like to share in the hopes that unite you and that help you to work more and more as brothers, thereby strengthening ecclesial communion, as I invited you to do in my Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (cf. nn. 44-45). The image your country has in the world as a crucial place of passage and communication is an invitation for your Ecclesial Communities to set an example by their ability to join forces, to engage in dialogue with everyone and to create unbreakable bonds of unity, while at the same time respecting the diversity of each culture.

As I ask the Virgin Mary to accompany you in your pastoral ministry and to protect her beloved Panamanian sons and daughters, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you.
