



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE BISHOPS OF BRAZIL  
FROM THE NORTH EAST REGION III  
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

*Tuesday, 10 December 2002*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. With great joy I welcome you today after the personal meetings I have had with you. I greet you with a cordial brotherly greeting and thank the Lord for the full communion that binds you to your local Churches and to the Successor of Peter.

The still recent division of the Ecclesiastical Province of Salvador, with the creation of the two new Provinces of Fria de Santana and Vitória da Conquista, aims to facilitate the organizational work and accompaniment of this territory that, like the ecclesiastical province of Aracaju, challenges your creativity and the capacity of the whole Church to evangelize.

You have before your eyes like an open book, this region with its full historical, social and religious reality. The faith of the Brazilian people originated mainly in this area. In 1676 the Ecclesiastical Province of Brazil was founded, with the Archiepiscopal See in Bahia, around which were grouped as suffragans the Dioceses of Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco, Maranhão, and later, in the following century, the Dioceses of Grão-Pará, São Paulo and Mariana, with the Prelatures of Cuibá and Goiás. Time cannot erase the memory of many native Pastors and those who came from abroad who devoted themselves generously to scattering the seeds of the Word.

I thank *Bishop Ricardo José Weberberger* of Barreiras, President of your *Region*, for describing in your name the hopes and difficulties, the plans and expectations of the Dioceses entrusted to your care. I would like to take this opportunity to send my affectionate greeting to all the priests, religious and Christian faithful of your dioceses, whom I think of with esteem and sympathy.

2. *Consecrated persons in the Church* have a special place in the Pope's heart and, I am sure, also in all of your hearts, dear Bishops. The charism of each one is an eloquent sign of participation in the manifold riches of Christ, whose "breadth and length and height and depth" (cf. Eph 3,18) always exceed by far what we are able to absorb of his fullness. The Church, which is the visible face of Christ in time, welcomes and nourishes congregations and institutes with very different lifestyles, since they all contribute to revealing the richly diversified presence and dynamism of the Word of God incarnate and of the community of those who believe in Him.

At a time when there is a visible risk of creating human beings with a single dimension, which inevitably ends by being historicist or immanentist, consecrated persons are called to keep alive the value and meaning of the prayer of adoration, that is not separate but united with the living commitment of generous service to their neighbour. From this prayer religious draw motivation and effectiveness: prayer and work, action and contemplation, are binomials which, in Christ, never degenerate into contradictory opposites, but develop in reciprocal complementarity and fruitful integration.

Contemporary society needs to see in consecrated men and women how great is the harmony that exists between the human and the divine, between the visible and the invisible (cf. II Cor 4,18). It needs to see how much more important is the invisible than the visible, without ever trivializing or humiliating the visible but animating and elevating it to the level of the eternal plan of salvation. This is the witness they must bear in the world today: to show all the goodness and love that are contained in the mystery of Christ (cf. Ti 3,4), and, at the same time, how much the transcendent and supernatural are needed for their mission among men and women.

3. I want to underline how much we need to give credit to the many religious congregations who sent the flower of their vocations to form and educate this people with great love and dedication. We cannot forget the Franciscans, Dominicans, Augustinians, Benedictines, Jesuits, Salesians, Vincentians, Comboni Missionaries and *fidei donum* priests. What we see today in your national territory is the fruit of the hidden, silent, praiseworthy work of many lay persons and religious, men and women, who have contributed and are contributing to create a Christian soul in Brazilians. Let us recognize them and thank God, for in the silence and disinterested gift of themselves, the City of God has grown and the vigorous tree of the Church has borne the good fruit of grace.

The many religious communities, both active and contemplative, certainly constitute a great treasure for the Churches you govern. Each one of them is a gift for the diocese, which it helps to build, offering the experience of the Spirit that goes with its own charism and the evangelizing activity characteristic of its mission. Precisely because they are a priceless gift for the whole Church the Bishop is required "to support and help consecrated persons, so that, in communion with the Church, they open themselves to spiritual and pastoral initiatives responding to the needs of our time, while remaining faithful to their founding charism" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 49). In this important mission, respectful and fraternal dialogue will be the best way to join forces and ensure

the indispensable pastoral cohesion in each diocese, under the guidance of its pastor.

Support and encourage religious communities that are integrated into the life of the diocese

4. Religious communities that are integrated in the life of their diocese deserve all possible support and encouragement. They make a precious contribution, since although "there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit" (1 Cor 12,4). The Second Vatican Council said in this regard: "Let religious see well to it that the Church truly show forth Christ through them with ever-increasing clarity to believers and unbelievers alike - Christ in contemplation on the mountain, or proclaiming the kingdom of God to the multitudes, or healing the sick and wounded and converting sinners to a better life" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 46).

The Church can only show joy and appreciation for all that the religious accomplish in universities, schools, hospitals and other institutions. This vast service to the people of God is reinforced by all the religious communities which have responded adequately to the Conciliar exhortation, by being faithful to their founding charism and by a renewed dedication to the essential elements of religious life (cf. Decree *Perfectae caritatis*, n. 2). I pray God that he will abundantly reward all the religious communities for their collaboration in the pastoral work of the diocese, both in the hidden, silent life of the monastery and in the activity of assisting and forming in the faith all sectors of society, including the indigenous peoples.

May pastoral activities be guided by a sound initiative in spreading the revealed faith in all walks of life. Here for example, one can bring up the need to challenge the means of social communication for a correct presentation of the truth. Religious throughout the world, and Brazil is no exception, make use of the mass media as a major instrument for spreading the Good News. Hence the importance of giving appropriate guidance, so that they are not carried away by ideologies contrary to the Magisterium of the Church, but endeavour to preserve unity with the See of Peter.

In its great diversity, consecrated life constitutes a great resource for the Church in your country. The spiritual quality of consecrated persons, who offer great benefit to the faithful and are a valuable help to priests, continually fosters in the people of God an awareness of "the need to respond with holiness of life to the love of God poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit ... by reflecting in their conduct the sacramental consecration which is brought about by God's power in Baptism, Confirmation, or Holy Orders" (*Vita consecrata*, n. 33).

In fidelity to their charism, in communion and in dialogue with the other members of the Church and with bishops first of all, religious communities will respond generously to the Spirit's call, and be concerned to seek new ways for the mission so that Christ may be announced to all the cultures even in the most remote regions.

5. In a profoundly secularized environment, the proclamation of the Kingdom of God through the witness of men and women religious is decisive. For this reason I desire to invite you to renew

your attention to the *promotion and care of consecrated life* in your country. The practice of the evangelical counsels witnesses to "the new and eternal life which we have acquired through the redemptive work of Christ and prelude to our future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom". (*Lumen gentium*, n. 44). The distinctive role of the evangelical message fully justifies the increase of initiatives, both on the diocesan level and at the Bishops' Conference to motivate young people ever more to respond generously to a vocation to institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life.

If we consider that in less than two decades in Brazil the number of vocations to the diocesan priesthood has overtaken the number of vocations to the religious life, we will understand the increased effort that the religious themselves have to exert, to recruit new workers for the Lord's harvest.

This problem is of great importance for the life of the Church in the world. There is "a pressing need to implement an extensive plan of vocational promotion, based on personal contact and involving parishes, schools and families in the effort to foster a more attentive reflection on life's essential values. These reach their fulfilment in the response which each person is invited to give to God's call, particularly when the call implies a total giving of self and of one's energies to the cause of the Kingdom". (*Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 46).

I encourage the superiors of the congregations and institutes present in your dioceses to offer to the novices of both sexes a human, intellectual and spiritual formation that allows a *conversion of their whole being to Christ*, so that their consecration may ever more shape their self-offering to the Father.

The activity and programmes of the Brazilian Conference of Religious must first of all "be distinguished by its reverent respect and special obedience to the Successor of Peter and to his directives" that emanate from this Apostolic See. I also remind you once again that "all initiatives in this important sector, both those promoted by the Brazilian Conference as well as the others, initiated by other structures of regional or local coordination, must be put under the effective supervision and responsibility of the major superiors and the diocesan bishop.... The bishops of the region ... have an objective responsibility and should be in a position to control and effectively support" (*Address to Brazilian Bishops from North East Region II*, 11 July 1995, n. 6; *ORE* 19 July 1995, p. 5).

Moreover, one sometimes hears talk of the *refoundation* of congregations, but disregarding - over and above the insecurity and confusion created in many people of good faith - that it is above all, a matter of their setting out anew completely from Christ, and of examining their *sentire cum Ecclesia* (thinking with the Church). It is therefore urgently necessary that the reorganization not only aim at human competence, but at an explicit Christian and Catholic formation. A religious life that does not express the joy of belonging to the Church, and with her, to Jesus Christ, has

already lost its first and basic opportunity for promoting vocations.

6. As a bishops' conference and also individually as pastors, you will certainly examine with objectivity and respect the growing scarcity of vocations that is occurring in many institutes, while others constantly flourish.

It is a constitutive part of your ministry to sustain and guide the observance of the evangelical counsels, through which religious are consecrated to God, in Jesus Christ, to belong to him exclusively.

The care of religious life is particularly urgent when one speaks of *vocational identity*. In a spirit of deep humility, and taking as a reference point Him "who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think" (Eph 3,20), men and women religious should ask themselves a few questions about the renewal proposed by the Second Vatican Council. Are they seeking to follow it faithfully, has it produced the expected fruits of holiness and apostolic zeal?

Have they put into practice the directives of certain documents, published with my approval in recent years, on formation in religious institutes and on contemplative life (for example, the Instruction on the Contemplative Life and the Enclosure of Nuns *Verbi sponsa* of 1999)?

The renewal of religious life will depend on growth in God's love, keeping in mind that the "contemplation of divine things and assiduous union with God in prayer is to be the first and foremost duty of all religious" (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 663 1). The only effective way the better to discover one's identity is the rigorous but consoling process of sincere, personal conversion, with humble recognition of one's imperfections and sins. Confidence in the power of Christ's resurrection (cf. Phil 3.10) will help overcome all dryness and weakness, eliminating the sense of disenchantment that is felt on certain occasions.

7. Men and women who are consecrated to God in *perfect chastity* sometimes have to face the abandonment or indifference of those around them and consequently face solitude in the harsh and bitter sense of the word. At those times, the desire for human support and consolation can reawaken the memory of what they have left behind in life: the natural desire to be prolonged through children, the desire for affection and the comfort of family warmth. These are humanly understandable aspirations but in the perspective of the faith it is possible to transcend them in view of the Kingdom of God.

Whoever has taken the crucial step of consecration did so reassured by Christ's promise that "there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive much more in the present time, and eternal life in the age to come" (Lk 18,29-30). In moments of trial it is necessary to imitate Jesus who, on the eve of the

Passion, abandoned himself without reserve to the Father's will, thus setting the example of a true *obedience*, which is not servile nor does it limit one's autonomy, but is a path of true freedom for the children of God. It is therefore necessary to reassert the serene conviction that He who began this good work in consecrated persons will bring it to completion on the day of Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 1,6).

History teaches that certain cases of decline in the fervour and vitality of religious life are connected with a decline in the understanding and practice of *evangelical poverty*, although the lack of fulfilment of the other evangelical counsels, to a greater or lesser extent, also affects fidelity to the consecrated life. In imitating Christ "who became poor" for our sake (cf. II Cor 8,9), religious are called to "carry out a sincere review of their lives regarding their solidarity with the poor" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 60). If they do not do this, they will fall into the temptation of being preachers of a poverty of which they do not set an example in their own lives, when they demand poverty of others without living it themselves.

Finally, through the free and total gift of themselves to Christ and to the Church, women and men religious can witness in a surprising way that the spirit of the Beatitudes is the way *par excellence* to transform the world and re-establish all things in Christ (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 31).

8. Venerable brothers, in concluding my fraternal meeting with you, I desire to reaffirm all the affection and esteem I have for each of you. In listening to you, I have realized the dedication with which you govern your dioceses, and appreciated the communion that binds you to one another.

May Mary, sublime model of consecration, sustain your dedication and your unity, which I wholeheartedly confirm with an ample Apostolic Blessing which I also impart to the priests, seminarians, novices and the other members of your Christian communities.