



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE FIRST GROUP OF BISHOPS
FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM» VISIT**

Friday, 15 April 1983

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. It is a great joy for me to welcome you as the first group of American Bishops making your *ad Limina* visit in this Holy Year of the Redemption. I wish to tell you immediately how close I feel to the faithful of the New York region and of the Military Ordinariate and to all the faithful of the United States, who are very much in my thoughts and prayers. But I wish to emphasise above all my spiritual union with you my brother Bishops. I am sure that all of you like me find special strength in our meeting today, because, in the power of the Holy Spirit, we are actuating the Episcopal collegiality of the Church. For you, moreover, it is right and just to know that *you do not work and toil alone*. You are supported by the Successor of Peter and the entire College of Bishops.

2. Today I wish to reflect with you on our common mission as Bishops: *to proclaim Jesus Christ, the Redeemer and Reconciler of humanity*. I wish to do so within the double context of the Holy Year of the Redemption and the forthcoming Synod of Bishops that has its theme: "Reconciliation and Penance in the Mission of the Church". In my Letter of January 25 last to the Bishops of the Church, I endeavoured to point out how these two events are intimately linked: "Reconciliation", I wrote, "is nothing other than the Redemption which the Father has offered to every person in the death and Resurrection of his Son, and which he continues still today to offer to every sinner, waiting, like the Father in the parable of the prodigal son, for the repentant return of his son through conversion" (IOANNIS PAULI PP. II *Epistula ad totius mundi Episcopos occasione oblata praesentationis "Instrumenti Laboris" pro VI Sessione Generali Synodi Episcoporum preparati, 2, die 25 ian. 1983*).

The Synod, linked to the Holy Year, will seek ways of more effectively proclaiming the reconciliation of the Redemption and of eliciting from the faithful a response of conversion and penance to God's call; and we can be sure that the Synod will bring immense insights to its collegial task. But already as Bishops we have the task every day of proclaiming reconciliation according to the rich apostolic patrimony of the Church. Ours is truly, in the expression of Saint Paul, "the ministry of reconciliation" (2 Cor. 5, 18).

3. And today I would propose for your consideration this *ministry of reconciliation in all its implications*. We are truly called to proclaim the reconciliation of humanity with God. This means reviving a sense of God, of his word, of his commandments - of the need for accepting his will as the real criterion for human action. Proclaiming reconciliation means reviving a sense of sin among our people; this in turn can lead us to recognise the roots of human responsibility in the varied fields of economic, social, historical, cultural and political ills. When man understands his alienation from God, he can begin to perceive how he is in opposition with his brothers and sisters and with creation itself. The proclamation can then become an effective call to peace. Proclaiming reconciliation means insisting on the greatness of God's pardon and on his compassionate love. To offer the response of the Redemption to a world made conscious of sin is to proclaim the revelation of mercy and the message of hope which is in "Christ Jesus our hope" (1 Tim. 1, 1).

4. To proclaim reconciliation means, in particular way, *promoting the Sacrament of Penance*. It means stressing the importance of the Sacrament as it relates to conversion, to Christian growth, to the very renewal of society that cannot be healed without the forgiveness of sins.

It is our role as Bishops to point out that both original sin and personal sin are at the basis of the evils that affect society and that there is a constant conflict between good and evil, between Christ and Satan. It is salutary for our people to realise that they are involved in the continuation of the Paschal conflict - *Mors et vita duello conflixere mirando* - but that they are fortified by the strength of the Risen Christ. Only when the faithful recognise sin in their own lives are they ready to understand reconciliation and to open their hearts to penance and personal conversion. Only then are they able to contribute to the renewal of society, since personal conversion is also the only way that leads to the lasting renewal of society. *This personal conversion, by divine precept, is intimately linked to the Sacrament of Penance.*

Just five years ago this month, Paul VI spoke to the New York Bishops during the last *ad Limina* visit. With prophetic insistence he emphasised both the importance of conversion and its relationship to the Sacrament of Penance. He stated at that time: Conversion constitutes the goal to be achieved by our apostolic ministry: to awaken a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, a consciousness of its personal and social dimensions, together with a realisation that 'grace has far surpassed sin' (Rom. 5, 20). His solicitude for conversion and its various sacramental aspects is my own today. His words retain their total relevance for the Church in the United States and throughout the world, and *I propose them once again to your pastoral zeal and*

responsibility.

In particular he requested that priests be encouraged by the Bishops *to give special priority to the ministry of the Sacrament of Penance*. He wrote: "If priests deeply understand how closely they Sacrament of Penance, with the Saviour in the work of conversion, they will give themselves, with ever greater zeal to this ministry. More Confessors will readily be available to the faithful. Other works, for lack of time, may have to be postponed or even abandoned, but not the Confessional". Our ministry as priests and Bishops certainly means that we are called upon to go in search of those who have sinned, so as to invite them to return to the fullness of the Father's love. In doing so, let us help up hope and proclaim mercy. Let us, together with our priests, concentrate the attention of the faithful on the person of Jesus Christ the Redeemer, who personally forgives and reconciles each individual. For the glory of the Father let us encourage our people to understand the great truth that "the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin" (1 Jo. 1, 7). Yes, dear Brothers, let us emphasise over and over again the immense value of a personal encounter with the God of mercy *through individual confession*. Let us, with our people, raise a hymn of praise to "the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God" (Hebr. 9, 14).

5. In speaking to the group of New York Bishops, Paul VI also dealt with *the question of general absolution*, and its proper application. The experience of the universal Church confirms the need on the part of all the Bishops for further pastoral vigilance. The new Code of Canon Law points out again the exceptional character of this practice, repeating that general absolution is not envisioned solely because of large numbers of penitents assembled for a great celebration or pilgrimage: "Ratione solius magni concursus paenitentium, qualis haberi potest in magna aliqua festivitate aut peregrinatione" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, [can. 961](#), § 1, 2°).

I would ask once again for your zealous pastoral and collegial solicitude to help ensure that these norms, as well as *the norms regulating the First Confession of children*, are understood and properly applied. The treasures of Christ's love in the Sacrament of Penance are so great that children too must be initiated into them. The patient effort of parents, teachers and priests needed to prepare children for this Sacrament are of great value for the whole Church.

6. In this Holy Year of the Redemption I would ask that *a whole pastoral program be developed around the Sacrament of Penance* and be effected by practical means. This will include a renewed effort at catechises, so that the Sacrament can be made a dynamic part of the lives of young and old alike. Frequent penitential celebrations including the individual confession and absolution of sins will be a great help to the faithful in grasping better the realities of sin and grace, and in experiencing the great joy of meeting Christ in an encounter of love, mercy and pardon. The availability of Confessors, emphasised and publicised in different ways, such as Church bulletins, can give a great impetus to the faithful to go to Confession, since God's grace has already awakened a desire or a need for the Sacrament in the hearts of many. Something- totally

consonant with our priestly and apostolic ministry is for us to invite the faithful repeatedly to reconciliation with God and with the ecclesial community. As pastors, we must be humbly conscious of our weaknesses and our sins, and yet, in God's plan of mercy, we have been given the charism and obligation to call the faithful to repentance and conversion, and to lead the way.

As mentioned in the *Ordo Paenitentiae*, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance is always permitted during any season or on any day (Cfr. *Ordo Paenitentiae*, 12). Yet it is *particularly appropriate during Lent*, so as to prepare the faithful for a fitting celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the grace of which is so effectively presented to them during the liturgy of the Sacred Triduum. The faithful are certainly to be encouraged to confess their sins before these last days of Holy Week as a spiritual preparation for them; at the same time this will help to diminish the heavy pressure on Confessors. Nevertheless, I would ask that Bishops urge their priests to do everything possible in their pastoral generosity and zeal to make Confessions available also during the last days of Holy Week. There will inevitably be people who, in spite of everything, will need this opportunity of grace. This generous sacrifice on the part of priests will allow them to share even more deeply in the Paschal Mystery and will be amply rewarded by Christ.

The Holy Year is also an excellent time to help our people reflect on the rich content of the "Our Father" as a prayer of reconciliation: "Forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us". By the grace of God and through your apostolic ministry may the Holy Year find the Church ever more as a reconciling and reconciled community, attentive to *the word of God as the criteria according to which the whole "ministry of reconciliation" is applied*

7. As we pursue our ministry of reconciliation let us always look to both aspects of the person's return to God: the reconciling action of God and the response of the individual through penance and conversion. There is no doubt that penance and conversion involve great effort, and are sometimes extremely painful. There is no doubt that the word of God is demanding and sometimes the human being is confused in concrete situations which call for much more than human effort and which require humble and persevering prayer. And yet as pastors *we must not underestimate the limitless power of Christ's grace*, nor can we attempt to alter the requirements of the Gospel. We are accountable to Jesus Christ the Good Shepherd for exercising true pastoral compassion, and we must not be surprised if the world falsely equates fidelity to the eternal word of God with insensitivity to human weakness. On the contrary, the Redemption touches hearts precisely through the revelation of God's world. What we must do is to give the prophetic example of reconciliation, conversion and penance in our own lives, proclaiming by word and example that Jesus Christ is the only Redeemer and Reconciler of humanity.

Let us dear Brothers, walk this path together, united with Mary the Mother of Jesus and united among ourselves and with the world-wide Episcopate. In this great bond of collegiality between all the Bishops and the Successor of Peter there is strength for your pastoral initiatives and the important guarantee of their supernatural effectiveness. In the ministry of reconciliation, in the

dispensation of the mystery of the Redemption through the Sacrament of Penance, supernatural effectiveness is of supreme importance. Be convinced, dear Brothers, that *if we walk together*, the Lord Jesus will reveal himself to us; he will convert us ever further to his love; *he will use us as servant pastors to bring his Redemption to the world*.

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