



The Holy See

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

Monday, 5 September 1983

Venerable and dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

The experience of the whole post-conciliar life of the Church confirms just *how much the renewal willed by the Second Vatican Council depends on the ministry of Bishops*: on the way this ministry is conceived, on the way it is exercised. As Bishops gathered collegially in the Holy Spirit, let us reflect together on certain aspects of this ministry of ours.

1. It is clear that *the Incarnational economy of salvation* is continued through us as servant pastors chosen to lead God's people to the fullness of life that exists in Jesus Christ the Incarnate Word of God. To understand the Church of the Incarnate Word, in which all grace is dispensed through the sacred humanity of the Son of God, is to understand how important it is for every Bishop in his own humanity to be *a living sign of Jesus Christ* (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 21). We who are invested with the mission of the Good Shepherd have to make him visible to our people. We must respond in a specific way to the cry that comes from every corner of the world: "We wish to see Jesus" (*Io. 12, 21*). And the world wants to see him in us.

Our effectiveness in showing Jesus to the world - the final effectiveness of all our pastoral leadership - depends to a great extent on the authenticity of our discipleship. Our own *union with Jesus Christ* determines the *credibility of our witness*. Precisely for this reason we are called to exercise prophetically the role of holiness: to anticipate in our own lives that state of holiness to which we are striving to lead our people.

In order to be a living sign of Jesus Christ in holiness of life, we Bishops experience *the need for personal conversion* - deep conversion, sustained conversion, renewed conversion. And I, John

Paul II, your fellow apostle and your brother Bishop in the See of Rome, in order to be faithful to the fullness of my mandate, to confirm my brothers (Cfr. *Luc. 22, 32*), while being conscious of my own weaknesses and sins, feel the need to speak to you about conversion - the conversion to which Jesus invites you and me. And you, on your part, in the name of Jesus, while still desiring ever greater personal conversion, must call your people to conversion, especially in this Holy Year of the Redemption. I emphasized this in my address last April to the Bishops of New York and I pointed out its special relevance for Religious in the Letter that I wrote to all the Bishops of the United States at Easter. No one of us is exempt from this call, this invitation, this summons to conversion that comes from the Lord Jesus. Only through conversion and the holiness of our lives can we succeed in being living signs of Jesus Christ. Our whole humanity will communicate Christ only if we live in union with him, only if, through conversion, we "put on the Lord Jesus Christ" (*Rom. 13, 14*).

2. In particular, the Bishop is *a sign of the love of Jesus Christ*: he expresses to all individuals and groups of whatever tendency - with a universal charity - the love of the Good Shepherd. His love embraces sinners with an easiness and naturalness that mirrors the redeeming love of the Saviour. To those in need, in trouble and in pain he offers *the love understanding and consolation*. In a special way the Bishop is the sign of Christ's love *for his priests*. He manifests to them *the love of friendship* - just as he once liked to experience it from his Bishop - a friendship that knows how to communicate esteem, and through warm human exchange can help a brother priest even rise from moments of discouragement, sadness or dejection.

3. As a sign of Christ's love, the Bishop is also *a sign of Christ's compassion*, since he represents Jesus the high priest who is able to sympathize with human weakness, the one who was tempted in every way we are, and yet never sinned (Cfr. *Hebr. 4, 15*). The consciousness on the part of the Bishop of personal sin, coupled with repentance and with the forgiveness received from the Lord, makes his human expression of compassion ever more authentic and credible. But the compassion that he signifies and lives in the name of Jesus can *never be a pretext* for him to equate God's merciful understanding of sin and love for sinners with a denial of the full liberating truth that Jesus proclaimed. Hence there can be *no dichotomy* between the Bishop *as a sign of Christ's compassion* and *as a sign of Christ's truth*.

The Bishop, precisely because he is compassionate and understands the weakness of humanity and the fact that its needs and aspirations can only be satisfied by the full truth of creation and redemption, will *proclaim without fear or ambiguity the many controverted truths* of our age. He will proclaim them with pastoral love, in terms that will never unnecessarily offend or alienate his hearers, but he will proclaim them *clearly* because he knows the liberating quality of truth.

Hence the compassionate Bishop proclaims the indissolubility of marriage, as did the Bishops of the United States when in their splendid pastoral letter "To Live in Christ Jesus" they wrote: "The covenant between a man and a woman in Christian marriage is an indissoluble and irrevocable as

God's love for his people and Christ's love for his Church". The compassionate Bishop will proclaim the incompatibility of premarital sex and homosexual activity with God's plan for human love; at the same time, with all his strength he will try to assist those who are faced with difficult moral choices. With equal compassion he will proclaim the doctrine of *Humanae Vitae* and *Familiaris Consortio* in its full beauty, not passing over in silence the unpopular truth that artificial birth control is against God's law. He will speak out for the rights of the unborn, the weak, the handicapped, the poor and the aged, no matter how current popular opinion views these issues. With personal humility and pastoral zeal the Bishop will strive to discern, not alone but in union with the universal Episcopate, the signs of the times and their true application to the modern world. With his brother Bishops he will work to ensure the participation of every category of people in the life and mission of the Church, in accordance with the truth of their calling.

This zeal will be manifested in supporting *the dignity of women*. and every legitimate freedom that is consonant with their human nature and their womanhood. The Bishop is called upon to oppose any and all discrimination of women by reason of sex. In this regard he must likewise endeavour to explain as cogently as he can that the Church's teaching on the exclusion of women from priestly ordination is extraneous to the issue of discrimination and that it is linked rather to Christ's own design for his priesthood. The Bishop must give proof of his pastoral ability and leadership by withdrawing all support from individuals or groups who in the name of progress, justice or compassion, or for any other alleged reason, promote the ordination of women to the priesthood.

In so doing, such individuals or groups are in effect damaging the very dignity of women that they profess to promote and advance. All efforts made against the truth are destined to produce not only failure but also acute personal frustration. Whatever the Bishop can do to prevent this failure and frustration by explaining the truth is an act not only of *pastoral charity* but of *prophetic leadership*.

4. In a word, the Bishop as a sign of compassion is at the same time *a sign of fidelity to the doctrine of the Church*. The Bishop stands with his brother Bishops and the Roman Pontiff as a teacher of the Catholic faith, whose purity and integrity is guaranteed by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church.

Like Jesus, the Bishop proclaims the Gospel of salvation *not as a human consensus but as a divine revelation*. The whole framework of his preaching is centered on Jesus who states: "I say only what the Fathers has taught me" (*Jo.* 8, 28). Hence the Bishop becomes a sign of fidelity because of his sharing in the special pastoral and apostolic charism with which the Spirit of Truth endows the College of Bishops. When this charism is exercised by the Bishops within the unity of that College, Christ's promise to the Apostles is actuated: "He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects him who sent me" (*Luc.* 10, 16). Christ's promise, by guaranteeing the authority of the Bishops' teachings and imposing on the faithful the obligation of obedience, makes it crystal clear why the individual Bishop has to be a

sign of fidelity to the doctrine of the Church.

And in this important task of proclaiming the Gospel in all its purity and power, with all its demands, the Bishop accepts willingly the apostolic challenge that Paul put to Timothy: "I charge you to preach the word, to stay with the task whether convenient or inconvenient - correcting, reproving, appealing - constantly teaching and never losing patience" (2 Tim. 4, 2).

5. And because Episcopal teaching, guaranteed by a charism, must be nothing else than the word of God in its application to human life, the Bishop becomes for his people *a sign of the certainty of faith*. Called to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ and to lead the flock effectively to this goal, the Bishop inculcates certainty in the people of God, who know that he will listen to them, accept their numerous insights into the truth of the faith, and impose no unnecessary burdens on their lives. And yet they know that the Church's teaching which he announces is much more than human wisdom. The Church, through her Bishops, rejects all triumphalism; she publicly denies that she has ready-made solutions to all particular problems, but she definitely claims to possess the light of revealed truth - which transcends all human consensus - and she works with all her strength so that this light of faith will illumine the experiences of humanity (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 33).

6. In communicating to the People of God the certainty of faith and the tranquillity that flows there from, the Bishop's has a special role to play as *a teacher of prayer*. How closely the Bishop's role is linked here to that of Jesus the teacher, who so zealously responded to the needs of the disciples to learn how to pray. Surely there are millions of voices rising up from every corner of your combined dioceses, directed to you and pleading: "Teach us to pray" (Luc. 11, 1). In giving the same response that Jesus gave, you open up to your people the immense treasures of the Our Father, initiating them into *the dialogue of salvation*, catechizing them in the mystery of their divine adoption, and bearing witness to the exquisite humanity of the Son of God, who knows more than anyone else the needs and aspirations of his brothers and sisters.

And through his own personal prayer the Bishop will convincingly communicate the value of prayer and he himself become more and more *a living sign of the praying Christ*, who submits all his pastoral initiatives to his Father, including the very choice of his Apostles (Cfr. *ibid.* 6, 12-13).

7. *The choice of Bishops*, successors of the Apostles, is as important today for the Church as was the choice of the Twelve for Jesus. The recommendation and selection of every new Bishop deserves the greatest prayerful reflection on the part of all those associated with the process of the selection of candidates. In this regard, the Bishops themselves have a special role in proposing those whom they judge the most suitable, with God's help, to be living signs of Jesus Christ - priests who have already proven themselves as *teachers of the faith as it is proclaimed by the Magisterium of the Church*, and, who, in the words of Paul's pastoral advice to Titus, "hold fast to the authentic message" (Tit. 1, 9). As so many Bishops in this post-conciliar period lay down their pastoral charge and render account for their flocks, it is a great consolation of conscience for

them to know that they have proposed to the Roman Pontiff as candidates for the Episcopal office only those priests who will be true shepherds in each aspect of the one pastoral mission of Jesus to teach, govern and sanctify God's people.

8. It is important for the Episcopal candidate, as for the Bishop himself, to be *a sign of the unity of the universal Church*. The unity of the College of Bishops through *collegialitas affectiva* and *collegialitas effectiva* is an apt instrument to serve the unity of Christ's Church. Never is the unity of the local Church stronger and more secure, never is the ministry of the local Bishop more effective than when the local Church under the pastoral leadership of the local Bishop proclaims in word and deed the universal faith, when it is open in charity to all the needs of the universal Church, and when it embraces faithfully the Church's universal discipline.

The Bishop is thus called to be *a sign of Catholic solidarity* in the local Church, which is the miniature reflection of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, which really and truly does subsist in the local Church.

9. Finally, it is evident in all of this that the Bishop, a living sign of Jesus Christ, must vindicate to himself the title and accept the consequences of the fact that he is, with Jesus Christ, *a sign of contradiction*. Despite every dutiful effort to pursue the dialogue of salvation, the Bishop must announce to the young and old, to the rich and poor, to the powerful and weak the fullness of truth, which sometimes irritates and offends, even if it always liberates. The justice and holiness that he proclaims are born of this truth (Cfr. *Eph.* 4, 24). The Bishop is aware that he must preach "Jesus Christ and him crucified" (*1 Cor.* 2, 2), the same Jesus who said: "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (*Matth.* 16, 24).

Precisely because he cannot renounce the preaching of the Cross, the Bishop will be called upon over and over again *to accept criticism*, to sacrifice popularity, and to admit failure in obtaining a consensus of doctrine acceptable to everyone. As a living sign of Christ, he must be with Christ a sign of fidelity and therefore a sign of contradiction.

10. Venerable and dear Brothers, these reflections, partial though they be, speak to us of the reality of the Episcopate of our Lord Jesus Christ in which we share. I offer them to you as *the expression of our common strivings*, and perhaps to some extent of our common failings. As your Brother in the See of Peter, humbled and repentant, I offer them as *a challenge of grace* in a moment of grace, a moment of collegiality, and a moment of fraternal love. I offer them to your apostolic responsibility and to your pastoral accountability to Jesus Christ, "the Chief Shepherd" (*1 Petr.* 5, 4), and to me, his servant Vicar. I offer them as a manifestation of *deep gratitude* for what you are and intend, with God's grace, ever more to become: in Christ *a sign of hope* for the People of God, as strong and unbreakable as *the sign of the Cross*, becoming *a living sign of the Risen Christ*. It is the Risen Jesus, the Incarnate Word, who communicates through his humanity and ours the mystery of salvation in his name.

As I take leave of you today, my thoughts turn once again to one who is a close friend of many of us, your brother Bishop and mine, *Cardinal Cooke*. In his hour of suffering I have spoken to him and written to him to thank him for what he has been in the Church of God - a living sign of Jesus Christ, a faithful pastor and servant of his people, living and willing to die for the Church. A special friend, yes; an illustrious member of the Hierarchy of the United States, yes; a faithful collaborator of the Holy See, yes. And yet, simply one of so many holy American Bishops who live and die so that Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd may continue to lead his people to the newness of life and the fullness of salvation.

Dear Brothers, there is no deeper meaning in our lives as Bishops than to be *living signs of Jesus Christ!* May Mary the Mother of Jesus help us to realize fully this vocation.

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