



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF BURMA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA» VISIT**

Friday, 7 June 1985

Dear Brother Bishops,

It is with great pleasure and with *a deep sense of joy in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ* that I greet you. Your *ad Limina* visit brings you from your distant land to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul - those men of faith and zeal, whose strength and fidelity in responding to Christ's call are so linked to the very foundation of the Church, and are the model of our own fidelity to the Lord in the service of the Gospel.

I greet you in the words of Saint Paul: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you . . . making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the gospel" (*Phil.* 1, 3). Yes, I often remember you and your collaborators, the priests, religious and laity, who daily toil with you for the building up of the Church "in the defence and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus" (*Ibid.* 1, 7-8).

1. As teachers in the Church of God, you are deeply aware that your service to the Gospel has a *distinctively theological character and explanation*. The whole mystery of the Redemption proceeds from a divine initiative. It has its origin in the decree of God the Father. It flows "from that fountain of love or charity within God the Father" (*Ad Gentes*, 2) which gives rise to the mission of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, God's purpose was to establish peace and communion between sinful human beings and himself, and to fashion humanity into a fraternal and reconciled community (Cfr. *ibid.* 3). In order to do this the Son of God walked the ways of a true Incarnation, that he might draw men to share his divine life. He became poor for our sake, though he had been rich, in order that his poverty might enrich us (Cfr. *2 Cor.* 8, 9).

The Church in Burma knows that it walks in the footsteps of that Jesus of Nazareth who was poor and humble, who preferred the company of the simple and needy, and who taught his followers that “whoever humbles himself . . . is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven” (*Matth.* 18, 4).

I fully understand that our pastoral ministry reflects this example of the Master. Yours is *a service of love* rendered to your brothers and sisters in the faith, often *in poverty and deprivation*. But far from being a disadvantage, this is in fact your glory and the reason of your people’s trust and love for you. You must continue to strive to fulfil the Council’s recommendation: “In exercising his office of father and pastor the Bishop should be with his people as one who serves, as a good shepherd who knows his sheep and whose sheep know him, as a true father who excels in his love and solicitude for all” (*Christus Dominus*, 16).

2. Your willingness to place your trust above all in the grace of God, with a consequent steadfastness and purity of heart in your ministry to your people, remains for you and for your collaborators in the task of evangelization and catechesis the best indication that you are labouring for the Lord himself. By being close to the life and culture of your people you show the Lord is present in their midst, you sustain them in their profession of faith, you defend them against discouragement and the onslaught of a materialistic and self-centred outlook on life. You help them to become ever more conscious of the dignity which is theirs as sons and daughters of God and as loyal citizens of their country.

It is true that your pastoral activity is often hindered by the *absence of human and material means*, by the very fact that Catholics form a small minority in Burma, and by circumstances inherent in the historical and geographical conditions of your country today.

3. But it is also true that there are many supernatural advantages in your local Churches which point to the generous - often heroic - dedication of pastors, priests, religious and laity. You are rich in grace and love: the Lord has given the increase (Cfr. *1 Cor.* 3, 7).

You can boast of a regular flow of vocations to the diocesan Minor Seminaries, and also to the Major Seminary in Rangoon, which by reason of the increased numbers of aspirants is now exclusively for theological students, while the students of philosophy have moved to Maymyo in Mandalay.

There has been a steady increase in the number of vocations to the religious life, and the activities of the religious are well integrated into the pastoral programmes of the various local Churches.

The active collaboration of the laity as catechists and community leaders, with an increasing awareness of their specific role in the Church, testifies that the Holy Spirit “stirs up in their hearts the obedience of faith” (*Ad Gentes*, 15).

These are *God's gifts* to the Church in Burma, for which we give thanks together in the spirit of the collegial communion which unites us, the successors of the Apostles with the Successor of Peter. Among these gifts there is one that elicits special mention. I refer to your priests: your cooperators and assistants in the work of evangelizing and catechizing your people. They are one with you in the priesthood of our Lord Jesus Christ, and for this reason they share, in their own way, in your responsibility for each local Church, "and even for the entire Church", as the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church reminds us (*Lumen Gentium*, 28).

The Bishop's effectiveness depends to a great extent on his priests. Hence you must always welcome them with a special love, regard them as brothers, sons and friends, listen to them and give them your trust. You should be concerned for their spiritual, intellectual and material well being, so that they can live holy lives and fulfil their ministry faithfully and fruitfully. You are called to be compassionate and helpful to those priests who are in any kind of danger or who in some respect may have failed. In doing this you imitate the love in the heart of Jesus, and draw abundant blessings upon your priests, many of whom live in conditions of isolation and even danger, as they serve scattered communities and, perhaps, have few opportunities to experience the warmth and fellowship of the company of their brothers in the priesthood.

4. The Church in Burma can count on the commitment and generous support of many of the laity in the work of evangelization and social development.

Your *catechists play an indispensable role* in sustaining the Christian life of your communities and in bringing the divine message of salvation to those near and far. The validity of this contribution of the laity to the Church's mission is closely related to the *formation* available to these men and women, who are anxious to be of effective assistance to their pastors in the apostolate of "like towards like" and in proclaiming Christ in places which it is difficult or impossible for the clergy and religious to reach. I encourage you in your efforts to provide this formation through special centres for this purpose, and in programmes adapted to the possibilities of your people.

In a special way I am happy to know that you pay special attention to *the needs and possibilities of young people*. They too can have an extraordinary effectiveness in bringing the message of Christ to their peers and to the younger members of the community. In my recent Apostolic Letter to the youth of the world for International Youth Year, I wrote that "the Church looks to the young; or rather, the Church in a special way *sees herself in the young*" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Epistula Apostolica ad iuvenes, Internationali vertente Anno Iuventuti dicato, 15, die 31 mar. 1985: vide supra, p. 794*).

As pastors you will know how to convert into a living reality in your local Churches the role of young people. It means appointing capable priests and religious to the task of their formation, and it involves an effort on the part of all to give them a sense of belonging to the Church as their right and dignity.

5. There is one other point to which I would refer briefly and entrust it to your prayerful consideration. It is the question of the necessary and important *dialogue between faith and culture* which takes place in the concrete circumstances of the Church's presence in each place.

The Church, which is the light of all nations, speaks the same message of salvation and offers the same means of holiness and justice to all peoples. Yet, in each local Church she seeks a serious and sincere "dialogue" with the culture and traditions of the people, in order to ensure a genuine "inculturation" of the Christian faith. Without permitting any undermining of the integrity of her truth or of the unity of her Catholic discipline, the Church "utilizes the resources of different cultures in her preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 58). In this way faith enriches the spiritual qualities of every nation, and the Church herself progresses towards a fuller understanding of the mystery of the Redemption.

In this process two principles must be respected: the compatibility with the Gospel of the various cultures and cultural elements assimilated into the life of the Church, and the safeguarding of communion with the universal Church (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 10).

This "dialogue" between the *truly Catholic faith* of the Church and *local cultures* is an important aspect of your episcopal ministry. It is essential that Bishops of the same country should work together in this matter, in close contact with the Roman Curia. I pray that the Holy Spirit, the Lord and Giver of Life, may guide you in this task of ensuring that the seed of the Christian faith takes ever deeper root in Burmese soil.

6. My brother Bishops, we have touched on only a few of the many aspects of your pastoral ministry. It is not possible to speak of everything that is in our hearts. What is especially important is that we have lived this meeting in the full communion of faith and in the love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I commend you and the Churches over which you preside and which you serve to the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church. I ask you to take my greetings to your fellow Bishops who have not been able to come. I pray for all the Burmese people, especially the young, the old and the sick.

With the words of the Apostle Peter I say "Peace to all of you that are in Christ" (*1 Petr.* 5, 14).

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana