



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO BANGLADESH

MEETING OF JOHN PAUL II WITH FOUR BISHOPS OF THE BANGLADESHI NATION

Dacca (Bangladesh), 19 November 1986

Dear brother Bishops,

1. I thank God, the Father of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, for this opportunity to renew the ecclesial communion and brotherhood which we experienced together during your ad limina visit last year. You came to the See of Peter to manifest your apostolic faith. Now, with immense joy, the Successor of Peter comes to your own land to confirm and strengthen you in your service of the Gospel, which is "the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith".

This meeting is thus a spiritual continuation of your ad limina visit. At that time I spoke of the great mystery of the Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, called to proclaim in every age and to all peoples the saving work of Christ crucified and risen from the dead. We reflected together on the unity of the Church's faith and discipline which is entrusted, above all, to the teaching and pastoral office of the bishop who is himself the visible source and foundation of unity in his local Church. We recognized the importance of the united action of the bishops and of the whole community in the service of the poor and the suffering, who are always with us to bear witness to the suffering Christ. We spoke of the Church's desire to foster dialogue with non-Christians, and in particular with our Muslim brethren who constitute the vast majority of the people of this country.

2. My presence among you today is meant to be a sign and a confirmation that you belong to the universal communion of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, "which the Lord established on the Apostles and built upon blessed Peter, their chief, while Christ Jesus himself remained the supreme cornerstone". The entire Church is with you, and you are with the Church and in the Church. This bond of grace and divine love is manifest in the union of prayer and practical solidarity by which one part of the Church seeks to serve the others. The abundance of one part of

God's people involves a responsibility for meeting the needs of another part. I have called you a *pusillus grex*, for that is what you are. But no part of the Church can feel itself isolated or forgotten by the great family of those redeemed by Christ.

I wish to assure you that your hopes and aspirations, your burdens and sorrows find a special echo in my own heart. In my prayer I constantly offer you as a spiritual sacrifice to God, knowing that he will sustain you and give you increase.

3. The Church has been present in this region for over four centuries, and this year you are happily celebrating the hundredth anniversary of the Diocese of Dhaka, now an Archdiocese. Against this background and in prayerful attention to what the "signs of the times" reveal regarding the "moment" which the Catholic community in Bangladesh is living, you have committed yourselves and your communities to achieving the goals of the "Pastoral Plan for the Church in Bangladesh". I wish to encourage you along this path. Above all I encourage you to work in unity, so that everyone in the Church in Bangladesh will come together in a renewed and more conscious sharing in the Church's apostolate. As you yourselves wrote, you are indeed "at the threshold of a new Advent, a new moment of this grace and mission of service".

4. The final purpose of this ecclesial endeavour is none other than the Kingdom of God: "Seek first the Father's kingdom and his righteousness". This is the content of Jesus' redemptive mission which the Church continues in time. This is the essential message of the Church today. The Holy Spirit constantly gives fresh life and energy to the Christian community for the task of proclaiming Good News to the poor, release to the captives, and an acceptable year of the Lord. The generous individual and collective response of pastors and faithful to this "Good News", both within the ecclesial body itself and outwards towards the entire national community, constitutes the new Advent, the new moment of grace and mission of which you have written. The Churches over which you preside in charity will undoubtedly experience vitality and fruitfulness in the measure in which they are open to this evangelical challenge.

You are entrusted with a mission that goes far beyond a mere material enterprise and even beyond your human capacity to respond, and so you place your trust in Christ. You draw courage from the thought that the message you proclaim is in no way alien to the character and needs of your people. You proclaim justice, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit. These are values which Christians are called to make "incarnate" in their lives and activities, as a testimony, so that the world may believe. These are values which are valid for all peoples in all ages. They are human aspirations concerning which the followers of different religious traditions and men and women of good will can and should enter into dialogue and collaboration. These are values which the contemporary world urgently needs.

5. As bishops you are aware of the importance of involving all the members of the Church in putting the Pastoral Plan into practice. You have asked everyone to take part and share in the

responsibility.

Your Bangladeshi priests, as well as the missionary priests from other lands, are your closest collaborators. They should be the first ones to benefit from your pastoral solicitude and fraternal love. They preach the word of God and teach the faithful the truths of faith. They teach them the practice of the Christian life and what justice demands. They encourage families to respond to their Christian calling in the service of love and life. They watch over the welfare of children and the Christian formation of youth. They seek out the sheep that has gone astray and bring the Gospel message to those who have not yet heard it. They are often obliged to carry out their ministry in materially and spiritually difficult situations. For each one of them you are teacher, father, brother and friend. You have a sacred duty to esteem and support them, to pray for them and see to their spiritual advancement: you must always be readily available to them with kindness and evangelical charity.

The Christian communities of Bangladesh are small, and live in the midst of a large non-Christian population. The priests are often isolated and their activities are many and varied. It is therefore especially important to seek ways of fostering a deep sense of communion among priests, both diocesan and religious, so that they have a real and personal share in the whole life of the diocese. If they maintain an interest in theological study and continue pastoral formation, they will more easily meet the new challenges which their apostolate constantly brings. In all of this the bishop's word and witness are of the greatest importance for the good of his presbyterium as a whole and of each individual priest member.

6. The bishop has to concern himself with the well-being of the men and women religious who collaborate with him in the service of God's people. Through the health-care, charitable and educational activities carried out by the Religious Congregations in your country, the Church is present in a visible and helpful way, even to non-Christian. Your particular Churches are consolidated and built up by the religious, who witness to the primacy of the love of Jesus by the faithful observance of their vows. Religious life in fact is a "divine gift" to the Church. The bishop must therefore promote and encourage vocations, and show his support by often visiting communities and respecting their specific charisms.

One of the most positive signs of the vitality of the Church in your country is the increasing numbers of vocations to the priesthood and to the religious life. Thus the Lord is indeed responding to your needs. He is sending labourers into his harvest to make up for the scarcity of workers for the Gospel which you have felt so deeply.

That grace constitutes a responsibility for all concerned: a responsibility for the appropriate selection and training of candidates. Time and effort spent in giving them an adequate preparation for the ecclesial tasks ahead is never too much. I encourage you to make this one of your first concerns. There is also the responsibility for using the energies and talents of religious

communities in an organized pastoral programme of action.

7. As bishops, you are heralds of God's love for his people. In your ministry you seek to express the compassion that Jesus had for the crowds. Thus, while you point the way to final happiness in the Father's house, you are concerned to stimulate the Christian community to serve the poor and the less fortunate in their immediate needs, and you endeavour to guide the faithful in the task of promoting greater justice in human affairs.

The whole Church "recognizes in the poor and the suffering the likeness of her poor and suffering Founder. She does all she can to relieve their need and in them she strives to serve Christ". The Church in Bangladesh feels called to such service in an eminent way. She lives in constant awareness of the needs of the nation. She herself is a community of "little ones".

In your Pastoral Plan you have indicated the service of the poor - in all the forms that material and spiritual poverty assumes - as a priority in the Church's service. This in an area in which no lasting results can be obtained without the "skilful concern and attention - op the laity". In this you will seek to favour "the unmistakable work of the Holy Spirit in making the laity today even more conscious of their own responsibility and inspiring them everywhere to serve Christ and the Church".

8. Whatever is done for the spiritual and professional training of lay men and women willing to work for the renewal of the temporal order constitutes a great service to the nation and the Church. Catholic education, specialized programmes of formation for the laity, training for leadership both within the ecclesial community and in society in general are a genuine contribution to the nation's development. By cooperating with their fellow citizens, the members of the Church seek to build society on the bases of the dignity and inalienable rights of every human person, on justice, and on a real solidarity among individuals and groups. They do this through personal conviction and a sense of responsibility inspired by the Gospel and by Christ's command to love and serve one's neighbour.

You are very much aware of the important role of young people in building the future of the Church and of society. In many ways they are the special object of your pastoral concern. New ideas and changing social and cultural conditions deeply affect them. They need understanding and sure guidance. I earnestly encourage you and the priests and religious to be close to them, to help them to find the truth and to live in holiness.

9. Finally, there are two thoughts which I wish to share with you regarding your pastoral care of God's people. First, the vitality and Christian hope of your communities depend upon a real commitment to prayer. The Church in Bangladesh must be a Church that prays. In the Lord's Prayer we can all recognize our deepest aspirations and the certainty of God's loving response. To praise the Father, to acknowledge his will, to implore his gifts and blessings: these are the

profound realities of our lives which we express in hopefilled prayer. As bishops, you are called to give an example of spiritual maturity. You invite and encourage your priests and all your collaborators to pray. You teach the faithful to do so, both as individuals and as a community gathered to celebrate the mysteries of faith. In such a prayerful community the Holy Spirit cannot but pour forth his gifts of light, strength and courage for the present tasks and the challenges of the future.

10. The other reflection which I convey to you concerns the wonderful and inspiring truth of the catholicity and universal nature of Christ's Church. The Church spread throughout the world is the one visible Body of Christ. All the particular Churches are united with one another and with the See of Peter. Furthermore, in the "Communion of Saints" we share in each other's riches of grace beyond the frontiers of time and space. Through catechesis and the preaching of the word this thought can penetrate the spiritual and ecclesial outlook of all your people. They will then feel more truly a part of the great mystery of the Church. They will be strengthened and encouraged. They will see local realities in the light of the universal call to holiness and salvation.

11. My dear brother bishops: I commend you and your people to the loving intercession of Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church. May she who knew how to keep the workings of God's saving providence, pondering them in her heart, help you to read the "signs" of God's favour upon your people. May she help you to nourish your people with the Eucharist and the word of God, and lead them to eternal life.

In the communion of apostolic service, I assure you of my fraternal support, and I invoke from the Father every good gift upon you, your priests, religious, and laity. "My love be with you all in Christ Jesus. Amen".

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