



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT IN THE FIJI ISLANDS

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL
CONFERENCE OF THE PACIFIC**

Suva (Fiji), 21 November 1986

Dear brother Bishops of the Pacific,

1. It is a great joy for me to be with you here in the Pacific Regional Seminary of Saint Peter Chanel. You have received me in a most cordial spirit of fraternal love. With a grateful heart, I greet you in the grace and peace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

You have come from all the particular Churches of this immense territory of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia, to celebrate with me the unity and universality of the Church and to manifest your loyalty and love for the Successor of Peter. I am deeply grateful to each one of you.

As bishops, you represent in your own persons the People of God of the Archdioceses of Suva, Agaña, Papeete, Nouméa, and Samoa-Apia and Tokelau, and the Dioceses of Port-Vila, Tonga, Wallis and Futuna, Taiohae, Samoa-Pago Pago Chalan Kanoa, Rarotonga, Tarawa and Nauru, Carolines-Marshalls and the Mission Sui iuris of Funafuti. The name of each of these local Churches speaks of God's providential love, incarnated in a particular culture and people, in the lives of the clergy, religious and laity to whom you give a shepherd's care.

All of us remember the question that Nathanael put to Philip: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth"? Philip simply replied: "Come and see". Very soon after asking that question Nathanael would indeed begin to see what incredible good could come from Nazareth.

Each of the local Churches which you serve in Christ's name represents in its own particular way the mystery of Nazareth. For the Risen Saviour is living today in your faithful people. By visiting Fiji I have been able to come and see what incredible good can come from the Body of Christ in

Oceania. I rejoice in this opportunity of celebrating with you the marvels God has done and is doing in this part of the world.

I also wish to take this occasion to thank you for helping some of your own people to come here to Suva today or to be with me in the days ahead in New Zealand or Australia. I am sorry that I cannot visit each of your local communities on this occasion, but I assure you that you are all very dear to the heart of the Pope. I look forward, with the help of God, to coming and seeing the Holy Spirit at work in your midst at some time in the future.

2. Sixteen years ago, Pope Paul VI visited this part of the world. Some of you would have been present on that historic occasion when, in Western Samoa, he made a missionary appeal to the whole world. In honour of my beloved Predecessor and in view of the continued relevance of his words, may I remind you of the exhortation he made at that time to continue zealously the work of evangelization. He stated: "Missionary work, in the name of which I am among you, began on the day of Pentecost and is still being carried on in our own day. It is always necessary and always urgent".

The Church is by nature missionary. In every age, she feels herself urged on by the words of our Saviour: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations". The Church in Oceania eloquently shows the fruit of this evangelizing spirit. Evangelization is the task of everyone in the Church, although the bishops have the specific role of overseeing its broad range of activities and coordinating the efforts of all. The bishops have laboured long and hard in proclaiming the Gospel. The Good News of Christ has been accepted in faith and gratitude, and the Church has been firmly planted in your midst.

The next stage, which is no less urgent, is the consolidation and deepening of the faith. Ever more effective means must be sought to transmit to everyone, but especially to the young, the teachings of overseeing its broad range of activities and coordinating the efforts of all. The bishops have laboured long and hard in proclaiming the Gospel. The Good News of Christ has been accepted in faith and gratitude, and the Church has been firmly planted in your midst.

3. In this regard, I wish to congratulate you, as I have already done on other occasions, on the establishment of this Regional Seminary of the Pacific. It fills my heart with joy to hear that the number of vocations to the priesthood and religious life is growing year by year. I know that, through the grace of the Holy Spirit, this increase is due in no small part to your own zealous efforts as shepherds of the flock of Christ.

I am pleased, too, that the promotion of priestly vocations and the support of this Regional Seminary have been marked by true collaboration. Thus you have indeed borne witness to the collegial nature of the episcopal ministry in your work to ensure a more effective programme of priestly formation for all your particular Churches. I would ask you always to maintain this interest

in the Seminary and particularly in the seminarians, through personal contact and fatherly concern. It is important that all aspects of seminary training should lead young men to a greater knowledge and love of our Lord Jesus Christ.

I encourage you to continue in the vital task of promoting vocations to the priesthood and to religious life. The future of the Church depends in great part upon the evangelical witness and generous service of priests and religious. In particular, I encourage you in your pastoral solicitude to reach out to the young people of your parishes and communities. My prayer is that you will witness such a flowering of vocations in your midst that, in the not too distant future, the Churches which have been established by missionaries will in turn be sending forth missionaries to other nations.

4. As I meet with you this evening, I would like to reflect for a moment on the lives of two celebrated saints of the Church: Peter Chanel, the great Patron of Oceania, who in 1836 set sail from France to bring the Gospel to this part of the world; and Augustine, the bishop and theologian whose sixteenth centenary of conversion we commemorate this year. These two men, of very different temperaments and abilities, who served the Church in widely differing historical and geographical situations, were nonetheless motivated and sustained by the same love for Christ and zeal for the Gospel.

It is fitting that the universal Church should honour Augustine in this anniversary year of his conversion. He is truly one of the greatest bishops and teachers in the history of Christianity. In every way, he placed his intellectual gifts and spiritual energy at the service of the Church:

– in the particular Church of Hippo where he was renowned for his catechetical initiatives, his fraternal support of priests and religious, his rousing homilies and instructions, his loving care for the poor;

– in the Church throughout North Africa and in, the universal Church as she faced division and confusion due to heretical movements and paganism.

Even today, in the modern technological world so different from his own, Augustine remains an inspiring model of episcopal ministry. He described himself in these words: "Christ's servant, and through him the servant of his servants". Surely we could find no better motto for our own lives as bishops of the Church.

But perhaps what is most memorable about Augustine and most worthy of our imitation is precisely his conversion. He was the great convert, not just at one dramatic moment but throughout his life. As he once said: "We must be always made by God, always perfected, we must cling to him and remain in the conversion that brings us to him... For we are his creation, not only in that we are human persons, but also in that we are good human persons".

As bishops, we too like Augustine must always go forward on the path of conversion, always eager to grow in the love of Christ our Saviour. At the same time, we must invite our people to take this same path and continue on it. Conversion will require reconciliation, and for this purpose the great gift of God at our disposal is the Sacrament of Penance. It is at one and the same time the Sacrament of forgiveness, reconciliation and mercy. For this reason, I urge you to foster regular reception of this Sacrament among your people, and I ask you to encourage your brother priests to give themselves generously to this pastoral service. The Sacrament of Penance is the first and fundamental step, through reconciliation, towards peace – peace in the heart of each person, in our communities and in the world.

5. It is truly fitting that this Regional Seminary has been placed under the patronage of Saint Peter Chanel. What better model of the priesthood could be offered to young men than this missionary who became the first martyr for the faith in Oceania Martyrdom, as the Second Vatican Council said, is "the highest gift and supreme test of love". It is good for us to recall, however, that the foundation for Peter Chanel's heroic martyrdom was firmly laid long before his death.

Many years before the day he was put to death in his own hut, Peter Chanel had begun to live, in a most profound way, the Paschal Mystery of Christ. With Saint Paul he could say: "All I want is to know Christ and the power of his Resurrection and to share his suffering by reproducing the pattern of his death".

This is what sustained him, as it still sustains your priests in Oceania today. When he faced the physical privations and social obstacles of those first years in Futuna, and when he was weighed down by the feelings of isolation and discouragement that were part of those first missionary efforts, he took heart and found the strength to persevere by looking firmly to the Cross and Resurrection of our loving Redeemer.

With deep faith and remarkable patience, he was always gentle. He never lost hope in the transforming power of the Gospel. When we consider that within two years of his martyrdom the whole island of Futuna became Catholic, we realize that there was something remarkable about the daily witness of his life in Christ. His life confirms the truth of what Pope Paul VI said in his Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization: "For the Church, the first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life, given over to God in a communion that nothing should destroy and at the same time given to one's neighbour with limitless zeal... It is primarily by her conduct and by her life that the Church will evangelize the world, in other words, by her living witness of fidelity to the Lord Jesus – the witness of poverty and detachment, of freedom in the face of the powers of this world, in short, the witness of sanctity".

6. My brother bishops: I leave with you these few thoughts, fully aware that there is much more that could be said. It is not possible now to speak of all that is in our minds and hearts, but I particularly want to assure you of my closeness to you and your people. Between the Successor of

Peter and the successors of the other Apostles there is indeed a profound spiritual and pastoral bond; it is our *collegialitas affectiva et effectiva*. May we always find ways to support one another in our united efforts to build up the Church and to live out this communion in service and in faith.

At the altar each day and in my other prayers, I present you and your clergy, religious and laity to the Father in gratitude and in petition. The words of Saint Paul express well what is in my heart: "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, ... making my prayer with joy, thankful for your partnership in the Gospel".

Dear brother bishops: in this hour of joy and ecclesial communion, I commend you to Mary the Mother of Jesus and Mother of his Church. I also entrust to her loving care the future of your local Churches, and especially all your generous efforts to make our Lord Jesus Christ ever more known and loved. I ask her to help the poor and the needy, and to protect all the People of God scattered throughout the Pacific. May she be for all of you a cause of joy and a source of strength!

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