



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS FROM THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR «AD LIMINA» VISIT**

Thursday, 15 October 1988

Dear Brothers in our Lord Jesus Christ,

1. It is a special joy for me to welcome all of you, my brothers Bishops from New York. On this occasion there come before my mind so many remembrances of my Pastoral Visit in 1979. At the same time I wish to honour in your persons the pilgrimage of faith and love that the millions of Catholic people living in your State are making, in union with Christ, to the Father, in the Holy Spirit.

Today we are gathered together as Pastors, conscious of the words of Jesus to his Apostles: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations... teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you". These words must find a constant echo in our minds and hearts. As successors of the Twelve, we have as our pre-eminent duty the proclamation of the Gospel to all people. This is a task that is always necessary, but it is even more urgent wherever there is ignorance, error or indifference to the truth.

After commanding us to teach, Jesus assures us of his presence and support: "Behold I am with you always, to the end of the age". This promise fills us with peace; it challenges us to confidence and hope. The Lord Jesus Christ sends us forth and remains with us! He wants us to do our part, to carry out our mission, to be vigilant. He wants us ourselves to walk in the light of Christ and to offer this light to the Church and to the world. Today I wish to refer to a concrete means of offering this light to humanity. It is the Catholic college and university, with its institutional commitment to the word of God as proclaimed by the Catholic Church.

2. As the Second Vatican Council states: "The destiny of society and of the Church herself is

intimately linked with the progress of young people pursuing higher studies". Accordingly, the same Council exhorts Bishops to pay careful pastoral attention to university students. They need this care if they are to sanctify themselves in the exercise of their obligations and "inform culture with the Gospel". The re-evangelization of society depends in great part on today's university students. While pursuing their higher studies, they have the right to receive a Catholic formation – both doctrinal and moral – at a level that corresponds to their scholastic endeavours.

The lofty mission of Catholic colleges and universities is to provide a public, enduring and pervasive influence of the Christian mind in the whole enterprise of advancing higher culture, and to equip students to bear the burdens of society and to witness to their faith before the world. Catholic institutions of higher learning, which educate a large number of young people in the United States of America, have a great importance for the future of society and of the Church in your country. But the degree of their influence depends entirely on preserving their Catholic identity. This Catholic identity has to be present in the fundamental direction given to both teaching and studies. And it must be present in the life of these institutions which are characterized by a special bond with the Church – a bond that springs from their institutional connection with the Catholic message. The adjective "Catholic" must always be the real expression of a profound reality.

3. We are convinced that it is necessary to respect the legitimate autonomy of human sciences. But we are also convinced that when Christians, with reason enlightened by faith, know the fundamental truths about God, man and the world, they are in a position to have their intellectual efforts produce more abundant fruits of authentic human progress.

Faith does not limit freedom in the pursuit of knowledge. On the contrary, it is its greatest guarantee. This leads us once again to focus our attention on the true significance of freedom in the service of, and the search for, truth.

"If you remain in my word", Jesus tells us, "you will truly be my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free". These words of our Lord proclaim the liberating power of truth. Their profound meaning is easier to grasp when we realize that Christ himself is the Truth. It is he, Christ, who contains in himself the complete truth about man; it is he who is the highest revelation of God.

The profound connection between truth and freedom affects the order of all knowledge. Truth does not limit freedom. On the contrary freedom is ordered to truth. Furthermore, the truth of faith does not limit human knowledge. Rather, human knowledge opens up the way that leads to Christian faith, and Christian faith guides human knowledge. While faith does not offer solutions for investigation by reason – which follows its own principles and methodologies in different fields and enjoys a legitimate autonomy – nevertheless, faith assists reason in achieving the full good of the human person and of society. When Catholic colleges and universities promote true freedom in

the intellectual sphere, they provide a singular service for the good of all society. Today's culture, influenced by methods and ways of thinking characteristic of the natural sciences, would be incomplete without the recognition of man's transcendent dimension. Hence any philosophical current proclaiming the exclusive validity of the principle of empirical verification could never do justice to the individual or to society.

The findings of all study can be fully utilized only in consonance with the fundamental truths concerning man, his origin, destiny and dignity. For this reason the university by its nature is called to be ever more open to the sense of the absolute and the transcendent, in order to facilitate the search for truth at the service of humanity.

4. In reflecting on theological knowledge, we turn immediately to faith, since faith is the indispensable foundation and fundamental disposition of all theology. Faith constitutes its starting point and its constant intrinsic point of reference. Saint Anselmo of Canterbury has given us that well-known definition of the work of theology: faith seeking understanding. Theology springs from faith, from the desire of the believer to understand the faith.

What faith teaches is not the result of human investigation but comes from divine revelation. Faith has not been transmitted to the human mind as a philosophical invention to be perfected; rather, it has been entrusted to the Spouse of Christ as a divine deposit to be faithfully guarded and infallibly interpreted. In the area of strictly human knowledge, there is room not only for progress towards the truth but also, and not infrequently, for the rectification of substantial error. Revealed truth, however, has been entrusted to the Church once and for all. It has reached its completion in Christ. Hence the profound significance of the Pauline expression "deposit" of faith. At the same time, this deposit allows for a further explanation and for a growing understanding as long as the Church is on this earth.

This task of achieving an ever deeper understanding of the content of faith belongs to every member of the Church. But the Second Vatican Council assures us that the "task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed down, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church".

This magisterium is not above the divine word but serves it with a specific *carisma veritatis certum*, which includes the charism of infallibility, present not only in the solemn definitions of the Roman Pontiff and of Ecumenical Councils, but also in the universal ordinary magisterium, which can truly be considered as the usual expression of the Church's infallibility.

5. This does not, however, prevent the Church from recognizing and fostering a legitimate pluralism in theology. Right after the Council, Paul VI stated that "a moderate diversity of opinions is compatible with the unity of the faith and with fidelity toward the teachings and norms of the magisterium". The extent of this pluralism is limited by the unity of faith and the teachings of the

Church's authentic magisterium. But within its scope, the plurality of theologies should have a certain conceptual common ground. Not every philosophy is capable of providing that solid and coherent understanding of the human person, of the world, and of God which is necessary for any theological system that strives to place its knowledge in continuity with the knowledge of faith.

In order to understand the limits of theological pluralism, it is necessary to distinguish it clearly from the unity of faith, which depends totally on revealed truth. With respect to the non-infallible expressions of the authentic magisterium of the Church, these should be received with religious submission of mind and will.

6. With the passing of time it is ever more evident how certain positions on the so-called "right to dissent" have had harmful repercussions on the moral conduct of a number of the faithful. "It has been noted" – I mentioned in my address last year to the Bishops gathered in Los Angeles – "that there is a tendency on the part of some Catholics to be selective in their adherence to the Church's moral teachings". Some people appeal to "freedom of conscience" to justify this way of acting. Therefore, it is necessary to clarify that it is not conscience that "freely" establishes what is right and wrong. Using a concise expression of John Henry Newman's Oxford University Sermons, we can say that conscience is "an instrument for detecting moral truth". Conscience detects moral truth: it interprets a norm which it does not create.

7. Dear Brothers: to carry out the prophetic mission that falls to us as Pastors of the Church, it is of great importance to have the collaboration of Catholic theologians and ecclesiastical faculties. As a reflection on the faith, made in faith, theology is an ecclesial science that constantly develops within the Church and is directed to the service of the Church. This is at the root of the theologian's grave responsibility, particularly if he has received the *missio canonica* to teach in an ecclesiastical faculty. The authentic faith of theologians nourished by prayer and constantly purified through conversion is a great gift of God to his Church. On it depends the well-being of theology in our day. As I mentioned at the Catholic University in Washington: "It behooves the theologian to be free but with the freedom that is openness to the truth and the light that comes from faith and from fidelity to the Church".

The Catholic institution in which the Bishops of the United States have placed great hope and which they have loyally supported – the Catholic University of America – last year celebrated the 100th anniversary of its founding. Next year will mark the centenary of the granting of its papal charter. All the achievements of the past are due to God's grace, on which is well-founded the hope for a future that will see ever greater academic achievements, including those in theological scholarship. In particular, it is to be hoped that this University and all the other Catholic universities and colleges will contribute even more to the enrichment of the Church in the United States and elsewhere, that they will constantly meet their calling to prepare students who are heralds of culture, servants of humanity and witnesses of faith

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, Sedes Sapientiae, obtain for all of you the light of her Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. May she sustain you in pastoral wisdom, and bring joy and peace to the hearts of your people.

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