



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Friday, 15 October 1993

*Your Eminence,
Dear brother Bishops,*

1. I welcome you, the Bishops of the Provinces of *New York and Saint Paul-Minneapolis*, who have come to Rome for your visit "*ad Limina Apostolorum*". To borrow the words of Saint Paul: "I hold you in my heart, you who are all partners with me in grace, ...and in the defense and confirmation of the Gospel" (Phil. 1: 5). Our meeting follows an age-old ecclesial tradition which expresses the communion in truth and charity linking the members of the College of Bishops with the Successor of Peter. This fellowship is the guarantee that your particular Churches stand secure upon the "twelve courses of stone" inscribed with the "names of the twelve Apostles of the Lamb" (Rev. 22: 14). For the members of your particular Churches, the unity of their Pastors with the Bishop of Rome is the sign that the community's faith and evangelical service rest on rock, not sand (Cf. Mt. 7: 24-27). With affection in the Lord I pray that the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses may grow in spiritual insight and holiness of life, and be "filled with the fruit of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (Phil. 1: 10-11).

2. At the beginning of this year's meetings with the Bishops of the United States, of whom you are the ninth group, I set out to follow the basic outline of "[*The Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#)".

Having dealt with matters concerning Catholic belief and identity, worship and holiness of life, and some aspects of the Bishop's ministry within the community, today I wish to take up the topic which will serve as the framework for the last set of talks in the series, namely, *living the faith in the world*.

In perfect harmony with her two-thousand-year tradition, the Church's mission in the world and the service she gives to the human family were central concerns of the Second Vatican Council.

On the basis of the teaching in "Lumen Gentium", that "the Church is the universal sacrament of salvation" (Lumen Gentium, 48), the Fathers of the Council, in the Pastoral Constitution "Gaudium et Spes", pointed out that in "pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church not only communicates divine life to men, but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth. This she does most of all by her healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which she strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of men and women with a deeper meaning and importance" (Gaudium et Spes, 40). In other words, by faithfully responding to her divine vocation and mission, the Church of Christ makes an invaluable contribution to the common good of the civil societies in which she lives and acts (Cf. Gaudium et Spes, 40).

3. The Church sheds light upon temporal realities; she purifies, uplifts and reconciles them to God. This she does, on the one hand, through *the presence and action of her members in the world of human affairs and human endeavours*. Countless works and institutions, large and small, in every corner of the world, testify to the ecclesial community's unfailing commitment and generosity in serving the good of the human family and in meeting the needs of millions of our brothers and sisters. This boundless witness of faith and love on the part of single members of the Church, as well as of groups and communities, reveals the true face of the Church to the world (Cf. *ibid.* 43). It is the fulfilment of Jesus' pressing invitation: "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (Mt. 5: 16).

On the other hand, there is another way in which the Church makes an indispensable contribution to the development and wellbeing of the human family. She does so *by means of her proclamation of God's design for his handiwork*. The Church possesses a truth, a doctrine, a wisdom and an experience, of which people have need in travelling the path of their authentic liberation and good. This is the context in which to understand the recently published Encyclical Letter "Veritatis Splendor". This Letter springs from a profound sense of the need to re-present the light of the Gospel and the authoritative teaching of the Church regarding the basic principles which underlie and sustain the moral life. It is intended to help dispel the crippling confusion which many people today feel in relation to fundamental questions of good and evil, right and wrong. A restatement of the Church's constant yet ever new moral teaching is a necessary response of the *Magisterium* to the widespread *ethical crisis* affecting contemporary society. As experienced Pastors, you are fully conscious of the depth and consequences of this crisis in the everyday lives of people, just as you are aware of your own responsibility to offer pastoral guidance according to the mind of Christ and of the Church.

4. At the heart of the message of "Veritatis Splendor" is the reaffirmation of *the essential relationship between truth and freedom* (Cf. John Paul II, Veritatis Splendor, 32). The universal

truth about the good of the human person and the perennially valid norms which ensure the protection of that good are indeed accessible to human reason; we can indeed share in God's knowledge about what we should be and about what we must do in order to reach the end for which we were created. Because this "law" is inscribed in our hearts (Cf. Rom. 2: 15), to accept it and to act accordingly is not to submit to some extraneous imposition; it is to embrace the deepest truth of our own being (Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 41. 50). In response to the question about what truth should shape human destiny, the Church answers: God's truth, which is man's. To the question about what justice ought to guide society, she replies: God's justice, which alone is a truly human and humanizing justice.

Helping contemporary men and women rediscover "the inseparable connection between truth and freedom" (Ibid. 99) is a pressing requirement of our pastoral office, individually and collectively.

By ensuring that the basic truths of the Church's moral doctrine are clearly taught, we are offering a reaffirmation of the dignity of the human person, a correct understanding of conscience, which is the only solid basis for the right exercise of human freedom, and a foundation for living together in solidarity and civic harmony. All of this is an essential service to the common good. How can modern society pull back from its slide into increasingly destructive behaviour involving the violation of the basic rights of the human person, without a recovery of the inviolable character of the moral norms which should always and everywhere govern human conduct? (Cf. John Paul II, *Veritatis Splendor*, 84)

5. At the "World Youth Day" in Denver I had the opportunity to reflect with the young people present on the *false morality currently applied to the theme of life*. According to this way of thinking, "*abortion and euthanasia* – the actual killing of another human being – are hailed as 'rights' and solutions to 'problems' – an individual's problem or society's... Life – God's first gift, and the fundamental right of every individual, on which all other rights are based – is often treated as just *one more commodity* to be organized, commercialized and manipulated according to convenience" (John Paul II, *Address to youth during the vigil of prayer in Denver*, 3, 14 August 1993).

The difficult path of society's renewal lies in "*a great rebirth of the sense of personal answerability before God, before others and before our own conscience*" (Ibid.). No one should underestimate the immensity of the challenge which the Church faces and the seriousness for the whole of society of what is at stake. That is why, upon arriving in Denver I expressed a deep concern which I know is shared by many, and not only Catholics, among your fellow-citizens: "*To educate without a value system based on truth is to abandon young people to moral confusion, personal insecurity and easy manipulation. No country, not even the most powerful, can endure if it deprives its own children of this essential good*" (John Paul II, *Address at the international airport of Denver*, 4, 12 August 1993).

6. In rejecting both ethical relativism and agnosticism about the moral good the Church is not being "dogmatic" or "sectarian". The truth which the Church is defending affirms the transcendent dignity of the person and the inviolable obligation to respect each individual's conscience. In fact, this truth offers the surest guarantee of human freedom, for – as I wrote in "[Centessimus Annus](#)", when "there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political activity, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power" (John Paul II, [Centessimus Annus](#), 46), leaving the individual no appeal against the domination of a particular opinion or ideological system.

It can be said that in indicating the necessary relationship between truth and freedom, the Encyclical *exposes the primeval untruth that has brought untold suffering, evil and violence to the human family* from its very origins, and which today appears to know no bounds, deceiving even the elect (Cf. Mt. 24: 24). As Saint Paul puts it so simply in the Letter to the Romans, the falsehood is this: that so many have "exchanged the truth about God for a lie and worshipped and served the creature rather than the Creator" (Rom. 1: 24). The end result on the practical level is the enthronement of self-centredness, and the demise of solidarity and self-giving love.

7. My final remarks in the Encyclical, before commending this document and its application to the protection of the Mother of God, concern our responsibility to teach faithfully and tirelessly the "answer' to the question about morality... entrusted by Jesus Christ in a particular way to us, the Pastors of the Church" (John Paul II, [Veritatis Splendor](#), 114). This is our shared duty and privilege. In fulfilment of my specific responsibility I have reaffirmed certain fundamental moral truths of Catholic doctrine which, in the present circumstances, risk being distorted or denied (Cf. *ibid.* 4). I consign this critical discernment regarding some present-day trends in moral theology *to you and your brother Bishops* with the ardent hope and prayer that together we shall fulfil the task of bringing this teaching into the mainstream of the Church's life.

Our trust is in God's power. We must be confident that the Holy Spirit will enlighten and strengthen the hearts of priests, religious and laity, moving them to show *assent and fidelity to this message which is not ours but is from the One who sent us* (Cf. Jn. 7: 16). In being "personally vigilant that the 'sound doctrine' (1Tim. 1: 10) of faith and morals is taught" (John Paul II, [Veritatis Splendor](#), 116), we shall often feel our own faith and courage challenged and put to the test. Then we shall need the virtue of fortitude and the strengthening grace of the Spirit of Truth. Let us pray for one another and for all our brother Bishops, that we may be fully faithful to the Lord in this important hour of the Church's pilgrimage through human history. With my Apostolic Blessing.

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana