



# The Holy See

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## ***ADDRESS TO THE BISHOPS OF PUERTO RICO DURING THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

*Saturday, 11 september 1999*

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

1. I am pleased to receive you today, Pastors of God's Church in Puerto Rico, during your pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, a sign of your communion with the Bishop of Rome and with the universal Church. The *ad limina* visit gives you the opportunity to meet the Successor of Peter and his assistants, and to receive from them the support you need for your pastoral work.

I cordially thank Bishop Ulises Aurelio Casiano Vargas of Mayagüez, President of the Episcopal Conference, for his kind words on behalf of you all, in which he renewed your affection and esteem, and told me of the anxieties and hopes of the Church in Puerto Rico. I also extend a warm and grateful greeting to Cardinal Luis Aponte Martínez for his long years of zealous service to the Archdiocese of San Juan, now governed by Archbishop Roberto Octavio González Nieves.

Through you I also greet the priests, religious and faithful of your Dioceses. Please convey to them the greeting of the Pope, who remembers them in his prayer that they will grow in their faith in Christ and their love of neighbour.

2. In your mission as Pastors of the people entrusted to your care, you must first of all be supporters and models of communion. Just as the Church is one, so too is the episcopate, since the Pope, as the Second Vatican Council says, is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 23). Therefore, the collegial union of the episcopate is one of the constitutive elements of the Church's unity.

This union among Bishops is particularly necessary today when pastoral initiatives take many forms and transcend the boundaries of one's own Diocese. Moreover, communion must be made concrete in pastoral cooperation and joint programmes and projects. This becomes even more urgent, if one takes into account the geographical size of Puerto Rico, the facility and multiplicity of the means of communication and information, and the mobility of the population which, because of work and for others reasons, is mainly concentrated in the capital, giving rise to the phenomenon of urbanization with its resulting problems. This phenomenon presents great challenges for the Church's pastoral work (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 21).

On the other hand, the Ecclesial Communities need Pastors who are men of faith and are united with one another, capable of facing the challenges of a society which is more and more prone to secularization. In fact, although the majority of Puerto Ricans have been baptized in the Catholic Church and practise a variety of popular devotions, they sometimes lack a solid and mature faith. For this reason many of them, especially the young, try to compensate for their interior emptiness and the absence of a plan of life with substitutes of various kinds, letting themselves being drawn into hedonism and shirking their responsibilities (cf. *Pastores dabo vobis*, n. 7). In this regard, consumerism, hedonism, the lack of positive ideals and indifference to religious values and ethical principles are a great hindrance to evangelization. This becomes all the more difficult because of the presence of sects and new pseudo-religious groups, whose activities are spreading in traditionally Catholic areas. This phenomenon requires thorough study "to ascertain why many Catholics leave the Church" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 73).

In the face of all this, as teachers of sound doctrine called to show the secure way that leads to the Father, and as servants of the light which is Christ, "image of the invisible God" (Col 1: 15), you must not cease to impart your teaching, as a united Episcopal Conference, about the problems affecting your island, without usurping the responsibility of politicians and lay people but respecting Catholics' freedom of choice regarding Puerto Rico's "status" and future.

3. In your pastoral mission you rely on the diligent cooperation of your priests who, in communion with you, must always be credible and generous ministers of Christ and his Church in every situation. In this regard, the Second Vatican Council urges: "On account of this common sharing in the same priesthood and ministry then, Bishops are to regard their priests as brothers and friends and are to take the greatest interest they are capable of in their welfare both temporal and spiritual.

For on their shoulders particularly falls the burden of sanctifying their priests: therefore they are to exercise the greatest care in the progressive formation of their diocesan body of priests. They should be glad to listen to their priests' views and even consult them and hold conference with them about matters that concern the needs of pastoral work and the good of the Diocese" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 7). For this reason, try to give your priests personal guidance in their pastoral ministry, in both their difficulties and their joys, by visiting and receiving them frequently,

making friends with them and showing them fraternal concern, as you encourage them to be faithful to their priestly commitments and especially to have constant recourse to personal prayer.

Since the clergy of your Dioceses are diverse and insufficient in number, the seminary has capital importance as the centre where future priests are prepared. I encourage you to continue to give intense support to the pastoral care of vocations in parishes, so that all priests will feel responsible and involved in the beginning and care of new vocations. At the same time, you must devote your greatest attention and efforts to the new candidates, forming them in fraternal communion, giving them a sound theological and cultural basis, and ensuring that they are above all men of God who will bear constant witness to evangelical charity and poverty, with special sensitivity to the needs of the most poor and marginalized. To this end you must revitalize the seminaries of San Juan and Ponce, preparing holy and suitable educators to give the young men sound guidance as they follow Christ in serving the Church. It is desirable that all Puerto Rican seminarians be formed at these two centres; in this way their Bishops will be able to visit them often and thus create an atmosphere of deeper trust and mutual knowledge.

4. The men and women religious who work in the fields of education, health care or social assistance hold a special place in the pastoral work of the Diocese. It is important to establish relations of communion with them and to help them live in holiness and fidelity to their own charism as an enrichment of ecclesial life, so that they will bear a personal witness wherever they carry out their mission. The contemplative communities too are a silent but very effective presence in the Diocese. They deserve special attention because, through their radical choice of following Christ, they cooperate in spreading his kingdom.

5. On the other hand, pastoral care of the Diocese should be focused primarily on the laity, who through their baptismal priesthood must feel directly involved in ecclesial and social life. In this regard the Second Vatican Council says: "The mission of the Church is not only to bring men the message and grace of Christ but also to permeate and improve the whole range of the temporal order" (*Apostolicam actuositatem*, n. 5). All the realities which make up this temporal order - which include the family, culture, the economy, the arts, work, politics and international relations - must be directed to God through the commitment of mature Christians. It is through the assiduous and thorough formation of the lay faithful at the spiritual, moral and human level that the Church must help them to be a Gospel leaven in today's society.

Concerning the family, a constitutive element of society, I know that Puerto Rico is going through a particularly difficult period, as evidenced by the increasing number of divorces and the high rate of children born out of wedlock. This makes it urgently necessary to provide a catechesis that stresses the greatness and dignity of conjugal love in accordance with the divine plan, as well as its requirements for the good of the couple and their children. The family, as a "domestic church", is called to be the setting where parents pass on the Christian faith, since "the parents, by word and example, are the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 11).

I therefore invite you to spare no efforts in the pastoral care of the family, preparing family units that will also be catechists in word and by their witness of life.

As a consequence of the above, be concerned about the education of children and young people. In fact, "young people are a great force in society and for evangelization. They "represent quite a large part of the population in many nations of America. On their encounter with the living Christ depends the hope and expectation of a future of greater communion and solidarity for the Church and society in America" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 47). See, then, that the new evangelization reaches the world of young people through groups, movements and associations which encourage them to participate in ecclesial life and in acts of solidarity with those most in need. The formation of young people must not be separated from the religious and moral education which Catholic schools and universities should offer them. That is why the human, religious and cultural formation of teachers should be supervised with care, so that they will ensure and complete the transmission of values that should begin in every family.

6. In this whole process of human formation, we sometimes encounter laws that conflict with Christian principles. In this regard, the Church considers that authentic culture must consider the person in his entirety, that is, all his personal dimensions, without forgetting the ethical and religious aspects. For this reason it is also necessary to appoint properly trained people to look after the pastoral care of culture. In this regard various initiatives such as Catholic Education Weeks, congresses and other cultural activities deserve praise. Alas, the current cultural context - and Puerto Rico is no exception - tends to foster a culture and society in which God has no place.

Some ideas, which can be considered the pillars of modern or postmodern culture, are clearly not Christian. In the ethical realm, divorce, abortion, assisted euthanasia, premarital relations and hedonism are presented as the modern "achievements" of a misunderstood personal freedom which is free of all responsibility. In view of this rather worrisome reality, the Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops rightly considered that "the new evangelization calls for a clearly conceived, serious and well organized effort to evangelize culture" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 70).

7. Dear Brothers, before concluding this meeting which is taking place a few months before the beginning of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I assure you of my deep communion in prayer together with my firm hope in the spiritual renewal of your Dioceses, so that the Catholic faithful of Puerto Rico will increase in faith, progress in cultivating the Christian virtues and witness courageously in their own surroundings.

I entrust all these wishes and your pastoral ministry to the intercession of Our Lady of Providence, Mother and Patroness of Puerto Rico, so that with maternal concern she will accompany and protect the spiritual growth of all her sons and daughters in a climate of serenity and social peace.

On this occasion, I ask you once again to convey my affectionate greetings to your priests, men

and women religious, seminarians and their educators, your pastoral workers and all the diocesan faithful. To you and to them I impart my Apostolic Blessing with great affection.

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