



# The Holy See

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***ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER PAUL VI  
TO A GROUP OF AMERICAN BISHOPS  
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT***

*Thursday, 20 April 1978*

*Venerable and dear Brothers,*

In the name of the Lord: "Peace be with you" (*Io. 20, 19*).

We have looked forward to this day. And now, we welcome you all with joy, with great joy. For a brief moment you have returned to the center of ecclesial unity from the fields of your pastoral labors; in the apostolic tradition of the Church, you have come "to see Peter" (*Gal. 1, 18*). And with you, you bring the hopes and aspirations of over six million Catholics of New York State. In you, the Shepherds of the local churches, we embrace, in the love of the Savior, all the people of God. Indeed, by the will of Christ our Lord, all your faithful are also our sons and daughters in the communion of the universal Church, and with great paternal affection we wish to strengthen them all, together with you their Bishops, in faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God.

For us, your Dioceses are truly worthy of special honor, special pastoral attention. You are the heirs of a great tradition of holiness. The blood of North American Martyrs has sanctified your soil. Furthermore, Saint Frances Cabrini, Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton and Saint John Neumann all lived at one time in your midst. You are also heirs of great ethnic richness. How many immigrants- perhaps your own mothers or fathers- have found entrance to America in New York. We too remember with gratitude your hospitality.

By your visit here to us today you profess your belief in the Church as a communion of faith and love, built on Christ Jesus, and visibly united in the Successor of Peter. As we assemble today, we know that the Lord Jesus is with us. We are confident that, through the power of his Spirit, you will go out with renewed energy and fresh vigor to pursue your ministry of evangelization: to proclaim

Christ, and to preach his Kingdom and his Coming.

For a few moments we would like to reflect with you on a fundamental aspect of the Gospel: Christ's call to conversion. This theme of conversion was announced by John the Baptist: "Reform your lives" (*Matth. 3, 2*). These words were later spoken by Jesus himself (Cfr. *Ibid. 4, 17*). And just as the Apostles had learned this message from the Lord, so they were instructed by him to make it the content of their preaching (Cfr. *Luc. 24, 27*). On the very day of Pentecost, faithful to the command of Jesus, Peter proclaimed conversion for the forgiveness of sins (Cfr. *Act. 2, 38*). And Saint Paul also says clearly: "I preached a message of reform and of conversion to God" (*Ibid. 26, 19*)

Dear Brothers, this call to conversion has come down to us from the Lord Jesus: it is meant for our own lives, and for our incessant and fearless proclamation to the world. On a former occasion we said that conversion is a whole program linked with the renewing action of the Gospel (Cfr. PAULI PP. VI *Allocutio in Audientia Generali habita, 9 novembris 1977*). As such, conversion constitutes the goal to be achieved by our apostolic ministry: to awaken a consciousness of sin in its perennial and tragic reality, a consciousness of its personal and social dimensions, together with a realization that "grace has far surpassed sin" (*Rom. 5, 20*); and to proclaim salvation in Jesus Christ.

Today we wish to speak to you, your fellow Bishops and brother priests in America particularly about certain sacramental aspects of conversion, certain dimensions of the Sacrament of Penance or of Reconciliation. Six years ago, with our special approval and by our mandate, the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith promulgated Pastoral Norms regulating general sacramental absolution. This document, entitled "Sacramentum Paenitentiae", reiterated the solemn teaching of the Council of Trent concerning the divine precept of individual confession. The document also acknowledged the difficulty experienced by the faithful in some places in going to individual confession because of a lack of priests. Provisions were made for general absolution in cases of grave necessity, and the conditions constituting this grave necessity were clearly specified (*Sacramentum Paenitentiae, 3*).

It was then reserved to the Ordinary, after consultation with other members of the Episcopal Conference, to judge whether the necessary conditions determined by the Apostolic See and specified in Norm 3 were in fact present. Ordinaries were not authorized to change the required conditions, to substitute other conditions for those given, or to determine grave necessity according to their personal criteria, however worthy. "Sacramentum Paenitentiae" recognized in effect that the norms governing the basic discipline of the Church's ministry of reconciliation were a matter of special concern to the universal Church and of regulation by her supreme authority. What is so important in the application of the norms is the general effectiveness of the basic ecclesial ministry of reconciliation in accordance with the intention of Christ the Savior. In the life of the Church general absolution is not to be used as a normal pastoral option, or as a means of

confronting any difficult pastoral situation. It is permitted only for the extraordinary situations of grave necessity as indicated in Norm 3. Just last year we drew attention publicly to the altogether *exceptional* character of general absolution (Cfr. PAULI PP. VI *Allocutio in Audientia Generali habita*, 23 martii 1977).

Brethren, we also recall the words of our Bicentennial Letter to the Bishops of America: “We ask for supreme vigilance in the question of auricular confession” (PAULI PP. VI *Epistola ad Foederatarum Americae Septemtrionalis Civitatum Episcopos, altero exeunte saeculo ab adepta civium libertate*: AAS 68 (1976) 410). And today we add explicitly: we ask for faithful observance of the norms. Fidelity to the communion of the universal Church requires it; at the same time this fidelity will be the guarantee of the supernatural effectiveness of your ecclesial mission of reconciliation. Moreover, we ask you, the Bishops, to help your priests to have an ever greater appreciation of this splendid ministry of theirs as Confessors (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 30). The experience of centuries confirms the importance of this ministry. And if priests deeply understand how closely they collaborate, through the Sacrament of Penance, with the Savior in the work of conversion, they will give themselves with ever greater zeal to this ministry. More Confessors will readily be available to the faithful. Other works, for lack of time, may have to be postponed or even abandoned, but not the Confessional. The example of Saint John Vianney is not outmoded. The exhortation of Pope John in his Encyclical “*Sacerdotii Nostri Primordia*” is still extremely relevant.

We have repeatedly asked that the capital function of the Sacrament of Penance be safeguarded (Cfr. PAULI PP. VI *Allocutiones in Audientiis Generalibus habitae*, 3 aprilis 1974 et 12 martii 1975). And two years ago, when we beatified the Capuchin Father Leopoldo da Castelnovo, we pointed out that he reached the highest holiness through a ministry dedicated to the Confessional. We believe that conditions in the Church today-in your own Dioceses as elsewhere-are ripe for a more diligent and fruitful use of the Sacrament of Penance, in accordance with the “*Ordo Paenitentiae*”, and for a more intensive ministry on the part of priests, with the consequent fruits of greater holiness and justice in the lives of priests and faithful. But the full actuation of this renewal depends, under God’s grace, on your own vigilance and fidelity. It requires constant guidance on your part and strong spiritual leadership. Moreover, with regard to the practice of frequent Confession we ask you to recall to your priests and religious and laity-to all the faithful in search of holiness the words of our predecessor Pius XII: “Not without the inspiration of the Holy Spirit was this practice introduced into the Church ” (AAS 35 (1943) 235).

Another important aspect of the penitential discipline of the Church is the practice of First Confession before First Communion . Our appeal here is that the norms of the Apostolic See be not emptied of their meaning by contrary practice. In this regard we repeat words we spoke last year to a group of Bishops during their *ad limina* visit: “The faithful would be rightly shocked that obvious abuses are tolerated by those who have received the charge of the ‘episcopate’ which stands for, since the earliest days of the Church, vigilance and unity” (AAS 69 (1977) 473).

There are many other aspects of conversion that we would like to speak to you about. But we shall conclude by urging you to take back to your people an uplifting message of confidence, which is: “Christ Jesus our hope” (1 *Tim.* 1, 1). In the power of his Resurrection, through the strength of his word, exhort the faithful to continue the life-long process of conversion, well aware that: “Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him” (1 *Cor.* 2, 9).

Venerable Brothers: we thank you deeply for your partnership in the Gospel and we ask the Lord Jesus to renew you in his love. And to all your priests and deacons, your religious and laity we send our greeting of peace and our Apostolic Blessing: in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.