



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOPS OF ONTARIO (CANADA)
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Tuesday, 4 May 1999

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the glorious hope of Easter, I greet you, the *Bishops of Ontario*, rejoicing with you that the paschal promise "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us" (Rom 5:5). I pray that during these days of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* the Spirit who raised Jesus from the dead *will move powerfully in your hearts*, so that you may taste anew his peace and joy in "the priestly service of the Gospel of God" (Rom 15:16). You come from the cities, great and small, from the vast spaces of rural Canada, from cultures both English-speaking and French-speaking and from Churches of East and West. But you have come to the tombs of the Apostles *united as brothers in hierarchical communion*, as Pastors bearing the joys and hopes, the sorrows and concerns of the People of God whom Christ has called you to serve. The ministry of Bishops is complex and demanding, and its many pressures can at times blur our vision of what Christ calls us to be and to do. This time in Rome is a moment the Lord gives you to step aside awhile and focus once again upon what really matters, to take stock of your ministry in the light of the Lord's love for his Church, and to plan for the future with ever greater courage and confidence.

This is *an hour of great challenge for the Catholic community*, but it is also a time of abundant grace; and we who lead the People of God on their pilgrim way dare not overlook the gift that is now being offered. We stand at the threshold of a new millennium, at a time of profound cultural change which, like the millennium drawing to a close, is fraught with ambiguity. Yet in the midst of complexities and contradictions, the whole Church is preparing to celebrate *the Great Jubilee of the 2,000th anniversary of the Saviour's birth*, certain that the mercy of God will do great things for us (cf. Lk 1:49). The signs are there that Christ, the fullness of God's mercy, is moving in new and marvellous ways. As at other significant moments of her history, the Church stands under judgement; and she will be judged on whether or not she succeeds in recognizing and responding to the demands of this "hour of grace". More than others, we Bishops stand under judgement: "it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy" (1 Cor 4:2).

2. The memory of *the Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops* is still vivid in my mind: and how could it be otherwise, with so deep an experience of episcopal communion in the "care for all the churches" (2 Cor 11:28)? From Mexico City, the

Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* has gone forth to you and to the priests, religious and lay faithful of your Dioceses as an earnest invitation to engage in the "new evangelization". The Apostolic Exhortation contains *many elements for thought and action*; and it is one of these that I wish to consider with you today. The Exhortation notes that "the evangelization of urban culture is a formidable challenge for the Church. Just as she was able to evangelize rural culture for centuries, the Church is called in the same way today to undertake a methodical and far-reaching urban evangelization" (n. 21). What the Synod Fathers called for is nothing short of the evangelization which I have described as "new in ardour, methods and expression" (*Address to the Assembly of CELAM*, 9 March, 1983, III); and *such an evangelization is certainly needed at the dawn of the third Christian millennium*, especially in the large urban centres where a growing percentage of the population now lives. As the Synod Fathers observed, the Church in Europe and elsewhere has in the past succeeded in evangelizing rural culture, but that is no longer enough. A great new task now beckons, and it is unthinkable that we should fail in *the evangelization of the cities*. "He who calls you is faithful, and he will do it" (1 Th 5:24).

3. The phenomenon of the megalopolis has long been with us, and the Church has not been slow to consider how best to respond. In his Apostolic Letter of 1971, *Octogesima adveniens*, Pope Paul VI noted how increasing and irreversible urbanization is a great challenge to human wisdom, imagination and powers of organization (n. 10). He emphasized how urbanization in an industrial society upsets traditional ways and structures of life, producing for people "a new loneliness ... in an anonymous crowd ... in which they feel themselves strangers" (ibid.). It also produces what the Pope called "new proletariats" on the edges of the big cities, "a belt of misery in silent protest at the luxury which blatantly cries out from centres of consumption and waste" (ibid.). There arises a *culture of discrimination and indifference*, "lending itself to new forms of exploitation and domination" which deeply undermine human dignity. This is not the whole truth of the modern megalopolis but it is a crucial part of it, and it presents the Church, especially her Pastors, with a pressing and inescapable challenge. Urbanization, it is true, provides new opportunities, creates new modes of community, stimulates many forms of solidarity; but "in the struggle against sin" (cf. Heb 12:4) *it is often the dark underside of urbanization which occupies your immediate pastoral attention*.

In the years since 1971, the truth of Pope Paul's remarks has become clearer as the process of urbanization has gone on and increased. The Synod Fathers noted that the movement of people to the cities is most often caused by poverty, lack of opportunity and poor services in rural areas (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 21). The attraction grows stronger because the cities hold out the promise of employment and entertainment, appearing to be the answer to poverty and boredom when in fact they generate new forms of both.

For many people, especially the young, the city becomes an experience of rootlessness, anonymity and inequality, with the consequent loss of identity and sense of human dignity. The result is often the violence that now marks so many of the large cities, not least in your own country. At the core of this violence there is a protest bred of deepseated disappointment: the city promises so much and delivers so little to so many. This sense of disappointment is also linked to *a loss of confidence in institutions* - political, legal and educational institutions, but also the Church

and the family. In such a world, a world of great absences, the heavens seem closed (cf. Is 64:1) and God seems a long way away. It becomes *a profoundly secular world*, a one-dimensional world which to many people can appear like a prison. In this "city of man", we are called to build "the city of God"; and before so daunting a duty we are tempted perhaps, like the prophet Jonah at Nineveh, to lose heart and flee from the task (cf. Jon 4:1-3; *Octogesima adveniens*, n. 12). But, as with Jonah, the Lord himself will lead us resolutely along the path which he has chosen for us.

4. The Synod Fathers were not vague when advocating a new urban evangelization: they also specified elements of the pastoral strategy which it requires. They spoke of the need for "a methodical and far-reaching urban evangelization through catechesis, liturgy and the very way in which pastoral structures are organized" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 21). Here we have three quite precise indications: *catechesis, liturgy and the organization of pastoral structures* - indications which are radically linked to *the threefold ministry of a Bishop to teach, to sanctify and to govern*. At this point, dear Brothers, we are at the heart of what Christ is calling us to be and to do in the new evangelization.

All three factors look towards *a fresh and more profound experience of community in Christ*, which is the only effective and enduring response to a culture of rootlessness, anonymity and inequality. Where this experience is weak, we may expect more of the faithful to lose interest in religion or to drift into the sects and pseudo-religious groups which feed off alienation and which flourish among Christians who are disenchanted with the Church for one reason or another. We can no longer expect people to come to our communities spontaneously: there must be instead a new missionary outreach in the cities, with dedicated men and women, and young people, going forth in Christ's name to invite people into the community of the Church. This is a crucial element of that "organization of pastoral structures" which a new evangelization of the cities will require. It will be a new surge of the same energy which brought the Church to birth in your land: the heroic outreach of Jean de Brébeuf and Isaac Jogues, Marguerite Bourgeoys and Marguerite d'Youville. But *the frontier now is the city*, and it is there that the new missionary heroism must shine no less brightly than it did in other ways in the past. This will depend in large part upon the energy and dedication of *urban lay missionaries*, but they in turn will need the service of truly zealous priests who are themselves fired with the missionary spirit and who know how to kindle that spirit in others. It is vital that *seminaries and houses of formation be seen clearly as schools for mission* which train priests who can inspire the faithful to become the new evangelizers whom the Church now needs.

5. Once the faithful respond to the Lord's call and seek to enter more fully into the community of faith, they must be led ever closer to Christ through the experience of worship and catechesis of which the Synod Fathers spoke. *The privileged place for this remains the parish*, for all the great changes it is undergoing in today's urban context (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, n. 41). It is true that the parish needs to be adapted to meet rapidly changing circumstances; but it is also true that the parish has shown itself extraordinarily adaptable in the past and will show itself no less adaptable

now.

Every adaptation, however, must keep clearly in mind that *it is above all the Eucharist which reveals the unchanging truth of the Christian life*. This is why the liturgy is so crucial and why Bishops and priests need to do all in their power to ensure that the Church's worship, especially the Mass, is centred on the real presence of the Lord - "for the Eucharist is the Church's entire spiritual wealth" (*Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 5). This demands both a systematic catechesis of young people and adults and a great spirit of fraternity among all who gather to worship the Lord. *The anonymity of the city cannot be allowed to enter our Eucharistic communities*. New ways and structures must be found to build bridges between people, so that there really is that experience of mutual acceptance and closeness which Christian fellowship requires. It may be that this, and the catechesis which must accompany it, would be better done in smaller communities: as the Post-Synodal Exhortation puts it, "one way of renewing parishes, especially urgent for parishes in larger cities, might be to consider the parish as a community of communities" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 41). This will need to be done wisely, lest it lead to new forms of fragmentation; but its potential advantage is that "in such a human context, it will be easier to gather to hear the word of God, to reflect on the range of human problems in the light of this word, and gradually to make responsible decisions inspired by the all-embracing love of Christ" (ibid.).

Not only the parishes, but also *Catholic schools and other institutions must be open to the pastoral imperative of evangelizing the city*. But, for this, they must ensure that their Catholic identity is in no way eroded by the surrounding pressures of secularization. In Canada, those pressures are at times severe and you, dear Brothers, have struggled to withstand them. I strongly urge you to pursue that path with courage and clarity of vision, so that Catholic institutions, precisely because of their Catholic identity, may effectively contribute to the Church's great work of evangelization. All of this is very much a part of the task of vigilance which Christ has entrusted to the Bishops.

6. Yet it must never be forgotten that developments at the level of pastoral structure and strategy are intended to do one thing alone: *to lead people to Christ*. This was the simple and luminous vision of the Synod, and it is reflected in the Post-Synodal Exhortation. It is certainly this for which people long, even though they themselves sometimes fail to see it. Scripture leaves no doubt that Christ is not encountered apart from the experience of Christian community. We cannot have Christ without the Church, the community of faith and saving grace. Without the Church, it is certain that we shall create an idea of Christ in our own image, when our real task is to allow him to create us in his own image. The New Testament is also quite precise in its description of the encounter with Christ. We see this especially in the Easter season, when we read the accounts of the appearances of the risen Lord which were the very seed of Christianity understood as a religion not just of enlightenment but especially of encounter. The Gospels tell us that *the encounter with Christ is always unexpected, unsettling and commissioning*. The call of Christ, like the call of God in the Old Testament, comes to those who do not expect it - at a time, in a place and in a way they could never have predicted. It is unsettling in the sense that life can never be

the same again: there is always a dislocating effect in the call of Christ who says, "Follow me" (Mt 4:19), with all the conversion of life that this implies. And finally, those who encounter Christ are always commissioned by him to go forth to share with others the gift which they themselves have received (cf. Mt 28:19-20). This, then, will be the threefold shape of the encounter with Christ which leads people more deeply into the community of faith, and which remains the whole purpose of their journey of faith within the Church.

7. In a community more fully conscious of Christ's presence the megalopolis will find the God-given sign pointing beyond a culture of rootlessness, anonymity and inequality. There will be nurtured *the culture of life* which you, dear Brothers, have striven so consistently to promote; and this in turn will generate *a culture of human dignity*, that true humanism which is rooted in God's creative act and is always a sign of Christ's redemptive power. Such a community will be the seed of "the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God" (Rv 21:2). We are those who have seen that vision of the Church: therefore "we have learnt that there is a City of God and we have longed to become citizens of that City" (St Augustine, *City of God*, XI, 1), where "we shall be still and see; we shall see and we shall love; we shall love and we shall praise" (ibid., XXII, n. 30).

With the praise of the Most Holy Trinity in our hearts and on our lips, we look to Mary, "Mother of America" (*Ecclesia in America*, n. 76). May she through whom the light rose over the earth shed light upon your own path as you journey with your people through the darkness to meet the risen Lord. Entrusting the Church in Ontario to her unfailing care, and invoking the infinite mercy of God upon yourselves, and upon the priests, religious and lay faithful, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.