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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEL GIAPPONE

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale del Giappone, ricevuti questa mattina e incontrati in questi giorni in separate udienze per la Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. Rejoicing in "the unsearchable riches of Christ" (*Eph* 3:8), I welcome you, the Bishops of Japan, on your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*, a veritable pilgrimage in the spirit of communion with the universal Church and with the Successor of Peter. Through you, I greet the entire household of God in your land, "giving thanks at every remembrance of you, praying always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership in the Gospel" (*Phil* 1:3-4).

In the Year of the Great Jubilee, the whole Church gave thanks for the endless graces of the two thousand years since the Saviour's birth; and in greeting you now, I cannot fail to praise God for the heritage of Christian faith which has flourished in Japan from the day when Saint Francis Xavier first set foot on your shores. The early missionaries taught the Christians of Japan a profound reverence for the majesty of God, a high esteem for the Redemption, a fervent love for the crucified Saviour and a resolute shunning of sin. They appealed to your people's innate sense of the transience of earthly things and fearlessness in the face of death, stirring in them a love for the things of heaven and the eternity found above. As a result, the early centuries of Christianity in Japan were indelibly marked by the courage and steadfastness of your martyrs. Their heroic witness not only adorns your past with the splendor of the crucified Lord, it also indicates the path of the present and future vocation and commitment of Japanese Christians.

2. In the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, I pondered the story of the miraculous catch of fish which we find in the Gospel of Saint Luke (5:1-11). *Duc in altum!*: these were the words that echoed in my mind as I looked back upon the grace of the Great Jubilee and forward to the future for which the Jubilee was an excellent

preparation. Not only in Japan, but in many parts of the world, Pastors can be left feeling as Peter did when Jesus commanded him to cast his nets out into the deep for a catch. We labor with all our might to make a catch; yet at times we are left feeling that we have caught little or nothing and that, for the time being at least, there is nothing there to catch. Yet Jesus says: Put out your nets! Faith assures us that the Lord knows our world better than we do, that he sees into the deep waters of the human soul and of the culture which you are called to evangelize.

History shows that times which seem particularly difficult for the proclamation of Jesus Christ and resistant to his Gospel can also be the most rewarding. There are in fact many signs of a widespread hunger for the deeper things of the Spirit (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33). Christ is calling us to "an exciting work of pastoral revitalization" (*ibid.*, 29). With imagination and courage we must seek to apply to the world of our day the ageless program of the Gospel, and to present to all who will listen the endlessly attractive figure of the Lord Jesus and the truth of his Gospel, "the power of God for salvation" (*Rom* 1:16).

3. The necessary inculturation of the faith in the context of Japanese society cannot be the result of a preconceived plan or theory, but must be born of the lived experience of the whole People of God in a continuous dialogue of salvation with the society in which they live. In guiding this dialogue, the Pastors of the Church in Asia have a delicate and vitally important duty to fulfil, which the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops dealt with at length, offering guidelines which I reported in the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*. The close bonds between religion, culture and society make it particularly difficult for the followers of Asia's great religions to be open to the mystery of the Incarnation and to conceive of Jesus as the one and only Savior. The proclamation of Christ therefore requires a careful and protracted effort to translate exactly the truths of the faith into categories more readily accessible to Asian sensibilities and the mentality of your people. The challenge is to present the "Asian face of Jesus" in a way that is in perfect harmony with the Church's whole mystical, philosophical and theological tradition.

The Good News of God's love manifested in Jesus Christ is good news for everyone, for it concerns the meaning of our human existence and destiny. As the well-known text of the Second Vatican Council states: "It is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22). At a time when many are confused about the meaning of life or are searching for a light to clarify the many existential and moral questions which trouble them, the truth about our human condition is the essential basis for building a culture and a society worthy of the image of God inherent in every man and woman. When there is an effort to build progress and prosperity without reference to God, bringing incalculable damage to the dignity of the human person, the Church has a duty to remind people of what is essential: the truth, goodness, justice and respect for all. To present this reality is a fundamental form of solidarity with our fellow human beings. To proclaim this to society is an excellent form of pastoral charity.

4. In responding to the yearning of the human spirit, we fully rely on God's grace while we recognize also the need for careful and confident pastoral planning (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29). The challenges before your pastoral ministry are many and complex. Happily now, the right to religious freedom is fully recognized in your land and the days of persecution are a thing of the past. Yet pressures of another kind have emerged to beset the faith and challenge your ministry. Some of these challenges are common to the Church in all developed countries, and others are particular to your own country.

As so often happens, affluence brings with it an array of problems, the roots of which are to be found in the human heart. While some enjoy the benefits of material progress, others are left at the margins, in new and sometimes particularly degrading forms of poverty. When a consumerist mentality takes hold, people are absorbed by the concern for "having", to the detriment of "being". The harmony of the spirit is fragmented, and the result is dissatisfaction and the inability to build interpersonal relationships and assume a commitment of self-giving love and service of others. How many people, even among the affluent, are threatened by despair at the lack of meaning in their lives, by fear of abandonment in old age or sickness, by marginalization or social discrimination! Some of the ways in which people seek relief are extremely self-defeating and destructive of individuals and society: violence, drugs and suicide come immediately to mind. But, as Pastors of souls, you are fully aware of the truth of what Saint Paul writes to the Romans: "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (5:20). It is your confidence in this grace of God which gives you hope and strength in facing the

challenges before you, and it is true pastoral charity which urges you to gather all the energies of the communities entrusted to your pastoral care in a great and generous effort to bring the Gospel to bear more visibly and more effectively on the situation in which you live.

5. In the climate of prayer surrounding your visits to the tombs of the Apostles it will perhaps be more easy to reaffirm that the goal of all pastoral planning and activity is holiness according to the standards of the Beatitudes (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31). The call to holiness, while it applies in specific ways to Bishops, priests and Religious men and women, is, as Chapter 5 of *Lumen Gentium* stresses, a universal call. There are different ministries and different roles in the Church, but this cannot mean that some are called to holiness and others are not. Everyone who is baptized is drawn into the holiness of God, and therefore "it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31).

In a sense, the holiness of clergy and religious is intended as a service to lay people, enabling them to grow more and more in the way of holiness, so that they can fulfil their baptismal vocation. A laity imbued with Christian virtue to a heroic degree is not a novelty in the history of the Church in Japan. In the list of your martyrs the names of lay people figure prominently, and when difficulties persisted for long periods it was the laity who passed on an ardent faith from one generation to the next. The truth is that holy Pastors will produce holy lay people, and from among those holy lay people there will come the vocations to the priesthood and religious life which the Church needs in every time and place. We must keep this vision of complementarity and collaboration in mind, so that the relationship between clergy and laity will reflect more and more the communion (*koinonia*) which is the Church's very nature.

6. One of the principal objectives of your pastoral planning in union with your collaborators will be to help Christian communities in Japan to become more than ever "genuine schools of prayer", "where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly 'falls in love'" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 33). Such prayer is more than comfort and strength in the disciple's life: it is also the well-spring of evangelization. It is from a new depth of prayer and contemplation that a "new evangelization" will come.

A specific renewal of pastoral activity and methodology is required in parishes and communities which are being transformed by an influx of immigrants, many of whom are Catholics. These brothers and sisters in the faith are in most cases going through the difficulties of adjusting to an unfamiliar situation with very little resources. They are often friendless, linguistically disadvantaged and culturally estranged, with negative consequences for work opportunities, the education of their children and even necessary services such as health care and legal protection. Many are not well instructed in the faith, and are greatly in need of spiritual as well as material support. Every effort must be made to meet their legitimate needs and to make them feel welcome in the Catholic community. The Church cannot but oppose all forms of discrimination and injustice, working with determination to act on behalf of those who are exploited or have no voice of their own.

A "new evangelization" in Japan will also mean a discerning but generous openness to the communities and movements which the Holy Spirit is raising up in the Church as a special fruit of the Second Vatican Council. It is often in such groups that people, especially the young, find the spiritual fervor and experience of community which leads them to a personal encounter with Christ and makes them in turn missionaries of the new millennium. Clearly these communities and movements have to work in union with the Bishops and priests, and in full harmony with the pastoral life of the local Churches. It is the Bishops' task to "test everything and hold fast what is good" (*1 Th 5:21*).

7. Dear Brother Bishops, the good seed has been planted in the rich soil of Japan (cf. *Lk 8:8, 15*). The work of Saint Francis Xavier and the first missionaries, which has borne such fruit in the past, will continue to bear abundant fruit as long as their memory is cherished and venerated. The witness of the Japanese martyrs will not cease to show forth "the glory of God in the face of Christ" (*2 Cor 4:6*); the heroic fidelity of those Japanese Christians who secretly held to their faith for centuries despite persecution and a lack of priests is surely a guarantee that the fruitful encounter between the faith and Japanese culture can come about at the deepest levels of mind and heart.

Entrusting you, and the priests, religious and all Christ's faithful in Japan to Mary, "Mother of the New Creation and Mother of Asia" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 51), I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and peace in her divine Son.

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