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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DI THAILANDIA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc. mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale di Thailandia, ricevuti questa mattina e incontrati nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Cardinal Kitbunchu,
Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With great joy I welcome you – the Bishops of Thailand – on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. You have come to Rome to re-affirm your faith at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and to seek guidance and strength for the service of the Gospel which has been entrusted to you. Your visit is a sign of the communion of mind and heart (cf. *Acts* 4:32) which unites you with the Successor of Peter in the Apostolic College. I assure you of my prayers during these days that you may be filled with the knowledge of God's will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding (cf. *Col* 1:9), so that through your ministry God's kingdom may continue to grow and make progress among your people. My thoughts go too to the priests, consecrated men and women, and laity of the Church in Thailand, and through you I encourage them to remain steadfast in faith and in the love of the Lord.

Last year's Great Jubilee of the Birth of Jesus Christ unleashed new energies and fresh enthusiasm in the Christian community around the world, and also in your own country. It is not possible for us to know all the ways in which God touched the lives of people during the year, but we do know that many Christians experienced his merciful love, especially in the Sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist. The countless graces and blessings of the Jubilee urge us to give heartfelt thanks to the Lord, "for he is good, for his love endures for ever" (*Ps* 118:1). Our responsibility now is to direct our thoughts to the future and to profit from the grace received, by developing a practical programme of pastoral renewal capable of responding to the Church's needs at the beginning of this new millennium.

2. Your *ad Limina* visit is taking place almost immediately after the Tenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, which has concentrated attention once more on the figure of the Bishop as a man of God whose first concern is for his own personal holiness and the holiness of God's people. The Synod Fathers repeatedly stressed that the Bishop must be a man of prayer and growth in grace through the Sacraments; a man of exemplary life, wholly dedicated to the task of teaching, sanctifying and governing the part of God's flock committed to his care. Today I wish to encourage you to place all your trust in Jesus Christ, who called you and consecrated you for this task. He will not fail you as you strive to respond to that call and seek to fulfil in your country the great command which the Lord gave his Apostles at his Ascension: the evangelization of all nations.

In this sense, your pastoral programme already exists. It is centred in Christ himself, "who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29). Your constant thought must be to discern what has to be done in your particular Churches in order to enable the proclamation of Christ to reach people's hearts, to build and shape vibrant Christian communities, and to have a deep and incisive effect in bringing Gospel values to bear on society and culture.

The commitment and self-sacrifice of countless foreign missionaries has contributed much to the growth of the Church throughout Asia, and the example of their zeal should be remembered and imitated with deep gratitude. Today, however, the missionary endeavour has to be carried out primarily by Asians themselves. The pressing work of evangelization in your country will depend on the convincing witness of life, the zealous dedication, and a display of fresh energies on the part of all Thai Catholics. Likewise, the Thai Missionary Society, founded in recent years, is a maturing fruit of your local Church deserving your close support, for it is in giving to others that you too will receive all that you need from the Lord.

3. Since there can be no true evangelization "if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the Kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God, are not proclaimed" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 22), Pastors must ensure that their people receive a thorough and systematic knowledge of the person and message of Jesus Christ, a knowledge that will enable them in turn to communicate to others the saving message of the Gospel with joy and conviction. As the first teachers of the faith in your Dioceses, your task is to make the Christian message accessible to your people, explaining how the Gospel sheds light on life's meaning amid the demands posed by contemporary society.

Though the Catholic community in Thailand forms a small minority, it is nevertheless held in high esteem for the good work that is being done in the fields of health care and education. Your Catholic schools provide instruction of a high standard, and this makes an invaluable contribution to the life of the Church and of society. By its very nature Catholic education aims not only to provide knowledge and training but also, and more importantly, to transmit a coherent vision of life, shaped by the Gospel, which will enable young people to grow in true wisdom and freedom. Contemporary society urgently needs such educational institutions to provide a solid moral training and help students to acquire the virtues and skills required for the service of God and neighbour. Students should be encouraged to engage in forms of service and volunteer work so that they may become more actively involved in the Church's mission and learn to contribute in a real way to the renewal of society. I am confident that you will do all you can to maintain and strengthen the Catholic character of your schools and to find new ways of ensuring that the poor and marginalized, who otherwise would not have the opportunity, will be given greater access to education.

4. Since the family is the foundation of society and the place where people first learn the values which will guide them through life, it has to have a special place in your pastoral concern. In every Diocese an active family apostolate should aim at ensuring that parents and children are helped to live their vocation according to the mind of Christ, and that couples in interreligious marriages receive the help they need to avoid any weakening of faith. The family is under threat from various forms of materialism and from widespread offences against human dignity, such as the scourge of abortion and the sexual exploitation of women and children. Fresh efforts must be constantly made in your local communities to meet these difficulties and to train the lay faithful to carry out their specific mission in the temporal order, in every area of political, economic, social and cultural life.

It is essential then that both lay and religious catechists, who play such an important role in your communities, continue to be "equipped for every good work" (2 Tim 3:17) by receiving opportunities for systematic training, as well as through days of prayer and courses of renewal. In the task of transmitting the faith, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* would be an invaluable resource.

Consecrated men and women, whose form of life enables them to bear particularly effective witness to God's love for his people, make a significant contribution to the life of the Church in Thailand. Their special charism enables them to respond to the widespread demand for genuine spirituality and spiritual direction among the faithful. The apostolate of prayer is the secret of a truly vital Christianity in any age (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 32), and for this reason consecrated men and women, particularly contemplatives, should not only offer a clear example of a life committed to prayer and reflection but should become true masters of prayer for others. It is not without significance that the Second Vatican Council reminds us that contemplatives "enlarge the Church by their hidden apostolic fruitfulness" (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 7).

5. It is above all in attention to the formation and welfare of priests that a Bishop shows himself to be a true pastor, and a true father, brother and friend of those who are his closest collaborators in the ministry. The Church in Thailand continues to be blessed with numerous vocations. It is important that you pay close attention to the various elements of seminary training in order to ensure that your particular Churches will always have the exemplary priests which your communities have a right to expect. Candidates need a solid grounding in the ecclesiastical sciences and a well-structured spiritual training if they are to have a proper and profound grasp of their ministry, the expression of a special sacramental configuration with Christ which cannot be reduced to a role patterned after secular careers.

During the Jubilee Year, I had the joy of beatifying a Thai priest, Father Nicolas Bunkerd Kitbamrung, who was "outstanding in teaching the faith, in seeking out the lapsed and in his charity towards the poor" (*Homily*, 5 March 2000, No. 3). Blessed Nicolas is a true model for Thai priests and I am confident that his example will inspire seminarians and priests to understand that, far from being a mere custodian of ecclesiastical institutions, the priest should always think of himself as a living instrument of Christ the eternal High Priest (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 12). His life "is a mystery totally grafted on to the mystery of Christ and of the Church in a new and specific way" which "engages him totally in pastoral activity" (*Directory for the Life and Ministry of Priests*, 6). In a real sense, the priest in his identity and in his activities of preaching the word, celebrating the Sacraments and spreading God's Kingdom, must be Christ for others; he must put on the "very mind of Christ" (cf. *1 Cor 2:16*). At a time when there is a deep yearning for authentic spirituality, the priest must be a man of prayer, familiar with God's word and strong in his attachment to the Lord. Since the message we preach is the truth about God and man, priests should dedicate particular attention to the preparation of the Sunday homily, so that the faithful may come to know how the Gospel sheds light on the path of individuals and society. A close relationship between the Bishop and his priests, and fraternal cooperation between priests themselves, help to build the Diocese as a family in which all the members – Bishop, priests, religious and laity – can place their gifts and talents at the service of Christ's Body.

6. As you well know from daily experience, evangelization in Asia, a continent shaped by ancient cultures and religious traditions, presents particular challenges. The Church accomplishes her missionary task in obedience to Christ's command, in the knowledge that every person has the right to hear his saving message in all its fullness. She must do so with respect and esteem for her listeners, taking account of their philosophical, cultural and spiritual values, and engaging in dialogue with them. In your country, as in the rest of Asia, the question of interreligious dialogue is a pressing one. Contact, dialogue and cooperation with the followers of other religions represent both a duty and a challenge for you. Thailand's ancient monastic tradition should provide a point of contact and fellowship which can foster fruitful dialogue between Buddhists and Christians. That tradition is a reminder of the primacy of the things of the spirit and should act as a counter-balance to the materialism and consumerism which affect such a large part of society.

The truths of the faith which form the content and context of this missionary task are the doctrine of Jesus as the one Saviour of the world and the Church as the necessary instrument of God's redemptive plan. These are truths which must be proclaimed in a reasoned and convincing manner, so as to invite those who hear them to ponder them with an open heart. At the beginning of a new millennium the Church in Thailand is being

challenged to present the mystery of Christ in a way that corresponds to your people's cultural patterns and ways of thinking, by drawing on the positive elements of Thailand's great human patrimony. On the other hand, the process of inculturation calls for careful discernment on your part to ensure that the principles of compatibility with the Gospel and communion with the universal Church are fully respected. Clearly, inculturation is more than external adaptation, for it entails "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 52). I urge you to make continuing efforts in this field, so that the truths and values of the Gospel will be seen ever more clearly as responding to your people's genuine spiritual and human needs and aspirations.

7. Dear Brother Bishops, my thoughts often turn to your land and to its people. With affection I pray that the graces of the Great Jubilee will continue to strengthen your attachment to Christ and your commitment to evangelization. I ask Mary, bright Star of Evangelization in every age, to intercede for the people you serve and to lead all of you to the saving encounter with her Son, our Redeemer. To her I entrust the needs and hopes of your particular Churches, as well as the burdens and joys of your episcopal ministry. To you and the priests, religious and laity of your Dioceses I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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