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

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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 Myanmar, ricevuti questa mattina e incontrati nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the name of the Lord who is "the Amen, the faithful and true witness, the source of God's creation" (*Rev* 3:14), I greet you the Bishops of Myanmar as you make your quinquennial pilgrimage *ad Limina Apostolorum*. I embrace you with joy in the bond of faith, for "I know your works, your toil and your patient endurance" (*Rev* 2:2). As you come to pray at the Tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, the Bishop of Rome in turn wishes to honour the witness given by Christ's faithful in your land. Myanmar is a land where the Church in her early years knew martyrdom, and still today lives close to the Cross of the Saviour. But the Cross is the source of our hope and certainty: for every grace that enlightens and strengthens human hearts flows from the wounded side of the Crucified Lord. From this saving mystery, you will acquire the strength to set out once more on the sea of the Church's mission: the great ocean of evangelization which stretches before us at the dawn of the Third Christian Millennium.

2. On your *ad Limina* visit you bring with you the joys and sorrows, the hopes and disappointments, not only of the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care but of the people of Myanmar as a whole. The difficulties include widespread poverty despite the abundant resources of the land, and limits placed on fundamental rights and freedoms. These problems are in many ways aggravated by isolation, which is all the more harmful when interaction between peoples and between nations is increasing and growing more complex by the day. Moreover, these are troubled times in the world, when a deep and unexpected turmoil has gripped the international community. In this situation the Church's Pastors must be all the more concerned to remain close to their people and lead them in the path of the Gospel.

In this task we are guided by the Lord himself: "I am the way, the truth and the life" (*Jn* 14:6). Jesus Christ himself is the way, for he alone is the saving truth which leads to the fullness of life for which all peoples long. This is the grandeur of our faith which shone forth so splendidly during the Year of the Great Jubilee. In that time of grace, the whole Church contemplated more deeply and joyfully the face of Christ, marred by suffering but radiant with the glory of God (cf. *2 Cor* 4:6; *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 25-28). On that face we see both the greatness of divine love and the greatness of human dignity. It is of these that Christ now speaks to the heart of the Church in Myanmar, summoning you and the faithful to a fresh discovery of "the immeasurable riches of [God's] grace in kindness toward us in Christ Jesus" (*Eph* 2:7).

3. In contemplating the face of Christ, you and your people will find the strength to live the humility, poverty and even solitude of your situation not as a burden but as an evangelical virtue, uplifting and freeing. "As the unequivocal words of the Gospel remind us, there is a special presence of Christ in the poor, and this requires the Church to make a preferential option for them" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 49). I know, dear Brothers, that even with your scant resources you have chosen this path. Your testimony will be all the more convincing in so far as others see "with still greater clarity to what length of dedication the Christian community can go in charity towards the poorest" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 49). This was one of the principal exhortations of the recent Tenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, at which the Fathers stressed the need for Bishops to be truly *patres pauperum*.

4. Dear Brothers, be resolute in following the path of evangelical freedom, which is the path of an ever deeper obedience to Christ. There is a paradox in the fact that when human power prevails, restrictions enslave; but when we submit to the power of Christ, our obedience is actually liberating. This is the paradox of life in Christ, the One who has already "overcome the world" (*Jn* 16:33). We must rely on the truth of the Apostle's words: "I can do all things in him who strengthens me" (*Phil* 4:13), and on the truth of the Lord's own promise: "No one will take your joy from you" (*Jn* 16:22). In the midst of affliction, we can taste the freedom and the joy of Easter!

To live in this way is to be drawn into that love which is the heart of the "spirituality of communion" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 43) to which Bishops especially are called. The communion of which we are servants and stewards is the wondrous fruit of the Thrice Holy God's decision to dwell within us (cf. *ibid.*). It is this newness of grace in our hearts that enables the Bishop to live an affective and effective collegiality with the Successor of Peter and the episcopate throughout the world; it enables him to live close to his priests in a bond of brotherly openness and fatherly concern; to work in a spirit of collaboration with the consecrated Religious and lay people of the Diocese; to embrace with a particular love the poor and oppressed, as he sees shining on the face of these brothers and sisters the light of God himself (cf. *ibid.*; *Mt* 25:35-37). In this grace you will find the strength to foster genuine ecumenical understanding between all Christians, and to promote that interreligious dialogue which is so important at a time when relations between peoples of different cultures and traditions are subjected to great stress.

I urge you, therefore, dear Brothers, to allow your spiritual life and your pastoral ministry to be more and more shaped by this spirituality of communion, without which the episcopal office will be without life and energy, becoming disheartening and burdensome. I exhort you to meditate unceasingly on the practical demands of this spirituality, and confidently and courageously to act as examples and teachers of that communion. Then you will find an ever greater fulfilment in the ministry to which you have been called by him who desires "that your joy may be complete" (*Jn* 16:24).

5. The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* made it clear that "communion and mission are inseparably connected" (No. 24). As a sequel to the Great Jubilee, the whole Church is called to a new evangelization, drawing inspiration from the words of Christ: "*Duc in altum!*" (*Lk* 5:4). Now is the time for fresh pastoral efforts! All the baptized – Bishops, priests, religious and laity – must be prepared to play their part in the task before the Church in Myanmar. The signs of grace are everywhere to be seen among you. One of these is the reassuring number of vocations to both the priestly and consecrated life; another is your people's devotion and enthusiasm. But more is needed. The key to success is proper training at every level, especially for your priests. You will know what initiatives to take in order to provide spiritual, intellectual and pastoral training, including formation in the Church's social teaching. Likewise, whatever you can do to improve the preparation of catechists will be of great benefit, for they play an indispensable role in transmitting the faith and sustaining the

vigour of your communities. The consecrated life too, with its abundance of vocations, calls for each Bishop's attention and that of the Episcopal Conference, so that its structures may be strengthened and its members provided with a solid training.

6. Dear Brother Bishops, the demands on your ministry are unending and you are not unfamiliar with obstacles and even opposition, but you remain – in the words of the recent Synod – undaunted servants of the Gospel of Jesus Christ for the hope of the world. May this hope never cease to grow richer and stronger within you "until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts" (*2 Pt* 1:19). Invoking upon you a fresh outpouring of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and entrusting the entire household of God in Myanmar to the mighty intercession of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of endless mercy in Jesus Christ, the First and the Last, and the One who lives (cf. *Rev* 1:17-18).

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