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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELL'INDIA

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A fine mattinata, nella Sala Clementina del Palazzo Apostolico Vaticano, il Santo Padre ha ricevuto in Udienza il secondo gruppo degli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum".

Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Papa ha loro rivolto:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Your Eminence,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. In the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, I warmly welcome you, the second group of Latin Rite Bishops of India, on the occasion of your Visit *Ad Limina Apostolorum*. In a particular way, I greet Archbishop Viruthakulangara, and I thank him for the good wishes he has conveyed on behalf of the Bishops, clergy, Religious and lay faithful of the Provinces of Bombay, Nagpur, Verapoly, the newly created Province of Gandhinagar and the Archdiocese of Goa-Damao. I pray that through the intercession of the Apostles Peter and Paul the Catholic Church in India will continue fearlessly to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ.

On the subcontinent, and especially in the regions of Kerala and Goa, the saving message of Christ has been heard for many centuries. Recently, the Church celebrated the 450th Anniversary of the death of the zealous missionary Saint Francis Xavier, one in the long line of faith-filled men, like Saint Thomas the Apostle, who gave their lives for the evangelization of Asia. Saint Francis teaches us the importance of forgetting our own desires and human plans and of giving ourselves entirely to God's will (cf. Office of Readings for the Feast of Saint Francis Xavier). It is my hope that the life and work of this Patron of the Orient will stir in the Indian people a desire to give of themselves more completely to the will of the Father.

2. Christ continues to make your Dioceses fertile ground for his harvest of faith. "Just as the great dialogue of

love between God and man was prepared for by the Spirit and accomplished on Asian soil in the Mystery of Christ, so the dialogue between the Saviour and the peoples of the continent continues today by the same Holy Spirit at work in the Church" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 18). During my Pastoral Visits to India, I have been impressed by the many expressions of Christianity in your nation. The presence of the Latin and Oriental Traditions in such close proximity is a great source of strength and vitality for the Church. At times, the relationship can be a challenge to your communities, as you strive to work together to find concrete ways of ministering to God's people. As I mentioned to the Syro-Malabar Bishops from your country, it is important to persevere in strengthening bonds with your Brother Bishops of the Oriental Rites through an efficacious inter-ritual dialogue in order to overcome any misunderstandings which may occasionally arise. This is especially the case in spheres concerning evangelization and the pastoral care of Oriental Catholics in India (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 27).

Since Christ has placed you as shepherds of his flock, you are called in a special way to foster mutual dialogue and understanding between Catholics and the other Christian communities. The Apostle Paul encourages us all to "walk as children of the light, for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true" (*Eph* 5:8-9). As Bishops, it is your obligation not only to walk in that light but to help illumine the path of all Christ's followers, leading them towards an ever more complete spiritual solidarity.

3. It is very encouraging to see the impressive numbers of religious and diocesan vocations in your Provinces, and the high percentage of faithful who attend Sunday Mass. Even though your local Churches may be materially poor, especially when compared to other Christian communities, they are rich in human resources. This is clearly evidenced in the many basic Christian communities, lay movements and associations which play such a vital role in the ecclesial life of your regions. Notwithstanding these positive signs, your Dioceses are also faced with challenges. The negative influences of the mass media, secularism, materialism and consumerism, compounded by the false promises of a few fundamentalist groups, have lured some Catholics into giving up their faith. Sadly, even some members of the clergy have, at times, been attracted by empty promises of money, comfort and power.

When facing these problems one is tempted to ask the same question which the disciples put to Peter soon after Pentecost: "What must we do?" (*Acts* 2:37) In this regard, it is consoling to see many of your Dioceses answering the question by Synods and pastoral planning, confronting problems in a serious manner and thereby avoiding possible future crises. As I said in my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, pastoral initiatives must always include the four Christian pillars of holiness, prayer, the sacraments and the word of God (cf. 30-41), always keeping in mind that "it is not therefore a matter of inventing a new programme. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever" (*ibid.*, 29).

4. Effective pastoral planning must be contextualized in such a way that it addresses the special problems created by modern society. Like many other countries, India finds itself caught in the movement towards a culture of death, as seen for example in the menacing threats directed towards unborn children, especially unborn girls. Brother Bishops, I encourage you to remain vigilant in your efforts to preach fearlessly the consistent teaching of the Church regarding the inviolable right to life of every innocent human being. Concerted efforts to curb the culture of death necessitate the involvement of the entire Catholic community. Accordingly, any strategy in this regard must include individuals, families, movements and associations committed to building "a society in which the dignity of each person is recognized and protected and the lives of all are defended and enhanced" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 90).

Globalization has also challenged traditional customs and ethics. This is clearly seen in attempts to impose upon Asian society morally unacceptable types of family planning and reproductive health measures. At the same time, an incorrect understanding of the moral law has led many people to justify immoral sexual activity under the guise of freedom, which in turn has resulted in a commonplace acceptance of the contraceptive mentality (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 6). The consequences of such irresponsible activity not only threaten the institution of the family but also contribute to the spread of HIV/AIDS, which is reaching epidemic proportions in parts of your country. The response of the Church in India must be to continue to promote the sanctity of married life, and the "innate language that expresses the total self-giving of husband and wife" (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2370). The Church is called to proclaim that true love is Christian love, and Christian love is chaste love. I encourage you to support programmes of education which emphasize the Church's teaching in this regard.

At the same time, efforts which respect the dignity and rights of women must be made to guarantee that at all levels of Indian society a "new feminism" is promoted. This will "reject the temptation of 'male domination', in order to acknowledge and affirm the true genius of women in every aspect of the life of society, and overcome all discrimination, violence and exploitation" (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 99).

5. At the beginning of this talk, I spoke of Saint Francis Xavier, who did so much for the spread of Christianity in India. He possessed the ability to minister successfully in a non-Christian environment. I pray that the Church in India will, in imitation of him, respectfully yet courageously proclaim the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is not an easy task, especially in areas where people experience animosity, discrimination and even violence because of their religious convictions or tribal affiliation. These difficulties are exacerbated by the increased activity of a few Hindu fundamentalist groups which are creating suspicion of the Church and other religions. Unfortunately, in some regions the State authorities have yielded to the pressures of these extremists and have passed unjust anti-conversion laws, prohibiting free exercise of the natural right to religious freedom, or withdrawing State support for those in scheduled castes who have chosen to convert to Christianity.

In spite of the grave difficulties and suffering this has caused, the Church in India must never relinquish her fundamental task of evangelization. It is my hope that you, dear Brother Bishops, together with the faithful, will continue to engage local leaders of other religious beliefs in an interreligious dialogue which ensures greater mutual understanding and cooperation. Likewise, you must maintain a substantive dialogue with local and national authorities to ensure that India continues to promote and protect the basic human rights of all its citizens. An integral part of such a democracy "which truly serves the good of individuals and peoples is respect for religious freedom, for this is the right which touches on the individual's most private and sovereign interior freedom" (cf. *Address to the New Ambassador of India*, 13 December 2002).

6. "'As the Father has sent me, even so I send you' (cf. *Jn* 20:21). From the perpetuation of the sacrifice of the Cross and her communion with the body and blood of Christ in the Eucharist, the Church draws the spiritual power needed to carry out her mission" (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 22). Dear Brothers in the Lord: as you return to your local Churches after this visit to the tombs of the Blessed Apostles, I hope that, filled with "spiritual power", you will have renewed your desire to participate ever more fully in the Church's mission which "stands in continuity with the mission of Christ" (cf. *ibid.*).

In this year of the Rosary, I pray that, through the intercession of our Blessed Lady, the Holy Spirit will confirm you, the clergy, Religious and faithful of your Dioceses in "the gift of God that is within you" (*2 Tim* 1:6), and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

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