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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEGLI STATI UNITI D'AMERICA (REGIONE XI)

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto al gruppo degli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale degli Stati Uniti d'America (Regione XI), incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti, nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "God who is rich in mercy, out of great love ..., made us alive together with Christ" (*Eph 2:4-5*). With these words of Saint Paul I warmly welcome you, the Bishops of the Church in California, Nevada and Hawaii, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. Continuing my reflection on the *munus sanctificandi* of Bishops, I wish to reflect on the call to a profound conversion of heart and mind, essential to the new impetus in Christian living to which I have invited the whole Church. I am confident that a commitment to ongoing purification and deep renewal will bring about a greater appreciation of the Church's sanctifying mission and embolden her prophetic witness to American society and the world.

2. Every member of the Church is a pilgrim along the path of personal sanctification. Through baptism the believer enters into the holiness of God himself, being incorporated into Christ and made a dwelling place of his Spirit. But holiness is not only a gift. It is also a task, intrinsic and essential to discipleship, which shapes the whole of Christian life (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 30). Impelled by the Lord's explicit teaching – "this is the will of God, your sanctification" (*1 Th 4:3*) – the community of believers rightly grows in the awareness that it is holiness which best expresses the mystery of the Church (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 7) and which stirs the desire to give "striking witness" (*Lumen Gentium*, 39).

As Bishops you must be at the forefront of this spiritual journey of sanctification. Your episcopal ministry of ecclesial service, marked by your personal quest for holiness and your vocation to sanctify others, is a participation in Jesus' own ministry and directed towards the building up of his Church. It demands a pattern of

life that unequivocally rejects any temptation to ostentation, careerism, or the recourse to secular models of leadership and instead requires you to bear witness to the kenosis of Christ, in pastoral charity, humility and simplicity of life (cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, c. 387; *Ecclesia in America*, 28). Walking in the presence of the Lord, you will grow in a holiness lived with and for your priests and people, inspiring in them the desire to embrace the high standards of Christian life and guiding them along the footsteps of Christ.

3. The credibility of the Church's proclamation of the Good News is intimately linked to the commitment of her members to personal sanctification. The Church is always in need of purification and so she must constantly follow the path of penance and renewal (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 8). The Father's will that all believers be sanctified is amplified by the Son's fundamental exhortation: "Repent, and believe in the gospel" (*Mk* 1:15). Just as Peter boldly echoed this imperative at Pentecost (cf. *Acts* 2:38), you are charged with heralding a *kerygmatic* call to conversion and penance, proclaiming the boundless mercy of God, and inviting everyone to experience the call to reconciliation and hope at the heart of the Gospel (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 39).

The courage to face the crisis of the loss of the sense of sin, to which I alerted the whole Church early in my Pontificate (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 18), must be addressed today with particular urgency. While the effects of sin abound – greed, dishonesty and corruption, broken relationships and exploitation of persons, pornography and violence – the recognition of individual sinfulness has waned. In its place a disturbing culture of blame and litigiousness has arisen which speaks more of revenge than justice and fails to acknowledge that in every man and woman there is a wound which, in the light of faith, we call original sin (cf. *ibid.*, 2).

Saint John tells us: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (*1 Jn* 1:8). Sin is an integral part of the truth about the human person. To recognize oneself as a sinner is the first and essential step in returning to the healing love of God. Given this reality, the Bishop's duty to indicate the sad and destructive presence of sin, both in individuals and in communities, is in fact a service of hope. Far from being something negative, it strengthens believers to abandon evil and embrace the perfection of love and the fullness of Christian life. Let us boldly announce that indeed we are not the sum total of our weaknesses and failures! We are the sum of the Father's love for us, and capable of becoming the image of his Son!

4. The lasting peace and harmony so longed for by individuals, families and society can only be won through that conversion which is a fruit of mercy and constituent of genuine reconciliation. As Bishops you have the difficult yet satisfying duty of promoting the true Christian understanding of reconciliation. Perhaps no story better illustrates the profound drama of *metanoia* than the parable of the Prodigal Son, upon which I have elsewhere commented at length (cf. *Dives in Misericordia*, 5-6). The prodigal son is in a certain sense all men and women. We all can be lured by the temptation to separate ourselves from the Father and thus suffer loss of dignity, humiliation and shame, but equally so we all can have the courage to turn back to the Father who embraces us with a love which, transcending even justice, manifests itself as mercy.

Christ, who reveals the abounding mercy of God, demands the same of us, even when confronted with grievous sin. Indeed mercy "constitutes the fundamental content of the messianic message of Christ and the constitutive power of his mission" (*ibid.*, 6) and thus can never be set aside in the name of pragmatism. It is precisely the father's fidelity to the merciful love proper to him as a father that sees him restore the filial relationship of his son who "was lost and is found" (*Lk* 15:32). As pastors of your flock it is with this merciful love – never a mere sense of favor – that you too must "reach down to every prodigal son, to every human misery, and above all to every form of moral misery, to sin" (*Dives in Misericordia*, 6). In this way you will draw good from evil, restore life from death, revealing anew the authentic face of the Father's mercy so necessary in our times.

5. Dear Brothers, I particularly wish to encourage you in your promotion of the Sacrament of Penance. As a divinely instituted means by which the Church offers the pastoral activity of reconciliation, it is "the only ordinary way for the faithful to reconcile themselves with God and the Church" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1484). Though it cannot be denied that the profound power of this Sacrament is often considered today with indifference it is also the case that young people in particular readily give testimony to the graces and transforming benefits it bestows. Strengthened by this encouraging message I again appeal directly to you and to your priests: arm yourselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting it and leading

people to appreciate it (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 37). Time spent in the confessional is time spent in service of the spiritual patrimony of the Church and the salvation of souls (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 29).

As Bishops, it is of special importance for you to have frequent recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in order to obtain the gift of that mercy of which you yourselves have been made ministers (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 13). Since you are called to show forth the face of the Good Shepherd, and therefore to have the heart of Christ himself, you more than others must make your own the Psalmist's ardent cry: "A pure heart create for me, O God, put a steadfast spirit within me" (*Ps* 51:12). Sanctified by the graces received in your regular reception of the sacrament, I am confident that you will encourage your brother priests and indeed all the faithful to discover anew the full beauty of this sacrament.

6. With fraternal affection I share these reflections with you and assure you of my prayers as you seek to make the sanctifying and reconciling mission of the Church ever more appreciated and recognizable in your ecclesial and civic communities. The message of hope which you proclaim to a world often fraught with sinfulness and division will not fail to evoke fresh fervor and a renewed zeal for Christian life! With these sentiments I commend you to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, in whom is effected the reconciliation of God with humanity. I gladly impart to you and to the priests, deacons, Religious, and lay faithful of your Dioceses my Apostolic Blessing.

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