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

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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 VII), 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. With joy and fraternal affection I welcome you, the Bishops of the ecclesiastical provinces of Indianapolis, Chicago and Milwaukee, on the occasion of your quinquennial visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. May these days of reflection and prayer at the heart of the Church confirm you in your witness to Jesus Christ, "the same yesterday, today and forever" (*Heb 13:8*), and to "that gracious word of his which can enlarge you, and give you a share among all who are consecrated to him" (*Acts 20:32*).

In my continuing reflections with you and your Brother Bishops on the exercise of the episcopal office, I now wish to turn from the mission of sanctification entrusted to the successors of the Apostles to the prophetic mission which they carry out as "heralds of the Gospel and teachers of the faith" (*Lumen Gentium*, 25) within the communion of the whole People of God. There is in fact an intrinsic relationship between holiness and Christian witness. By their rebirth in Baptism, "all the faithful together become a holy and royal priesthood, offer spiritual sacrifices to God through Jesus Christ, and declare the wonderful deeds of him who called them out of darkness into his marvelous light" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2; cf. *1 Pet 2:9*). Every Christian, in carrying out this prophetic mission, has taken on a personal responsibility for the divine truth revealed in the Incarnate Word, handed on in the Church's living Tradition, and made manifest in the efforts of believers to spread the faith and to transform the world by the light and power of the Gospel (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 19).

2. This "responsibility for the truth" demands of the Church a forthright and credible witness to the deposit of faith. It calls for a correct understanding of the act of faith itself as a graced assent to the word of God which

enlightens the mind and empowers the spirit to rise to the contemplation of uncreated truth, "so that by knowing and loving God, men and women may also come to the fullness of truth about themselves" (*Fides et Ratio*, Proemium). An effective proclamation of the Gospel in contemporary Western society will need to confront directly the widespread spirit of agnosticism and relativism which has cast doubt on reason's ability to know the truth which alone satisfies the human heart's restless quest for meaning. At the same time, it must firmly defend the Church as being, in Christ, the authentic minister of the Gospel and the "pillar and bulwark" of its saving truth (cf. *1 Tim* 3:15; *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

For this reason, the new evangelization calls for an unambiguous presentation of faith as a supernatural virtue by which we are united to God and become sharers in his own knowledge, in response to his revealed word. The presentation of an authentically biblical understanding of the act of faith, one which emphasizes both its cognitive and its fiducial dimensions, will help to overcome purely subjective approaches and facilitate a deeper appreciation of the Church's role in authoritatively proposing "the faith which is to be believed and put into practice" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 25). An essential element of the Church's dialogue with contemporary society must also be a correct presentation, in catechesis and preaching, of the relationship between faith and reason. This will lead to a more fruitful understanding of the spiritual dynamics of conversion as obedience to the word of God, openness to "putting on the mind of Christ" (*Phil* 2:5), and sensitivity to that supernatural *sensus fidei* by which "the people of God, under the guidance of the sacred magisterium to which it is faithfully obedient, adheres indefectibly to 'the faith which was once for all delivered to the saints'" (*Lumen Gentium*, 12).

3. The word of God must not be chained (cf. *2 Tim* 2:9); instead, it must resound before the world in all its liberating truth as a word of grace and salvation. If indeed "it is Christ, the new Adam, who fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his supreme calling" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 22), then all the Church's efforts need to be focused on and directed to this one goal: to make Christ everywhere known and loved as "the way, and the truth and the life" (*Jn* 14:5). This will require a profound renewal of the missionary and prophetic sense of the whole People of God, and the conscious mobilization of the Church's resources in the work of an evangelization which enables individual Christians to give an account of the hope that is within them (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15) and the Church as a whole to speak courageously and with a united voice in addressing the great moral and spiritual issues confronting the men and women of our time.

The Church in the United States, with its impressive network of educational and charitable institutions, is challenged to an evangelization of culture capable of drawing from the wisdom of the Gospel "things both new and old" (*Mt* 13:52). It is called to respond to the profound religious needs and aspirations of a society increasingly in danger of forgetting its spiritual roots and yielding to a purely materialistic and soulless vision of the world. Taking up this challenge, however, will require a realistic and comprehensive reading of the "signs of the times", in order to develop a persuasive presentation of the Catholic faith and prepare young people especially to dialogue with their contemporaries about the Christian message and its relevance to the building of a more just, humane and peaceful world. Now is above all the hour of the lay faithful, who, by their specific vocation to shape the secular world in accordance with the Gospel, are called to carry forward the Church's prophetic mission by evangelizing the various spheres of family, social, professional and cultural life (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, 44).

4. In these reflections on the Church's prophetic mission, I cannot fail to express my appreciation of the efforts which the American Bishops have made since the Second Vatican Council, both as individuals and through the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, to contribute to an informed and respectful discussion of important issues affecting the life of your nation. In this way the light of the Gospel has been brought to bear on controversial social questions such as respect for human life, problems of justice and peace, immigration, the defense of family values and the sanctity of marriage. This prophetic witness, presented with arguments drawn not only from religious convictions which Catholics share with many other Americans, but also from the principles of right reason and law, is a significant service to the common good in a democracy like your own.

Dear Brother Bishops, in the daily exercise of your ministry of teaching I encourage you to ensure that the spirituality of communion and mission finds expression in a sincere commitment on the part of each believer and of every one of the Church's institutions to the proclamation of the Gospel as "the only fully valid response to the problems and hopes that life poses to every person and society" (*Christifideles Laici*, 34). The profession of the

Catholic religion demands of every member of the faithful a consistent witness to the truth of the Gospel and the objective requirements of the moral law. As you strive to fulfill the Apostle's charge to "preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort" (*2 Tim* 4:2), may you be ever more united in spirit, working tirelessly to enable the flock entrusted to your pastoral care to be witnesses of hope, heralds of God's Kingdom and builders of the civilization of love which responds to the deepest aspirations of the human heart.

With these sentiments I entrust you and all the clergy, religious and lay faithful of your particular Churches to the loving intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

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