

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE



BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIEGE
PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS

BOLLETTINO

SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE

N. 0426

Giovedì 02.09.2004

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

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale degli Stati Uniti d'America (Regione I), 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. Through the gift of God we have become "ministers of the Gospel" and received the grace "to preach to the nations the unfathomable riches of Jesus Christ". Echoing these words of the Apostle Paul (cf. *Eph* 3:7-8), and in a spirit of gratitude for our common calling, I warmly welcome you, my brother Bishops of the ecclesiastical provinces of Boston and Hartford, on the occasion of your quinquennial visit to the tombs of the Apostles and the See of Peter. Taking up once again my series of reflections on the teaching office entrusted to Bishops within the communion of the People of God, I wish to consider some particular concerns facing the Church in the United States as she carries out her duty to proclaim the Gospel and to lead all people to the fullness of faith, freedom and salvation in Christ.

2. Throughout these reflections on the exercise of the *munus episcopale propheticum* I have more than once drawn attention to the importance of the evangelization of culture. A fundamental challenge in this area is surely that of bringing about a fruitful encounter between the Gospel and the new global culture which is rapidly taking shape as a result of unprecedented growth in communications and the expansion of a world economy. I am convinced that the Church in the United States can play a critical role in meeting this challenge, since this emerging reality is in many ways the fruit of contemporary Western, and particularly American, experiences, attitudes and ideals. The new evangelization calls for a clear discernment of the profound spiritual needs and aspirations of a culture which, for all its aspects of materialism and relativism, is nonetheless profoundly attracted to the primordially religious dimension of the human experience and is struggling to rediscover its spiritual roots.

For the Church in America, the evangelization of culture can thus offer a unique contribution to the Church's mission *ad gentes* in our day. Through her preaching, her catechesis and her public witness, the Church in your country is challenged to develop a new kerygmatic style, one capable of appealing to the spiritual needs of contemporary men and women and of offering them a clear and convincing response grounded in the truth of the Gospel. Catholics of all ages must be helped to appreciate more fully the distinctiveness of the Christian message, its capacity to satisfy the deepest yearnings of the human heart in every age, and the beauty of its summons to a life completely centered on faith in the Triune God, obedience to his revealed word and loving configuration to Christ's paschal mystery, in which we see disclosed the full measure of our humanity and our supernatural call to fulfillment in love (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22).

3. The Church in the United States has long been committed to making her voice heard in public debate in the defense of fundamental human rights, the dignity of the person and the ethical requirements of a just and well-ordered society. In a pluralistic nation like your own, this has necessarily involved practical cooperation with men and women of various religious beliefs, and with all people of good will, in the service of the common good. I am deeply appreciative of your continuing efforts to promote ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue on every level of the Church's life, not only as a means of overcoming misunderstandings between believers, but also for fostering a sense of common responsibility for the building of a future of peace. As the tragic events of 11 September 2001 have made clear, the building of a global culture of solidarity and respect for human dignity is one of the great moral tasks confronting humanity today. In the end, it is in the conversion of hearts and the spiritual renewal of humanity that the hope of a better tomorrow lies, and here the witness, example and cooperation of religious believers has a unique role to play.

4. I also wish to express my personal gratitude for the traditional generosity of the faithful of the United States to the Church's mission *ad gentes* through the training and sending forth of generations of missionaries and through the contributions of countless Catholics to the foreign missions. I encourage you to make every effort to revive this powerful manifestation of solidarity with the universal Church. History bears witness that a sustained commitment to the mission *ad gentes* renews the whole Church, strengthens the faith of individuals and communities, reinforces their Christian identity, and gives rise to fresh enthusiasm for overcoming the challenges and difficulties of the moment (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 2). May the Church in your country discover the sources for a profound interior renewal through a revitalization of missionary zeal, above all by promoting vocations to missionary Institutes and proposing, especially to young people, the lofty ideal of a life completely devoted to the Gospel.

5. More than once in the course of these meetings I have told you of my admiration for the outstanding contribution which the Catholic community in the United States has made to the spread of the Gospel, the care of the poor, the sick and those in need, and the defense of fundamental human and Christian values. Today I wish to encourage you, and through you, all the Catholics of America, to continue to bear faithful testimony to the truth of Christ and the power of his grace to inspire wisdom, reconcile differences, heal wounds and point to a future of hope. The Church in your country has been chastened by the events of the past two years, and much effort has rightly been expended on understanding and addressing the issues of sexual abuse which have cast a shadow on her life and ministry. As you continue to confront the significant spiritual and material challenges which your local Churches are experiencing in this regard, I ask you to encourage all the faithful – clergy, religious and lay – to persevere in their public witness of faith and hope, so that Christ's light, which can never be dimmed (cf. *Jn* 1:5), will continue to shine forth in and through the Church's entire life and ministry.

In a particular way I would ask you to be strongly supportive of your brother priests, many of whom have suffered deeply because of the much-publicized failings of some of the Church's ministers. I would ask you also to convey my personal gratitude for the generous and selfless service which mark the lives of so many American priests, as well as my deep appreciation of their daily efforts to be models of holiness and pastoral charity in the Christian communities entrusted to their care. In a very real way the renewal of the Church is linked to the renewal of the priesthood (cf. *Optatam Totius*, 1). For this reason I ask you to make every effort to be present as a father and a brother in the midst of your priests, to show heartfelt gratitude for their ministry, to join them frequently in prayer and to encourage them in fidelity to their noble vocation as men completely consecrated to the service of the Lord and his Church. In a word, tell your priests that I hold them in my heart!

6. At the conclusion of these reflections on our responsibility for the Church's prophetic witness before the world, I once more express my conviction, born of faith, that God is even now preparing a great springtime for the Gospel (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 86), and that this calls all of us to "open the doors to Christ" in every aspect of our life and activity. As I suggested in the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, ours is the wonderful yet demanding responsibility of reflecting Christ, the light of the world. Indeed, "this is a daunting task if we consider our human weakness, which so often renders us opaque and full of shadows. But it is a task we can accomplish if we remain ever turned to the light of Christ and open to the grace which makes us a new creation" (*op. cit.*, 54).

Dear Brother Bishops, as I set this challenge before you, I assure you once more of my confidence and my fraternal affection. Entrusting you and the clergy, religious, and lay faithful of your particular Churches to the loving intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and peace in the Lord.

[01360-02.02] [Original text: English]

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