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

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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 IX), 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 affection in Christ Jesus, I welcome you, my brother Bishops from the ecclesiastical Provinces of Dubuque, Kansas City in Kansas, Omaha and Saint Louis, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. Today, as I continue my reflections on the exercise of episcopal governance, I wish to consider with you the relationship which unites you to your closest co-workers in the apostolate, your brother priests.

Several times in the course of these talks I have asked you and your Brother Bishops to convey to the priests of the United States my personal gratitude and appreciation for their faithful service to the Gospel. In these days, as you kneel before the tomb of Peter, here at the very heart of the Church, I ask you not only to commend them and their ministry to the Lord, but to renew your commitment to working with them "in unanimity, possessing the one love, united in spirit and ideals" (cf. *Phil 2:2*).

2. *Hinc unitas sacerdotii exoritur*. These words inscribed over the high altar of Saint Peter's Basilica are a solemn reminder that the fellowship uniting you and your priests is ultimately born of the grace of Holy Orders and the one mission entrusted by the Risen Lord to the Apostles and their successors in the Church (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7). The Second Vatican Council, in particular, appealed to this vision of the unity of the priesthood in its teaching that priests form one presbyterium with their Bishop, exercising with him, and under his authority, the office of Christ, the shepherd and head of his Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 28). The daily strengthening of this spiritual and hierarchical communion within the diocesan presbyterate is a primary and essential task of each Bishop.

The Council in fact exhorted Bishops to be particularly concerned for the welfare of their priests, treating them as sons and friends, and constantly cultivating that supernatural charity which brings about a union of wills in the service of the People of God (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 16, 28). I myself am convinced that the most effective means of promoting such a union is through a shared and constantly renewed commitment to the life and mission of the particular Church. In a complete and sacrificial love for the local Christian community, Bishops and priests alike will discover "a wealth of meaning, criteria for discernment and action which can shape both their pastoral mission and spiritual life" (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 31). The Bishop, by demonstrating clearly that he loves the Church entrusted to his care with an undivided heart, will be the first to promote among his brother priests the growth of that "fellowship of life, work and charity" (*Lumen Gentium*, 28), grounded in the "one love", which is the heart and soul of the apostolate.

3. Together with fostering mutual trust and confidence, dialogue, a spirit of unity and a common missionary spirit in his relationship with his priests, the Bishop is also responsible for cultivating within the presbyterate a sense of corresponsibility for the governance of the local Church. The Council rightly points out that pastors themselves have a proper share in the *munus regendi* (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 30), while the Bishop is called to rule his Diocese "with the cooperation of the presbyterium" (*ibid.*, 11; cf. *CIC*, can. 369). The concrete exercise of this corresponsibility demands of the Bishop above all a sound ecclesiological vision, a concern for the legitimate demands of subsidiarity within the Church, and a respect for the proper roles of the various members of the diocesan presbyterate.

Given the historical importance of the parish in the Church in the United States, a fundamental goal of your governance should be that of encouraging and coordinating the pastoral work carried out in the great network of parishes and related institutions which make up the local Church. The parish, in fact, is "pre-eminent among all the other communities in his Diocese for which the Bishop has primary responsibility: it is with the parishes above all that he must be concerned" (*Pastores Gregis*, 45). The parish is, and should be, the first and foremost place where the faithful encounter and are invited to share fully in the life and mission of the Church. The Diocese should always be understood as existing in and for its parishes.

For this reason, the renewal of ecclesial life in the service of the new evangelization should rightly begin with the revitalization of the parish community, centered as it is on the preaching of the Gospel and the celebration of the Eucharist (cf. *Ecclesia in America*, 41). The Bishop is to play an indispensable role in this revitalization by authoritatively promoting the Church's teaching and proposing a unified pastoral plan capable of inspiring and directing the apostolate of clergy and laity alike. Pastors need to be helped not only to "build community", but also to clarify ever more fully the goals at which their governance should aim, always in communion with the particular and universal Church (cf. *CIC*, canons 528-529), while the lay faithful should be inspired to understand and exercise their proper *munus regale* in the service of the Kingdom of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 31). In a word, the entire Christian community needs to be encouraged to move "from Mass to mission" (*Dies Domini*, 45) in the pursuit of holiness and the service of the new evangelization.

4. An essential concern of responsible governance must also be to provide for the future. No one can deny that the decline in priestly vocations represents a stark challenge for the Church in the United States, and one that cannot be ignored or put off. The response to this challenge must be insistent prayer according to the Lord's command (cf. *Mt* 9:37-38), accompanied by a program of vocational promotion which branches out to every aspect of ecclesial life. Inasmuch as "the entire People of God is responsible for promoting vocations, and does so chiefly by persistent and humble prayer for vocations" (*Ecclesia in America*, 40), I would propose for your consideration that the Catholic community in your country annually set aside a national day of prayer for priestly vocations.

Concern for the future also demands particular attention to seminary training, which needs to instill in students for the priesthood not only an integrated theological vision, but also a commitment to holiness and spiritual wisdom, as well as formation in prudent leadership and selfless dedication to the flock. In this regard, I would also encourage you to spare no effort in ensuring a sound continuing education for the clergy, and in particular, to consider it an essential part of your governance to send young priests for advanced studies in the ecclesiastical sciences, especially theology and canon law. This training, whatever the sacrifices it entails, should be seen as a source of lasting enrichment for the life of the local Church.

5. Dear Brothers, the vision of the Council, the spiritual inheritance of the Great Jubilee and the pastoral needs of the faithful in America today call for a renewed commitment to the heart of the Church's mission: proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in its integrity, calling to the obedience of faith, promoting authentic holiness and working for the extension of God's Kingdom in every aspect of personal, social and cultural life. As you strive to carry out this great work in communion with your brother priests, your deacons, the consecrated men and women belonging to your particular Churches and all the faithful in the variety of their gifts and callings, I commend all of you to the loving prayers of Mary, Mother of the Church, and cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of abiding joy and peace in the Lord.

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