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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DI IRLANDA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale di Irlanda, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

In the words of a traditional Irish greeting, a hundred thousand welcomes to you, the Bishops of Ireland, on the occasion of your *ad Limina* visit. As you venerate the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, may you draw inspiration from the courage and vision of these two great saints, who so faithfully led the way in the Church's mission of proclaiming Christ to the world. Today you have come to strengthen the bonds of communion with the Successor of Peter, and I gladly express my appreciation for the gracious words addressed to me on your behalf by Archbishop Seán Brady, President of your Episcopal Conference. The constant witness of countless generations of Irish people to their faith in Christ and their fidelity to the Holy See has shaped Ireland at the deepest level of her history and culture. We are all aware of the outstanding contribution that Ireland has made to the life of the Church, and the extraordinary courage of her missionary sons and daughters who have carried the Gospel message far beyond her shores. Meanwhile, the flame of faith has continued bravely burning at home through all the trials afflicting your people in the course of their history. In the words of the Psalmist, "I will sing for ever of your love, O Lord, through all ages my mouth shall proclaim your truth" (*Ps* 89:1).

The present time brings many new opportunities to bear witness to Christ and fresh challenges for the Church in Ireland. You have spoken about the consequences for society of the rise in prosperity that the last fifteen years have brought. After centuries of emigration, which involved the pain of separation for so many families, you are experiencing for the first time a wave of immigration. Traditional Irish hospitality is finding unexpected new outlets. Like the wise householder who brings forth from his treasure "what is new and what is old" (*Mt* 13:52), your people need to view the changes in society with discernment, and here they look to you for leadership. Help them to recognize the inability of the secular, materialist culture to bring true satisfaction and joy. Be bold in

speaking to them of the joy that comes from following Christ and living according to his commandments. Remind them that our hearts were made for the Lord and that they find no peace until they rest in him (cf. Saint Augustine, *Confessions*, 1:1).

So often the Church's counter-cultural witness is misunderstood as something backward and negative in today's society. That is why it is important to emphasize the Good News, the life-giving and life-enhancing message of the Gospel (cf. *Jn* 10:10). Even though it is necessary to speak out strongly against the evils that threaten us, we must correct the idea that Catholicism is merely "a collection of prohibitions". Sound catechesis and careful "formation of the heart" are needed here, and in this regard you are blessed in Ireland with solid resources in your network of Catholic schools, and in so many dedicated religious and lay teachers who are seriously committed to the education of the young. Continue to encourage them in their task and ensure that their catechetical programmes are based on *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as the new *Compendium*. Superficial presentations of Catholic teaching must be avoided, because only the fullness of the faith can communicate the liberating power of the Gospel. By exercising vigilance over the quality of the syllabuses and the course-books used and by proclaiming the Church's doctrine in its entirety, you are carrying out your responsibility to "preach the word ... in season and out of season ... unfailing in patience and in teaching" (*2 Tim* 4:2).

In the exercise of your pastoral ministry, you have had to respond in recent years to many heart-rending cases of sexual abuse of minors. These are all the more tragic when the abuser is a cleric. The wounds caused by such acts run deep, and it is an urgent task to rebuild confidence and trust where these have been damaged. In your continuing efforts to deal effectively with this problem, it is important to establish the truth of what happened in the past, to take whatever steps are necessary to prevent it from occurring again, to ensure that the principles of justice are fully respected and, above all, to bring healing to the victims and to all those affected by these egregious crimes. In this way, the Church in Ireland will grow stronger and be ever more capable of giving witness to the redemptive power of the Cross of Christ. I pray that by the grace of the Holy Spirit, this time of purification will enable all God's people in Ireland to "maintain and perfect in their lives that holiness which they have received from God" (*Lumen Gentium*, 40).

The fine work and selfless dedication of the great majority of priests and religious in Ireland should not be obscured by the transgressions of some of their brethren. I am certain that the people understand this, and continue to regard their clergy with affection and esteem. Encourage your priests always to seek spiritual renewal and to discover afresh the joy of ministering to their flocks within the great family of the Church. At one time, Ireland was blessed with such an abundance of priestly and religious vocations that much of the world was able to benefit from their apostolic labours. In recent years, though, the number of vocations has fallen sharply. How urgent it is, then, to heed the Lord's words: "The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few. Pray, therefore, the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (*Mt* 9:37-38). I am pleased to learn that many of your dioceses have adopted the practice of silent prayer for vocations before the Blessed Sacrament. This should be warmly encouraged. Yet above all, it falls to you, the Bishops, and to your clergy to offer young people an inspiring and attractive vision of the ordained priesthood. Our prayer for vocations "must lead to action so that from our praying heart a spark of our joy in God and in the Gospel may arise, enkindling in the hearts of others a readiness to say 'yes'" (*Address to Priests and Permanent Deacons*, Freising, 14 September 2006). Even if Christian commitment is considered unfashionable in some circles, there is a real spiritual hunger and a generous desire to serve others among the young people of Ireland. A vocation to the priesthood or the religious life offers an opportunity to respond to this desire in a way that brings deep joy and personal fulfilment.

Allow me to add an observation that is close to my heart. For many years, Christian representatives of all denominations, political leaders and many men and women of good will have been involved in seeking means to ensure a brighter future for Northern Ireland. Although the path is arduous, much progress has been made in recent times. It is my prayer that the committed efforts of those concerned will lead to the creation of a society marked by a spirit of reconciliation, mutual respect and willing cooperation for the common good of all.

As you prepare to return to your Dioceses, I commend your apostolic ministry to the intercession of all the saints of Ireland, and I assure you of my deep affection and constant prayer for you and for the Irish people. May Our Lady of Knock watch over and protect you always. To all of you, and to the priests, religious and lay faithful of

your beloved island I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of peace and joy in the Lord Jesus Christ.

[01529-02.02] [Original text: English]
