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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEGLI ECC.MI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEL GIAPPONE

Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI rivolge agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale del Giappone, che incontra questa mattina nella Sala del Concistoro e ha ricevuto in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "*ad Limina Apostolorum*":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I am pleased to welcome you on your *ad Limina* visit, as you come to venerate the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. I thank you for the kind words that Archbishop Peter Takeo Okada has addressed to me on your behalf, and I offer you my warmest good wishes and prayers for yourselves and all the people entrusted to your pastoral care. You have come to the city where Peter carried out his mission of evangelization and bore witness to Christ even to the shedding of his blood—and you have come to greet Peter's Successor. In this way you strengthen the apostolic foundations of the Church in your country and you express visibly your communion with all the other members of the College of Bishops and with the Roman Pontiff (cf. *Pastores Gregis*, 8). I want to take this opportunity to reiterate my sorrow at the recent passing of Cardinal Stephen Hamao, President Emeritus of the Pontifical Council for Migrants and Itinerants, and to express my appreciation for his years of service to the Church. In his person he exemplified the bonds of communion between the Church in Japan and the Holy See. May he rest in peace.

Last year the Church celebrated with great joy the five hundredth anniversary of the birth of Saint Francis Xavier, Apostle of Japan. I join you in giving thanks to God for the missionary work that he carried out in your land, and for the seeds of Christian faith that he planted at the time of Japan's first evangelization. The need to proclaim Christ boldly and courageously is a continuing priority for the Church; indeed it is a solemn duty laid upon her by Christ who enjoined the Apostles to "go out to the whole world, proclaim the Good News to all creation" (*Mk* 16:16). Your task today is to seek new ways of bringing alive the message of Christ in the cultural setting of modern Japan. Even though Christians form only a small percentage of the population, the faith is a treasure that needs to be shared with the whole of Japanese society. Your leadership in this area needs to inspire clergy and religious, catechists, teachers, and families to offer an explanation for the hope that they possess (cf. *1 Pet* 3:15). This in turn requires sound catechesis, based on the teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*

and the *Compendium*. Let the light of the faith so shine before others, that "they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven" (*Mt 5:16*).

Indeed the world is hungry for the message of hope that the Gospel brings. Even in countries as highly developed as yours, many are discovering that economic success and advanced technology are not sufficient in themselves to bring fulfilment to the human heart. Anyone who does not know God "is ultimately without hope, without the great hope that sustains the whole of life" (*Spe Salvi, 27*). Remind people that there is more to life than professional success and profit. Through the practice of charity, in the family and in the community, they can be led towards "that encounter with God in Christ which awakens their love and opens their spirits to others" (*Deus Caritas Est, 31*). This is the great hope that Christians in Japan can offer their compatriots; it is not foreign to Japanese culture, but rather it reinforces and gives new impetus to all that is good and noble in the heritage of your beloved nation. The well-merited respect which the citizens of your country show towards the Church, on account of her fine contribution in education, health care and many other fields, gives you an opportunity to engage with them in dialogue and to speak joyfully to them of Christ, the "light that enlightens every man" (*Jn 1:9*). Young people especially are at risk of being deceived by the glamour of modern secular culture. Yet, like all the greater and lesser hopes that appear on first sight to promise so much (cf. *Spe Salvi, 30*), this turns out to be a false hope – and tragically, disillusion not infrequently leads to depression and despair, even to suicide. If their youthful energy and enthusiasm can be directed towards the things of God, which alone are sufficient to satisfy their deepest longings, more young people will be inspired to commit their lives to Christ, and some will recognize a call to serve him in the priesthood or the religious life. Invite them to consider whether this may be their vocation. Never be afraid to do so. Encourage your priests and religious likewise to be active in promoting vocations, and lead your people in prayer, asking the Lord to "send out labourers into his harvest" (*Mt 9:38*).

The Lord's harvest in Japan is increasingly made up of people of diverse nationalities, to the extent that over half of the Catholic population is formed of immigrants. This provides an opportunity to enrich the life of the Church in your country and to experience the true catholicity of God's people. By taking steps to ensure that all are made to feel welcome in the Church, you can draw on the many gifts that the immigrants bring. At the same time, you need to remain vigilant in ensuring that the liturgical and disciplinary norms of the universal Church are carefully observed. Modern Japan has wholeheartedly chosen to engage with the wider world, and the Catholic Church, with its universal outreach, can make a valuable contribution to this process of ever greater openness to the international community.

Other nations can also learn from Japan, from the accumulated wisdom of her ancient culture, and especially from the witness to peace that has characterized her stance on the world political stage in the last sixty years. You have made the voice of the Church heard on the enduring importance of this witness, all the greater in a world where armed conflicts bring so much suffering to the innocent. I encourage you to continue to speak on matters of public concern in the life of your nation, and to ensure that your statements are promoted and widely disseminated, so that they may be properly heard at all levels within society. In this way, the message of hope that the Gospel brings can truly touch hearts and minds, leading to greater confidence in the future, greater love and respect for life, increasing openness towards the stranger and the sojourner in your midst. "The one who has hope lives differently; the one who hopes has been granted the gift of a new life" (*Spe Salvi, 2*).

In this regard, the forthcoming Beatification of 188 Japanese martyrs offers a clear sign of the strength and vitality of Christian witness in your country's history. From the earliest days, Japanese men and women have been ready to shed their blood for Christ. Through the hope of these people "who have been touched by Christ, hope has arisen for others who were living in darkness and without hope" (*Spe Salvi, 8*). I join you in giving thanks to God for the eloquent testimony of Peter Kibe and his companions, who have "washed their robes white in the blood of the Lamb" and now serve God day and night within his temple (*Rev 7:14f.*).

In this Advent season, the whole Church looks forward eagerly to the celebration of our Saviour's birth. I pray that this time of preparation may be for you and for the whole Church in Japan an opportunity to grow in faith, hope, and love, so that the Prince of Peace may truly find a home in your hearts. Commending all of you and your priests, religious and lay faithful to the intercession of Saint Francis Xavier and the Martyrs of Japan, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of joy and peace in the Lord.

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