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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEI PAESI SCANDINAVI

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Alle ore 12.05 di questa mattina, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI incontra gli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dei Paesi Scandinavi, ricevuti in questi giorni, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum", e rivolge loro il discorso che pubblichiamo di seguito:

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I welcome you to Rome on the occasion of your visit "to the threshold of the Apostles" and I thank Bishop Arborelius for the words he has addressed to me on your behalf. You exercise pastoral governance over the Catholic faithful in the far north of Europe and you have travelled here to express and renew the bonds of communion between the people of God in those lands and the Successor of Peter at the heart of the universal Church. Your flock is small in number, and scattered over a wide area. Many have to travel great distances in order to find a Catholic community in which to worship. It is most important for them to realize that every time they gather around the altar for the Eucharistic sacrifice, they are participating in an act of the universal Church, in communion with all their fellow Catholics throughout the world. It is this communion that is both exercised and deepened through the quinquennial visits of bishops to the Apostolic See.

I am pleased to note that a Congress on the Family is due to be held at Jönköping in May of this year. One of the most important messages that the people of the Nordic lands need to hear from you is a reminder of the centrality of the family for the life of a healthy society. Sadly, recent years have seen a weakening of the commitment to the institution of marriage and the Christian understanding of human sexuality that for so long served as the foundation of personal and social relations in European society. Children have the right to be conceived and carried in the womb, brought into the world and brought up within marriage: it is through the secure and recognized relationship to their own parents that they can discover their identity and achieve their proper human development (cf. *Donum Vitae*, 22 February 1987). In societies with a noble tradition of defending the rights of all their members, one would expect this fundamental right of children to be given priority over any

supposed right of adults to impose on them alternative models of family life and certainly over any supposed right to abortion. Since the family is "the first and indispensable teacher of peace" (*Message for the 2008 World Day of Peace*), the most reliable promoter of social cohesion and the best school of the virtues of good citizenship, it is in the interests of all, and especially of governments, to defend and promote stable family life.

While the Catholic population of your territories constitutes only a small percentage of the total, it is nevertheless growing, and at the same time a good number of others listen with respect and attention to what the Church has to say. In the Nordic lands, religion has an important role in shaping public opinion and influencing decisions on matters concerning the common good. I urge you, therefore, to continue to convey to the people of your respective countries the Church's teaching on social and ethical questions, as you do through such initiatives as your 2005 pastoral letter "The Love of Life" and the forthcoming Congress on the Family. The establishment of the Newman Institute in Uppsala is a most welcome development in this regard, ensuring that Catholic teaching is given its rightful place in the Scandinavian academic world, while also helping new generations to acquire a mature and informed understanding of their faith. Within your own flock, pastoral care of families and young people needs to be pursued with vigour, and with particular care for the many who have experienced difficulties in the wake of the recent financial crisis. Due sensitivity should be shown to the many married couples in which only one partner is Catholic. The immigrant component among the Catholic population of the Nordic lands has needs of its own, and it is important that your pastoral outreach to families should include them, with a view to assisting their integration into society. Your countries have been particularly generous to refugees from the Middle East, many of whom are Christians from Eastern Churches. For your part, as you welcome "the stranger who sojourns with you" (*Lev 19:34*), be sure to help these new members of your community to deepen their knowledge and understanding of the faith through apposite programmes of catechesis – in the process of integration within their host country, they should be encouraged not to distance themselves from the most precious elements of their own culture, particularly their faith.

In this Year for Priests, I ask you to give particular priority to encouraging and supporting your priests, who often have to work in isolation from one another and in difficult circumstances in order to bring the sacraments to the people of God. As you know, I have proposed the figure of Saint John Vianney to all the priests of the world as a source of inspiration and intercession in this year devoted to exploring more deeply the meaning and indispensable role of the priesthood in the Church's life. He expended himself tirelessly in order to be a channel of God's healing and sanctifying grace to the people he served, and all priests are called to do likewise: it is your responsibility, as their Ordinaries, to see that they are well prepared for this sacred task. Ensure too that the lay faithful appreciate what their priests do for them, and that they offer them the encouragement and the spiritual, moral and material support that they need.

I would like to pay tribute to the enormous contribution that men and women religious have made to the life of the Church in your countries over many years. The Nordic lands are also blessed with the presence of a number of the new ecclesial movements, which bring fresh dynamism to the Church's mission. In view of this wide variety of charisms, there are many ways in which young people may be attracted to devote their lives to the service of the Church through a priestly or religious vocation. As you carry out your responsibility to foster such vocations (cf. *Christus Dominus*, 15), be sure to address yourselves to both the native and the immigrant populations. From the heart of any healthy Catholic community, the Lord always calls men and women to serve him in this way. The fact that more and more of you, the Bishops of the Nordic lands, originate from the countries in which you serve is a clear sign that the Holy Spirit is at work among the Catholic communities there. I pray that his inspiration will continue to bear fruit among you and those to whom you have dedicated your lives.

With great confidence in the life-giving power of the Gospel, commit your energies to promoting a new evangelization among the people of your territories. Part and parcel of this task is continued attention to ecumenical activity, and I am pleased to note the numerous tasks in which Christians from the Nordic lands come together to present a united witness before the world.

With these sentiments, I commend all of you and your people to the intercession of the Nordic saints, especially Saint Bridget, co-patron of Europe, and I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and peace in the Lord.

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