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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEGLI ECC.MI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA DEI VESCOVI CATTOLICI DEGLI STATI UNITI D'AMERICA (REGIONI X-XIII)

Alle ore 11.30 di questa mattina, il Santo Padre Benedetto XVI incontra un gruppo di Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza dei Vescovi Cattolici degli Stati Uniti d'America, che sta ricevendo in questi mesi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum" (Regioni X, XI, XII e XIII).

Dopo l'indirizzo di omaggio di S.E. Mons. Michael Jarboe Sheehan, Arcivescovo di Santa Fe, a nome dei Vescovi della XIII Regione, il Papa rivolge ai presenti il discorso che pubblichiamo di seguito:

● DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

I greet all of you with affection in the Lord and I offer you my prayerful good wishes for a grace-filled pilgrimage *ad limina Apostolorum*. In the course of our meetings I have been reflecting with you and your Brother Bishops on the intellectual and cultural challenges of the new evangelization in the context of contemporary American society. In the present talk, I wish to address the question of religious education and the faith formation of the next generation of Catholics in your country.

Before all else, I would acknowledge the great progress that has been made in recent years in improving catechesis, reviewing texts and bringing them into conformity with the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Important efforts are also being made to preserve the great patrimony of America's Catholic elementary and high schools, which have been deeply affected by changing demographics and increased costs, while at the same time ensuring that the education they provide remains within the reach of all families, whatever their financial status. As has often been mentioned in our meetings, these schools remain an essential resource for the new evangelization, and the significant contribution that they make to American society as a whole ought to be better appreciated and more generously supported.

On the level of higher education, many of you have pointed to a growing recognition on the part of Catholic colleges and universities of the need to reaffirm their distinctive identity in fidelity to their founding ideals and the Church's mission in service of the Gospel. Yet much remains to be done, especially in such basic areas as

compliance with the mandate laid down in Canon 812 for those who teach theological disciplines. The importance of this canonical norm as a tangible expression of ecclesial communion and solidarity in the Church's educational apostolate becomes all the more evident when we consider the confusion created by instances of apparent dissidence between some representatives of Catholic institutions and the Church's pastoral leadership: such discord harms the Church's witness and, as experience has shown, can easily be exploited to compromise her authority and her freedom.

It is no exaggeration to say that providing young people with a sound education in the faith represents the most urgent internal challenge facing the Catholic community in your country. The deposit of faith is a priceless treasure which each generation must pass on to the next by winning hearts to Jesus Christ and shaping minds in the knowledge, understanding and love of his Church. It is gratifying to realize that, in our day too, the Christian vision, presented in its breadth and integrity, proves immensely appealing to the imagination, idealism and aspirations of the young, who have a right to encounter the faith in all its beauty, its intellectual richness and its radical demands.

Here I would simply propose several points which I trust will prove helpful for your discernment in meeting this challenge.

First, as we know, the essential task of authentic education at every level is not simply that of passing on knowledge, essential as this is, but also of shaping hearts. There is a constant need to balance intellectual rigor in communicating effectively, attractively and integrally, the richness of the Church's faith with forming the young in the love of God, the praxis of the Christian moral and sacramental life and, not least, the cultivation of personal and liturgical prayer.

It follows that the question of Catholic identity, not least at the university level, entails much more than the teaching of religion or the mere presence of a chaplaincy on campus. All too often, it seems, Catholic schools and colleges have failed to challenge students to reappropriate their faith as part of the exciting intellectual discoveries which mark the experience of higher education. The fact that so many new students find themselves dissociated from the family, school and community support systems that previously facilitated the transmission of the faith should continually spur Catholic institutions of learning to create new and effective networks of support. In every aspect of their education, students need to be encouraged to articulate a vision of the harmony of faith and reason capable of guiding a life-long pursuit of knowledge and virtue. As ever, an essential role in this process is played by teachers who inspire others by their evident love of Christ, their witness of sound devotion and their commitment to that *sapientia Christiana* which integrates faith and life, intellectual passion and reverence for the splendor of truth both human and divine.

In effect, faith by its very nature demands a constant and all-embracing conversion to the fullness of truth revealed in Christ. He is the creative Logos, in whom all things were made and in whom all reality "holds together" (*Col 1:17*); he is the new Adam who reveals the ultimate truth about man and the world in which we live. In a period of great cultural change and societal displacement not unlike our own, Augustine pointed to this intrinsic connection between faith and the human intellectual enterprise by appealing to Plato, who held, he says, that "to love wisdom is to love God" (cf. *De Civitate Dei*, VIII, 8). The Christian commitment to learning, which gave birth to the medieval universities, was based upon this conviction that the one God, as the source of all truth and goodness, is likewise the source of the intellect's passionate desire to know and the will's yearning for fulfilment in love.

Only in this light can we appreciate the distinctive contribution of Catholic education, which engages in a "diakonia of truth" inspired by an intellectual charity which knows that leading others to the truth is ultimately an act of love (cf. *Address to Catholic Educators*, Washington, 17 April 2008). Faith's recognition of the essential unity of all knowledge provides a bulwark against the alienation and fragmentation which occurs when the use of reason is detached from the pursuit of truth and virtue; in this sense, Catholic institutions have a specific role to play in helping to overcome the crisis of universities today. Firmly grounded in this vision of the intrinsic interplay of faith, reason and the pursuit of human excellence, every Christian intellectual and all the Church's educational institutions must be convinced, and desirous of convincing others, that no aspect of reality remains alien to, or

untouched by, the mystery of the redemption and the Risen Lord's dominion over all creation.

During my Pastoral Visit to the United States, I spoke of the need for the Church in America to cultivate "a mindset, an intellectual culture which is genuinely Catholic" (cf. *Homily at Nationals Stadium*, Washington, 17 April 2008). Taking up this task certainly involves a renewal of apologetics and an emphasis on Catholic distinctiveness; ultimately however it must be aimed at proclaiming the liberating truth of Christ and stimulating greater dialogue and cooperation in building a society ever more solidly grounded in an authentic humanism inspired by the Gospel and faithful to the highest values of America's civic and cultural heritage. At the present moment of your nation's history, this is the challenge and opportunity awaiting the entire Catholic community, and it is one which the Church's educational institutions should be the first to acknowledge and embrace.

In concluding these brief reflections, I wish to express once more my gratitude, and that of the whole Church, for the generous commitment, often accompanied by personal sacrifice, shown by so many teachers and administrators who work in the vast network of Catholic schools in your country. To you, dear Brothers, and to all the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of wisdom, joy and peace in the Risen Lord.

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