



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 0287

Sabato 19.05.2001

VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DEL PAKISTAN

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale del Pakistan, ricevuti questa mattina e incontrati in questi giorni, in separate udienze, per la Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. With great joy I welcome you, the Bishops of Pakistan, on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum*. Following the experience of my recent pilgrimage in the footsteps of Saint Paul, the Apostle's words continue to echo in my heart and I greet you with his exhortation: "my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and my crown, stand firm in the Lord" (*Phil 4:1*). The *ad Limina* visit is always a significant and enriching moment for the Successor of Peter, a visit during which he has the opportunity to meet his brother Bishops from various parts of the world and to spend time with them in prayer and fraternal reflection regarding their joys and hopes, their griefs and sorrows.

In Pakistan, the Christian community is a small flock living in the midst of a large Muslim majority. Though many of its members are poor and live in difficult circumstances, they are rich in faith and fidelity to the Gospel of Jesus Christ. During your pilgrimage to the tombs of Saints Peter and Paul, I know that your communities at home are very close to your hearts, as you entrust their needs and concerns, as well as your own episcopal ministry, to the heavenly protection of the Apostles. I join you in thanking God for the blessings he has bestowed upon all of you.

The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 has been a time of grace in the life of the whole Church. During the year, the Church in Pakistan too experienced many spiritual benefits, as the faithful took part in the Jubilee activities, including various pilgrimages to Rome, from which many returned to their families and communities with renewed faith and strengthened commitment. The Jubilee should not be merely an exceptional moment in the life of the Church, after which everything returns to normal, so to speak. As I have emphasized in my Apostolic

Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, it is now time to build on the gains of the Great Jubilee in order to plan for the future, with our gaze fixed firmly on Christ, the one Mediator and Saviour of us all. This is especially a task for each local Church, which must grasp the opportunity to assess its own fervour and find fresh enthusiasm for its spiritual and pastoral responsibilities (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 3).

2. As we celebrated the Two Thousandth Anniversary of his birth, we reflected on Christ "considered in his historical features and in his mystery, Christ known through his manifold presence in the Church and in the world, and confessed as the meaning of history and the light of life's journey" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 15). This contemplation of Christ is at the heart of your ministry as Bishops. May it inspire in you new energy, as it impels you to invest in concrete initiatives the fervour you have experienced in your people. It likewise leads you to reflect on the quality of your own interior life and your relationship with the Lord. Through an intense life of prayer, you will acquire that inner serenity which leads us to be "contemplatives in action", credible witnesses capable of passing on to others what we ourselves have received: the Word of Life (cf. *1 Jn* 1:1). Radiant holiness, fidelity to the Gospel, courage in facing the challenges of the apostolate: these are essential conditions for a fruitful episcopal ministry at the service of the new evangelization to which God is calling the Church at the beginning of the new millennium.

Apart from the pastoral government of their own Dioceses, Bishops, by virtue of their membership in the College of Bishops, should be deeply concerned about the Church at the national and universal level. To respond more effectively to the many pastoral and social problems of your country it is important to strengthen cooperation at the level of your Episcopal Conference, in order to speak with one voice and offer decisive leadership to the Catholics of Pakistan. In this regard I invite you to consider ways of improving and strengthening the institutions and activities of the Conference. In particular, a permanent secretariat and a more stable arrangement for the Conference's meetings would perhaps be helpful.

3. To your priests go my encouragement and the assurance of my prayers. I know the often difficult circumstances of their ministry. You have a particular responsibility towards them, and it is upon your shoulders that the task of promoting their well-being and holiness falls. Priests must continually rekindle in their hearts a passion for the tremendous gift they received when the Lord called them to his service. This means that they too must be men of prayer, concerned with the things of God. Theirs is not a position of privilege but a ministry of service, directed to helping God's people to respond to their deepest vocation, which is to enter into communion with the Blessed Trinity.

Particular attention must therefore be given to the formation of priests and seminarians, so that they may respond to the grace of the Holy Spirit who continually calls them to conversion, holiness and pastoral charity. I rejoice that the number of vocations continues to rise in Pakistan, and I encourage you to give these young men the best possible training so that they may become the kind of priests that the People of God needs and has a "right" to (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 79). Your minor seminaries, apart from providing education of the highest quality, should help young men to discern God's call and respond to it with generous commitment. Working together, you must ensure that the National Catholic Institute of Theology, established in 1997, will succeed in improving the intellectual training of the seminarians, religious and laity who attend the courses available, by providing high academic standards, and by being faithful to the teaching of the Church and to the authentic traditions of Christian spirituality.

4. The laity too should be encouraged to play a fuller and more visible part in the Church's mission. To do this effectively, local Catholic communities should be well grounded in the fundamentals of the faith. In this regard I wish to express my gratitude to the Religious and lay catechists whose dedication to catechesis and instruction are of such importance for the growth of the Church in Pakistan. I encourage them to make full use of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, which is not only a systematic synthesis of the essential contents of Catholic doctrine but also a vital and efficacious instrument in the work of evangelization.

We should not overlook the fact that faith is transmitted in the first place in the home. For this reason the family must be one of the priorities of your pastoral planning. Today Christian families are experiencing pressures from a variety of external forces. Your efforts should concentrate on ensuring that the family is truly a "domestic

Church", marked by a climate of prayer, mutual respect and service to others. By humbly and lovingly living out its Christian vocation, the Christian family will become a true "hearth of evangelization, where each member experiences God's love and communicates it to others" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 46).

Likewise, the Church has always had the pastoral care of young people very much at heart. Today, in the rapidly changing circumstances of society, Pastors should encourage and support young people at every step, to ensure that they are mature enough, humanly and spiritually, to assume an active role in the Church and in society. To them the Church presents the truth of Jesus Christ, "a joyful and liberating mystery to be known, lived and shared, with conviction and courage" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 47).

Catholic schools are widely recognized in Pakistan for the high quality of their teaching and for the human values they inculcate. Since students of all religious traditions attend these schools, their part in promoting a climate of dialogue and tolerance cannot be underestimated and constitutes a serious challenge for the Catholic community. Regardless of their religious or cultural background, students should learn from the example and teaching of their educators to prize and seek always "whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious" (*Phil 4:8*).

5. In your country, interreligious dialogue constitutes an essential feature of your pastoral mission. During my recent visit to Syria I have again called for greater understanding and cooperation between Christians and Muslims. To ensure that such initiatives bear fruit, it is important to have properly trained personnel who have made a serious study of the religious beliefs, values and traditions of Islam. Dialogue does not imply abandonment of one's own principles, nor should it lead to a false irenicism (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 56). Rather, in fidelity to our own religious traditions and convictions, we must be open to understanding those of the followers of other religions in a spirit of humility and frankness.

I have already mentioned the importance of Catholic schools in fostering mutual tolerance and dialogue. Other Catholic institutions, such as hospitals, homes and social works, also bear witness in a practical way to the values of the Gospel; they enable a "dialogue of life" to take place between the followers of the various religions, and thus contribute to the building of a more just and fraternal society (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 57).

Since cultures develop as ways of dealing with the most profound questions of human existence, ultimately they must face the question of God: "At the heart of every culture lies the attitude man takes to the greatest mystery: the mystery of God" (*Centesimus Annus*, 24). Pakistani culture recognizes and defends the place of God in public life. This fact should make it possible for the followers of the various religions to work together in order to defend the inestimable dignity of every man and woman from conception to natural death, and to build a society in which the inalienable rights of all are respected and protected, and particularly the right to life, the right to freedom (including freedom of thought, conscience and religion) and the right to participate fully in society. From these flow the civil, economic, social and cultural rights which are essential to the well-being of individuals and societies. A common basis for cooperation between Christians and Muslims, and for the fostering of authentic social and political development, is to be found in the universal and unchanging moral norms which derive from the order of creation and are inscribed in the human heart (cf. *Veritatis Splendor*, 96).

Despite possibilities for understanding and mutual assistance, it is unfortunately still the case that many of your people are enduring hardships for their fidelity to Christ. They are sometimes regarded with suspicion and feel that they not treated as full citizens of their own country, especially in the face of laws which do not sufficiently respect the religious freedom of minorities. My thoughts turn to all Christians in your country who are in any way suffering for their faith. In their trials and afflictions I wish to assure them of my solidarity and prayerful support. The Lord Jesus Christ, to whom I invite them to turn with confidence, is with them in a particularly intimate way, to comfort and strengthen them. As Pastors of the Church in Pakistan you have been courageous in taking a stand in defence of religious freedom, which is at the very heart of human rights (cf. *Message for the World Day of Peace 1999*, 5). I encourage your efforts to ensure that a spirit of mutual tolerance and respect prevails, and I invite you to continue to provide the leadership necessary to ensure that all Christians join in a common approach, marked by a spirit of respectful and truthful dialogue, free from excessive and imprudent actions, and aimed at bringing an improvement in the situation.

6. Dear Brother Bishops, the Father of mercies and the God of all comfort (cf. *2 Cor* 1:3), who loves you in Jesus Christ and who pours forth the gifts of the Holy Spirit upon all who believe, is the source of your trust and courage. I have every confidence that you will continue to proclaim boldly the good news of Jesus Christ to your people, who are particularly close to my heart. Entrusting you and the priests, religious and laity of Pakistan to the maternal protection of Mary, the radiant dawn and sure guide for our steps, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

[00819-02.01] [Original text: English]
