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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLE CONFERENZE EPISCOPALI DI MALAYSIA, SINGAPORE E BRUNEI

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto agli Ecc.mi Presuli delle Conferenze Episcopali di Malaysia, Singapore e Brunei, ricevuti questa mattina e incontrati nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "I have heard of your faith in the Lord Jesus and your love toward all the saints, and I do not cease to give thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers" (*Eph 1:15-16*). In the bond of that faith, I greet you, the Bishops of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei, as you come on your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. As you pray at the Tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you reaffirm the bond of communion with the Successor of Peter and with the episcopal college throughout the world, and you re-commit yourselves to that "care for all the Churches" (*2 Cor 11:28*) which is at the heart of the apostolic ministry. You re-dedicate yourselves to that witness to which Bishops are called as Successors of the Apostles, a witness to the Risen Christ who dispels all darkness by the power of his glorious light. With the Church throughout the ages you echo the song of Easter which has long been heard in this place: *Christus vincit, Christus regnat, Christus imperat!* These words, by directing your minds and hearts to the Lord Jesus – to whom alone belong "honour and glory and might for ever and ever" (*Rev 5:13*) – remind you that the Bishop is a steward, not an owner, of the mysteries. You are servants of the Gospel of the one Saviour Jesus Christ: the source, heart and goal of all your episcopal ministry.

You come from afar, "but there is no distance between those who are united in the same communion, the communion which is daily nourished at the table of the Eucharistic Bread and the Word of Life" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 58). The particular Churches entrusted to your care are a precious part of the great fellowship of faith which is the universal Church. In this moment of communion, dear Brothers, let us together give thanks for what the universal Church is to your particular Churches and for the wonderful gifts which the faithful of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei bring to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

2. Today I wish to encourage you to direct your ministry and pastoral planning more and more to that lifelong Christian formation which is the essential support of a solid Christian life, a formation which begins in Baptism, develops through grace at every stage of life's journey, and will end only when our eyes are fully opened in the beatific vision of heaven. It is this lifelong Christian training which enables us to hear the voice of Christ, our Teacher (cf. *Mt 23:10*), and adhere with heart and mind to the cause of his kingdom. The Lord's teaching reaches the Christian community in many ways, not the least of which are the three great areas within which it unfolds in the lives of most of the faithful: the family, the school and the parish. These are not just conventional arrangements which might at some point be judged outmoded; they are in fact enduringly valid institutions through which the grace of Christ is mediated to those involved. They require sustained and sensitive pastoral care on your part if the community over which you preside is to be strengthened as a visible social body.

3. In your lands as elsewhere, the family is under pressure. Divorce has become more common, and its prevalence can lead to a diminished sense of the special grace and commitment involved in Christian marriage. Among couples of different religious allegiance, the problem is especially felt, since the shared bond of faith is lacking. Family life is also made more difficult where the mass media present values contrary to the Gospel and become instruments of a vision of life reduced to the ephemeral and unsubstantial. In such a situation, "the Church perceives in a more urgent and compelling way her mission of proclaiming to all people the plan of God for marriage and the family" (*Familiaris Consortio*, 3). Indeed, you will be doing an excellent service to the whole of society when you proclaim that the marriage of man and woman was "willed by God in the very act of creation" (*ibid.*) and that it is a primary locus of the ceaseless creativity of God, with whom couples cooperate through their service of life and love. This means that marriage and the family are not institutions which can change with passing trends or as majority opinion might decide. Every effort should be made to ensure that the family will be recognized as the *primordial* building block of a truly healthy and spiritually vigorous nation (cf. *Letter to Families*, 2 February 1994, 17).

In the bond of Christian marriage, Christ himself dwells sacramentally, drawing spouses and children ever more deeply into his inexhaustible love, showing forth the glory of his own self-giving, and revealing to the world the truth that man is created both through love and for love (cf. *ibid.*, 11). I would recall the words of Tertullian: "How wonderful the bond between two believers, with a single hope, a single desire, a single observance, a single service! They are both brethren and both fellow-servants; there is no separation between them in spirit or flesh; in fact they are truly two in one flesh, and where the flesh is one, one is the spirit" (*To His Wife*, II, VIII, 7-8). Because of this very special vocation, it is essential that there should be not only thorough preparation for the Sacrament of Marriage, but also unflinching support and continuing formation of Christian spouses, so that they can understand the dignity and duties of their state.

4. In the lifelong process of formation, Catholic schools are closely associated with parents in teaching children to know and love both God and man. In your particular Churches in general, magnificent work has been done in the field of Catholic education, especially by men and women Religious, and you have been unstinting in offering support and encouragement. The presence of Religious in the schools is less assured now than it was, and dedicated lay teachers are assuming wider responsibility. This means that special attention has to be given to their training, in order to ensure that they see their professional work as a genuine vocation, and likewise to ensure that what is most distinctive about Catholic schools is not compromised.

Cultural, political and financial pressures sometimes make it difficult to maintain the independence required by Catholic schools. In a situation such as yours, Church schools are open to students of all backgrounds. Yet it is essential to preserve and nurture that sense of the providence of the Creator, of the inviolability of human dignity, of the uniqueness of Jesus Christ, and of the Church as a communion of holiness and mission, which enables Catholic schools to make their special contribution not only to the children whom they teach but also to the society which they serve.

5. Just as schools cannot be separated from the education which takes place within the family, so too they are intimately related to the formation offered in the parish. This is especially true in situations where the faith cannot be taught in schools but must be taught in the parish. As you know from daily experience, catechists play a fundamental role in teaching the faith in your local communities. They need the special formal and informal training which enables them to pass on the riches of Catholic doctrine in all its fullness, as well as the support

and encouragement of the community and its pastor.

This is even more important in the case of priests, since it is they who have day-to-day contact with their people as teachers of the faith. Not only must they themselves teach, but they must also help parents, teachers and catechists to fulfil their particular responsibilities. That is why your priests need not only excellent seminary training, but also the continuing formation mentioned in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, which speaks of such further training as "a requirement of the priest's own faithfulness to his ministry, to his very being" (No. 70). Be especially close to your priests, by helping them constantly to cherish in their hearts the treasure of their priestly calling. Encourage them to grow in the love and zeal which ensures that their communities are equipped in every way for the worship of God and the service of the brethren.

What is true of priests is also true, *a fortiori*, of Bishops. Many beautiful and penetrating things were said at the recent Tenth Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops about the figure of the Pastor as a man of God, a teacher of the faith that has been handed down, a sanctifier of God's people, and a guide of the community's pilgrimage journey. With the many pressures of your ministry, it is never easy to find the time for further study and reflection. Yet this is very necessary. Otherwise it will surely be more difficult for you as Bishops to persevere with truth and humility in the task of being faithful stewards of the mysteries. Therefore, dear Brothers, I urge you "to rekindle the gift of God that is within you" (2 Tim 1:6). And do all you can to help your priests to do the same, so that in the parishes of your Dioceses the voice of Christ the Good Shepherd will always be heard by the flock he has claimed as his own.

6. The Catholic family, school and parish must, each in its own way, become more and more a school of faith and holiness, a sanctuary where God is worshipped and a service to a broken world. In doing so they will provide that "genuine training in holiness" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 31) which is especially needed now if the new evangelization is to bear the fruit so earnestly needed. On this point we must be clear: holiness of life is the goal of all Christian formation, just as it is the goal of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the start of the new millennium. Christian holiness springs from contemplation of the face of Christ; it grows through a process of continuing formation, leading to an ever more perfect following of Jesus; and it comes to maturity when we bear faithful witness to Christ and proclaim his truth to the world.

All of this will bring positive results also in dealing with another of the challenging tasks facing the Church in the Third Christian Millennium: the duty to engage in fruitful interreligious dialogue and work effectively with the followers of all religions for a strengthening of mutual understanding and peace in the world. This undertaking is of particular importance for your local churches. As I wrote in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, only Christians with a mature and convinced faith, who are deeply immersed in the mystery of Christ and are happy in their faith community, can be effective in promoting genuine interreligious dialogue (cf. No. 31). Such dialogue includes scholarly exchanges, joint action for integral human development and the defence of human and religious values. The Church's mission in the new millennium calls for her "to strive to preserve and foster at all levels this spirit of encounter and cooperation between religions" (*ibid.*); this in turn will sustain the values upon which a just and peaceful society can be built.

My fervent prayer for you, dear Brothers, is that you will ever be men of God, men of prayer and intense pastoral love, so that you will help your people to live in genuine Christian hope: "For in hope we were saved" (*Rom* 8:24). In this uncertain period in world events, let your hearts be ever more filled with the compassion and mercy of the Heart of Jesus. Be prophets of his love for every needy person!

I entrust you, your priests, the women and men Religious, and the lay people of Malaysia, Singapore and Brunei to the unfailing protection of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, and I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of grace and peace in her Divine Son.

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