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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELL'INDIA

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Pubblichiamo di seguito il discorso che il Santo Padre Giovanni Paolo II ha rivolto questa mattina al gruppo degli Ecc.mi Presuli della Conferenza Episcopale dell'India delle Province Ecclesiastiche di Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, Patna e Ranchi, incontrati questa mattina e ricevuti, nei giorni scorsi, in separate udienze, in occasione della Visita "ad Limina Apostolorum":

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. I gladly welcome you, the Bishops of the Ecclesiastical Provinces of Cuttack-Bhubaneswar, Patna and Ranchi. You have come to Rome on the occasion of your *Ad Limina* visit: a privileged moment in your lives as Pastors as you make your way to the tombs of the Apostles to manifest and strengthen your bonds of communion with the Successor of Peter. I am grateful to you, Archbishop Toppo, for the kind words you offered in the name of your Brother Bishops. Your presence here today draws me ever closer to your beloved country and to the clergy, men and women Religious and the lay faithful of your Dioceses. During my meetings with the first two groups of Latin Rite Bishops from your nation, I recalled the successes and challenges facing those who proclaim the Gospel in India. While focusing on the bountiful harvest of grace you have continued to reap as a result of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I also noted the difficulties that remain. The Jubilee provided the Church in India, in communion with the universal Church, an opportunity to ponder the need for renewal of Christian life. You remember the past with gratitude; you live the present with enthusiasm and you look to the future with confidence (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 1).

2. "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (*Mk 16:15*). Christ's parting words to his disciples are both an invitation and a challenge to go forth and proclaim the Good News. Understood in this way, evangelization is a charge in which all the members of the Church share by virtue of their baptism. Therefore, all the baptized "should everywhere on earth bear witness to Christ and give an answer to everyone who asks a reason for the hope of an eternal life which is theirs" (*Lumen Gentium*, 10). How unfortunate it is then that even today in many places in India unnecessary obstacles still impede the preaching of the Gospel. Citizens of a

modern democracy should not suffer because of their religious convictions. Nor should anyone feel compelled to hide his or her religion in order to enjoy fundamental human rights, such as education and employment.

Notwithstanding these difficulties, the Church in India courageously preaches Christ's message of salvation to the people of the subcontinent. I pray that you, dear Bishops, will remain beacons of courage and hope, inspiring clergy, Religious and lay faithful to take heart and continue to preach Christ who loves us even unto death, death on a cross (cf. *Phil 2:8*). As Saint Paul reminds us, the surpassing power of God is ever our strength: we may be "perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed; always carrying about in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies" (cf. *2 Cor 4:7-10*).

3. The trials and tribulations that accompany a life in Christ ask of the Church a special commitment to the ministry of "first evangelization". The initial contact with the salvific message of Christ by those who have not yet heard the Good News demands of us all an intelligent and credible expression of the faith. The mission of training the faithful to respect and proclaim the Gospel falls to parents, teachers and catechists of today. For this reason, a fundamental task of every Bishop is to ensure that he has well-trained laity equipped and ready to be teachers of the faith. Catholics are to be encouraged to participate in the essential apostolate of the word that "acquires a specific property and peculiar efficacy because it is accomplished in the ordinary circumstances of the world" (*Lumen Gentium*, 35).

Fulfilling the role of a catechist requires a relationship of trust and cooperation between the clergy and the lay faithful. Bishops therefore must constantly strive to ensure that nothing erodes this rapport. They should always recognize that "all Christ's faithful have the obligation and the right to strive so that the divine message of salvation may more and more reach all people of all times and all places" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, can. 211). At the same time, personal views originating from caste or tribal affinity should never be allowed to cloud the authentic teaching of the Church.

4. Intimately related to the Church's efforts for evangelization is a true and profound respect for culture. Culture is the space "within which the human person comes face to face with the Gospel" (cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 21). Always respectful of differing cultures, the Church seeks to engage her brothers and sisters of other religions in order to foster "a relationship of openness and dialogue" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 55). Thus considered, interreligious dialogue will not only increase mutual understanding and respect for one another, but will also help to develop society in harmony with the rights and dignity of all.

The Church in India has constantly demonstrated her commitment to the principle of the inalienable dignity of the human person through her numerous social institutions, offering unconditional love to Christians and non-Christians alike. Her schools, dispensaries, hospitals and institutes aimed at the integral development of the human person give untold assistance to the poorer members of society, regardless of creed. It is unfortunate that some of the Church's honest attempts towards interreligious dialogue at its most basic level have sometimes been hindered by a lack of cooperation from the Government and by harassment from certain fundamentalist groups. India has strong traditions of respect for religious differences. It is my hope that for the good of the nation contrary tendencies will not be allowed to develop (cf. *Address to the new Ambassador of India*, 13 December 2002). As Bishops, it is your obligation to ensure that interreligious dialogue continues. However, while engaging in this mutual exchange, you must never allow it to be influenced by religious indifferentism. It is vital that Christ's call to discipleship be preached and lived with conviction by every Christian.

5. Dear Brother Bishops, I am hopeful that you will persevere in your efforts to guarantee a solid theological training in your seminaries and a sound continuing formation for your priests, thus rejecting "the temptation to reduce Christianity to a merely human wisdom, a pseudo-science of well-being" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 11). Proper theological preparation requires instruction which, while respecting that part of the truth found in other religious traditions, nevertheless unfailingly proclaims that Jesus Christ is "the Way and the Truth and the Life" (*Jn 14:6*; cf. *Ecclesia in Asia*, 31). To this end Catholic educational institutions must offer a sound philosophical formation which is necessary for the study of theology. Truth transcends the limitations of both Eastern and Western thought and unites every culture and society (cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 76-77). As sharers in Christ's prophetic

mission, we have a solemn responsibility to bring that truth ever closer to ourselves and to others. This sacred duty is especially incumbent upon those who are entrusted to train priests and religious. Formators and professors are obliged to teach the message of Christ in its completeness as the only way, not as one way among many. In so doing "theologians, as servants of the divine truth, dedicate their studies and labours to ever deeper understanding of that truth, and never lose sight of the meaning of their service in the Church" (cf. *Redemptor Hominis*, 19).

6. In considering the many responsibilities involved in your care of God's people, I am keenly aware of the trials you face as you strive to develop a viable ecclesial life in your Dioceses. It is disheartening to see the work of the Church often compromised by a lingering tribalism in certain parts of India. At times this tribalism has been so strong that some groups have even refused to receive bishops and priests not from their clans, thus crippling the proper functioning of Church structures and obscuring the essential nature of the Church as communion. Tribal or ethnic difference must never be used as a reason for rejecting a bearer of God's word. It is the responsibility of all Christians to examine their consciences to ensure that they always and everywhere love all God's children including those who are different: "by this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (*Jn* 13:35).

I thank God for the numerous priests and Religious in your country who are living exemplary lives of poverty, charity and holiness. Faced with so many hardships, they may be tempted to lose the zeal and creativity indispensable for effective ministry. I earnestly pray that the Lord will continue to strengthen them in their work. To this end, I invite the whole Church in India to renew her missionary commitment (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 2).

Consecrated men and woman make a particularly valuable contribution to your local Churches. It is my hope that you will all continue to work closely together. In today's circumstances there is an even greater need for good mutual relations. Some difficult and painful conflicts regarding the management of institutes and the ownership of property have arisen in your region. These issues, however, are not insurmountable for those who live the Gospel in a spirit of fraternal love and service. Pastoral planning and clear agreements between bishops and religious superiors will often provide solutions to problems of this sort. I am confident that "consecrated persons will not fail to cooperate generously with the particular Churches as much as they can and with respect for their own charism, working in full communion with the Bishop in the areas of evangelization, catechesis and parish life" (*Vita Consecrata*, 49).

7. Dear Brothers, it is my fervent hope that your pilgrimage to Rome has been an opportunity for you to reflect again on the grace of the Holy Spirit which you received through the laying on of hands. One of the hallmarks of apostolic service to the Church is the bold proclamation of the Gospel (cf. *Acts* 2:28, 30-31). I express my prayerful support for you and for all those in India, who through their witness continue to proclaim Christ yesterday, today, and for ever (cf. *Heb* 13:8). Praying that this time has confirmed your faith in Christ, the source of our missionary and apostolic zeal, I commend you and all those whom you serve to the loving intercession of Mary, Queen of the Rosary, and with affection I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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