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VISITA "AD LIMINA APOSTOLORUM" DEI PRESULI DELLA CONFERENZA EPISCOPALE DELLE FILIPPINE

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

• DISCORSO DEL SANTO PADRE

My Dear Brothers in the Episcopacy,

1. It is with immense joy that I greet you, the Filipino Bishops from the Provinces of Cagayan de Oro, Cotabato, Davao, Lipa, Ozamis and Zamboanga, on the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum*. You are the first of three groups of Filipino Bishops who, over the course of the next two months, will be coming to Rome to "see Cephas" (cf. Gal 1:18), to share with him "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1) of your local communities. These days are a time of grace for you as you pray at the tombs of the Apostles and seek to be strengthened in preaching "the unsearchable riches of Christ", making known "the plan of the mystery hidden for ages in God who created all things" (Eph 3:8-9).

My words to you today, and those that I shall address to your fellow Bishops when the next two groups arrive, are meant for all of you in the Philippines whose task it is to "tend the flock of God that is your charge" (1 Pet 5:2).

2. At the beginning of this new millennium, shortly after the close of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Filipino Bishops convoked the National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal, taking up once more the theme that, ten years earlier, had been the inspiration for one of the most significant events in the ecclesial life of your local Church: the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines. In fact, the National Consultation focused its attention squarely on the results of the Council, taking a careful and realistic look at the continuing implementation of the decrees arising from it.

As I share my thoughts with you, I too would like to place my reflections in the context of this Council and the

recommendations that came from it. Three key pastoral priorities emerged from the plenary council: the need to be a Church of the poor, the pledge to become a true community of the Lord's disciples, and the commitment to engage in renewed integral evangelization. Since the Filipino Bishops will be making their *ad Limina* visits to Rome in three groups, I shall use each of these points as a broad backdrop for my comments to each group. For you, I shall start with the first priority: the Church of the poor.

3. In the Vision-Mission Statement for the Church in the Philippines, we read the simple and incisive declaration: "Following the way of our Lord, we opt to be a Church of the poor". The plenary council dealt extensively with what it means to be a Church of the poor (cf. Acts and Decrees of the Second Plenary Council of the Philippines, 122-136). It gave a succinct description of the Church of the poor as a community of faith that "embraces and practices the evangelical spirit of poverty, which combines detachment from possessions with a profound trust in the Lord as the sole source of salvation" (*ibid.*, 125). This echoes the first Beatitude — "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3).

We do well to note that this preference for the poor is in no way exclusive but embraces all people regardless of economic class or social standing. It is a Church, however, that gives preferential attention to the poor, seeking to share time and resources in order to alleviate suffering. It is a Church that works with all sectors of society, including the poor themselves, in search of solutions to the problems of poverty, in order to free people from lives of misery and want. It is a Church moreover that makes use of the talents and gifts of the poor, relying on them in the mission of evangelization. The Church of the poor is a Church in which the poor are welcomed, listened to and actively involved.

4. In a very real way, then, a true Church of the poor contributes much to the needed transformation of society, to social renewal based on the vision and values of the Gospel. This renewal is an undertaking that has the lay faithful as its principal and essential agents: therefore, the laity must be given the necessary tools to carry out this role successfully. This entails a thorough formation in the Church's social doctrine, and constant dialogue with clergy and religious concerning social and cultural issues. As Pastors and spiritual leaders, your careful attention to these tasks will do much to serve the Church's mission *ad gentes*: for "by the grace and call of Baptism and Confirmation, all lay people are missionaries; and the arena of their missionary work is the vast and complex worlds of politics, economics, industry, education, the media, science, technology, the arts and sport" (*Ecclesia in Asia*, 45).

5. Of course, we must not lose sight of the fact that the immediate and perhaps most important arena of lay witness to Christian faith is marriage and the family. When family life is healthy and flourishing, there is likewise a strong sense of community and solidarity — two essential elements for the Church of the poor. Not only is the family an object of the Church's pastoral care but it is also one of the most effective agents of evangelization. In fact, "Christian families are today called to witness to the Gospel in difficult times and circumstances, when the family itself is threatened by an array of forces" (*ibid.*, 46). You and your priests, therefore, should be ever ready to help couples to relate their family life in concrete ways to the life and mission of the Church (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 49), nourishing the spiritual life of parents and children through prayer, the word of God, the sacraments, examples of holiness of life and charity.

The witness borne by being a Church of the poor will also be of inestimable value to the family in its Christian and social vocation. Indeed, without ignoring the deleterious effects of secularism or of legislation that corrupts the meaning of family, marriage and even human life itself, we may note that poverty is certainly among the major factors exposing Filipino families to the risk of instability and fragmentation. How many children have been left to live without mother or father because one or both parents have had to seek work abroad? Moreover, the many different types of exploitation that can undermine family life — child labor, pornography, prostitution — are often linked to dire economic conditions. A Church of the poor can do much to strengthen the family and to combat human exploitation.

Before moving on from the topic of the family, I must add a word of praise for the Filipino Bishops and all who worked with you to make the Fourth World Meeting of Families, held in Manila at the beginning of this year, such a success.

6. Dear Brothers, the sharing of my thoughts with you today would be incomplete if I failed to mention the unsettling presence of terrorist activity in the Philippines and the abhorrent episodes of violence erupting there. These are indeed a cause of grave concern, and I wish you to know that I share your preoccupations and am close to you and your people in these painful and distressing circumstances. With you, I cannot condemn such acts strongly enough. I call on the parties involved to lay down the weapons of death and destruction, rejecting the despair and hatred which these entail, and to take up the arms of mutual understanding, commitment and hope. These are the sure foundations for building a future of authentic peace and justice for all.

In the campaign against terrorism and violence, religious leaders have a vital role to play. "The various Christian confessions, as well as the world's great religions, need to work together to eliminate the social and cultural causes of terrorism. They can do this by teaching the greatness and dignity of the human person, and by spreading a clearer sense of the oneness of the human family" (Message for the 2002 World Day of Peace, 12). This, my Brothers, is an explicit call for ecumenical and interreligious dialogue and cooperation, which are themselves further components of a true Church of the poor. I encourage your efforts in this regard and urge you to increase the opportunities for yourselves and your communities to engage in fruitful exchanges with other believers in Christ and with your Muslim brothers and sisters.

In a special way I recommend that the Bishops-Ulama Forum emphasize at the local level the joint "Commitment to Peace" presented at the Day of Prayer for Peace held in Assisi on January 24, 2002. Two hundred religious leaders joined me at that time in condemning terrorism, and together we committed ourselves "to proclaiming our firm conviction that violence and terrorism are incompatible with the authentic spirit of religion, and . . . to doing everything possible to eliminate the root causes of terrorism" (Commitment 1). This, my Brothers, must be the clear pledge of the religious leaders in Mindanao and throughout the Philippines.

7. These then are some of the reflections that I wish to share with you. With full support for your ongoing special commitment to the poor, I commend you and your priests, religious and lay faithful to Mary, the humble and obedient handmaid of the Lord. As a pledge of grace and strength in her Son, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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