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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**

Your Eminence,

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. On the occasion of your visit *ad Limina Apostolorum* I warmly welcome you, the Filipino Bishops from the Provinces of Caceres, Capiz, Cebu, Jaro and Palo. You are the second of three groups who are making this solemn pilgrimage to the city of the Apostles Peter and Paul. It is my fervent prayer that your time together with "the Successor of Peter" and those who assist him in his pastoral ministry will be a source of renewed zeal and strength for you when you return to your respective local Churches. I am especially pleased to greet Cardinal Vidal, and I thank him for the sentiments he conveyed on behalf of the Bishops, clergy, religious and faithful of your Dioceses.

As I mentioned to the first group of Bishops from the Philippines, the significant ecclesial events of the Second Plenary Council held in 1991 and the more recent National Pastoral Consultation on Church Renewal have had positive lasting effects in the lives of Filipino Catholics. The Plenary Council stressed the need for three fundamental pastoral initiatives: becoming a Church of the poor, developing into a community of disciples of the Lord, and engaging in renewed integral evangelization. Indeed, the challenge of fully implementing this threefold plan continues to breathe new life into the Filipino Church and Filipino society at large. Having already developed the theme of the Church of the poor in my comments to the first group of Bishops, I now focus my attention on the second priority: becoming a true community of disciples of the Lord.

2. The National Pastoral Consultation describes the Church in the Philippines as "the community of disciples

who firmly believe in the Lord Jesus and who joyfully live in harmony and solidarity with one another, with creation and with God" (*Vision-Mission Statement of the Church in the Philippines*). This brings to mind the teaching of Jesus in the Gospel of John, when he explains that being a disciple of the Lord is not a whimsical decision but is instead a serious, loving response to a personal invitation: "You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should bear fruit and that your fruit should abide. This I command you, to love one another" (Jn 15:16,17). The manner in which the disciples express their love is one of the many topics that you and your Brother Bishops sought to address, clearly teaching that to become a true follower of Christ requires "integral faith formation". In fact, it is only through this authentic discipleship, based on loving solidarity, that the Philippines can begin to resolve the worrisome dichotomy between faith and life which plagues so many modern societies.

3. In my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* I mentioned the pride which Asians take in their religious and cultural values of love of silence, contemplation, simplicity and harmony, to name but a few. "All of this indicates an innate spiritual insight and moral wisdom in the Asian soul" (No. 6). This "spiritual insight" is clearly witnessed in the deep religious sentiments of the Filipino people and is fertile ground in which to nurture the disposition that leads every Christian to a more authentic discipleship. Your Pastoral Letter on spirituality explains that it is Christ-centered commitment which defines your people as pilgrims on the way to their true home. Regular attendance at Sunday Mass, active participation in parish activities and feasts, impressive Marian devotions and the large number of national shrines in your country are but a few examples of the rich Christian heritage which constitutes an integral part of your country's life and culture. Notwithstanding these positive aspects, there still exist certain contradictions among Christians and in Filipino society at large. These incongruities can only be rectified by your being fully opened to Christ's spirit, going into the world and transforming it into a culture of justice and peace (cf. *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 4).

4. Fulfilling these noble aims necessitates a commitment on your part to prepare the lay faithful to be true disciples for the world. It is the Pastors of local Churches who ensure that the laity has at its disposal programs of spirituality and catechesis to prepare it for this mission. I am encouraged to see the many ways in which the Church in the Philippines strives to fulfill this responsibility. This is apparent not only in the educational opportunities offered by so many Dioceses but also in the various lay organizations and in the small faith communities and movements which are thriving in your country. Although these groups may seem quite diverse at first glance, in fact "they all come together in an all-inclusive and profound convergence when viewed from the perspective of their common purpose" (*Christifideles Laici*, 29). This is especially the case when such groups are actively involved in parish life and maintain a relationship of open and affectionate communication with one another, their parish priests and their Bishops. As Christ teaches "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:34).

5. One of the major contributions the Church can make in guaranteeing a solid preparation of the laity is to ensure that seminaries and religious houses are training future priests to be dedicated disciples of the Word and Sacrament. It is a complex process that begins with the proper selection of candidates. In this regard, I recommend that you and your priests actively search for good, pious and well-balanced young men for the priesthood and challenge them to be not afraid "to put out into the deep" for a catch of inestimable value (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 1).

Once a candidate is selected, the process of preparing him to be a good and holy priest begins. This demands that "the spiritual formation and doctrinal instruction of the students in a seminary be harmoniously blended" (*Codex Iuris Canonici*, c. 244) and supervised by well-trained formators. We can speak here of the diverse types of formation: human formation, which assists the candidate to live and internalize priestly virtues, especially those of simplicity, chastity, prudence, patience and obedience; intellectual formation, which emphasizes an in-depth study of philosophy and theology, at all times maintaining fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium; pastoral formation, which enables the candidate to apply theological principles to pastoral praxis; and spiritual formation, which stresses the essential need for regular celebration of the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of penance, together with private and devotional prayer and frequent visits with a spiritual director (cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 43-59, *Codex Iuris Canonici*, c. 246). Any course of priestly formation which offers these elements will indeed produce ministers who will joyously "struggle to be faithful to the Lord and to serve his flock unswervingly" (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 82).

6. The National Pastoral Council discussed at great length the need to support and assist priests in their ministry and resolved to "seek creative ways of ongoing formation" for the clergy (*Proceedings and Addresses of the NPCCR*, January 2001, p. 59). This may be likened to the continuing renewal of "spirit and mind" that Saint Paul writes about in his Letter to the Ephesians (cf. 4:23-24). As in the case of the formation of seminarians, priestly formation demands a "harmoniously blended" approach which at all times promotes the priestly virtues of charity, prayer, chastity and faithful celebration of the liturgy, practices unappreciated or even rejected by modern culture and its media.

Today's clergy must be careful not to adopt the secular view of the priesthood as a "profession", a "career" and a means of earning a living. Rather, the clergy must see the priesthood as a vocation to selfless, loving service, embracing wholeheartedly the "esteemed gift of celibacy" and all that this involves. Here I wish to emphasize that celibacy is to be regarded as an integral part of the priest's exterior and interior life, and not just as a long-standing ideal which is to be respected (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 16). Sadly, the lifestyle of some clergy has been a countersign to the spirit of the evangelical counsels which should be a part of the spirituality of every priest. The scandalous behavior of a few has undermined the credibility of many. I wish you to know that I am aware of the sensitive way in which you have attempted to address this issue, and I encourage you not to lose hope. True discipleship calls for love, compassion and at times strict discipline in order to serve the common good. Always be just and always be merciful.

7. Dear Brothers, as you prepare for your return home I leave you with these reflections, knowing that you will continue to guide your people effectively on the lifelong pilgrimage of true discipleship. Take consolation in the fact that you are not alone on this journey, as our beloved Mother Mary, the Morning Star that lights up our lives and banishes the darkness of night accompanies you, ushering you and your faithful into the new dawn (cf. Pastoral Letter on Filipino Spirituality). As a pledge of joy and peace in her Son, the *Santo Niño*, I impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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