



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF POPE FRANCIS
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE OF POLAND
ON THEIR AD LIMINA VISIT**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 7 February 2014*

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I cordially greet each one of you and the particular Churches that the Lord has entrusted to your fatherly leadership. I thank Archbishop Józef Michalik for his words, especially for assuring me that the Church in Poland is praying for me and for my ministry.

We are meeting, one might say, on the eve of the Canonization of [Bl. John Paul II](#). We all carry him in our hearts: the great Pastor who, at every stage of his mission as priest, bishop and Pope, gave us a luminous example of total abandonment to God and to his Mother, and of complete dedication to the Church and to man. He accompanies us still from Heaven and reminds us how important the spiritual and pastoral communion among Bishops is. The unity of Pastors, in faith, in charity, in teaching and in the common concern for the good of the faithful, constitutes a point of reference for the entire ecclesial community and for any who seek a sure orientation in their daily journey in the ways of the Lord. Nothing and no one should be able to introduce division among you, dear Brothers! You are called to build communion and peace rooted in brotherly love, and to give it to all people as an encouraging example. And certainly such an attitude will bear fruit and will offer to your faithful people the strength of hope.

During our meetings in these days I have been reassured of the fact that the Church in Poland has a great potential for the faith, for prayer, for charity and for Christian practice. Thanks be to God, in Poland there is a high attendance at the Sacraments, there are valid initiatives in the sectors of the new evangelization and catechesis, there is widespread charitable and social work, and a satisfactory trend in priestly vocations. All this favours the Christian formation of people, motivated

and committed practice, readiness on the part of the laity and the religious to actively work together in the ecclesial and social structures. Regarding the fact that there is also a certain decline in various aspects of Christian life, discernment is required, a study of the causes and of the ways to confront these new challenges, such as, for example, the idea of unlimited freedom, hostile tolerance or distrust of the truth, or discontent toward the Church's just opposition to the pervading relativism.

First of all, in the area of regular pastoral care, I would like to focus your attention on the *family*, "the fundamental cell of society", "where we learn to live with others despite our differences and to belong to one another; it is also the place where parents pass on the faith to their children" (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 66). Today however marriage is often considered a form of emotional gratification that can be formed in any way and be modified according to the sensibilities of the individual (cf. *ibid.*). Unfortunately, this view also influences the mentality of Christians, thereby facilitating recourse to divorce or separation. Pastors are called to study the best way to assist those who are living in this situation, so that they do not feel excluded from the mercy of God, from the brotherly love of other Christians and from the Church's concern for their salvation; how they can help them so that they do not abandon the faith and that they can raise their children in the fullness of the Christian experience.

On the other hand, one needs to ask oneself how he could prepare young people for marriage better, in a way that they might discover ever more deeply the beauty of this union that, well founded on love and responsibility, is capable of overcoming trials, difficulties and selfishness with mutual forgiveness, repairing what risks being broken and not falling into the trap of a throw-away mindset. One needs to ask oneself how one can help families live and appreciate the moments of joy, those of sorrow and weakness alike.

Ecclesial communities should be places of listening, of dialogue, of comfort and support for spouses, on their marital journey and in their educational mission. May they ever find in their Pastors the support of authentic fathers and spiritual guides, who protect them from the threats of negative ideologies and help them become strong in God and in his love.

The prospect of the coming World Youth Day, which will take place in Krakow in 2016, makes me think of *young people*, who together with the elderly are the hope of the Church. Today, a world endowed with instruments of information offers them new possibilities for communication, but at the same time diminishes direct contact, the exchange of values and shared experiences in interpersonal relationships. Nevertheless, in the hearts of young people there is a longing for something deeper, something which fully enhances their personality. One needs to meet this desire.

In this sense, catechesis offers many possibilities. I know that in Poland the majority of students attend catechesis classes at school and gain a good understanding of the truths of the faith. The

Christian religion, however, is not an abstract science, but a living knowledge of Christ, a personal relationship with God who is love. One needs perhaps to insist more on formation in the faith lived as a relationship, in which one experiences the joy of being loved and able to love. It is necessary to intensify the care of catechists and pastors, so that the newer generations can discover the full value of the Sacraments as privileged means of encounter with the living Christ, the font of grace. Young people should be encouraged to take part in movements and associations whose spirituality is based on the Word of God, on the liturgy, on community life and on missionary witness. Let them also take opportunities to express their readiness and youthful enthusiasm in works of charity sponsored by the parish or by school groups of *Caritas* or in other kinds of volunteer and missionary work. May their faith, their love and their hope be strengthened and flower in concrete commitment in the name of Christ.

The third point that I would recommend is to focus on *vocations to priesthood and to consecrated life*. I join you in thanking the Lord that in recent decades he has called so many labourers in the Polish land to work in his harvest. So many brave and holy Polish priests carry out with dedication their ministry in their local churches, abroad and in the missions. Do not let the Church in Poland weary, however, of continuing to pray for new priestly vocations! On you, dear Bishops, devolves the task of ensuring that this is translated into concrete commitment to the vocational apostolate and to a sound training of candidates in seminaries.

In Poland, due to the presence of good universities and theological faculties, seminarians reach a high intellectual and pastoral standard. This must always be accompanied by human and spiritual formation, so that they may live a deep personal relationship with the Good Shepherd, that they may be men of fervent prayer, open to the work of the Holy Spirit, generous, poor in spirit, full of ardent love for the Lord and for neighbour.

In the priestly ministry the light of witness may be blurred or “hidden under a bushel” if it lacks the missionary spirit, the will to “step out” in an ever renewed missionary conversion to seek — even in the peripheries — and approach those who are waiting for the Good News of Christ. This apostolic style also requires the spirit of poverty, of abandonment, in order to be free in proclaiming and sincere in witnessing to charity. Concerning this aspect, the words of Bl. John Paul II: “It is expected of all us, priests of Jesus Christ, that we will be faithful to the example he left us: thus that we will be ‘for others’. If ‘we have’, it is so that we may have ‘for others’ as well. This is all the more true, for the fact that if ‘we have’, we have “from others” (...) with a lifestyle close to that of the middle class family — or rather, close to that of a poorer family” (*Address to seminarians, priests and religious*, in the Cathedral of St James Szezecin, 11 June 1987, n. 9).

Let us not forget, dear Brothers, vocations to consecrated life, especially female ones. As you observed, the decline in membership to female religious congregations in Poland too is concerning: it is a complex phenomenon, the causes of which are manyfold. I hope that women’s religious institutes may continue to be, in a way suited to the times, privileged places of affirmation

and of human and spiritual growth for women. Women religious should be ready to tackle the difficult and demanding tasks and missions that fulfil their intellectual capacities, their talents and personal charisms. Let us pray for female vocations and let us accompany and esteem our sisters, who often in silence and unnoticed spend their lives for the Lord and for the Church, in prayer, in pastoral care and in charity.

I conclude by urging you to care for the poor. In Poland too, despite the current economic development of the Country, there are so many in need, unemployed, homeless, sick, neglected, as well as many families — especially the large ones — without sufficient means to raise and educate their children. May you be close to them! I know how much the Church in Poland does in this field, demonstrating great generosity not only at home but also to other countries of the world. I thank you and you communities for this work. Continue to encourage your priests, religious and all the faithful to have the “creativity of charity” and practice it always. And do not forget the many who for various reasons leave the Country and seek to build a new life abroad. Their growing number and their needs require perhaps more attention on the part of the Episcopal Conference. May you accompany them with appropriate pastoral care, so that they may retain the faith and religious traditions of the Polish people.

Dear Brothers, I thank you for your visit. Bear my cordial greeting to your particular Churches and to all your fellow countrymen. May the Virgin Mary, Queen of Poland, intercede for the Church in your Country: may she protect with her mantle the priests, men and women religious and all the faithful and obtain for each one and for every community the fullness of the grace of the Lord. And let us pray to her together: *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, Sancta Dei Genitrix, nostras deprecationes ne despicias in necessitatibus, sed a periculis cunctis libera nos semper, Virgo gloriosa et benedicta.*