

Pope John Paul II - Address to Bishops of Bangladesh - 15 May 2001

Dear Brother Bishops,

1. "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:2). With memories of my recent visit in the footsteps of Saint Paul still vivid in my mind, I greet you, the Bishops of Bangladesh, on the occasion of your visit ad limina Apostolorum, in these words of the Apostle of the Nations. Your presence is an occasion for us to give thanks to Almighty God for the graces and blessings he has poured out upon the Church in your country since the first missionaries preached the Gospel there, and particularly since the Church's coming of age there with the establishment of Dhaka as a Diocese in 1886.

Although the Catholic community in Bangladesh is small, the enthusiasm and fervour with which its members prepared themselves for the celebration of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is an eloquent and convincing testimony to its health and vibrancy. I take this opportunity to thank you for all that you did during the three years of immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee to ensure that it would truly be an occasion for a renewal of faith and commitment to Christian living. I also greet the Catholics of your land, and I pray that they will grow "in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to live a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God" (Col 1:9-10).

2. During your visit to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, you have the opportunity to pray and reflect, in the light of their example, on your own ministry as Bishops and successors of the Apostles. The ministry of the Bishop, as willed by Christ, is essential to the life and mission of the Church. Since "individual Bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches" (Lumen Gentium, 23), the Bishop has the task of safeguarding and promoting unity and communion among all the People of God in the local Church entrusted to his care. He serves the people of his Diocese by preaching God's word, by sanctifying them through the celebration of the Sacraments, by governing them after the example of the divine Master, and by encouraging them in their living of the faith, often in difficult circumstances. He is also to safeguard the bonds of faith and hierarchical communion with the Successor of Peter, and, as a member of the College of Bishops, he shares in the concern for all the Churches (cf. Christus Dominus, 3).

It is clear that the Bishop's responsibilities and duties are onerous ones, yet he serves his people with joy and confidence in the knowledge that the Lord who has called him to the task will not leave him without the necessary support and graces. Even in the midst of seemingly insurmountable difficulties, we can draw great strength from contemplating the life and ministry of Saint Paul who, having felt "utterly,

unbearably crushed", so much so that he "despaired of life itself", came to see that he should rely not on himself but on God: "on him we have set our hope that he will deliver us again" (cf. 2 Cor 1:8-10). It is therefore essential for Bishops to devote time to prayer, in order to develop a deep spiritual life characterized by intimacy with Christ. Imitating the Virgin Mary, they have to ponder God's word carefully in their hearts (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). This must be true also of your priests. This necessity was emphasized by the Synod Fathers at the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops: "People in Asia need to see the clergy not just as charity workers and institutional administrators but as men whose minds and hearts are set on the deep things of the Spirit; By their life of prayer, zealous service and exemplary conduct, the clergy witness powerfully to the Gospel in the communities which they shepherd in the name of Christ" (Ecclesia in Asia, 43).

3. Your priests are "your indispensable co-workers and advisers" (Presbyterorum Ordinis, 7), and I wish to express to them my gratitude and encouragement. Their fidelity and daily commitment is indeed precious in the eyes of the Lord. As Bishops, you are aware of the importance of devoting attention to your priests, especially by supporting and encouraging them in their ministry. Priests should always be able to turn to their Bishop as a loving father, confident that they will find in him sympathy and understanding.

I rejoice with you that vocations continue to grow in number in Bangladesh. There is always a need to ensure that applicants for the seminary are of high moral character and possess sound motives, genuine piety and sufficient ability. The programmes provided in the seminary should aim at training priests after the heart of Christ, priests who will be men of prayer, outstanding in learning and able to respond to the pastoral needs and challenges of our time. I invite you in particular to give careful consideration to the formation of those who will teach in your seminaries. Apart from their intellectual and pastoral qualifications, seminary teachers must be genuine and convincing examples of priestly life, capable of nurturing the progress of seminarians in the priestly virtues.

When you provide opportunities for continuing formation aimed at helping your priests to mature in Christ, you enable each one "to safeguard with vigilant love the mystery which he bears within his heart for the good of the Church and of mankind" (Pastores Dabo Vobis, 72). With this in mind, I encourage you to develop initiatives to assist priests in developing their spiritual life and in acquiring greater familiarity with positive developments in theology, Biblical studies, moral teaching and pastoral care. They should be ever more aware that their priesthood is a gift received from God, a special vocation which consists in being uniquely configured to Christ the high priest, the teacher, sanctifier and shepherd of his people. The priest's whole life should be transformed so that he may truly be an attractive and compelling sign of God's loving and saving presence.

4. Consecrated men and women also need your support and understanding. The Church in Bangladesh is blessed with a great number of male and female religious, outstanding

for the commitment and generosity with which they devote themselves to a wide range of apostolic activities. They are active in the fields of education, health-care and various social apostolates. Our gratitude is due to them for all they do to assist in spreading the faith, through the example of their lives and their teaching. Above all, they have accepted Christ's invitation to forsake everything in order to follow him through the practice of the evangelical counsels. In any form of pastoral planning, it is essential to see consecrated persons in the first place for what they are, before taking into consideration the particular apostolates in which they are engaged. Special attention should be given to the promotion of vocations to the consecrated life and to the quality of education received by those in formation.

5. The Great Jubilee was an extraordinary year of grace which touched the minds and hearts of countless people "from every tribe and tongue and people and nation" (Rev 5:9), and it enables the Church to look to the future with confidence. During the year, two of the more significant projects, which you undertook, were the Jubilee Bible and the Bengali translation of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Great credit and profound gratitude is due to all involved in the preparation of these publications, which will help to build up the community of faith in your country. The Bengali translation of the Catechism will be of special value to priests and catechists in teaching the faith and in preparing people for the reception of the Sacraments.

In my Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, I expressed the hope that the energies released by the Great Jubilee would be channelled into fresh initiatives to teach the art of prayer (cf. No. 32), an essential part of which is devout listening to Sacred Scripture (cf. No. 39). Experience teaches that the work of evangelization always draws fresh strength from attentiveness to God's word. I invite you to make the new edition of the Bible easily available and to help individuals and families to read it prayerfully by encouraging the ancient and ever valid tradition of *lectio divina* in a way which is readily understood and accessible to all. In this way, the word of Scripture will become a life-giving encounter with the Lord, shaping and directing people's lives.

6. Given the particular situation in which you live, interreligious dialogue is an integral part of your pastoral mission. More frequent contacts between Christians and Muslims, and greater understanding of each other's religious traditions and values, should help to overcome attitudes of suspicion and distrust, and ensure that Bangladesh's traditions of religious freedom are maintained and upheld. In defending the dignity of the human person and the essential role of the family in the life of society, and in promoting the common good, there is ample room for interreligious co-operation. The best foundation for such co-operation is the moral law inscribed in the human heart, which is mankind's common treasure and a fundamental meeting point between peoples of different cultures and religious traditions. Since this is so, the fidelity of Christians to their religious beliefs and moral traditions is of paramount importance. Faithful witness leads to the so-called "dialogue of life", through which believers of different religions "bear witness before each other in daily life to their own human and spiritual values, and help each other to live

according to those values in order to build a more just and fraternal society" (Redemptoris Missio, 57).

7. New evangelization and renewal of the Church in Bangladesh is a task for all the People of God. In a particular way, it depends on how much the lay faithful become fully aware of their baptismal vocation and their responsibility for bringing the good news of Jesus Christ to bear on culture and society. In your country the laity face many difficulties due to their minority status and the poverty, which afflicts so many. I deeply share your concern for the poor, the marginalized and the suffering, and I encourage the various efforts of the Church in Bangladesh to respond to situations of poverty. You have undertaken practical initiatives in the areas of health care, social services and education, and you have also been active in the defence of human rights. The Church's social doctrine, provided it is more widely known and implemented, can make a significant and positive contribution to alleviating the causes of poverty and can be a powerful instrument in furthering the common good.

The laity must be encouraged to avail themselves of the educational opportunities open to them and to be ever more active in political, social, economic and cultural life at all levels.

8. One of your principal pastoral concerns and responsibilities is the family, and in recent years you have been involved in various initiatives to promote this "priority sector of pastoral care" (Familiaris Consortio, 73). Throughout Asia family values such as filial respect, love and care for the aged and the sick, and love of children are held in high esteem, and this is true also of Bangladesh. Seen through the Church's eyes, the family is also one of the most effective agents of evangelization, and should be a place in which the Gospel is the rule of life (cf. Ecclesia in Asia, 46). I wish to encourage you to continue to reflect on ways of strengthening and promoting the family, founded upon marriage, as the community with the mission of guarding, revealing and communicating life and love (cf. Familiaris Consortio, 17). Christian families need to become ever more fully the "domestic Church", humbly and lovingly living out their vocation to holiness. This is all the more necessary at a time when the family itself is threatened by an array of forces, especially those that promote an anti-life mentality. Families which are built on a solid foundation are true sanctuaries of life, in which God's gift of life can be properly welcomed and protected against the many attacks to which it is exposed. It is for this reason that the role of the family in building a culture of life is "decisive and irreplaceable" (Evangelium Vitae, 92).

9. My dear Brothers, your ad limina visit has been an occasion for us to share some reflections and thoughts about the situation of the Catholic community in your land. Yours is one of the "young Churches", strong in its love of Christ and vibrant in its enthusiasm for the Gospel message. I wish once again to assure you and the priests, religious and laity of Bangladesh of my support and encouragement. In the words of Saint Paul I pray: "May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy, giving thanks to the Father" (Col 1:11-

12). With these thoughts I entrust the Church in Bangladesh to the maternal protection of Mary, bright star of evangelization in every age, and I willingly impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.