



Ubi Primum

Encyclical Of Pope Leo XII

On His Assuming The Pontificate

May 5, 1824

To All Patriarchs, Primates, Archbishops, and Bishops.

Venerable Brothers, We Give You Greeting and Our Apostolic Blessing.

As soon as We were raised to the supreme pontificate, We began to exclaim immediately with St. Leo the Great: "O Lord I have heard your utterance and been afraid: I have reflected on your works and been terrified. For what is so unaccustomed and so much to be feared as toil to the weak, height to the lowly, rank to the undeserving? Yet We do not despair or faint since it is not on Ourselves that We depend but on Him who works in Us"[1] That praiseworthy pope spoke thus to humble himself, but We can say and confess this in very truth.

2. We desired to address you as soon as possible, venerable brothers, and to reveal Our feelings to you. For you are Our crown and joy, as your flocks, We feel sure, are crown and joy to you. But partly because We were preoccupied with the serious concerns of Our Apostolic office and partly, indeed principally, because We were afflicted by a long illness, until now We have been unable to do so. This has caused Us great sorrow. But Our merciful God now grants the fulfillment of Our desire. The silence, however, which until now We were constrained to observe possessed its own consolation. For God who consoles the humble consoled Us too by the love and enthusiasm of your religious devotion for Us. This was a signal instance of the piety of Christian unity, causing Us to rejoice greatly and to give thanks to God. And so as a proof of Our love We are sending you this letter to give you additional encouragement to observe the divine commandments and to fight bravely the Lord's battles.

3. You know that the Apostle Peter instructed bishops in these words: "Feed God's flock which is given to you, caring for them not under constraint but freely for God's sake, not for the sake of base gain but willingly, nor as lording it over the clergy but being examples to your flock from the heart."[2] From this you understand rightly the method of action which is proposed for you. You also

understand the virtues of the mind which you should increasingly practice, the richer knowledge with which you should adorn it, and the fruit of piety and love which you should not only produce but also share with your flock. In this way you will certainly attain the object of your ministry and be examples to your flock from the heart. To some you will give milk, to others meat. You will train your flock not only by teaching, but by work and example as well, to lead a quiet life on earth in Christ Jesus. You will lead them to obtain eternal happiness with you. For the chief of the Apostles says: "And when the prince of shepherds appears you will receive an imperishable crown of glory."

4. We had hoped to bring many matters to your attention but We shall simply touch on some of them, and then deal at greater length with the more serious questions as the need of Our sad times demands.

5. You already understand the teaching of the Apostle on the great caution required in promoting candidates to minor and especially to major orders. He writes to Timothy: "Lay hands on no one quickly."^[3] You understand also the decrees of the Council of Trent on the appointment of pastors and on the seminaries for clerics^[4] and the clarification of these decrees by Our predecessors.

6. You know too the importance of residing personally in your diocese, a duty to which your office strictly obliges you. This is evident from the decrees and apostolic constitutions of many councils, and was confirmed by the holy Council of Trent in the following words: "The divine commandment orders everyone entrusted with the care of souls to know their sheep and to offer sacrifice for them. They must also feed them by preaching the divine word, by administering the sacrament, and by setting a good example. Furthermore, they must take fatherly care of the poor and other wretched persons and perform their other pastoral duties. Since none of these can be accomplished by men who do not attend their flock but abandon it as hirelings do, the holy council warns and exhorts them to remember the divine commandments by being an example to their flock, feeding and guiding them in justice and in truth."^[5] Bound as We are by the obligation of this great office and zealous as We are for the glory of God, We heartily praise those who observe this command strictly. But We warn and exhort those who disobey these ecclesiastical sanctions -- for it is sad but not surprising that there are some such men among the great number of bishops -- to reflect seriously that the supreme judge will demand the blood of their sheep from their hands and judge with great strictness those who are their leaders.

7. This fearful sentence, as you know well, does not strike only those who do not reside in person in their diocese or seek to leave it on every empty pretext; it includes also those who refuse without reason to perform the task of visitation according to the prescriptions of the canons. For they will never satisfy the requirements of the decree of Trent unless they take care to approach their charges in person and like a good shepherd cherish the good while they seek the

strays and lead them at last to the fold, by calling and driving some of them strongly and others gently.

8. Bishops who do not with due concern try to obey the precepts of residence or visitation will not avoid the fearful judgment of Our Savior the supreme shepherd by pleading that they fulfilled their duties through delegated ministers.

9. For care of the flock has been entrusted to themselves not to their ministers; it was to themselves that the gifts of the Spirit were promised. Consequently the sheep listen more gladly to the voice of their own shepherd than to that of a representative. They seek salutary food with more confidence from the shepherd's hand than from his representative's, and rejoice more to obtain it. For His hand is as the hand of the Lord, whose person is revered in His bishops. All this is also amply borne out by experience, the world's instructor.

10. It would be enough to write to you on the previous topics since you are not thankless in keeping silence about your gifts nor proud in presuming on your merits.[6] Certainly men who desire ardently to progress from virtue to virtue ought to be such as We have described. Inspired by the example of holy bishops, ancient and recent, they boast in the Lord of smiting the Church's enemies and reforming evil morals. But always keep in mind the golden saying of Leo the Great. "In this struggle no victory is definitive enough to prevent the recurrence of conflict." [7]

11. Who can reflect without weeping on the fierce and mighty conflicts which have raged in Our times and continue to rage almost daily against the Catholic religion? Listen to St. Jerome: "It is no small spark, no small spark, I say, which is scarcely seen in being observed; it is not a little leaven which is obviously a small thing. It is rather a flame which attempts to devastate almost the entire world and to burn up walls, cities, broad pastures and districts; and a leaven which mixes with the flour and tries to destroy its whole substance." [8] With this reason for fear, We would lose all heart for Our apostolic service were it not that the Guardian of Israel does not slumber or sleep, and says to His disciples: "Behold I am with you all days even to the end of the world," and condescends to be shepherd of shepherds as well as guardian of the sheep. [9]

12. But at what are these remarks aimed? A certain sect, which you surely know, has unjustly arrogated to itself the name of philosophy, and has aroused from the ashes the disorderly ranks of practically every error. Under the gentle appearance of piety and liberality this sect professes what they call tolerance or indifferentism. It preaches that not only in civil affairs, which is not Our concern here, but also in religion, God has given every individual a wide freedom to embrace and adopt without danger to his salvation whatever sect or opinion appeals to him on the basis of his private judgment. The apostle Paul warns us against the impiety of these madmen. "I beseech you, brethren, to behold those who create dissensions and scandals beyond the teaching which you have learned. Keep away from such

men. They do not serve Christ Our Lord but their own belly, and by sweet speeches and blessings they seduce the hearts of the innocent." [10]

13. Of course this error is not new, but in Our days it rages with a new rashness against the constancy and integrity of the Catholic faith. Eusebius cites Rhodo as his source for saying that the heretic Apelles in the second century had already produced the mad theory that faith should not be investigated, but that each man should persevere in the faith he was raised in. [11] Even those who put faith in a crucified man were to be saved, according to Apelles, provided that they engaged in good works. Rhetorius too, as We learn from St. Augustine, used to claim that all the heretics walked on the right road and spoke truth. But Augustine adds that this is such nonsense that he cannot believe it. [12] The current indifferentism has developed to the point of arguing that everyone is on the right road. This includes not only all those sects which though outside the Catholic Church verbally accept revelation as a foundation, but those groups too which spurn the idea of divine revelation and profess a pure deism or even a pure naturalism. The indifferentism of Rhetorius seemed absurd to St. Augustine, and rightly so, but it did acknowledge certain limits. But a tolerance which extends to Deism and Naturalism, which even the ancient heretics rejected, can never be approved by anyone who uses his reason. Nevertheless -- alas for the times; alas for this lying philosophy! -- such a tolerance is approved, defended, and praised by these pseudophilosophers.

14. Certainly many remarkable authors, adherents of the true philosophy, have taken pains to attack and crush this strange view. But the matter is so self-evident that it is superfluous to give additional arguments. It is impossible for the most true God, who is Truth Itself, the best, the wisest Provider, and the Rewarder of good men, to approve all sects who profess false teachings which are often inconsistent with one another and contradictory, and to confer eternal rewards on their members. For we have a surer word of the prophet, and in writing to you We speak wisdom among the perfect; not the wisdom of this world but the wisdom of God in a mystery. By it we are taught, and by divine faith we hold one Lord, one faith, one baptism, and that no other name under heaven is given to men except the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth in which we must be saved. This is why we profess that there is no salvation outside the Church.

15. But Oh! the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How incomprehensible His judgments! [13] God, who destroys the wisdom of the wise, has clearly given the enemies of His Church, who despise supernatural revelation, a perverted mind [14] corresponding to the symbol of iniquity which was written on the forehead of the wicked woman in the Apocalypse. [15] For what greater iniquity is there than for those proud men not only to abandon true religion, but also to seek to ensnare the imprudent by criticisms of every sort, in speech and writings filled with all deceit! Let God arise and restrain, make futile and destroy this unbridled license in all its manifestations.

16. Furthermore, quite apart from the flood of evil books which are intrinsically

hostile to religion, the wickedness of our enemies has gone so far as to try to turn against religion the sacred writings divinely given to us for the building up of religion.

17. You have noticed a society, commonly called the Bible society, boldly spreading throughout the whole world. Rejecting the traditions of the holy Fathers and infringing the well-known decree of the Council of Trent,[16] it works by every means to have the holy Bible translated, or rather mistranslated, into the ordinary languages of every nation. There are good reasons for fear that (as has already happened in some of their commentaries and in other respects by a distorted interpretation of Christ's gospel) they will produce a gospel of men, or what is worse, a gospel of the devil![17]

18. To prevent this evil, Our predecessors published many constitutions. Most recently Pius VII wrote two briefs, one to Ignatius, Archbishop of Gniezno, the other to Stanislaus, Archbishop of Mohileu, quoting carefully and wisely many passages from the sacred writings and from the tradition to show how harmful to faith and morals this wretched undertaking is.

19. In virtue of Our apostolic office, We too exhort you to try every means of keeping your flock from those deadly pastures. Do everything possible to see that the faithful observe strictly the rules of our Congregation of the Index. Convince them that to allow holy Bibles in the ordinary language, wholesale and without distinction, would on account of human rashness cause more harm than good.

20. Experience also shows that this is true, and aside from other Fathers, St. Augustine states it in the following words: "Heresies and other wicked teachings which ensnare souls and cast them into the deep, arise only when the good scriptures are badly understood and when what is not well understood in them is affirmed with daring rashness." [18]

21. Such is the object of this society and it leaves no means untried to achieve its objective. For it delights in printing its own translations, as well as in dashing through every city to distribute them itself to the common people. Indeed, to seduce the minds of the simple, it is careful to sell them in one place, while elsewhere it wants to give them as a gift with calculating generosity.

22. But if one wishes to search out the true source of all the evils which We have already lamented, as well as those which We pass over for the sake of brevity, he will surely find that from the start it has ever been a dogged contempt for the Church's authority. The Church, as St. Leo the Great teaches,[19] in well-ordered love accepts Peter in the See of Peter, and sees and honors Peter in the person of his successor the Roman pontiff. Peter still maintains the concern of all pastors in guarding their flocks, and his high rank does not fail even in an unworthy heir.[20] In Peter then, as is aptly remarked by the same holy Doctor, the courage of all is strengthened and the help of divine grace is so ordered that the constancy

conferred on Peter through Christ is conferred on the apostles through Peter. It is clear that contempt of the Church's authority is opposed to the command of Christ and consequently opposes the apostles and their successors, the Church's ministers who speak as their representatives.[21] He who hears you, hears me; and he who despises you, despises me; and the Church is the pillar and firmament of truth, as the apostle Paul teaches.[22] In reference to these words St. Augustine says: "Whoever is without the Church will not be reckoned among the sons, and whoever does not want to have the Church as mother will not have God as father." [23]

23. Therefore, venerable brothers, keep all these words in mind and often reflect on them. Teach your people great reverence for the Church's authority which has been directly established by God. Do not lose heart. With St. Augustine We say that "all around us the waters of the flood are roaring, that is, the multiplicity of conflicting teaching. We are not in the flood but it surrounds us. We are hard pressed but not overwhelmed, buffeted but not submerged." [24]

24. So We urge you again not to lose heart. We are confident that you will have the powerful support of secular princes since the question of the Church's authority has a bearing on their own authority, as both reason and experience prove. For Caesar can receive what is his only if God is given what is His. As St. Leo said, "Our duty to serve you all will give you additional support. In difficulties, in doubts and in every need, have recourse to this Apostolic See. For God has placed the teaching of truth in the see of unity, as St. Augustine says." [25]

25. Finally, We beseech you, by the Lord's mercy. Assist Us by your prayers to God that the Spirit of grace may abide in Us and that your decisions may not falter. May He who has given you the desire for agreement grant the blessing of peace to us all in general, that We may be able all the days of Our life to serve Almighty God and hold you in reverence and pray to the Lord with confidence: "Holy Father, preserve them whom you have given me in your holy name." [26]

In this confidence We impart wholeheartedly both to you and to your flock the Apostolic blessing, pledge of Our love.

Given at Rome in St. Mary Major's on the 5th day of May 1824, in the first year of Our Pontificate.

1. Serm. 3, on his birthday, delivered on the anniversary of his elevation to the pontificate.
2. I Pt 5.2-3.
3. I Tm 5.22.
4. Session 23, chap. 18.
5. Session 23 on reform, chap. 1.
6. St. Leo, serm. 5 on his birthday.

7. Ibid.
8. Comm. on Gal 3.8.
9. St. Leo, serm. 5.
10. Rom 16.
11. Hist. eccl., 5.
12. De haeresibus, no. 72.
13. I Cor 1.
14. Rom 1.28.
15. Apoc 17.5.
16. Session 4 on the publication and use of sacred books.
17. St. Jerome on Gal 1.
18. Treatise 18 on Jn 5.
19. St. Leo, serm. 2, on his birthday.
20. Ibid., serm. 3, on his birthday.
21. Lk 10.
22. I Tim 3.
23. Bk. 4, de Symb. ad catech., chap. 13.
24. Enarrat. 2 in Ps 31.
25. Ep 103 (166) to the Donatists.
26. St. Leo, serm. 1, and Jn 17.