

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Oriole Park at Camden Yards, Baltimore Sunday, 8 October 1995

"Oh, that today you would hear his voice: harden not your hearts"
(Ps. 95 (94): 7-8).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Each day, the Church begins the Liturgy of the Hours with the Psalm which we have just prayed together: "Come, let us sing joyfully to the Lord!" (Ibid.). In that call, ringing down the centuries and echoing across the face of the globe, the Psalmist summons the People of God to sing the praises of the Lord and to *bear great witness* to the marvelous things God has done for us. Priests, women and men Religious, and increasing numbers of lay people daily recite the Liturgy of the Hours, giving rise to a powerful mobilization of praise to God – *officium laudis* – to God who, through his Word, *created the world* and all that is in it: "In his hands are the depths of the earth, and the tops of the mountains are his. His is the sea, for he has made it, and the dry land, which his hands have formed" (Ps. 95 (94): 4-5).

Not only are we God's creatures. In his infinite mercy, God has chosen us as his beloved people: "For he is our God, and *we are the people he shepherds, the flock he guides*" (Ibid. 7). He chose us in Christ, the Good Shepherd, who gave his life for his sheep and who calls us to the banquet of his Body and Blood, the Holy Eucharist which we are celebrating together this morning.

2. The Psalmist's call to hear the Lord's voice has particular

significance for us as we celebrate this Mass in Baltimore. *Maryland was the birthplace of the Church in colonial America.* More than three hundred and sixty years ago, a small band of Catholics came to the New World to build a home where they could "sing joyfully to the Lord" (Ibid. 1) in freedom. They established a colony whose hallmark was religious tolerance, which would later become one of the cultural cornerstones of American democracy. Baltimore is the senior Metropolitan See in the United States. Its first Bishop, John Carroll, stands out as a model who can still inspire the Church in America today. Here were held the great Provincial and Plenary Councils which guided the Church's expansion as waves of immigrants came to these shores in search of a better life. Here in Baltimore, in 1884, the Bishops of the United States authorized the "Baltimore Catechism", which formed the faith of tens of millions of Catholics for decades. In Baltimore, the country's Catholic school system began under the leadership of Saint Elizabeth Ann Seton. The first Seminary in the United States was established here, under the protection of the Virgin Mother of God, as was America's first Catholic College for women. Since those heroic beginnings, men and women of every race and social class have built the Catholic community we see in America today, a great spiritual movement of witness, of apostolate, of good works, of Catholic institutions and organizations.

With warm affection therefore I greet your Archbishop, Cardinal Keeler, and thank him for his sensitive leadership in this local Church and his work on behalf of the Bishops' Conference. With esteem I greet the other Cardinals and Bishops present here in great numbers, the priests, deacons and seminarians, the women and men Religious, and all God's people, the "living stones" (1Pt. 2: 5) whom the Spirit uses to build up the Body of Christ.

I gladly greet the members of the various Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I assure them of the Catholic Church's

ardent desire to celebrate the Jubilee of the Year 2000 as a great occasion to move closer to overcoming the divisions of the Second Millennium (Cf. John Paul II, *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 34). I thank the civil authorities who have wished to share this sacred moment with us.

Doy gracias a los fieles de lengua española presentes aquí y a todos los que siguen esta misa por radio o televisión. La Iglesia es su casa espiritual. Sus parroquias, asociaciones, escuelas y programas educativos religiosos necesitan su cooperación y el entusiasmo de su fe. Con especial afecto, les exhorto a transmitir sus tradiciones católicas a las generaciones jóvenes.

3. Our celebration today speaks to us not only of the past. The Eucharist always makes present anew the saving mystery of Christ's Death and Resurrection, and points to the future definitive fulfillment of God's plan of salvation. Two years ago, at Denver, I was deeply impressed by the vitality of America's young people as they bore enthusiastic witness to their love of Christ, and showed that they were not afraid of the demands of the Gospel. Today, I offer this Mass for a *strengthening of that vitality and Christian courage at every level of the Church in the United States*: among the laity, among the priests and Religious, among my brother Bishops. The whole Church is preparing for the Third Christian Millennium. The challenge of the great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is *the new evangelization: a deepening of faith and a vigorous response to the Christian vocation to holiness and service*. This is what the Successor of Peter has come to Baltimore to urge upon each one of you: the courage to bear witness to the Gospel of our Redemption.

In today's Gospel reading, the Apostles ask Jesus: "Increase our faith" (Lk. 17: 5). This must be our constant prayer. Faith is always demanding, because faith leads us beyond ourselves. It leads us directly to God. Faith also imparts a vision of life's purpose and

stimulates us to action.

The Gospel of Jesus Christ is not a private opinion, a remote spiritual ideal, or a mere program for personal growth. The Gospel is the power which can transform the world! The Gospel is no abstraction: it is the living person of Jesus Christ, the Word of God, the reflection of the Father's glory (Cf. Hebr. 1: 2), the Incarnate Son who reveals the deepest meaning of our humanity and the noble destiny to which the whole human family is called (Cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 22). Christ has commanded us to let the light of the Gospel shine forth in our service to society. How can we profess faith in God's word, and then refuse to let it inspire and direct our thinking, our activity, our decisions, and our responsibilities towards one another?

4. In America, Christian faith has found expression in an *impressive array of witnesses and achievements*. We must recall with gratitude the inspiring work of education carried out in countless families, schools and universities, and all the healing and consolation imparted in hospitals and hospices and shelters. We must give thanks for the practical living out of God's call in devoted service to others, in commitment to social justice, in responsible involvement in political life, in a wide variety of charitable and social organizations, and in the growth of ecumenical and interreligious understanding and cooperation. In a more global context, we should thank God for the great generosity of American Catholics *whose support of the foreign missions has greatly contributed to the spiritual and material well-being* of their brothers and sisters in other lands. The Church in the United States has sent brave missionary men and women out to the nations, and not a few of them have borne the ultimate witness to the ancient truth that the blood of martyrs is the seed of Christianity. In my visits to Catholic communities around the world I often meet American missionaries, lay, Religious and priests.

I wish to make an appeal to young Catholics to consider the missionary vocation. I know that the "spirit of Denver" is alive in many young hearts. Christ needs many more committed men and women to take that "spirit" to the four corners of the world.

5. Today though, some Catholics are tempted to discouragement or disillusionment, like the Prophet Habakkuk in the First Reading. They are tempted to cry out to the Lord in a different way: why does God not intervene when violence threatens his people; why does God let us see ruin and misery; why does God permit evil? Like the Prophet Habakkuk, and like the thirsty Israelites in the desert at Meribah and Massah, our trust can falter; we can lose patience with God. In the drama of history, we can find our dependence upon God burdensome rather than liberating. We too can "harden our hearts".

And yet the Prophet gives us an answer to our impatience: "If God delays, wait for him; he will surely come, he will not be late" (Cf. Hb. 2: 3). A Polish proverb expresses the same conviction in another way: *"God takes his time, but he is just"*. Our waiting for God is never in vain. Every moment is our opportunity to model ourselves on Jesus Christ – to allow the power of the Gospel to transform our personal lives and our service to others, according to the spirit of the Beatitudes. "Bear your share of the hardship which the Gospel entails": writes Paul to Timothy in today's Second Reading (2Tm. 1: 8). This is no idle exhortation to endurance. No, it is an invitation to enter more deeply into the *Christian vocation* which belongs to us all by Baptism. There is no evil to be faced that Christ does not face with us. There is no enemy that Christ has not already conquered. There is no cross to bear that Christ has not already borne for us, and does not now bear with us. And on the far side of every cross we find the newness of life in the Holy Spirit, that new life which will reach its fulfillment in the resurrection. This is our *faith*. This is our *witness* before the world.

6. Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ: *openness to the Lord* – a willingness to let the Lord transform our lives – should produce a renewed spiritual and missionary vitality among American Catholics. *Jesus Christ is the answer to the question posed by every human life*, and the love of Christ compels us to share that great good news with everyone. We believe that the Death and Resurrection of Christ reveal the true meaning of human existence; therefore nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in our hearts. Christ died for all, so we must be at the service of all. "The Spirit God has given us is no cowardly spirit... Therefore, never be ashamed of your testimony to our Lord" (2Tm. 1: 7-8).

Thus wrote Saint Paul to Timothy, almost two thousand years ago; thus speaks the Church to American Catholics today.

Christian witness takes different forms at different moments in the life of a nation. Sometimes, witnessing to Christ will mean drawing out of a culture the full meaning of its noblest intentions, a fullness that is revealed in Christ. At other times, witnessing to Christ means challenging that culture, especially when the *truth about the human person* is under assault.

America has always wanted to be a land of the free. Today, the challenge facing America is to find freedom's fulfillment in the truth: the truth that is intrinsic to human life created in God's image and likeness, the truth that is written on the human heart, the truth that can be known by reason and can therefore form the basis of a profound and universal dialogue among people about the direction they must give to their lives and their activities.

7. One hundred thirty years ago, President Abraham Lincoln asked whether a nation "conceived in liberty and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" could "long endure". President Lincoln's question is no less a question for the present generation of Americans. Democracy cannot be sustained without

a shared commitment to certain moral truths about the human person and human community. The basic question before a democratic society is: "how ought we to live together?" In seeking an answer to this question, can society exclude moral truth and moral reasoning? Can the Biblical wisdom which played such a formative part in the very founding of your country be excluded from that debate?

Would not doing so mean that America's founding documents no longer have any defining content, but are only the formal dressing of changing opinion? Would not doing so mean that tens of millions of Americans could no longer offer the contribution of their deepest convictions to the formation of public policy? Surely it is important for America that the moral truths which make freedom possible should be passed on to each new generation. Every generation of Americans needs to know that freedom consists not in doing what we like, but in having the right to do what we ought.

8. How appropriate is Saint Paul's charge to Timothy! "*Guard the rich deposit of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us*" (2Tm. 1: 14). That charge speaks to parents and teachers; it speaks in a special and urgent way to you, my brother Bishops, Successors of the Apostles. Christ asks us to guard the truth because, as he promised us: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (Jn. 8: 32). *Depositum custodi!* We must guard the truth that is the condition of authentic freedom, the truth that allows freedom to be fulfilled in goodness.

We must guard the *deposit of divine truth handed down to us in the Church*, especially in view of the challenges posed by a materialistic culture and by a permissive mentality that reduces freedom to license. But we Bishops must do more than guard this truth. *We must proclaim it, in season and out of season*; we must celebrate it with God's people, in the sacraments; we must live it in

charity and service; we must bear public witness to the truth that is Jesus Christ.

9. Catholics of America! Always be guided by the truth – by the truth about God who created and redeemed us, and by the truth about the human person, made in the image and likeness of God and destined for a glorious fulfillment in the Kingdom to come. *Always be convincing witnesses to the truth.* "Stir into a flame the gift of God" that has been bestowed upon you in Baptism. Light your nation – light the world – with the power of that flame! Amen.

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