



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO IRELAND

HOLY MASS IN DROGHEDA

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 29 September 1979

Dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,

1. Having greeted the soil of Ireland today on my arrival in Dublin, I make my first Irish journey to this place, to Drogheda. The cry of centuries sends me here.

I arrive as a pilgrim of faith. I arrive also as Successor of Peter, to whom Christ has given a particular care for the universal Church. I desire to visit those places in Ireland in particular where the power of God and the action of the Holy Spirit have been specially manifested. I seek first those places which carry in themselves the sign of the "beginning"; and "beginning" is connected with "firstness", with primacy. Such a place on Irish soil is Armagh, for centuries the Episcopal See of the Primate of Ireland.

The Primate is he who has the first place among the Bishops, Shepherds of the People of God in this land. This primacy is linked to the "beginning" of the faith and of the Church in this country. That is to say, it is linked to the heritage of Saint Patrick, patron of Ireland.

Hence I desired to make my first Irish journey a journey towards the "beginning", the place of the primacy. The Church is built in her entirety on the foundation of the Apostles and Prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the chief cornerstone (cf. *Eph 2 :20*). But in each land and nation the Church has her own particular foundation stone. So it is towards this foundation here in the Primatial See of Armagh that I first direct my pilgrim steps. The See of Armagh is the Primatial See because it is the See of Saint Patrick. The Archbishop of Armagh is Primate of All Ireland today because he is

the *Comharba Phádraig*, the successor of Saint Patrick, the first Bishop of Armagh.

2. Standing for the first time on Irish soil, on Armagh soil, the Successor of Peter cannot but recall the first coming here, more than one thousand five hundred years ago, of Saint Patrick. From his days as a shepherd boy at Slemish right up to his death at Saul, Patrick was a witness to Jesus Christ. Not far from this spot, on the Hill of Slane, it is said that he lit, for the first time in Ireland, the Paschal Fire, so that the light of Christ might shine forth on all of Ireland and unite all of its people in the love of the one Jesus Christ. It gives me great joy to stand here with you today, within sight of Slane, and to proclaim this same Jesus, the Incarnate Word of God, the Saviour of the world. He is the Lord of history, the Light of the world, the Hope of the future of all humanity. In the words of the Easter Liturgy, celebrated for the first time in Ireland by Saint Patrick on the Hill of Slane, we greet Christ today : he is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning of all things and their end. All time is his and all the ages. To him be glory for ever and ever. *Lumen Christi: Deo gratias*. The Light of Christ: Thanks be to God. May the light of Christ, the light of faith continue always to shine out from Ireland. May no darkness ever be able to extinguish it.

That he might be faithful to the end of his life to the light of Christ was Saint Patrick's prayer for himself. That the people of Ireland might remain faithful always to the light of Christ was his constant prayer for the Irish. He wrote in his Confession :

"May God never permit it to happen to me that I should lose his people that he purchased in the utmost parts of the world. I pray to God to give me perseverance and to deign that I be a faithful witness to him to the end of my life for God ... From the time I came to know him in my youth, the love of God and the fear of him have grown in me, and up to now, thanks to the grace of God, I have kept the faith" (*Confession*, 44, 58).

3. "I have kept the faith". That has been the ambition of the Irish down the centuries. Through persecution and through poverty, in famine and in exile, you have kept the faith. For many it has meant martyrdom. Here at Drogheda, where his relics are honoured, I wish to mention one Irish martyr, Saint Oliver Plunkett, at whose Canonization in the Holy Year, 1975, I was happy to assist, as Cardinal of Cracow, on the invitation of my friend, the late Cardinal Conway. Saint Oliver Plunkett, Primate of Ireland for twelve years, is for ever an outstanding example of the love of Christ for all men. As Bishop he preached a message of pardon and peace. He was indeed the defender of the oppressed and the advocate of justice, but he would never condone violence. For men of violence, his word was the word of the Apostle Peter: "Never pay back one wrong with another" (*1 Pt 3 :9*). As a Martyr for the faith, he sealed by his death the same message of reconciliation that he had preached during his life. In his heart there was no rancour, for his strength was the love of Jesus, the love of the Good Shepherd who gives his life for his flock. His dying words were words of forgiveness for all his enemies.

4. Faith and fidelity are the marks of the Church in Ireland, a Church of martyrs, a Church of

witnesses ; a Church of heroic faith, heroic fidelity. These are the historical signs marking the track of faith on Irish soil. The Gospel and the Church have struck deep roots in the soul of the Irish people. The See of Armagh, the See of Patrick, is the place to see that track, to feel those roots. It is the place in which to meet, from which to address, those other great and faithful dioceses whose people have suffered so much from the events of the past decade, Down and Connor, Derry, Dromore, Clogher, Kilmore.

During the period and preparation of my visit to Ireland, especially precious to me was the invitation of the Primate of All Ireland that I should visit his Cathedral in Armagh. Particularly eloquent also was the fact that the invitation of the Primate was taken up and repeated by the representatives of the Church of Ireland and by leaders and members of the other Churches, including many from Northern Ireland. For all these invitations I am particularly grateful.

These invitations are an indication of the fact that the Second Vatican Council is achieving its work and that we are meeting with our fellow-Christians of other Churches as people who together confess Jesus Christ as Lord, and who are drawing closer to one another in him as we search for unity and common witness.

This truly fraternal and ecumenical act on the part of representatives of the Churches is also a testimony that the tragic events taking place in Northern Ireland do not have their source in the fact of belonging to different Churches and Confessions ; that this is not—despite what is so often repeated before world opinion—a religious war, a struggle between Catholics and Protestants. On the contrary, Catholics and Protestants, as people who confess Christ, taking inspiration from their faith and the Gospel, are seeking to draw closer to one another in unity and peace. When they recall the greatest commandment of Christ, the commandment of love, they cannot behave otherwise.

5. *But Christianity does not command us to close our eyes to difficult human problems.* It does not permit us to neglect and refuse to see unjust social or international situations. What Christianity does forbid is to seek solutions to these situations by the ways of hatred, by the murdering of defenceless people, by the methods of terrorism. Let me say more: Christianity understands and recognizes the noble and just struggle for justice; but Christianity is decisively opposed to fomenting hatred and to promoting or provoking violence or struggle for the sake of "struggle". The command, "Thou shalt not kill", must be binding on the conscience of humanity, if the terrible tragedy and destiny of Cain is not to be repeated.

6. For this reason it was fitting for me to come here before going to America, where I hope to address the United Nations Organization on these same problems of peace and war, justice and human rights. We have decided together, the Cardinal Primate and I, that it would be better for me to come here, to Drogheda, and that it should be from here that I would render homage to the "beginning" of the faith and to the primacy in your homeland ; and from here that I should reflect

with all of you, before God, before your splendid Christian history, on this most urgent problem, *the problem of peace and reconciliation*.

We must, above all, clearly realize where the causes of this dramatic struggle are found. We must call by name those systems and ideologies that are responsible for this struggle. We must also reflect whether the ideology of subversion is for the true good of your people, for the true good of man. Is it possible to construct the good of individuals and peoples on hatred, on war? Is it right to push the young generations into the pit of fratricide? Is it not necessary to seek solutions to our problems by a different way? Does not the fratricidal struggle make it even more urgent for us to seek peaceful solutions with all our energies? These questions I shall be discussing before the United Nations Assembly in a few days. Here today, in this beloved land of Ireland, from which so many before me have departed for America, I wish to discuss them with you.

7. My message to you today cannot be different from what Saint Patrick and Saint Oliver Plunkett taught you. I preach what they preach : Christ, who is the "Prince of Peace" (*Is 9 :5*) ; who reconciled us to God and to each other (cf. *2 Cor 5 :18*) ; who is the source of all unity.

The Gospel reading tells us of Jesus as "the Good Shepherd" whose one desire is to bring all together into one flock. I come to you in his name, in the name of Jesus Christ, who died in order "to gather into one the children of God who are scattered abroad" (*Jn 11 :52*). This is my mission, my message to you: Jesus Christ who is our peace. Christ "is our peace" (*Eph 2 :11*). And today and for ever he repeats to us : "My peace I give to you, my peace I leave with you" (*Jn 14 :27*). Never before in the history of mankind has peace been so much talked about and so ardently desired as in our day. The growing interdependence of peoples and nations makes almost everyone subscribe—at least in principle—to the ideal of universal human brotherhood. Great international institutions debate humanity's peaceful coexistence. Public opinion is growing in consciousness of the absurdity of war as a means to resolve differences. More and more, peace is seen as a necessary condition for fraternal relations among nations, and among peoples. Peace is more and more clearly seen as the only way to justice; peace is itself the work of justice. And yet, again and again, one can see how peace is undermined and destroyed. Why is it then that our convictions do not always match our behaviour and our attitudes? Why is it that we do not seem to be able to banish all conflicts from our lives?

8. Peace is the result of many converging attitudes and realities; it is the product of moral concerns of ethical principles based on the Gospel message and fortified by it.

I want to mention here in the first place: justice. In his [Message for the 1971 Day of Peace](#), my revered Predecessor, that Pilgrim for peace, Paul VI said: "True peace must be founded upon justice, upon a sense of the untouchable dignity of man, upon the recognition of an indelible and happy equality between men, upon the basic principle of human brotherhood, that is, of the respect and love due to each man because he is man". This same message I affirmed in Mexico

and in Poland. I reaffirm it here in Ireland. Every human being has inalienable rights that must be respected. Each human community—ethnic, historical, cultural or religious—has rights which must be respected. Peace is threatened every time one of these rights is violated. The moral law, guardian of human rights, protector of the dignity of man, cannot be set aside by any person or group, or by the State itself, for any cause, not even for security or in the interests of law and order. The law of God stands in judgment over all reasons of State. As long as injustices exist in any of the areas that touch upon the dignity of the human person, be it in the political, social or economic field, be it in the cultural or religious sphere, true peace will not exist. The causes of inequalities must be identified through a courageous and objective evaluation, and they must be eliminated so that every person can develop and grow in the full measure of his or her humanity.

9. Secondly, peace cannot be established by violence, peace can never flourish in a climate of terror, intimidation and death. It is Jesus himself who said : "All who take the sword will perish by the sword" (*Mt 26 :52*). This is the word of God, and it commands this generation of violent men to desist from hatred and violence and to repent.

I join my voice today to the voice of Paul VI and my other predecessors, to the voices of your religious leaders, to the voices of all men and women of reason, and I proclaim, with the conviction of my faith in Christ and with an awareness of my mission, that violence is evil, that violence is unacceptable as a solution to problems, that violence is unworthy of man. Violence is a lie, for it goes against the truth of our faith, the truth of our humanity. Violence destroys what it claims to defend: the dignity, the life, the freedom of human beings. Violence is a crime against humanity, for it destroys the very fabric of society. I pray with you that the moral sense and Christian conviction of Irish men and women may never become obscured and blunted by the lie of violence, that nobody may ever call murder by any other name than murder, that the spiral of violence may never be given the distinction of unavoidable logic or necessary retaliation. Let us remember that the word remains for ever : "All who take the sword will perish by the sword".

10. There is another word that must be part of the vocabulary of every Christian, especially when barriers of hate and mistrust have been constructed. This word is reconciliation. "So if you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; be reconciled with your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (*Mt 5:23-24*). This command of Jesus is stronger than any barrier that human inadequacy or malice can build. Even when our belief in the fundamental goodness of every human being has been shaken or undermined, even if long-held convictions and attitudes have hardened our hearts, there is one source of power that is stronger than every disappointment, bitterness or ingrained mistrust, and that power is Jesus Christ, who brought forgiveness and reconciliation to the world.

I appeal to all who listen to me ; to all who are discouraged after the many years of strife, violence and alienation—that they attempt the seemingly impossible to put an end to the intolerable. I pay

homage to the many efforts that have been made by countless men and women in Northern Ireland to walk the path of reconciliation and peace. The courage, the patience, the indomitable hope of the men and women of peace have lighted up the darkness of these years of trial. The spirit of Christian forgiveness shown by so many who have suffered in their persons or through their loved ones have given inspiration to multitudes. In the years to come, when the words of hatred and the deeds of violence are forgotten, it is the words of love and the acts of peace and forgiveness which will be remembered. It is these which will inspire the generations to come.

To all of you who are listening I say: do not believe in violence ; do not support violence. It is not the Christian way. It is not the way of the Catholic Church. Believe in peace and forgiveness and love; for they are of Christ.

Communities who stand together in their acceptance of Jesus' supreme message of love, expressed in peace and reconciliation, and in their rejection of all violence, constitute an irresistible force for achieving what many have come to accept as impossible and destined to remain so.

11. Now I wish to speak to all men and women engaged in violence. I appeal to you, in language of passionate pleading. On my knees I beg you to turn away from the paths of violence and to return to the ways of peace. You may claim to seek justice. I too believe in justice and seek justice. But violence only delays the day of justice. Violence destroys the work of justice. Further violence in Ireland will only drag down to ruin the land you claim to love and the values you claim to cherish. In the name of God I beg you : return to Christ, who died so that men might live in forgiveness and peace. He is waiting for you, longing for each one of you to come to him so that he may say to each of you : your sins are forgiven ; go in peace.

12. I appeal to young people who may have become caught up in organizations engaged in violence. I say to you, with all the love I have for you, with all the trust I have in young people : do not listen to voices which speak the language of hatred, revenge, retaliation. Do not follow any leaders who train you in the ways of inflicting death. Love life, respect life; in yourselves and in others. Give yourselves to the service of life, not the work of death. Do not think that courage and strength are proved by killing and destruction. The true strength lies in joining with the young men and women of your generation everywhere in building up a just and human and Christian society by the ways of peace. Violence is the enemy of justice. Only peace can lead the way to true justice.

My dear young people : if you have been caught up in the ways of violence, even if you have done deeds of violence, come back to Christ, whose parting gift to the world was peace. Only when you come back to Christ will you find peace for your troubled consciences, and rest for your disturbed souls.

And to you fathers and mothers I say: teach your children how to forgive, make your homes places of love and forgiveness; make your streets and neighbourhoods centres of peace and reconciliation. It would be a crime against youth and their future to let even one child grow up with nothing but the experience of violence and hate.

13. Now I wish to speak to all the people in positions of leadership, to all who can influence public opinion, to all members of political parties and to all who support them. I say to you: Never think you are betraying your own community by seeking to understand and respect and accept those of a different tradition. You will serve your own tradition best by working for reconciliation with the others. Each of the historical communities in Ireland can only harm itself by seeking to harm the other. Continued violence can only endanger everything that is most precious in the traditions and aspirations of both communities.

Let no one concerned with Ireland have any illusions about the nature and the menace of political violence. The ideology and the methods of violence have become an international problem of the utmost gravity. The longer the violence continues in Ireland, the more the danger will grow that this beloved land could become yet another theatre for international terrorism.

14. To all who bear political responsibility for the affairs of Ireland, I want to speak with the same urgency and intensity with which I have spoken to the men of violence. Do not cause or condone or tolerate conditions which give excuse or pretext to men of violence. Those who resort to violence always claim that only violence brings about change. They claim that political action cannot achieve justice. You politicians must prove them to be wrong. You must show that there is a peaceful, political way to justice. You must show that peace achieves the works of justice, and violence does not.

I urge you who are called to the noble vocation of politics to have the courage to face up to your responsibility, to be leaders in the cause of peace, reconciliation and justice. If politicians do not decide and act for just change, then the field is left open to the men of violence. Violence thrives best when there is political vacuum and a refusal of political movement. Paul VI, writing to Cardinal Conway in [March 1972](#), said: "Everyone must play his part. Obstacles which stand in the way of justice must be removed : obstacles such as civil inequity, social and political discrimination, and misunderstanding between individuals and groups. There must be a mutual and abiding respect for others: for their persons, their rights and their lawful aspirations". I make these words of my revered predecessor my own today.

15. I came to Drogheda today on a great mission of peace and reconciliation. I come as a pilgrim of peace, Christ's peace. To Catholics, to Protestants, my message is peace and love. May no Irish Protestant think that the Pope is an enemy, a danger or a threat. My desire is that instead Protestants would see in me a friend and a brother in Christ. Do not lose trust that this visit of mine may be fruitful, that this voice of mine may be listened to. And even if it were not listened to, let

history record that at a difficult moment in the experience of the people of Ireland, the Bishop of Rome set foot in your land, that he was with you and prayed with you for peace and reconciliation, for the victory of justice and love over hatred and violence. Yes, this our witness finally becomes a prayer, a prayer from the heart for peace for the peoples who live on this earth, peace for all the people of Ireland.

Let this fervent prayer for peace penetrate with light all consciences. Let it purify them and take hold of them.

Christ, Prince of Peace ;

Mary, Mother of Peace, Queen of Ireland;

Saint Patrick, Saint Oliver, and all saints of Ireland;

I, together with all those gathered here and with all who join with me, invoke you :

Watch over Ireland. Protect humanity. Amen.

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