



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO BANGLADESH, SINGAPORE, FIJI ISLANDS,
NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA AND SEYCHELLES

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Brisbane (Australia), 25 November 1986

"What do you want me to do for you?"

"...Master, let me see again!"

"...Go; your faith has saved you".

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In the spirit of the Gospel of today's Liturgy, we wish to reflect on the response which Jesus of Nazareth gave to the blind man: "Your faith has saved you". What is our faith? What is the faith of the blind man that restores health? What is the faith that leads to salvation? And at the same time, what does it mean to say: I believe? What does it mean to believe in Christ? What does it mean to be a Christian, to be a Catholic?

Inspired by the word of God, I wish to consider, together with all of you, the fundamental question of faith.

This links us with the catechumens – those who are preparing for Baptism – and the other candidates for admission into full communion with the Catholic Church. At the same time, faith is a basic theme for all those who through Baptism have already entered the Church and have become Christians and Catholics.

2. Let me say, first of all, what a great joy it is to be with you in the City of Brisbane in Queensland. I greet you all in the peace of Christ: the faithful of the Catholic Church in Queensland and the northern part of New South Wales, together with Archbishop Rush of Brisbane and all my brother

bishops. I rejoice in the communion of faith and charity which we have been privileged to receive from the Lord and which is given visible expression in this Liturgy. It has been a particular joy to meet and bless the sick and handicapped, who have a special place in the heart of Christ and who play an important part in the mission of the Church.

I offer warm greetings also to the members of other Christian Communions who are present. As brothers and sisters in Christ, may we continue to strive towards that full unity for which our Lord himself prayed and which is so vital for the Church's work of evangelization. Indeed, I extend a fraternal greeting to all the citizens of this part of Australia. I am happy to be with you all.

It is a special pleasure for me to celebrate this Eucharist in which the Church is officially welcoming a number of you into the ranks of the catechumens or as candidates for admission into full communion with the Catholic Church. The restored catechumenate, or the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults, is surely one of the great fruits of the Second Vatican Council. I rejoice to learn how successful the catechumenate has been in Australia, and particularly in this Archdiocese. This is a wonderful grace, and a clear sign of the Holy Spirit's renewing presence in the Church. At all times and in every land, the Church is sent forth to proclaim the Good News of salvation and to call people to conversion of heart.

3. The questions which I mentioned at the beginning can be linked to the ones which Saint Paul asks in his Letter to the Romans and which are in the second reading of today's Liturgy: "With God on our side who can be against us?" "Could anyone accuse those that God has chosen?" "When God acquits, could anyone condemn?". At the centre of Saint Paul's questions there is the fundamental affirmation: "Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ". He asks these questions and makes this affirmation because he is writing to people who are trying to remain faithfully committed to Christ in the midst of persecution and tribulation, and perhaps to others who are preparing to make a commitment to Christ in these same circumstances. The great Apostle goes on to make the confident assertion of faith: "These are the trials through which we triumph, by the power of him who loved Us".

To have faith, to believe in Christ means to acknowledge his identity, to accept him in his divine nature and in his human nature, to embrace his message, to respond to his love, and to resolve to belong totally to him. And to belong to Christ means to have a share in the "triumph" which he himself won over death and sin through his own Death and Resurrection. His triumph is a triumph through love; it is the victory of love.

We begin to share in Christ's Death and Resurrection when we receive the Sacrament of Baptism. This is how we begin to share in the victory of love. And this initial sacrament of faith is the foundation of the whole life of the baptized person: the foundation of "being a Christian".

4. Why am I a Christian? Why have I committed my whole life to Christ? These are questions

which touch the very convictions and fundamental values upon which we have sought to base our thoughts and actions.

Our life is shaped by the choices we make in response to the initiative of God. But God's initiatives are even more important than our response. God calls, God acts, and we respond. This is why we are Christians. In Christ, God is with us, and this is the meaning of the word "Emmanuel". Indeed, the Father so desired to be with his people that he gave us his only Son, his beloved Son. No greater gift could ever be given. And that is why Saint Paul says: "We may be certain, after such a gift, that he will not refuse anything he can give us". In Christ, the Father has chosen us and justified us by his grace, forgiving all our sins and offering us eternal salvation. "Nothing therefore can come between us and the love of Christ". And the love of Christ reaches us through the Church. It is because of this love that we commit ourselves in turn to Christ.

5. There are some who wrongly suppose that Christ can be separated from the Church, that it is possible to dedicate one's whole life to Christ without reference to the Church. In so doing they forget the truth proclaimed by Saint Paul in the words: "The Church is his body – and we are its living part". As I said in my recent Apostolic Letter on Saint Augustine: "Because Christ, the only mediator and Redeemer of people, is head of the Church, Christ and the Church are one single mystical person, the total Christ".

To love Christ, then, is to love the Church. The Church exists for Christ, in order to continue his presence and mission in the world. Christ is the Church's Spouse and Saviour. He is her Founder and her Head. The more we come to know and love the Church, the closer we shall be to Christ. You who are catechumens will realize this more and more clearly in the weeks and months ahead. Meanwhile, I would like to offer some reflections today on the nature of the Church, for you too will soon be her members.

The Church is truly a mystery, a human and divine reality which deserves our study and contemplation, yet which goes far beyond the grasp of the human mind. A number of symbols helps us to penetrate and appreciate this mystery of the inner nature of the Church. For example, Saint Paul speaks of the Church as "a farm" which is cultivated and made fruitful by God. He calls the faithful God's "temple" where the Holy Spirit dwells. He describes the Church as "the bride of Christ" whom the Lord tenderly cares for and for whom he gave up his life. Indeed Saint Paul often identifies the Church with Christ himself, calling her the Body of Christ. He also calls her "our Mother", for in virtue of the love of Christ and the waters of Baptism she gives birth to many children in the course of history. Through these and many other symbols, we come to see, in a limited but real way, the vast richness of the mystery of the Church.

6. The Church is essentially a mystery of communion. She is a sign or sacrament of that unity in Christ which Saint Paul speaks of in today's second reading when he says: "I am certain of this: neither death nor life, no angel, no prince, nothing that exists, nothing still to come, not any power,

or height or depth, nor any created thing, can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord".

The communion which we enjoy in the Church is both vertical and horizontal: it is communion with the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity and with one another in the Body of Christ. To be in communion implies a deep personal relationship of knowledge and love. This is the kind of relationship which the catechumenate aims at fostering, and so it entails far more than merely learning facts about God. A catechumen embarks on a journey into intimate friendship with Christ, a journey requiring openness of mind and heart to the life-giving word of God, a journey requiring continual conversion of heart.

This journey does not end when the catechumenate is completed. In fact, the catechumenate merely prepares the way for the Sacrament of Baptism, which is the foundation of communion in the Church. In Baptism we are reborn as children of the Father; we are made intimate friends of Christ and we receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. This communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit is built up and renewed in the celebration of the Eucharist, the source and culmination of the Christian life. And the other sacraments as well deepen this communion. In particular, the Sacrament of Penance fosters it, strengthens it and restores union with God when it has been broken by sin.

7. The Church which lives as a communion is a sign of unity among all peoples. The very word "Catholic" means universal. For this reason the Catholic Church knows no national or cultural boundaries. She cannot limit herself to any one race or language. Rather she is called to be truly universal, a community of faith in Christ embracing people of every country and culture on earth, yet remaining always one. Saint Paul describes the universality of the Church, in this way: "All baptized in Christ, you have all clothed yourselves in Christ, and there are no more distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, male and female, but all of you are one in Christ Jesus".

This organic communion of the Catholic Church is so deep that she remains ever one though she is present in widely differing situations, in many different particular Churches. Each particular Church is a true expression of the universal Church and enriches the whole Body of Christ through the special gifts which each one possesses and generously shares. Thus, the one Catholic Church is Asian as well as European, Slav as well as Australian, African as well as American, Byzantine as well as Latin.

Such unity and universality are gifts which require shared effort and continual vigilance. Not only do we rejoice in these gifts, but we also must preserve them and build them up. The particular Churches must bear witness to perfect unity in faith and ecclesial communion. They must work together to maintain unaltered the content of the Catholic faith, while at the same time translating this faith into a legitimate variety of expressions, in accordance with different cultures.

Of particular importance is the service of authority, and in a unique way the ministry of the Pope. For the Successor of Peter is charged with that special responsibility of presiding over the whole flock in charity, protecting legitimate variety while ensuring that such variety does not hinder unity. This is one of the reasons why I constantly visit the particular Churches, such as those in Australia, in order to proclaim our unity in Christ.

8. The gift of communion in which the Catholic Church rejoices brings with it important responsibilities towards the world, for the Church is meant to be for all peoples an instrument of unity and reconciliation.

The words of the Prophet Isaiah, in the first reading of this Liturgy, point to this mission of the Church. The Lord says: "See, I have made you a witness to the people, a leader and a master of the nations". The Church takes seriously her mission in the world. That is why the Second Vatican Council stated: "The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ... The Church, at once a visible assembly and a spiritual community, goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot as the world. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family".

As the Catholic Church promotes unity and reconciliation in the world, she also prays and works for complete unity among Christians.

Thus, ecumenical dialogue and collaboration are an important priority in the Church, and an essential part of her efforts to build up the human family in unity and charity. For the lack of full unity among Christians hinders the Church in her call to be for all peoples a sacrament of reconciliation and communion. We can make a valid contribution to the ecumenical dialogue only if we bring to it the richness of the Catholic tradition. Our dialogue will be authentic and fruitful only if we speak the truth in love and with fidelity to our own identity. Any blurring of those things which still separate us does nothing to serve the cause of Christ and the Gospel.

9. You who are catechumens have publicly made known your desire to change your lives and to come to know and love God within the Catholic community. You ask the Catholic Church for the gift of faith and you express your readiness to accept the teachings of the Gospel as the foundation of your daily lives.

This is a day of joy and hope for all of us in the Church. We are eager to help you grow in the Christian faith. Together with you we look forward to the day of your Baptism, confirmation and First Communion, the day when you will be received into full communion with the Catholic Church. Already we consider you as part of the household of Christ, with a right to be nourished by the word of God and to take part in special liturgical rites. As we journey together with you, we shall try

to help you in your efforts to pray, to practise charity, to trust in God in the midst of difficulties. We shall try to help you to draw closer to our Lord Jesus Christ and to Mary, who is his Mother and whom we recognize as the Mother of his Church. Your individual sponsors will have a primary role to fulfil in this process, but the whole Church accompanies you.

Today's Liturgy of the word contains an invitation to Baptism: "Oh, come to the water!". And the responsorial psalm picks up the same theme: "You will draw water joyfully from the springs of salvation". Through the Prophet Isaiah, the Lord tells us of the effects of Baptism when he says: "With you I will make an everlasting covenant".

This covenant has been firmly established in our Lord Jesus Christ through his saving Death and glorious Resurrection. And in Baptism it is renewed for each of us individually. As a result of this covenant of Baptism, nothing "can ever come between us and the love of God made visible in Christ Jesus our Lord".

Nothing! Through faith and Baptism we belong to Christ's Church. And in his Church we belong for ever to Christ! For ever! Amen.