



The Holy See

FIRST VESPERS OF THE 26th SUNDAY OF THE YEAR

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Church of Sts Andrew and Gregory on the Caelian Hill

Saturday, 30 September 1989

1. *“Grace to you and peace from God, our Father”.*

We hear this greeting as we listen to the words of Saint Paul to the community of Colossae, in the reading appointed for the eve of the 26th Sunday of the year.

These same words I address to you this evening. I greet, first of all, my brother in Christ, the Archbishop of Canterbury: I warmly welcome you, together with the other representatives of the Anglican Communion who accompany you. I welcome you to Rome, the city that was stained with the blood of the Apostles Peter and Paul; I welcome you to this Church of Saint Gregory the Great from which, fourteen hundred years ago, my predecessor Pope Saint Gregory the Great sent Saint Augustine to preach the “word of truth” to the people of England. Augustine was prior of the monastery of Saint Andrew on the Caelian Hill which stood on the very spot where we are gathered this evening, and we have entered into the sequence of prayer and praise that has been offered to God in this place down through the centuries. I salute the representatives of the same living monastic tradition whom we join in prayer today. Moreover I recall the important role that monastic life has always played – not least in England – in receiving, living and handing on that “word of truth”.

In sending Saint Augustine to preach to the Anglo-Saxon people, Saint Gregory was exercising the pastoral and missionary responsibility which is proper to the office of the Bishop of Rome. In his own writings we discover a profound and rich appreciation of the universal primacy entrusted to the Bishop who occupies the See of Peter. He it was who called the Bishop of Rome the “*caput fidei*” and who described the one who holds this office as the “*servus servorum Dei*”.

2. It was as Bishop of Rome that seven years ago I myself went to England to visit the Catholic people there. My journey took me also to Canterbury, to the Cathedral Church of Saint Augustine. In making my pilgrimage to the shrine of the martyr, Saint Thomas Becket, I sought to play a part in healing the terrible wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ in the sixteenth century. We prayed together there, Your Grace and I, for that wholeness, that fullness of life in Christ which is God's gift of unity.

My pilgrimage to Canterbury was motivated by obedience to the will of Christ our Lord who, on the night before he died prayed "that they all may be one". Today the divisions among Christians require that the primacy of the Bishop of Rome should also be a primacy in action and initiative in favour of that unity for which Christ so earnestly prayed. I see our celebration of Evening Prayer together as a further moment in that ecumenical pilgrimage that Catholics and Anglicans, together with other Christians, are called to make. Our goal is to discover once more that common inheritance of faith which was shared before the tragic sequence of events which divided Christian Europe four centuries ago. We must find our common roots in that period of a thousand years when Christians in England were united in the faith that had been planted there by Saint Augustine.

In the Common Declaration we signed together at Canterbury, we established the Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission (ARCIC-II) to study doctrinal differences that still separate us. But as we meet today, we cannot but acknowledge that events in recent years have seriously aggravated the differences between us, making the work of the Commission more difficult. I wish today to confirm the members of the Commission in their arduous task as they study the roots and origins of the differences between us. May they be endowed with hope and courage as they seek to meet the challenge.

3. The integrity of the apostolic faith as delivered once and for all to the saints in the apostolic Tradition, must be fully preserved if our unity is to be that for which Christ prayed.

Responsibility for discerning the teaching and practice that are part of what Saint Paul calls the deposit which has been entrusted to us and which we must guard lies with the teaching authority of the Church. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God whether in its written form, or in the form of Tradition has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone". The specific role of bishops which is to be exercised in communion with the See of Peter in ensuring the unity and continuity of the faith is vital if we are to hand on the faith of Peter, Gregory and Augustine, if we are to evangelize once more the peoples of Europe and to preach the Gospel to the peoples of the world.

Saint Gregory was a man of vast experience. As the representative of the Church of Rome to the Church of Constantinople, he knew well that there could be variety in confessing and living out the faith, in its liturgical expression, as well as in spirituality, theology and Church discipline, while

preserving in all things the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. That was certainly also his hope and vision for the Church in England. Today the continent of Gregory and Augustine urgently needs to hear the “word of truth” afresh.

The tide of superstition rises high, as it did among the Colossians in the time of Saint Paul. We are surrounded by the forces of secularization that bring with them ignorance of the word of God. The people of our continent cry out for the “Good News” and woe to us if we do not preach it.

4. “Grace to you and peace from God, our Father”.

When Saint Paul wrote these words to the Colossians, and when he thanked God for their “faith in Christ Jesus” and “love... for all the saints”, he wrote very much in a spirit of hope and courage. But he was also writing with concern that some of the Christians at Colossae were wavering in their faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour who by his Death and Resurrection has conquered all other principalities and powers, whether in heaven or on earth. This concern inspired in Paul the great hymn to Christ, the first-born of all creation.

“He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church”.

Christ is our Head; all things have been subjected to him. He is our Lord. He is our beginning and our last end. As in the time of Saint Paul, so now, all our efforts to restore unity among Christians will be in vain if they are not carried out in total fidelity to the faith in Christ that was handed on by the Apostles.

5. It is my firm hope that our meeting in Rome will pave the way for the time when Rome and Canterbury will once more be fully able to proclaim together the “word of truth” as they did in the days of Gregory and Augustine. Today the Gospel has been preached far beyond our continent. We too can say with Paul that throughout the world the Gospel is “bearing fruit and growing”. The missionary task gives new urgency to our ecumenical endeavours: we have a special responsibility to the developing countries of the world where the divisions originating in Europe have been transplanted.

We also have in view the tragic conflicts and divisions which scar the face of the contemporary world. Especially in these days we think of the people of the Middle East – a region which I know is ever in the thoughts and prayers of my beloved brother here today. If men and women are to know the peace of Christ, if they are to be reconciled in him who alone can bring peace to the world, then Christians must be seen to be a community that is both reconciled and reconciling.

How great is the harvest we are called upon to reap for Christ! How many are the wounded, the lost, the lonely in the teeming cities of our world! How many are the homeless and the hungry who

cry out for the Bread of Life and would make their home in Jesus Christ!

It is my prayer that during these days of the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Rome, we may truly be led by God towards that unity of all in Christ who is our Head. May our quest be a sign to the world of the peace and joy that have been given in Christ.

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters in Christ: "Grace to you and peace from God, our Father".

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