



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO SARAJEVO (APRIL 12-13, 1997)

**HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER
AT VESPERS WITH PRIESTS,
RELIGIOUS AND SEMINARIANS**

12 April 1997

*Your Eminence,
My Brother Bishops of Bosnia-Herzegovina and other Bishops present,
Dear Priests, Men and Women Religious and Seminarians!*

1. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation" (1 Pet 2:9). With these words of the Apostle Peter to the early Christians, I offer you my cordial greeting. God has "called you out of darkness into his marvellous light". And you have been given the task of proclaiming before the world his "wonderful deeds" (ibid.).

What are these "wonderful deeds"? Countless are the "wonders" which God has accomplished in human history! But the most "wonderful deed" of all is surely the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, which gave birth to that new People to which we belong.

In the Paschal Mystery ancient enmities have been overcome: those who once were "no people", because they had not "received mercy", have now become, or are called to be, the one "People of God", which has "received mercy" in the blood of Christ (1 Pet 2:10).

This is the joyful message which the Church re-lives and proclaims at this Easter season, as she raises a song of praise and gratitude to Christ Jesus, "who was put to death for our trespasses and raised for our justification" (Rm 4:25).

2. Dear Brothers and Sisters, I offer heartfelt thanks to the Lord who has enabled me to make this long-desired and long-awaited pilgrimage. I rejoice to be here, in this Cathedral, together with you, and to join in your prayer to Him who "is our peace" (Eph 2:14).

I greet all of you with affection, particularly Cardinal Vinko Puljic, to whom I express my gratitude for the sentiments which he has expressed in the name of all present. At this moment my thoughts turn to the priests and consecrated persons who have suffered most in these difficult years. I cannot forget those who have died, like Fathers Grgic and Matanovic, and I ask that light be shed on the circumstances of their deaths. I recall in a special way all those who bore witness to their love of Christ and the brethren at the cost of their blood. May the blood which they shed give renewed vigour to the Church, which seeks only to be able freely to preach in Bosnia-Herzegovina the Gospel of eternal salvation, with respect for every human being, every culture and every religion.

I have come to Sarajevo in order to repeat in this war-torn land the message of the Apostle Paul: "Christ is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2:14). In the high "dividing wall", before which the world felt all but powerless, "the breach of peace" has at last been opened.

The insistent and heartfelt prayer symbolized by the lamp burning in Saint Peter's Basilica during the terrible days of the war has been heard. That lamp is now given to you, so that from this Cathedral it may continue to foster trust in the maternal assistance of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and remind everyone of the duty to work tirelessly in the service of peace.

3. Here, in this "martyr city", and throughout Bosnia-Herzegovina, still scarred by a violent and crazed "logic" of death, division and annihilation, there were people who strove to "break down the dividing wall". You were among them, as, amid all sorts of sufferings and dangers, you worked actively to open the way to peace. I think especially of you priests, who during the bleak period of the war remained at your people's side and suffered with them, continuing to exercise your ministry with courage and fidelity. Thank you for this sign of love for Christ and his Church! In these years you have written a chapter of authentic heroism, which can never be forgotten.

Today I have come to say to you: Do not grow weary in your efforts to advance the peace which was so long awaited! The dawn of God is already present in your midst. The light of a new day is already illuminating your path.

Dear priests, I urge you to remain, even at the cost of great sacrifice, among the sheep of the flock entrusted to you, as bearers of hope and transparent witnesses of Christ's peace. In carrying out your mission, firmly maintain the sense of your vocation and your identity as priests of Christ. Let it be a source of pride for you to be able to say with Saint Paul: "as servants of God we commend ourselves in every way, through great endurance in afflictions... by purity, knowledge, forbearance,

kindness, the Holy Spirit, genuine love" (2 Cor 6:4-6).

4. To you also, dear Men and Women Religious, I wish to express the Church's gratitude for the important work which you have done and continue to do in serving the People of God, as you bear witness to the Gospel by your profession of the evangelical counsels and by the many forms of the apostolate.

Rekindle the genuine charism entrusted to you by your Founders and Foundresses. Strive constantly to discover its richness and live it out with ever greater conviction and intensity.

In this Cathedral how can I fail to recall Monsignor Josip Stadler, the first Archbishop of the revived see of ancient Vrhbosna, modern Sarajevo, and the founder of the Congregation of the Handmaids of the Child Jesus, the only Religious Congregation founded in Bosnia-Herzegovina? May the living memory of this great Bishop, utterly faithful to the Apostolic See and ever ready to serve his brothers and sisters, encourage and sustain the missionary commitment of all the consecrated persons who work in this region, so dear to me!

I wish to address a special word to you, dear Friars Minor, whom I greet together with your Minister General who has joined us this evening. Down the centuries you have worked untiringly to spread and preserve the Christian faith in Bosnia- Herzegovina, making an effective contribution to the preaching of the Gospel among its people. Your glorious past demands of you an unstinting generosity in the present moment, in imitation of Saint Francis who, as his first biographer says, was completely filled, "in his heart, on his lips, in his ears, in his eyes, in his hands and in his whole body", with the passionate remembrance of Christ crucified (I Cel. 115), bearing the marks of his passion on his heart even before he bore them on his body (II Cel. 11). How very timely are the words which he addressed to his friars: "I counsel, admonish and exhort my friars in the Lord Jesus Christ that, when they go throughout the world, they not quarrel and that they avoid verbal disputes, and that they not judge others; instead, they should be gentle, peaceful and modest, meek and humble, speaking sincerely with all, as is fitting" (Regula Bullata, Chapter III). What benefits there will be for the unity of the Church, apostolic activity and the cause of peace from such a witness of Franciscan meekness!

5. A word also to you, dear Seminarians, the hope of the Church in this land. Following the example of the Servant of God Petar Barbaric, let yourselves be captivated by Christ! Discover the beauty of giving your life to him, in order to bring his Gospel of salvation to your brothers and sisters. A vocation is an adventure worth living to the full! A generous and persevering response to the Lord's call is the secret to a life which is completely fulfilled.

To all of you, priests, men and women Religious and seminarians, I wish to leave a double exhortation: Practise among yourselves that solidarity and "union in the same mind and judgment" (cf. 1 Cor 1:10), which is an unmistakable sign that Christ is present and at work among you.

In a spirit of humility and obedience, foster communion and effective pastoral cooperation with your Bishops, following the exhortation of Saint Ignatius of Antioch: "I beseech you, take care to do all things in the concord of God, under the guidance of the Bishop" (Ad Magn. 6,1). This teaching was echoed by the Second Vatican Council, which recalled that "Bishops govern the particular Churches entrusted to them as the vicars and ambassadors of Christ" (*Lumen Gentium*, 27). As a consequence of this duty, the Council goes on to say, "Bishops have the sacred right and the duty before the Lord to make laws for their subjects, to pass judgment on them, and to moderate everything pertaining to the ordering of worship and the apostolate" (ibid.). Therefore, the Council concludes, the faithful "must cling to their Bishop, as the Church does to Christ, and Jesus Christ to the Father, so that everything may harmonize in unity, and abound to the glory of God" (ibid.).

6. Dear friends, the time has come for a profound examination of conscience. The time has come for a decisive commitment to reconciliation and peace.

As ministers of God's love, you have been sent to dry the tears of the many people who grieve for their murdered relatives, to hear the impotent cry of those who have seen their rights trampled and their families torn apart. As brothers and sisters to all, be near to the refugees and the evacuees, to those driven from their homes and deprived of the resources with which they planned to build their future. Give support to the elderly, orphans and widows. Encourage the young, who have often been cheated of a serene passage into adult life and forced by the harshness of conflict to grow up much too soon.

We need to say loud and strong: Never again war! We need each day to make a renewed effort to encounter others and to make a personal examination of conscience, not only about one's failings, but also about the energy one is willing to invest in building peace. We need to acknowledge the primacy of ethic, moral and spiritual values, by defending the right of every individual to live in peace and harmony, and by condemning every form of intolerance and persecution rooted in ideologies which show contempt for persons in their inviolable dignity.

7. Dear Brothers and Sisters! The Successor of Peter is here among you as a pilgrim of peace, reconciliation and communion. He is here to remind everybody that God forgives only those who have the courage, in turn, to forgive others. We need to open our minds to God's way of thinking in order to become part of his people and to be able to proclaim "the wonderful deeds of his love" (cf. 1 Pet 2:9). The power of your example and your prayer will obtain from the Lord, for those who have not yet found it, the courage to ask for, and to offer, forgiveness.

Let us ask Mary, venerated in so many shrines in this land, to take us by the hand and to teach us that it is precisely the courage to ask for and to offer forgiveness which is the beginning of the way toward true peace. Let us entrust to her the difficult but necessary resolve to persevere in building the "civilization of love".

Mary, Queen of Peace, pray for us!

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