



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO BOLOGNA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE
23rd ITALIAN NATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS
(SEPTEMBER 27-28, 1997)

CLOSING MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 28 September 1997

1. *"Where is my guest room, where I am to eat the Passover with my disciples?"* (Mk 14:14).

This is what Jesus asks on Holy Thursday in Jerusalem. Having found the place where they could eat the Passover meal, the disciples go to prepare everything as the Teacher had arranged, and there, in that privileged room, the Last Supper takes place, the Passover supper at which Christ institutes the Eucharist, the supreme sacrament of the New Covenant.

Taking the bread, he blesses it and gives it to the disciples, saying: "Take; this is my body". He then does the same with the cup of wine; after blessing it he gives it to the disciples, saying: "This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many; do this in memory of me" (cf. Mk 14:22-24).

Today we enter Jerusalem in spirit, *the venerable room where the Last Supper* and the institution of the Eucharist took place. At the same time we enter so many other places in every part of the world, countless other "Upper Rooms". Down through history, during periods of persecution, it was sometimes necessary to prepare these rooms in the catacombs. Unfortunately, even today there are situations where Christians have to celebrate the Eucharist in hiding, as in the time of the catacombs. But wherever the Supper is celebrated, in marvellous cathedrals rich in history or in

the small chapels of mission countries, the Last Supper in Jerusalem is always re-enacted.

2. The places where the paschal Supper is renewed are very numerous, especially in this Italy of ours. Today we must make all the "Eucharistic rooms", all the "Upper Rooms" of this land of ancient Christian traditions converge symbolically here. Indeed, this is the meaning of the National Eucharistic Congress, which in the marvellous choreography of this celebration represents a special "Passover room", a new "Cenacle", where the great Mystery of faith is solemnly made present. The Eucharist of the Church is celebrated as a gift and mystery, The great prayer of thanksgiving of the Italian people, who have taken part in the Eucharistic banquet for almost 2,000 years, is raised to heaven.

I am thinking of the *beginnings of the Church*, of the Apostles Peter and Paul, of the martyrs of the early centuries and, after Constantine's edict, of the era of the holy Fathers, the doctors, the founders of orders and religious congregations down to our times. There is a ceaseless memorial of the great Eucharist, which contains the thanksgiving of history, because Christ "by his holy Cross has redeemed the world".

For the Italian people, this will be the last Congress of the century: a century that has seen man attacked in the truth of his being on a global scale. This century, in the name of totalitarian and deceitful ideologies, has sacrificed millions of human lives. In the name of a self-will called freedom, innocent unborn human beings continue to be killed. In the name of a prosperity that cannot maintain the prospects of happiness it promises, many have thought they could do without God. Thus it is a century marked by dark shadows, but one which has also preserved the faith handed down by the Apostles, enhancing it with the radiance of holiness.

On the spiritual pilgrimage taking us to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, this Eucharistic Congress is *an important stage for the Churches in Italy*.

This is also attested by the large number of Bishops who are here today to celebrate the Eucharist with me and by the many faithful who have come from every part of the country. I address my cordial greetings to each of them and, in particular, to my venerable Brother, Cardinal Giacomo Biffi, Archbishop of Bologna, who has welcomed me on this extraordinary occasion; to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, my Legate to this Congress. I also greet the many Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, priests and religious present. I address a cordial thought to the young people with whom I spent yesterday evening here in this square, to the families and to the sick, who are united in a special way with the Eucharistic mystery through their physical and moral suffering. I greet the Prime Minister, the Honourable Romano Prodi, who is from Bologna, and the other civil and military authorities who have wished to join our celebration.

Gathered here together at this liturgical assembly which represents the whole Christian community of Italy, let us acclaim: "*Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again*".

3. "And you shall remember all the way which the Lord has led you these forty years in the wilderness" (Dt 8:2).

In the first reading, today's liturgy refers to the history of Israel, the chosen people whom God led out of Egypt, out of slavery, and for 40 years guided through the wilderness into the promised land. That 40-year journey is not only a historical fact; it is a great symbol, with a significance that is in some way universal. All humanity, all peoples and nations are *on a journey*, like Israel, through *the desert of this world*.

Of course, all the world's regions have their characteristics of culture and civilization which make them interesting and pleasing. Nevertheless, from a more profound point of view, every land is always *a desert through which man passes on his way to the promised land*, to the Father's house.

On this pilgrimage the leader is Christ crucified and risen, who by his Death and Resurrection continually confirms the ultimate direction of the human path through history. In itself, *the desert of this world is a place of death*; the human being is born, grows and dies there. Down the centuries how many generations have met death in this desert! *The only exception is Christ*. He alone conquered death and revealed life. It is thanks to him alone that those who died will be able to rise again, because he alone can lead man through the desert of time *into the promised land of eternity*. He has already done so with his Mother; he will do so with all who believe in him and belong to the new People on their way to the heavenly homeland.

4. During the 40 years they spent in the desert, the people needed *manna* in order to survive. Indeed, the desert could not be cultivated and the people traveling through it could not be fed: manna, the bread that came down from heaven, was essential. Christ, the new Moses, nourishes the People of the New Covenant with *a quite particular manna*. His Body is the true food under the appearance of bread; his Blood is the true drink under the appearance of wine. We are kept alive by this Eucharistic food and drink.

The second lesson, from the Letter to the Hebrews, leads us into the mystery of the Blood. The Apostle writes: "But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things that have come... he entered once for all into the Holy Place, taking ... his own blood, thus securing an eternal redemption.... Therefore he is the mediator of a new covenant, so that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance, since a death has occurred which redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant" (Heb 9:11-12,15).

The Apostle reserves a special place for the mystery of Christ's Blood, of which a Eucharistic hymn proclaims: "Blood most holy, Blood of the Redemption, you heal the wounds of sin". This truth is precisely enunciated by the inspired author: "... the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, [shall] purify your conscience from dead works" (Heb

9:14).

5. These two meanings of the Eucharist should be linked in a close and special way in our reflection today. *The Eucharist is nourishment*; it is food and drink. At the same time, *the Eucharist*, as the "Body given" and the "Blood shed", is *the source of our purification*.

Through the Eucharist Jesus Christ, the Redeemer of man, the one Saviour of the world, not only remains among us but also within us. With his grace he remains in us "yesterday, today and for ever" (Heb 13:8).

This Eucharistic Congress seeks to express all these points in a unanimous and significant way for the glory of God, for the renewal of the human conscience and for the comfort of God's People. It seeks to emphasize that *the Eucharist is God's supreme gift to man*, the basis of all authentic solidarity.

At the end of the Congress, so well prepared by the Church which has hosted it and by the city which has welcomed it, I would like to say to all the believers of this beloved country: look with trust to Christ; renew your love for him present in the Eucharistic sacrament! He is the divine Guest of the soul, the support for every weakness, the strength for every trial, the consolation for every sorrow, the Bread of life, the supreme destiny of every human being.

From the Eucharist springs the strength to be equal always and everywhere to the demands of truth and the duty of consistency. The National Eucharistic Congresses have marked a long tradition of service to mankind: a tradition which is handed on from Bologna today to the Christianity of the third millennium.

With our gaze focused on the Eucharist, the central mystery of our faith, we pray: Lord Jesus, Word of God incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary, guide the steps of the Italian people on the ways of justice and solidarity, of reconciliation and peace!

Enable Italy to preserve intact that heritage of human and Christian values that has made her great down the ages. From the countless tabernacles scattered about the country gleams the light of that truth and the warmth of that love which contain the hope of the future for this people, as for every other people of the world.

Amen!
