



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION WITH THE NEW CARDINALS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Thursday, 22 February 2001

Feast of Saint Peter's Chair

1. *"Who do you say that I am?'. Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God'" (Mt 16: 15-16).*

This conversation between Christ and his disciples, which we have just heard again, is always relevant to the life of the Church and of Christians. At every moment in her history, especially those which are the most decisive, Jesus questions his followers and, after asking them what "people" think of him, he narrows the field and asks them: "But who do you say that I am?".

We heard this question echoing in the background throughout the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. And every day the Church has ceaselessly replied in a unanimous profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Saviour of the world, yesterday, today and for ever". A universal answer, in which the voices of the Pastors and faithful of the whole People of God are one with the voice of Peter's Successor.

2. *One solemn confession of faith: You are the Christ!* This confession of faith is the great gift which the Church offers the world at the beginning of the third millennium, as she ventures upon the "vast ocean" that lies before her (cf. *Novo millennium ineunte*, n. 58). Today's celebration highlights *the role of Peter and his Successors* in steering the barque of the Church across this "ocean". It is therefore very significant that at this liturgical celebration the College of Cardinals is beside the Pope together with the new Cardinals created yesterday at the first Consistory since the Great Jubilee.

Let us thank God together for founding his Church on the rock of Peter. As the opening prayer suggests, let us pray intensely that amid the upheavals of the world, she may not be shaken but advance with courage and trust.

3. But permit me first of all to express my joy and gratitude to the Lord for you, dear friends and venerable Brothers, who are now members of the College. Once again I offer you my most cordial greeting, which I extend to your relatives and to

the faithful gathered here, as well as to the communities you come from, which are spiritually united with our celebration today.

I consider it providential to celebrate the feast of the Chair of Peter with you and with the entire College, because this is a remarkably eloquent *sign of unity* with which we begin the post-Jubilee period together. It is a sign which at the same time invites us to reflect more deeply on the Petrine ministry, to which your role as Cardinals is particularly related.

4. "*You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*" (Mt 16: 13-19).

In the "today" of the liturgy, the Lord Jesus also addresses these words to the Successor of Peter, and they become a duty for him to strengthen his brethren (cf. Lk 22: 32). With great consolation and deep affection I call you, venerable Brother Cardinals, to support the See of Peter in the particular *ministry of unity* entrusted to it.

"As Bishop of Rome, I am fully aware", as I reaffirmed in the Encyclical on the commitment to ecumenism *Ut unum sint*, "that Christ ardently desires the full and visible communion of all those Communities in which, by virtue of God's faithfulness, his Spirit dwells" (n. 95). To this primary goal *Cardinals*, both as a College and individually, *can and must make their valuable contribution*.

For they are the first collaborators in the Roman Pontiff's ministry of unity. The red that they wear recalls the blood of the martyrs, especially that of Peter and Paul, on whose supreme witness the vocation and universal mission of the Church of Rome and of her Pastor is founded.

5. How can we forget that the Petrine ministry, the visible principle of unity, constitutes a difficulty for the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities? (cf. Encyclical *Ut unum sint*, n. 88). But at the same time, how can we not recall the historical fact that in the first millennium the primatial role of the Bishop of Rome was exercised without encountering any resistance in the Church of either the West or the East? Today I would like in a special way to pray to the Lord with you that the new millennium we have entered may soon see this situation overcome and full communion re-established. May the Holy Spirit give all believers the necessary light and strength to achieve what the Lord so ardently desires. I ask you to help me and to collaborate in every way in this demanding mission.

Venerable Brother Cardinals, *the ring* that you wear and which I will shortly present to the new members of the College highlights the special bond that joins you to this Apostolic See. On the "vast ocean" which is opening before the barque of the Church, I am counting on you to guide her way in truth and love, so that she may survive the storms of the world and become an ever more effective sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 1).

6. "*Thus says the Lord God: "Behold, I, I myself will search for my sheep, and will seek them out"*" (Ez 34: 11).

On the feast of the Chair of St Peter, the liturgy once again offers us the famous oracle of the prophet Ezekiel, in which God reveals himself as the Shepherd of his people. Indeed, the *chair* is inseparable from the *pastoral staff*, because Christ, *Teacher and Lord*, came to us as *the Good Shepherd* (cf. Jn 10: 1-18). This is how Simon, the fisherman of Capernaum, knew him: he experienced his tender and merciful love and was won over by it. His apostolic vocation and

mission, summed up in the new name of Peter that he received from the Master, is based entirely on his relationship with him from the first meeting, to which his brother Andrew had called him (cf. *Jn* 1: 40-42), until the last one on the lake shore, when the Risen One charged him to tend his flock (cf. *Jn* 21: 15-19). In between is the long journey of discipleship, in which the divine Master leads Simon to a profound conversion, which experienced the tragic hours of the Passion but then led to the bright joy of Easter.

By virtue of the *transforming experience of the Good Shepherd*, Peter described himself, in his Letter to the Churches of Asia Minor, as "a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed" (1 *Pt* 5: 1). He urges "the elders" to tend the flock of God and become examples to it (cf. 1 *Pt* 5: 2-3). Today, dear friends, this exhortation is addressed particularly to you, whom the Good Shepherd has wished to associate in the most eminent way with the ministry of Peter's Successor. Be faithful to your mission and ready to lay down your lives for the Gospel. The Lord is asking this of you, and the Christian people who have gathered around you today with joy and affection expect it of you.

7. "*I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail*" (*Lk* 22: 32). This is what the Lord said to Simon Peter at the Last Supper. Jesus' words, fundamental for Peter and his Successors, also spread light and comfort to those who cooperate more closely in their ministry. Today, venerable Brother Cardinals, Christ is repeating to each of you: "I have prayed for you" that your faith will not fail in the situations in which your fidelity to Christ, to the Church, to the Pope, may be put to the greatest test.

May this prayer, which never ceases to flow from the Good Shepherd's heart, always be your strength! Have no doubt that just as it was for Christ and for Peter, so it will be for you: your most effective witness will always be one that is marked by the Cross. *The Cross is God's chair in the world*. On it Christ has offered humanity the most important lesson, that of loving one another as he has loved us (cf. *Jn* 13: 34): even to the ultimate gift of oneself.

The Mother of Christ and of the disciples, Mary Most Holy, always stands beneath the Cross. The Lord entrusted us to her when he said: "Woman, behold, your son!" (*Jn* 19: 26). Since the Blessed Virgin, Mother of the Church, protected Peter and the Apostles in a special way, she will not fail to protect the Successor of Peter and his collaborators. May this consoling certainty encourage you not to be afraid of trials and difficulties. But, reassured by God's constant protection, let us obey together the command of Christ, who vigorously asked Peter, and with him the Church, to put out into the deep: "*Duc in altum*" (*Lk* 5: 4). Yes, dear Brothers, let us put out into the deep, let us cast our nets for the catch and let us "go forward in hope!" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 58).

Christ, the Son of the living God, is the same yesterday and today and forever. Amen!