



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Baku Sports Palace
Thursday, 23 May 2002

1. "*Honour to you who believe!*" (1 Pt 2:7).

Yes, beloved brothers and sisters of the *Catholic community* of Baku, and all of you who come from the Catholic communities in the neighbouring countries, "honour to you who believe!" I greet the Christians of the *Orthodox Church* who have joined us for this solemn moment of prayer, with their Bishop, Alexander. To them too I address the words of the Apostle Peter to the first Christians: "Honour to you who believe!".

The universal Church pays tribute to all those who *succeeded in remaining faithful to their Baptismal commitments*. I am thinking in particular of those who live permanently in this country and who experienced *the tragedy of Marxist persecution*, and bore the consequences of their faithful attachment to Christ. Brothers and sisters, you saw your religion mocked as mere superstition, as an attempt to escape the responsibilities of engagement in history. For this reason you were regarded as second class citizens and were humiliated and marginalized in many ways.

2. "Honour to you who believe!" Honour to your grandfathers and grandmothers, to your fathers and mothers, who nurtured the seed of faith in you, nourished it with prayer, and helped it to grow and bear fruit. I wish to repeat once again, honour also to you, the *holy Orthodox Church*; you opened your doors to the Catholic faithful, who were without fold or shepherd. May the Lord reward your generosity.

I extend a special greeting to the Superior of the mission *sui iuris*, and the Salesian community that works with him looking after the Catholics. Brothers and Sisters, you are the living proof that faith in God works miracles. Though you are few in number, and belong to different ethnic groups, scattered over a vast territory, the Good Shepherd has kept you together in unity.

3. "*I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me*" (Jn 10:14), says the Lord in the Gospel passage we have just heard. Truly, Lord Jesus, you knew your sheep, even when they were persecuted and forced to hide. You knew them and were close to them, and supported them when they were disheartened by severe physical and moral isolation and tempted to scatter.

For their part, your sheep continued to know and recognize you, to experience your comforting presence, and to follow you despite the tribulations of the journey. What a marvellous exchange! You had offered your life for them, and they offered theirs for you, praying that their faith would not falter. And just as you took up your life again, so too the community of survivors, restored to freedom, rediscovered the joy of gathering together to celebrate their faith in your house, from which the prayer of praise and thanksgiving, like the fragrance of incense, now rises once more to heaven.

4. Brothers and Sisters, beloved sons and daughters of the Catholic Church, *today the Pope is with you*. He too knows of your suffering, and has carried you in his heart during the years of wandering in the desert of persecution. Today he is here to share in your joy at freedom restored, and to support you on the journey which has as its final goal the promised land of Heaven, where the Lord of life will wipe away every tear: "death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away" (Rev 21:4).

Sustained by this certainty, you know that this is a time of joy, a time of hope. A sign of this is the foundation stone of the parish church to be built, which I shall bless at the end of Mass. *The Pope brings you the greetings and the esteem of the entire Catholic Church*. Today, the eyes of all are turned to you, the "little flock" (Lk 12:32). Do not be afraid! Open your hearts, and hope in the Lord. You are already experiencing the resurrection; in a way you are enjoying a foretaste of the final meeting with the glorious Christ.

5. O Church present in Azerbaijan, today I would like to leave you as your task what we asked for in the Opening prayer of today's Eucharist. Know that you are "a people gathered from all the nations of the earth in the unity of the one spirit".

Your community, Brothers and Sisters, is a symbolic expression of that universality, made up as it is of people from various backgrounds, some with a past and the prospect of stability, others on their way to other lands. We all form one people, inspired by the one Holy Spirit. Wherever the Eucharist is celebrated, the "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" Church is present.

It seems to me, at this moment, that Bernini's colonnade, those arms stretching out from the Basilica of Saint Peter to embrace the world, reaches out to hold you too, the little Catholic community of Azerbaijan, close to the bosom of Christ and the Church. In this embrace, the heart of the whole Church beats with affection and love for you. With the Church, and in her, beats the heart of the Pope, who has come here to tell you that he loves you and has never forgotten you.

6. Be faithful to your mission! You were faithful in the time of trial, when in tears you carried the seed for sowing. Be faithful now in joy, as you prepare to gather the sheaves (cf. *Ps 125:6*). Your mission is to preserve the faith and bear witness to it with a life which is truly prophetic, so that the world may believe. In seeing you, may your brothers and sisters in this country see how much you believe, how much you hope, how much you love. This will be your way of showing that the Risen One is present. Let your witness, which cannot count on abundant resources, exercise its influence through the strength of Christ's grace, the leaven which, though invisible, can make the whole loaf rise.

You share the joys and hopes of the people who live close to you and with you: you are part of them and with them you must hope and work for *a better future for all*. Be cautious, but *have the courage to make things new*. There is need for renewal here too, in this land! Not the novelty that only brings uncertainty and insecurity, no! Rather, the newness that will restore to all, *especially the young*, a desire to live and work for a world of greater justice and solidarity.

7. Look at them, these young people! They run the risk of succumbing to the illusion of aimless idleness, of easy but dishonest gain. But they are also able to commit themselves to an ideal and risk the heroism of sacrifice in order to bring about the victory of justice and promote the establishment of freedom and peace. They must be taught not to be afraid to dare. We have to reveal to them the radiant perspective of faith, of the friendship of Christ. *There is no enthusiasm for good that Christ does not understand*, for he himself is eternally young!

O Church that prays, hopes and loves in this land of Azerbaijan, *the Pope invokes upon you the blessing of the Lord*. Take his blessing to your poor, sick and suffering. Take it to everyone, as an outpouring of grace and love. Never forget that you are called to be the leaven and the soul of the world, for the Lord is with you and he goes before you on your journey.

Amen!