



The Holy See

FIRST VESPERS OF THE SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 28 June 2003

1. "You are Christ, the Son of the living God. Blessed are you, Simon: the Father has revealed it to you" (*Antiphon 1*).

This Antiphon opens the Psalmody for the First Vespers of the Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul. Its words take us back to the *dialogue between Jesus and Simon Peter* at Cesarea Philippi. They ceaselessly echo in this Basilica, as though they were recorded in the stones, in the mosaics, and especially in this central place known as the "Confessio".

You are Christ! - the Successor of Peter repeats this evening, together with his Brother Bishops, the priests and the Christian people of Europe and of every corner of the earth. He proclaims this fundamental truth of the Christian faith forcefully and with deep joy. Christ alone is the Redeemer of man, Christ alone is our hope.

2. "Jesus Christ, alive in his Church, source of hope for Europe". This was the theme of the second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishps, which took place in the Vatican from 1 to 23 October 1999.

I rejoice this evening *to sign and to present the Apostolic Exhortation "Ecclesia in Europa", which collects and compiles what emerged during this important Synodal Assembly.*

The brief biblical reading we have heard - the beginning of the Letter to the Romans - puts this act into the broadest and most authentic *perspective* of the *evangelizing mission* of the Church, modelled on that of the Apostles. In particular, the three features with which St Paul describes

himself to the Christian community of Rome can apply in a broad sense to the whole Church, which is, precisely, a *servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart to proclaim the Gospel of God* (cf. Rom 1: 1).

To Cardinal Jan Pieter Schotte and to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, as well as to all who cooperated in the organization of the Assembly of the Synod for Europe in 1999, laying then the foundations for this Document, I express my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude.

I greet the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops present, as well as the priests, men and women Religious and lay people who have gathered here for this solemn celebration. I also extend my fraternal greeting to the delegation sent by the Ecumenical Patriarch, His Holiness Bartholomew I, led by venerable Archbishop Demetrios of America. Furthermore, we are comforted by the knowledge that they share with us the same concern for the safeguard and promotion of the moral values of the new Europe.

3. "*Jesus Christ, alive in his Church*". That Christ is alive in his Church is clear from the 2,000-year-old history of Christianity. From the Eastern shores of the Mediterranean, the Gospel message continued to spread throughout the Roman Empire and was later grafted on to the multiple ethnic and cultural branches that existed on the European continent. To all of these the Church - called, precisely, "*catholic*" - communicated *the one and universal message of Christ*.

The "Good News" was and continues to be a source of life for Europe. If it is true that Christianity cannot be restricted to any particular culture but converses with each one, to help them all to express their best qualities in every field of knowledge and human action, then *the Christian roots of Europe are the main guarantee of its future*. Could a tree that had no roots grow and develop? Europe, do not forget your history!

4. "*Jesus Christ, source of hope for Europe*". Down through the ages the purity of the Gospel sap has unfortunately been *polluted, due to the shortcomings and sins* of some members of the Church. For this very reason I felt the need during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 to express the request for pardon, especially for certain painful *divisions that occurred precisely in Europe* and wounded the Mystical Body of Christ.

However, in the 20th century, the Holy Spirit has brought forth a new springtime which the witness of many saints and martyrs made fruitful. The Second Vatican Council was responsible for a *profound spiritual renewal*.

5. "*You are Christ, the Son of the living God*". The Church has not been without Peter's profession of faith, despite the difficulties and trials that have strewn the 2,000-year-old path of the Christian people.

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation which this evening I am symbolically presenting to the

Bishops, priests and deacons, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful of Europe, is an invitation to renew this boundless loyalty to Christ and to his Gospel. *You alone, Jesus Christ, alive in your Church, are the source of hope!*

We proclaim you present on the European continent, from the Atlantic to the Urals. Together we commit ourselves to witnessing to you, following your example with the help of the *Apostles Peter and Paul*, and the holy Patrons: Benedict, Cyril and Methodius, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena and Edith Stein.

May Mary, Queen of the Apostles, Mother of Christ our Hope, sustain us from Heaven. Amen.

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