



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY AT MASS

Elk, Tuesday, 8 June 1999

1. *“Zaccheus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5).*

Saint Luke, in the Gospel which we have just heard, recounts the meeting between Jesus and a man called Zaccheus, a chief tax collector who was very rich. Since he was short of stature he climbed a tree to be able to see Christ. He then heard the Master’s words: “Zaccheus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today” (Lk 19:5). Jesus had taken note of Zaccheus’ gesture; he understood his desire and anticipated his invitation. The fact that Jesus would go to the house of a sinner even caused amazement in some people. Zaccheus, delighted at the visit, “received him joyfully” (Lk 19:6), that is, he opened the door of his house and of his heart to the encounter with the Saviour.

2. Dear brothers and sisters, I cordially greet those present at this Holy Mass. In a special way I greet Bishop Wojciech, Pastor of the Church in Elk, his Auxiliary Bishop Edward, and also the clergy present here in large numbers, the consecrated men and women, and the People of God. I greet this land and those who live here. It is very dear to me because I have visited it many times, coming here also for periods of rest. I have been able to admire the richness of nature in this part of my homeland and to enjoy the peace of the lakes and the woods. You yourselves are heirs of the rich past of this land, formed down the centuries by different traditions and cultures. This is made evident at this celebration by the presence round the altar of God not only of Polish Bishops, but also of Bishops from other countries. I thank them for having come to Elk. I greet also the students of the major seminaries, as well as the pilgrims who have come from neighbouring Dioceses and from abroad, especially from Belarus, Russia and Lithuania. I ask you to take my greeting to all those brothers and sisters of ours who cannot be here with us.

I cordially greet the members of the Lithuanian community living in the territory of the Diocese of Elk who are present at this Holy Mass, and also the pilgrims who have come from Lithuania. In a special way I greet the President of the Republic of Lithuania, Mr Valdas Adamkus, and his entourage. I greet the Bishops, priests, Religious men and women, and also the students from the major seminaries. Through you I wish to greet all those who live in the land of Lithuania. My thoughts and my heart often turn to the visit that I made to your country in September 1993. All of us together gave thanks to God and the Mother of Mercy at the Shrine of the Dawn Gate for the unshakable fidelity to the Gospel shown by your nation in times of difficulty. During the Mass celebrated near the Hill of Crosses I thanked you for “this great witness given to God and to mankind . . . given to your history and to all the peoples of Europe and the whole earth” At that time I also said: “May this hill be a witness until the end of the second millennium after Christ, and a message for the new millennium, the third millennium of the redemption and salvation which is found nowhere else but in the Cross and Resurrection of our Redeemer . . . This is the message which I leave all of you from this mystical place of Lithuanian history. I leave it to all of you. I hope that it may always be contemplated and lived” (7 September 1993, No. 5).

Dear Lithuanian Brothers and Sisters, six years later I would like once more to remind you of these words and repeat them to you. Today I commend your nation to the Madonna of the Dawn Gate and to Saint Casimir, Patron of Lithuania. At his tomb in the Cathedral of Vilnius I prayed fervently for your whole nation and I thanked God that I had been able to go there and carry out my pastoral ministry there. I invoke the intercession also of Queen Saint Hedwig, whose liturgical memorial the Church celebrates today, and also the intercession of the Blessed Archbishop Jurgis Matulaitis, tireless and courageous Pastor of the Church in Vilnius. May faith ever be your nation’s strength, and may witness to Christ’s love produce spiritual fruits. It is on faith that you must build the future of your country, of your lives, of your identity as Lithuanians and Christians, for the good of the Church, of Europe and of humanity.

3. *“Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor”* (Lk 19:8). I wish to return to the Gospel reading from Saint Luke: Christ, “the light of the world” (cf. Jn 8:12), brought his light to the home of Zaccheus, and in a special way to his heart. Thanks to the closeness of Jesus, of his words and of his teaching, this man’s heart begins to be transformed. Already on the threshold of his house Zaccheus declares: “Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I restore it fourfold” (Lk 19:8). In the example of Zaccheus we see how Christ dispels the darkness of the human mind. In his light the horizons of existence become broader: we begin to be aware of other people and their needs. A bond with others is born, an awareness of man’s social dimension and consequently a sense of justice. “The fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true”, teaches Saint Paul (Eph 5:9). Opening ourselves to our fellow man, to our neighbour, constitutes one of the principal fruits of sincere conversion. Man breaks out of his selfish “being for himself alone” and opens himself to others, feeling the need to “be for others”, to be for his brothers and sisters.

This opening of the heart in the encounter with Christ is a pledge of salvation, as is shown in the ensuing conversation with Zaccheus: "Jesus said to him, 'Today salvation has come to this house . . . For the Son of Man came to seek and to save the lost'" (*Lk* 19:9-10).

In our own day too, Luke's description of the event that took place at Jericho has lost none of its importance. It brings us the exhortation given by Christ, "whom God made our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (*1 Cor* 1:30). And just as he once did with Zaccheus, so at this moment Christ stands before the men and women of our own age. He seems to say to each person individually: "I must stay at your house today" (*Lk* 19:5).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, this "today" is important. It is a kind of summons. In life there are certain matters that are so important or so urgent that they cannot be put off or left for another day. They must be dealt with now, today. The Psalmist exclaims: "O that today you would harken to his voice! Harden not your hearts" (*Ps* 95:7-8). "The cry of the poor" (*Job* 34:28) of all the world rises endlessly from the earth and reaches God. It is the cry of children, women, the elderly, refugees, those who have been wronged, the victims of war, the unemployed. The poor too are in our midst: the homeless, beggars, the hungry, the despised, those who have been forgotten by their own families and by society, the degraded and humiliated, the victims of various vices. Many of these people even try to hide their human misery, but we must know how to recognize them. There are also people suffering in hospitals, children left without parents, or young people experiencing the difficulties and problems of their age.

"Still today we see immense areas in which the work of Christians must bring to bear the charity of God . . . There are situations of persistent misery which cannot but impinge upon the conscience of Christians, reminding them of their duty to address these situations both as individuals and as a community", as I wrote in my last Message for Lent (15 October 1998, 3 and 4). The "today" of Christ should therefore echo loudly in every heart, making it mindful of the works of mercy. "The lament and the cry of the poor" require us to give a concrete and generous response. It requires us to be willing to serve our neighbour. The invitation is made by Christ. We are constantly being called. Each of us in a different way. In various places, in fact, people are suffering and calling out to others. They need the presence of others, their help. How very important is this presence of the human heart and of human solidarity!

Let us not harden our hearts when we hear "the cry of the poor". Let us strive to listen to this cry. Let us strive to act and to live in such a way that in our country no one will be without a roof over their head or bread on the table; that no one will feel alone, left without anyone to care for them. I make this appeal to my fellow countrymen. I know how much is being done in Poland to halt the spread of poverty and indigence. Here I would like to emphasize the work being done by the Church's different *Caritas* agencies, at both the diocesan and parochial levels. These groups are involved in various initiatives, for example during the Advent and Lenten seasons, and provide assistance to individuals and entire social groups. They are also involved in training and

educational activities. The assistance which they provide often goes beyond the borders of Poland. How numerous are the social assistance centres, the hospices, soup kitchens, charitable centres, homes for single mothers, child-care and after-school care centres, protection stations and centres for the disabled that have recently appeared. These are but a few examples of this immense “Good Samaritan” undertaking. I wish also to emphasize the efforts being made by the State and by private institutions and individuals, and by the volunteers who work in them. Mention should also be made here of the initiatives aimed at providing solutions to the troubling situation of growing poverty in different sectors and regions. These are concrete, real and visible contributions to the development of a civilization of love on Polish soil.

We must always recall that the country’s economic development must take into consideration the greatness, dignity, and vocation of man, who “was made in the image and likeness of God” (cf. *Gen* 1:26). Development and economic progress must never be at the expense of men and women, hindering the meeting of their fundamental needs. The human person must be the subject of development, that is, its most important point of reference. Development and economic progress cannot be pursued at whatever cost! That would not be worthy of man (cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 27). The Church of today proclaims and seeks to exercise a preferential option for the poor. This is not just a passing feeling or immediate action, but a real and persevering will to work for the good of those who are in need and who often have no hope of a better future.

5. “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven” (*Mt* 5:3).

At the very beginning of his messianic activity, speaking at the synagogue in Nazareth, Jesus said: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor” (*Lk* 4:18). He considered the poor the most privileged heirs of the Kingdom. This means that only “the poor in spirit” are able to receive the Kingdom with all their hearts. Zaccheus’ meeting with Jesus shows that a rich man too can become a sharer in Christ’s beatitude for the poor in spirit.

The poor in spirit are those who are willing to use their wealth generously for the needy. In such cases, we see that these people are not attached to their wealth. We see that they understand its real purpose. Material goods in fact are meant to help others, especially the needy. The Church allows private ownership of these goods, if they are used for this purpose.

Today we remember Queen Saint Hedwig. Her generosity to the poor is well known. Although she was rich, she did not forget the poor. For us she is a model of how to live and put into practice Christ’s teaching about love and mercy, about how we must make ourselves like him who, as Saint Paul says, “though he was rich, yet for our sake he became poor that by his poverty we might become rich” (*2 Cor* 8:9).

“Blessed are the poor in spirit”. This is Christ’s declaration that every Christian, every believer today should hear. There is a great need for people who are poor in spirit, that is, people who are

open to the truth and to grace, open to the great things of God; there is a need for big-hearted people who do not let themselves be deceived by the splendour of the riches of this world, and who do not allow these riches to dominate their hearts. Such people are truly strong, because they are filled with the riches of God's grace. They live in the awareness that they are receiving from God all the time and without end.

"I have no silver and gold, but I give you what I have; in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, walk" (*Acts 3:6*). With these words the Apostles Peter and John answer the cripple's plea. They gave him the greatest gift that he could have desired. From poor men, this poor man receives the greatest wealth: in the name of Christ they restore his health. Thus they proclaimed the truth which, from generation to generation, has been the heritage of those who proclaim Christ.

These are the poor in spirit. Though they possess neither silver nor gold themselves, thanks to Christ they have greater power than those who can give all the riches of the world.

Truly such people are happy and blessed, for to them belongs the Kingdom of heaven. Amen.