



The Holy See

HOLY MASS
FOR THE INAUGURATION OF
THE PETRINE MINISTRY OF THE BISHOP OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL I

St. Peter's Square

Sunday, 3 September 1978

Venerable Brothers and dear Sons and Daughters,

In this sacred celebration inaugurating the ministry of the Supreme Pastor of the Church, which has been placed on our shoulders, we begin by turning our mind in adoration and prayer to the infinite and eternal God, who has raised us to the Chair of blessed Peter by his own design, which human reasoning cannot explain, and by his benign graciousness. The words of Saint Paul the Apostle come spontaneously to our lips: "O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Next we embrace in thought and greet with paternal affection the whole Church of Christ. We greet this assembly, representing as it were the whole Church, which is gathered in this place—a place filled with works of piety, religion, and art, which is the attentive custodian of the tomb of the Chief of the Apostles. We then greet the Church that is watching us and listening to us at this moment through the modern media of social communication.

We greet all the members of the People of God: the Cardinals, Bishops, priests, men and women religious, missionaries, seminary students, laypeople engaged in the apostolate and in various professions, people involved in the fields of politics, culture, art, and business, fathers and mothers of families, workers, migrants, young people, children, the sick, the suffering, the poor.

We greet also with reverence and affection all the people in the world. We regard them and love

them as our brothers and sisters, since they are children of the same heavenly Father and brothers and sisters in Christ Jesus (cf. Mt 23:8f).

We have begun this homily in Latin, because, as is well known, it is the official language of the Church and in an evident and effective way expresses its universality and unity.

The Word of God that we have just been listening to has presented the Church to us as in crescendo, first, as prefigured and glimpsed by the Prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 2:2-5) in the form of the new Temple with the nations streaming towards it from all sides, anxious to know the Law of God and to observe it with docility, while the terrible weapons of war are transformed into instruments of peace. But Saint Peter reminds us that this mysterious new Temple, the pole of attraction for the new humanity, has a cornerstone, a living, chosen and precious cornerstone (cf. 1 Pt 2:4-9), which is Jesus Christ, who founded his Church on the Apostles and built it on blessed Peter, their leader (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 19).

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church" (Mt 16:18) are the weighty, great and solemn words that Jesus speaks to Simon, son of John, after his profession of faith. This profession of faith was not the product of the Bethsaida fisherman's human logic or the expression of any special insight of his or the effect of some psychological impulse; it was rather the mysterious and singular result of a real revelation of the Father in heaven. Jesus changes Simon's name to Peter, thus signifying the conferring of a special mission. He promises to build on him his Church, which will not be overthrown by the forces of evil or death. He grants him the keys of the kingdom of God, thus appointing him the highest official of his Church, and gives him the power to interpret authentically the law of God. In view of these privileges, or rather these superhuman tasks entrusted to Peter, Saint Augustine points out to us: "Peter was by nature simply a man, by grace a Christian, by still more abundant grace one of the Apostles and at the same time the first of the Apostles" (Saint Augustine, *In Ioannis Evang. tract.*, 124, 5: PL 35, 1973).

With surprised and understandable trepidation, but also with immense trust in the powerful grace of God and the ardent prayer of the Church, we have agreed to become Peter's Successor in the See of Rome, taking on us the yoke that Christ has wished to place on our fragile shoulders. We seem to hear as addressed to us the words that Saint Ephraem represents Christ as speaking to Peter: "Simon, my apostle, I have made you the foundation of the Holy Church. I have already called you Peter because you will support all the edifices. You are the superintendent of those who will build the Church on earth . . . You are the source of the fountain from which my doctrine is drawn. You are the head of my apostles . . . I have given you the keys of my kingdom" (Saint Ephraem, *Sermones in hebdomadam sanctam*, 4,1: Lamy T.J., *S. Ephraem Syri hymni et sermones*, 1,412).

From the moment we were elected throughout the days that followed, we were deeply struck and encouraged by the warm manifestations of affection given by our sons and daughters in Rome

and also by those sending us from all over the world the expression of their irrepressible jubilation at the fact that God has again given the Church her visible Head. Our mind re-echoes spontaneously the emotion-filled words that our great saintly Predecessor, Saint Leo the Great, addressed to the faithful of Rome: "Blessed Peter does not cease to preside over his See. He is bound to the eternal Priest in an unbroken unity . . . Recognize therefore that all the demonstrations of affection that you have given me because of fraternal amiability or filial devotion have with greater devotedness and truth been given by you and me to him whose See we rejoice to serve rather than preside over it" (Saint Leo the Great, *Sermo V*, 4-5: PL 54, 155-156).

Yes, our presiding in charity is service. In saying this, we think not only of our Catholic Brothers and Sons and Daughters but also of all those who endeavour to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to honour God, and to work for the good of humanity.

In this way we greet affectionately and with gratitude the Delegations from other Churches and Ecclesial Communities present here. Brethren not yet in full communion, we turn together to Christ our Saviour, advancing all of us in the holiness in which he wishes us to be and also in the mutual love without which there is no Christianity, preparing the paths of unity in faith, with respect for his Truth and for the Ministry that he entrusted, for his Church's sake, to his Apostles and their Successors.

Furthermore, we owe a special greeting to the Heads of State and the members of the Extraordinary Missions. We are deeply touched by your presence, you who preside over the high destinies of your countries, or represent your Governments or International Organizations, for which we are most grateful. In your participation we see the esteem and trust that you place in the Holy See and the Church, that humble messenger of the Gospel for all the peoples of the earth, in order to help create a climate of justice, brotherhood, solidarity and hope, without which the world would be unable to live.

Let all here, great or small, be assured of our readiness to serve them according to the Spirit of the Lord.

Surrounded by your love and upheld by your prayer, we begin our apostolic service by invoking, as a resplendent star on our way, the Mother of God, Mary, *Salus Populi Romani*, and *Mater Ecclesiae*, whom the Liturgy venerates in a special way in this month of September. May Our Lady, who guided with delicate tenderness our life as a boy, as a seminarian, as a priest and as a bishop, continue to enlighten and direct our steps, in order that, as Peter's voice and with our eyes and mind fixed on her Son Jesus, we may proclaim in the world with joyous firmness our profession of faith: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). Amen.
