



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 2 June 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. After reflecting on humanity's common destiny as it will be fulfilled at the end of time, today we want to turn our attention to another topic which directly concerns us: the meaning of death. It has become difficult to speak of death today because prosperous societies are inclined to disregard this reality, the thought of which alone causes anxiety. Indeed, as the Council observed, "it is in regard to death that man's condition is most shrouded in doubt" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 18). But on this reality the Word of God offers us, although gradually, a light to illumine and comfort us.

In the Old Testament the first indications stem from the common experience of mortals who are not yet enlightened by the hope of a blessed life after death. It was generally believed that human life ended in "Sheol", a place of shadows incompatible with life in its fullness. In this regard, the words of the Book of Job are very significant: "Are not the days of my life few? Let me alone, that I may find a little comfort before I go whence I shall not return, to the land of gloom and deep darkness, the land of gloom and chaos, where light is as darkness" (*Jb* 10:20-22).

2. God's Revelation gradually surpassed this severe view of death, and human reflection was opened to new horizons which would receive their full light in the New Testament.

First of all we can understand that if death is the relentless enemy of man, and tries to overpower and dominate him, God could not have created it because he cannot delight in the destruction of the living (cf. *Wis* 1:13). God's original plan was different, but it was impeded by the sin committed by man under the devil's influence, as the Book of Wisdom explains: "For God created man for incorruption, and made him in the image of his own eternity, but through the devil's envy death entered the world, and those who belong to his party experience it" (*Wis* 2:23-24). Jesus also refers to this idea (cf. *Jn* 8:44) and St Paul's teaching on the Redemption achieved by Christ, the new Adam (cf. *Rom* 5:12, 17; *1 Cor* 15:21), is based on it. By his Death and Resurrection,

Jesus overcame sin and death, which is its consequence.

3. In the light of what Jesus accomplished, we can understand God the Father's attitude towards the life and death of his creatures. The Psalmist had already sensed that God could not abandon his faithful servants in the tomb, nor permit his godly one to undergo corruption (cf. *Ps* 16:10). Isaiah pointed to a future in which God would destroy death forever, wiping away "tears from all faces" (*Is* 25:8) and raising the dead to new life: "Your dead shall live, their bodies shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a dew of light, and on the land of the shades you will let it fall" (ibid., 26:19). Over death, which levels all the living, is superimposed the image of the earth as a mother preparing to give birth to a new living being and bringing into the world the righteous destined to live in God. Consequently, even if the righteous "in the sight of men were punished, their hope is full of immortality" (*Wis* 3:1, 4).

The hope of resurrection is magnificently affirmed in the Second Book of Maccabees by the seven brothers and their mother at the time of their martyrdom. One of them says of his hands: "It was from heaven that I received these; for the sake of his laws I disdain them; from him I hope to receive them again" (2 *Mc* 7:11); another, "when he was near death, said, 'It is my choice to die at the hands of men with the God-given hope of being restored to life by him'" (ibid., 7:14). Their mother heroically encourages them to face death with this hope (cf. ibid., 7:29).

4. Already in the Old Testament the prophets warn people to await "the day of the Lord" with an upright heart, or it would become "darkness, and not light" (cf. *Am* 5:18, 20). The full revelation of the New Testament emphasizes that everyone will be subject to judgement (cf. 1 *Pt* 4:5; *Rom* 14:10). But the righteous should not fear it, since as the elect they are destined to receive the promised inheritance; they will be set at the right hand of Christ, who will call them "blessed of my Father" (*Mt* 25:34; cf. 22:14; 24:22, 24).

The death the believer experiences as a member of the Mystical Body discloses the way to the Father, who has shown us his love in the death of Christ, the Victim of "expiation for our sins" (1 *Jn* 4:10; cf. *Rom* 5:7). In regard to death, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* stresses: "For those who die in Christ's grace it is a participation in the death of the Lord, so that they can also share his Resurrection" (n. 1006).

Jesus "loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father" (*Rv* 1:5-6). Of course, it is necessary to pass through death, but now with the certainty that we will meet the Father, when "this corruptible body puts on incorruptibility, this mortal body immortality" (1 *Cor* 15:54). Then it will be clearly seen that "death is swallowed up in victory" (ibid.) and we will be able to face it defiantly and fearlessly: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" (ibid., v. 55).

It is precisely because of this Christian vision of death that St Francis of Assisi could exclaim:

“Praised be you, my Lord, for our sister bodily death” (*Fonti Francescane*, n. 263). With this comforting outlook, we can understand the beatitude proclaimed by the Book of Revelation as the fulfilment of the Gospel Beatitudes: “Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord henceforth’. ‘Blessed indeed’, says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labours, for their deeds follow them!’” (*Rv* 14:13).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I warmly greet the members of the General Chapter of the Montfort Missionaries, and I pray that your deliberations will help to lead the congregation into the new millennium with renewed vigour, in fidelity to your charism. I extend a special welcome to the group of sisters taking part in the Programme of Formation of Formators, sponsored by the International Union of Superiors General. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, India, Indonesia, Japan and the United States of America, I invoke the abundant blessings of almighty God.

We continue to receive sad news from Colombia, where last Sunday in the Church of the Transfiguration in Cali, an armed group sacrilegiously interrupted the celebration of Holy Mass and kidnapped many people, including the priest. In the past, similar acts have taken place in interior regions of the country, such as El Piñón (Magdalena), and religious personnel have been killed.

In view of these terrible events, I renew my pressing appeal for reconciliation, with respect for the rights of individuals and a commitment to dialogue that will resolve this serious crisis, as everyone desires. I accompany this wish with a remembrance in my prayer that God will grant peace to Colombia.
