



The Holy See

HOLY MASS CELEBRATED WITH THE BISHOPS OF EUROPE
IN THE SISTINE CHAPEL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

20 June 1979

Dear Brothers!

1. I express cordial and sincere joy at our meeting. Joy in particular because the meeting takes place in the framework of the Symposium on the subject: "The young and faith".

I remember the preceding Symposium, in 1975, in which I had the fortune to participate actively as one of the speakers. At the same time I wish to express my happiness at meeting you today, concelebrating the Holy Eucharist. I hope that in this communion, in which our priestly and episcopal unity is expressed in the fullest and deepest way, we will receive greater light and strength of the Holy Spirit from Christ—the Prince of Pastors, who as the one Eternal Priest is also the one source and foundation of this unity, which we manifest and live in the eucharistic concelebration.

We need so much this light and strength of the Spirit of Christ for all the tasks that derive from our mission—for example, in the sphere of the subject of your Symposium: Youth—but not exclusively. Those tasks as a whole, our whole mission, call for some particular grace in order that we may be able to meet with exact and full correspondence the signs of the times, which are *the salvific "kairos" of Europeans* and of the continent we represent, and to which "we are sent" as successors of those Apostles, those messengers of the Gospel, from whom the history of Europe in the Christian era begins.

2. Your meeting—and therefore also our eucharistic concelebration today—has its roots in that happy thought of Vatican II which reminds the Bishops of the whole Church *of the collegial*

character of the ministry they exercise. Precisely from this thought, expressed with the greatest doctrinal precision in the dogmatic Constitution "Lumen Gentium", there have sprung a series of pastoral institutions and initiatives which already bear witness today to the new vitality of the Church, and will certainly constitute in the future the foundation of the further renewal of her salvific mission in a variety of dimensions and spheres of action.

Saying so, I have still before my eyes the marvellous assembly of bishops of the Church of Latin America, which I had the fortune to inaugurate *at Puebla in Mexico* on 28 January of the current year. The assembly itself was the fruit of a systematic collaboration of all the Episcopal conferences of that immense continent, in which nearly half of the Catholics of the whole world now live. They are Episcopates of varying numerical importance, some very numerous, particularly such as that of Brazil which alone has over 300 Bishops. The methodical collaboration of all the Episcopal Conferences of Latin America has its support in the Council commonly known as "CELAM", which makes it possible for these Conferences to re-read together the tasks that await Pastors of the Church in that great continent, so important for the future of the world.

The very title of the Conference held at Puebla from 27 January to 13 February 1979 already very clearly bears witness to this. It was: *Evangelization in the present and the future of Latin America.* It is, therefore, already easy to understand from the title how useful at Puebla was the providential subject of the ordinary session of the 1974 Synod of Bishops, namely: *evangelization.*

3. In connection with this fundamental subject every bishop in the world, as the pastor of his particular Church, of his diocese, could and should consider his Church from the contemporary point of view. And as evangelization expresses the mission of the Church, this look must be connected with the past and open up the perspective of the future: yesterday, today and tomorrow. *And not only every single bishop in his diocese, but also the different communities of bishops and above all the National Episcopal Conferences can and must make that "key subject" of the 1974 Synod an object of reflection about society, with regard to which they have pastoral responsibility for the work of evangelization. The subject proposed by Paul VI for the Synod, five years ago, has multiform possibilities of application in various spheres.*

At the same time, this subject induces us to reflect, in a fundamental way, if it is a question of *realizing the Council itself* and of carrying out its doctrine. The basic realization of Vatican II is nothing but a new awareness of the divine mission transmitted to the Church "among all nations" and "to the end of the world". The basic realization of Vatican II is nothing but a new *sense of responsibility for the Gospel*; for the Word, for the Sacrament, for the work of salvation, which the whole People of God must assume in the way suited to it. The task of the bishops is to direct this great process. Their dignity and pastoral responsibility lies in this.

3. It is of great weight and fundamental importance to reflect on the problem of evangelization with regard to the *European continent*. I consider it a complex, extremely complex, subject. Moreover,

as also for any other contest, it is necessary to bring out from an analysis of the present situation a vision of the future, since this situation is a consequence of the past, ancient as the Church herself is and the whole of Christianity. In the analysis we should reach every single country, every single nation of our continent, but also understand every situation of theirs, having before our eyes the great movements of history which—especially in the second millennium—divided the Church and Christianity on the European continent.

I think that, at present, *in time of ecumenism*, the moment has come to look at these questions in the light of the criteria drawn up by the Council; to look at them in a spirit of brotherly collaboration with the representatives of the Churches and communities with which we do not have full unity; and, at the same time, it is necessary to look in a spirit of responsibility for the Gospel. And this not only in our continent, but also outside it. Europe is still the cradle of creative thought, of pastoral initiatives, of organizational structures, the influence of which goes beyond its frontiers. At the same time, Europe, with its grand missionary past, is questioning itself at the various points of its present "ecclesial geography" and wondering if it is not about to become a missionary continent.

There exists therefore for Europe the problem that was defined in "[Evangelii Nuntiandi](#)" as "self-evangelization". The Church must always evangelize herself. Catholic and Christian Europe needs this evangelization. It must evangelize itself. Nowhere, perhaps, so much as in our continent do the movements of the negation of religion, the movements of the "death of God", of programmed secularization, of organized militant atheism, take shape so clearly. The 1974 Synod provided a great deal of material in this connection.

It is possible to examine all this according to historico-social criteria. The Council, however, indicated to us another criterion: that of the "signs of the times", that is, of a special challenge of Providence, of him who is "the Lord of the harvest" (Lk 10:2).

Next year we will celebrate *the fifteenth centenary of the birth of St Benedict*, whom Paul VI proclaimed Patron Saint of Europe. This might be, perhaps, the right moment for such a deep reflection on the problem of the "yesterday and today" of the evangelization of our continent—or rather, for reflection on this challenge of Providence, which, in its rich and varied historical complex, constitutes the Christian "today" of Europe as regards its responsibility for the Gospel—and also in the perspective of the future.

Our mission is always and everywhere turned towards the future. Either towards the future of which we are certain in faith: the eschatological future; or towards the future about which we can humanly be uncertain. Let us think of those who were the first to come to the European continent as messengers of the Good News, such as Peter and Paul. Let us think of those who, throughout the history of Europe, have opened the ways towards new peoples, such as Augustine or Boniface, or the brothers of Thessalonica, Cyril and Methodius. Not even they were certain of the human future of their mission or even of their own fate. Faith and hope were more powerful than

this human uncertainty. The love of Christ that "drove" them (cf. 2 Cor 5:14) was more powerful. In this faith, hope, and charity was manifested *the operating Spirit*. We, too, must become docile and effective instruments of his action in our age.

6. The subject of your Symposium is: "The young and faith".

It is well that it is. I think it is deeply and organically integrated in the great subject of reflection of the whole post-conciliar Church, which can never be far from our attention, the subject of evangelization. If we think of evangelization *in terms of the future, it is necessary to turn our minds to the young*: we must meet the intellects, the hearts, the characters of the young. This is the problem chosen, through which we arrive at the global problem.

The exchange of your experiences and suggestions must be a wide one, it cannot remain "particular". *All practice of collegiality serves the cause of the universality of the Church*. You, too, dear Brothers, through this practice of collegial collaboration which forms your Symposium, must, so to speak, "expand the spaces of love" (S. Aug. *de Ep. Ioan. ad Parthos*, X, 5: P.L. XXXV, 2060). This expansion never takes you away from the responsibility entrusted directly to each of you, on the contrary it makes it keener. The Bishops and Episcopal Conferences of every country and nation in Europe must live the interests of all the countries and nations of our continent. And let those of you who are absent be present—I would say—even more intensely. It is necessary to work out special, effective methods to make those who are "absent" "intensely present". Their absence cannot be ignored or be justified with commonplaces.

Remember that just as all the Episcopal Conferences of Europe take part in this symposium, through their representatives, so, too, all the Episcopates, all the bishops stand around this altar in the eucharistic communion of love, sacrifice, and prayer. And in a certain way those who are missing, those who have not been able to attend, are present even more vividly.

Through everyone, the Church, as the *people of God* of our whole continent, "*works out*" her *Christian future* in union with Christ the Prince of Pastors, with Christ the Eternal Priest.

Amen.

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