



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AT THE VENERABLE ENGLISH COLLEGE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

12 December 1979

Brothers and sons in Christ Jesus,

I have come to celebrate with you the Four Hundredth Anniversary of the Venerable English College – to commemorate with you and your fellow-countrymen at home the four centuries in which the Catholic faith has been lived here by young men preparing for the priesthood. From this historic edifice in the City of Rome, those young men have gone forth as priests in order to pass on the faith to generations of the faithful in England and Wales.

Within the sacred setting of this Eucharistic Liturgy, I wish to pay homage to this saving faith in Jesus Christ, and to honour all those whose lives have been anchored in this faith, those who, keeping their eyes fixed on Jesus, the Son of God, held fast to the confession of their faith.

A living faith in Jesus Christ has been the bedrock foundation of this College and of all its activities from the time of its establishment by my predecessor Gregory XIII in 1579. The men of faith who were your predecessors here continue to inspire you by the example of their lives. Yours is a great heritage; a whole *martyrum candidatus exercitus* honours the beginning of your College, and spans an entire century from the time of Saint Ralph Sherwin in 1591 to Saint David Lewis in 1679. As supreme witnesses to the faith, these Martyrs speak to you today from this chapel and from every corner of this house. And the Church herself corroborates their witness and exhorts you to "consider the outcome of their life, and imitate their faith".

And so, dear brothers and sons, this moment of joyful celebration and solemn commemoration becomes a time of prayerful reflection and a day of challenge for the rest of your lives. Like your predecessors, you yourselves are called to be priests of Jesus Christ, servants of his Gospel, and

witnesses before your people to the pure Catholic faith as transmitted by the Apostles, proclaimed by the Magisterium of the Church and upheld by the martyrs and confessors of all ages. By word and example you are called to bear your Catholic witness at this juncture of history. God is calling you here and now, in the present circumstances of the Church and the world. Christ and his Church bid you, however, to face the challenge of this hour, not just with your own skill or with mere human wisdom, but with the power of the Gospel. In the words of Saint Paul, you are to take the shield of faith, the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. Your individual and corporate witness to the faith can be essentially non different from the witness given by your Martyrs – a witness to the faith of the universal Church, a witness that will lead others to Christ, a witness that will not yield when – as Jesus tells us in the Gospel – the rains come, the floods rise, the gales blow and the house is struck.

It is precisely because we have the whole armour of God and are rooted in faith that we feel strong in the Lord and in the strength of his might, equipped to proclaim the whole mystery of the Gospel and to bear witness, in the continuity of this generation, to the fullness of Catholic truth.

This is the first part of your challenge today: to be witnesses to the faith. You are called by Christ and will be sent by his Church on an ecclesial mission, to bear witness to the faith in a place where, perhaps, you never dreamed of being, in a way that you never thought of. And yet, openness, readiness and calmness are what you have learned from the history of your College and, in particular, from the lives of your Martyrs. And today in this liturgy, Isaiah addresses to each one of you young men his prophetic exhortation: "Trust in the Lord for ever, for the Lord is the everlasting Rock". And I repeat these words to you: Trust in the Lord; trust in the Lord, in order to fulfil your role as witnesses to the faith – faith in Jesus Christ.

It is good to reflect that you are likewise called to be witnesses in this generation to the vitality of the Church's youth – to be witnesses to the power and effectiveness of Christ's grace to capture the hearts of the young today. The world needs concrete proof that Christ can draw this generation to himself. And you must show that you have understood the meaning of life in the context of Christ's love and his call. You are called to bear witness to the fact that, amid the thousand and one attractions and options offered by the modern world, you have been "captured" by Christ, to the point of giving up all the rest, in order to become his companions and disciples; in order to embrace his mission and, finally, his Cross; and in order to know the power of his Resurrection.

The consideration of being witnesses to the strength of Christ's grace leads us naturally to something that is at the summit of our very being: our own freedom. It is only through the exercise of this freedom – God's great gift to us – that we can adequately respond to his invitation, to the call of his grace, to the love that he offers us. For each one of you the present challenge is this: to surrender your hearts and your wills to Christ under the action of the Holy Spirit, to give yourselves freely and totally and perseveringly to Christ. The Lord Jesus asks for the response of your freedom, for the oblation of your liberty. And the words of the Psalm enable you to reply: "My heart

is ready, God; my heart is ready".

Dear brothers and sons: you are therefore called to bear witness to your Catholic faith in all its purity; you are called to be witnesses to the victory of Christ's love, not as an abstract power, but as it touches your own lives and consecrates your own freedom. For all of you this is indeed an hour for great trust. He who began in you a good work – who began a good work in this College four hundred years ago – is well able through the power of his Spirit to bring it to perfection, for the glory of his name, for the honour of his Gospel and for the good of his entire Church.

And Mary, the Queen of Martyrs, the Faithful Virgin, who stood by your Martyrs and all your predecessors, will be with each of you, so that your witness may be genuine in faith and holiness.

She will assist you in the role that is yours as true disciples of her Son, faithful members of the Church, diligent students of the Second Vatican Council and of all the Councils that went before. In a special way I commend to her intercession the witness that you are called to bear in truth and love before your Anglican brethren in the providential dialogue – to be sustained by prayer and penance – that is directed to the restoration of full unity in Jesus Christ and in his Church.

And so, anchored in faith and committed to holiness of life, look forward with joyful confidence to a new era of your College. Sacrifice and generosity, prayer and study, humility and discipline will be as much a part of your future as they were of your past. Countless men, women and children will look to you to find Christ. From the depths of their being they will plead with you in the words of the Gospel: "We wish to see Jesus". Like the Apostle Philip you must show Jesus to the world – Jesus and no substitute, for there is salvation in no other name. Thus you can clearly see that the destiny of your homeland is linked with the success of the mission of this institution. The contribution that you will make to the world depends on how well you bear witness to the faith and to the power of Christ's grace in your own lives.

My beloved brothers, sons and friends: after four hundred years this College is still, by the grace of God, just as active as it ever was, and what it stands for is more relevant than ever before. And so it will remain, provided that you continue to put into practice what Jesus himself tells you when he says: Preach my Gospel. Proclaim my word. Re-enact my Sacrifice. Yes, be my witnesses. Remain in my love, today and for ever. Amen.

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