



The Holy See

MASS AT THE NORTH AMERICAN COLLEGE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

22 February 1980

1. "You are the Messiah," Simon Peter answered, "the Son of the Living God!".

These words of personal faith and divine inspiration mark the beginning of Peter's mission in the history of the People of God. These words also mark the beginning of a new era in the history of salvation. From the moment these words were spoken at Caesarea Philippi, the history of the People of God was linked to the man who had pronounced them: "You are Peter and on this rock I will build my church".

These words have a special meaning for me. They express what is the heart of my mission as the Successor of Peter at the end of the twentieth century. Jesus Christ is the center of the universe and of history. He alone is the Redeemer of every human being. In God's inscrutable providence I have been chosen to continue the mission of Peter and to repeat with similar conviction: "You are the Messiah - the Christ - the Son of the living God". Nothing in my life and ministry can take precedence over this mission: to proclaim Christ to all the nations, to speak of his marvelous goodness, to tell of his power to save, and to assure every man and woman that whoever believes in Christ will not die but will have eternal life.

My brothers and sons in Christ, the words of Peter at Caesarea Philippi also have special meaning for you. Your life too must be rooted in Christ and built up in him. For it is because of Christ, on account of Christ, and for Christ that you wish to serve the People of God as priests. Thus your knowledge of Christ and your love for him must continually grow and deepen. You shall have to be men of strong faith, who through the Eucharist, the liturgy of the hours and daily personal prayer maintain a vibrant friendship with Jesus, with Jesus who told his disciples: "I no longer speak of you as slaves... Instead I call you friends". And so at all times and in all places, your first thoughts must go to him who is the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the living God.

2. The feast of the Chair of Saint Peter by a happy coincidence is also the birthday of George Washington, your first President. In a certain sense these two events indicate the motivation for my coming here today. It has been my desire

as Bishop of Rome to visit the various Colleges of the City; but I have come to the North American College in particular as an extension of my recent visit to the United States. This evening you represent for me the Church in the United States: you my brother Bishops, and you who make up the community in Rome known as the North American College, on the Janiculum Hill and at Via dell'Umiltà. In all of you and through you I once again greet the people of America.

On this occasion I would like to speak about what I consider to be extremely important components of priestly preparation, and to reiterate several points in this regard which I stressed during my visit of your country.

3. The first priority in seminary life is the word of God. God's word is the center of all theological study; it is the chief instrument for handing down Christian doctrine and it is the perpetual source of spiritual life. Speaking to seminarians in America, I said: "The intellectual formation of the priest, which is so vital for the times in which we live, embraces a number of the human sciences as well as the various sacred sciences. These all have an important place in your preparation for the priesthood. But the first priority for seminaries today is the teaching of God's word in all its purity and integrity, with all its demands and in all its power".

It is my hope that in your reverence for the word of God you will be like Mary - like -Mary whose response to God's word was "Fiat": "let it be done to me as you say"; like Mary "who trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled"; like Mary who treasured those things which were said of her Son and pondered them in her heart. May you treasure God's word always and ponder it each day in your heart, so that your whole life may become a proclamation of Christ, the Word made flesh.

4. The proclamation of God's word reaches its summit in the celebration of the Eucharist. Indeed, all your personal endeavors and all the activities of the seminary community are bound up with the Eucharistic Sacrifice and directed toward it: "For the most blessed Eucharist contains the Church's entire spiritual wealth, that is, Christ himself, our Passover and living bread". I strongly urge you therefore to make the Mass the real center of your life each day, and I recommend that you regularly spend time in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, adoring our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

5. Seminary life should also be characterized by an atmosphere of recollection, which enables each of you to acquire lifelong habits of study and prayer, and to develop interiorly the attitudes of self-sacrifice, generosity and joyful obedience - attitudes which are so necessary in a priest. For a priest is truly called to put on the mind and heart of Christ, to imitate the Son who "learned obedience from what he suffered", and to say with Jesus: "I am not seeking my own will but the will of him who sent me". Sound discipline in the seminary, when it is properly exercised, creates that atmosphere of recollection which helps you prepare for a life of continual conversion and generous service. In particular it will assist you, as I said in Philadelphia, "in ratifying day after day in your hearts the obedience you owe to Christ and his Church".

6. Ten years ago today, my beloved predecessor Paul VI visited the North American College. On that occasion he spoke of the special value of preparing for the priesthood here in Rome. "Your being here in Rome", he said, "is neither accidental nor unimportant. It is not pure coincidence... It is something deliberately willed for your spiritual formation; for your preparation for a priestly ministry; for a service, yet to come, to the Church and to your fellow-citizens".

If you sometimes wonder why the American Bishops have built and maintained this College in Rome, or why the Catholic faithful of the United States for over a century have given financial support and have sacrificed of themselves to provide for you and many others the opportunity to prepare for the priesthood in Rome, the answer is found in the words of Peter at Caesarea Philippi; it is linked to the mystery of Peter's mission in the universal Church. Here in Rome the universality and rich diversity of the Church are seen more clearly than elsewhere; here the apostolic tradition of the Church as a living reality and not merely as a relic of the past becomes a conscious part of your vision of faith; and here in Rome you encounter the Successor of Peter as he endeavors to show fidelity to Christ by confirming all his brethren in the faith.

7. I would like to take occasion also to extend a special greeting to Cardinal Baum, who has only recently come to Rome to assume the weighty task of directing the Sacred Congregation for Catholic Education. Among his many responsibilities will be the promotion of the authentic renewal of seminary life in Rome and throughout the world. No other responsibilities of his will be of greater importance. In full accord with this conviction of mine are the following words that I wrote to the Bishops of the Church in my Holy Thursday Letter last year: "The full reconstitution of the life of the seminaries throughout the Church will be the best proof of the achievement of the renewal to which the Council directed the Church".

8. Beloved brothers and sons in Christ, you have a special place in my thoughts and prayers, and I look to you with confidence. For I see your youth and your sincerity, your strength and your desire to serve. I see your joy and your love for Christ and his people. All this gives me hope that the authentic renewal of the Church begun by the Second Vatican Council will indeed be brought to completion. Yes, your lives hold great promise for the future of the Church, for the future of the evangelization of the world, provided that you remain faithful: faithful to the word of God, faithful to the Eucharist, faithful to prayer and study, faithful to the Lord, who has begun this good work in you, and who will carry it through to completion.

Dear brothers and sons: let us together praise his name, and let us proclaim by word and deed - today and always - that Jesus is the Christ the Son of the Living God.

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