



The Holy See

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TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

MASS FOR THE FAITHFUL OF DETROIT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Pontiac Silverdome, Detroit
Saturday, 19 September 1987*

“Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ” (*Phil. 1, 27*).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. The apostle Paul addresses this appeal to the Christians of Philippi. And today *the Church's liturgy repeats this appeal* to all who believe in Christ. As my visit to your country comes to an end, it is my special joy this evening to reflect on those words with you, the people of the Church in Detroit, as well as visitors from elsewhere in Michigan, from nearby Canada and from other areas.

From the humble beginnings of the foundation of Detroit in the year 1701, *the proclamation of God's word* in this region has continued unbroken, despite hardships and setbacks, and has reached a level of maturity and a fruitfulness unimagined by the early missionaries. Many years separate us from the first celebration of the Eucharist by the priests who accompanied Cadillac, the founder of Detroit, and yet we know that our communion this evening in the Body and Blood of Christ also links us with them and with *all who have gone before us in faith*.

With you I give thanks to God for the courage, dedication and perseverance of the many clergy, religious and laity who worked so hard during all these years, first to share their faith with the Native Americans of this area, and then *to preserve and spread the faith* among those of almost every race and nation who settled here. I also give thanks with you for the intrepid Catholic faith of

so many of your parents and grandparents who came to Michigan in order to find liberty and in order to build a better life for themselves and especially for you, their children and grandchildren. Whatever may be the path by which you have received the gift of your Catholic faith, it is due in some measure to those who have gone before you here. *Their voices are joined to that of Saint Paul* when he says to us: "Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ".

2. We read this exhortation this evening in the light of the Gospel *parable of the workers* sent by the owner of an estate into his vineyard, after he has agreed with them on the daily wage. Our Lord often taught through parables like this one. By using images from daily life, he led his hearers to insights about the Kingdom or Reign of God. Using parables, he was able to raise their minds and hearts *from what is seen to what is unseen*. When we remember that the things of this world already bear *the imprint of God's Kingdom*, it is not surprising that the imagery of the parables is so well suited to the Gospel message.

On the one hand, the vineyard of which Jesus speaks is an earthly reality, as is the work to be done in it. On the other hand, *the vineyard is an image of the Kingdom of God*. This Kingdom is described in the Gospel as "the vineyard of the Lord".

3. Let us reflect for a moment on the first of these realities - *the earthly vineyard* - as a workplace, as the place where you and I must *earn our daily bread*. As I said in the encyclical *Laborem Exercens*: "Man must work, both because the Creator has commanded it and because of his own humanity, which requires work in order to be maintained and developed. Man must work out of regard for others, especially his own family, but also for the society he is a child, and the whole human family of which he is a member since he is the heir to the work of generations and at the same time a sharer in building the future of those who will come after him in the succession of history" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Laborem Exercens*, 16).

Accordingly, *the Church considers it her task to focus attention on the dignity and rights of workers*, to condemn violations of that dignity and those rights, and to provide guidance for authentic human progress (Cfr. *ibid.* 1). The Church's goal is to uplift ever more the family of mankind in the light of Christ's word and by its power.

Central to the Church's teaching is the conviction that *people are more important than things*; that work is "for man" and not man "for work"; that the person is both the subject and purpose of all work and cannot be reduced to a mere instrument of production; that *the person is to be valued for what he or she is* rather than for what he or she owns (Cfr. *ibid.* 6. 12; *Gaudium et Spes*, 35). This last truth in particular reminds us that the only gift we can offer God that is truly worthy of him is the gift of ourselves, as we discover in the message of today's Gospel parable.

4. That message, as I mentioned, has to do with *a spiritual reality*, the Kingdom of God, towards which Jesus seeks to raise the minds and hearts of his listeners. He begins today's parable with

the words: "The reign of God is like the case of the owner of an estate who went out at dawn to hire workmen for his vineyard" (*Matth. 20, 1*). That our Lord is speaking about *more than just human work and wages* should be clear from the owner's actions and the ensuing conflict between him and some of the workers. It is not that the owner refuses to honour the agreement about wages. The dispute arises because he gives the same pay to everybody, whether the person worked all day or only part of the day. Each receives the sum which had been agreed upon. Thus the owner of the estate shows *generosity to the latecomers*, to the indignation of those who had worked all day. To them this generosity seems to be an injustice. And what response does the owner give? "I am free", he says, "to do as I please with my money, am I not? Or are you envious because I am generous?" (*Matth. 20, 15*).

In this parable we find one of those seeming contradictions, those *paradoxes*, that appear in the Gospel. It arises from the fact that the parable is describing *two different standards*. One is the standard by which justice is measured by things. The other standard belongs to the Kingdom of God, in which the way of measuring is not the just distribution of things but *the giving of a gift*, and, ultimately, the greatest gift of all - *the gift of self*.

5. The owner of the estate pays the workers according to the value of their work, that is, the sum of one *denarius*. But in the Kingdom of God the pay or wages is *God himself*. This is what Jesus is trying to teach. When it comes to salvation in the Kingdom of God, it is not a question of just wages but of *the undeserved generosity of God*, who gives himself as the supreme gift to each and every person who shares in divine life through sanctifying grace.

Such a recompense or reward *cannot be measured in material terms*. When a person gives the gift of self, even in human relations, the gift cannot be measured in quantity. The gift is one and undivided because the giver is one and undivided.

How can we receive such a gift? We look to Saint Paul for an answer. His words in the Letter to the Philippians are fascinating: "I firmly trust and anticipate that I shall never be put to shame for my hopes... Christ will be exalted through me, whether I live or die. For, to me, 'life' means Christ; hence dying is so much gain" (*Phil. 1, 20-21*).

With these words of Saint Paul we find ourselves at the very heart of that standard of measurement which belongs to the kingdom of heaven. When we receive a gift, *we must respond with a gift*. We can only respond to the gift of God in Jesus Christ - his Cross and Resurrection - in the way that Paul responded - with *the gift of ourselves*. All that Paul is, is contained in this gift of self, both his life and his death. The gift of a person's life cannot be valued merely in terms of the number of hours spent in an earthly vineyard.

Saint Paul, and everyone like him, realizes that one can *never match or equal the value of God's gift of himself to us*. The only measure that applies is the measure of love. And love's measure, as

Saint Bernard says, is *to love without measure* (S. Bernardi *De Diligendo Deo*, I, 1). This makes it possible for the last to be first, and the first last (Cfr. *Matth.* 20, 16).

6. There is another episode, in the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus says to one of the pharisees who is scandalized at *the behaviour of a woman known to be a sinner*: her many sins are forgiven because of her great love” (*Luc.* 7, 47). We do well to reflect upon the love in the heart of this woman, who washed the Lord’s feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. We can imagine the bitter sorrow that led her to such an extravagant gesture. Yet *by giving herself humbly to God*, she discovered the far greater and underserved gift of which we have spoken, namely, *God’s gift of himself to her*. Through this exchange of gifts, the woman found herself once again, only now she was healed and restored. “Your sins are forgiven”, Jesus says to her, “... go in peace” (*Ibid.* 7, 48).

For us too, sinners that we are, it is all too easy to squander our love, to use it in the wrong way. And like the pharisee, we do not easily understand *the power of love to transform*. Only in the Life, Death and Resurrection of Christ do we come to see that love is the measure of all things in the Kingdom of God, because "God is love" (*1Jo.* 4, 8). We can fully experience love in this life *only through faith and repentance*.

7. "Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ". As Christians we *live and work in this world*, which is symbolized by the vineyard, but at the same time we are *called to work in the vineyard of the Lord*. We live this visible earthly life and at the same time the life of the Kingdom of God, which is the ultimate destiny and vocation of every person. How then are we to conduct ourselves worthily *in regard to these two realities?*

In the *Credo of the People of God* proclaimed by my predecessor Paul VI, we find an answer to that question, an answer that reflects *the faith of the Church* in the light of the Second Vatican Council, particularly the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World: "We confess that the Kingdom of God... is not of this world... and that its growth cannot be confused with the progress of civilization, science or technology. The true growth of the Kingdom of God consists in an ever deeper knowledge of the unfathomable riches of Christ, in an ever stronger hope in eternal blessings, in an ever more fervent response to the love of God... But this same love also leads the Church to show constant concern for the true temporal welfare of people . . . Although the Church does not cease to remind her children that here they have no lasting city, she also urges them to contribute, according to their vocation and means, to the welfare of this their earthly home . . . and to devote themselves to helping the poorest and neediest of their brothers and sisters. This intense solicitude of the Church... for the needs of people, their joys and hopes, their griefs and labours, is nothing other than her great desire to be present with them in order to illuminate them with the light of Christ and gather them into one in him who alone is their Saviour" (Pauli VI *"Credo" Populi Dei*, die 30 iun. 1968: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, VI (1968) 289ss).

Dear brothers and sisters: these words tell us what is meant by *conduct worthy of the Gospel of Christ* - that Gospel which we have heard and believed, and are called to live every day. And today *in this Eucharistic sacrifice we offer our work, our activities, our whole lives to the Father* through his Son, Jesus Christ. We call upon God to accept the gift of ourselves.

8. "The Lord is just in all his ways
and holy in all his works.

The Lord is near to all who call upon him,
to all who call upon him in truth" (*Ps. 145(144), 17-18*).

In the first reading, the prophet Isaiah speaks in the name of the Lord, who in the Gospel parable is symbolized by the owner of the vineyard. The Lord says: "my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways... As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above our thoughts" (*Is. 55, 8-9*).

And so, my brothers and sisters, "Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ", that is to say, *measure the things of this world by the standard of the Kingdom of God.*

Not the other way around!

Not the other way around!

"Seek the Lord while he may be found, call to him while he is near" (*Ibid. 55, 6*).

He is near! The Lord is near!

The Kingdom of God is within us. Amen.

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