



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

LITURGY OF VESPERS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Chapel of Saint Joseph's Seminary, Yonkers
Friday, 6 October 1995*

"O Wisdom, O holy Word of God, you govern all creation with your strong yet tender care. Come, teach us the way of wisdom" (Advent Antiphon, December 17).

*Dear Brothers, Cardinals, Bishops,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

1. These words of the Advent Antiphon come to mind as we listen to the reading of today's Vespers here in this beautiful chapel of Saint Joseph's Seminary in Dunwoodie. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Saint Paul writes of wisdom: *"What we utter is God's wisdom: a mysterious, a hidden wisdom. God planned it before all ages for our glory"* (1Cor. 2: 7). But what wisdom is this? Saint Paul is speaking of God's plan for our salvation, the plan brought to completion by the Eternal Word, Divine Wisdom himself, the Son who is of one being with the Father, the Holy Word of God spoken of in the Advent Antiphon. This is the Word, of course, of whom Saint John speaks in the Prologue of his Gospel: *"In the beginning was the Word. The Word was in God's presence and the Word was God... The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us, and we have seen his glory"* (Jn. 1: 1.14).

2. Dear members of this Seminary community, and you from other Seminaries, as well as the many people outside this Chapel who have joined us: Eternal Wisdom became flesh, being born of the Virgin Mary. This is why we pray to Mary as the "Seat of Wisdom", *Sedes Sapientiae*. Wisdom, the Person of the Son, was conceived in her womb by the power of the Holy Spirit. Born of her flesh, Jesus is Eternal Wisdom, the Son of God, whose glory is revealed in his passing from the Cross to the Resurrection. It is crucial that *you seminarians* understand this because, as Saint

Paul says, the "rulers of this age" did not understand God's wisdom at the time, for – he writes – "if they had known it, they would never have crucified the Lord of glory" (1Cor. 2: 8). And many do not understand it today.

Even some who call themselves Christians do not recognize that Christ is the Eternal Son of the Father who brings true wisdom into the world. For this reason, they do not understand or accept the teachings of the Church. Perhaps you have already been confronted by this. You will certainly have to confront it as priests. If you are to become priests, it will be for the purpose – above all other purposes – of proclaiming the Word of God and feeding God's people with the Body and Blood of Christ. If you do this faithfully, teaching the wisdom that comes from above, you will often be ignored as Christ was ignored, and even rejected as Christ was rejected. *"I preach Christ and Christ crucified"*, says Saint Paul (Cf. *ibid.* 1: 23).

3. Why has the Pope come to Dunwoodie to give you such a serious message? *Because in Christ we are friends* (Cf. Jn. 15: 15), and friends can talk about serious matters. If there is one challenge facing the Church and her priests today, it is the challenge of transmitting the Christian message whole and entire, without letting it be emptied of its substance. The Gospel cannot be reduced to mere human wisdom. Salvation lies not in clever human words or schemes, but in the Cross and Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. *The wisdom of the Cross is at the heart of the life and ministry of every priest.* This is the sublime "science" which, above all other learning, the Seminary is meant to impart to you: "The Spirit we have received is not the world's spirit but God's Spirit... we speak... not in words of human wisdom, but in words taught by the Spirit" (1Cor. 2: 12-13).

This is also the framework of the service I have tried to render at the United Nations during these days. If the Pope did something other than what Saint Paul calls "interpreting spiritual things in spiritual terms" (*ibid.* 2: 13), what message could he preach? How could I justify my presence and my speaking to that Assembly? My task is not to speak in purely human terms about merely human values, but in spiritual terms about spiritual values, which are ultimately what make us fully human.

4. Over the magnificent doors of this chapel I am able to read words that have a very special meaning for me: *"Aperite portas Redemptori"*. These were my words to the peoples of the world at the very beginning of my Pontificate: *"Help the Pope"*, I said, *"and all those who wish to serve Christ and with Christ's power to serve the human person and the whole of mankind. Do not be afraid! Open wide the doors for Christ!"* (John Paul II, *Homily at Saint Peter's Basilica*, 5, 22 October 1978)

Do not be afraid, I say, because great courage is required if we are to open the doors to Christ, if we are to let Christ enter into our hearts so fully that we can say with Saint Paul, *"The life I live now is not my own; Christ is living in me"* (Gal. 2: 20), Conquering fear is the first and indispensable step for the priest if he is to open the doors, first of his own heart, then of the hearts of the people he serves, to Christ the Redeemer. You need courage to follow Christ, especially when you recognize that so much of our dominant culture is a culture of flight from God, a culture which displays a not – so – hidden contempt for human life, beginning with the lives of the unborn, and extending to contempt for the frail and the elderly. Some people say that the Pope speaks too much about the "culture of death". But these are times in which – as I wrote in my Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* – "choices once unanimously considered criminal and rejected by the common

moral sense are gradually becoming socially acceptable" (John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae*, 4). The Church cannot ignore what is happening.

5. And yet, this is only one part of the picture. The complete picture is what I wrote at the beginning of the same Encyclical: "The Gospel of Life is at the heart of Jesus' message. Lovingly received day after day by the Church, it is to be preached with dauntless fidelity as 'good news' to the people of every age and culture" (Ibid. 1). Therefore, dear Seminarians, you must not be afraid to confront the "wisdom of this world" with the certainty of the teachings of Christ in which you are grounded, *but above all with the love of Christ*, with the compassion and the mercy of Christ, who – like the Father – desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth (Cf. 1Tim. 2: 4). The disciple cannot be greater than the master (Cf. Mt. 10: 24). You will not become priests to be served, or to lord it over others (Cf. ibid. 20: 28), but to serve others, especially the poorest of the poor, the materially poor and the spiritually poor.

Open the doors of your hearts in order that Christ may enter and bring you his joy. The Church needs *joyful* priests, capable of bringing true joy to God's people, which is the Good News in all its truth and transforming power.

6. This evening's reading from Saint Paul is very appropriate for the Seminary community. Why are you here as Seminarians? Why are you here, members of the faculty and others who help to prepare Seminarians for the priesthood? Is it not to "*know the mind of the Lord*"? The Seminarian must ask himself: Is Christ calling me? Does he wish me to be his priest? If you answer "yes", then the great work of the Seminary is to help you to put off "*the natural man*", to leave behind "*the old man*", that is, the unspiritual man who used to be, in order to experience the action of the Holy Spirit and to *understand the things of the Spirit of God*. You must enter into an intimate relationship with the Holy Spirit and with all his gifts, in order that the Lord's intentions for you may become clear. This is another way of expressing the need for wisdom. Indeed, the Seminary must be a school of wisdom. Here you must live with your patron, Saint Joseph, and with Mary, the Mother of Jesus; and in the silence of this intimacy you will learn that wisdom of which Saint Luke speaks: "*Jesus for his part progressed steadily in wisdom and age and grace before God and men*" (Lk. 2: 52).

I have to say a word of appreciation to the Rector and his associates for recently incorporating into the Seminary program a full year devoted exclusively to spiritual formation. This will be a precious time for advancing in wisdom and holiness, that wisdom and holiness which are essential for the priesthood.

7. Next year, Saint Joseph's Seminary will celebrate its Hundredth Anniversary. It is providential that the same year, 1996, will be *a year of evangelization in the Church in New York*. It helps us remember the countless souls, redeemed by the Blood of Christ, who have been helped toward salvation by the thousands of priests trained in this Seminary. Priests, like the most distinguished alumnus of this Seminary, the humble saintly Cardinal Terence Cooke whose death twelve years ago today we commemorate with prayerful remembrance. You will join them in continuing the work of salvation, which will never end until, as Jesus prayed, all will become one in him as he is one with the Father (Cf. Jn. 17: 21-23).

I thank Cardinal O'Connor, your Rector Monsignor O'Brien, the Faculty and staff and all who have invited me here for this special privilege of praying with you. Above all, I encourage you, the Seminarians, to be unselfish in answering the call of Christ and in offering your lives to his Church. Do not be afraid! If you begin to lose courage, turn to Mary, Seat of Wisdom; with her at your side, you will never be afraid. Amen.

I wish to express my heartfelt gratitude to all of you for your warm welcome. I thank all the Priests and Seminarians and all the many people outside. I thank the Pastors, the Parishioners here in Yonkers, who have received me with such enthusiasm – it may be said – and affection. That is true. I bless all of you, and I bless all your religious objects: In the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. God love you all!