



The Holy See

OPENING MASS OF THE SYNOD FOR AMERICA

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 16 November 1997

1. *"Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming"* (Gospel acclamation; cf. Mt 24:42, 44).

The prayerful vigilance to which today's liturgy invites us is well suited to the important event we are experiencing: the opening of the *Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops*, with the theme: *"Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: the Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America"*. This Assembly has gathered the prelates of all the Episcopates of the American continent, from the North to the Centre and the South, including the Caribbean region. I extend my cordial greetings to everyone and a warm welcome to those who have come from overseas.

Today the Word of God offers us a fitting perspective for the work of discernment we are about to undertake: that precisely of a faith-filled look at history, an "eschatological perspective".

This is the way to consider human events that the Lord teaches believers. We have heard a prophecy from the Book of Daniel, received by the prophet himself from the mouth of a heavenly messenger sent to "show [him] the truth" (Dn 11:2) about historical events. This prophecy tells of anguish and salvation for the people: how can we fail to recognize it as a prediction of the paschal mystery, the unique focus of history and a key to its authentic interpretation?

The Church prepares for and takes every step of her earthly pilgrimage in the light of the paschal mystery. And today she is celebrating the solemn beginning of an exceptional time of reflection and exchange on the mission she is called to carry out on the American continent. God's word offers her the correct faith vision for reading, as the angel tells Daniel, "what is inscribed in the book of

truth" (Dn 10:21). With this outlook the Church pauses to consider the road traveled thus far, in order to press onward to the new millennium with renewed missionary zeal.

2. It was only a short while ago, in 1992, that we solemnly recalled the fifth centenary of the evangelization of America. The Synod, which is beginning its work in St Peter's Basilica today, calls to mind those times when the inhabitants of the so-called "*Old World*", thanks to Christopher Columbus' admirable undertaking, learned of the existence of a "*New World*" previously unknown to them. The colonizers' work began on that historic day and so did the evangelizers' mission of making Christ and his Gospel known to the peoples of that continent.

One fruit of this extraordinary missionary effort was the evangelization of America, or more precisely, of the so-called "three Americas", which today can be considered largely Christian. It is also very important, 500 years later and at the threshold of the new millennium, that we remember the road traveled by Christianity in all these lands. Moreover, it is appropriate not to separate the Christian history of North America from that of Central and South America. It is essential to consider them together, even while safeguarding the originality of each one, because, in the eyes of those who arrived there more than 500 years ago, they appeared as a single reality, and especially because the communion between the local communities is a living sign of the inborn unity of the one Church of Jesus Christ, of which they are an organic part.

3. Everyone is aware that on the great American continent the results of the activity of the colonizers are evident today in the political and economic diversity of the continent, with undoubted cultural and religious repercussions. In comparison to other countries, North America has reached a higher level of technological advancement and economic well-being, and in the development of democratic institutions.

Faced with these realities, we cannot but ask about the historical causes which gave rise to such social differences. To what extent are these differences rooted in the history of the last five centuries? To what extent does the heritage of colonization count in them? And what influence did the first evangelization have?

In order to furnish an exhaustive response to these questions, it will be necessary, during the Synod, to consider the continent as a whole, from Alaska to Tierra del Fuego, without introducing a separation between the North, the Centre and the South, so as not to risk a contrast between them. On the contrary, we must look for the deeper reasons which prompt this unitary vision, by appealing to the common religious and Christian traditions.

These few indications enable us to understand the importance of the Synod we are inaugurating today.

4. "*Watch therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming*".

This exhortation that we have just heard in the Gospel acclamation refers to the spiritual atmosphere we are experiencing as the liturgical year draws to a close. It is an atmosphere interwoven with eschatological themes, highlighted in particular by the passage from St Mark's Gospel in which Christ stresses the transitory nature of heaven and earth: "Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away" (Mk 13:31).

The form of this world is passing away, but the Word of God will never pass away. How eloquent this comparison is! *God does not pass away* and neither will anything that comes from him. Christ's sacrifice never passes away, as we read today in the Letter to the Hebrews: Jesus "offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins" (10:12); and: "for by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified" (10:14).

Throughout this Synod Assembly we will pause to reflect on the past, but especially on the present moment of the American continent. We will attempt to identify in each of its regions the signs of Christ's saving presence, of his Word and of his sacrifice, so that we may revive our energies for the service of conversion and evangelization.

5. How could we not remember here the comforting intentions especially regarding collaboration between pastors in the new evangelization, which became evident at the end of CELAM's Fourth General Conference in Santo Domingo in 1992? It was then a question of intensifying the missionary apostolate of every community, in order to renew in consciences the commitment to go beyond our frontiers "to bring to other peoples the faith that reached us 500 years ago" (*Message, L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 18 November 1992, p. 7).

Let us give thanks to God because today the wish is fulfilled that I expressed at the opening session of that conference. On that occasion, I stressed: "This General Conference could take the opportunity in the not too distant future of holding a *meeting for representatives of the Bishops of the entire American continent* — a meeting which could be synodal in nature — for increased cooperation between the various particular Churches in the different areas of pastoral activity and at which, in the context of the new evangelization and as an expression of episcopal communion, the problems relating to justice and solidarity among all the nations of America could be faced" (*Insegnamenti*, vol. XV, 2, 1992; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 October 1992, p. 8), Here we are now gathered together with the intention of carrying out these resolutions of pastoral charity, with concern for the Church in America and in a spirit of affective and effective collegiality among all the Pastors of the particular Churches.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, we open the Synod's work in the context of the imminent conclusion of the liturgical year, with the beginning of Advent close at hand. May this significant coincidence determine the basic direction of our reflections and decisions!

Dear brothers and sisters, this season truly invites us to great watchfulness. We must watch and

pray, remembering that one day we will come before the Son of man as Pastors of the Church on the American continent.

We entrust this Synod Assembly to you, Mary, Mother of hope, beloved and venerated in the many shrines across the American continent. Help the Christians of America to be vigilant witnesses of the Gospel, that they may be found watchful and ready on the great and mysterious day when Christ will come as the glorious Lord of the nations to judge the living and the dead.

Amen!

© Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana