



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE FAITHFUL OF COLUMBIA

Church of Saint Peter, Columbia

Friday, 11 September 1987 "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matth. 16, 16)

Dear Bishop Unterkoefer,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

These words, which are recorded in the Gospel Saint Matthew, were spoken by Simon Peter, the first Bishop of Rome. They are full of meaning for every one who believes in Christ, but they have special meaning for us who are gathered here today in this *Church of Saint Peter in Columbia*, which the Successor of Peter is privileged to visit.

It is a great joy for me to come to *the Diocese of Charleston*. I thank you for receiving me with such warmth and fraternal love. Your famous "southern hospitality" makes me feel at home.

As you know, I have come to Columbia to take part in *ecumenical dialogue* with national leaders other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and to join with a large gathering our brothers and sisters in an ecumenical prayer service. Our Lord prayed "that all may be one" (*Jo. 17, 21*). We all want to do our part to make this unity come about.

2. *"You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God"*.

These words of Peter express *the heart of our faith*, for they reveal the mystery of Christ; they reveal Christ as the Son of the living God, the eternal Word who became man and was born of the Virgin Mary.

Peter was the first of the Apostles, *the first disciple* to make a public declaration of his faith in Jesus the Messiah. The words of Peter's profession of faith were words spoken with real personal conviction; and yet, these words did not find their ultimate origin in him. As Jesus told him : "Blest

are you, Simon son of Jonah! No mere man has revealed this to you, but my heavenly Father" (*Matth. 16, 17*). *Faith in Christ is a gift*. It is not a human achievement. Only God the Father can draw us to Jesus, only he can give us the grace to know Jesus, to accept him as the eternal Son of God, and to profess our faith in him.

3. From that day in the neighbourhood of Caesarea Philippi, Peter's life was radically changed. And not only his life ! The other Apostles, the other disciples as well, were granted the gift of faith and they too became witnesses of the words and deeds of Jesus. A whole new era began in the history of the world, in the history of salvation. And so it has continued down through the ages. People of all centuries, people from all countries have, like Peter, come to know Jesus, to accept him as God's Son one in being with the Father to profess their faith in him, and to make his holy Gospel the basis of their Christian lives. *The person of Jesus Christ and his word are forever the centre of the Church's life*.

4. But the wonderful gift of faith is not separate from the Cross. Belief in Christ is not free from difficulties. It is not without cost. In fact, our *faith in Jesus Christ is often put to the test*. Peter came to know this only too well. And therefore he writes: "You may for a time have to suffer the distress of many trials; but this is so that your faith, which is more precious than the passing splendour of fire-tried gold, *may by its genuineness lead to praise, glory, and honour* when Jesus Christ appears" (1 *Petr.* 1, 6-7) .

We recall too the time, after our divine Master spoke of the mystery of the Eucharist, when "many of his disciples broke away and would not remain in his company any longer. Jesus then said to the Twelve, 'Do you want to leave me too?' Simon Peter answered him, '*Lord to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life*. We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one'" (*Jo.* 6, 66-69).

When our faith is tested, when we are tempted to doubt and turn away, we can find courage and renewed hope in these words of Peter : "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life". Christ gives us the strength to live according to our faith, and to meet all the challenges against it. *From Christ we must learn the way to overcome those sad divisions which still exist today among Christians*. We must be eager to be fully one in faith and love.

5. I know that you share this *ecumenical conviction* with me. Indeed, Catholics in South Carolina have long felt the need for ecumenical dialogue and collaboration, first of all, because you are a distinct minority, less than three per cent of the population. Moreover, the Catholic Church here has *a long tradition of ecumenical initiative*. Your first *Bishop, John England*, accepted the invitations of other Christians to preach in their churches and to explain the teachings of our faith. And, with the passage of the years, you have never lost this ecumenical spirit.

In more recent times in particular, you have joined with other Christian believers to promote justice

and truth, to further mutual understanding and collaboration. This cooperation has been particularly striking in regard to efforts to improve racial relations among citizens of your State. I commend you in these deserving endeavours, so worthwhile and so important.

At the same time, you must never cease to strive for *personal holiness and conversion of heart*. For, as the Second Vatican Council has said: "This change of heart and holiness of life, along with public and private prayer for the unity of Christians, should be regarded as the soul of the whole ecumenical movement" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 8) .

6. Dear friends in Christ, representatives of all the Catholics of the Diocese of Charleston: thank you for coming to greet me. I wish to assure you of my esteem for all of you who make up this local Church, spread out across this entire State of South Carolina. Know that the Pope admires all the efforts you and your forebears have made to preserve your faith in Jesus Christ, to live this faith, and to transmit it to your children.

And now I ask you to take home with you those other words ascribed to Peter words which explain so well what it means to believe in Christ, the Son of the living God. He wrote: "*Although you have never seen him, you love him, and without seeing you now believe in him, and rejoice with inexpressible joy touched with glory because you are achieving faith's goal, your salvation*" (1 Petr. 1, 8-9).

Dear Catholic people of this Diocese of Charleston: never forget that faith in Jesus Christ brings you to salvation and eternal life!

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