



The Holy See

LETTER OF POPE JOHN PAUL II TO GERMAN FAITHFUL FOR "KATHOLIKENTAG"

14 June 1998

Venerable Brother,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. "Give reason for the hope that is in you!". With this motto, you inaugurated the 93rd celebration of the *Deutschen Katholikentag* in Mainz. From Rome, I greet those who have gathered to celebrate the Divine Office in Volkspark, Mainz, and also those who have taken part in this solemnity by means of radio and television. I convey a particular greeting to you, dear Bishop Lehmann; this meeting is taking place in your Diocese. You have combined your task as President of the German Bishops' Conference with service to the Church throughout the world and worked with generous apostolic concern for the success of this *Katholikentag*. Through you, I also greet all the Bishops of Germany and of all the countries of the earth who have come to Mainz in these days.

2. Remembrance full of gratitude is an important source of hope. Mainz has an honoured place in the memory of the Church in Germany, since in the second century Christians laid the foundations in the mid-Rhine area for a shining history of which Mainz, an Episcopal city and Diocese, ought justly to be proud. Exceptional Pastors such as Boniface, Willigis and Rabanus Maurus governed this former Metropolis of Germany.

I myself have a special relationship with this Diocese. In fact, I cherish in my heart many personal memories of Mainz and of the Message of Bishop Ketteler whose tomb I visited when I was a student. The memory of my stay in this city, about 20 years ago, when I was welcomed by the then-Bishop, Cardinal Hermann Volk, to whom I was bound by close ties of friendship, is still particularly vivid.

3. The first pages of the *Katholikentag* were written here in Mainz 150 years ago. The first meeting of this kind was the result of an ecclesial renewal, which had strengthened the self-awareness of Catholics to the point of enabling them to take an active stand against the secular world and a frequently hostile State.

This year, various commemorations recall those burning issues: the national meeting which took place in St Paul's Church, Frankfurt, in 1848 sustained German society's quest for unity and freedom and its attempt to put human rights into effect and to resolve social problems. Catholics acquired a new consciousness of their own mission to intervene in social life so that they might become the salt of the earth and the light of the world (cf. Mt 5:13-16). Many gathered together in associations. That same year, when Marx and Engels' *Communist Manifesto* appeared and Europe experienced a wave of revolutions, the Catholic faith also displayed new vitality. In 1848 the first *Katholikentag* in Mainz together with the sixth centenary of Cologne Cathedral were a visible and effective proof that Catholicism was increasingly gaining strength.

Mainz, 100 years later, was again the place in which the first *Katholikentag* of the post-war period was able to give to the many, who met there among the ruins, precious stones to build a social, economic and ecclesial future. The theme "Christ in the needs of the time" questioned your fellow citizens in the depths of their hearts and enabled them to find new courage and new hope to continue on their way. Several vocations to the priesthood and religious life sprang from that *Katholikentag*.

You have now once again gathered in Mainz to address the challenges Christians must face after almost two millenniums of history if they wish not only to preserve the heritage of the faith in the next millennium, but also to bear a forceful and lively witness for the next generations. I would like to remind you of the words of the Jesuit, Fr Ivo Zeiger, in his opening address for *Katholikentag* in 1948: "Germany has become a land of mission". Millions of people no longer rely on God in their own lives; "they do not oppose him, but are merely indifferent to him".

4. Fifty years lie between this analysis of the times and the jubilee of *Katholikentag*, whose motto, addressed to the "missionary Germany" of today, says: *Account for the hope that is in you*. It is taken from a prayer in St Peter's First Letter which the Apostle expresses as follows: "in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you" (1 Pt 3:15).

Not only in the period of rebuilding, but also in our day, hope concerns goods which cannot be bought with money. In fact, what use is it to own many things if we do not know who we are or why we are living? Man's thoughts and sentiments are determined by much anxiety, insecurity, fear and foreboding. Blind trust in progress gives way to disappointment. Social developments, which affect peoples' lives like the high unemployment rate, can result in hostility to foreigners and give rise to doubt in many hearts. Alarming questions arise: does the progress achieved by science and technology correspond to moral and spiritual progress? Is there an increase in neighbourly love and mutual respect? Or does selfishness prevail in the small and in the great world?

These are questions on which the Church must maintain a dialogue with all people of goodwill. The *Katholikentag* is a suitable forum for this dialogue. It is the laity in particular who are involved in this task. I thank the sponsors of the *Katholikentag* for their efforts. I especially ask the Central Committee of German Catholics and the Bishops, priests and laity to speak and act in unison in this important testimony and also to guarantee their deep union with the Successor of Peter and with the whole Church throughout the world, which has gathered so impressively in your home town. Account for the hope that is in you!

Since hope in many places is no longer a sturdy tree but often only a frail plant that can soon be crushed underfoot in the tumult of a feverish world, I ask you to present the Gospel of hope to your neighbours in the various walks of life, so that this plant may recover its strength or germinate and flower anew. I do not know anywhere which cannot become a biotype of hope with God's help and through man's concern. Indeed, there is always room for hope: in the family and in friendships, in urban neighbourhoods and villages, in schools and offices, in factories and hospitals. I remind you that the first form of witness is life, since "people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories" (*Redemptoris missio*, n. 42).

5. If an increasing number of women and men were to witness faithfully to the Gospel, this would be a service to the whole of society which not only hungers and thirsts for justice, but also yearns for a hope that goes beyond the transient and the visible. In the contemporary social context, marked by a dramatic struggle between the "culture of life" and the "culture of death", I urge you, as my allies, to help build a new culture of life also in your esteemed land (cf. *Evangelium vitae*, n. 95). Only those who are aware of the inalienable dignity of each person and respect it absolutely can serve life in all its phases. Indeed, no one is a hopeless case.

6. Building a culture of life begins at home, in the Church. We must courageously and honestly ask ourselves what culture of life is promoted among us: among individual Christians, in families, groups, spiritual movements, parishes and Dioceses. Concrete decisions at personal, family and social levels must have as their parameters the priority of being over having, of the person over things and of solidarity over selfishness, which often requires the courage to start a new life-style.

This also has repercussions on a dialogue that is sincere, based on truth and love. When we speak of the Church as *communio* in relation to the Second Vatican Council, we must not be limited only to sacramental communion; we must commit ourselves to a communication worthy of those who are in the community of the Triune God.

7. I express special gratitude to the numerous women and the many men who, in the particular Churches of your country, have long since discovered and credibly live their dignity and task as lay people, multiplying the talents God has given them. They are Christ's best letters (cf. 2 Cor 3:3) to a world yearning for a hope that is certain. The laity are called to devote themselves in particular to being witnesses in society and to "contribute to the sanctification of the world, as from within like leaven" (*Lumen gentium*, n. 31).

I urge Bishops, priests and deacons, religious and lay people, in mutual esteem, with kindness and the willingness to collaborate, to weave a net that unites everyone in that hope which is Jesus Christ. What a convincing and persuasive image the Church would portray were she to become increasingly a net of hope that could gather even those who have slipped through the meshes of the world.

8. During the *Katholikentag* many young people have contributed to weaving this net of hope. I extend a particularly affectionate greeting to them. With your presence you express your hope in Christ. I have faith in you and urge you: be the hope of the Church. May you give a young face to the Church in the third millennium!

The Church looks at you with sympathy and understanding. She expects a great deal of you. Not only does the Church

have so much to say to you young people, but you too, dear young people, have so much to share with the Church (cf. *Christifideles laici*, n. 46). I know that your hearts are open to friendship, fraternity and solidarity. You commit yourselves to the causes of justice and peace, to improving the quality of life and the preservation of the environment. However, you also have painful experiences such as disappointment, poverty, fear, and attempt to quench your interior, deeper thirst with superficial pleasures.

I give you a word of advice: listen inwardly to yourselves and hear what God wants to tell you through his words and the voice of your conscience. Share your experiences of hope. Since you are preparing to cross the threshold of the third millennium, examine in your heart what plan the Lord has for you and how you can achieve it with determination.

9. A short time separates us from that date. The stretch of the ecumenical path we have covered since the Second Vatican Council is not a short one. The steps that still await us require fervent prayer, a resolute will for change, diligent theological work and spiritual perseverance as well as suitable ecumenical initiatives. In this way we will later be able to face the Great Jubilee, if not completely united, at least with the certainty of being much closer to overcoming the divisions of the second millennium (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 34). The next Holy Year must spur us to bear a more tangible common witness to the central truth of our faith "so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21).

10. Dear brothers and dear sisters, to describe better the testimony of the Church, the Fathers of the Church often use an effective image. Just as the moon receives the sun's light by day and shines in the darkness of night, so the Church must receive and radiate Christ's light in the darkness of the world. However, the moon can only draw the strength to shine if it continues to wax and wane in rhyme with the seasons, if from being full it plunges into darkness, to return once again to being full and bright.

In this image, while Jesus Christ is the sun, the Church interprets the role of the moon. Even she has not been spared, down the ages, the constant experience of having to "wane" in order to shine again. A part of her historical aspect must be purified by the Holy Spirit, so that she may radiate Christ's light. Only the readiness to penetrate the darkness of history, although a part of her exterior aspect must die, will enable her, with God's help, to overcome the darkness and shadows, the defeats and failures. I am thinking, in this regard, of the light of the paschal candle: its small, frail flame dispels the shadows. It overcomes the darkness.

"May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom 15:13). With this sincere wish which Paul, Apostle to the Gentiles, addressed to the Romans, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you.

From the Vatican, 14 June 1998.

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