



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

PILGRIMAGE TO THE HOLY MONASTERY OF RILA

ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER

Saturday, 25 May 2002

*Venerable Metropolitans and Bishops,
Beloved Monks and Nuns of Bulgaria
and of all the Holy Orthodox Churches!*

1. Peace be with you! I greet you with affection in the Lord. In particular I greet the Hegumen of this Monastery, Bishop Ioan, who, as an Observer sent by His Holiness Patriarch Cyril, took part with me in the sessions of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

In the course of my visit to Bulgaria, I wanted to make this pilgrimage to Rila to venerate the relics of the holy monk John and to express gratitude and affection to all of you: "We give thanks to God always for you all, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labour of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (*1 Thes 1:2-3*).

Yes, dear Brothers and Sisters, Eastern monasticism, together with that of the West, constitutes a great gift for the whole Church.

2. Many times I have emphasized the precious contribution that you make to the ecclesial community through the example of your lives. In my Apostolic Letter *Orientale Lumen* I wrote how I would like "to look at the vast panorama of Eastern Christianity from a specific vantage point which affords a view of many of its features: monasticism" (No. 9). I am in fact convinced that the

monastic experience constitutes the heart of Christian life, so much so that it can be proposed as a point of reference for all the baptized.

A great Western monk and mystic, William of Saint-Thierry, calls your experience, which nourished and enriched the monastic life of the Catholic West, a "light which comes from the East" (cf. *Epistula ad fratres de Monte Dei* I, *Sources Chrétiennes* 223, p. 145). With him, many other spiritual men of the West expressed praise-filled recognition of the richness of Eastern monastic spirituality. I am pleased today to join my voice to this chorus of appreciation, and to acknowledge the authenticity of the path of sanctification traced out in the writings and lives of so many of your monks, who have offered eloquent examples of radical discipleship of the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Monastic life, in virtue of the uninterrupted tradition of holiness on which it is based, preserves with love and fidelity certain elements of Christian life that are important also for modern men and women: monks and nuns are *the Gospel memory* for Christians and the world.

As Saint Basil the Great teaches (cf. *Regulae Fusius Tractatae* VIII, PG 31, 933-941), Christian life is above all *apotaghé*, "renunciation" of sin, of worldliness, of idols, in order to hold fast to the one true God and Lord, Jesus Christ (cf. *1 Thes* 1:9-10). In monasticism, this renunciation becomes radical: it is the renunciation of home, family, profession (cf. *Lk* 18:28-29); the renunciation, therefore, of earthly goods in the unending quest for those that are eternal (cf. *Col* 3:1-2); the renunciation of *philautía*, as Saint Maximus Confessor calls it (cf. *Capita de Charitate* II, 8; III, 8; III, 57 and *passim*, PG 90, 960-1080), that is, selfish love, in order to gain knowledge of the infinite love of God and to become capable of loving the brethren. Monastic mysticism is above all a path of renunciation in order to be able to hold ever faster to the Lord Jesus and to be transfigured by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Blessed John of Rila — whom I arranged to have depicted along with other holy men and women of East and West in the mosaic of the *Redemptoris Mater* Chapel in the Apostolic Palace, and to whom this Monastery bears enduring witness — when he heard Jesus' words calling him to renounce all his possessions and give them to the poor (cf. *Mk* 10:21), left everything for the precious pearl of the Gospel, and placed himself under the tutelage of holy ascetics in order to learn the art of spiritual combat.

4. "Spiritual combat" is another element of monastic life which needs to be taught anew and proposed once more to all Christians today. It is a secret and interior art, an invisible struggle in which monks engage every day against the temptations, the evil suggestions that the demon tries to plant in their hearts; it is a combat that becomes crucifixion in the arena of solitude in the quest for the purity of heart that makes it possible to see God (cf. *Mt* 5:8) and of the charity that makes it possible to share in the life of God who is love (cf. *1 Jn* 4:16).

More than ever in the lives of Christians today, idols are seductive and temptations unrelenting:

the art of spiritual combat, the discernment of spirits, the sharing of one's thoughts with one's spiritual director, the invocation of the Holy Name of Jesus and of his mercy must once more become a part of the inner life of the disciple of the Lord. This battle is necessary in order not to be distracted (*aperispastoi*) or worried (*amérimnoi*) (cf. *1 Cor* 7:32,35), and to live in constant recollection with the Lord (cf. Saint Basil the Great, *Regulae Fusius Tractatae* VIII, 3; XXXII, 1; XXXVIII).

5. Through the spiritual combat, Blessed John of Rila also lived his "submission" in the obedience and mutual service required by life in common. The monastery is the place where the "new commandment" is daily fulfilled, it is the house and school of communion, the place where we become servants of the brethren, just as Jesus chose to be a servant in the midst of his disciples (cf. *Lk* 22:27). What a powerful Christian witness is given by a monastic community when it lives in authentic charity! Before such witness, non-Christians too are led to recognize that the Lord is ever living and active in his people.

Blessed John experienced, then, the hermit's life in "compunction" and penance, but above all in uninterrupted listening to the Word and in unceasing prayer, to the point of becoming — as Saint Nilus says — a "theologian" (cf. *De Oratione* LX, PG 79, 1180B), that is, a man endowed with wisdom that is not of this world, but which comes from the Holy Spirit. John's testament, which he wrote out of love for his disciples who wished to have his last words, is an extraordinary teaching on the quest for and experience of God for those desirous of leading an authentic Christian and monastic life.

6. Monks and nuns, in obedience to the Lord's call, undertake the journey which, starting with self-denial, leads to perfect charity, by virtue of which they experience the very sentiments of Christ (cf. *Phil* 2:5): they become meek and humble of heart (cf. *Mt* 11:29), they share in God's love for all creatures, and they love — as Isaac the Syrian says — the very enemies of truth (cf. *Sermones Ascetici, Collatio Prima*, LXXXI).

Having been enabled to see the world through God's eyes, and become ever more configured to Christ, religious men and women move towards the ultimate end for which man was created: *divinization*, sharing in the life of the Trinity. Grace makes this possible only to those who — through prayer, tears of compunction and charity — open themselves to the Holy Spirit, as we are reminded by another great monk of these beloved Slav lands, Seraphim of Sarov (cf. *Colloquio con Motovilov* III, in P. Evdokimov, *Serafim di Sarov, Uomo dello Spirito*, Bose 1996, pp. 67-81).

7. How many witnesses of the path of holiness have shone brightly in this Monastery of Rila during its many centuries of history, and in so many other Orthodox monasteries! How great is the universal Church's debt of gratitude to all the ascetics who have kept in mind the "one necessary thing" (cf. *Lk* 10:42), man's ultimate destiny!

We gratefully admire the precious tradition that Eastern monks and nuns live faithfully and continue to hand on from generation to generation as an authentic sign of the *éschaton*, that future to which God continues to call every person through the hidden power of the Spirit. They are a sign, through their adoration of the Most Holy Trinity in the liturgy, through their communion in the *agape*, through the hope which in their intercession encompasses every person and every creature, to the very threshold of hell, as Saint Silvanus of Athos recalls (cf. Ieromonach Sofronij, *Starec Siluan*, Stavropegic Monastery of St. John the Baptist, Tolleshunt Knights by Maldon 1952 [1990], pp. 91-93).

8. Dearest Brothers and Sisters, all the Orthodox Churches know how much the monasteries are a priceless heritage of their faith and culture. What would Bulgaria be without the Monastery of Rila, which in the darkest periods of your national history kept the flame of faith burning? What would Greece be without the Holy Mountain of Athos? Or Russia without that myriad of dwelling places of the Holy Spirit which enabled it to overcome the inferno of Soviet persecution? And so, the Bishop of Rome is here today to tell you that the Latin Church also and the religious of the West are grateful to you for your life and witness!

Dearly beloved Monks and Nuns, God bless you! May he confirm you in your faith and in your vocation, and may he make you instruments of communion in his holy Church and witnesses of his love in the world.