



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO LEBANON (MAY 10-11, 1997)
HOMILY DURING MASS
AT A NAVAL BASE IN BEIRUT

Sunday, 11 May 1997

1. Today *I greet Lebanon*. For a long time I have wanted to come among you, and for many reasons! I arrive in your country only today, to *conclude the Special Assembly for Lebanon of the Synod of Bishops*. Almost two years ago the Synodal Assembly conducted its work in Rome. But the solemn part of it, the publication of the Post-Synodal Document, is taking place now, here in Lebanon. These circumstances enable me to be in your land, for the first time, and to tell you of the love that the Church and the Apostolic See have for your nation, for all Lebanese: for the Catholics of the different rites — Maronite, Melkite, Armenian, Chaldean, Syrian, Latin; for the faithful belonging to the other Christian Churches; as well as for the Muslims and the Druze, who believe in the one God. From the bottom of my heart I greet you all on this very important occasion. We wish now to present to God the fruits of the Synod for Lebanon.

I thank Cardinal Nasrallah Pierre Sfeir, the Maronite Patriarch, for the words of welcome which he has addressed to me in the name of all of you. I also thank the Cardinals accompanying me; by their presence they emphasize the Apostolic See's affection for Lebanon.

It is a joy for me to greet the distinguished representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, and notably the fraternal delegates to the Synod, who have desired to take part in this celebration of their Catholic brethren. I also extend to the Muslim and Druze leaders a very cordial greeting.

I respectfully express my gratitude to His Excellency the President of the Republic, to His Excellency the President of the Parliament, to His Excellency the President of the Council of

Ministers, and to the State Authorities for their presence at this liturgical celebration.

2. At this exceptional assembly we wish to declare before the world *the importance of Lebanon, its historical mission*, accomplished down the centuries: a country of many religious faiths, Lebanon has shown that these different faiths can live together in peace, brotherhood and cooperation; it has shown that people can respect the rights of every individual to religious freedom, that all are united in love for this homeland which has matured over the centuries, preserving the spiritual heritage of their forbears, notably of the monk Saint Maron.

3. We are here in the region where the feet of Christ, the Saviour of the world, trod two thousand years ago. The Holy Scriptures teach us that Jesus went to preach beyond the borders of the Palestine of that time, that he visited also the territory of the ten cities of the Decapolis — Tyre and Sidon in particular — and that he worked miracles there. Men and women of Lebanon, the Son of God himself was the first to preach the Good News to your ancestors. This is an extraordinary privilege.

Listening to today's Gospel, the Gospel of the Eight Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount, we cannot forget that the echo of those saving words, uttered one day in Galilee, had soon reached here. The authors of the Old Testament turned often in their writings to the mountains of Lebanon and Hermon, which they saw on the horizon. *Lebanon, then, is a biblical country*. Being very near the places where Jesus accomplished his mission, it was among the first countries to receive the Good News.

Certainly, it was through preaching of the Apostles — particularly through the missions of Saint Paul — that your ancestors learned the history of salvation, the events which took place from Palm Sunday till Good Friday and Easter Sunday. Christ was crucified, laid in the Tomb, but he rose again on the third day. *The Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ is the very heart of salvation history*, as is shown, at Mass, in the Pauline acclamation after the Consecration: "Christ has died, Christ is risen, Christ will come again". The whole Church awaits his coming, from East to West. The sons and daughters of Lebanon await his new coming. We are all living in the Advent of the last days of history, and all trying to prepare for the coming of Christ, to build the Kingdom of God which he proclaimed.

4. The first reading of this liturgy, from the Acts of the Apostles, *reminds us of the period after Christ's Ascension* into Heaven, when the Apostles, at his command, returned to the Upper Room and remained there in prayer with the Mother of Jesus and the brothers and sisters of the primitive community which was the first nucleus of the Church (cf. 1:12-14). Each year, after the Ascension, the Church re-lives this first novena, the novena to the Holy Spirit. The Apostles, gathered in the Upper Room with the Mother of Christ pray for the accomplishment of the promise made to them by the Risen Christ: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses" (1:8). This first Apostolic novena to the Holy Spirit is the model of what the

Church does each year.

The Church prays: *Veni, Creator Spiritus!*

"Come, Creator Spirit, visit the souls of your people,
Fill with grace from on high the hearts which you have created . . ."

I am moved as I repeat this prayer of the Universal Church with you, dear Brothers and Sisters, sons and daughters of Lebanon. We are confident: *the Holy Spirit will renew the face of the earth.*

5. In the Epistle which we read today, Saint Peter writes: "Rejoice *in so far as you share Christ's sufferings*, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed because *the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you*" (1 Pet 4:13-14).

People often spoke of the "martyr Lebanon", especially during the period of war which afflicted your country more than ten years ago. In this historical context, the words of Saint Peter can well be applied to all who have suffered in this land. The Apostle writes: "In so far as you share in Christ's sufferings, *rejoice because the Spirit of God rests upon you*, and that is the Spirit of glory" (cf. *ibid.*). I am mindful that we are gathered near the historic heart of Beirut, Martyrs' Square; but you have also called it Freedom Square and Unity Square. I am certain that the sufferings of the past years will not be in vain; they will strengthen your freedom and unity.

Today, the words of Jesus inspire our prayer. We pray that those who mourn will be *comforted*, that those who are merciful will *obtain mercy* (cf. Mt 5:4,7), that having received forgiveness from the Father everyone will agree in turn to forgive offences suffered. We pray that the sons and daughters of this land will be happy to be *peacemakers* and to be *called sons of God* (cf Mt 5:9). If by suffering we share in Christ's Passion, we shall also share in his glory.

6. The Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is a Spirit of glory. Let us pray today that this divine glory will encompass all who are familiar with suffering in this land of Lebanon. Let us pray that it will become *a source of spiritual strength for all of you*, for the Church and for the nation, in order that Lebanon may be able to fulfil its role in the Middle East, among the neighbouring nations and with all the nations of the world.

Spirit of God, pour your light and your love into human hearts to achieve reconciliation between individuals, within families, between neighbours, in cities and villages, and within the institutions of civil society!

Spirit of God, may your power reunite all the children of this land, that they may go forward together with courage and perseverance along the path of peace and friendliness, with mutual

respect for people's dignity and freedom, for the full development of each individual and for the good of the whole country!

Spirit of God, grant that Lebanese families may nurture the gifts of the grace of marriage! Grant that the young may form their characters with confidence and may become aware of their responsibilities in the Church and in the State!

Spirit of God, grant that the Lebanese faithful may affirm the unity of each of the Patriarchal Churches, of the whole Catholic Church in Lebanon! Help them to take new steps along the path towards the full unity of those who have received the gift of faith in Christ the Saviour!

Spirit of God, "You who are called Counselor, Living Source, Fire, Charity", show forth in this people the expected fruits of the Synodal Assembly! Spirit of light and love, be for the sons and daughters of Lebanon the source of strength, of spiritual strength, especially at this historic hour, on the threshold of the Third Millennium of Christianity! Amen.

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