



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY AT MASS

Monday, 7 June 1999

1. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:10).*

We have just heard the words of Christ in the Sermon on the Mount. To whom do they refer? They refer above all to Christ himself. He is poor, he is meek, he is a peacemaker, he is merciful, and he too is persecuted for righteousness' sake. This Beatitude in particular makes us think of the events of Good Friday. Christ was condemned to death like a criminal and then crucified. On Calvary it seemed he was abandoned by God and given over to the scorn of men.

The Gospel preached by Christ then underwent a terrible test: "He is the King of Israel; let him come down now from the Cross, and we will believe in him" (Mt 27:42), shouted those who witnessed the event. Christ does not descend from the Cross because he is faithful to his Gospel. He suffers human injustice. For only in this way can he bring about man's justification. He wanted the words of the Sermon on the Mount to be applied first of all to himself: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you" (Mt 5:11-12).

Christ is the great prophet. In him all prophecy is fulfilled, for all prophecy pointed to him. In him at the same time the definitive prophecy opens up. He is the one who suffers persecution for righteousness' sake, fully aware that it is precisely this persecution which opens to humanity the doors of eternal life. Henceforth the Kingdom of heaven is to belong to those who will believe in him.

2. I thank God that the itinerary of my pilgrimage includes Bydgoszcz, the largest urban center of the Archdiocese of Gniezno. I greet all of you who have come to take part in this Eucharistic celebration. In particular I greet Archbishop Henryk, the Pastor of the Church of Gniezno, and the Auxiliary Bishops. I express my joy at the presence here of the visiting Cardinals from Berlin, Cologne and Vienna, as well as the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops of Poland. I greet the clergy, the consecrated persons and the pilgrims who have come from elsewhere in Poland, as well as all those who are not able to be present at this Holy Mass, especially the sick.

Two years ago, in Gniezno, I had an opportunity to thank the Lord, the Triune God, for the gift of Saint Adalbert's fidelity even to the supreme sacrifice of martyrdom and for the blessed fruits which that death brought not only to our homeland but also to the whole Church. On that occasion I said: "Saint Adalbert is always with us. He has remained in Gniezno of the Piasts and in the universal Church, surrounded by the glory of martyrdom. And from the perspective of the Millennium he seems to speak to us today with the words of Saint Paul: 'Only let your manner of life be worthy of the Gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or am absent, I may hear of you that you stand firm in spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the Gospel, and not frightened in anything by your opponents' (*Phil 1:27-28*) ... Today we re-read once more, after a thousand years, this testament of Paul and Adalbert. We ask that their words be fulfilled in our own generation too. For in Christ we have been granted the grace not only to believe in him but also to suffer for his sake, since we have sustained the conflict of which Adalbert has left us his witness (cf. *Phil 1:29-30*)" (*Homily*, 3 June 1997).

I wish to reconsider this message in the light of the Gospel Beatitude, which includes everyone who is ready to be "persecuted" for the sake of righteousness. Poland has never lacked such confessors of Christ. Nor did the city on the Brda River lack them either. In the last decades Bydgoszcz has been marked in a particular way by "persecution for righteousness' sake". For here, in the first days of the Second World War, the Nazis carried out the first public executions of the city's defenders. The Old Market of Bydgoszcz is the symbol of this. Another tragic place is the so-called "Valley of Death" in Fordon. How can we fail to remember on this occasion Bishop Michal Kozal, who before becoming the Auxiliary Bishop of Wloclawek was a zealous pastor in Bydgoszcz. He died a martyr's death in Dachau, bearing witness to his unshakable fidelity to Christ. Many persons connected with this city and this land met a similar death in the concentration camps. God alone knows the exact places of their torture and sufferings.

The Servant of God, Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski, knew how to appreciate the eloquence of these events. When in 1973, after numerous attempts, he obtained permission from the Communist authorities of the time to build in Bydgoszcz the first Church after the Second World War, he gave it an unusual name: "The Holy Polish Brethren Martyrs". The Primate of the Millennium wanted to express in this way the conviction that the land of Bydgoszcz, tested by "persecution for righteousness' sake", was a fitting place for such a Church. It commemorates all the nameless Poles who during the more than thousand-year history of Polish Christianity gave their lives for the

Gospel of Christ and for the homeland, beginning with Saint Adalbert. Significant too is the fact that Father Jerzy Popieluszko set out from this very Church on his last journey. This history echoes the words spoken during the recitation of the Rosary: "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake" (*Phil 1:29*).

3. *"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake"*.

To whom then do these words refer? To the many, many people to whom it was granted in the course of human history to suffer persecution for the sake of righteousness. We know that the first three centuries after Christ were marked by terrible persecutions, especially under certain Roman Emperors, from Nero to Diocletian. And although the persecutions ceased from the time of the Edict of Milan on, they nonetheless flared up again at different times in history in many parts of the world.

Our century too has written a great martyrology. I myself, in the course of the twenty years of my papacy, have raised to the glory of the altars many groups of martyrs: Japanese, French, Vietnamese, Spanish, Mexican. And how many martyrs there were during the time of the Second World War and under Communist totalitarianism! They suffered and gave their lives in the death camps of Hitler or those of the Soviets. In a few days, in Warsaw, I will beatify 108 martyrs who gave their lives for the faith in the concentration camps. Now is the time to remember all these victims and to grant them the honour which is their due. These are "the martyrs, many of them nameless, *'unknown soldiers' as it were of God's great cause*", as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* (No. 37). And it is good that we speak of them in Poland, since this country had a special role in this contemporary martyrology. It is good that we speak of them in Bydgoszcz! All gave testimony of fidelity to Christ in spite of sufferings which horrify us by their cruelty. Their blood was poured out on our land and made it fertile for growth and for the harvest. That same blood continues to bring forth fruit a hundredfold for our nation, which perseveres faithfully alongside Christ and the Gospel. Let us persevere unceasingly in union with them. Let us thank God that they emerged victorious from their labours: "God ... tried them like gold in the furnace, and like a sacrificial offering he accepted them" (*Wis 3:6*). They represent for us a model to be followed. From their blood we ought to draw strength for the sacrifice of our own life, which we must offer to God each day. They are an example for us, so that, like them, we may give a courageous witness of fidelity to the Cross of Christ.

4. *"Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you ... on my account"* (*Mt 5:11*).

Christ does not promise an easy life to those who follow him. Instead, he proclaims that, by living according to the Gospel, they are to become a sign of contradiction. If he himself suffered persecution, so too will his disciples: "Beware of men", he says, "for they will deliver you up to councils, and flog you in their synagogues" (*Mt 10:17*).

Dear Brothers and Sisters! Every Christian, united to Christ through the grace of Holy Baptism, has become a member of the Church and “no longer is his own” (cf. 1 *Cor* 6:19), but belongs to the one who died and rose for our sake. From that moment on, the baptized enter into a particular bond of community with Christ and his Church. They therefore have the duty of professing before others the faith they have received from God through the Church. At times this demands great sacrifice on our part, to be offered each day and sometimes for an entire lifetime. This firm perseverance alongside Christ and his Gospel, this readiness to face “sufferings for righteousness’ sake”, often involve acts of heroism and can take the form of an authentic martyrdom, carried out every day and at every moment of life, drop by drop, until the final “it is finished”.

A believer “suffers for righteousness’ sake” when, in exchange for his fidelity to God, he experiences humiliations, maltreatment, derision from his own, and misunderstanding even from the persons dearest to him. When he exposes himself to opposition, he risks unpopularity or other unpleasant consequences. Yet he is always ready for any sacrifice, since “we must obey God rather than men” (*Acts* 5:29). Alongside public martyrdom, which takes place before the eyes of many, how often does a hidden martyrdom take place in the depths of people’s hearts: there is a martyrdom of the body and a martyrdom of the spirit; a martyrdom of our vocation and of our mission; a martyrdom of the struggle with oneself and the victory over oneself. In the Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 *Incarnationis Mysterium* I wrote: “The believer who has seriously pondered his Christian vocation, including what Revelation has to say about the possibility of martyrdom, cannot exclude it from his own life’s horizon” (No. 13).

Martyrdom is a great and radical test for man, the supreme test of being human, the proof of man’s dignity before God himself. Yes, it is a great test for man, which takes place in the eyes of God himself, but also before the eyes of a world forgetful of God. In this test, man wins the victory when he allows himself to be sustained by the power of grace and becomes an eloquent witness to that power.

Does not a mother find herself before a similar test when she chooses to sacrifice herself in order to save the life of her child? How numerous were and are these heroic mothers in our society. We thank them for their example of love, which does not shrink from the supreme sacrifice.

Does not a believer find himself before a test of this sort when he defends the right to religious freedom and to freedom of conscience? I am thinking here of all those brothers and sisters who during the persecutions against the Church bore witness to their fidelity to God. We need only recall the recent history of Poland and the difficulties and persecutions to which the Church in Poland and those who believed in God were subjected. It was a great test for human consciences, an authentic martyrdom of faith, because it called for faith to be professed before men. It was a time of trial, often quite painful. To many persons the words of the Book of Wisdom could be fully applied: “God ... tried them like gold in the furnace, and like a sacrificial offering he accepted them” (*Wis* 3:6). Today we wish to honour them because they were not afraid to face this trial and

because they showed us the path to take towards the new millennium. They are a great inspiration for us. By their lives they show that the world needs such “fools for God’s sake”, who walk the earth like Christ, like Adalbert, Stanislaus, or Maximilian Maria Kolbe and many others. The world needs people who have the courage to love and do not retreat before any sacrifice, in the hope that one day it will bear abundant fruit.

5. *“Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven” (Mt. 5:12).*

Such is the Gospel of the eight Beatitudes. All those people - far and near, of other nations as well as our own - having been persecuted for righteousness’ sake, became one with Christ. As we celebrate the Eucharist, which makes present the sacrifice of the Cross offered on Calvary, we are surrounded by all those who, like Christ, were persecuted for righteousness’ sake. Theirs is the Kingdom of Heaven. They have already entered into their reward.

In our prayer we also embrace those who are still being put to the test. Christ says to them: “Rejoice and be glad”, because you share not only in my sufferings but also in my glory and my resurrection.

Indeed, “rejoice and be glad”, all you who are ready to suffer for righteousness’ sake, for your reward is great in heaven! Amen.