



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF OUR LORD

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

24 May 1979

Dear sons and brothers and friends in Jesus Christ,

ON THIS SOLEMNITY of the Ascension of our Lord, the Pope is happy to offer the Eucharistic Sacrifice with you and for you. I am happy to be with the students and staff of the Venerable English College in this year in which you are celebrating your fourth centenary. And today, in a special way, I feel spiritually close to you, to your parents and families, and to all the faithful of England and Wales – to all who are united in the faith of Peter and Paul, in the faith of Jesus Christ. The traditions of generosity and fidelity that have been exemplified in the life of your College for four hundred years are present in my heart this morning. You have come to give thanks and praise to God for what has been accomplished by his grace in the past, and to find strength to go forward – under the protection of our Blessed Lady – in the fervour of your forefathers, many of whom laid down their lives for the Catholic faith.

A cordial word of welcome goes also to the new priests from the Pontifical Bede College. For you too this is a moment of special challenge to keep alive the ideals manifested in your patron, Saint Bede the Venerable, whom you will commemorate tomorrow. Welcome also to the staff and to your fellow students.

With joy then and fresh resolves for the future, let us reflect briefly on the great mystery of today's liturgy. In the Scripture readings the whole significance of Christ's Ascension is summarized for us. The richness of this mystery is spelled out in two statements: Jesus gave instructions, and then Jesus took his place.

In the providence of God – in the eternal design of the Father – the hour had come for Christ to go

away. He would leave his Apostles behind, with his Mother Mary, but only after he had given them his instructions. The Apostles now had a mission to perform according to the instructions that Jesus left, and these instructions were in turn the faithful expression of the Father's will.

The instructions indicated, above all, that the Apostles were to wait for the Holy Spirit, who was the gift of the Father. From the beginning, it had to be crystal-clear that the source of the Apostles' strength is the Holy Spirit. It is the Holy Spirit who guides the Church in the way of truth; the Gospel is to spread through the power of God, and not by means of human wisdom or strength.

The Apostles, moreover, were instructed to teach – to proclaim the Good News to the whole world. And they were to baptize in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Like Jesus, they were to speak explicitly about the Kingdom of God and about salvation. The Apostles were to give witness to Christ to the ends of the earth. The early Church clearly understood these instructions and the missionary era began. And everybody knew that this missionary era could never end until the same Jesus, who went up to heaven, would come back again.

The words of Jesus became a treasure for the Church to guard and to proclaim, to meditate on and to live. And at the same time, the Holy Spirit implanted in the Church an apostolic charism, in order to keep this revelation intact. Through his words Jesus was to live on in his Church: I am with you always. And so the whole ecclesial community became conscious of the need for fidelity to the instructions of Jesus, to the deposit of faith. This solicitude was to pass from generation to generation – down to our own day. And it was because of this principle that I spoke recently to your own Rectors, stating that the first priority for seminaries today is the teaching of God's word in all its purity and integrity, with all its exigencies and in all its power. The word of God – and the word of God alone – is the basis for all ministry, for all pastoral activity, for all priestly action. The power of God's word constituted the dynamic basis of the Second Vatican Council, and John XXIII pointed out clearly on the day it opened: 'The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be more effectively guarded and taught'. And if the seminarians of this generation are to be adequately prepared to take on the heritage and challenge of this Council they must be trained above all in God's word: in 'the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine' Yes, dear sons, our greatest challenge is to be faithful to the instructions of the Lord Jesus.

And the second reflection on the meaning of the Ascension is found in this phrase: Jesus took his place. After having undergone the humiliation of his passion and death, Jesus took his place at the right-hand of God; he took his place with his eternal Father. But he also entered heaven as our Head. Whereupon, in the expression of Leo the Great, the glory of the Head became the hope of the body. For all eternity Christ takes his place as the firstborn among many brethren: our nature is with God in Christ. And as man, the Lord Jesus lives for ever to intercede for us with Father. At the same time, from his throne of glory, Jesus sends out to the whole Church a message of hope and a call to holiness.

Because of Christ's merits, because of his intercession with the Father, we are able to attain justice and holiness of life, in him. The Church may indeed experience difficulties, the Gospel may suffer setbacks, but because Jesus is at the right-hand of the Father the Church will never know defeat. Christ's victory is ours. The power of the glorified Christ, the beloved Son of the eternal Father, is superabundant, to sustain each of us and all of us in the fidelity of our dedication to God's Kingdom and in the generosity of our celibacy. The efficacy of Christ's Ascension touches all us in the concrete reality of our daily lives. Because of this mystery it is the vocation of the whole Church to wait in joyful hope for the coming of our Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Dear sons, be imbued with the hope that is so much a part of the mystery of the Ascension of Jesus. Be deeply conscious of Christ's victory and triumph over sin and death. Realize that the strength of Christ is greater than our weakness, greater than the weakness of the whole world. Try to understand and share the joy that Mary experienced in knowing that her Son had taken his place with his Father, whom he loved infinitely. And renew your faith today in the promise of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has gone to prepare a place for us, so that he can come back again and take us to himself.

This is the mystery of the Ascension of our Head. Let us always remember: Jesus gave instructions, and then Jesus took his place. Amen.