



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO BANGLADESH, SINGAPORE, FIJI ISLANDS,
NEW ZEALAND, AUSTRALIA AND SEYCHELLES

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Hobart (Australia), 27 November 1986

"You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world".

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Jesus addresses these words to his disciples: to those who were his disciples at the time of his messianic mission on earth, and also to all people of every time and place who have been or who will be his disciples.

And therefore, he addresses them to us.

To me, and to each one of you, Jesus says: "You are the salt of the earth . . . You are the light of the world"! These words contain the recognition of a fact and at the same time a call.

Let us meditate on the meaning of these words, in order to understand more fully the relationship of the Church to the world: the modern world which is undergoing so many rapid changes.

Let us meditate on the meaning of these words, so as to fulfil more effectively the task common to both the Church and the world, and in which they serve each other.

2. It is difficult to find better words of greeting to the Church in Tasmania - to you, Archbishop Young, and to you all my brothers and sisters in Christ - than those contained in today's Gospel. I want you to know what a joy it is to be with you at this celebration of the Eucharist. Together with you and with the Church throughout the world, I give thanks for the gift of faith which has brought

us the salt and light of the Gospel. Let us join our hearts and voices in praising Christ, who, in the first place and above all, is the light of the world.

I know that the Church in Tasmania has a most interesting history, which shows how divine providence has been at work in your midst. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Catholic faith was sown here against many odds. Your forebears came with both hope and anxiety to a land that perhaps seemed then rather unpromising. Some came as free settlers; many were not free. And this land was very far from the world they had known.

After the first settlement, almost twenty years had to pass before the first priest, Father Philip Conolly, was permitted to enter Van Diemen's Land, as your island was known at that time. From poor beginnings what riches flowed! Valiant parents reared and educated their families in the knowledge and love of Christ. In the next hundred and fifty years, women religious in large numbers, together with priests and religious brothers, raised the hopes of this young Church and served here with great generosity.

You remember with pride and affection Bishop Robert William Willson, your first bishop, who worked successfully to put an end to convict transportation, and who established the local Church on a more solid basis. Your ancestors in the faith left behind an impressive record of Gospel service, seen for example in the fact that from Tasmania came Father Daniel Connell, the first Australian-born priest; Sister Teresa Robertson, the first Australian-born woman religious; and Brother Patrick Kinnear, the first Australian-born religious brothers.

The faith that has grown so well since it was first planted lives on today in all of you. And as the Successor of Peter I have come to join you in giving thanks for your rich heritage and to encourage you to transmit this precious treasure to future generations.

3. When Jesus Christ called his disciples "the salt of the earth" and "the light of the world", he was also pointing out their special responsibilities. After all, what does it mean to be "salt" and "light"?

Salt is a preservative which is mixed with food to keep it from spoiling. To be like salt, then, implies that a person has a special kind of presence, a way of being with others, which strengthens them in their faith, and helps them to face temptation and avoid sin, to persevere in prayer and loving service of God and neighbour. Salt also gives flavour. Without it, food is tasteless and flat. So, the disciples of Christ give favour to life; they bring a spirit of joy, enthusiasm and hope; they bring the Spirit of Christ.

We all appreciate the value of light to guide us in the dark and to enable us to see the created world. When Jesus told his disciples that they were the light of the world, he was really telling them that they were to be a reflection of himself and were to carry on his own mission of salvation. For he says in another place: "As long as I am in the world I am the light of the world".

We notice too that Jesus does not merely say: "You are the light of your own home", or "You are the light of your local Christian community". Instead he directs them out to the larger society, beyond the boundaries of the familiar and well known, beyond the boundaries of the Church. He declares that they are "the light of the world".

4. The first reading for today's Mass shows that the disciples of Jesus become the "salt of the earth" and "the light of the world" when they humbly ask God for "the spirit of Wisdom". Only in "the spirit of wisdom" can we undertake the tasks that Christ entrusted to his first disciples, the responsibilities that the Church restated so clearly for us at the Second Vatican Council.

The Council, in fact, devoted a whole document to the role of the Church in the modern world. For example, it said: "The Church, at once a visible assembly and a spiritual community, goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God's family . . . Pursuing the saving purpose which is proper to her, the Church not only communicates divine life to people, but in some way casts the reflected light of that life over the entire earth. This she does most of all by her healing and elevating impact on the dignity of the person, by the way in which she strengthens the seams of human society and imbues the everyday activity of people with a deeper meaning and importance".

5. The Church is not afraid to live in the world, even though she readily sees the brokenness and sinfulness which abound. When, in the light of Christ, she sees violence and oppression for what they are, when she encounters injustices of any kind, she does not withdraw within herself and try to hide behind the safety of church walls; she does not abandon her mission of evangelization and service. The Church reaches out with compassion to the homeless and refugees; she hears the cry of the poor and the oppressed. The Church knows well that she is a pilgrim community of faith called to serve the human family with evangelical openness and authentic love.

Some people mistakenly claim that since Christians are seeking a heavenly city they have no genuine concern for other people's earthly needs. This is far from the truth. For to follow Christ is to be even more strictly obliged to be a responsible citizen and an active member of the human community. There can be no contradiction between our personal prayer and worship on the one hand and our social responsibilities on the other. For the Christ whom we seek in prayer is the same Christ who lives in the least of our brothers and sisters.

6. The Church acknowledges with gratitude the help which she receives from the world. Scientific and technological progress has opened up vast new possibilities for helping the poor and underprivileged and for benefitting the whole human family. We rejoice especially in the advances of medical science which have eliminated some diseases entirely and brought relief and comfort to countless people. Improvements in the communications media have given the Church more effective ways of proclaiming the Gospel and of carrying out her catechetical mission. The

accomplishments of artists, poets and scholars are warmly applauded by the Church, for when they respect the moral and spiritual dimensions of the human person, they are in harmony with her own efforts to further both truth and beauty and to create a better world. In so many ways, the Church has been enriched by the progress of humanity.

7. A question of great importance today is the relationship of the Gospel to culture. This is particularly true here in Australia where you have a rich blend of cultures: the Aboriginal and those derived from Europe, Asian cultures brought by recent immigrants and those from the Pacific region. Whatever is truly good in a particular culture is defended and strengthened by the Gospel. But elements which are imperfect must be purified and refined, so that a more authentic culture can emerge. Of course, this process of cultural transformation does not occur on a purely theoretical level. Rather, it requires the serious, dedicated efforts of Christians in the day-to-day life of a particular society.

With the help of the Holy Spirit, Christ's followers seek to identify, affirm and foster values which have true cultural worth. At the same time, how important it is that they should have the courage to oppose whatever is contrary to the Gospel and whatever violates the dignity of the human person. Service to society and to culture is a service which protects and ennobles the human person.

Christians, then, cannot remain silent in the face of the unspeakable crimes against human life which are being committed. Nor can they ignore the violation of human rights, the tide of drug and alcohol abuse, the breakdown of family life, the neglect of the poor. These and other social evils not only go against the law written in the human heart; they are contrary to Christ's command to love. They need to be faced with prophetic courage and with a Christian solidarity that embraces the whole world. Action for justice and on behalf of the dignity of every person will always be demanded by the Gospel. They are demands of Christian love.

8. As we reflect on the role of the Church in our changing world, let us listen once again to what Saint Paul says to us in his Letter to the Ephesians "I, the prisoner of the Lord, implore you to lead a life worthy of your vocation. Bear with one another charitably, in complete selflessness, gentleness and patience".

These words are very important in understanding the relationship between the Church and the modern world. To fulfil her role in the world, the Church must have that interior maturity of which the Apostle speaks and which is reflected in "complete selflessness, gentleness and patience". Even more important is the text that follows: "Do all you can to preserve the unity of the Spirit by the peace that binds you together".

This unity of the spirit is a unity that includes everybody: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, teachers, families, everyone in the Church. It means unity within each particular parish and between the pastor and his flock and unity with the Church throughout the world, "a unity in the

work of service, building up the Body of Christ". Working for unity is especially challenging in a country like Australia where you have such diverse cultural traditions, with so many different attitudes and customs to take into account. Unity is something that must be continually built up through the power of the Holy Spirit. And only when we are truly one in mind and heart can we be "fully mature with the fullness of Christ himself."

9. Everyone, in fact, is called to do his or her part in "building up the body of Christ".

In this work of building up the Church, we prove - indeed we must prove - that we are truly "the salt of the earth", that we are "the light of the world".

The world has a great need of this "salt" and this "light" because of God's eternal plan.

This eternal plan directs us towards the "spiritual man", the human person at the level of maturity in Christ. This plan is the measure of greatness for the whole of creation, for each person and for all humanity according to "the fullness of Christ himself".

Let us go forward towards this fullness of God - the fullness of God in Christ Jesus our Lord!

Amen.

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