



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO POLAND (MAY 31-JUNE 10, 1997) *HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II*

AT THE CELEBRATION OF THE WORD Gorzów- 2 June 1997

1. *"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?"* (Rom 8:35).

This is the question asked by Saint Paul in the Letter to the Romans. Today we repeat it in the Liturgy, during this visit to the Church in Gorzów Wielkopolski. In the spirit of this love, I cordially greet all the People of God in this Diocese. I greet Bishop Adam, Pastor of this Church, his Auxiliary Bishops, the clergy, and the pilgrims from neighbouring Dioceses and from abroad. I am pleased to be able to pray with you today and to celebrate this Liturgy of the Word. I give thanks to Divine Providence for this meeting.

Your community has as its patrons several martyrs who - together with Saint Adalbert - are the most ancient witnesses to Christ on Polish soil. The Church's tradition has preserved the memory of these hermits named Benedict, John, Matthew, Isaac and Christin. They lived here, in your region, in the time of Boleslaw the Brave. As was the martyr's death of Saint Adalbert, their martyrdom too was described in the chronicle of Saint Bruno of Querfurt, the apostle and missionary Bishop who in the time of Boleslaw the Brave engaged in evangelization in the territories of western and northern Poland. They are called the Polish Brethren, even though there were foreigners among them. Two of them came to Poland from Italy, in order to transplant monastic life here in accordance with the Rule of Saint Benedict. *Their death by martyrdom, along with that of Saint Adalbert, took place in a sense at the threshold of the thousand-year history of Christianity in our land.*

2. The martyrs are outstanding witnesses to the Most High God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The words of the Letter to the Romans which we have just heard remind us of the Trinitarian mystery which is the origin of the world's Redemption. God, the Apostle writes, "did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all". On the basis of this, Paul then asks: "Will he not also give us all things with him?" (8:32). Behold: Jesus Christ who for us died and rose on the third day, is at God's right

hand and intercedes for us. From this life of Christ nothing can separate us (cf. Rom 8:34-35). We are joined to it by faith. And this faith in the redemptive power of Christ's Death and Resurrection is the source of our victory: "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (cf. Rom 8:37). *Christ's redemptive love unites us to God. It is the source of our justification. From it we become certain of the victory proclaimed by the Apostle.*

This certainty of victory marked the first martyrs on Polish soil. It has marked the Church's martyrs in every age. But while we admire their witness, which shows that "love is stronger than death" (cf. S. of S. 8:6), the question arises in the hearts of each of us: would the faith, hope and love which I possess be sufficient for me to give such an heroic witness? The answer seems to come from the liturgical prayer which we have just recited: "God, you made holy the beginnings of the faith in Poland by the blood of the martyrs Benedict, John, Matthew, Isaac and Christin. *Strengthen our weakness by the power of your grace.* By imitating the martyrs who did not hesitate to die for you, may we bear courageous witness to you in our lives". It is God who by his grace supports our witness. By the power of his spirit he strengthens us and makes us capable of bearing courageous witness to the faith.

3. "In all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us" (cf. Rom 8:37). Brothers and sisters, wherever there is no need for the witness of blood, the witness of daily life should be even more evident. We need to bear witness to God in word and deed everywhere, in every place: in the family, in the workplace, in offices and schools. In places where people work and where they rest. We need to profess our faith in God by taking an active part in the life of the Church; by concern for the weak and suffering, and also by taking responsibility for public issues, in a spirit of concern for the future of the nation, built on the truth of the Gospel. Such an attitude requires a mature faith, a personal commitment. It needs to express itself in concrete actions. At times, an attitude like this must exact a price in the heroism of complete self-denial. In our times and in our lives too, have we not experienced different kinds of humiliation in order to maintain our fidelity to Christ and thus to preserve our Christian dignity? *All Christians are called, always and wherever they are placed by Providence, to acknowledge Christ before men* (cf. Mt 10:32).

How can we fail to recall here the witness of fidelity to tradition and to the Church which you bore in times which were very difficult for you? Many of you carry in your hearts the painful experiences of the Second World War. After the liberation, when you came to this area from various parts of Poland and even from beyond its borders, in a sense you began a new life. Uprooted from your places of origin, you nevertheless preserved the roots of faith. In the difficult time of great changes you were close to the Church, which sought to meet your spiritual and material needs like a good mother concerned for her children. I express my gratitude to the clergy and women Religious who did not hesitate to leave their native Dioceses in order to serve here with generosity. Together you helped to build a common house, not only materially, but above all spiritually, in people's hearts. In times of difficulty you were a support for these people, bringing them the light of faith and pointing to Christ as the one source of hope. I cannot list here the names of all, but I wish at least to recall

with gratitude the late Bishop Wilhelm Pluta, a great Bishop of this Diocese. In a certain sense it was he who laid the foundations of this Diocese in very difficult times for our country. For long years he governed the Church of Gorzów, first as Administrator and then as its first Bishop. Today he is certainly here with us. I thank you, Bishop Wilhelm, for everything that you did for the Church in this area. I thank you for your efforts, your courage and your wisdom. I thank you also for everything that you did for the Church in Poland.

A great contribution to the development of religious life in this region came from your Major Seminary, from whose walls there issued ranks of priests so greatly awaited and so necessary here. Today all this is producing an abundant harvest. Let us give thanks to Divine Providence that today the Church in your Diocese is enjoying such great growth. At its beginnings this land was bathed in the blood of the holy martyrs, the Polish Brethren, who, like blazing torches, today guide your Church towards new times. The new times, the approaching third millennium, will continue to call for your witness. Before you new tasks will appear. Do not be afraid to take them up.

The tasks which God puts before us are commensurate to the abilities of each of us. They are not beyond our capacity. God comes to help us in the moments of our weakness. Only he truly knows that weakness. He knows it better than we do ourselves, and yet he does not reject us. On the contrary, in his merciful love, he bends down to us in order to comfort us. *We receive this comfort through living contact with God.* I would like to call your attention to this fact. Amid our ordinary human occupations we cannot lose contact with Christ. We need special moments set apart exclusively for prayer. Prayer is indispensable, both in personal life and in the apostolate. There can be no authentic Christian witness unless we have first been strengthened by prayer. Prayer is the source of inspiration, energy and courage in the face of difficulties and obstacles: it is the source of perseverance and of the ability to take initiatives with renewed strength.

The life of prayer is nourished above all by participation in the Church's Liturgy. In order to be able to grow, the interior life requires participation at Holy Mass and recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. In this way, the whole of life is pervaded by Christ: by Christ himself and by his grace. For it was he who said: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (Jn 6:56). The Eucharist is the spiritual food from which in a particular way we draw spiritual strength in our journey of witness, so that we can bear fruit abundantly. For this reason taking part in Sunday Mass is so important. Neither family occupations nor other questions ought to remain outside the context of the spiritual life. *In Christ, every human activity takes on a more profound meaning and becomes authentic witness.* Rooted in the spirit of prayer, the soul then opens itself to the infinite and eternal God. It seeks to serve this God and to draw from him the strength and the light which make its activity Christian. Thanks to faith, we recognize in our lives the workings of God's plan of love, we discover the constant care of the Father who is in heaven.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the martyred Polish Brethren show us the example of such a life. They themselves, Benedict, John, Matthew, Isaac and Christin, in the silence of their hermitages,

devoted much time to prayer and in this way prepared for the great task which God in his inscrutable plans had prepared for them: to give Him the supreme witness to offer their lives for the Gospel. The Polish Brethren - as we call them - through the tribute of their blood offered to God at the beginning of our nation and of the Church in this nation wished to say to all those who would come after them that in order to bear witness to Christ it is necessary to be prepared. Witness in fact is born, matures and is ennobled in the atmosphere of prayer, of that profound and mysterious dialogue with God. On our knees! We cannot show Christ to others if we have not first met him in our own lives. Only then will our witness have true value. It will be a seed growing up for all humanity, the salt of the earth and the light which scatters the darkness for our brothers and sisters journeying along the paths of this world.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?". Saint Paul today cries out these words for us. May this cry penetrate the depths of our hearts and minds! Be vigilant, so that nothing may separate you from this love: no false slogan, no mistaken ideology, no yielding to the temptation of compromise with what is not from God or with the quest of self-advantage. Reject everything that destroys and weakens communion with Christ. Be faithful to God's commandments and to the commitments of your Baptism.

4. *"And do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul"* (Mt 10:28). These are the words of Christ, taken from the Gospel of Matthew. The Church applies them to the martyrs and in our context to Saint Adalbert and to the holy Polish Brethren. Martyrdom is the highest expression of the strength of those who, by cooperating with grace, are made capable of heroic witness. In martyrdom the Church sees "an outstanding sign" of her holiness. A precious sign for the Church and the world, since "it helps to avoid the most dangerous crisis which can afflict man: the confusion between good and evil which makes it impossible to build up and to preserve the moral order of individuals and communities. By the eloquent and attractive example of their lives, the martyrs, together with all the Church's saints, build up the moral sense. By witnessing to the good, they are a reproof to those who transgress the law" (cf. *Veritatis splendor*, 93). *Looking to the example of the martyrs, do not be afraid to bear witness. Do not be afraid of holiness. Have the courage to strive for the full measure of your humanity!* Demand this of yourselves, even if others should not demand it of you!

People have a natural fear not only of suffering and death but also of opinions which differ from their own, especially if those opinions are spread by means of communication so powerful that they become instruments of pressure. As a result, people often prefer to adapt to the environment, to the fashion of the moment, rather than run the risk of bearing witness in fidelity to Christ's Gospel. *The martyrs remind us that the dignity of the human person is priceless*; it is a dignity which "may never be disparaged or called into question, even with good intentions, whatever the difficulties involved" (*Veritatis splendor*, 92). "For what does it profit a man, to gain the whole world and forfeit his life" (Mk 8:36). And so I repeat once again with Christ: "Do not fear those who kill the body, but cannot kill the soul" (Mt 10:28). Is the dignity of conscience not more important than

any external profit? The martyred Polish Brethren, whom we recall in today's Liturgy, Saint Adalbert, Saint Stanislaus, Saint Andrew Bobola, Saint Maximilian Maria Kolbe and the martyrs of every age *all testify to the primacy of conscience and its inviolable dignity, the primacy of the spirit over the body, the primacy of eternity over time.* What took place here, at the beginning of this millennium of Christianity, in the time of Boleslaw the Brave, has many times been echoed in history and, most recently, also in the history of our own century. During this century how many men and women bore heroic witness to Christ before others? *We believe that the death which they suffered out of fidelity to their own consciences, out of fidelity to Christ, will find a response in the hearts of believers: their witness will strengthen the weak and the faint-hearted, and will be the source of new vitality for the Church in this land of the Piast.* Christ assures us that he will acknowledge before his heavenly Father all those who did not hesitate to acknowledge him before men (cf. Mt 10:32-33), even at the cost of immense sacrifice. Christ exhorts us also to be on guard against denying the faith and against failing to bear witness to it before others.

And the whole Church today obtains grace thanks to the mediation of the martyrs. The whole Church rejoices in their courageous confession of faith, in which our weakness finds strength. This is for us the sign of hope! "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:35,38-39).