



# The Holy See

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## OPENING MASS OF THE SPECIAL ASSEMBLY

FOR ASIA OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS **HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II** Sunday 19 April 1998

1. "Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven Churches" (Rv 1:17-19). The words of the Book of Revelation sound so timely today. In fact, the Churches mentioned were all located in Asia. And we are gathered here this morning to open the *Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of Bishops* with a solemn Eucharistic liturgy. Bishops from the Asian continent, together with representatives of other Ecclesial Communities, have gathered in Rome for this important event. The fruit of the Synod's work will then be compiled in a book, which will constitute the post-synodal document destined for all the Churches of Asia. In it will be "written" what the Spirit will suggest, in a way similar to what John wrote at the end of the first century after Christ when he addressed the Book of Revelation to the Christian communities living in Asia at the time. In a rapture of ecstasy while on the island of Patmos, he heard a loud voice (cf. Rv 1:10) ordering him to write down the things he saw and to send them to the Churches of Asia. John reported that this was the voice of the Son of Man, who appeared to him in glory. He saw him and fell at his feet as if dead. Christ laid his hand upon him and said: "*Fear not, I am the first and the last, and the living one. I died, and behold I am alive for evermore, and I have the keys of Death and Hades. Now write what you see, what is and what is to take place hereafter*" (Rv 1:17-19). These very words, venerable Brothers of the Churches in Asia, are in a certain sense also addressed to us. During the Synod's work we will have to write about what we have witnessed. As successors of the Apostles, we are called to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. This is in fact the truth by which we advance towards the third millennium: "*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever!*" (Heb 13:8).

2. We are opening this Synodal Assembly on the Second Sunday of Easter. The liturgy today recalls what happened in the Upper Room in Jerusalem, the Sunday after the Resurrection when Christ again appeared to the Apostles, this time *in the presence of Thomas*. He had, in fact, already appeared eight days earlier, but Thomas was absent, and when the others told him: "*We have seen the Lord!*", he refused to believe them and declared: "Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe" (Jn 20:25). Doubting Thomas! It is precisely because of him that Christ appears eight days later in the Upper Room, entering even though the doors were locked. He said to those who were there: "*Peace be with you*". Then he said to Thomas: "*Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing*" (Jn 20:27). Thomas then spoke the words which express the whole faith of the apostolic Church: "*My Lord and my God*" (Jn 20:28). And Christ said: "*Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*" (Jn 20:29).

3. "*Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe*". The Apostles were eyewitnesses of Christ's life, passion, death and resurrection. After them, others who were unable to see all this with their own eyes would have to accept the truth transmitted by the first witnesses in order to become witnesses themselves. The Church's faith is transmitted and remains living through this *line of witnesses*, which extends from generation to generation. Thus from the Upper Room in Jerusalem the Church has spread through every country and

every continent. According to a very ancient tradition, *the Gospel was brought to India by St Thomas, the Apostle to whom the Lord said: "You believe because you can see me"*. Thomas, no longer unbelieving but convinced of his Lord's resurrection, passes on to many others the certainty expressed in his confession of faith: *"My Lord and my God!"*. His faith is still alive in India and in Asia. Dear Brothers in the Episcopate who have come here, the Church you represent, built on the foundations of the Apostles, is assembled in Rome today on the threshold of the third millennium for the work of the Synod, in order to pass on to future generations the witness borne to Christ by the Apostles, the witness borne by Thomas almost 20 centuries ago.<sup>4</sup> *"Jesus Christ the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia: '... that they may have life, and have it abundantly' (Jn 10:10)"*. This is the theme of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which we are beginning today with this solemn liturgical celebration. The theme invites us to direct our gaze to Christ, from whose pierced Heart flows the inexhaustible source of eternal life which vivifies our human existence. This Synodal Assembly is a providential time of grace for the whole Christian people, and especially for the faithful in Asia, who are called to a fresh missionary outreach. In order that this favourable *"time"* may be truly fruitful, the figure of Jesus and his saving mission need to be presented once more in their full light. On everyone's lips there must resound with renewed awareness the profession of faith of the Apostle Thomas: *"My Lord and my God!"* In effect, it is only by keeping her gaze fixed on Christ that the Church can adequately respond to the hopes and challenges of the Asian Continent, as to those of the rest of the world. The launch of the new evangelization for the Third Millennium demands an ever deeper knowledge of Jesus and unflinching fidelity to his Gospel.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the new evangelization calls for respectful attention to *"Asian realities"* and healthy discernment in their regard. This vast continent, rich in history and age-old wisdom, is coming to the dawn of the Year 2000 with all the variety of its peoples, its cultures, its traditions and its religions. Alongside the heritage of ancient civilizations, we see the signs of truly advanced technological and economic progress. There exists a notable difference between peoples, cultures and ways of living. And yet, there has been a long tradition of peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance. Almost everywhere there are signs of the struggle for human advancement, and while difficulties and causes for concern are not lacking, notable signs of hope can also be seen. The ancient cultures of the continent, with their acknowledged wisdom, offer solid grounds for building the Asia of the future. How can we ignore the fact that more than three fifths of the world's inhabitants are Asian and that an important part of them are young people? To this vast portion of the humanity of our time, dwelling on the continent of Asia, we must bring with enthusiasm and vigour the Easter proclamation echoed in today's Liturgy: *"We have contemplated, O God, the wonders of your love"* (Responsorial Psalm); *"We have seen the Lord"* (Gospel).<sup>6</sup> Dear Brothers and Sisters, the first Reading, taken from the Acts of the Apostles, speaks of the fervour uniting the early community and of its missionary activity, to the amazement of the people (cf. *Acts 5:12-13*). May all this be a model for us, who have been called together by the Spirit of the Lord for this special Synodal Assembly. We ask ourselves: what must we do to proclaim and bear witness to Christ before the men and women living in Asia? At the threshold of the Year 2000, what must be the Church's commitment in this vast continent, ancient and yet abounding in new developments? Essentially, we find the answer in today's Liturgy: we must bear witness to Christ Crucified and Risen, Redeemer of the world. At the same time we must carry on, for our part, the history initiated by the Apostles: ours is the task of writing new chapters of Christian witness in every part of the world, and in Asia: from India to Indonesia, from Japan to Lebanon, from Korea to Kazakhstan, from Vietnam to the Philippines, from Siberia to China. And it is precisely to the Catholics of Mainland China and to their Pastors that the thoughts of all of us go at this moment. In order that also the Episcopate there might be represented in this Synodal Assembly, in addition to the Bishops who work in the Diocese of Hong Kong I have invited to take part two other Bishops, namely Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming, Bishop of Wanhshien, and his Coadjutor, Bishop Joseph Xu Zhixuan. I hope that they will soon be able to take their places among us and bear witness to the vitality of

those communities. At this time all the Churches must feel mobilized, since they all take their origin from that dynamic Jerusalem community which had such a lively sense of its duty to proclaim the Gospel. All originate from the same Apostles, witnesses of Christ's Cross and Resurrection - the same Apostles who, on the day of Pentecost, by the power of the Holy Spirit, received the light and power needed to set out on the paths of the world and to raise up everywhere new communities of believers. We are the successors of these Apostles, and we must be ready to take up their missionary heritage.<sup>7</sup> *"Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven Churches"*. We hear these words addressed especially to us. During the Synod we would like to witness to *what the Spirit of Christ says to the Churches on the great Asian continent*. We will ask ourselves how they hear his voice, how they live in the communion of God's word and the Eucharist, how they can encourage evangelization among the peoples of Asia. We would like to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches, so that they can proclaim Christ in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism and all those ways of thinking and living which were already rooted in Asia before the preaching of the Gospel arrived there. Moreover, we want to reflect together on how Christ's message is accepted by our contemporaries, how today the history of salvation continues among them and how the words of the Good News resonate in souls. We will ask ourselves in prayer and mutual listening how Christ, *"the stone which the builders rejected"*, can still be the cornerstone on which to build the Church in Asia. All this in the light of Easter, which floods our hearts with the joy and peace of the risen Lord. *"Haec est dies quam fecit Dominus. Exsultemus et laetemur in ea!"* (Ps 117 [118]:24). Amen! © Copyright 1998 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana