



The Holy See

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

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Suva (Fiji), 21 November 1986

"This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you".

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. It is a greater joy for me to be with you today in Suva. I wish to express my cordial greetings to the citizens of the whole nation of Fiji, a multiracial, multicultural and multi-religious society.

Fiji - an archipelago of two main islands and several hundred smaller ones, a "crossroads" in the blue Ocean of the South Pacific where the paths of the Melanesian and Polynesian migration meet - is beautiful both in its natural scenery and in you, its people.

From time immemorial you have been a religious people, particularly concerned with nature and conscious of the value of the community. Your social awareness is seen in the way that the different races, cultures and religions live together in harmony without losing their own identity. I encourage you to continue to pursue the paths of creative dialogue and mutual understanding. And may you always cherish your own particular cultural values and customs as a means of enriching one another.

2. Today I have come here in order to proclaim in your presence what the Lord Jesus said to his disciples: "This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you". Our faithfulness to this commandment to love one another as the Lord has loved us is the best way we can live our dedication to the Lord.

In order to reflect upon this theme, "Dedication to the Lord", let us turn our attention to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who is our Mother in the order of grace. In a special way Mary fulfilled the Lord's command to love, and as a result she gives us the perfect example.

Let us listen again to Mary's Song of Praise as recorded in Saint Luke's Gospel, for there is no more eloquent expression of Mary's love:

"My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit finds joy in God my Saviour, For he has looked upon his servant in her lowliness; all ages to come shall call me blessed. God who is mighty has done great things for me, holy is his name".

More than any other person, Mary was aware of God's love for her, of all the great things that the Lord had done for her. Mary's life was a response of God's love. She was the lowly handmaid of the Lord who gave herself without reserve to love of God and neighbour.

In the Scriptures we find Mary ready to do the Lord's will even when it is difficult and mysterious. In the Gospel of Luke we hear Mary called blessed by Elizabeth, for she "trusted that the Lord's words to her would be fulfilled". We can see in the events of Mary's life how she devoted herself unceasingly to the will of God the Father and to the mission of her Son. She was always willing to offer herself as a gift of love, while "she served on earth as the loving mother of the divine Redeemer, an associate of unique nobility, and the Lord's humble handmaid".

Her dedication to the Lord is shown at the moment of the Annunciation in the poverty of Bethlehem, in the anxiety of the flight into Egypt, in the humble and hard-working life of Nazareth, and finally in Jerusalem, both on the sorrowful way to Calvary, and at the foot of the Cross, where she offered herself in union with the Sacrifice of her Son. Even after her Son's glorious Resurrection, Mary continues to devote herself to the Father's will and to her Son's mission, as she perseveres in prayer with the other women and the Apostles as they await the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

In the words of the Second Vatican Council, we can say by way of summary: "In an utterly singular way she cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope, and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to souls".

3. On a certain occasion during our Lord's public ministry, his Mother and other relatives approached him while he was addressing the crowds. Upon hearing that they wished to speak to him, Jesus asks: " 'Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?' Then, turning to his disciples, he says: 'These are my mother and my brothers. Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me'".

These words of Jesus in response to his Mother are meant to explain that our relationship to him

is a spiritual one, not dependent on a family tie. What matters for us is to do the Father's will. Mary understands this truth very well, and the words of her Son only confirm her resolve to devote herself with greater love to accomplishing the Father's will even when this means sacrifice. Thus Mary teaches us that true love for God the Father and for Jesus his Son always consists in perfect conformity to the divine will.

Mary's readiness to dedicate herself to the Lord finds its most profound expression at the moment of the Annunciation, when in response to the angel's message she declares: "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say".

We can say that it is through Mary's total self-offering at the moment of the Annunciation that she becomes our model, our guide and our Mother. The Second Vatican Council highlights this fact when it teaches that: "Mary's maternity in the order of grace began with the consent which she gave in faith at the Annunciation and which she sustained without wavering beneath the cross. This maternity will last without interruption until the eternal fulfilment of all the elect".

In the Gospel to which we have just listened, Jesus assures each of us of his love. He says: "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Live on in my love". We must keep reminding ourselves of this fundamental truth that the Lord loves us in a special way. We must often repeat the words of the Psalmist: "Strong is the Lord's love for us; he is faithful forever". The Lord's love is real for each of you here in Fiji and the whole Pacific. This love is personal and unconditional, and it is clearly seen in the many ways in which he has blessed you. His love is the source of your strength. And you are called upon each day of your lives to respond to this love of the Lord, just as Mary did.

4. In today's Gospel, when Jesus tells us to love one another as he loves us, he also says: "All this I tell you that my joy may be yours and your joy may be complete". We must understand that in order to love as Jesus does we must offer to others the gift of ourselves. And it is only in the giving of ourselves through charity, service and compassion that we can experience true joy. Faithfulness to the Lord's command to love one another as he has loved us brings us a share in the joy of the Lord now and forever.

5. Our Lord's own life illustrates the words which he speaks to us today: "There is no greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends". Following the example of the Blessed Virgin Mary, whose life was a fragrant offering of love, you are invited to live your lives out of love for others in imitation of the Lord Jesus, who first laid down his life in love for you. Your dedication to the Lord and to his command of love assures you of his friendship, for in today's Gospel Jesus repeats: "You are my friends if you do what I command you. I no longer speak of you as slaves, for a slave does not know what his master is about. Instead, I call you friends, since I have made known to you all that I heard from my Father".

My dear brothers and sisters: all of you have been chosen by the Lord, just as Mary was. May you respond wholeheartedly and generously to the Lord's call to embrace a life of service for others.

In the Letter to the Colossians that has just been read to us Saint Paul writes: "Because you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with heartfelt mercy, with kindness, humility, meekness and patience. Bear with one another; forgive whatever grievances you have against one another. Forgive as the Lord has forgiven you. Over all these virtues put on love, which binds the rest together and makes them perfect".

In this passage Saint Paul is clearly referring to the fact that we are God's chosen ones, and so he exhorts us to bear with one another, to forgive any grievances we have against one another, and in obedience to the Lord's command to love one another.

6. The history of the beginning of the Church in Oceania offers us an inspiring example of dedication to the Lord and of that selfgiving love " to lay down one's life for one's friends ". I am referring to the heroic witness and martyrdom of Saint Peter Chanel, the Marist Father who came from France as one of the first missionaries to proclaim the Gospel of Christ in Western Oceania. In the face of great difficulties he laboured with profound faith, patience and fortitude. After many hardships and seeming failure, Peter Chanel became the first martyr of Oceania. He laid down his life for the sake of the Gospel, and his selfless dedication to the Lord bore great fruit when in 1843 all the inhabitants of Futuna were converted to Christ.

The Church in Fiji itself can be traced to the arrival in 1844 of Peter Chanel's Marist colleagues from France. With immense gratitude to the Lord, I praise the many generations of missionaries who over the last hundred and fifty years have followed in the footsteps of Saint Peter Chanel and have laboured for the spread of the Gospel in Oceania. The vitality of the Church today is linked to the generosity of their lives.

The present Archdiocese of Suva, erected in 1966, and the Regional Seminary of the Pacific established under the patronage of Saint Peter Chanel, are a testimony to the Church's growth here and throughout Oceania. By the grace of God, the spirit of sacrifice and dedication to the Lord shown by past generations is being continued by the clergy, religious and laity of today. We can see proofs of this dedication in the Catholic schools, in the hospitals, especially Makogai, in the help given to the homeless and the unemployed and to all those in great need. I call upon all of you to keep up your wholehearted service to the Lord, especially in the poorest of your brothers and sisters. May the memory of the heroic missionaries inspire many young men today to dedicate themselves to the Lord in the priesthood and inspire other young men and women to aspire to the religious life; may this memory sustain all the People of God in their vocation to holiness.

7. Dearly beloved in Christ: always be mindful of your Baptism, and know that God has chosen you to share in his Son's mission. Your vocation is to follow Jesus and to obey his word. Saint

Paul says: "Let the Word of Christ, rich as it is, dwell in you. In wisdom made perfect, instruct and admonish one another".

You can be sure that the word of Christ dwelling in your hearts will bear abundant fruit, especially in acts of mercy and compassion. When he tells his disciples to love one another, Jesus emphasizes that he has chosen them and not the other way round, and that they are to go forth and bear fruit: "It was not you who chose me, it was I who chose you to go forth and bear fruit. Your fruit must endure, so that all you ask the Father in my name he will give you".

The Lord's command of love has been proclaimed to the people of Fiji from the arrival of the first Christian missionaries. I invite all of you to become more aware of Christ's call to spread the Gospel to others as well as to pray and work together for Christian unity. I encourage you in your esteem and friendship for your Hindu and Muslim brethren, so that respectful dialogue may bring about better mutual understanding.

It is my fervent prayer that my Pastoral Visit to Fiji will help you to dedicate yourselves ever more to doing the Father's will and to sharing in the mission of his Son. For this reason:

I call upon you to love one another as Jesus has commanded.

I call upon you to renew your efforts to appreciate and respect each other's cultural diversity.

I call upon you to show special concern for the poor and those who are pushed to the margins of society.

I call upon you to mark for a more just society, in which wealth will be more equally divided and in which it will be possible for all to live a life in keeping with their human dignity.

I call upon you to give your prayerful support to Archbishop Petero Mataca as he proclaims to you the Gospel of salvation.

I call upon you especially, the young people, to respond to the Lord's love and to share his joy with others.

I call upon you who are sick to offer your sufferings for the growth of the Kingdom of God.

And I commend all of you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, the perfect example of dedication to the Lord, the Mother of him who says: "This is my commandment: Love one another as I have loved you". Amen.

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