



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

ECUMENICAL SERVICE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Stadium of the University of South Carolina, Columbia
Friday, 11 September 1987*

Praised be Jesus Christ!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I greet each one of you in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. It is indeed the "Lord of both the dead and the living" (*Rom. 14, 9*) who has brought us together in this holy assembly of Christian people, a joyfilled gathering of different Ecclesial Communions: Orthodox, Anglicans, Methodists, Baptists, Lutherans, Presbyterians, members of the United Church of Christ and of other Reformed Churches, Disciples of Christ, members of the Peace Churches, Pentecostals, members of the Polish National Catholic Church and Catholics.

We stand, side by side, *to confess Jesus Christ*, "the one mediator between God and man" (*1Tim 2, 5*), for "at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim to the glory of God the Father: *Jesus Christ is Lord!*" (*Phil 2, 10*).

We have come here to pray, and in doing so we are following the example of all the saints from the beginning, especially the Apostles, who in awaiting the Holy Spirit "devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the Mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (*Act. 1, 14*). Together we are renewing our common faith in the eternal redemption which we have obtained through the Cross of Jesus Christ (Cfr. *Hebr. 9, 12*), and our hope that, just as Jesus rose from the dead, so too we shall rise to eternal life (Cfr. *Phil. 3, 11*). In fact, through our *Baptism in the name*

of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, we have been buried with Christ, "so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live a new life" (*Rom.* 6, 4). Living a new life in the Spirit, we are *a pilgrim people*, pressing forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, announcing the death of the Lord until he comes (Cfr. *1 Cor.* 11, 26; *Lumen Gentium*, 8).

Brothers and sisters: we are divided in many ways in our faith and discipleship. But we are here together today as sons and daughters of *the one Father*, calling upon *the one Lord Jesus Christ*, in the love which *the same Holy Spirit* pours forth into our hearts. Let us give thanks to God and let us rejoice in this fellowship! And let us commit ourselves further to the great task which Jesus himself urges upon us: to go forward along the path of Christian reconciliation and unity "without obstructing the ways of divine Providence and without prejudging the future inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, 24).

2. In this service of Christian witness we have listened together to the word of God given to us in the Holy Scriptures. *The Scriptures are dear to all of us. They are one of the greatest treasures we share.* In the Sacred Scriptures and in the deeds of divine mercy which they narrate, God our Father, out of the abundance of his love, speaks to us as his children and lives among us. The Bible is holy because in its inspired and unalterable words the voice of the Holy Spirit lives and is heard among us, sounding again and again in the Church from age to age and from generation to generation (Cfr. *Dei Verbum*, 21).

3. Today this stadium has resounded with passages from Holy Scripture bearing on the reality of *the family*. We have heard the plea and promise made by the young widow, Ruth: "Wherever you go I will go, wherever you lodge I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God. Wherever you die I will die and there be buried" (*Ru.* 1, 16-17). To hear these words is to be moved with a deep feeling for *the strength of family ties*: stronger than the fear of hardships to be faced; stronger than the fear of exile in an unfamiliar land; stronger than the fear of possible rejection. The bond that unites a family is not only a matter of natural kinship or of shared life and experience. It is essentially a holy and religious bond. *Marriage and the family are sacred realities.*

The sacredness of Christian marriage consists in the fact that in God's plan the marriage covenant between a man and a woman becomes *the image and symbol of the Covenant which unites God and his people* (Cfr. *Os.* 2, 21; *Ier.* 3, 6-13; *Is.* 54, 5-10). It is the sign of Christ's love for his Church (Cfr. *Eph.* 5, 32). Because God's love is faithful and irrevocable, so those who have been married "in Christ" are called to remain faithful to each other forever. Did not Jesus himself say to us: "What therefore God has joined together, let no man put asunder (Cfr. *Matth.* 19, 6)?"

Contemporary society has a special need of the witness of couples who persevere in their union, as an eloquent, even if sometimes suffering a "sign" in our human condition of the steadfastness of God's love. Day after day *Christian married couples are called to open their hearts ever more to*

the Holy Spirit, whose power never fails, and who enables them to love each other as Christ has loved us. And, as Saint Paul writes to the Galatians, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patient endurance, kindness, generosity, faith, mildness and chastity" (*Gal. 5, 22-23*). All of this constitutes the rule of life and the programme of personal development of Christian couples. And each Christian community has a great responsibility to sustain couples in their love.

4. From such love Christian families are born. In them *children are welcomed as a splendid gift of God's goodness*, and they are educated in the essential values of human life, learning above all that "man is more precious for what he is than for what he has" (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 35). The entire family endeavours to practise respect for the dignity of every individual and to offer disinterested service to those in need (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Familiaris Consortio*, 37).

Christian families exist to form *a communion of persons in love*. As such, the Church and the family are, each in its own way, living representations in human history of the eternal loving communion of the Three Persons of the Most Holy Trinity. In fact, the family is called the Church in miniature, "the domestic church", a particular expression of the Church through the human experience of love and common life (Cfr. *ibid.* 49). Like the Church, the family ought to be a place where the Gospel is transmitted and *from which the Gospel radiates to other families and to the whole of society*.

5. In America and throughout the world, *the family is being shaken* to its roots. The consequences for individuals and society in personal and collective instability and unhappiness are incalculable. Yet, it is heartening to know that in the face of this extraordinary challenge many Christians are committing themselves to the defence and support of family life. In recent years the Catholic Church, especially on the occasion of the 1980 Synod of the world's bishops, has been involved in an extensive reflection on the role of the Christian family in the modern world. This is a field in which there must be the maximum collaboration among all who confess Jesus Christ.

So often the pressures of modern living separate husbands and wives from one another, threatening their lifelong *interdependence in love and fidelity*. Can we also not be concerned about the impact of cultural pressures upon *relations between the generations*, upon parental authority and the transmission of sacred values? Our Christian conscience should be deeply concerned about the way in which *sins against love and against life* are often presented as examples of "progress" and emancipation. Most often, are they not but the age-old forms of selfishness dressed up in a new language and presented in a new cultural framework?

6. Many these problems are the result *a false notion of individual freedom work in our culture*, as if one could be free only when rejecting every objective norm of conduct, refusing to assume responsibility, or even refusing to put curbs on instincts and passions! Instead, *true freedom* implies that we are capable of choosing a good, without constraint. This is the truly human way proceeding in the choices - big and small - which life puts before us. The fact that we are also able

to choose *not* to act as we see we should is a necessary condition of our moral freedom. But in that case we must account for the good that we fail to do and for the evil that we commit. This sense of moral accountability needs to be reawakened if society is to survive as a civilization of justice and solidarity.

It is true that our freedom is weakened and conditioned in many ways, not least as a consequence of the mysterious and dramatic history of mankind's original rebellion against the Creator's will, as indicated in the opening pages of the Book of Genesis. But *we remain free and responsible beings* who have been redeemed by Jesus Christ, and we must *educate our freedom* to recognize and choose what is right and good, and to reject what does not conform to the original truth concerning our nature and our destiny as God's creatures. *Truth* - beginning with the truth of our redemption through the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ - *is the root and rule of freedom, the foundation and measure of all liberating action* (Cfr. Congr. Pro Doctr. Fidei [*Libertatis Conscientia*](#), 3).

7. It would be a great tragedy for the entire human family if the United States, which prides itself on its consecration to freedom, were to lose sight of the true meaning of that noble word. America: you cannot insist on the right to choose, without also insisting on *the duty to choose well, the duty to choose the truth!* Already there is much breakdown and pain in your own society because fundamental values, essential to the well-being of individuals, families and the entire nation, are being emptied of their real content.

And yet, at the same time, throughout this land there is *a great stirring, an awareness of the urgent need to recapture the ultimate meaning of life and its fundamental values.* Surely by now we must be convinced that only by recognizing the primacy of moral values can we use the immense possibilities offered by science and material progress to bring about the true advancement of the human person in truth, freedom and dignity. As Christians our specific contribution is *to bring the wisdom of God's word to bear on the problems of modern living*, in such a way that modern culture will be led to a more profoundly restored covenant with divine Wisdom itself (Cfr. Ioannis Pauli PP. II [*Familiaris Consortio*](#), 8). As we heard proclaimed in the Gospel reading, Jesus indicates that the supreme norm of our behaviour and our relationships, including our relationship with him, is always obedience to the will of the Creator: "Whoever does the will of my heavenly Father is brother and sister and mother to me" (*Matth.* 12, 50).

8. Brothers and sisters: to the extent that God grants us to *grow in Christian unity let us work together to offer strength and support to families*, on whom the well-being of society depends, and on whom our Churches and Ecclesial Communities depend. May the families of America live with grateful hearts, giving thanks to the Lord for his blessings, praying for one another, bearing one another's burdens, welcoming one another as Christ has welcomed them.

My prayer for all of you at the end of this second day of my visit echoes the words of Paul to the Thessalonians: "May the God of peace make you perfect in holiness ... May the grace of our Lord

Jesus Christ be with you" (*1Thess. 5, 23-28*).

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