



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

MASS FOR THE INDIGENOUS PEOPLES IN CANADA

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Camp Ground of Fort Simpson
Sunday, 20 September 1987

“Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near” (*Is. 55, 6*).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We have waited a long time for this moment. Almost exactly three years ago my visit to Denendeh was prevented by weather conditions. Now, at last, God has brought us together and gives us the privilege of *celebrating the Eucharist of the Twenty-fifth Sunday of the Year*.

Je salue mes frères les Evêques, spécialement Monseigneur Denis Croteau, Evêque de ce diocèse de Mackenzie-Fort Smith. Je salue également les prêtres, les religieux, les religieuses et les laïcs. Je remercie Son Excellence le Gouverneur Général d’avoir tenu à venir ici, ainsi que les Représentants des Autorités civiles canadiennes. Je suis particulièrement heureux de rencontrer les membres des Tribus et des Peuples descendant des premiers habitants de ce pays, qui ont souhaité à maintes reprises que je vienne et qui sont maintenant réunis en grand nombre en cette circonstance festive. Je voudrais exprimer ma reconnaissance à l’Assemblée des Premières Nations, à la Tapirisat Inuit du Canada, au Conseil national des Métis et au Conseil des Autochtones du Canada pour leur collaboration à l’organisation de cette visite. Je vous salue tous dans l’amour de Notre Seigneur Jésus-Christ. Une fois encore, je proclame votre dignité d’hommes et de chrétiens, et je vous apporte mon soutien dans vos efforts pour répondre à votre vocation temporelle et éternelle.

2. "*Seek the Lord while he may be found, call him while he is near*" (Is. 55, 6). These words from the first reading are a pressing invitation to raise your thoughts to the Father, from whom all good gifts come, that he may continue to guide your destiny as Aboriginal peoples along the path of peace, in reconciliation with all others, in the experience of an effective solidarity on the part of the Church and of society in attaining your legitimate rights.

For untold generations, you the native peoples have lived in *a relationship of trust with the Creator*, seeing the beauty and the richness of the land as coming from his bountiful hand and as deserving wise use and conservation. Today you are working to preserve your traditions and consolidate your rights as Aboriginal peoples. In this circumstance today's liturgy has a deep application.

3. The Prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people experiencing the sufferings of exile and *yearning for rebirth*, especially a renewal of the spirit through the rebirth of their culture and traditions. He seeks to console them and strengthen them in their task by reminding them that the Lord is not far from them (Cfr. *ibid.* 55, 6-9).

But where is he to be found? How can we live in God's presence? The Prophet indicates three steps for unveiling the presence of God in our personal and collective experience.

First, he says: "*call him*". Yes, *in prayer we will find the Lord*. By calling upon him with trust you will discover that he is near.

But *prayer must come from a pure heart*. Consequently, the Prophet launches a call to *conversion*: "*turn to the Lord for mercy... to our God, who is generous in forgiving*" (Is. 55, 7).

And finally, we are called to *transform our lives* by learning to walk in the ways of the Lord: "*As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways above your ways and my thoughts above your thoughts*" (*Ibid.* 55, 9). *The covenant between God and his people* is constantly renewed when they invoke his merciful forgiveness and keep his commandments. God is our God and we are more and more his people.

4. In the Gospel reading, Jesus speaks of the owner of an estate who goes out at different hours to hire workers for his land (Cfr. *Matth.* 20, 1-16). The parable portrays *the unlimited generosity of God*, who is concerned about providing for the needs of all people. It is the landowner's compassion for the poor - in this case, the unemployed - that compels him to pay all the workers a wage that is calculated not only according to the laws of the market-place, but according to the real needs of each one.

Life in God's kingdom is based on a true sense of solidarity, sharing and community. His is a *kingdom of justice, peace and love*. It is our task to build a society in which these Gospel values will be applied to every concrete situation and relationship.

5. Today, this parable of cultivating the Lord's vineyard presents *a real challenge to Aboriginal nations and communities*. As native peoples you are faced with a supreme test: that of promoting the religious, cultural and social values that will uphold your human dignity and ensure your future well-being. Your sense of sharing, your understanding of human community rooted in the family, the highly valued relationships between your elders and your young people, your spiritual view of creation which calls for responsible care and protection of the environment - all of these traditional aspects of your way of life need to be preserved and cherished.

This concern with your own native life in no way excludes your *openness to the wider community*. It is a time for reconciliation, for new relationships of mutual respect and collaboration in reaching a truly just solution to unresolved issues.

6. Above all, I pray that my visit may be a time of comfort and encouragement for *the Catholic communities* among you. The pioneering efforts of the missionaries - to whom once again the Church expresses her profound and lasting gratitude - have given rise among you to living communities of faith and Christian life. The challenge is for you to become more active in the life of the Church. I understand that Bishop Croteau and the other bishops of the North are seeking ways of *revitalizing the local Churches* so that you may become ever more effective witnesses of God's kingdom of love, justice, peace, forgiveness and human solidarity.

My dear Indian, Inuit and Metis friends, I appeal to all of you, especially the young people, to accept roles of responsibility and to contribute your talents to *building up the Church among your peoples*. I ask all the elders, leaders and parents to encourage and support vocations to the priesthood and religious life. In this way the Church will become ever more at home in your own cultures, evangelizing and strengthening your traditional values and customs.

7. I have come today, dear brothers and sisters, *to proclaim to you Jesus Christ and to proclaim that he is your friend and your Saviour*. In his name, with the love of the Good Shepherd, I repeat the words of the second reading: "Conduct yourselves in a way worthy of the Gospel of Christ" (*Phil. 1, 27*). By doing this, Christ will be exalted in all your actions (*Cfr. ibid. 1, 20*), and his peace will reign in your hearts.

We are about to renew our *baptismal promises*. This is a solemn moment. By rejecting sin and evil, and by renewing our trust in the power of Christ's saving mysteries, we are, in fact, *reaffirming our covenant with God*. He is our God, and we are his people.

As we commit ourselves further to God's ways, may we be filled with the spiritual joy of Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer and our Mother in the faith. May her words express the deepest sentiments of our own hearts:

"My being proclaims the greatness of the Lord,

my spirit finds in God my saviour...

*God who is mighty has done great things for me,
holy is his name" (Luc. 1, 46-47. 49). Amen.*

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