



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO AMERICA

LITURGY OF VESPERS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II *Cathedral Basilica, Saint Louis*

27 January 1999

"May the peoples praise you, O God; may all the peoples praise you." (Psalm 67:4)

Dear Friends,

1. We are here together in this striking Cathedral Basilica to worship God and to let our prayer rise up to him like incense. In singing God's praises, we remember and acknowledge God's dominion over creation and over our lives. Our prayer this evening reminds us that our true mother-tongue is the praise of God, the language of Heaven, our true home.

We are gathered on what is already the eve of a new Millennium – by any standard a decisive turning-point for the world. As we look at the century we are leaving behind, we see that human pride and the power of sin have made it difficult for many people to speak their mother-tongue. In order to be able to sing God's praises we must relearn the language of humility and trust, the language of moral integrity and of sincere commitment to all that is truly good in the sight of the Lord.

2. We have just heard a moving Reading in which the Prophet Isaiah envisions a people returning from exile, overwhelmed and discouraged. We too sometimes experience the parched desert-land: our hands feeble, our knees weak, our hearts frightened. How often the praise of God dies on our lips and a song of lament comes instead! The Prophet's message is a call for trust, a call to courage, a call to hope for salvation from the Lord. How compelling, for all of us today, his exhortation: "Be strong, fear not! Here is your God... he comes to save you" (*Is 35:3-4*)!

3. Our gracious host, Archbishop Rigali, has invited to this Evening Prayer representatives of many different religious groups and sectors of civil society. I greet the Vice President of the United States of America, and the other civil authorities and community leaders present. I greet my

brothers and sisters in the Catholic faith: the members of the laity who want to live their baptismal dignity ever more intensely in their efforts to bring the Gospel to bear on the realities of everyday life in society.

With affection I greet my brother priests, representing all the many zealous and generous priests of St. Louis and other Dioceses. My hope is that you will rejoice each day in your encounter – in prayer and in the Eucharist – with the living Jesus Christ, whose priesthood you share. I happily greet the deacons of the Church and encourage you in your liturgical, pastoral and charitable ministry. A special word of thanks goes to your wives and families for their supportive role in this ministry.

The many Religious who are here this evening represent thousands and thousands of women and men who have labored in the Archdiocese from the beginning. You are those who follow Christ by imitating his total self-giving to the Father and to the cause of his Kingdom. My appreciation and thanks go to each one of you.

I gladly address a special word of encouragement to the seminarians. You will be the priests of the new Millennium, working with Christ in the new evangelization; helping the Church, under the action of the Holy Spirit, to meet the demands of the new century. I pray each day that the Lord will make you “shepherds after his own heart” (*Jer 3:15*).

4. I am particularly pleased that distinguished members of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities have joined the Catholic community of St. Louis in this Evening Prayer. With hope and confidence let us continue to work together to realize the Lord’s desire: “That they may all be one . . . that the world may believe” (*Jn 17:21*) . My friendship and esteem go also to those of all other religious traditions. In particular I recall my long association with members of the Jewish faith, and my meetings in many parts of the world with my Muslim brothers and sisters. Today, divine Providence has brought us all together and enabled us to pray: “O God, let all the nations praise you!” May this prayer signify our shared commitment to ever greater understanding and cooperation.

5. I wish also to say a word of appreciation to the civic community of the entire metropolitan area, to all those associated with the City of St. Louis and committed to its human, cultural and social well-being. Your determination to meet the many urban challenges facing the community will help bring about a renewed “*Spirit of St. Louis*” to serve the cause of the city, which is the cause of its people and their needs. Of particular concern must be the training of young people for positive participation in the community. In this regard I share the Archdiocese’s hope that Cardinal Ritter College Prep, sustained by the concerted support of all sectors, will be able to continue to give numerous young people the opportunity for quality education and genuine human advancement.

In the Church’s name I express gratitude to everyone, including the business community, for their

continuing support of many worthy charitable, social and educational services promoted by the Church.

6. "O God, let all the nations praise you!" (*Ps 67*)

At the end of this century - at once marked by unprecedented progress and by a tragic toll of human suffering - radical changes in world politics leave America with a heightened responsibility to be for the world an example of a genuinely free, democratic, just and humane society. There is a lesson for every powerful nation in the Canticle from the Book of Revelation which we have recited. It actually refers to the song of freedom which Moses sang after he had led the people through the Red Sea, saving them from the wrath of the Pharaoh. The whole of salvation history has to be read in the perspective of that Exodus: God reveals himself in his actions to defend the humble of the earth and free the oppressed.

In the same way, in her Magnificat Canticle, Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, gives us the key to understanding God's intervention in human history when she says: the Lord "has scattered the proud in the conceit of their hearts... and exalted the lowly" (*Lk 1:51-52*). From salvation history we learn that power is responsibility: it is service, not privilege. Its exercise is morally justifiable when it is used for the good of all, when it is sensitive to the needs of the poor and defenseless.

There is another lesson here: God has given us a moral law to guide us and protect us from falling back into the slavery of sin and falsehood. We are not alone with our responsibility for the great gift of freedom. The Ten Commandments are the charter of true freedom, for individuals as well as for society as a whole.

America first proclaimed its independence on the basis of self-evident moral truths. America will remain a beacon of freedom for the world as long as it stands by those moral truths which are the very heart of its historical experience. And so America: If you want peace, work for justice. If you want justice, defend life. If you want life, embrace the truth – the truth revealed by God.

In this way the praise of God, the language of Heaven, will be ever on this people's lips: "The Lord is God, the mighty... Come then, let us bow down and worship". Amen.