



The Holy See

MASS AT THE SPORT PALACE IN THE COMPLEX OF THE OLYMPIC CENTRE OF ATHENS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 5 May 2001

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you" (*Acts 17:23*).

Reported in the Acts of the Apostles, these words that Paul spoke at the Areopagus in Athens represent one of the first proclamations of the Christian faith in Europe. If we consider the role of Greece in the formation of ancient culture, we will understand that this speech by Paul can be considered the very symbol of the encounter of the Gospel with human culture.

"To those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, . . . grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ!" (*1 Cor 1:2,3*). Using these words of the Apostle to the community in Corinth, I greet you with affection, all of you, Bishops, priests and lay Catholic faithful living in Greece. I thank first of all His Grace Nikolaus Foscolos, Archbishop of Athens and President of the Episcopal Conference of Greece, for his welcome and cordial greeting. Gathered together this morning for the Eucharistic celebration, we ask the Apostle Paul to give us his fervour in faith and in proclaiming the Gospel to all the Nations, as well as his concern for the unity of the Church. I rejoice in the presence of other Christian confessions at this Divine Liturgy, who thus bear witness to their interest in the life of the Catholic community and to their common brotherhood in Christ.

2. Paul clearly reminds us that we cannot enclose God in our very human ways of seeing or doing. If we wish to welcome the Lord, we are called to conversion. This is the path put before us, the path that enables us to follow Christ in order to live as he did, sons and daughters in the Son. We

can therefore re-interpret our personal journey and that of the Church as a Paschal experience. We must be purified in order to enter fully into the divine will, accepting that God, by his grace, transforms our being and our existence, as was the case with Paul, who was transformed from persecutor to missionary (cf. *Gal* 1:11-24). Thus we pass through the trials of Good Friday, with its sufferings, with its darkness of faith, with its mutual misunderstandings. But we also experience moments of light, like the dawn of Easter Sunday, in which the Risen One communicates to us his joy and leads us to all truth. Viewing our personal history and that of the Church in this way, we cannot fail to live in hope, certain that the Master of history will lead us along paths known to him alone. Let us ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be witnesses to the Good News of God's love by our words and our actions! For the Spirit inspires missionary fervour in his Church, it is he who calls and sends, and the true apostle is first of all a person who is "tuned in", a servant ready for God's action.

3. To be here in Athens and to recall the life and work of Paul is to be invited to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth, to put before our contemporaries the salvation wrought by Christ, showing them the ways of holiness and of an upright moral life which is the response to the Lord's call. The Gospel is universal good news which all peoples can understand.

Speaking to the Athenians, Saint Paul wishes to hide nothing of the faith which he has received; like every apostle, he must carefully guard the deposit of faith (cf. *2 Tim* 1:14). It begins with references that are familiar to his listeners and their way of thinking, and this so that they may better understand the Gospel that he has come to bring them. Paul depends on the natural knowledge of God and on the deep spiritual desire present in his audience in order to prepare them to receive the revelation of the one and true God.

If, to the Athenians, he was able to quote ancient classical authors, the reason is that, in a certain way, his own personal culture had been fashioned by Hellenism. He therefore used his own training to proclaim the Gospel in words that would make an impression on his listeners (cf. *Acts* 17:17). What a lesson! In order to proclaim the Good News to the men and women of our time, the Church must be attentive to their cultures and their ways of communicating, without allowing the Gospel message to be altered or its meaning or scope diminished. "In the Third Millennium, Christianity will have to respond more effectively to this need for inculturation" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 40). Paul's masterful speech invites Christ's disciples to enter into a truly missionary dialogue with their contemporaries, with respect for what they are, but at the same time with a clear and forceful presentation of the Gospel, together with its implications and demands in people's lives.

5. Brothers and sisters, your country enjoys a long tradition of wisdom and humanism. Since the beginnings of Christianity, philosophers have taken on the task of "bringing to light the link between reason and religion . . . This opened a path which took its rise from ancient traditions but allowed a development satisfying the demands of universal reason" (*Fides et Ratio*, 36). This work

done by philosophers and the early Christian apologists made it possible afterwards — following Saint Paul and his speech in Athens — for Christian faith and philosophy to engage in a fruitful dialogue.

It is important to create opportunities for dialogue with our contemporaries, using the example of Saint Paul and the first communities, especially where the future of mankind and humanity is at stake. In this way, decisions will not be guided only by political or economic interests unaware of the dignity of persons and the obligations deriving from that dignity. Rather there will be a spiritual element present, reminding people of every individual's high position and dignity. The "areopagi" that today call out for the witness of Christians are many (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 37); and I encourage you to be present to the world. Like the Prophet Isaiah, Christians have been placed as watchmen on the summit of the walls (cf. *Is 21:11-12*), to discern the human consequences of present situations, to discern the seeds of hope within society, and to show the world the light of Easter that illuminates with the radiance of a new day all human realities.

Cyril and Methodius, the two Brothers from Salonika, understood the call of the Risen One: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (*Mk 16:15*). Having departed for the encounter with the Slav peoples, they brought them the Gospel in their own language. They "not only carried out their mission with full respect for the culture already existing among the Slav peoples, but together with religion they eminently and unceasingly promoted and extended that culture" (*Slavorum Apostoli*, 26). May their example and prayer help us to respond ever more effectively to the demands of inculturation and to rejoice in the beauty of the multiform face of Christ's Church!

6. In his personal experience as a believer and in his ministry as an Apostle, Paul understood that Christ alone was the way of salvation, he who, by his grace, reconciles people among themselves and with God. "For he is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (*Eph 2:14*). The Apostle then became the defender of unity, within communities as well as between them, consumed as he was with "concern for all the Churches" (*2 Cor 11:28*)!

Passion for the unity of the Church must be a mark of all Christ's disciples. "Unhappily, as we cross the threshold of the new millennium, we take with us the sad heritage of the past . . . there is still a long way to go" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 48). But that must not discourage us; our love of the Lord impels us to be ever more involved in work for unity. In order to take new steps in this direction, it is important to "start afresh from Christ" (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29).

"It is on Jesus's prayer and not on our own strength that we base the hope that even within history we shall be able to reach full and visible communion with all Christians . . . May the memory of the time when the Church breathed with 'both lungs' spur Christians of East and West to walk together in unity of faith and with respect for legitimate diversity, accepting and sustaining each other as members of the one Body of Christ" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 48)!

The Virgin Mary, by her prayer and maternal presence, accompanied the life and mission of the first Christian community, gathered around the Apostles (cf. *Acts* 1:14). With them, she received the Spirit at Pentecost! May she watch over the path that we must now walk in order to move towards full unity with our brethren of the East and in order to fulfil with one another, in openness and enthusiasm, the mission that Christ has entrusted to his Church. May the Virgin Mary — so venerated in your country and most especially in her island shrines, such as the Virgin of the Annunciation on the island of Tinos, and under the title of Our Lady of Mercy at Faneromeni, on Syros — lead us always to her Son Jesus (cf. *Jn* 2:5). He is the Christ, he is the Son of God, "the true light that enlightens every man" by coming into the world (cf. *Jn* 1:9).

Strengthened in the hope that comes to us from Christ, and sustained by the fraternal prayer of those who have gone before us in faith, let us continue our earthly pilgrimage as true messengers of the Good News, filled with joy at the Easter praise that is in our hearts and wishing to share it with all people:

"Praise the Lord, all nations!

Extol him, all peoples!

For great is his steadfast love towards us;

and the faithfulness of the Lord endures for ever!" (*Ps* 117).

Amen.