



The Holy See

HOLY MASS AT THE ABBASSYIN STADIUM OF DAMASCUS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 6 May 2001

1. "'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?' And he said: 'Who are you, Lord?' And he said: 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting; but rise and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do" (Acts 9:4-6).

It is as a pilgrim that I have come today to Damascus, to commemorate the event which took place here two thousand years ago: the conversion of Saint Paul. On his way to Damascus to oppose and imprison those who confessed the name of Jesus, Saul, approaching the gates of the city, experiences an extraordinary illumination. On the road, the Risen Christ appears to him; the meeting deeply affects him and a profound inner transformation takes place. From being a persecutor he becomes an apostle, from an opponent of the Gospel, he becomes its missionary. The *Acts of the Apostles* recalls in detail the event which changed the course of history: "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel: for I will show him how much he must suffer for the sake of my name" (Acts 9:15-16).

Your Beatitude, I thank you for your kind words of welcome at the beginning of this celebration. Through you I greet with affection the Bishops and the members of the Greek Melkite Church of which you are Patriarch. I warmly greet the Cardinals, Patriarchs, Bishops, priests and faithful of all the Catholic communities of Syria and the other countries of the region. I rejoice at the fraternal presence of the Patriarchs, Bishops and faithful of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities. I extend heartfelt greetings to them. I thank the members of the Muslim community who have joined their Christian friends on this occasion.

2. The extraordinary event that took place not far from here was decisive for the future of Paul and the Church. The Apostle's meeting with Christ radically changed his life, because it affected him at

the most intimate level of his being and made him fully receptive to divine truth. Paul freely accepted this truth and freely agreed to commit his life to the following of Christ. By welcoming the divine light and receiving baptism, his deepest being was conformed to Christ. His life was thus transformed and he discovered happiness in placing his faith and trust in the One who had called him from darkness into his own wonderful light (cf. *2 Tim* 1:12; *Eph* 5:8; *Rom* 13:12). Meeting the Risen One in faith is truly a light on man's journey, a light which calls one's whole life into question. On the shining face of Christ, God's truth manifests itself in a spectacular way. May we too keep our gaze upon the Lord! O Christ, light of the world, cause to shine upon us and all men and women the heavenly light which surrounded your Apostle! Enlighten and purify the eyes of our heart, so that we may learn to see all things in the light of your truth and love of humanity!

The Church has no other light to pass on to the world than the light which come to her from her Lord. We have been baptized into the Death and Resurrection of Christ, we have received light from God and we have been made children of the Light. Let us recall the beautiful exclamation of Saint John Damascene which emphasises the origin of our common ecclesial vocation: "You have made me come into the light by adopting me as your son, and you have counted me among the members of your holy Church which is without stain" (*De Fide Orthodoxa*, 1)! On our journey, the word of God is a shining lamp; it enables us to know the truth that sets us free and makes us holy.

3. "I looked, and behold, a great multitude which no man could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and tongues, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands" (*Rev* 7:9).

This reading in today's Liturgy, taken from the Book of Revelation, shows, in its own way, the work wrought by Saint Paul's apostolic ministry. Saint Paul played an essential role in the proclamation of the Gospel outside Israel. The Mediterranean lands became the focus of Paul's evangelizing efforts. And we can say that subsequently, in the centuries that followed down to our own time, the immense progress of the proclamation of the Gospel follows in a sense logically from the ministry of the Apostle of the Nations. Down to our own time the Church continues to bear the fruits of his apostolic activity and constantly refers to the missionary ministry of Saint Paul, who became for whole generations of Christians the pioneer and inspirer of all mission.

Following the example of Saint Paul, the Church is invited to look to the ends of the earth in order to continue the mission entrusted to her to transmit the light of the Risen One to all peoples and cultures, while respecting the freedom of individuals and communities, including spiritual communities. The immense multitude of people of every origin is called to give glory to God. For, as Saint Ephraem says, "You have no need to communicate to us the treasures which you give us. You need only one thing: that we open our hearts to carry your good things, by surrendering our will and listening to you with our ears. All your works shine with the wreaths which the wisdom of your mouth made for them when you said: 'All this is very good'" (*Diathernane*, 2, 5-7).

Like Paul, the disciples of Christ face a great challenge: they are to transmit the Good News by expressing it in a manner suited to each culture, without losing its content or altering its meaning. Do not be afraid to bear witness to this joyful news among your brothers and sisters, by your word and by your whole life: God loves everyone and calls them to be one family in love, for they are all brothers and sisters!

4. This joyful news should inspire all Christ's disciples to seek ardently the paths of unity. By making their own the Lord's prayer "may they all be one", they will bear witness in an ever more genuine and credible way. I truly rejoice at the fraternal relations which already exist between the members of the Christian Churches of your countries, and I encourage you to develop them in truth and with care, in communion with your Patriarchs and Bishops. At the dawn of the new millennium Christ is calling us all to come closer to one another in the charity which forms our unity. Be proud of the great liturgical and spiritual traditions of your Churches of the East! They are part of the heritage of the one Church of Christ and are bridges between people of different persuasions. Since the beginnings of Christianity, your land experienced a flourishing Christian life. In spiritual descent from Ignatius of Antioch, Ephraem, Simeon and John Damascene, the names of many Fathers, monks, hermits and so many other saints who are the glory of your Church are still in the living memory of the universal Church. By your attachment to the land of your fathers, by living your faith here with generosity, you too in turn today bear witness to the fruitfulness of the Gospel message which has been handed down from generation to generation.

With all your compatriots, without distinction of community, continue tirelessly your efforts to build a society marked by fraternity, justice and solidarity, where everyone's human dignity and fundamental rights are recognized. In this holy land, Christians, Muslims and Jews are called to work together, with confidence and boldness, and to work to bring about without delay the day when the legitimate rights of all peoples are respected and they can live in peace and mutual understanding. Among you, may the poor, the sick, the handicapped and all those hurt by life be always brothers and sisters who are respected and loved! The Gospel is a powerful element in the transformation of the world. By your witness of life, may people today find the response to their deepest aspirations and the foundations for social coexistence!

5. Christian families, the Church looks to you with confidence to pass on to your children the faith you have received over the centuries since the time of the Apostle Paul. By remaining united and open to all, by always defending the right to life from conception, be homes of light, in full conformity to God's plan and the true requirements of the human person! Give significant time to prayer, to listening to God's word and to Christian education; in them you will find effective support to tackle the difficulties of daily life and the great challenges of today's world. Any faithful and consistent Christian life requires regular participation in the Sunday Eucharist. The Eucharist is a privileged gift where communion with God and others comes about and is proclaimed.

Brothers and sisters, do not tire of seeking the face of Christ who shows himself to you. In him you

will find the secret of true freedom and joy of heart! May your hearts be filled with the desire for genuine fraternity with all! By placing yourselves enthusiastically at the service of others, you will find meaning in your life, because Christian identity is not defined by opposition to others but by the ability to go out of oneself towards one's brothers and sisters. Openness to the world, with clarity and without fear, is part of the vocation of the Christian, conscious of his own identity and rooted in the religious heritage which the richness of the Church's witness expresses.

6. "My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me; and I shall give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand. I and the Father are one" (Jn 10:27-30).

These are the words of today's Gospel, by which Jesus Christ himself shows us the admirable dynamism of evangelization. God, who in many and various ways spoke to our fathers by the prophets, finally spoke by his Son (cf. *Heb* 1:1-2). This Son, one in substance with the Father, is the Word of life. It is he who gives eternal life. He came so that we might have life and have it abundantly (cf. Jn 10:10). At the gates of Damascus, when he met the Risen Christ, Saint Paul learned this truth and made it the content of his preaching. The wonderful reality of the Cross of Christ, upon which the work of the world's Redemption was wrought, became present before him. Paul understood this reality and consecrated his whole life to it.

Brothers and sisters, let us lift our eyes to the Cross of Christ to find the source of our hope! In it we find a genuine path of life and happiness. Let us contemplate the loving face of God who gives us his Son to make us all "of one heart and soul" (*Acts* 4:32). Let us welcome him into our lives to inspire us and bring about the mystery of communion which embodies and makes manifest the very essence of the Church.

Your belonging to the Church should be a sign of hope for you and your brothers and sisters, which reminds us that the Lord meets everyone on their journey, often in a mysterious and unexpected way, just as he met Paul on the road to Damascus, surrounding him with his brilliant light.

May the Risen One, whose Resurrection all Christians celebrated together this year, grant us the gift of communion in charity! Amen.