



The Holy See

CONCLUSION OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Saturday 27 October 2001

1. *"Proclaim His salvation to every people " (Resp. Psalm).*

The words of the responsorial Psalm express our inner attitude at the end of the Synod of the Bishops. The prolonged, detailed examination of the theme of the Episcopate renewed in each of us the passionate awareness of the mission entrusted to us by the Lord Jesus Christ. With apostolic fervour, in the name of the entire College of Bishops which we represent, gathered together at the tomb of the Apostle Peter, we wish to repeat our common acceptance of the mandate of the Risen Lord: "We shall proclaim the salvation of the Lord to all peoples".

It is a new beginning, as a follow up to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 and at the beginning of the third Christian millennium. The first reading took us back to the atmosphere of the Jubilee, the Messianic oracle of Isaiah repeated many times during the Holy Year. It is a *proclamation full of hope* for the poor and the afflicted. It is the beginning of the "year of the mercy of the Lord" (Is 61,2), which found in the Jubilee a wonderful reality. However, it transcends the limits of the calendar to go out to every place touched by the saving presence of Christ and of his Spirit.

Listening to this proclamation once more, we are confirmed in the conviction expressed at the end of the great Jubilee: *"to leave more open than before the living door which is Christ" for the new generations of the new millennium* (cf. *Novo Millennio ineunte*, n. 59). In fact, Christ is the hope of the world. The mission of the Church, and particularly, of the Apostles and of their successors is *to preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth*.

2. The exhortation of the Apostle Peter to the *"elders"*, heard during the second reading, as well as the *Gospel passage*, just proclaimed, make use of the *symbolism of the shepherd and his flock*,

presenting the ministry of Christ and of his Apostles in a "pastoral" key. "Feed the flock of God which has been entrusted to you", wrote St Peter, mindful of the mandate he himself received from Christ: "Feed my lambs ... feed my sheep" (Jn 21,15. 16. 17). It is even more striking to realize that it is the way the Son of God reveals himself: "I am the Good Shepherd" (Jn 10,11), with the sacrificial designation: "I lay down my life for my sheep" (cf. Jn 10,15).

For this reason, Peter is defined "witness of the sufferings of Christ and partaker of the glory to be revealed" (I Pt 5,1). In the Church, the Pastor is above all the bearer of the Easter and eschatological witness, that finds its culmination in the celebration of the Eucharist, memorial of the death of the Lord and pledge of his glorious return. The celebration of the Eucharist is the pastoral action par excellence: "Do this in memory of me" includes not just the ritual representation of the Supper, but also, as a consequence, the availability to offer himself for his flock, following the example of what he did during the time of his life and above all at the hour of his death.

3. In these weeks the image of the Good Shepherd was recalled many times in the Synod. In fact, it is the "icon" that inspired many holy bishops down through the centuries, and which better than any other, defines the ministry and life style of the successors of the Apostles. From this point of view, one cannot fail to realize that the Synod was spiritually connected with the Magisterium that the church left us in the course of her history. It should be enough to think, for example, of the Council of Trent, which took place about four and a half centuries ago. Among the reasons for the enormous impact of the Council on the revival of the life of the People of God, there was certainly the representation of the *care of souls* as the first and primary duty of the bishops, who were called to stable residence with their flock, and to form valid collaborators in the pastoral ministry by the creation of seminaries.

Four hundred years later, the *Second Vatican Council* took up and developed the lesson of Trent, opening it toward the global vistas of the new evangelization. *At the dawn of the third millennium* the Church continues to rely on the ideal figure of the bishop, that of the Pastor who, configured to Christ in holiness of life, expends himself generously for the Church entrusted to him, at the same time carrying in his heart the solicitude for the churches spread over the face of the earth (cf. II Cor 11,28).

4. The bishop, the good shepherd, finds light and force for his ministry in the *Word of God*, interpreted in the communion of the church, and announced with courageous fidelity *in season and out of season* (II Tm 4,2). *Master of the faith*, the bishop promotes whatever is good and positive in the flock entrusted to him, sustains and guides those weak in faith (Rom 14,1), intervenes to unmask falsehoods and combat abuses.

It is important that the bishop be aware of the challenges that faith in Christ has to face today on account of the mentality based on human criteria, that at times relativises the Law and the Plan of

God. Above all, he must have the *courage to announce and defend sound doctrine*, even when it entails suffering. In fact, the bishop, in communion with the apostolic college and with the Successor of Peter, has the duty of protecting the faithful from any kind of temptation, showing in a *wholehearted return to the Gospel of Christ* the true solution for the complicated problems that burden humanity. The service the bishops are called to render to the flock will be the source of hope to the extent to which they live an *ecclesiology of communion and mission*. In the Synodal meetings these days, the request for a spirituality of communion was often stated. In line with the Working Document (n. 63) many members repeated the phrase: "*the strength of the church is her communion, her weakness is division and internal opposition*".

Only if a deep and convinced unity of the pastors with the *Successor of Peter* is clearly discernible, and also the unity of the *bishops with their priests*, can we give a credible reply to the challenges that come from the present social and cultural world. In this regard, dear Brothers, Members of the Synod, I wish to express my grateful appreciation for the witness of joyful communion in your solicitude for the humanity of our time that you gave these days.

5. I would like to ask you to bring my greetings to your *faithful* and, in a special way, to your *priests*, to whom you will devote special attention, establishing with each of them a direct, confident and cordial relationship. I also know that you make every effort to do it, since you are convinced that a diocese works well only if the clergy are joyfully united around the bishop in fraternal charity.

I ask you to greet the *Bishops emeriti*, bringing them the expression of my appreciation for the work done for the good of the faithful. I wanted them to be represented in the Synod to reflect on the theme which is new in the Church, since it is the result of the resolution of Vatican II for the good of the particular churches. I trust that each Bishops' Conference will study how to utilise the bishops *emeriti* who are still in good health and full of energy, entrusting to them an ecclesial service and the study of problems for which they have experience and competence, calling upon those who are available to join one or other committee alongside younger colleagues so that they will always feel they are living members of the college of bishops.

I want to send a special greeting to the *Bishops of mainland China*, whose absence from the Synod has not prevented us from feeling their spiritual closeness in memory and prayer.

6. "When the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of unfading glory" (I Pt 5,4). At the end of the first Synod of the third millennium, I fondly recall the *22 bishops canonized in the course of the 20th century*: Alessandro Maria Sauli, Bishop of Pavia, Robert Bellarmine, Cardinal, Bishop of Capua, Doctor of the Church; Albert the Great, Bishop of Regensburg, Doctor of the Church; John Fisher, Bishop of Rochester, Martyr; Antonio Maria Claret, Archbishop of Santiago of Cuba; Vincenzo Maria Strambi, Bishop of Macerata and Tolentino; Antonio Maria Gianelli, Bishop of Bobbio; Gregory Barbarigo, Bishop of Padua; Juan de Ribera, Archbishop of Valencia;

Oliver Plunkett, Archbishop of Armagh, Martyr; Justin de Jacobis, Bishop of Nilopolis and Apostolic Vicar of Abyssinia; John Nepomucene Neumann, Bishop of Philadelphia; Jeronimo Hermosilla, Valentino Berrio-Ochoa with six other bishops, Martyrs in Viet Nâm; Ezekiel Moreno y Diaz, Bishop of Pasto, Colombia; Charles Joseph Eugène de Mazenod, Bishop of Marseille. Furthermore, in less than a month, I will have the joy of proclaiming saint, Giuseppe Marelli, Bishop of Acqui.

From this chosen circle of *holy Pastors*, which could be extended to include the *numerous fellowship of the Blessed Servants of God* there emerges, as in a mosaic, the face of *Christ the Good Shepherd and Missionary of the Father*. We fix our eyes on this living icon, at the beginning of the new epoch that Providence has opened up before us, so that with ever greater dedication we may be servants of the Gospel, hope of the world.

May the Blessed Virgin Mary, the Queen of Apostles, assist us in our ministry. At every moment on the horizon of the Church and of the world, she shines as sign of consolation and of sure hope.