



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO AZERBAIJAN AND BULGARIA

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION - BEATIFICATIONS

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Plovdiv - Central Square

Sunday 26 May 2002

1. *"To you be praise and glory for ever!"*

A few moments ago we sang these words in the Responsorial Psalm. Our assembly, dear brothers and sisters, has come together today, on the Lord's Day, to celebrate *the grandeur and the holiness of our God* and to profess the faith of the Church.

The descent of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost is the crowning of the cycle of events by which God, in successive historical stages, came to meet men and women and offered them the gift of salvation. The Liturgy invites us today to go back *to the supreme Source of this gift*: God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the Most Holy Trinity.

2. *The Old Testament* emphasizes *that God is one*. In the First Reading we heard God proclaim before Moses: "The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness" (*Ex 34:6*). Moses, for his part, exhorts his people: "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God is one Lord" (*Dt 6:4*).

The New Testament reveals to us that the one God is Father, Son and Holy Spirit: *one divine nature in three Persons*, perfectly equal and really distinct. Jesus names these Persons explicitly, when he orders the Apostles to baptize "in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (*Mt 28:19*).

The whole New Testament is *one continuous and explicit proclamation of this mystery* which the Church, the faithful guardian of the word of God, has always proclaimed, explained and defended. For this reason we too say to God, Most High and Omnipotent, Father, Son and Holy Spirit: "To you be praise and glory for ever!".

3. With the Apostle Paul, I invoke upon everyone "the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit" (2 Cor 13:14). With particular affection I greet you, dear brothers and sisters, *sons and daughters of the Catholic Church*, assembled here with your Bishops from the Dioceses of Sofia-Plovdiv and Nicopoli and from the Apostolic Exarchate for the faithful of the Byzantine-Slav rite. I thank the Pastor of this Particular Church, Bishop Gheorghii Jovev, for his words of welcome and I offer cordial greetings to my Brothers in the Episcopate, Bishop Christo Proykov, President of the Episcopal Conference, and Bishop Petko Christov, Bishop of Nicopoli. I also greet the Cardinals and Bishops who have come from nearby countries in order in order to share this day of celebration with the Church in Bulgaria.

I would like to address a particular greeting to *His Eminence Arsenij, the Orthodox Metropolitan of Plovdiv*, who with exquisite thoughtfulness has wished to take part in the celebration of this holy Liturgy; I thank him most sincerely for the cordial words which he addressed to me at the beginning of the celebration. With him I greet in the Lord all the faithful of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church who have joined us. Their presence here is a most welcome sign of brotherhood, *giving us a foretaste in hope of the joy of full unity*, when it will be granted us to celebrate together the Eucharistic Sacrifice, memorial of the Death and Resurrection of the Lord.

I also wish to greet with respect the followers of Islam, who also worship, although in a different way, the One and All-powerful God.

Finally, I greet the civil authorities who honour us by their presence. I thank them for their help in making possible my visit to Bulgaria.

4. God, One and Three, is present in his people, the Church. We are baptized in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit; in this same name the other Sacraments are administered. In a special way the Mass, "the centre of all Christian life", is characterized by the remembrance of the Divine Persons: the Father to whom the offering is made; the Son, priest and victim of the sacrifice; the Holy Spirit, invoked to change the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ and to make those who partake of them one body and one spirit.

The life of Christians is completely directed towards this mystery. The success of our journey here below depends on our faithful response to the love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

This truth was ever before the eyes of *the three Assumptionist priests* whom today I have the joy of beatifying. The cause for which Fathers Kamen Vitchev, Pavel Djidjov and Josaphat Chichkov

did not hesitate to give their lives was their faith in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; it was love of Christ, the Incarnate Son of God, to whom they gave themselves unreservedly in the service of his Church.

Father Josaphat Chichkov declared: "We seek to do as best we can everything that is expected of us in order to become holy", and he added: "The most important thing is to draw near to God by living for him; everything else is secondary". Several months before the infamous trial which condemned them to death together with Bishop Bossilkov, foreseeing in some way what awaited them, Father Kamen Vitchev wrote to his Provincial Superior: "Obtain for us by prayer the grace of being faithful to Christ and to the Church in our daily life, so that we may be worthy of bearing witness when the time comes". And Father Pavel Djidjov said: "We await our turn: may God's will be done".

5. In thinking of the three new Beati, I also feel in duty bound to honour the memory of the *other confessors of the faith* who were *sons and daughters of the Orthodox Church* and who suffered martyrdom under the same Communist regime. This tribute of fidelity to Christ *brought together the two ecclesial communities in Bulgaria*, even to the supreme witness. "This gesture cannot fail to have an ecumenical character and significance. Perhaps the most convincing form of ecumenism is the ecumenism of the saints and of the martyrs. The *communio sanctorum* speaks louder than the things which divide us" (*Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 37).

How could that communion not already be perfect, when it is realized "in what we all consider the highest point of the life of grace, *martyria* unto death"? (*Ut Unum Sint*, 84). Is this not "the truest communion possible with Christ who shed his Blood, and by that sacrifice brings near those who once were far off (cf. *Eph 2:13*)"?

6. The courageous fidelity in the face of suffering and imprisonment shown by Fathers Josaphat, Kamen and Pavel was acknowledged by their former students - Catholics, Orthodox, Jews and Muslims -, by their parishioners, the members of their religious communities, and their fellow prisoners. By their dynamism, their fidelity to the Gospel, their selfless service to the Nation, *the new Beati stand out as models for Christians today*, especially for Bulgaria's young people, who are looking to give meaning to their lives and who wish to follow Christ whether as laypersons, in religious life or in the priesthood.

May the special commitment with which the new Beati encouraged *candidates to the presbyterate* be an incentive for everyone: I exhort the local Church in Bulgaria to consider seriously the possibility of *re-establishing a Seminary* in which young men, by means of a solid human, intellectual and spiritual training, can prepare themselves for the ministerial priesthood in the service of God and their brothers and sisters.

7. The mystery of the Trinity reveals to us the love which is in God, the love which is God himself,

the love with which God loves all men. "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (*Jn 3:16*). The Crucified and Risen Son, for his part, has sent in the Father's name the Holy Spirit, to nourish in the hearts of believers the desire for and the expectation of eternity.

The new Beati actively experienced this expectation, and they now enjoy the all-satisfying contemplation of the Most Holy Trinity. Let us entrust ourselves to their intercession by praying, in the words of the Byzantine Liturgy (*Sext, Dismissal Prayer*):

"Eternal God, you dwell in inaccessible light...

Protect us who put our hope in you,

fill us with your divine and august grace.

For yours is the power, yours the majesty, might and glory,

Father, Son and Holy Spirit,

now and for ever.

Amen".