



# The Holy See

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## **MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE PRESIDENT**

**OF THE SPANISH EPISCOPAL CONFERENCE** To Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela

*Archbishop of Madrid*

*President of the Spanish Episcopal Conference*<sup>1</sup>. The Pastors and faithful of the Ecclesial Communities of Spain, with their gaze fixed on the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God which will be commemorated during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, have chosen to gather in Santiago de Compostela at the Apostle's tomb, to proclaim and celebrate their faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, present in the Eucharist. In this way, the *Statio Ecclesiarum Hispaniae*, which concludes the National Eucharistic Congress of Santiago, is preparing and announcing the *Statio Orbis* of the 47th International Eucharistic Congress which will be held in Rome next year. With this great event I wanted to emphasize that the Jubilee Year must be an "intensely Eucharistic" year (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 55), in order to celebrate Jesus Christ the only Saviour of the world, the Bread of new life, "the same yesterday, and today, and for ever" (Heb 13:8). In fact, Christ in the Eucharist enables us to feel his presence and company. He invites us to look at the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 not merely as the memory of a past event, but as the commemoration of God's definitive entrance into the world through the Incarnation of the Word, to remain always with us until the end of time. This is why, in a spirit of prayer and adoration, I join all of you, Pastors and faithful, who have gathered in Santiago to celebrate this ecclesial event whose centre is the Eucharist, "a sacrament of love, a sign of unity, a bond of charity, a paschal banquet" (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 47).<sup>2</sup> The solemn celebration of this Congress is an important moment in the three years of preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, which had such significant stages as the Congress on the Pastoral Ministry of Evangelization held in Madrid in 1997 with the theme: "*Jesus Christ, the Good News*", and the Mariological and Marian Congresses of Zaragoza in 1998, on the theme: "*Mary, the Gospel Lived*". The city of Santiago de Compostela, the place where this great Eucharistic Congress will be held, certainly has special significance. The memory of this Apostle reminds us that he witnessed the institution of the Eucharist at the Last Supper, as well as Christ's glory in the Transfiguration and his agony in the Garden of Olives. James, "the first Apostle to drink from the cup of ... our Lord" (*Preface for the Mass of St James*) not only passed on to the Church, like the other Apostles, the memorial of the Lord's Supper and faith in the Eucharistic mystery, but by his own martyrdom celebrated the deepest meaning of the Eucharist by offering his body and shedding his blood.<sup>3</sup> The Church of Compostela preserves the memory of this Apostle, James, friend of Christ and of Christians. Over the centuries the "Campo de la Estrella", which, according to tradition welcomed and preserves the Apostle's relics, has been the goal of numerous pilgrimages and journeys made by the faithful from so many parts of the world. This pilgrimage along the traditional road to Santiago yielded abundant fruits of truth and life; it was marked by penance and conversion and nourished by meditation on the Word lived in exemplary charity, without boundaries of nationality or race, by those who performed works of mercy and who gave and received assistance at inns,

hospitals and monasteries. The pilgrimage was made to receive the "great pardon" and full reconciliation with God, through Jesus Christ and the Apostle's intercession. The motto of the congress is an allusion to the community pilgrimage made by the Church with the strength of the Eucharist, "*cibus viatorum*", the nourishment of pilgrims and wayfarers. Christians throughout the world live in this way, with their gaze fixed on the ultimate goal, when all humanity will be an acceptable offering to God the Father. A beautiful text of the Second Vatican Council reminds us of it: "Christ left to his followers a pledge of this hope and food for the journey in the sacrament of faith, in which natural elements, the fruits of man's cultivation, are changed into his glorified Body and Blood, as a supper of brotherly fellowship and a foretaste of the heavenly banquet" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 38).<sup>4</sup> The Eucharist is also "*panis filiorum*", the bread of God's children. This expression of the Church's Eucharistic piety reminds us of another fundamental aspect which has special resonance in this year of grace, when with all the holy people we will turn our gaze to God the Father who is in heaven (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 49). The Eucharist is the food of God's children, the living Bread of God come down from heaven which gives life to the world. "My Father gives you the true bread from heaven" (Jn 6:32), Jesus says. For this reason the Church celebrates the Eucharist with her eyes and heart turned to the holy and merciful Father, source of all holiness, who nourishes us every day with the gift of the Body and the Blood of his beloved Son. The Eucharistic prayer overflows with gratitude to the Father for giving us the Victim of our reconciliation, and in it we remember that Christ is the Bread of the children of God who grants us a share in his divine life: "As the living Father sent me, and I live because of the Father, so he who eats me will live because of me" (Jn 6:57). Everything in the Eucharist comes from the Father and everything returns to him, through Christ in the unity of the Holy Spirit. To participate worthily in the Eucharistic banquet, the true banquet of God's children, we must be wearing our "wedding garment" (Mt 22:11). This is why the Church offers us the sacrament of Reconciliation. In it we receive forgiveness through the merciful embrace with which God welcomes us (cf. Lk 15:20). This is the source of true peace and inner joy, which enables us to feel like children and brethren, reconciled around the table of the Eucharist.<sup>5</sup> In "the breaking of bread" the pilgrim people relive the grace and duty of new life, like the early community in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 2:42ff.). Communion between individuals and peoples is strengthened over and above cultural differences, within the Church's catholicity. Thus, the Eucharist has always been a factor of communion in diversity, of sharing the same bread of life which also increases the gift of brotherhood. So it is expressed in a text of the ancient Hispanic tradition that precedes the Lord's Prayer in the Eucharistic liturgy: "So that with the desire for humility and the profession of love, through the nourishment and blood of the Lord, the whole brotherhood of his body will be united and we can confidently say on earth, 'Our Father'" (PL, 96, 759-760). The Church which believes in the Eucharist and celebrates it is a prayerful community that contemplates and adores the mystery of the real and permanent presence of Christ in the sacrament, and learns to pray with the same sentiments as the Eucharistic prayer.<sup>6</sup> The celebration of this National Eucharistic Congress is a forceful call to unity and communion for the whole Spanish Church, to a return to the roots of the Christian faith that have made your communities fruitful. Many other Sister Churches throughout the world recognize it. It is attested by your martyrs, the rich spirituality of your saints and the enterprising zeal of your missionaries who brought the Gospel message from the "finis terrae" of Compostela to other places in the world. Today the Eucharist is still a forceful call to live the Christian faith in the light of the expressive and sacramental sign of "Dies Domini", the Lord's day and our weekly Easter, when the family of God's children gather round the table of the Bread of the Word and the Eucharistic Bread, as a witness of faith in the risen Lord's presence in this world. The Eucharist, as a sign of unity and fount of love, is also an outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, and spurs us to foster brotherhood in a divided world by bearing witness to God's loving fatherhood to everyone. How can we forget that it was the Eucharist, celebrated, adored and received, that was the secret of the Church's vitality in your country on this historical pilgrimage of past centuries which has left so many monuments of authentic piety? With this

same certainty I urge you to have confidence in the future, so that Christ present in the Eucharist will strengthen your resolve and renew in everyone, especially in the young, the commitment to evangelization and the yearning to bear a public and social witness of Christian life at the end of this century and this millennium.<sup>7</sup> May faith in the Eucharist increase your hope, foster brotherhood and spur you to charity, and may St James accompany you with his friendly presence, a witness of the Cross and of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ, who encourages pilgrims by his example and helps them with his intercession. We cannot speak of the Eucharist without remembering the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus, pilgrim of faith, sign of hope and consolation for the pilgrim people, who has given us Christ, the true Bread. In communion with her and with the hope of enjoying her company in glory, let us celebrate the Eucharist which is the sacrament of our faith, proclaiming the "presence of Christ, Son of the Virgin Mary: 'Ave, verum Corpus, natum de Maria Virgine'...". As I join you in these days of grace, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you all, Pastors and faithful of the Church in Spain. *From the Vatican, 13 May, Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, 1999.* **JOHN PAUL II** © Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

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