



The Holy See

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOP OF AACHEN ON THE 12TH ANNIVERSARY
OF THE FOUNDATION OF THE BASILICA**

To my Venerable Brother Bishop

The Most Reverend Heinrich Mussinghoff Bishop of Aachen

1. *"I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord!" (Ps 122: 1).*

The Psalmist's joyful cry has found a vivid echo in Aachen for 1,200 years, that is, since Charlemagne completed his palace chapel and dedicated it to Mary, Help of Christians.

Throughout its history countless pilgrims, great and small, have visited this Marian cathedral to pray before Mary's miraculous image and to invoke her motherly protection on the Church and the world.

2. I cannot be personally present for the 1,200th anniversary of Aachen's cathedral, but I have sent you a Special Envoy in the person of Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, who will take my place at this festive event as my personal representative. This expresses Catholic communion, whose centre is the Church of Rome and which covers the whole world like a net. Charlemagne, who built this house of God, was already aware of the need for these close ties with the Successor of Peter. With his coronation as emperor by Pope Leo III on Christmas Day of the year 800, this awareness reached a symbolic climax a few years after he had founded the *"Schola Francorum"* in the shadow of St Peter's Basilica. It was intended as a hostel for pilgrims who came to the Eternal City over the Alps to visit the tombs of the Princes of the Apostles.

3. In addition to this bond with Rome, the cathedral of Aachen has another connection. It preserves precious items which turn our hearts and minds not only to the Eternal City but also to the Holy City. Jerusalem gave Charlemagne four cloth relics that recall in a tangible and deeply

reverential way important events in salvation history and, at the same time, can be considered as pilgrim's garb for the People of God on their journey through time.

Whoever looks at Jesus' swaddling clothes remembers that the faith community is also a living communion with Jesus. Indeed, like every Christian, Christ also began his life as a little child. Just as Jesus grew in wisdom, in stature and in favour with God and men (cf. *Lk 2: 52*), so we are asked to care for the growth and maturity of our faith. In the manger Jesus was not only a human child, but the Son of God. Thus the swaddling clothes are an invitation to honour him with our lives and to bring others with us on this path of adoration: *Venite adoremus!* Come let us adore the King, the Lord!

The King's throne is the Cross. The most precious relic venerated in Aachen's cathedral, from the standpoint of salvation history, is the cloth that girded Jesus' loins. This cloth alone was left to the King on the Cross, so that he could offer everything for God and the world. Just as he entrusted his whole self to the Father and at the same time entrusted his work to Mary and John, so too it is the Church's task in her pilgrimage through time to advance towards God without reserve and to bring him "the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 1).

This testifies that the orthodoxy of her teaching is reflected in credibility of life. In this context, we recall the cloth which covered John the Baptist's head. Professing their faith does not cost Christians their head in modern society. Nevertheless, witnessing costs many sleepless nights and countless drops of sweat in a social context to which Christ has often become a stranger. Precisely at a time when God is frequently silenced, strength and courage are needed if we are to guarantee the inalienable dignity of all human beings through the love of God who sent his own Son, "so that they [might] have life, and have it abundantly" (*Jn 10: 10*).

The word *life* makes us think of Mary who was chosen to bear Christ, the life of the world. The fourth cloth relic in Aachen's cathedral recalls the cloak that the Mother of God wore on the Holy Night. Just as Mary carried the Son in her womb, so the Church, her image, carries Christ in pilgrim garb down the centuries. What Mary lived for must motivate the Church in the course of history: the "mystery of faith" in Jesus Christ, the "Saviour of man" yesterday, today and for ever. It is a great honour for the Church and her noble task to be able to live with a mystery entrusted to her by God himself. The Church, as custodian of the divine mystery, is sent to reveal the mystery of salvation "to the ends of the earth" (*Acts 1: 8*).

4. The Church's evangelizing mandate is her mission in every age but particularly in the Holy Year 2000, which we are celebrating as the Great Jubilee of the Incarnation of God. Let us thank the Giver of all things because not only have we not stopped 2,000 years *after* Christ, but we have been able to continue for 2,000 years *with* Christ. Christianity has a bright future in the new century as well. This was already recalled by the venerable and prematurely deceased Bishop Klaus Hemmerle when, a few months before his death, he made an assessment of the times: "We

are not only stewards of a precious and holy past, but precursors of a future that we cannot create ourselves, but which will come because Christ comes" (*Homily of 7 November 1993 for the 18th anniversary of his episcopal consecration*).

May the 1,200th anniversary of the great cathedral of Aachen remind all Christians that they are being built like living stones into God's house (cf. 1 Pt 2: 5). May the pilgrimage to the shrines, which coincides with the Jubilee Year, encourage the Church of Aachen to see herself even more profoundly as the pilgrim People of God and set out with joyful hearts! May Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, be a faithful guide on their journey to the Lord! United in spirit, I am close to all of you who have gathered round the Bishop to celebrate the Jubilee of Aachen's Marian cathedral, and I cordially give you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 25 January 2000.

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