



JOHN PAUL II

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO GREAT BRITAIN

Holy Mass In Westminster Cathedral, Homily Of John Paul II, London, Friday, 28 May 1982

My brothers and sisters,

1. With heartfelt gratitude and love I thank our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, that he has given me the grace of coming among you today. Today, for the first time in history, a Bishop of Rome sets foot on English soil. I am deeply moved at this thought. This fair land, once a distant outpost of the pagan world, has become, through the preaching of the Gospel, a beloved and gifted portion of Christ's vineyard.

Yours is a tradition embedded in the history of Christian civilization. The roll of your saints and of your great men and women, your treasures of literature and music, your cathedrals and colleges, your rich heritage of parish life speak of a tradition of faith. And it is to the faith of your fathers – living still – that I wish to pay tribute by my visit.

I am happy that I can concelebrate this Eucharist with my brother Bishops who, together with me, are the successors of the Apostles, and whose task it is to sanctify and govern the portion of the Church entrusted to their pastoral care (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 19).

2. Let us reflect on the spiritual significance of this moment.

Christ, "the chief Shepherd" (1 Petr. 5, 4), gave to Peter – as we have heard proclaimed in the passage from Saint John's Gospel – the task of confirming his brothers in their faith and in their pastoral duty: "Feed my lambs . . . Look after my sheep" (Io. 21, 15–16).

I come among you in response to this command of the Lord. I come to confirm the faith of my brother Bishops. I come to remind all believers who today inherit the faith of their fathers that in each diocese the Bishop is the visible sign and source of the Church's unity. I come among you as the visible sign and source of unity for the whole Church. I come at the service of unity in love: in the humble and realistic love of the repentant fisherman: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you."

Christians down the ages often travelled to that city where the Apostles Peter and Paul had died in witness to their faith and were buried. But, during four hundred years the steady flow of English pilgrims to the tombs of the Apostles shrank to a trickle. Rome and your country were estranged.

Now the Bishop of Rome comes to you. I truly come at the service of unity in love, but I come as a friend, too, and I am deeply grateful for your welcome.

I have always admired your love of freedom, your generous hospitality to other peoples in their adversity; as a son of Poland I have the strongest, most personal reason for this admiration and for the thanks that go with it.

3. With these sentiments, I am especially glad to do what Peter did in the early Church. I shall administer Baptism here this morning and meditate with you on its meaning.

In a mysterious but real way, there is repeated and re-presented in this hallowed place that moment of the early Church's life when, as we have read in the Acts of the Apostles, "Peter stood with the Eleven and addressed them in a loud voice" (Act. 2, 14) concerning the need to be baptized and to receive the gift of the Holy Spirit. As a result many "received his word" and were baptized, being added to the number of the household of the living God.

4. Through Baptism we are incorporated into Christ. We accept his promise and his commands.

The meaning of Baptism is reflected in the symbolism of the sacramental rite. Water, washing over us, speaks of the redeeming power of Christ's suffering, death and Resurrection, washing away the inheritance of sin, delivering us from a kingdom of light and love. By Baptism we are indeed immersed into the death of Christ – baptized, as Saint Paul says, into his death – so as to rise with him in his Resurrection (Cfr. Rom. 6, 3–5). The anointing of our heads with oil signifies how we are strengthened in the power of Christ and become living temples of the Holy Spirit.

We are on the eve of Pentecost, the feast of the Holy Spirit who descend on us at Baptism. One of the finest passages in the Pentecost liturgy was written by an Englishman, Stephen Langton, an Archbishop of Canterbury. In six short and vivid lines he calls upon the Holy Spirit to work in us:

Wash what is unclean.

Water what is parched.

Heal what is diseased.

Bend what is rigid.

Warm what is cold.

Straighten what is crooked.

Most of the ills of our age or of any age can be brought under that prayer. It reflects a boundless confidence in the power of the Spirit whom it invokes.

5. Through Baptism we are incorporated into the Church. The minister, our parents and godparents sign us with the sign of the Cross, Christ's proud standard. This shows that it is the whole assembly of the faithful, the whole community of Christ, that supports us in the new life of faith and obedience that follows from our Baptism, our new birth in Christ.

In Baptism we are drawn into the community of faith. We become part of the pilgrim People of God which, in all time and in all places, goes forward in hope towards the fulfilment of the "promise". It is our task to take our place responsibly and lovingly beside those who, from the beginning, "remained faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers" (Act. 2, 42).

6. Baptism creates a sacramental bond of unity linking all who have been reborn by means of it. But Baptism, of itself, is only a beginning, a point

of departure, for it is wholly directed towards the fullness of life in Christ (Cfr. Unitatis Redintegratio, 22). Baptism is the foundation of the unity that all Christians have in Christ: a unity we must seek to perfect. When we set out clearly the privilege and the duty of the Christian, we feel ashamed that we have not all been capable of maintaining the full unity of faith and charity that Christ willed for his Church. We the baptized have work to do together as brothers and sisters in Christ. The world is in need of Jesus Christ and his Gospel – the Good News that God loves us, that God the Son was born, was crucified and died to save us, that he rose again and that we rose with him, and that in baptism he has sealed us with Spirit for the first time, gathered us into a community of love and of witness to his truth.

These are my thoughts as we gather to celebrate the sacrament of Baptism in this historic place.

This fine church where we meet is a symbol of the faith and energy of the English Catholic community in modern times. Its architecture is unusual for this country: it evokes memories of other parts of the Christian world, reminding us of our universality. Tomorrow I shall be welcomed in the much older cathedral of Canterbury, where Saint Augustine, sent by my predecessor Saint Gregory, first built a little church whose foundations remain. There indeed everything speaks of ancient common traditions, which, in this modern age, we are ready to stress together.

I, too, want to speak in this way – to mourn the long estrangement between Christians, to hear gladly our blessed Lord's prayer and command that we should be completely one, to thank him for that inspiration of the Holy Spirit which has filled us with a longing to leave behind our divisions and aspire to a common witness to our Lord and Saviour. My deep desire, my ardent hope and prayer is that my visit may serve the cause of Christian unity.

7. I would like to recall another aspect of Baptism which is perhaps the most universally familiar. In Baptism we are given a name – we call it our Christian name. In the tradition of the Church it is a saint's name, a name of one of the heroes among Christ's followers – an apostle, a martyr, a religious founder, like Saint Benedict, whose monks founded Westminster Abbey nearby, where your sovereigns are crowned. Taking such names reminds us again

that we are being drawn into the Communion of Saints, and at the same time that great models of Christian living are set before us. London is particularly proud of two outstanding saints, great men also by the world's standards, contributors to your national heritage, John Fisher and Thomas More. John Fisher, the Cambridge scholar of Renaissance learning, became Bishop of Rochester. He is an example to all Bishops in his loyalty to the faith and in his devoted attention to the people of his diocese, especially the poor and the sick. Thomas More was a model layman living the Gospel to the full. He was a fine scholar and an ornament to his profession, a loving husband and father, humble in prosperity, courageous in adversity, humorous and godly. Together they served God and their country – Bishop and layman. Together they died, victims of an unhappy age. Today we have the grace, all of us, to proclaim their greatness and to thank God for giving such men to England.

In this England of fair and generous minds, no one will begrudge the Catholic community pride in its own history. So I speak last of another Christian name, less famous but no less deserving honour. Bishop Richard Challoner guided the Catholics of this London district in the eighteenth century, at what seemed the lowest point of their fortunes. They were few. It seemed they might well not survive. Yet Bishop Challoner bravely raised his voice to prophesy a better future for his people.

And now, two centuries later, I am privileged to stand here and to speak to you, in no triumphal spirit, but as a friend, grateful for your kind welcome and full of love for all of you.

Bishop Challoner's courage may remind all of us where the seeds of courage lie, where the confidence of renewal comes from. It is through water and the Holy Spirit that a New People is born, whatever the darkness of the time.

8. As the reading from the prophet Ezekiel reminds us, it is the Lord himself who is the true shepherd of this new People. He himself pastures his sheep. He shows them where to rest: "As a shepherd keeps all his flock in view . . . so shall I keep my sheep in view. I shall rescue them from wherever they have been scattered during the mist and the darkness . . . I shall look for the lost one, bring back the stray, bandage

the wounded and make the weak strong" (Ez. 34, 12. 16). May those of us who today renew our baptismal vows, as well as those who are now to be baptized, cry out and raise our plea to our heavenly Father through Jesus Christ his Son, our Lord: "O Shepherd of Israel, hear us . . . implore, O Lord, come to our help. God of hosts, turn again, we look down from heaven and see. Visit this vine and protect it, the vine your right hand has planted. And we shall never forsake you again: give us life that we may call upon your name" (Ps. 80, 1–2. 14–15. 18.). Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters, as we proceed to celebrate the mysteries of our faith, we cannot forget that an armed conflict is taking place.

Brothers in Christ are fighting in a war, that imperils peace in the world.

In our prayers let us remember the victims of both sides. We pray for the dead – that they may rest in Christ – and for the wounded, and for all the afflicted families. I ask you to join me at each step of my Pastoral visit, praying for peaceful solution of the conflict, praying that the God of peace will move men's hearts to put aside the weapons of death, and to pursue the path of fraternal dialogue. With all our heart we turn to Jesus the Prince of Peace.

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