



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Wednesday, 17 September 2003

Reflection on the recent Apostolic Journey to Slovakia

Faithful to Christ and Church!

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. Today I would like to reflect with you on the *Apostolic Visit* that I had the joy of making to *Slovakia* last week. I thank the Lord who enabled me to visit that noble country for the third time. I once again express my gratitude to all those who welcomed me with such warmth. I first thank my venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, the President of the Republic and the other Authorities, as well as all those who saw to every aspect of my stay in that country.

2. *Faithful to Christ and to the Church*: this is the characteristic that Slovakia has revealed down through history. By going there in person, I wanted to strengthen Slovakia in this fidelity as it starts out confidently towards the future. I admired with pleasure the economic and social development that has been achieved in recent years. I am sure that the Slovak people, on entering the European Union, will also know how to make their own effective contribution to building Europe at the level of values. Thanks be to God, in fact, they possess a rich spiritual heritage which, despite the harsh persecution of the past, they have been able to keep intact. An eloquent proof of this is the promising flourishing, found here today, of Christian life and of vocations to the priesthood and to the Religious life. I pray that this beloved Nation will continue confidently in this direction.

3. The first stop on my pilgrimage was the *visit to the Cathedral of Trnava*, the mother church of the Archdiocese of Bratislava-Trnava. At that church, dedicated to St John the Baptist, I asked Christians to be ever more fearless Gospel witnesses.

The following days were centred on beautiful and evocative Eucharistic Celebrations, with carefully prepared liturgies and songs and intensely devout participation on the part of the Christian people. The first celebration took place in Banská Bystrica Square, in the heart of the Country. Commenting on the Gospel of the Annunciation, I stressed the need, starting with the family, to foster a *mature freedom*. This is the only way to be able to respond to God's call, after the example of the Virgin Mary.

While in Banská Bystrica, I met the members of the Bishops' Conference of Slovakia. I encouraged them to persevere in the immense task of nurturing Christian life, after the dark years of isolation and of the Communist dictatorship.

4. I then went to Roznava, the capital of an agricultural region. In this context, the Parable of the Sower was particularly eloquent. Yes! The Word of God is a seed of new life. Addressing the farm workers in particular, I emphasized the importance of their contribution to building the Nation. However, they must remain soundly rooted in their age-old Christian tradition. Also in Roznava, I was granted to greet a large Hungarian-speaking community.

The last and most important stage of my Apostolic Journey was in the capital, Bratislava. During a solemn Holy Mass, I had the joy of *beatifying two children of that land*: Bishop Vasil' Hopko and Sr Zdenka Cecilia Schelingová, victims of the atrocious persecutions of the Communist regime in the 1950s; both of them were 20th-century witnesses of the faith, raised to the honour of the altars on the very day of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. They remind us that in the dramatic hours of suffering, the Slovak people found strength and hope in the Cross of Christ: *O Crux, ave spes unica!*

5. Our Lady of Sorrows was a support for the Church in Slovakia and is her principal Patroness. United to her as she stood next to her Son on Calvary, our Slovak brethren in our day too intend to stay *faithful to Christ and to the Church*. May the Sorrowful Virgin protect Slovakia, so that it may jealously guard the Gospel, the most precious good, in order to proclaim and to witness to it with holiness of life.

God bless you, dear Slovakia! Thank you for your love for the Church and for the Successor of Peter!

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

I offer greetings to the English-speaking visitors present today, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, India, Australia and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke the grace and peace of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

My thoughts go lastly to the *young people*, the *sick people* and the *newly-weds*.

May friendship with Jesus be for you, dear *young people*, a cause of inspiration for every demanding decision; for you, dear *sick people*, may it be a support in moments of suffering; and for you, dear *newly-weds*, may it spur you to live up to your family vocation.