



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE PHILIPPINES,
PAPUA NEW GUINEA, AUSTRALIA AND SRI LANKA

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF FATHER JOSEPH VAZ**

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

*Galle Face Green, Colombo
Saturday, 21 January 1995*

"Praise the Lord all nations! Praise him, all peoples!" (Ps. 118 (117): 1).

Dear Sri Lankan Brothers and Sisters,

1. The Responsorial Psalm of today's Mass speaks to the whole world, to every nation and people. *The nations and peoples of the vast continent of Asia* also are called to join in a chorus of praise to God. Today, in Colombo, I thank God for enabling me to add my voice to yours in this great *symphony of praise*, and to rejoice with you for the Beatification of Father Joseph Vaz. I express my gratitude to everyone gathered here, to Archbishop Fernando, my brother Bishops, the priests, religious women and men and all of you whose presence makes this joyful celebration possible. I greet the civil authorities and thank them for their presence at this ceremony.

This is a day of special happiness for Christ's followers in Sri Lanka! From the very beginning of my Pontificate, whenever I have had occasion to meet your Bishops they have told me of your great desire to see Father Vaz raised to the honours of the Altar. Today Joseph Vaz, the apostle of Sri Lanka, has been proclaimed one of the Blessed in heaven. Sri Lanka's Catholics, with gratitude for all that God has done in the history of his People on this Island, can truly repeat with the Psalmist: "His love for us is strong! His faithfulness is eternal!" (Ps. 118 (117): 2).

2. Joseph Vaz is rightly considered the second founder of the Church in your country. From his native India he came, a dedicated priest of Jesus Christ, to this land of ancient spiritual traditions, a land steeped in respect for the Sanyasi, the man of holiness, the man of God. During the last few months, as I prepared for today's Beatification, my thoughts often turned to the respect for things spiritual which characterizes the peoples of Asia. This brought to mind the passage of the Second Vatican Council's *Declaration on Non-Christian Religions*, which expresses the Church's deep esteem for the ancient religions of Asia, and especially for Buddhism and Hinduism.

This is what we read in the document "[Nostra Aetate](#)". *The Church respects these religions* because of their ability to instil deep religious meaning into the lives of their followers. Men and women look to the different religions for answers to the profound and troubling mysteries which surround human existence: Who is man? What is the meaning and purpose of our life? What is the origin and purpose of suffering? How do we attain true happiness? What is the meaning of death, and what is that ultimate mystery which surrounds and penetrates our whole being, the Mystery which is our origin and towards which we are always journeying? (Cf. [Nostra Aetate](#), 1-2)

3. And now I read other texts from "Gaudium et Spes", the Constitution "[Gaudium et Spes](#)" – part of that document. *The Catholic Church "rejects nothing of what is true and holy in other religions, for she sees in them a ray of that Truth which enlightens all men"* ([Nostra Aetate](#), 2). At the same time she exists to proclaim that the fullest answer to life's questions is found in Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God. He is the Eternal Word of the Father and the New Adam. Through him all things were made and in him all people find that light which is the life of the world (Cf. Jn. 1: 3-4). Christ, by revealing the mystery of the Father and his Love, "fully reveals man to himself and makes clear his sublime calling" ([Gaudium et Spes](#), 22).

For this reason, the Church never ceases to proclaim that *Jesus Christ is "the way, and the truth, and the life"* (Jn. 14: 6), the One "in whom the fulness of religious life is found and in whom God has reconciled all things to himself" ([Nostra Aetate](#), 2). *Father Joseph Vaz came to this land in order to proclaim this same message.* He preached the name of Christ out of obedience to the Truth and out of a desire to share with others the way that leads to eternal life.

4. *Father Joseph Vaz was a great missionary priest*, belonging to the unending line of ardent heralds of the Gospel, missionaries who, in every age, have left their own land to bring the light of the Faith to peoples not their own. Among those following in the footsteps of Saint Paul who became all things to all men for the sake of the Gospel (Cf. 1Cor. 9: 22-23), the figure of Saint Francis Xavier shines before us as the great apostle of Asia and the universal Patron of the Missions. Father Vaz was a worthy heir of Saint Francis Xavier; he was also a true son of his native Goa, outstanding for its deep Christian and missionary traditions. *Father Vaz was a son of Asia who became a missionary in Asia.* The Church today needs more such missionary men and women among the different continents.

Who was Father Joseph Vaz? Above all, what moved him to come to Sri Lanka? The Gospel we have heard today sheds light on his missionary vocation. Jesus went about proclaiming the Kingdom of God *in his native Galilee*. People brought their sick to him and he healed them. He freed others from the grip of evil spirits. When he went off by himself to pray, people started looking for him. They did not want him to leave them. But he replied: "I must preach the Good News about the Kingdom of God in other towns also, *because that is what God sent me to do*" (Lk. 4: 43).

Father Joseph strove to follow in the path of his Divine Master. He too had been *sent by God in order to proclaim* "a kingdom of truth and life, a kingdom of holiness and grace, a kingdom of justice, love and peace" (*Roman Missal, Preface, "Our Lord Jesus Christ, King of the Universe"*). Heeding the call of the Holy Spirit, he left his homeland to come to this country where the Church had had no priests for over three decades. He came here in absolute poverty and lived as a beggar, driven by a burning desire to draw people to Christ. Before he had even arrived he learned the Tamil language, and later when he was imprisoned in Kandy he learned Sinhala, so as to make the name of Jesus Christ resound in the languages and culture of your country.

Joseph Vaz was on fire with faith. Guided by the example of his Divine Master, he travelled the whole Island, going everywhere, often barefoot, with a rosary round his neck as a sign of his Catholic faith. As a true disciple of Jesus, he endured innumerable sufferings with joy and confidence, knowing that in those sufferings too God's plans were being fulfilled. His heroic charity, shown in a particular way in his selfless devotion to the victims of the epidemic in 1697, earned him the respect of everyone.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters, Christians of Sri Lanka! What is the message of Joseph Vaz? Blessed Joseph should inspire you to be tireless and spirit-filled witnesses to the Gospel in your families and in your communities. In Baptism you were remade in the likeness of Christ and given a mission to proclaim prophetically his presence in the world. In Confirmation you were strengthened by the Holy Spirit and sent forth to profess your faith in word and deed. To some of you is addressed a further call: to be *Asian missionaries to Asia*. On the eve of the Third Christian Millennium, the whole Church is called to take up with fresh vigour the missionary mandate she received from Christ, and to meet the challenges of a new evangelization. Among the peoples of this continent, *holiness will always be the first and most effective form of teaching the truths and values of the Gospel*. Asia's venerable traditions of silence, reflection, prayer, asceticism and self-denial will find their fullest meaning in a living encounter with the Spirit of Jesus Christ, an encounter which will certainly take place if you are people of deep personal holiness, filled with love and zeal for the Church and God's Kingdom. Through your witness, "all the nations of the world will know that the Lord alone is God – that there is no other" (1Kings 8: 60).

6. In the first reading of today's Mass, King Solomon prays: "*May the Lord our God be with us, as he was with our ancestors; may he never leave us, or abandon us; may he make us obedient to*

him, so that we will always live as he wants us to live" (Ibid. 8: 57). These words call to mind how your ancestors in the faith joyfully received Father Vaz. At a time when the Catholic Church was banned and persecuted, and all her priests had been expelled, Sri Lanka's Catholics did not lose heart. *They remained faithful to the Gospel they had received.* And God did not abandon them. *Joseph Vaz could count on the laity in the task of rebuilding the Church in your country;* he trained lay leaders to look after Christ's scattered flock in the hour of difficulty.

Can we not see here a lesson for our own times? The Church in Sri Lanka needs fervent Catholics who are "obedient to God's law, living as he would have us live, and keeping all his laws and commands" (Ibid. 8: 58). She needs dedicated priests to proclaim the Gospel and celebrate the mysteries of our redemption; she needs Religious who are living signs of the joy which comes from total dedication to the Lord and his works. I should say that this joy I find in you, in your priests, your religious, men and women especially, I find this great joy of being Christian, being religious. There is also need for married couples whose faithful love will reflect the unbreakable bond of unity between Christ and his Church; there is a need for Christian parents who will be the first teachers of the faith to their children. The Church needs *young people who will be apostles to their own generation:* like the hundreds of thousands and millions of young people who gathered in Manila for the Tenth World Youth Day and recommitted themselves to transforming the world around them according to the Gospel demands of justice, peace and love. Like Joseph Vaz, who freely shared the truth he had received, everyone who has received the gift of faith is called to share that gift with others.

7. *"Praise the Lord who has given his people peace"* (Ibid. 8: 56).

My Brothers and Sisters: it is my ardent hope that the Beatification of Father Joseph Vaz will inspire Sri Lankans to work with ever greater commitment for *peace in this beloved country, to bring about a definitive end to the tragic violence* which has cost so many lives.

Peace is the fruit of love! Saint Paul reminds us that our love is shown in the way we treat others. He says: "Love one another warmly... and be eager to show respect for one another... Serve the Lord with a heart full of devotion. Let your hope keep you joyful, be patient in your troubles and pray at all times" (Rm. 12:10-12). These words which Paul wrote to the first Christians living in Rome are also the message of Blessed Joseph Vaz, a man known for his meekness and humility of heart. These words are addressed to you – and to all who earnestly strive for peace in this country. Saint Paul insists: *"If someone has done you wrong, do not repay him with a wrong. Try to do what everyone considers to be good"* (Ibid. 12:17). This is God's will for you. This is God's will for Sri Lanka! *Forgiveness, reconciliation, peace:* this is the challenge before you: all of you, Sinhalese and Tamils – Buddhists, Hindus, Muslims, Christians and all men and women of good will. This is the challenge before you all.

May *the example of Father Joseph Vaz speak to your hearts.* Father Joseph loved your nation and

all its people. He welcomed everyone as a child of God. And because of this love his name is now invoked as a blessing, here in Sri Lanka and throughout the world. "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt. 5: 9). When lasting peace comes, all Sri Lankans will be blessed and your country will be restored in its full dignity and greatness. May Almighty God achieve this through you. Amen.

May Almighty God through the intercession of Our Lady and of blessed Joseph Vaz achieve this through you.

Remarks of the Holy Father after the Apostolic Blessing:

Dear brothers and sisters, priests, friends, my heart is filled with gratitude to God for all the beauty of this wonderful island and for its marvellous people. I am grateful to all of you for the unique welcome you gave me, for this splendid ceremony of beatification so deeply marked by the signs of your culture, by the dignity which distinguishes you as people. May blessed Joseph Vaz watch over you, over your families. May he intercede for the peace and harmony which you all desire and pray for. May Almighty God abundantly bless Sri Lanka.

Really I admire the beauty, the beauty of your land, the beauty and the nature of this island and the beauty of the human beings of all men and women and the beauty in all your gestures, your way of dressing, your participation in the liturgy. All that is very beautiful. Sri Lanka is a homeland of beauty. I thank God for this opportunity of having the possibility to meet Sri Lanka immediately.

I invite you to come to Rome sometime. Be beautiful and courageous and peaceful.

Thank you very much.