



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO POLAND (MAY 31-JUNE 10, 1997)
HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II
AT THE SHRINE OF SAINT JOSEPH

Kalisz, 4 June 1997

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. I give thanks to Divine Providence because today it has brought me to visit your city, this Kalisz which the most ancient chronicles mark on their maps long before the beginnings of the Polish State. I have already been here several times. I remember those meetings and the people who took part in them. I cordially greet all of you here present. In a special way I greet Bishop Stanislaw Napierala, your Pastor, the Auxiliary Bishop, the clergy, the consecrated persons. I greet you, land of Kalisz, with all the riches of your past and present. I pray that all this will be renewed in some way in today's Eucharist.

"O happy man, Saint Joseph!". How glad I am to celebrate this Eucharistic Sacrifice in the Shrine of Saint Joseph! For it has a special place in the history of the Church and of the nation. While we listen to the Gospel which recounts for us the flight into Egypt, there come to mind the words contained in the liturgical preparation for Holy Mass: "O happy man, Saint Joseph, whose privilege it was not only to see and hear that God whom many a king has longed to see, yet saw not, longed to hear, yet heard not (cf. Mt 13:17); but also to carry him in your arms and kiss him, to clothe him and watch over him!" In this prayer Saint Joseph appears as the guardian of the Son of God. The prayer continues with the following petition: "God, who has conferred upon us a royal priesthood, we pray to you to give us grace to minister at your holy altars with hearts as clean and lives as blameless as that blessed Joseph who was found to hold in his arms and with all reverence to carry your only-begotten Son, born of the Virgin Mary. Enable us this day to receive worthily the sacred Body and Blood of your Son, and fit us to win an everlasting reward in the world to come".

It is a beautiful prayer! I say it every day before Holy Mass and certainly many priests around the world do so. Joseph, the husband of the Virgin Mary, the foster father of the Son of God, was not a priest, but shared in the common priesthood of the faithful. And since as father and guardian of Jesus he could hold him and carry him in his arms, priests turn to Saint Joseph with the fervent request to be able to celebrate the Eucharistic Sacrifice with the same veneration and the same love with which he carried out his mission as the foster father of the Son of God. These words are very eloquent. The hands which touch the Eucharistic Body of Christ wish to ask from Saint Joseph the grace of a chastity and devotion equal to that which the holy carpenter of Nazareth showed to his adopted Son. And therefore it is fitting that in the itinerary of the pilgrimage connected with the Eucharistic Congress of Wrocław there is also this visit to the Shrine of Saint Joseph in Kalisz.

2. "Rise, take the child and his mother, and flee to Egypt" (Mt 2:13).

Joseph heard these words in his sleep. The angel had warned him to flee with the Child, because he was threatened by mortal danger. From the Gospel just read we learn about those who were threatening the Child's life. In the first place Herod, but then also all his followers. In this way the liturgy of the word guides our thought towards the problem of life and its defence. Joseph of Nazareth, who saved Jesus from the cruelty of Herod, is shown to us in this moment as a great supporter of the cause of the defence of human life, from the first moment of conception to natural death. In this place, therefore, we wish to commend human life to Divine Providence and to Saint Joseph, especially the life of children not yet born, in our homeland and throughout the world. Life has an inviolable value and an unrepeatable dignity, especially because - as we read today in the liturgy - every person is called to share in God's life. Saint John writes: "See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are!" (1 Jn 3:1).

With the eyes of faith we can see with particular clarity the infinite value of every human being. The Gospel, by proclaiming the Good News of Jesus, announces also the Good News of man, of his great dignity, and teaches sensitivity concerning man. Because every man, insofar as he has a spiritual soul, is "capable of God". The Church, in defending the right to life, is making a broader appeal, a universal one which obliges all men and women. The right to life is not a question of ideology, not only a religious right; it is a human right. The most fundamental human right! God says: "You shall not kill!" (Ex 20:13). This commandment is at one and the same time a basic principle and a norm of the moral code written in the conscience of every human being.

The measure of civilization, a universal and permanent measure which includes all cultures, is its relationship with life. A civilization which rejected the defenceless would deserve to be called a barbarian civilization, even though it had great successes in the field of economics, technology, art and science. The Church, faithful to the mission received from Christ, despite the weaknesses and infidelities of many of her sons and daughters, has consistently brought into human history the great truth of love of neighbour, has reduced social divisions, overcome racial and

ethnic differences, cared for the sick and the orphaned, the old, the handicapped and the homeless. She has taught with words and deeds that no one can be excluded from the great human family, that no one can be pushed to the edges of society. Defence of the life of children not yet born is the consequence of this mission of the Church.

Here in Kalisz, where Saint Joseph, this great defender and careful guardian of Jesus' life, is venerated in a special way, I wish to remind you of the words that Mother Teresa of Calcutta addressed to those who took part in the International Congress on "Population and Development" called by the United Nations Organization in Cairo in 1994: "I speak today to you from my heart - to each person in all the nations of the world . . . to all the mothers, fathers and children in the cities, towns and villages. Each one of us is here today because we have been loved by God, who created us, and by our parents, who accepted and cared enough to give us life. Life is the most beautiful gift of God. That is why it is so painful to see what is happening today in so many places around the world: life is being deliberately destroyed by war, by violence, by abortion. And we have been created by God for greater things - to love and be loved. I have said often, and I am sure of it, that the greatest destroyer of peace in the world today is abortion. If a mother can kill her own child, what is there to stop you and me from killing each other? The only one who has the right to take life is the One who has created it. Nobody else has that right: not the mother, not the father, not the doctor; no agency, no conference, no government ... It frightens me to think of all the people who kill their conscience so that they can perform an abortion. When we die, we will come face to face with God, the Author of life. Who will give an account to God for the millions and millions of babies who were not allowed to have the chance to live, to love and be loved? ... The child is the most beautiful gift of God to a family, to a nation. Let us never refuse this gift of God".

3. Dear Brothers and Sisters, support life. I address this appeal to all my fellow countrymen, regardless of each one's religious convictions. I address it to all people, without excluding anyone. From this place, I repeat once more what I said in October last year: "A nation which kills its own children is a nation without a future". Therefore a general mobilization of consciences and a joint ethical effort is necessary in order to put into action the great strategy of the defence of life. Today the world has become the arena of the battle for life. The struggle between the civilization of life and the civilization of death continues. This is why the building of the "culture of life" is so important: the creation of cultural works and models which will emphasize the grandeur and dignity of human life; the establishment of scientific and educational institutions which will promote a true vision of the human person, of conjugal and family life: the creation of environments which will embody in everyday life the merciful love which God grants to every person, especially those who are suffering, weak or poor.

I know that in Poland a lot is being done for the defence of life. I am very grateful to all who, in different ways, are doing their utmost in this work of building the "culture of life". In a special way I express my thanks and appreciation to all those in our homeland who, with a great sense of responsibility before God, before their own conscience and the nation, are defending human life

and supporting the dignity of marriage and the family. I cordially thank the Federation of Movements for the Defence of Life, the Associations of Catholic Families and all the many other organizations and institutions which in recent years have arisen in our country. I thank the doctors, nurses and private individuals. Continue to defend life! This is your great contribution to the establishment of the civilization of love. May the ranks of the defenders of life steadily increase! Do not lose heart! This is a great mission entrusted to you by Providence. May God from whom every life takes its origin bless you.

4. The duty of service lies with each and every person, but this responsibility lies in a special way with the family which is a "community of life and love" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 48).

Brothers and Sisters, do not forget even for a moment the great value which the family is. Thanks to Christ's sacramental presence, thanks to the covenant freely entered into by which spouses give themselves to each other, the family is a sacred community. It is a communion of persons united by love, which Saint Paul describes in this way: "Love rejoices in the right. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends" (cf. 1 Cor 13:6-8). Every family can build such love. But it is attainable in marriage only and exclusively if the spouses become "a sincere gift of self" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 24), unconditionally and for ever, without placing any limit. This conjugal and family love is constantly ennobled, perfected by shared worries and joys, by mutual support in moments of difficulty. Each forgets himself or herself for the good of the one loved. True love never comes to an end. It becomes a source of strength and conjugal fidelity. The Christian family, faithful to its sacramental covenant, becomes a true sign God's free and universal love for people. This love of God is the family's spiritual centre and foundation. Through this love the family is born, develops, matures and is a source of peace and happiness for parents and children. It is a true nest of life and unity.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the sacrament which unites you to each other, unites you in Christ! It unites you with Christ! "This mystery is a profound one"! (Eph 5:32). God "has given you his love". He comes to you and is present in your midst and dwells in your souls. In your families! In your homes! Saint Joseph was well aware of this. For this reason he did not hesitate to entrust himself and his family to God. By virtue of this trust he completely fulfilled his mission, entrusted to him by God for the sake of Mary and his Son. Supported by the example and protection of Saint Joseph, offer a constant witness of devotion and generosity. Protect and show concern for the life of your children, of every person - especially the sick, the weak and the disabled. Bear witness to your love for life and share it generously.

Saint John writes: "See what love the Father has give us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are" (1 Jn 3:1). The person adopted in Christ as a child of God truly shares in the sonship of the Son of God. And therefore Saint John, developing his thought, continues thus: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not yet appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn 3:2). Behold the man!

Behold his full, inexpressible dignity! Man is called to share in the life of God; to know, enlightened by faith, and to love his Creator and Father, first through his creatures here on earth, and then in the beatific vision of his divinity for eternity.

Behold the man! In the itinerary of the Eucharistic Congress this man is revealed at every step.

Man in the community of the family and nation!

Man, sharer in the life of God!