



The Holy See

EXTRAORDINARY CONSISTORY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Ascension of the Lord, 24 May 2001

Eminent Cardinals,
Brothers in the Episcopate,
brothers and sisters in Christ,

1. We gather around the altar of the Lord in order to celebrate his Ascension into heaven. We have heard his words: "You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses ... even to the end of the earth" (Acts 1,8). For 2,000 years, the Risen Lord's promise impels the Church to put out "into the deep" waters of life, to become a contemporary of everyone and the ferment of human thought and imagination.

We listen to Christ's words today in order to accept with renewed fervour the mandate, "put out into the deep" given by Jesus to Peter: a mandate which I have wished to make resound in the Church with the Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio ineunte*. In this solemn liturgy, the Lord, who is present, commands us anew. Going out into the deep does not just mean that the Church is to be *much more a missionary Church*, but above all it says that she is to be more intensely contemplative. Like the Apostles who witnessed the Ascension, we are invited to fix our spiritual eyes on the face of Christ, taken up into the splendour of divine glory.

Certainly, to contemplate heaven *does not mean to forget the earth*. If there were ever the hint of such a temptation, just listen again to the two men in white robes, of the Acts of the Apostles: "Why do you stand looking up to heaven?" (Acts 1,11). *Christian contemplation does not take us away from our earthly commitments*. The "heaven" into which Jesus was taken up is not his removal into some place far away from us, but the veiling and protection of the presence of One who is always with us until he comes again in glory. The present age is very much the time

requiring our witness so that in the name of Christ "repentance and the forgiveness of sins should be preached to all the nations" (cf. Lk 24,47).

Collegiality exists for the mission of the Church and for the practical challenges to her mission

2. I convoked the *Extraordinary Consistory* which ends today in order to revive in the Church the awareness of her mission to the world. The Cardinals of the world, whom I greet with brotherly affection, have come together here in order to face some of the more important challenges to evangelization and to Christian witness in the world at the opening of the new millennium. These have been days of communion in which *we experienced some of the joy* that filled the souls of the Apostles when the Risen Lord, after blessing them, ascended into heaven. In fact, Luke says: "They worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy, and were continually in the temple blessing God" (Lk 24,52-53).

The *icon of the beginnings* is a perfect image of the missionary nature of the Church. The Church today has the same basic shape and the same spirit. The spirit emerges when she *experiences the joy* which the Lord Jesus promised to those who love him: "These things I have said to you that my joy may be in you and your joy may be full" (Jn 15,11). If our faith in the Risen Lord is alive, the soul will be full of joy and the mission will take the form of an "overflow" of joy which impels us to bring to everyone the "wonderful news" of salvation with a courage free of fear and doubt, even at the cost of giving our lives.

The missionary work of the Church, which begins with Christ, is supported by episcopal collegiality and is encouraged by the successor of Peter, whose ministry has the goal of promoting ecclesial communion by guaranteeing the unity of the faithful in Christ.

3. Such an experience made Paul "the Apostle of the Nations" bringing him to travel over most of the then known world, thanks to the inner motivation which forced him to speak of Christ: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (I Cor 9,16). In my recent *apostolic pilgrimage* to Greece, Syria and Malta, I wanted to walk in Paul's footsteps as the completion of my Jubilee pilgrimage. I had the joy of living briefly alongside my beloved and admired Catholic brothers of the Eastern Churches and of seeing opened up new ecumenical perspectives in our relations with our equally beloved Orthodox brothers: with the help of God, significant steps were taken towards the desired goal of full communion.

My meeting with the Muslims was wonderful. As during the Jubilee Year pilgrimage to the Holy Land I was able to highlight the special bonds that link our faith with the faith of the Jewish people, now there was an intense moment of dialogue with the believers of Islam. The Second Vatican Council taught us that the announcement of Christ as the only Saviour of the world does not forbid, but on the contrary calls for the pursuit of peaceful relations with the believers of other religions (cf *Nostra Aetate*, n. 2).

4. "You will be my witnesses". The words of Jesus to the Apostles before the Ascension tell us how to go about *evangelization* in every age, but they are particularly apt for today. We live in a *time in which there is an excessive use of the spoken word by the communications media* which have so great an impact on public opinion for better or worse. The word which we need to use is one that is *rich in wisdom and holiness*. For this reason, in *Novo Millennio ineunte*, I wrote, "all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to *holiness*" (n. 30), cultivated by listening to the Word of God, by prayer and by being centred on the Eucharist, which is at the heart of the celebration of *Sunday as the Day of the Lord*. The message of Christ will have an impact on our world only through the witness of believers who live the Gospel in a radical way.

Scientific approach to knowledge, resistance to the idea of God becoming man offer challenge. The Church finds herself confronting *enormous challenges* which test the confidence and enthusiasm of those who announce the Gospel. There are not just the problem of "numbers" due to the minority status of believers while the process of secularization continues to erode the Christian life in countries evangelized long ago. More serious problems derive from the sea change in the way people think, influenced by the empirical way of thinking that prevails in the experimental sciences to the absence of the impact spiritual values should exert on people's minds. Even when the modern world begins to take into account the religious dimension of life, it willingly accepts the image of God the Creator while it has great difficulty, as did Paul's listeners in the Areopagus, accepting the "scandal" of God who out of love enters our history and becomes man, dying and rising for us. Here is a challenge for Catholic schools and universities, as also for the centres of philosophical and theological formation of candidates for the priesthood, all places which should offer a cultural preparation which is adequate for dealing with our present world.

Other problems derive from the *advance of globalization*. If it offers the advantage of bringing peoples and cultures closer together, it does make more available an infinite number of messages. However, it does not favour a process of discernment and of mature synthesis, but fosters a relativist attitude which makes it more difficult to accept Christ as "the way, the truth and the life" (Jn 14,6) for everyone.

What can we say about emerging *moral questions*? Never before, above all in the area of bioethics, not to mention those of social justice, of family life, of married life, has humanity had to face a formidable spectrum of problems which jeopardize its own existence.

The Consistory reflected on some of these issues, offering careful analyses and proposing thoughtful solutions. Many of these items will be taken up in the coming Synod of Bishops which has become a valid and effective instrument of episcopal collegiality at the service of the local churches. I am grateful, my brother Cardinals, for the contributions you have now offered: I intend to draw from them the *appropriate practical measures* so that the pastoral and evangelizing action of the whole Church may abound in its missionary outreach with the full acknowledgement of present day challenges.

5. The mystery of the Ascension throws open before us the *spiritual horizon* before which such a gain must be situated. It is the horizon of the victory of Christ over sin and death. He ascends into heaven as king of love and of peace, source of salvation for the whole human race. He ascends "to appear in the presence of God on our behalf" as we have just heard in the Letter to the Hebrews (Heb 9,24). What comes to us from the word of God is an invitation to confidence: "he who promised is faithful" (Heb 10,23).

The *Spirit* whom Christ has poured forth without measure gives us the power. The Spirit is the secret of the life of the Church today as much as he was the secret of the life of the primitive Church. We would be condemned to failure, if Christ's promise to the Apostles were not realized in us: "I will send the promise of my *Father* upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24,49). The Spirit, Christ, the Father: the whole Trinity is involved with us.

Yes, my dear brothers and sisters, we are not alone in taking the road that lies before us. With us go priests, religious and laity, young and old, all seriously committed to being like Christ and making the Church visible as poor in earthly goods and full of mercy, especially towards the needy and marginalized, a visibility which is resplendent on account of the witness of communion in truth and love. We will not be alone, the Trinity will be with us. Not with purely human strength, but only with the strength that comes from above, can we face the tasks I entrusted to the whole Church in my Apostolic Letter and the problems which we discussed in the Consistory. The contemplation of the face of Christ ascended to heaven continually bestows the certainty of one who never fails us.

Looking to him, we willingly accept the warning of the Letter to the Hebrews, to "hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful" (Heb 10,23).

Our renewed zeal becomes a canticle of praise when with the words of the Psalm we show to the people of the world Christ risen and ascended into heaven: "Clap your hands, all you peoples, shout to God with songs of joy ... God is king over all the earth" (Ps 46/47,1.8).

With renewed confidence, then we "put out into the deep" in his name.