



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CROATIA (OCTOBER 2-4, 1998)

***HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER AT MARIJA BISTRICA
FOR THE BEATIFICATION OF THE
VENERABLE SERVANT OF GOD
CARDINAL ALOJZIJE STEPINAC***

3 October 1998

1. “Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (*Jn 12:24*). Christ’s words, which we have just heard, bring us to the very heart of the Mystery which we are celebrating. In some sense they contain within themselves the entire Paschal Event: they direct us to the death of the Redeemer on the Cross on Good Friday, and at the same time they point us toward the morning of Easter.

We refer to this Mystery every day during Holy Mass when, after the consecration of the bread and the wine, we say: “We proclaim your death, O Lord, we proclaim your resurrection; we await your return in glory”. The “grain of wheat which falls into the earth” is first and foremost Christ, who on Calvary died and was buried in the earth in order to give life to all. But this mystery of death and life also comes about in the earthly existence of Christ’s followers: for them too, being cast into the earth to die remains the condition for all authentic spiritual fruitfulness.

Was this not the secret also of your unforgettable and unforgotten Archbishop, Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, whom today we contemplate in the glory of the Beati? He took part in a unique way in the Paschal Mystery: as a grain of wheat he “fell into the earth” in this land of Croatia and, by dying, bore fruit, much fruit. “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates this life in this world, will keep it for eternal life” (*Jn 12:25*).

The words of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, which we have just heard, are closely bound up with the Event which we are celebrating. Saint Paul writes: "As the sufferings of Christ abound for us, so also our comfort abounds through Christ" (2 *Cor* 1:5). Are these words not a meaningful commentary on Christ's words about the grain of wheat which dies? Those who abound in sharing Christ's sufferings also experience, thanks to him, the profound consolation which derives from the outpouring of good which has its origin in the Cross.

2. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (*Jn* 12:24). Today we are filled with joy as we join in thanking God for the new fruits of holiness which Croatia offers to the Church in the person of the martyr Alojzije Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb and Cardinal of the Holy Roman Church.

Through the centuries, martyrs have abounded in these lands, from the time of the Roman Empire on, with figures like Venantius, Domnius, Anastasia, Quirinus, Eusebius, Pollio, Maurus and many others. In later centuries they were joined by Nicholas Tavelic and Marcus of Krizevci, and many confessors of the faith during the Ottoman rule, up to those of our own time, among whom the luminous personality of Cardinal Stepinac stands out.

By their sacrifice united to Christ's suffering, they bore an extraordinary witness, which with the passage of time has lost none of its eloquence, but continues to spread light and to inspire hope. At their side many other Pastors and simple faithful, men and women, also sealed their adherence to Christ by shedding their own blood. They are part of the great assembly of those who, vested in white garments and bearing palms in their hands, now stand before the throne of the Lamb (cf. *Rev* 7:9).

Blessed Alojzije Stepinac did not shed his blood in the strict sense of the world. His death was caused by the long suffering he endured: the last fifteen years of his life were a continual succession of trials, amid which he courageously endangered his own life in order to bear witness to the Gospel and the unity of the Church. In the words of the Psalm, he put his very life in God's hands (cf. *Pss* 16:5).

3. Very little time separates us from the life and death of Cardinal Stepinac: barely thirty-eight years. We all know the context of this death. Many present here today can testify from direct experience how much the sufferings of Christ abounded in those years among the people of Croatia and those of so many other nations of the continent. Today, reflecting on the words of the Apostle, we wish to express the heartfelt hope that, after the time of trial, the comfort of the Crucified and Risen Christ may abound in all who dwell in this land.

For all of us, a particular cause for comfort is today's Beatification. This solemn act takes place in the Croatian national shrine of Marija Bistrica on the first Saturday of the month of October. Beneath the gaze of the Most Blessed Virgin, an illustrious son of this blessed land is raised to the

glory of the altars, on the hundredth anniversary of his birth. It is an historic moment in the life of the Church and of your nation. The Cardinal Archbishop of Zagreb, one of the outstanding figures of the Catholic Church, having endured in his own body and his own spirit the atrocities of the Communist system, is now entrusted to the memory of his fellow countrymen with the radiant badge of martyrdom.

The Episcopate of your country asked that the Beatification of Cardinal Stepinac take place here, in the Shrine of Marija Bistrica. I know from personal experience the significance that the Shrine of Jasna Gora had for the Polish people at the time of Communist rule, a Shrine closely linked to the pastoral ministry of the Servant of God Cardinal Stefan Wyszynski. I am not surprised that this Shrine, or that of Solona which I shall visit tomorrow, have had a similar importance for you. For some time I have wanted to visit the Shrine of Marija Bistrica. And so I gladly accepted the proposal of the Croatian Episcopate and today celebrate the solemn beatification ceremony in this significant place.

I cordially greet the Croatian Bishops assembled here, especially Cardinal Franjo Kuharic and the Most Reverend Josip Bozanic, Archbishop of Zagreb and President of the Croatian Episcopal Conference. I also greet the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops from other countries who have joined us for this occasion. I cordially greet the priests, the men and women of consecrated life, and all the lay faithful, as well as the representatives of the other religious confessions present at this celebration. My respectful greetings also go to the President of the Republic, the Head of the Government, and to the country's civil and military authorities, who honour us by their presence.

4. "If anyone serves me, he must follow me" (*Jn* 12:26). Blessed Alojzije Stepinac took the Good Shepherd as his sole Teacher, following his example to the end and offering his life for the flock entrusted to him at a particularly difficult period of history.

The person of the new Beatus sums up, so to speak, the whole tragedy which befell the Croatian people and Europe in the course of this century marked by the three great evils of fascism, national socialism and communism. He is now in the joy of heaven, surrounded by all those who, like him, fought the good fight, purifying their faith in the crucible of suffering. Today we look to him with trust and invoke his intercession.

Significant in this regard are the words spoken by the new Beatus in 1943, during the Second World War, when Europe was in the grip of unheard-of violence: "What system does the Catholic Church support today, while the whole world is fighting for a new world order? We, in condemning the injustices, all the killing of innocent people, the burning of peaceful villages, the destruction of the labour of the poor, ... give this answer: the Church supports that system which is as old as the Ten Commandments of God. We are for the system which is not written on impermanent tables, but which has been written by the hand of the living God on the consciences of men" (*Homilies, Addresses, Messages*, Zagreb, 1996, 179-180).

5. "Father, glorify your name!" (*Jn 12:28*). In his human and spiritual journey Blessed Alojzije Stepinac gave his people a sort of compass to serve as an orientation. And these were its cardinal points: faith in God, respect for man, love towards all even to the offer of forgiveness, and unity with the Church guided by the Successor of Peter. He knew well that no bargains can be made with truth, because truth is not negotiable. Thus he faced suffering rather than betray his conscience and not abide by the promise given to Christ and the Church.

In this courageous witness he was not alone. He had at his side other courageous souls who, in order to preserve the unity of the Church and defend her freedom, agreed to pay with him a heavy price in imprisonment, mistreatment and even bloodshed. To these generous souls - Bishops, priests, men and women religious, and lay faithful - we offer today our admiration and gratitude. Let us listen to their urgent call for forgiveness and reconciliation. To forgive and to be reconciled means to purify one's memory of hatred, rancour, the desire for revenge; it means acknowledging as a brother even those who have wronged us; it means not being overcome by evil but overcoming evil with good (cf. *Rom 12:21*).

6. May you be blessed, "Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (*2 Cor 1:3*), for this new gift of your grace.

May you be blessed, Unbegotten Son of God and Saviour of the world, for your glorious Cross, which in the Archbishop of Zagreb, Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, has won a splendid victory.

May you be blessed, Spirit of the Father and the Son, Paraclete Spirit, who continue to manifest your holiness among men and unceasingly carry on the work of salvation.

Triune God, today I wish to thank you for the strong faith of this your people, despite the many trials encountered through the centuries. I wish to thank you for the countless martyrs and confessors, men and women in every age, who have arisen in this blessed land.

"Father, glorify your name!" (*Jn 12:28*).

Blessed be Jesus and Mary!