



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY

Thursday, 10 June 1999, Drohiczyn

1. *“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another” (Jn 13:34).*

We have just heard the words of Christ which Saint John has left us in his Gospel. The Lord addressed them to the disciples in the Farewell Discourse before his Passion and Death on the Cross, at the moment when he washed the Apostles' feet. It is virtually his final cry to humanity, with which he gives voice to a burning desire: “That you love one another”!

With these words of Christ I greet all who have come to today's liturgical gathering, which is at the same time an ecumenical prayer for Christian unity. I cordially greet Bishop Antoni, Pastor of the Diocese of Drohiczyn, Bishop Jan Szarek, president of the Polish Ecumenical Council, together with the representatives of the Churches and ecclesial communities belonging to the Polish Ecumenical Council. I greet the brothers and sisters of the Orthodox Church of Poland and those who come from abroad; I offer a special greeting to Archbishop Sawa, Metropolitan of Warsaw and all Poland and to the Bishops of that Church. My warmest consideration goes to the Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops from Poland and from other countries. I embrace with all my heart the entire People of God of the diocese of Drohiczyn, which is so dear to me. In a special way I salute my brother priests, the consecrated persons, and the students of the Major Seminar of Drohiczyn. I am also thinking most affectionately of the elderly, the sick, the disabled, the young people and the children here present. I salute as well the pilgrims from Belorussia, Lithuania and the Ukraine. Their presence fills me with special joy.

I greet you, land of Podlasia: a land made rich by nature's beauty and, above all, made holy by the

fidelity of this people who, throughout its history, were often sorely tested and had to struggle against huge adversities of every kind. Yet they remained faithful to the Church, and that is still true today. I am happy to be here and to exercise my pastoral ministry with you. I am moved to remember my many visits to Drohiczyn, especially for the celebrations of the Millennium, when the all Bishops of Poland, together with the Primate of the Millennium, gave thanks to God for the gift of holy Baptism, for the grace of faith, hope and charity. Here I was present at the final journey of the mitred prelate Monsignor Krzywicki, Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Pinsk. A few years later I returned here for the closure of the pilgrimage of the copy of the image of the Madonna of Czestochowa. Today these memories stir in me once again, present among you as a pilgrim Pope.

2. *“A new commandment I give you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another”.*

These words of Christ emanate great power. When he died on the Cross in his terrible Passion, humiliated and abandoned, he showed to the whole world the full meaning and depth of such trials. Watching Christ’s agony, the disciples came to realize what it was he had called them to when he said: “Love one another as I have loved you”. In recording the event, Saint John would write in his Gospel: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (13:1). Christ loved us first of all, loved us despite our sinfulness and our human weakness. It was he who ensured that we became worthy of his love which knows no bounds and never ends. It is a love which is absolute and most perfect. Christ has in fact redeemed us with his Precious Blood.

To us too he has taught this love and to us he has entrusted it: “A new commandment I give you” (Jn 13:34). That means that this commandment is always pertinent. If we wish to respond to the love of Christ, we must respect its demands always, regardless of time and place: it must be for man a new way, a new seed which renews relations between people. This love makes us, who are disciples of Christ, new men, heirs of the divine promises. It ensures that we all become brothers and sisters in the Lord. It makes us of the new People of God, the Church in which we must love Christ and in him love each other in turn.

This is the true love which shows itself in the Cross of Christ. We must all look to this Cross; towards it we must direct our desires and our efforts. In the Cross, we have the greatest of all models to imitate.

3. *“Lord, show us your ways, that we may walk in your paths” (cf. Is 2:3).*

The vision of the prophet Isaiah in the first reading of today’s liturgy shows us the many peoples and nations gathered around Mount Zion. The vision attests to God’s presence. The prophecy announces a universal kingdom of justice and peace. It may be applied to the Church, as Christ wished the Church to be, that is, a Church in which the indispensable principle of unity holds sway.

We Christians gathered today for this joint prayer must invoke the Lord with the words of Isaiah: “Lord, show us your ways, that we may walk in your paths”, so that we may together, with all who confess Christ, take those paths into the future. In a special way, the approach of the Great Jubilee should impel us to take up the task of searching for new ways in the life of the Church, the Mother of all Christians. In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, I expressed a fervent hope which I renew here today: “I pray that the Jubilee will be a promising opportunity for fruitful cooperation in the many areas which unite us; these are unquestionably more numerous than those which divide us” (No. 16). Faith tells us that the unity of the Church is not only a hope for the future: in some measure unity already exists! It has not yet attained fully visible form among Christians. The forging of unity is therefore “a duty of the Christian conscience enlightened by faith and guided by love”, since “to believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father’s plan from all eternity” (*Ut Unum Sint*, 8, 9).

We are therefore called to build unity. The unity found at the beginning of the Church’s life can never lose its essential value. We must note sadly, however, that this original unity has been seriously impaired through the centuries, and especially in the last millennium.

4. The way of the Church is not easy. “We may compare it to the *via dolorosa* of Christ. Yet it lasts not for several hours, but for centuries” – the Orthodox theologian Pavel Evdokimov has written. Wherever divisions among Christ’s disciples increase, his Mystical Body is wounded. On the Church’s journey through history, we see the successive “sorrowful stations”. But Christ founded a single Church and wants the Church to remain forever united. Therefore, at the threshold of a new period of history, we must all examine our consciences regarding responsibility for the present divisions. We must admit the faults committed and pardon each other in turn. In fact, we have received the new commandment of mutual love, which has its source in the love of Christ. Saint Paul urges this love upon us in these words: “Christ loved us and gave himself up for us . . . a sacrifice to God. Be imitators of God . . . and walk in love” (cf. *Eph 5:1-2*).

Love should lead us to reflect together on the past, so that we may move forward with perseverance and courage on the path towards unity.

Love is the only power that opens hearts to the word of Jesus and to the grace of Redemption. It is the only power able to lead us to share as brothers all that we are and all that we have through Christ’s will. It is a powerful stimulus to dialogue, in which we listen to each other and come to know each other.

Love leads us to be open to others, thus becoming the basis of human relations. It enables us to overcome the barriers of our own weaknesses and prejudices. It purifies memory, teaches new ways, discloses the vision of true reconciliation, which is an essential premise for joint witness to the Gospel, which the world needs so badly today.

On the eve of the third millennium, we must move more quickly towards full and fraternal reconciliation, so that in the next millennium with joined hands we can witness to salvation before a world which eagerly awaits this sign of unity.

It is good that we are speaking about the great cause of ecumenism precisely at Drohiczyn, in the heart of Podlasia, where for centuries the Christian traditions of East and West have come into contact. This is a city which has always been open to Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants. Yet there have been many moments in the history of this region which have shown more than in any other place the need for dialogue, if Christian unity is to be achieved. In the Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, I stressed that “dialogue is...a natural instrument for comparing differing points of view and, above all, for examining those disagreements which hinder full communion between Christians” (No. 36). This dialogue must be distinguished by love for the truth, since “love for the truth is the deepest dimension of any authentic quest for full communion between Christians. Without this love it would be impossible to face the objective theological, cultural, psychological and social difficulties which appear when difficulties are examined. This dimension, which is interior and personal, must be inseparably accompanied by a spirit of charity and humility. There must be charity towards one’s partner in dialogue, and humility with regard to the truth which comes to light and which might require a review of assertions and attitudes” (*ibid.*).

Let it be love therefore which builds bridges between us and encourages us to do everything possible. Let love for each other and love for the truth be the answer to present difficulties and to the tensions which surface from time to time.

Today I turn to the brothers and sisters of all the Churches: let us be open to the reconciling love of God. Let us open the doors of our minds and hearts, of the Churches and communities. The God of our faith, he whom we invoke as Father, is “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and Jacob” (*Mk 12:26*); he is the God of Moses. He is above all the God and Father of our one Lord, Jesus Christ, in whom he became “God with us” (cf. *Mt 1:23; Rom 15:6*).

Let us offer to our heavenly Father, to the Father of all Christians, the gift of a sincere desire for reconciliation, expressed in concrete actions. To God “who is love” let us respond with our human love, which looks kindly upon others and displays a sincere determination to cooperate wherever possible, and allows us to appreciate that which is good, that which deserves praise and imitation.

5. “Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob” (*Is 2:3*).

This is the cry which the prophet Isaiah puts on the lips of peoples and nations thirsting for unity and peace.

Sisters and Brothers, nothing expresses this concern better and with greater power than a great prayer for unity, for brotherhood, for a common family of all Christians. The love of Christ impels

us to this prayer. It is Christ himself who commands us to pray to the Father: “Your kingdom come” (cf. *Mt* 6:10). The Kingdom of God, which Jesus brought in himself as he entered the world and became man, endures in the Church as an already existing reality, but also as a task to be accomplished.

Only prayer can bring about a true *metanoia* of heart. Prayer in fact has the power to unite all the baptized in the brotherhood of the children of God. Prayer purifies from all that separates us from God and one another. It protects us against the temptation to timidity and opens the human heart to divine grace.

I therefore urge all gathered here to pray fervently for full communion among our Churches. To move further along the path towards unity will demand our effort, kindness to each other, openness and a true experience of brotherhood in Christ.

Let us ask the Lord to grant us this grace. Let us beseech him to remove the obstacles which delay the attainment of full unity. Let us ask that all of us will faithfully carry out his plans, so that the dawn of the new millennium will rise upon the disciples of Christ more united among themselves.

“A new commandment I give you” (Jn 13:34).

The new commandment.

*“That we may all be one,
so that the world may believe” (cf. Jn 17:21).*