



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY AT MASS

Thursday, 10 June 1999, Siedlce

1. *“Who then will separate us from the love of Christ” (Rom 8:35).*

We have just heard the words of Saint Paul, addressed to the Christians of Rome. It is a great hymn of thanksgiving to God for his love and his goodness. This love has found its summit and its most perfect expression in Jesus Christ. God in fact did not spare even his only Son, but gave him up for us, so that we might have eternal life (cf. *Rom 8:32*). Grafted onto Christ through Baptism, we are sons and daughters, chosen and loved by God. The certainty of this should encourage us to persevere in our fidelity to Christ, which Saint Paul understands as union with Christ in love.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, how eloquently these words of the Apostle of the Gentiles resound in the land of Podlasia, which has given such fearless witness to the Gospel of Christ. For centuries, the people of this land have offered countless proofs of their faith in Christ and their attachment to the Church, especially in the face of changing circumstances, cruel persecutions and the severe trials of history.

I greet all who are present at this Mass, all the People of God of Podlasia united with their Pastor, Bishop Jan Wiktor, Bishops Emeriti Jan and Waclaw and the Auxiliary Bishop Henryk. I am delighted that the Bishops of Belorussia, Kazakhstan, Russia and Ukraine are here. In a special way, I salute the Metropolitan Archbishop of Warsaw-Przemysl, Jan Martyniak, the Bishop of Wroclaw-Gdansk, and Bishop Lubomyr Huzar of Leopoli, as I do also the pilgrims who have come with him. I greet the priests, the consecrated men and women, the students of the Major Seminary of Siedlce, and the representatives of Catholic movements, prayer groups and associations of the apostolate. I greet the pilgrims from different parts of Poland, and those from nearby Belorussia, Lithuania, Ukraine and Russia.

At this moment, memories stir in me of earlier meetings with the Church of Siedlce, especially the commemoration of the millennium of the Baptism of Poland in 1996, and the one hundred and fiftieth anniversary of the Diocese, at which I was able to celebrate the Eucharist at Koden of the Sapieha, at the feet of Our Lady Queen of Podlasia. I joyfully come among you today and give thanks to Divine Providence that I have been given the chance to venerate the relics of the Martyrs of Podlasia. In them, the words of Saint Paul which we heard in today's liturgy were fulfilled in a special way: "neither death, nor life...nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (*Rom 8:38-39*).

2. *"Holy Father, keep them in your name, those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are one" (Jn 17:11).*

Christ spoke these words on the day before his Passion and Death. In a certain sense, they are his last will and testament. For two thousand years, the Church has moved through history with this testament, with this prayer for unity. Yet there are times in history when this prayer has a special relevance, and we are living in one of those times now. The first millennium of the Church's history was marked essentially by unity, but from the beginning of the second millennium there have been divisions, first in the East and then later in the West. For almost ten centuries, Christianity has been divided.

This reality has marked and continues to mark the Church which for a thousand years has carried out its mission on Polish soil. In the time of the First Republic, the Polish-Lithuanian-Ruthenian regions were a place where Eastern and Western traditions lived side by side. Slowly, however, there emerged the effects of the division which, as is well known, split Rome and Byzantium in the middle of the eleventh century. Yet gradually the understanding of the need to rebuild unity matured, especially after the Council of Florence in the fifteenth century. The year 1596 saw the historic event known as the Union of Brest. From that time, in the territories of the First Republic, and especially in the Eastern territories, the number of Dioceses and parishes of the Greek-Catholic Church increased. Although preserving the Eastern tradition in the liturgy, in discipline and in language, these Christians remained in union with the Apostolic See.

The Diocese of Siedlce, where we are today, and especially the area of Pratulin, is the place that bears particular witness to that historic process. It was here the confessors of Christ belonging to the Greek-Catholic Church, Blessed Wincenty Lewoniuk and his twelve companions, were martyred.

Three years ago, at their Beatification in Saint Peter's Square in Rome, I said that "they witnessed to an unshakeable fidelity to the Lord of the vineyard. They did not disappoint him, but staying united to Christ as branches to the vine they brought forth the desired fruits of conversion and holiness. They persevered, even at the cost of the supreme sacrifice. As faithful 'servants' of the Lord, trusting in his grace, they bore witness to their membership of the Catholic Church in fidelity

to their Eastern tradition. With a gesture so generous, the martyrs of Pratulín defended not only the holy place of worship in front of which they were slaughtered but also the Church of Christ entrusted to the Apostle Peter, of which they felt themselves to be living stones” (6 October 1996).

The Martyrs of Pratulín defended the Church, which is the vineyard of the Lord. They remained faithful to the Church to the very end and they did not yield to the pressures of the world of their time, which for that precise reason hated them. In their life and in their death, Christ’s request in the Priestly Prayer has been fulfilled: “I have given them your word; and the world has hated them . . . I do not pray that you take them from the world, but that you keep them from the evil one . . . Consecrate them in the truth; your word is truth. As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (*Jn* 17:14-15, 17-19). They bore witness to their fidelity to Christ in his holy Church. In the world in which they lived they sought courageously to defeat, by means of truth and goodness, the evil that was spreading ever more widely, and lovingly they strove to calm the hatred that was raging. Like Christ, who offered himself in sacrifice for them, to consecrate them in the truth – so did they offer their lives for the sake of faithfulness to Christ’s truth and defence of the Church’s unity. These simple people, fathers of families, chose at the critical moment to suffer death rather than yield to pressure in a way untrue to their conscience. “How sweet it is to die for the faith” – these were their last words.

We thank them for their witness which should become the heritage of the entire Church in Poland for the third millennium which is now so near. They made their great contribution to the building of unity. Through the generous sacrifice of their lives, they kept full faith with the cry of Jesus to his Father: “keep them in your name, those whom you have given me, that they may be one as we are one”. By their death they confirmed the commitment to Christ of the Catholic Church of Eastern tradition. The same spirit sustained the countless faithful of the Byzantine-Ukrainian Rite, Bishops, priests and lay people, who during forty-five years of persecution remained faithful to Christ, preserving their identity as a Church. In this witness, fidelity to Christ is interwoven with fidelity to the Church and becomes a service of unity.

3. *“As you, Father, sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world”* (cf. *Jn* 17:18).

The Martyrs of Pratulín bore witness before the world to their faith, reminding us that Christ called and sent all his disciples, so that through the centuries, to the end of time, they would proclaim the coming of his Kingdom. This universal call to witness to Christ was recalled very clearly by the Second Vatican Council, in the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity: “It is the Lord himself...who is once more inviting all the laity to unite themselves to him ever more intimately, to consider his interests as their own, and to join in his mission as Saviour” (No. 33). This invitation by the Council is especially pertinent now with the coming of the third millennium. It is the call of Christ, towards the end of the twentieth century, made through the mouth of the Council Fathers not only to Bishops, priests and religious women and men, but to all his disciples. Pointing to the example of

the thirteen men of Pratulín, Christ is addressing this call in a special way to us today.

More than ever now there is a need for a genuine witness of faith, made visible through the life of the lay disciples of Christ, men and women, young and old. There is a need for committed witness to fidelity to the Church and responsibility towards the Church, which for twenty centuries has brought salvation to every people and nation, announcing the immutable teaching of the Gospel. Humanity now faces difficulties of various kinds, problems and violent changes; often it knows dramatic convulsions and lesions. In such a world, many people, especially the young, feel lost and wounded. Some fall victim to sects and travesties of religion, or to manipulations of the truth. Others succumb to different forms of slavery. Attitudes of selfishness, injustice and insensitivity to the needs of others become more widespread.

The Church faces these and other challenges of our time. It wants to offer people effective help and therefore needs the commitment of lay faithful who, under the guidance of their Pastors, must take an active part in the Church's saving mission.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, through holy Baptism you have been grafted on to Christ. You form the Church, his Mystical Body. Through you, Christ wants to act in the power of his Spirit. Through you, he wants "to preach good news to the poor . . . to proclaim release to captives and new sight to the blind". Through you, he wants "to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour" (cf. *Lk* 4:18-19). Faithful to your lay identity and living in the world, you can actively and effectively transform the world in the spirit of the Gospel. May you be the salt which gives life the flavour of Christianity. May you be the light which shines in the darkness of indifference and egoism.

In the *Letter to Diognetus* we read that "what the soul is to the body, Christians are for the world. As the soul infuses all parts of the body, so too are Christians scattered in every city of the world" (2:6). The new evangelization puts to us great challenges. My Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "The [laity's] field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media. It also includes other realities which are open to evangelization, such as human love, the family, the education of children and adolescents, professional work, suffering" (No. 70).

I note with great joy that in Poland there is a lively growth of Catholic Action, various kinds of Catholic organizations, associations and movements, youth movements among them, in the first place the Catholic Youth Association and the Light-Life movement. It is a new breathing of the Holy Spirit upon our fatherland. Let thanks be given to God for this. Be faithful to your Christian vocation. Be faithful to God and to Christ living in the Church.

4. Today we venerate the relics of the martyrs of Podlasia and we adore the Cross of Pratulín

which was the silent witness of their heroic fidelity. They held this Cross in their hands and they bore it in the depth of their hearts, as a sign of love of the Father and of the unity of the Church of Christ. The Cross gave them strength to bear witness to Christ and his Church. They showed forth the truth of Saint Paul's words in today's liturgy: "If God is for us, who is against us?" (*Rom 8:32*). Through their death, they became a special part of the great heritage of the faith, from the time of Saint Adalbert, Saint Stanislaus and Saint Josafat until our own day.

In Poland, a countless number of people suffered for the Cross of Christ and bore the greatest sacrifices for it. Often in its history, our nation had to defend its own faith and endure oppression and persecution for fidelity to the Church. The post-War period in particular was a time of especially intense struggle against the Church, waged by a totalitarian system. The attempt was made then to forbid the teaching of religion in schools; the public display of faith was made difficult, as was the building of churches and chapels. How many sacrifices had to be made, what courage was needed to keep our Christian identity intact. Yet no one succeeded in removing the Cross, that sign of faith and love, from personal and social life, because it was deeply rooted in the soil of people's hearts and consciences. It became for the nation and for the Church a wellspring of strength and a sign of unity among people.

The new evangelization needs true witnesses of faith. It needs people rooted in the Cross of Christ and ready to accept sacrifice for the sake of the Cross. Authentic witness to the life-giving power of the Cross is given by those who, in its name, overcome in themselves sin, egoism and every evil, and want to imitate the love of Christ to the very end.

As in the past, the Cross must continue to be present in our lives as a clear pointer to the path to follow and as a light which illumines our whole being. May the Cross, the very form of which unites heaven and earth and men among themselves, flourish in our land and become a great tree laden with the fruits of salvation. May it bring forth new and courageous proclaimers of the Gospel, who love the Church and take responsibility for the Church, true heralds of the faith, a breed of new men. May they be the ones to light the torch of faith and to carry it burning brightly across the threshold of the third millennium.

Cross of Christ, to you be praise.

We hail you in every age,

from you there spring power and strength,

in you our victory!