



The Holy See

POPE JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

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An important chapter in European history

1. *“St Adalbert, our patron, protector of our land, pray for us!”*. These words and the melody to which they are sung have accompanied me during my visit to the Czech Republic to mark the millennium of St Adalbert’s death.

St Adalbert, a descendant of the princely family of the Slavníks, was born in 956 in Libice, today part of the Diocese of Hradec Králové. He became a Bishop at an early age and was the first Czech to occupy the episcopal see of Prague. However, his pastoral ministry proved so difficult that after a short time he was obliged to leave the city. He came to Rome and became a Benedictine here on the Aventine. The Bishop-monk, obedient to the Apostolic See, declared he was always ready to return to Prague should the Pope ask him. When the situation in Prague had somewhat improved the Successor of Peter asked him to return to his homeland. He obeyed. But it was a temporary improvement. Bishop Adalbert was once again expelled. He then left as a missionary to proclaim Christ to peoples who did not yet know him.

He first spent a time on the plains of Pannonia, today part of Hungary; then, at the invitation of King Boleslaw the Brave, he stayed at his court. Through the Gate of Moravia he went to Gniezno, not only to take advantage of the king’s hospitality, but to undertake further missionary work. This time the mission took him to the coasts of the Baltic Sea, with the prospect of proclaiming Christ to pagan Prussia. And it was precisely on the Baltic that he met his death by martyrdom, as John Canaparius emphasizes in the office of his liturgical memorial. King Boleslaw the Brave ransomed the martyr’s body at a high price and brought his relics to Gniezno.

At that time, in the Christian Middle Ages, the relics of martyrs were highly valued by the civil community as well. And so it was for St Adalbert. Thanks to his relics, in 1000 the first Polish metropolitan see was established in Gniezno, and the Poland of the Piasts entered the family of nations and European states. St Adalbert’s martyrdom became the foundation of Church and State in the Piast lands. Today, in addition to Gniezno, the relics of this

holy martyr are found in Prague in the cathedral of Sts Vitus, Wenceslaus and Adalbert.

2. It was right that, before accepting my invitation from the Polish Bishops to go to Gniezno, I went to the [Czech Republic](#). “*St Adalbert, our patron, protector of our homeland, pray for us!*”.

Without doubt St Adalbert's first homeland is Bohemia, especially the town of Libice, where he was born and where the family seat of the Slavnik princes still stands. St Adalbert's first homeland, his native land and the place where he received Baptism from his parents was, as is logical, the first destination of my Pastoral Visit to mark the millennium. It can be said that Poland was his second homeland, the land where he received his second baptism, martyrdom, by which he was born into the heavenly homeland, the destination of his heroic pilgrimage during the 41 years of his earthly life. He became a Bishop at a young age, and at a young age he was ready for the kingdom of heaven.

After 1,000 years, his personal journey, the way of a martyr, patron of Bohemia and Poland, also has great importance for us believers and for all humanity, who are pilgrims on earth. Through St Adalbert's earthly *itinerarium*, through his martyrdom, we can reread the spiritual history of the whole European continent and in particular of Central Europe. This is the purpose of the millennium celebrations, which have gathered Bishops representing every European nation, all aware of St Adalbert's significance in Europe's spiritual history.

Once again I warmly thank the State authorities and the Bishops of the Czech Republic for their invitation to take part in the celebrations for St Adalbert's millennium. I thank President Václav Havel for his words, which have clearly interpreted the significance of the great Bishop's mission. I thank Cardinal Miloslav Vlk and all the Bishops of the Czech Republic for organizing the celebrations for the millennium.

At this point, how can I fail to remember the late Cardinal František Tomášek, whose tomb I was able to visit in the cathedral of Prague? Indeed, he was responsible for the “Decade of Spiritual Renewal” for the millennium of St Adalbert's death. I would also like to thank Bishop Karel Otčenášek, dean of the Czech Episcopacy, who organized the celebrations in his Diocese, Hradec Králové, where St Adalbert was born. How appropriate it was that the young people of Bohemia and Moravia and the neighbouring countries, in a certain sense representing the youth of all Europe, gathered for Mass precisely in the place associated with the saint's youth.

The meeting with religious, together with the sick, in Prague's historic Benedictine Archabbey of Bøevnov, which owes its foundation to St Adalbert, was equally rich in meaning. After the long harsh trial of communist dictatorship, consecrated life is now enjoying a springtime, most eloquently expressed by the presence of young vocations side by side with the elderly men and women religious. Bøeznov Abbey, and especially the very well known Archabbot Anastasius, continue their work in the tradition of the great Benedictine family, rich in merits throughout

Europe, not only with regard to liturgical and religious life, but also for national culture.

On Sunday, 27 April, a great multitude of the faithful gathered in Prague for Mass, in the same place where seven years ago, immediately after the fall of communism, I was able to celebrate the Eucharist for the first time in the Czech land. The last meeting took place in the afternoon, the ecumenical prayer service in the cathedral, followed by a visit to the relics of St Adalbert which rest there next to those of St Wenceslaus. The cathedral is the great national shrine of all Bohemia. The Christian denominations living in the Czech land took part in the ecumenical prayer service. Together with the Pope, they all felt the urgent need for Christian unity, which St Adalbert convincingly and energetically championed. I thank God for that meeting and for the words spoken by Dr Smetana, President of the Council of Churches of the Czech Republic and the representative of the tradition of the Bohemian Brethren.

When President Václav Havel welcomed me at Prague Airport in 1990, he spoke these memorable words: "I do not know what a miracle is, but the fact of being able to receive the Pope here today is certainly a miracle". He was speaking of miracle in the moral sense, alluding to the collapse of the communist totalitarian system which for a long time had oppressed various nations of Eastern Europe. It can be said that this visit of mine, linked to the millennium of St Adalbert, was a sequel as it were to that moral miracle. I therefore say to the Lord with the psalmist: "I will thank you for ever, because you have done it" (Ps 52 [51]:9).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, the Holy Father said:

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors, especially the pilgrim groups from Ireland, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

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