



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday 7 October 1998*

1. I made my second Pastoral Visit to Croatia from Friday to Sunday last. While the images of this pilgrimage are still fresh in my mind, I would like to reflect briefly on its meaning, putting it in the context of the historical events that involved not only Croatia, but all of Europe.

First of all I thank God who allowed me to have this very intense experience. My gratitude also goes to the beloved Bishops of Croatia as well as to the President of the Republic, to the authorities and to everyone who made it possible for the Successor of Peter to have another meeting with the Croatian nation, which has remained faithful to him for more than 13 centuries.

The theme of the visit echoed the words of the risen Christ to the Apostles: “*You shall be my witnesses*” (Acts 1:8). A pilgrimage, then, whose *hallmark was witness*. And it is from this viewpoint that I could embrace in spirit almost two millenniums of history: from the martyrs of the Roman persecutions to those of the recent communist regime; from St Domnius, Bishop of Salona [Solin], the ancient primatial see, to Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb, whose beatification crowned my stay in Croatia. The solemn liturgical celebration must be seen then against the background of historical events dating back to ancient Rome, when the country was not yet inhabited by Croats.

The other focal point of my apostolic visit was the celebration of the 1,700th anniversary of the city and the Church of Split. Both these events were accompanied by a *Marian pilgrimage*: first to the national shrine of Marija Bistrica and then to Our Lady of the Island in Solin, the oldest shrine in Croatia dedicated to the Blessed Virgin. This is a very important fact. Indeed, when a people experiences the hour of the passion and the cross, it feels closer than ever to the Mother of Christ, who becomes a sign of hope and comfort. So it was for my homeland, Poland; so it was for

Croatia, and for every Christian nation sorely tried by historical events.

2. *In Te, Domine, speravi*: this was the motto of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, at whose tomb I paused in prayer as soon as I had arrived in Zagreb. His figure symbolizes *the entire tragedy which struck Europe* in this century, marked by the great evils of fascism, nazism and communism. In him *the Catholic response* shines brightly in its fullness: faith in God, respect for man, love for all confirmed by forgiveness, and unity with the Church guided by the Successor of Peter.

His persecution and show trial resulted from his refusal to comply with the regime's insistence that he break with the Pope and the Apostolic See and become head of a "national Croatian church". He preferred to remain faithful to the Successor of Peter. For this reason he was slandered and then condemned.

In his beatification we see the victory of Christ's Gospel over totalitarian ideologies; the victory of the rights of God and conscience over violence and oppression; the victory of forgiveness and reconciliation over hatred and revenge. Bl. Stepinac thus symbolizes the Croatia which wants to forgive and be reconciled, to purify its memory of bitterness and overcome evil with good.

3. For some time I have wanted to make a personal visit to the famous *Shrine of Marija Bistrica*. Providence arranged that this should take place on the occasion of Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac's beatification. From the beginning of his episcopate, he personally led the annual votive pilgrimage, on foot, from the city of Zagreb to the shrine, located about 50 km. from the capital, until the communist authorities forbade any public display of religion.

*The ancient and revered wooden statue* of Our Lady and Child, which the faithful were forced to hide in order to preserve it from sacrilege and destruction during the Ottoman invasion in the 16th century, *represents in a certain sense the painful history of the Croatian people* for over 1,300 years. Cardinal Stepinac's beatification at that shrine, with the visit to Split the next day, was cast against the background of events dating back to ancient times when the city was part of the Roman Empire.

Hidden in the centre of the modern city of Split, which includes the ancient episcopal see of Salona, are the palace and mausoleum of the Emperor Diocletian, one of the most cruel persecutors of Christians. A few centuries later the mausoleum was transformed into a cathedral, and within its walls are the relics of St Domnius, the martyred Bishop of Salona. I paused in prayer before his tomb, thinking back over the long history that extends from Diocletian to the events of our century, marked by equally ferocious persecutions but also illumined by martyrs who were no less glorious than those of antiquity.

4. The *oldest remnants of Christianity* in the region are found in *Solin*, where the *Marian shrine dedicated to Our Lady of the Island* is located. It is precisely here that I wished to meet the

catechists, teachers and members of ecclesial associations and movements, who are mainly young: near the *memorials* of our Christian roots, we prayed for the *future* of the Church and of evangelization.

The areas where the greatest work is called for are those of the *family, life and youth*, as I recalled at the meeting with the Croatian Episcopal Conference. In each of these areas Christians are called to bear a witness of Gospel integrity in both their personal and collective decisions. The healing of the wounds caused by the war, the building of a just and lasting peace and, especially, the restoration of the moral values undermined by the previous totalitarian regimes require long and patient work in which you must continually return to the spiritual legacy bequeathed by your ancestors.

The figure of Bl. Alojzije Stepinac is a reference point for everyone to look to for inspiration and support. With his beatification that struggle between the Gospel and the anti-Gospel which runs through history is unveiled before us against the backdrop of the ages. This contemporary martyr, still remembered by the elderly, became a great symbol of this battle: ever since a new society began to take shape on the ruins of the Roman Empire and the Croats reached the shores of the Adriatic, through the difficult times of Ottoman rule to our own turbulent and tragic century, the Church has continued to meet the challenges of evil by proclaiming the word of the Gospel with fearless strength.

In a span of over 13 centuries, Croats, after accepting this Word and receiving Baptism, have preserved their fidelity to Christ and the Church, and have confirmed it on the threshold of the third millennium. The blessed martyr Alojzije Stepinac, Archbishop of Zagreb, is a witness to this! His figure is linked to that of the ancient martyrs: despite Diocletian's intentions, the persecutions of the early centuries only strengthened the Church's presence in the ancient world. Let us pray to the Lord, through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, *Advocata Croatiae, Mater fidelissima*, that the persecutions of modern times will lead to a new flourishing of ecclesial life in Croatia and throughout the world.

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

I cordially welcome the group of seminarians from the Pontifical North American College who will be ordained to the diaconate tomorrow. I greet the participants in the World Equestrian Games being held here in Rome. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, India and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of the risen Lord.

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