



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO KOREA, PAPUA NEW GUINEA,

SOLOMON ISLANDS AND THAILAND

(MAY 2-11, 1984) **HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II** Fairbanks Airport (Alaska)

Wednesday, 2 May 1984

*Dear Brothers and Sister in our Lord Jesus Christ,
Peace be with you!*

1. I greet you with the very words that we have just heard the Risen Christ address to his disciples in the Gospel of Saint John. I use this expression not only to emphasize the wonderful joy that is ours in this Easter season, but also in remembrance of Christ's promise: "Where two or three are gathered in my name there am I in the midst of them" (*Matth. 18, 2*). Since we have come together in the name of Christ, *Christ is here in our midst*.

My dear brothers and sisters, do we not have a feeling of overwhelming happiness, a deep calm, in knowing that Jesus - our Risen Saviour, our Paschal Sacrifice, the Light of the world, - *this Jesus* is dwelling in our hearts and *offering us his peace*? I must tell you how good it is for me to be united with you today in the peace of the Risen Christ.

2. Observing the joy of the disciples when they see the Lord, we notice from the Gospel passage that there is something different about him. The doors are closed and yet he enters. He bears the marks of death and yet he lives. The Gospel narratives of both Saint John and Saint Luke are at pains to tell us that after the Resurrection the body of Jesus is different. He has entered into the *stage of his risen and glorious life*.

In Saint John's Gospel this is the second appearance of Jesus to the disciples assembled as a group. After the first appearance, their exhilaration at seeing Jesus was so great that, when they met Thomas afterwards, they could not resist exclaiming: "We have seen the Lord!". But Thomas would not accept their witness: "I will never believe it without probing the nail-prints in his hands, without putting my finger in the nail marks and my hand into his side". Perhaps it is easy for us to judge Thomas too harshly for his disbelief. After all, do we not often use the expression, "seeing is

believing"? Does not our age tend to believe only what can be proved by the senses? Does not modern man remain incredulous of what he cannot see or touch or hear?

Jesus understands Thomas and the reasons for his doubts. When he meets Thomas, Jesus immediately says to him: "Take your fingers and examine my hands. Put your hand into my side. Do not persist in your unbelief, but believe". So overwhelmed is Thomas by the Lord's gentleness, compassion and patience that he can barely utter in humble recognition: "My Lord and my God!". Yes, *this truly was the Lord*, transformed by the Resurrection, and fully alive.

3. The side of Christ into which Thomas placed his hand is the very same that had been pierced by the soldier's spear and from which "came out blood and water". And with the flowing of that "blood and water" *the Church is born from the side of Christ*. Thus, through his suffering and death, Christ fashions the Church from his own side in order that his risen presence may be manifested to the world. By God's will, the Church becomes the sacrament or sign of Christ on earth. As the Body of Christ, she becomes *the* point of encounter between God and humanity: between the Creator and creatures, between the Redeemer and the redeemed. And as Thomas was invited to "see and believe" by experiencing the risen presence of Christ in his glorified body, so too are all people invited to "see and believe" by *experiencing the same risen presence of Christ in his Mystical Body*, the Church.

4. In our first reading today from the Acts of the Apostles, which tells us what happened in the house of the Roman centurion Cornelius, we see that the message of faith is communicated through the Church: Peter was not preaching on his own initiative alone. The Scripture tells us that Cornelius had been directed by an angel to send for Peter, and Peter had gone there on instructions from the Holy Spirit. In addition, while Peter was preaching on the meaning of the events of Jesus' life, death and Resurrection, "the Holy Spirit fell on all who heard the word" (*Act. 9, 44*). By this preaching, Peter was involved in a *profoundly ecclesial activity*. And so is everyone who evangelizes, for one can authentically proclaim the Gospel of Christ only in the name of the Church and in union with the Church.

My predecessor Paul VI made reference to this truth in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangeli* *Nuntiandi* "When the most obscure preacher, catechist or pastor in the most distant land preaches the Gospel, gathers his little community together or administers a Sacrament, even alone, he is carrying out an ecclesial act, and his action is certainly attached to the evangelizing activity of the whole Church by institutional relationships, but also by profound invisible links in the order of grace. This presupposes that he acts not in virtue of a mission which he attributes to himself or by a personal inspiration, but in union with the mission of the Church and in her name" (Pauli VI, *Evangeli* *Nuntiandi*, 60).

How aptly this description applies to the Church in Alaska and particularly in the Diocese of Fairbanks, where the population is scattered over 409,000 square miles. In reading the history of

the missionary activity in this vast area, might we not ask whether the first missionaries would have dared to penetrate the interior of Alaska unless they had been fired by *a profound love for Christ's Church* and utterly convinced of the Church's duty to proclaim the Gospel to all people? The early missionary efforts of the Oblates of Mary Immaculate and the continuing labors of the Society of Jesus are well known. The *missionaries* stand out in this history as the *true heroes of the faith*, whose courage and zeal made possible the building up of the Church in this land.

Today the work of preaching and teaching the Gospel in the name of the Church is zealously continued by religious and diocesan priests, by deacons, by women religious, religious brothers and catechists. Many of them undertake great personal sacrifices, often traveling long distances to bring *the word of God with its message of hope and love* to their brothers and sisters.

These missionary efforts still today come under the pastoral care of the Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith and are assisted by the Pontifical Missionary Societies. Specifically this means that evangelization in this Diocese, and in so many others like it throughout the world, is supported by the interest and solidarity of others. In this regard the Catholics of North America have exercised a special role in sustaining and promoting *the missionary efforts of the Holy See*. They are owed an immense debt of gratitude. And today, standing on this missionary soil of America, I wish *to express my heartfelt thanks to the Church throughout the United States* for everything it has done for the cause of spreading the light of Christ's Gospel.

5. Dear brothers and sisters: let us beseech the Lord who calls laborers into his harvest, to grant *that many young people will dedicate their lives to the missionary work of the Church*. May these young people respond generously to the Lord's call to the priesthood and religious life. And thus may the presence of the Risen Christ continue to be revealed in his Church, and "the good news of peace proclaimed through Jesus Christ who is the Lord of all".

Dear brothers and sisters in Alaska: may the peace of the Risen Jesus be with you always!

We are journeying from Alaska to Korea. And as we recall the sad event in which - along this same route - all the passengers of the aircraft lost their lives, we commend their souls to the merciful God, as we recite the "Regina Coeli".