



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION IN HONOUR OF ST JOHN DE BRITTO

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Madras

Wednesday, 5 February 1986

*"Let the peoples praise you, O God;
let all the peoples praise you" .*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. With these words from today's liturgy, I wish to give glory to God in this part of your native land. Today, during the course of my apostolic pilgrimage through India, the Lord gives me the privilege of being here in Madras, known for its rich culture and deep religious traditions. I am very pleased to celebrate this Holy Eucharist with you all, commemorating Saint John de Britto, the Saint who preached and was martyred in Tamil Nadu, the Saint known to you as Arul Anandar.

At this stage of my pilgrim journey I greet all of you present here: the bishops, priests, men and women religious, the laity, the young, the old, all of you who confess your faith in our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I greet the civil authorities and the representatives of the world of art and culture, those engaged in public life, in industry, in education, in every service to their fellow citizens.

I wish to express my esteem for the members of the other Christian Churches and ecclesial Communities, for the representatives of all the religious traditions present in this region. May the words of the Responsorial Psalm be a joint invitation to us all: "Let the peoples praise you, O God;

let all the peoples praise you! ".

2. Brothers and sisters, we have heard the solemn words of Saint Paul re-echoing the central theme of his apostolic preaching: "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, descended from David, as preached in my gospel" .

In a sense, these words are a summary of the whole of the Church's proclamation. In this place, at Madras, they draw our minds to another figure, an Apostle of Christ, Saint Thomas, whose ministry is linked precisely to this land. He too was convinced that the word of God – the word concerning Christ's Resurrection – cannot be fettered . And so, as tradition tell us, he came to this region. Here he was a witness to Christ, to Christ's saving Passion, Death and Resurrection.

3. This great country, and particularly Tamil Nadu, has had the singular privilege of receiving the Gospel of Jesus Christ through three great Saints and other illustrious pioneers belonging to well-known religious congregation and missionary societies:

– Saint Thomas was martyred near this very city, and his tomb is venerated here;

– Saint Francis Xavier, according to history, worked at the Pearl Fishery Coast and stayed for some time near the tomb of the Apostle, and was here inspired with courage and strength to extend his labours to Japan;

– and finally, Saint John de Britto, whom we are remembering in today's liturgical celebration, was born in Lisbon in 1647. After entering the Society of Jesus he followed the footsteps of Saint Francis Xavier to India where he chose to work for the humble and needy in what was then called the Madurai Mission. His patient labours, selfless zeal and genuine love for the poor won for him their confidence. Like Jesus he was "a sign of contradiction" and his success created jealousy and opposition. As a result, John de Britto died a martyr on 4 February 1693, bearing witness to Christ.

These saints and innumerable men and women of various religious congregations and societies have made Jesus Christ known and loved in this land. We gladly remember all of them today – especially those who have served even to the extent of laying down their lives for the Gospel, witnesses and martyrs, after the example of the Son of Man, who "came not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" .

4. Christ, in fact, is described in today's Gospel as the "Good Shepherd" who lays down his life for his sheep.

His sacrifice reveals the infinite mercy of God the Father who raised him from the dead. From death Christ came back to life! And in the triumph of life over death, the infinite love of the Father for the Son and of the Son for the Father is unveiled before our eyes. And in the Holy Spirit we are

introduced to the mystery of eternal life itself, for as Jesus exclaimed at the Last Supper: "This is eternal life, that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" .

This was the experience that transformed the disciples after the Resurrection. They saw the darkness of death swallowed up in the light of life. Illumined by this light they set out to proclaim to the whole world the message of God's merciful love and his call to reconciliation and unity.

5. We too are called to become, like the Apostles, witnesses to this mystery. Witnesses to the Cross and Resurrection of Christ. Witnesses to the saving love of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

We are called to this task first of all through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. The Apostle says: " If we have died with him, we shall also live with him" . And it is precisely through Baptism that each of us "dies", together with Christ, to sin, in order to rise to new life with him: to the life of grace, to the life of divine sonship! After being "buried" in the waters of Baptism and purified by the power of the Holy Spirit, we emerge as bearers of the new life of Christ for the world.

6. The profound transformation that takes place in us through Baptism and Confirmation is the source and the foundation of every apostolate, and in particular of the apostolate of the laity. For we all become, first through Baptism and then in a new way through Confirmation, sharers in Christ's threefold mission as Prophet, Priest and King .

Because of this, the principal duty of lay men and women – in the words of the Second Vatican Council – "is to bear witness to Christ, and this they are obliged to do by their life and words in the home, in their social group, and in their own professional circle" . The Council goes on to insist that the apostolate of the laity takes place " in the social and cultural framework of their own national traditions. They must be acquainted with this culture. They must heal it and preserve it. They must develop it in accordance with modern conditions, and finally perfect it in Christ, so that the faith of Christ and the life of the Church may no longer be extraneous to the society in which they live" .

This has been true in India for almost two thousand years and it continues to be true today. As I wrote recently in commemoration of the Apostles of the Slavs, Saints Cyril and Methodius: "The Gospel does not lead to the impoverishment or extinction of those things which every individual, people and nation and every culture throughout history recognises and brings into being as goodness, truth and beauty. On the contrary it strives to assimilate and to develop all these values: to live them with magnanimity and joy and to perfect them by the mysterious and ennobling light of Revelation" . The dialogue between faith and culture belongs in a special way to the laity, whose faith inspires their daily service to their fellow citizens and to their country.

7. Saint John de Britto's life faithfully reflected the life of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, for it

was a life of service unto death. Today it challenges all of us to continue with fresh vigour the Church's role of loving service to humanity. The immense and tender love of Jesus Christ for the poor and the downtrodden, for sinners and the suffering, remains a challenge for every Christian. Christ's unrelenting stand for truth is a compelling example. Above all, the generosity shown in his suffering and death, as the culmination of his service to humanity and the supreme act of Redemption, is the example for us. We are called to serve.

There can be no authentic Christian life without an effective love of our fellow human beings. At the closing of the Vatican Council Pope Paul VI affirmed that "if... in the face of every man, especially when this face is made transparent by his tears and suffering, we can and must recognise the face of Christ, ... and in the face of Christ we can and must recognise the face of our heavenly Father, ... then our humanism becomes a Christianity and our Christianity becomes theocentric. And thus we can also say: to know God it is necessary to know man" .

Today we live at a time of history when peace and harmony between nations and races is constantly threatened. Division and hatred, fear and frustration – these are among the counter-values of our day. The message of love in Christ Jesus is urgently needed. Hence, the Church's task of proclaiming the Gospel and of being at the service of society is supremely relevant in India today. This task requires the active collaboration of all sectors of the ecclesial community, especially the laity.

8. To each one of you who in a particular way takes part in the mission of Christ and of the Church I wish to repeat the conviction expressed by the Apostle Paul in the first reading of this Mass; "the word of God is not fettered" ; indeed, it can never be fettered.

Through the testimony of your lives, through your words and deeds, the word of God is made known to the minds and hearts of others who seek him, so that "they also may obtain salvation in Christ Jesus with its eternal glory" – that "they may obtain salvation"!

Brothers and sisters, if we die with Christ, we shall live also with him, "if we endure, we shall also reign with him" .

Christ – Shepherd, Prophet and Priest – has sealed our hearts with his call just as he touched the hearts of the apostles, the hearts of Saint Thomas, Saint Francis Xavier and Saint John de Britto. May they intercede for the Church in India, for this beloved country and its people!

We will be happy if we remain faithful. For he, Christ, is faithful: he remains faithful for he cannot deny himself" .

Brothers and sisters: you are called to be living witnesses to Christ, living witnesses to God's word, living witnesses to the saving message of love and mercy that Christ revealed to the world.

Amen.

Remarks of the Holy Father during his visit to the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Thomas the Apostle:

Dear Archbishop Arulappa,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

It is an honour and special grace for me to come to the Cathedral Basilica of Saint Thomas the Apostle here in Madras. As so many pilgrims before me have done, I too come to venerate the Tomb of the Apostle to India. This holy place speaks of the history of the Church in this beloved land. It calls to mind, not only Saint Thomas and his martyrdom, but all the others after him who have dedicated their lives to the preaching of the Gospel, all those who have borne witness to Christ both in word and in deed.

I pray that our faith will be strong like theirs, and that our love for Christ may inspire us to love and serve our neighbour. With joy in our hearts, let us praise God who, through Saint Thomas, has communicated the Good News of salvation in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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