



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC PILGRIMAGE
TO NORWAY, ICELAND, FINLAND,
DENMARK AND SWEDEN

HOLY MASS FOR THE FINNISH FAITHFUL

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Cathedral of Christ the King, Reykjavik (Iceland)
Sunday, 4 June 1989

“Lord,... I am not worthy to have you come under my roof” (Luc. 7, 6).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. These are familiar words. We say them before Holy Communion every time we participate at Mass. Today they will be repeated here *in Reykjavik, in Iceland*, in this solemn assembly gathered in faith and love to celebrate the Eucharist with the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of the Apostle Peter.

Text in Icelandic

Kaeru börn; þetta er hátíðleg stund í lífi ykkar og mér er það einstök ánaegja að vera hér á Íslandi til að veita ykkur sakramentid, er þið gangid í fyrsta sinn til altaris. Þið hafid nú náð þeim broska að geta tekið á móti altarisakramentinu. Það er von mín að þið vardveitid kaerleikann, sem þið synid Jesú Kristi í dag, alla aevidaga ykkar.

Ykkur, íslenskum börnum og ungmennum, fel ég þennan kross, sem ég nú hef blessað. Hann munu skátar reisa við Ulfljótsvatn til minningar um heimsókn mína. Hann mun minna ykkur á búsvund ára sögu kristni á Íslandi. Hann mun minna ykkur á, að þessi trú er arfleifd ykkur. Tileinkid

ykkur hana! Lifid hana til fullnustu! Petta er ósk mín til handa íslenskri aesku.

This solemn Eucharist, the memorial of the saving death of our Lord Jesus Christ, is *a celebration of Iceland's thousand years of Christian history*. With gratitude we remember “those who have gone before us marked with the sign of faith”: from the first hermits of the ninth century mentioned in the Sagas, who came possibly from Ireland, and the first Icelandic bishop, Isleifur Gissurarson, and the saintly Bishop Thorlakur Thorhallsson. We remember your national hero, Bishop Jon Arason, the Jesuit Father Jon Svensson, and Gunnar Einarsson who persevered like Simeon waiting for the Lord, and died one month after his son Johannes Gunnarsson returned as the first Icelandic Catholic bishop of modern times. And all the others, too numerous to mention by name. *Both Catholics and Lutherans* can look back on the fidelity of men and women of sincere and resolute faith who bore witness to Christ in this land. *Christ is the Light of the nations*, the Light of these Northern countries I am visiting, *the Light of Iceland!* To him be praise for ever and ever!

2. *It was Christ himself who gave us the Eucharist*. He gave it once for all when he offered himself on the Cross “for the life of the world”. In fact, *during the Last Supper he instituted the Sacrament of his Body and Blood* under the signs of bread and wine, and he told the Apostles to renew that memorial – “in memory of him” – until he comes again. Christ himself gave to them, and gives to us, his Body as food and his Blood as our spiritual drink.

The Eucharist, which is celebrated over and over again in the Church, is both a Sacrifice and a Banquet. It contains the Church's whole spiritual wealth: Christ himself in the fullness of his humanity and in his marvellous divine equality with the Father. It is the very centre of the assembly of the faithful over which the priest presides (Cfr. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5). The Second Vatican Council clearly states that no Christian community can be built up unless it has its basis and centre in the celebration of the Eucharist, in which all education in community spirit must originate (Cfr. *ibid.* 6). In fact, the Council boldly states that *the principal manifestation of the Church* consists in the full, active participation of God's holy people *in the Eucharist at which the bishop presides*, surrounded by his priests and ministers (Cfr. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 41). All else in the Church's life is directed to this.

It is therefore a great joy on this Sunday, during my visit to Iceland, to be able to celebrate this most holy of gifts with the Catholic community:

- with Bishop Jolson, and the priests who serve here;
- with the religious; with the laity;
- in the company of our beloved Lutheran brothers and sisters who have wished to join us in this moment of prayer.

I have been told that this is *Seaman's Sunday*, when special prayers are offered throughout the country *for those who work at sea*. Let us remember those who have been lost or injured in this

traditional Icelandic occupation, which demands so much effort, courage and perseverance. May God have mercy on the souls of the departed and may he comfort those who have been the victims of a sea that is so generous but at times so cruel.

3. *The words “Lord,... I am not worthy” (Luc. 7, 6) were said for the first time by a Roman centurion, a man serving as a soldier in the land of Israel. Though he was a foreigner and a pagan, he loved the people of Israel, and – as the Gospel tells us – he had even built them a synagogue, a house of prayer. For that reason the Jews warmly supported the request he wished to make to Jesus, to heal his servant. In answer to the centurion’s petition Jesus set out for his house. But at that point the centurion, wanting to save Jesus the effort, said to him: “Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you come under my roof; that is why I did not presume to come to you myself. Just give the order and my servant will be healed (Luc. 7, 6-7). Christ granted the centurion’s wish, but at the same time “he was amazed” at the centurion’s words and said to the crowd following him: “I tell you, not even in Israel have I found such faith” (Ibid. 7, 9).*

4. If we repeat the words of the centurion when we approach Holy Communion, we do so because these words express *a faith that is strong and deep*. The words are simple but in a sense they contain *the fundamental truth which says who God is and who man is*: God is all-holy, he is the Creator who gives us life and who makes all that exists in the universe. We are creatures and his children, in need of healing because of our sins.

In a highly developed society such as yours, where everyone has enough to eat, where education and health care are available to all, and where a high level of social justice has been achieved, it is easy to lose sight of the Creator, from whose loving hands all things come. *It is easy to live as if God did not exist*. Indeed, there is a powerful attraction to such an attitude, for it might seem that acknowledging God as the origin and end of all things lessens human independence and places unacceptable limits on human action. But when we forget God we soon lose sight of the deeper meaning of our existence, we no longer know who we are (Cfr. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36). Is this not an important part of *the dissatisfaction* that is common in highly developed societies?

Is it not fundamental for our psychological and social well-being to hear God’s voice in the wonderful harmony of the universe? Is it not in fact *liberating* to recognize that the stability, truth, goodness and order which the human mind increasingly discovers in the cosmos *are a reflection of the unity, truth, goodness and beauty of the Creator himself*?

A radical challenge facing the human family at the end of the twentieth century is *to use the earth’s resources wisely and responsibly*, which means with respect for the limits to which these resources are necessarily subject. To do this is to respect the will of the Creator. And in human affairs the challenge is *to build a world of justice, peace and love*, where the life and equal dignity of every human being, without discrimination, is defended and sustained. To do this is to recognize the face of God in every human face, and especially in the tears and sufferings of those

who long to be loved or justly treated.

No single person can solve all the world's problems. But every act of goodness is an important contribution to the changes we all wish to see. It was from a profound sense of justice that Einar Asmundsson took the destitute Father Baudoin, a foreigner, into his home. This act had consequences far beyond anything Einar Asmundsson himself could imagine. So it is that *all our good actions constitute a victory for justice, peace and human dignity*. But our selfishness and lack of moral courage lead to the persistence and even strengthening of injustice in the world.

5. The centurion's words are the voice of the creature praising the Creator for his generosity and goodness. Indeed, those words *contain the entire Gospel: the entire Good News of our salvation*. They bear witness to the wonderful Gift of God himself, expressed in the Word of life. God bestows on humanity an absolutely free gift – *a share in his own divine nature*. He endows his creatures with eternal life in Christ. *Man is graced by God*.

The faith of the Roman centurion was great. He was aware of how much he had been “graced” by Christ. He knew that he was *not worthy of such a gift*, and that this gift was far beyond anything that he, a mere man, could humanly achieve or even desire, for *the gift is truly supernatural*. The wonder of this gift is that it makes it possible for us to achieve the object of our deepest longings: *to live forever in intimate union with God who is the source of all good*. In the Eucharist we share in this same gift sacramentally. The Eucharist is a memorial of the suffering and death of Jesus: it fills us with grace, and it is a pledge of our future glory. Through faith we must constantly renew our gratitude for the divine gift.

In Christ, who is the divine Gift, the gift of the Gospel, the gift of the Eucharist is offered to everyone. Everyone is invited to become a member of “the household of the faith” (Cfr. *Gal. 6, 10*). *In this Church there are no strangers*. Even someone who comes from “a far country”, from very far away, is “at home” in the Church. That is what today's First Reading from the Book of Kings tells us: when Solomon dedicates the great Temple in Jerusalem, he prays that “all the peoples of the earth may know your name” (1 *Reg. 8, 43*). *In spite of differences of race, nationality, language and culture, all are called to share equally in the unity and fellowship of God's people*. While we are well aware that history has left to us Christians those divisions and differences in faith which make it impossible for us to share in the Eucharist, we earnestly pray for the time when Christ's prayer will be fully answered: that all may be one, so that the world will believe (Cfr. *Jo. 17, 21*).

6. “*Praise the Lord, all you nations, acclaim him all you peoples! Strong is his love for us; he is faithful for ever*” (*Ps. 116, 1-2*).

Today *the Church everywhere sings these words* – wherever Christians gather to celebrate the Sunday Eucharist, just as we are doing here on this island of the North Atlantic, in Iceland! In so many different languages the words of the centurion are being repeated: “Lord,... I am not worthy”.

These words – like those of the Psalm – *speak of God's gifts to each one of us: our life, our family, the achievement of our society, our faith, and the greatest of all God's gifts, his only-begotten Son, Jesus Christ.*

“Lord,... I am not worthy to have you come under my roof, but only say the word and I shall be healed” (Cfr. *Luc. 7, 6*).

Lord Jesus Christ! I thank you for enabling me *to proclaim the mystery of faith here in Iceland*, in the midst of your faithful people: with those who are about to receive you sacramentally for the first time, with the entire Catholic community, and in the company of my Lutheran brothers and sisters.

(Icelandic)

Kæru kristnu vinir.

Ég þakka ykkur innilegar viðtökur og óska ykkur og öllum Íslendingum allrar blessunar Guðs.

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