



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO THE PHILIPPINES,
PAPUA NEW GUINEA, AUSTRALIA AND SRI LANKA

LITURGY OF VESPERS

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

Cathedral of St Lucia, Colombo

Friday, 20 January 1995

*My Brother Bishops,
Dear Priests and Sisters,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

1. Our prayer this evening is one of joy and thanksgiving. This beautiful Cathedral of Saint Lucia, modelled upon Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome, is a symbol of *our communion in the one faith*, the faith which Peter and the other Apostles were sent to proclaim to all the world. As Bishop of Rome and Successor of Peter, I am truly happy to be able to visit the Catholic community of Sri Lanka and to confirm you in your dedication to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ (Cf. Lk. 22: 32). I am grateful to Bishop Edmund Fernando for his kind words on your behalf. I am also pleased to acknowledge the presence of distinguished representatives of the various Christian Communities established in Sri Lanka, and I thank them for wishing to share this Evening Prayer with us.

The seed of faith, planted on this Island by the first missionaries and revived through the tireless apostolate of Father Joseph Vaz, has borne abundant fruits of ecclesial life. *Truly the Church in Sri Lanka has come of age!* You are guided by a native hierarchy, served by many clergy, religious and lay leaders, and blessed with abundant vocations. Although you are a "little flock" (Cf. Lk. 12: 32), you contribute much to the life of the nation by your spiritual witness and your achievements in many fields of service, especially in education and human development.

In giving thanks for these blessings, remember that God's gifts are the foundation upon which each generation is called to build. Let us pray that tomorrow's celebration in honour of Father Joseph Vaz will be an occasion for the Catholics of Sri Lanka to recommit themselves *to living fully the faith for which their forefathers were willing to suffer so much*. May Father Vaz be a perennial inspiration to the Church in Sri Lanka as she carries out her mission of bearing witness to the Gospel, which "is the power of God for salvation" (Rm. 1: 16).

2. In the sacred text which we have just heard, we see how Jesus applied to himself the ancient prophecy of Isaiah, which foretold that the Messiah, filled with the Spirit, would preach the good news of God's grace to the poor, freedom to the oppressed, and peace where there was hostility and conflict (Cf. Lk. 4: 21). To proclaim the message of salvation is the first priority of the Church's life and the most important service which she renders to individuals and society (Cf. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 44). *Every other work which Christians carry out flows from and leads back to the Church's commitment to evangelization*, understood not only as the proclamation of a message but as the communication of a "new life" in the grace of Christ. Every aspect of the apostolate – education, healthcare, social service, solidarity, interreligious dialogue – *is meant to manifest the love which the Father has given the world in Jesus his Son, the love which he pours into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us* (Cf. Rm. 5: 5). Dear Brothers and Sisters, be joyful messengers of Christ, eager to share with others the new life you have received, in complete respect for the freedom and conscience of every individual. This witness is not always easy and it may often meet with rejection, but true disciples of Christ, like the Apostles, cannot fail to "speak about what we have seen and heard" (Acts. 4: 20).

3. *Dear Brother Priests*, your whole being is permeated by the sacramental configuration to the Lord which you received in Holy Orders. *Centre your lives on Christ, the High Priest*, whom you meet each day in the mysteries which you celebrate and administer. Your spiritual development must be marked by constant conversion – *metánoia* – and growth in the Lord's image. The pillars of your interior life ought to be the Eucharist and Penance, for in these encounters with God's grace you come to know most deeply both your own sinfulness and the efficacy of God's infinite mercy. Your union with the Lord should be clearly visible to the faithful, who should know you as *living signs of the transforming power of divine grace*, just as Father Vaz was.

Your holiness of life is the indispensable condition for the authentic inculturation of the Gospel in this land of ancient religious traditions. Beware therefore of the temptation to allow the more immediate and practical aspects of your apostolate to take away from the time you need each day in order to "be with the Lord" (Cf. Mk. 3: 14-15). Be renewed in your minds and hearts, so that you will increasingly think with the mind of the Church – *sentire cum Ecclesia* – seeing things with her eyes, and judging all things in the light of the surpassing power of Christ's Cross. This is the encouragement which I wish to leave with you and all your fellow priests, especially those who are burdened by interior troubles or wounded in their hearts by the consequences of the sad conflict which has ravaged your beautiful land.

4. I am especially glad to meet so many *Men and Women Religious*. Dear Brothers and Sisters, you are signs of God's love, messengers of his Kingdom and witnesses to the joy which comes from following Christ with an undivided heart. Seek to draw nearer each day to the Lord, in a spirit of communion with all the members of his Body. As men and women consecrated to Christ, you must be examples of evangelical poverty, reflecting simplicity and self-denial in the way you live. Let your consecration be shown by your rejection of styles of life which go against the values of the Gospel.

A precious contribution to the growth of God's Kingdom in Sri Lanka has been made by Religious involved in *catechizing and educating young people*. *To co-operate with parents in passing on the faith*, whole and entire, to the next generation *is a fundamental act of evangelical love*. It is a service which nothing else can replace. Likewise, your work of educating the young in schools and other centres is of vital importance for the future of the Church, as well as for the progress of society as a whole (Cf. *Gravissimum Educationis*). Because the service you offer to God's people is so important in each particular Church, you rightly count on receiving *encouragement and guidance from the Bishops*, with whom you co-operate in the Lord's vineyard.

Certain elements of division which exist in your society can present particular challenges to Religious Communities, communities which must be marked by harmony, fraternal love and unity. I wish to encourage you therefore to bear witness to true communion and peace, thus showing that you are all children of the same Father.

I wish to say a special word of paternal encouragement and gratitude to the members of the *Contemplative Orders* who, through their constant prayer and their total self-giving love, "impart a hidden apostolic fruitfulness" to the whole Church (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 7). Dearest Sisters, continue to pray for the needs of the human family, which everywhere suffers hunger and thirst for many things, but most of all for God, who alone can quiet our restless hearts. And please pray for me too.

5. Dear *members of the lay faithful*: in the time of Father Vaz, the Church in Ceylon was able to survive persecution and flourish once more because of the fidelity of its laity. As individual men and women, and as members of lay movements and associations, your contribution to the Church's mission is absolutely necessary, especially in the face of attitudes of secularism and materialism which are so contrary to the deep spirituality and respect for religious values which are part of your national heritage. Your specific task is *to bring the light of the Gospel to your families and to the communities* in which you live and work. In particular, as the Second Vatican Council pointed out, the laity "are called to seek the Kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and ordering them according to the plan of God" (*Lumen Gentium*, 30). Sri Lankan Catholics are being challenged to play their proper part in the Church, and to take the initiative in being *a leaven of Gospel values in the worlds of business, the professions and politics*. It is my hope that the forthcoming *National Pastoral Convention*, now in the preparatory stage, will help the laity and

clergy alike to fulfil their respective roles and responsibilities within the Christian community. I hope that all will work together to face the challenges of this moment in the Church's life in your land.

6. May the Lord to whom we raise our hearts in praise at this Evening Prayer grant all of you, the members of the Catholic community of Sri Lanka, the strength to recommit yourselves, in the spirit of your great apostle, Father Joseph Vaz, to the Church's mission of proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ. *Father Vaz is an outstanding model* for Bishops, priests, Religious and laity alike. His example of profound love of God and neighbour, his authentic piety and humility, his witness of evangelical poverty and his loving zeal for souls should be an inspiration to each of you, and to each of us.

This is "the acceptable year of the Lord" (Lk. 4: 19), the year in which the Beatification of Joseph Vaz challenges every Sri Lankan Catholic to be deeply renewed in holiness and zeal for the Gospel. May Mary, Mother of the Church, to whom the Catholics of your country have always had a tender devotion, help you all to achieve this! Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

And at the end I offer my gratitude to the Archbishop of Colombo for inviting us in this very beautiful Cathedral for this evening prayer, Thank you very much.

Remarks of the Holy Father at the conclusion of the meeting:

It is a very beautiful Cathedral, but one thing I observe, it is not very easy to enter. It is nor easy... You are very strong in faith and you are very strong... in attacking the Pope? no?

Beautiful hospitality. I admire greatly your hospitality. The hospitality of the Catholic community of Sri Lanka... I am very grateful.