



The Holy See

SECOND SPECIAL ASSEMBLY FOR EUROPE OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Friday, 1 October 1999

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

1. *"Jesus himself drew near and went with them"* (Lk 24:15).

The Gospel account of the disciples at Emmaus, which we heard a few moments ago, is the biblical icon that serves as the backdrop for this Second Special Assembly for Europe of the Synod of Bishops. We open it with this solemn Eucharistic concelebration, whose theme is: *"Jesus Christ, alive in his Church, the source of hope for Europe"*. We open it by entrusting to the Lord the expectations and hopes which are in all of our hearts. We gather round the altar, representing the continent's nations and united by the desire to make the proclamation and witness of Christ, alive yesterday, today and for ever, more and more effective and concrete in every corner of Europe.

With great joy and affection I offer each of you my fraternal embrace of peace. The Spirit has called us together for this important ecclesial event which, in continuity with the First Assembly for Europe in 1991, concludes the series of continental Synods in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. Through you I extend my most heartfelt greetings to the local Churches from which you come.

2. *"Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and for ever"* (Heb 13:8). As you know, this is the constant refrain that re-echoes in the Church as she advances towards the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

Jesus Christ is living in his Church and, from generation to generation, he continues to "draw near"

to man and to "walk" with him. Especially in moments of trial, when disappointments threaten to shake our trust and hope, the Risen One crosses the paths of human confusion and, even without being recognized, becomes our traveling companion.

Thus, in Christ and in his Church, God constantly hearkens to the joys and hopes, the sorrows and anxieties of the human race (cf. Past. Const. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 1), to which he wishes to send his message of loving concern. This is what occurred at the *Second Vatican Council*; it is also the meaning of the various *Special Assemblies* of the Synod of Bishops: the risen Christ, living in his Church, walks with the men and women who live in Africa, America, Asia, Oceania and Europe in order to instil or to reawaken faith, hope and charity in their hearts.

3. With the Synod Assembly that begins today, the Lord wishes to extend to the Christian people on pilgrimage in the lands between the Atlantic and the Urals *a strong invitation to hope*. It is an invitation that was expressed in a remarkable way today in the words of the prophet Zephaniah: "*Sing aloud ... rejoice and exult!*" (Zep 3:14). The God of the Covenant knows the hearts of his children; he knows the many painful trials that European nations have had to endure throughout this tormented and difficult century now drawing to a close.

He, *Emmanuel*, God-with-us, was crucified in the concentration camps and the gulags; he knew affliction under bombardment in the trenches; he suffered wherever the inalienable dignity of man, of every human being, was humiliated, oppressed and violated. Christ suffered in the many innocent victims of the wars and conflicts that have soaked European regions in blood. He knows the serious temptations of the generations that are preparing to cross the threshold of the third millennium: the enthusiasm aroused by the collapse of ideological barriers and by the peaceful revolutions of 1989 seems, unfortunately, to have been dampened by the impact of political and economic selfishness, and on the lips of so many people in Europe are heard the dejected words of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus: "We had hoped ..." (Lk 24:21).

In this particular social and cultural context, the Church feels it her duty vigorously to repeat the message of hope entrusted to her by God. With this Assembly, she says again to Europe: "*The Lord your God is in your midst, a mighty Saviour!*" (Zep 3:17). Her invitation to hope is not based on a utopian ideology, like those of the last two centuries which ultimately trampled on human rights, especially the rights of the weakest. On the contrary, it is the timeless message of salvation proclaimed by Christ: the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1:15)! With the authority she received from her Lord, the Church repeats to today's Europe: Europe of the third millennium, "*let not your hands grow weak!*" (Zep 3:16); do not give in to discouragement, do not resign yourself to ways of thinking and living that have no future because they are not based on the sound certainty of God's Word!

Europe of the third millennium, the Church once again offers you and all your children Christ, the one Mediator of salvation, yesterday, today and for ever (Heb 13:8). She offers you Christ, the true

hope of man and of history. She offers him to you not only and not so much in words, but especially with the *eloquent witness of holiness*. With their lives marked by the Gospel Beatitudes, saintly men and women constitute the most effective and credible vanguard of the Church's mission. 4. For this reason, dear brothers and sisters, on the threshold of the Year 2000, while the whole Church in Europe is represented here in the worthiest of ways, I have the joy today of proclaiming *three new co-patronesses of the European continent*. They are: St Edith Stein, St Bridget of Sweden and St Catherine of Siena.

Europe has already been placed under the heavenly protection of three great saints: Benedict of Norcia, father of Western monasticism, and the two brothers, Cyril and Methodius, apostles of the Slavs. To these outstanding witnesses of Christ, I have wished to join the same number of women, to stress also the great role that women have had in the continent's ecclesial and civil history down to our day.

From her very origins, the Church, although conditioned by the cultures surrounding her, has always recognized the full spiritual dignity of women, beginning with the unique vocation and mission of Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. From the very start, Christians have turned to women such as Felicity, Perpetua, Agatha, Lucy, Agnes, Cecilia and Anastasia - as the Roman Canon attests - with no less fervour than that reserved for saintly men.

5. *The three saints* chosen as copatronesses of Europe are all linked in a special way with the continent's history. *Edith Stein*, who came from a Jewish family, left a brilliant career as a scholar to become a Carmelite nun with the name of Teresa Benedicta of the Cross and died in the death camp of Auschwitz, is the symbol of Europe's tragedies in this century. Bridget of Sweden and Catherine of Siena, who both lived in the 14th century, worked tirelessly for the Church, taking her fortunes to heart on a European scale. Thus *Bridget*, consecrated to God after having fully lived her vocation as a wife and mother, traveled Europe from North to South, working constantly for the unity of Christians and dying in Rome. *Catherine*, a humble and fearless Dominican tertiary, brought peace to her native Siena, Italy and 14th-century Europe; she devoted her energies unsparingly to the Church and succeeded in bringing the Pope back to Rome from Avignon.

All three marvellously express the *synthesis of contemplation and action*. Their life and works bear eloquent witness to the *power of the risen Christ*, living in his Church: the power of generous love for God and man, the power of genuine moral and civil renewal. In these new patronesses, so rich in supernatural and human gifts, *Christians and Ecclesial Communities* of every denomination can find inspiration, as can European *citizens and States* that are sincerely committed to seeking truth and the common good.

6. "Did not our hearts burn within us ... while he opened to us the Scriptures?" (Lk 24:32).

I ardently hope that the work of this Synod will enable us to relive the experience of the disciples at

Emmaus who, filled with hope and joy after recognizing the Lord "in the breaking of the bread", hastened back to Jerusalem to tell the brethren what had happened on the road (cf. Lk 24:33-35).

May Jesus Christ also allow us to meet him and recognize him at the Eucharistic table, in the communion of hearts and faith. May he grant that we can spend these weeks of reflection by listening deeply to the Spirit who is speaking to the Churches in Europe. May he make us humble and ardent apostles of his Cross, as were Sts Benedict, Cyril, Methodius, Edith Stein, Bridget and Catherine.

Let us implore their help together with the heavenly intercession of Mary, Queen of All Saints and Mother of Europe. May this Second Assembly for Europe lead to strategies for an evangelization that is attentive to the challenges and expectations of the younger generation.

And may Christ be the renewed source of hope for all who live on the "old" continent, where down the centuries the Gospel has yielded an incomparable harvest of faith, active love and civilization!

Amen!

© Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana