



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO MALTA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS OF MALTA

Saint John's Co-Cathedral, La Valletta

Friday, 25 May 1990

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Peace be with you". This is my greeting and prayerful wish for you and for all the people of Malta. "Peace be with you, and love with faith, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Cfr. *Eph.* 6, 23).

1. It is fitting that my first words on this visit to Malta should be spoken here in the magnificent Saint John's Co-Cathedral, an eloquent witness to a part of your history that has made your name known throughout the world. As one called to a universal ministry of service in the Church, I rejoice at the opportunity to visit this island of Malta, *the island of Saint Paul's preaching, an island of faith, an island of heroism and devotion*. Today I share the sentiments of Paul when he wrote:

"Being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us" (*1 Thess.* 2, 8).

Guided by divine providence, I have come to confirm the ancient faith that the Apostle of the Nations brought here at the dawn of Christianity. I also come as a *pilgrim*, to experience at first hand the vitality of your local Churches, to pay homage to the past and present accomplishments of all those who have responded generously to the Gospel and have brought forth works of faith, hope and love for the glory of God and the salvation of the world. And as the Church in Malta awaits the third millennium, I wish to offer *encouragement and hope for an even more glorious future*.

2. Beloved friends in the Lord: the Catholic faith has grown and flourished here, thanks to generous men and women who in every age have put their lives at the service of Christ and his Church, "not by constraint but willingly, not for shameful gain but eagerly, not as domineering... but being examples to the flock" (1 Petr. 5, 2-3). I am happy that my first meeting is with you, the priests and religious, for you have *an irreplaceable role to play* in building up the Church so that all the members of Christ's flock, from the greatest to the least, may attain the holiness of life which leads to salvation.

I am well aware that the Church in Malta is called to exercise her *pastoral mission in a social and cultural situation* which under certain aspects presents difficulties. In this context it is clear that the Church must be above all "the house of God" (Cfr. 1 Tim. 3, 15), in which his family dwells (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 6), and where the members of the family, while enjoying the rightful freedom of the children of God (Cfr. Rom. 8, 21), are united in the bonds of faith and love: "Ubi caritas et amor, Deus ibi est". I would encourage you, under the leadership of your Bishops, to continue along the path of authentic and profound renewal which the Holy Spirit, through the Second Vatican Council, has marked out for the whole People of God.

Furthermore, it cannot be denied that today your country is faced with ever increasing new problems. Your venerable traditions and your society are being subjected to the allurements of a secularized culture which has engulfed so much of the world. As men and women whose vocations have no meaning apart from God and his promises, you have no need to be afraid. It is by perseverance and fidelity in the face of challenges and trials that God's power shines through human weakness. Never underestimate *the hidden action of the Holy Spirit at work in human hearts* to bring about the transformation, the *metanoia*, which lies at the core of the Gospel message (Cfr. Marc. 1, 15). I exhort you to hold fast to the strong faith which is your Catholic heritage as sons and daughters of Malta, so that the mighty deeds of God may continue to be manifested here both now and in the future.

Malta has been *richly blessed with vocations* and has been *very generous in sending priests and religious abroad*, to the great joy and gratitude of Catholic communities throughout the world. But there is also a need to be vigilant about the future. Do not be afraid to ask much of the young, to challenge them with a call to service and a way of life based on the radical demands of the Gospel. In order that your appeal may be effective, you must communicate it not only in words but also by *an example that shows you to be committed, zealous, and joyful* in the service of the Lord.

3. To all *the priests of Malta* I commend the words of Saint Peter: "Tend the flock of God that is your charge... And when the chief Shepherd is manifested you will obtain the unfading crown of glory" (1 Petr. 5, 2. 4). Can there be a greater honour than this: that Christ has called each one of you by name to share in his ministry and has entrusted to you a portion of his flock? Can there be any greater encouragement than this: to serve, to labour and even to suffer with Christ, so that together with all the faithful you can be partakers in the glory that is to be revealed? Yes, dear

brothers, it is both *to ministry and to glory* that the chief Shepherd has called you as priests.

What a grace it is that your ministry in Malta is marked by *a genuine closeness to your people!* As you live and work among them in imitation of Christ who came "not to be served but to serve" (*Matth. 20, 28*), strive always to *develop a priestly heart*, one that draws people to their ultimate, eternal good, to "the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God" (*Col. 3, 1*). Be accessible to everyone, *with respect and genuine fraternal concern*. In your pastoral activity, "show no partiality as you hold the faith of our Lord Jesus Christ" (*Jac. 2, 1*). Each man and woman who knocks at your door, regardless of socio-economic status or political affiliations, should recognize in your words and actions the full truth of God offered in love and understanding. As "chosen from among men" (Cfr. *Hebr. 5, 1*), and "set apart for the Gospel of God" (Cfr. *Rom. 1, 1*), you have a special responsibility to embody that "compassion" which Jesus showed to all around him (Cfr. *Matth. 9, 36*).

You know that your ministry as priests can never be lived as an exclusively private affair. The "presbyterium" should clearly reflect the communion which is the very nature of the Church, the one Body of Christ (Cfr. *1 Cor. 12, 12*). The Conciliar *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests* speaks of the "*intimate sacramental brotherhood*" that unites priests as members of a single body under the Diocesan Bishop in a "bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 8). *Charity* is required, lest we fail to practice among our brothers the very commandment of love we preach to others: *a bond of prayer*, so that no priest will be spiritually isolated in fulfilment of the ministry; and *cooperation*, for, as the same Decree tells us, "no priest is sufficiently equipped to carry out his own mission alone and as it were single-handed. He can do so only by joining forces with other priests, under the leadership of those who are the Church's rulers" (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7). I urge you above all to be *models of unity and harmony*, so that the flock entrusted to you can likewise find inspiration to live in peace and work together as members of one family.

On the eve of the Synod of Bishops which will be devoted to the theme of priestly formation, I cannot fail to say something about your own *continuing formation* as priests. In order to grow as pastors, you will want to cultivate an ever deeper understanding of Scripture and the sacred sciences. As men of God you will also want to grow in grace through personal prayer and spiritual exercises, since it is only through the pursuit of holiness and intimacy with God that our knowledge and skills bear lasting fruit in the service of God's people. I ask your prayers for the work of the Synod and for seminarians and priests everywhere, so that the Church may continue to be blessed with a worthy and zealous clergy as she seeks to preach the Gospel in today's world.

Finally, I wish to encourage you to recognize and foster the proper role of the *laity* in the Church's life, in accordance with the Council's teachings, which have been further developed in the Apostolic Exhortation "*Christifideles Laici*". There is a complementarity between the role proper to priests and the role of the laity. Whatever your priestly work in Malta today, you will want to

increase and strengthen the cooperation that exists between yourselves and the laity, so that every member of the Church may make his or her rightful contribution to the spiritual and material well-being of all. This includes the various lay institutes, associations and movements, with their specific contribution to the Church's presence and mission in society.

My dear brothers in the priesthood, be always conscious of the ecclesial task that is yours in Christ: to "gather together God's family as a brotherhood all of one mind and lead them in the Spirit, through Christ, to God the Father" (*Lumen Gentium*, 28). May the Lord grant you perseverance in your "first enthusiasm", so that the whole People of God in Malta may benefit from your spiritual guidance and leadership, for a deepening of Christian life and a renewal of society from its roots.

4. Dear *men and women religious*: as I have said on many occasions, your greatest gift to the Church and the world consists above all in *who you are*. Your consecration is a powerful sign that in Christ *humanity is called to be a new creation*, to live no longer "in the flesh" but "in the Spirit" (Cfr. *Rom.* 8, 9). By freely and joyfully embracing chastity, poverty and obedience for the sake of the kingdom, you bear witness to the very "style" of life that the Son of God chose for himself on entering the world.

How much today's world needs the faith which makes your consecration possible, the faith which the Letter to the Hebrews defines as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen"! (*Hebr.* 11, 1). Modern life makes it so easy for people to forget God, to make idols of pleasure, material possessions and the exercise of power, none of which can bring lasting happiness or give true meaning to life. You who have vowed yourself to the evangelical counsels testify to what is imperishable (Cfr. *1 Cor.* 15, 50. 53). You show the world that it is by "losing one's life" (Cfr. *Matth.* 16, 25), that one "finds it" in abundance, both now and in the world to come. *You give expression to humanity's transcendent vocation*, which can only be achieved by walking the road of the Cross in company with Christ. This is the work of a lifetime, one which involves a constant dying and rising with Christ as you seek to be "perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect" (*Ibid.* 5, 48). As you walk this road, do not grow weary or discouraged. Remember that God is faithful. Having called you to the religious life, he will not fail to supply all you need in order to persevere and grow in its demands.

In Malta, where men and women religious have made a magnificent contribution to evangelization over the centuries, it is my hope that while you remain firm in the *charism* proper to each Institute, you will actively and consciously build up the local Church through the exercise of your various apostolates. I urge you to develop cooperation to the utmost, so that each local Church can truly be one around its Bishop in the rich diversity of its life and work, and be— in the motto chosen for this visit— *of one heart with the Pope!*

I wish to say a special word to those who have been called to *the contemplative life*. Your constant

prayer and sacrifice is *the Church's heart of love*. That heart beats unseen but unceasingly for the redemption of sinners, for the sanctification of the just, and for the spread of the Gospel. In keeping with God's ways, which are not always in line with our human way of thinking, your withdrawal from the things of this world increases rather than diminishes your influence upon them and becomes a source of boundless blessings for the whole human family. Through the hidden apostolic fruitfulness which the reality of your consecration imparts to Christ's Mystical Body (Cfr. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 7), your silent and cloistered life has a profound effect on the "earthly city" whose foundation must be laid "in the Lord" lest those who build labour in vain (Cfr. *Lumen Gentium*, 46). May God grant the Church in Malta many more vocations to the contemplative life, and may he keep each one of you in his peace and joy.

5. To every Priest, Sister and Brother present here today and to all the clergy and religious of Malta I wish to express the gratitude of the Church for your service of the Gospel. Like Saint Paul who brought the Christian faith here so long ago, I "always pray for you, that our God may make you worthy of his call, and may fulfil every good resolve and work of faith by his power, so that the name of our Lord Jesus Christ may be glorified in you, and you in him" (2 *Thess.* 1, 11-12). To all of you I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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