



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 23 September 1998

1. In the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*, I urged the whole Church, with regard to the year dedicated to the Holy Spirit, to “gain a renewed appreciation of the Spirit as the One who builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people’s hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time” (n. 45). With the eyes of faith we can see history, especially after the coming of Jesus Christ, as totally enveloped and penetrated by the presence of God’s Spirit. It is easy to understand why, today more than ever, the Church feels called to discern the signs of this presence in human history, with which she — in imitation of her Lord — “cherishes a feeling of deep solidarity” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 1).² So that the Church may fulfil this “responsibility she carries at all times” (cf. *ibid.*, n. 4), she is invited to rediscover in an ever deeper and more vital way that Jesus Christ, the crucified and risen Lord, is “the key, the centre and the purpose of all human history” (*ibid.*, n. 10). He is “the focal point of the longings of history and of civilization, the centre of the human race, the joy of every heart and the answer to all its yearnings” (*ibid.*, n. 45). At the same time, the Church recognizes that only the Holy Spirit, by impressing on the hearts of believers the living image of the Son of God made man, can enable them to search history and to discern in it the signs of God’s presence and action. The Apostle Paul writes: “What person knows a man’s thoughts except the spirit of the man which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God” (1 Cor 2:11-12). Sustained by this unceasing gift of the Spirit, the Church experiences with deep gratitude that “faith throws a new light on all things and makes known the full ideal which God has set for man, thus guiding the mind towards solutions that are fully human” (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 11).³ The Second Vatican Council, using an expression taken from the language of Jesus himself, describes the significant clues to the presence and action of God’s Spirit in history as the “signs of the times” (*ibid.*, n. 4). Today, Jesus’ admonition to his contemporaries rings clear and salutary for us as well: “You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of Jonah” (Mt 16:3-4). In the eyes of Christian faith, the invitation to discern the signs of the times corresponds to the eschatological newness introduced into history by the coming of the *Logos* among us (cf. Jn 1:14).⁴ In fact, Jesus invites us to discern the words and deeds which bear witness to the imminent coming of the Father’s kingdom. Indeed, he indicates and concentrates all the signs in the enigmatic “sign of Jonah”. By doing so, he overturns the worldly logic aimed at seeking signs that would confirm the human desire for self-affirmation and power. As the Apostle Paul emphasizes: “Jews

demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:22-23). As the first-born among many brethren (cf. Rom 8:29), Christ was the first to overcome in himself the diabolic “temptation” to use worldly means to achieve the coming of God’s kingdom. This happened from the time of the messianic testing in the desert to the sarcastic challenge flung at him as he hung upon the cross: “If you are the Son of God, come down from the cross” (Mt 27:40). In the crucified Jesus a kind of transformation and concentration of the signs occurs: he himself is the “sign of God”, especially in the mystery of his Death and Resurrection. To discern the signs of his presence in history, it is necessary to free oneself from every worldly pretense and to welcome the Spirit who “searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:10).⁵ If we were to ask when the kingdom of God will be fulfilled, Jesus would reply as he did to the Apostles that it is not for us to “know times (*chrónoi*) or seasons (*kairói*) which the Father has fixed by his own authority (*exousía*)”. Jesus asks us, too, to welcome the power of the Spirit, in order to be his witnesses “in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth” (Acts 1:7-8). The providential ordering of the signs of the times was at first hidden in the secret of the Father’s plan (cf. Rom 16:25; Eph 3:9), broke into history and made its advance in the paradoxical sign of the crucified and risen Son (cf. 1 Pt 1:19-21). It was welcomed and interpreted by Christ’s disciples in the light and power of the Spirit, in watchful and diligent expectation of the definitive coming which will bring history to fulfilment beyond itself, in the heart of the Father.⁶ By the Father’s design, time is thus extended as an invitation “to know the love of Christ which surpasses all knowledge”, to “be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). The secret of this path is the Holy Spirit, who guides us “into all the truth” (Jn 16:13). With a heart trustfully open to this vision of hope, I implore from the Lord an abundance of the Spirit’s gifts for the whole Church, “so that the ‘springtime’ of the Second Vatican Council can find in the new millennium its ‘summertime’, that is to say, its full development” (*Address at the Ordinary Public Consistory*, 21 February 1998, n. 4; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 February 1998, p.

2).

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said: I extend a special greeting to the members of the General Chapter of the Sisters of Notre Dame. May the Chapter be for all the sisters a time of grace and rededication. I warmly welcome the pilgrims from the Diocese of Hiroshima, led by Bishop Misue. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Finland, Japan, the Philippines, Australia and the United States of America, I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.