



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO MADAGASCAR, LA RÉUNION,
ZAMBIA AND MALAWI

HOLY MASS FOR THE FAITHFUL
OF THE ARCHDIOCESE OF NDOLA

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Airport of "Ndeke", Kitwe (Zambia)
Wednesday, 3 May 1989*

"The Lord is very near" (Phil. 4, 5).

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. These words give us comfort and courage. They explain *our gathering here today in Kitwe, in the Copperbelt*. The Lord himself has brought us together. In the name of him who is the chief Shepherd of the Church, I greet each one of you. I greet the bishops from your nine dioceses and in particular, Bishop de Jong of this Diocese of Ndola. I greet the other concelebrants, bishops, priests, the men and women religious, the seminarians, the catechists.

I greet the civic leaders and the members of the other Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities present.

Today *in Kitwe* God permits me to *proclaim Christ's love for his people*, his love for the young and the old, the rich and the poor, the healthy and the sick, believers and non-believers, refugees. Let us rejoice together in the message of Jesus' love for each and every one of us.

2. God's love is expressed in the words of the Prophet Ezekiel in the liturgy of today's Mass: *"I am going to look after my flock and keep all of it in view"* (Ez. 34, 11). The God of Israel reveals

himself to the people of the Old Testament as a *Shepherd*. The attentive shepherd looks after the sheep and protects them from being scattered. He seeks out the best pastures for them. At a suitable time he leads them to rest. He watches especially over the lost, the stray, the unhealthy or the injured members of the flock.

We are familiar with this image. In fact, Jesus says of himself: "*I am the Good Shepherd. The good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*" (Jo. 10, 11)

Jesus can say this about himself because he and the Father share the same love for mankind. As we heard in today's Gospel for the Feast of Saints Philip and James, at the Last Supper, as the "hour" drew near for Jesus to offer up his life for the sins of the world, Philip asked: "Lord, let us see the Father and then we shall be satisfied". Jesus replied: "Have I been with you all this time, Philip, and you still do not know me? *To have seen me is to have seen the Father*" (*Ibid.* 14, 8-9)

3. Jesus called God his Father and he taught his disciples to call God "our Father". But there in the Upper Room, Philip and James and the other apostles heard *something more*. Jesus says: "to have seen me is to have seen the Father". Explaining this idea he continues: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?" Here, Jesus' conversation with the apostles on the night before his Passion contains *a special revelation of the unity of God in the Trinity of Persons*.

The Son came from the Father. As man, born of the Virgin Mary through the power of the Holy Spirit, the Son remains always in the Father and the Father remains in him (Cfr. Jo. 14, 11). Having carried out his redemptive mission, Jesus returns to the Father. So he says to the apostles in the Upper Room: "I go to the Father" (*Ibid.* 14, 12). He came into the world from the Father. *Now he leaves the world and returns to the Father* (Cfr. *ibid.* 16, 28).

Forty days after Easter the Church celebrates the Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension. The conversation in the Upper Room prepares us for that moment when Jesus returns to the Father.

4. But it is his intention to *lead us too to our heavenly Father*. Jesus says of himself: "I am the Way, and the Truth, and the Life. *No one can come to the Father except through me*" (*Ibid.* 14, 6). The Son, who is of one being with the Father (Cfr. *ibid.* 10, 30), became our path to salvation. He is the Shepherd. The Shepherd knows the way and leads the flock until it reaches the best pastures, the rich meadows where the sheep will find food. For us, rational human beings, that food is the Truth which leads to Life. *Jesus Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life*.

This is the message of today's liturgy regarding Jesus Christ. Philip and James – indeed all the twelve apostles – received this message from Christ himself. This is the faith of the Church; and the Church in Zambia, as everywhere else, has been built up on the truth of this message.

5. I am pleased that my visit to Zambia coincides with the beginning of celebrations marking *the hundredth anniversary of the presence of the Catholic Church in this region*. It is true that Portuguese missionaries first came here in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but it was only in the late nineteenth century that organized Catholic missionary activity began. We cannot forget the first Jesuits and White Fathers who came at that time, nor the Italian Franciscans and Irish Capuchins who came later. By another happy coincidence, this year also marks *the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Bishop Francis Mazzieri*, the dedicated Conventual missionary who became the first Bishop of Ndola and who is buried here.

Like Bishop Mazzieri, the first missionary priests and sisters were inspired by a deep love of God and by a heroic zeal for the Gospel. They worked under difficult conditions, in a new environment, far from the support of their families and friends, but *the love of Christ kept them going*. What mattered most was that Christ should be lived and preached. They sowed the seeds of faith which you are privileged to make your own and in turn hand on to the next generation. The first generation of missionaries found strength in the knowledge that Christ the Good Shepherd *would always watch over his flock*.

As a sign of this, at the conclusion of Mass, I will be happy to bless the foundation stones of six new parish churches for the Diocese of Ndola. I do this in memory of Bishop Mazzieri and all the missionaries of Zambia, but also as an expression of hope for the future; *a future of great promise*.

6. It is only fitting then that we should ask ourselves what does it mean to be a Catholic in the Copperbelt and in Zambia today. Certainly, it means *to take an active part in the life of the Church*. The family of faith has grown since those early days and the message of the Gospel has taken root. The approaching centenary celebration is a moment of grace for the Church in Zambia, a young Church with great potential. The centenary is a precious opportunity to renew and deepen your relationship with Christ who is the cornerstone and the Good Shepherd. Each parish, each local group, should *intensify prayer in order to have the strength and courage* to evangelize and to serve each other in fraternal love.

Jesus has said: "Whatever you ask for in my name I will do" (*Jo. 14, 14*). *Through the solidarity of a faith-filled ecclesial community* Christ stretches out his hand to the unemployed, the sick, all who suffer, and he says to each one of you: "I love you". In the Second Reading of today's Mass, Saint Paul's words to the Philippians encourage us: "if there is anything you need, pray for it, asking God for it with prayer and thanksgiving" (*Phil. 4, 5-6*). Our petitions are not always immediately answered, but we can be certain that the "peace of God which is so much greater than we can understand, will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus" (*Phil. 4, 7*).

7. *The Lord is indeed very near*. The Lord has never abandoned his people but always seeks to draw ever closer to them. The history of Zambia shows this too: the Lord has always been very near to you in your progress towards independence and unity as a nation. He is with you as you

go to the mines, he is there at the pit face; he is with you as you gather as members of a family or social group. He is beside you as you go about your work in factories, in school, at home or in the fields.

In a special way Christ is near to you *in the sacraments*. He has made you children of God in *Baptism* and he strengthens you to be his witnesses in *Confirmation*. In the *Eucharist*, Christ comes to you as the food of your souls. He is the Lamb of God who takes away your sins in the *Sacrament of Reconciliation*. In *Marriage* he gives you the graces you will need to remain faithful to the love you pledge at the altar and to bring up your children as children of the Father. In *Holy Orders* he confirms the deacons and priests in their special vocation and gives them the necessary grace to be his ambassadors and ministers among the People of God. In the *Anointing of the Sick* he removes sin and brings relief and strength to the sick and the dying, giving them confidence in God's mercy.

8. "Christ is very near". I say these words especially to the *young people* who are gathered here at this Mass. The Lord is very close to you. When you need him he will come to you; he will lift you up and carry you on his shoulders since he is the Good Shepherd. You have a saying that the young trees, when they grow up, will make the forest. With Christ as the cornerstone, you will be *the architects, the builders of tomorrow's Zambia and tomorrow's Church*. Do not be afraid to build your lives on the rock which is Christ himself! He will be your joy and your peace.

9. Yes, my dear friends: "the Lord is very near". But how will people who are searching for him know this? Will they be able to recognize him in your lives? This will be the test! People will realize that Christ, the Good Shepherd, is in your midst if you live in harmony, in justice and in God's peace. They will see Christ in you if you exercise charity and tolerance especially towards those in need, the stranger, the refugee. *Christ needs the witness of your love* if the message of the Gospel is to take deeper root and spread out even further in Zambia.

To all the people of Zambia, to all families and to all who live in this richly endowed country Christ says to you today and every day of your lives: "I am very near... Let your tolerance be evident to everyone... and *the peace of God... will guard your hearts and your thoughts, in Christ Jesus*" (*Phil. 4, 4-5. 7*). Amen.