



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC (APRIL 25-27, 1997)
HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II
ON THE OCCASION OF THE MILLENNIUM OF THE BIRTH
INTO ETERNAL LIFE OF SAINT ADALBERT

Letná esplanade
Sunday, 27 April 1997

1. *"The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep" (Jn 10:11).*

We are gathered on this spacious esplanade to sing together the solemn *Te Deum* for the millennium of the birth into eternal life of Saint Adalbert, Bishop of Prague, apostle of the Gospel in the heart of Europe and witness to Christ even to the supreme sacrifice of his life.

Like the Good Shepherd, from the very beginning Saint Adalbert devoted his life to the flock, and offered it up definitively by the martyrdom which he suffered among the Prussians when they were still followers of pagan religions. He is thus the zealous Pastor, whom Providence placed at the beginning of the history of the Slav Nations of Central Europe: of the Czechs, Poles, Slovaks and also of the Hungarian nation.

This year we recall the millennium of his martyrdom: an event which all the particular Churches which for over ten centuries have lived and proclaimed the Gospel precisely among these Nations feel impelled to celebrate with special intensity, beginning from this land of Bohemia, which gave birth to this illustrious figure.

2. Called by the Successor of Peter to the episcopal service of the See of Prague, in Bohemia, Saint Adalbert did not have an easy ministry. In the face of the resistance offered by his own fellow-countrymen, he had to abandon his Episcopal See and go to Rome, where, on the Aventine

Hill, he took up the monastic life in the Benedictine tradition.

He returned to Prague when circumstances seemed to have become more favourable; but the opposition of his people again forced him to leave his homeland. He spent the rest of his life as a missionary, first on the plain of Pannonia - the Hungary of today - and later he was received as a guest at Gniezno, the court of Boleslaw the Brave. But he did not stay even there. He again left as a missionary of the Gospel, heading towards the Baltic, where he met martyrdom. Boleslaw the Brave paid a large ransom for the mortal remains of his Bishop friend, and had them taken to Gniezno.

In the year 1000, precisely near the relics of the Martyr, there took place an important meeting at which decisions were made which were destined to influence to a significant degree the national and ecclesial life in the Poland of the Piasts. The Christians of that Nation therefore venerate Saint Adalbert as one of their principal Patrons, seeing in him an eloquent sign of the close affinity which from the beginning united the neighbouring Nations of Bohemia and Poland.

On Polish soil the memory of Saint Adalbert is linked above all to the Church of Gniezno. But the faithful often go on pilgrimage to Prague. It was here in fact that the Saint's mission began; he had profound spiritual links with the patrons of the Church in Bohemia: Saint Wenceslaus and Saint Ludmila, both of them among the first of a long series of saints to whom this country of yours has given birth.

3. In the passage from the Letter to the Colossians which we have listened to Paul states: "Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church" (1:24).

It is difficult to find words which better express the meaning of the martyrdom of Saint Adalbert! He was a minister of the Gospel, a servant of Christ living in the Church. He became, like the Apostles, a forthright and courageous witness to the mystery of Christ: "The mystery", as Saint Paul writes, "hidden for ages and generations but now made manifest to his saints. To them God chose to make known how great among the Gentiles are the riches of the glory of this mystery" (Col 1:26-27).

4. It is a Mystery destined for all peoples, both those in the ancient world reached by Paul's apostolic journeys and those reached during the first and the second millennium by the Church's missionary activity. Astride the first and the second millennium, Saint Adalbert made his own this apostolic labour to bring the Mystery of Christ to the pagan nations in the centre of Europe.

Today, at the end of the second millennium, as we celebrate the thousandth anniversary of the martyrdom of Saint Adalbert, he himself seems to speak to us in the words of the Letter to the Colossians: "As therefore you received Christ Jesus the Lord, so live in him, rooted and built up in

him and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving" (2:6-7). Saint Paul's text warns us against every kind of knowledge and philosophy based, as he writes, on "the elemental spirits of the universe" (Col 2:8), that is to say on merely human tradition, and not on Christ. In today's language it could be said that Paul puts us on our guard against a worldly attitude and secularization. It is an extremely timely warning on this jubilee occasion.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters! What a great joy to be able to celebrate with you today the millennium of Saint Adalbert! I thank the Lord who gives us the opportunity to meet here again, on the Letná esplanade, exactly as we did seven years ago.

I offer a cordial and fraternal greeting first of all to the dear Cardinal Archbishop of Prague, Miloslav Vlk, successor of Saint Adalbert. Together with him I greet the Bishops of the Czech Republic and those coming from the neighbouring countries, the priests and the men and women Religious. I likewise offer a respectful greeting to the Representatives of the world of politics, culture and science who, by their presence, bear witness to the social as well as the religious significance of this anniversary.

I cordially greet you, the beloved faithful of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia, and all of you, Brothers and Sisters, who have come from Slovakia, Poland and other Nations of Europe, who today are welcome guests at this solemn celebration.

I recall with deep emotion Cardinal František Tomášek, who launched the decade of spiritual renewal in preparation for the Millennium of Saint Adalbert, in order to rediscover the historical roots of the country and its profound Christian traditions. As we look forward to the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, this celebration poses some specific questions not only to the citizens of the Czech Nation but to all who venerate the Holy Martyr as a father in faith: what is the state of the spiritual heritage which he left behind? What results have been taken from it? Can today's Christians find in the teachings and example of their great Patron an inspiration and stimulus to contribute effectively to the building of a new civilization of love?

6. Saint Adalbert still exercises today a particular fascination through his balanced personality, endowed with granite-like firmness and open to the spiritual and material needs of his brothers and sisters. Many see in him a worthy representative not only of the Czech Nation but also of the Christian tradition still happily undivided.

Under this aspect Saint Adalbert is, we could say, a many-faceted witness whom God has given to the Christian Community of the past and of the present. He is a sign of that harmony and cooperation which ought to exist between the Church and society. He is a sign of the link between the Czech and Polish Nations. I say this with great pleasure because, God willing, in a month's time I shall be among my fellow-countrymen in order to celebrate with them the Millennium of your Saint. Thanks also to him, Christianity developed well in Poland. At the present time a

considerable number of Polish priests, the fruit of the blood of this great Martyr, are coming to the Czech Dioceses to help in pastoral work in your communities, in this phase of hope after the long winter of violence and repression.

Saint Adalbert is a saint for the Christians of today: he invites them not to be defensive, not to keep for themselves the treasury of truths in their possession, with an attitude of sterile self-defence against the world. On the contrary, he asks them to be open to present-day society, to seek out all that is good and valid in it, in order to raise it up and if necessary purify it in the light of the Gospel.

7. "*The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep*" (Jn 10:11).

The Liturgy of the Word of today's Solemnity in a certain sense finds its crowning point in the passage of the Gospel according to John. The parable of the "Good Shepherd" is centred on the person and mission of Christ. It is precisely he who is the Good Shepherd who offers his life for the sheep, as happened on Calvary in his Passion and Death on the Cross.

At the moment in which he offers himself, Christ is clearly aware of the universal value which his Sacrifice possesses. He says: "I lay down my life for the sheep" (Jn 10:15). And immediately he adds, as though thinking of all those for whom he is offering himself: "And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold; I must bring them also, and they will heed my voice. So there shall be one flock and one shepherd" (Jn 10:16). On Golgotha there are already spiritually present the world's peoples and nations, all called to salvation.

8. The Gospel is meant for all people, because all have been redeemed by the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Everyone: and therefore also the peoples to whom Saint Adalbert was sent a thousand years ago as a witness to the mystery of Christ.

A thousand years later, as we recall the martyrdom and the whole evangelical life of Saint Adalbert, we sing with the whole Christian Community: *Te Deum laudamus* ...: - "We praise you, O God. / We proclaim you as Lord. / The white-robed army of martyrs acclaim you."

And at the same time we commend to Divine Providence the native land of the Holy Bishop, the illustrious Nation from which he was born, as also the Slav peoples who, at the beginning of their history, experienced the results of his mission. *Salvum fac populum tuum, Domine*, ...: "Lord, save your people, bless and protect your children."

Salvum fac! May the work of salvation first begun in this land by Saint Adalbert remain steadfast and bear abundant fruit among you, his fellow- countrymen, as also among those to whom he was sent!

Amen.

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