



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

Address at Liturgy of the Word

Warsaw, 13 June 1999

1. *“They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).*

The Evangelist Luke, who also wrote the Acts of the Apostles, introduces us to the life of the first community in Jerusalem with the description we have just heard. It has now become a community comforted by the descent of the Holy Spirit, after Pentecost. Elsewhere Saint Luke writes, “The company of those who believed were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). The Acts of the Apostles show how in the holy city of Jerusalem, touched by the recent events of Easter, the Church was coming to birth. From the very beginning, the young Church “persevered in the brotherhood”, that is, it formed a communion strengthened by the grace of the Holy Spirit. And thus it remains even to this day. In his Paschal Mystery, Jesus Christ is the heart of this community. He ensures that the Church lives, grows and takes shape like a body “joined and knit together by every joint with which it is supplied, when each part is working properly” (Eph 4:16).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in this spirit of unity, in the name of Jesus Christ, I cordially greet all of you who are gathered for this Liturgy of the Word. I greet the young Diocese of Warszawa-Praga with its Pastor, Bishop Kazimierz, I greet the Bishop Emeritus, the Auxiliary Bishop, the priests, men and women religious and all the People of God of this Church, and also those who through radio and television are sharing with us in this gathering of prayer. In a special way, I wish to greet the sick, who through their sufferings bring spiritual benefits upon the Church.

A short time ago I visited a place which is especially important in our national history. The memory of the Battle of Warsaw, fought near here in August 1920, is still fresh in our hearts. It was a great victory by the Polish Army, a victory so great that it could not be explained in purely natural terms

and was therefore called “the Miracle on the Vistula”. Fervent prayer by the nation preceded the victory. The Polish Bishops, gathered at Jasna Góra, consecrated the whole nation to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and entrusted it to the protection of Mary, Queen of Poland. We think today of all those who, at Radzymin and in many other places of this historic battle, gave their lives in defence of our homeland and its endangered freedom. Among others, we remember the heroic priest Ignacy Skorupka, who lost his life not far from here, at Ossów. We commend their souls to the Divine Mercy. For decades, silence surrounded “the Miracle on the Vistula”. Today, in a certain sense, Divine Providence assigns to the new Diocese of Warszawa-Praga the task of preserving the memory of this great event in the history of our nation and the whole of Europe, which took place on the eastern side of Warsaw.

Speaking of the tradition of these regions, I would also like to recall the Servant of God Father Ignacy Kłopotowski, founder of the Congregation of the Sisters of Loreto. In the last years of his life, he was Parish Priest at the Church of Saint Florian, now the Cathedral of this Diocese. With the love of the Good Samaritan, he cared for the poor and homeless. For this purpose he brought from Kraków the spiritual sons and daughters of Saint Brother Albert. Here he dedicated himself to the apostolate of the word of God through publishing. In this region was born our great poet of the Romantic period, Cyprian Norwid, who in his works often makes tender mention of his childhood and the years of his youth spent in these parts.

I salute you, beloved land of Masovia, with your rich religious tradition and your glorious history.

2. *“Before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1).*

To understand God’s plan for the Church, we must go back to what happened on the eve of the Passion and Death of Christ. We must go back to the Upper Room in Jerusalem. The reading from John’s Gospel takes us precisely to the Upper Room, to Holy Thursday: “Before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out of this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end”. This “to the end” seems to bear witness here to the absolute character of this love. Following upon the Gospel’s account, it is Jesus himself who explains in detail the nature of this love, when he begins to wash the feet of his disciples. With this gesture, he shows that he has come into the world “not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mk 10:45). Jesus presents himself as a model of this love: “I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you” (Jn 13:15). To those who believe in him, he teaches the love of which he himself is the model and entrusts this love to them, wanting it to grow like a great tree over the whole earth.

Yet this “to the end” was not accomplished in the humble gesture of washing feet. It was fully accomplished only when “Jesus took bread, and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to the disciples

and said, 'Take and eat; this is my body'. And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, 'Take and drink of it, all of you; for this is my blood of the new and eternal Covenant, which will be poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins'" (cf. *Mt 26:26-28*).

Here is the total gift. Before offering his life on the Cross for the salvation of man, the Son of God offered it sacramentally. He gives his Body and Blood to the disciples, so that, in consuming them, they may share in the fruits of his saving Death. "Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn 15:13*). Christ left the Apostles this sacramental sign of love. He said to them: "Do this in memory of me" (cf. *1 Cor 11:24*). The Apostles did this and, passing on the Gospel to their disciples, they passed on the Eucharist as well. From the Last Supper onwards, the Church has been built and formed through the Eucharist. The Church celebrates the Eucharist and the Eucharist forms the Church. This has always been the case wherever new generations of Christ's disciples gradually became the Church. This has always been the case on Polish soil too, and so it is today, as we approach the threshold of the third millennium: to those who will come after us, we pass on the Gospel and the Eucharist.

3. "*They devoted themselves to the . . . breaking of bread and the prayers*" (*Acts 2:42*).

The first Christian community, which Luke presents in the Acts of the Apostles as an example for us, drew strength from the Eucharist. The celebration of the Eucharist is most important for the Church and for her individual members. It is "the source and summit of the Christian life" (*Lumen Gentium*, 11). Saint Augustine calls it "the bond of love" (*In Evangelium Iohannis Tractatus*, 26, 6, 13). As we read in the Acts of the Apostles, this "bond of love" was from the first a source of unity in the community of Christ's disciples. From it there sprang care for the needy brethren so that from the community's goods "they distributed to all, as any had need" (cf. *Acts 2:45*). It was a wellspring of joy, of simplicity of heart, and mutual kindness. Thanks to this Eucharistic "bond of love", the community could live united, attend the Temple and praise God with a single heart (cf. *Acts 2:46-47*), and all of this was a witness which the world could read: "The Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved" (*Acts 2:47*).

The unity in love which springs from the Eucharist is not only an expression of human solidarity, but is a sharing in the very love of God. Upon this unity the Church is built. It is this which determines the success of her saving mission.

"I have given you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you" (*Jn 13:15*). These words of Christ contain a great challenge for the Church, for all of us who make up the Church – for the Bishops, the priests, the religious men and women and for the lay faithful: to bear witness to this love, make it visible and put it into practice every day. Today the world needs this witness of love, unity and perseverance in community so that, as Christ said, people "might see your good works and give glory to the Father who is in heaven" (cf. *Mt 5:16*). Here, it is a question primarily of unity within the Church on the model of the unity of the Son with the Father in the gift of the Holy

Spirit. “The whole Church”, says Saint Cyprian, “appears as a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit”. All believers bring to this community their own contribution, their own talents, according to the vocation and role which is theirs to fulfil. Unity in variety is a great richness of the Church which ensures that she grows constantly and dynamically. In a spirit of great responsibility to Christ who is ceaselessly present in the Church, we strive to accomplish this unity for the good of the whole community.

This is why the Church attributes such great importance to sharing in the Eucharist, especially on the Lord’s Day, that is, Sunday, when we celebrate the memorial of the Resurrection of Christ. In the Church in Poland devotion to the Eucharist was always intense, as was the people’s fidelity to attendance at Sunday Mass. On the threshold of the third millennium, I ask all my fellow Poles: hold fast to this good tradition. Respect the commandment of God about keeping the Lord’s Day holy. May it truly be the first of all days and the first of all feasts. Express your love for Christ and the brethren by sharing in the Sunday banquet of the New Covenant – the Eucharist.

In a special way I appeal to parents, to support and encourage the beautiful Christian custom of going to Mass with their children. May the sense of this duty always live in the hearts of children and young people. May the grace of love which we obtain when we receive the Eucharistic Bread strengthen the bonds of the family. May it become for the Christian family a source of apostolic energy.

I also appeal to you, dear Brothers in the priesthood: enkindle in human hearts devotion and love for the Eucharist. Show what a great boon for the whole Church is this sacrament of the Body and Blood of the Lord – the sacrament of love and unity. In your diocesan and religious communities, stay united in prayer. Remain faithful to the breaking of the bread, grow stronger in Eucharistic life and develop yourselves spiritually in the presence of the Eucharist. The Eucharist “is the chief and central *raison d’être* of the sacrament of the Priesthood. Therefore the priest is united to the Eucharist in a singular and exceptional way. He is in a certain way ‘from the Eucharist’ and ‘for the Eucharist’. He is also responsible for the Eucharist in a special way. The faithful expect from the priest a particular witness of reverence and love for the Eucharist, so that they too may be able to draw strength and life from it” (cf. *On the Mystery and Worship of the Most Holy Eucharist*, 2).

4. It is surprising how the Church, developing in time and space, thanks to the Gospel and the Eucharist, remains herself. We can say this even when we look at the history of the Church from the outside, but it is experienced especially from the within. This is the experience of all those who celebrate the Eucharist and of those who share in it. It is the memorial and renewal of the Last Supper. And the Last Supper made sacramentally present the Passion and Death of Christ on the Cross – the sacrifice of Redemption.

We proclaim your Death, Lord Jesus; we declare your Resurrection and, one in the love which comes from you, we await your Coming in glory. Amen.

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