

# HOMILY AT AQUEDUCT RACETRACK

Pope John Paul II

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*Visit to the United Nations and the United States: given on October 6, 1995*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Jesus' words in today's Gospel bring me back to my youth and remind me of a song we used to sing in my home parish at Wadowice. The words of that song are very simple, but at the same time very profound: "Come, Holy Spirit, we stand in need of your grace. Make us grow in the heavenly knowledge you have revealed. Make it easy for us to understand it, and by our perseverance may it remain in us. Enlightened by that truth, we shall be confirmed in goodness." These words express well the theology of the Holy Spirit, through whom the Father reveals what is "hidden from the learned and the clever" (Mt 11:25), and through whom the Son reveals the Father (cf. Mt 11:27). The Spirit, in fact, is the active agent of the Church's evangelizing mission. For this reason, the Church constantly invokes the Holy Spirit upon individual communities, and today we renew that invocation here, at the Aqueduct Race Track in Queens.

2. I am happy to see such a representative gathering of the faithful of this local Church. I greet all of you with warm affection: Your stalwart Pastor, Bishop Thomas Daily; my other Brother Bishops; the priests, deacons, Religious and laity from the Diocese of Brooklyn and many other Dioceses. At the same time my greetings go to the leaders of the various religious denominations and the civil authorities from both local and State government. I am pleased also to greet the different Councils of the Knights of Columbus from the United States and Canada which are represented here, together with the Supreme Knight, Mr. Virgil Dechant. Gathered around the Altar of the Lord, let us offer this sacred act of worship, asking for strength to meet the challenges of the new evangelization to which the Holy Spirit is calling the Church of God.

[ In Castilian: ] Se que en esta misa se hallan presentes numerosas personas, familias y comunidades de lengua espanola. Tienen un lugar especial en el corazon del eapa. A cada uno de ustedes expreso mi mas cordial amor y afecto en el Senor. [I know that there are many Spanish-speaking people, families and communities present at this Mass. In the heart of the Pope, you have a special place. To each one I express my sincere love and affection in the Lord.]

3. The theme of this morning's Holy Mass is the "Progress of Peoples". This is an appropriate issue in the context of my visit to the United States for the Fiftieth Anniversary of the United Nations Organization. The Pope's presence at that international forum is in fact an act of evangelization, aimed at serving the progress of humanity in the great family of nations which that World Organization represents.

The "progress of peoples" is closely connected with the proclamation of Christ's message of salvation and hope. Of this salvation Isaiah speaks in the first reading: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. Upon those who dwelt in the land of gloom a light has shone" (Is 9:1). This darkness stands for the spiritual darkness which sometimes envelops people, nations and history itself, in its desolate mantle.

Certainly the twentieth century has witnessed such periods of gloom. The two World Wars were times of great darkness which plunged peoples and nations into immense suffering. For many people, the twentieth century continues to be a time of terrible anguish and torture. From the depths of such sad experiences the human family searches for a path of justice and peace.

[In Castilian: ] 4. Isaias, a continuacion, asegura que la justicia y la paz genuinas, el autentico progreso de los pueblos, se centran en el plan de Dios de enviar a un Salvador. En efecto, escribe: "Un nino nos ha nacido, un hijo se nos ha dado... Grande es su seńorio y la paz no tendra fin... El lo restaura y lo consolida por la equidad y la justicia, desde ahora y hasta siempre" (Is 9:5-6). Aqui el Profeta habla del Mesias, cuya venida Israel

esperaba con tanto anhelo. Este es el Mesias en quien tienen puestas tantas expectativas los hombres y mujeres de hoy, especialmente cuando han estado inmersos en las devastadoras experiencias de la guerra, los campos de concentración, la brutalidad y el desprecio de la dignidad humana.

Aquí las palabras de Jesús, que es nuestra salvación y nuestra esperanza, cobran un significado especial: "Venid a mí todos los que estáis fatigados y sobrecargados, y yo os dare descanso" (Mt 11:28). Cristo mismo llevó una carga, y su carga -la Cruz- se hizo más pesada por los pecados de todos nosotros. Pero Cristo no huyó de la cruz; la aceptó y la llevó voluntariamente. Además, ahora está al lado de los que sufren pruebas y persecuciones, y permanece a su lado hasta el final. Precisamente por todos y con todos él lleva la Cruz hasta el Calvario, y allí es clavado en la Cruz por todos nosotros. Muere como un criminal, con la muerte más humillante para el mundo de entonces. Por eso, a los que, en nuestro siglo, llevan sobre sus hombros cargas terribles puede decirles: "Venid a mí. Yo soy vuestro hermano en el sufrimiento. No hay humillación o amargura que yo no conozca".

[Isaiah goes on to suggest that genuine justice and peace, the authentic progress of peoples, is centered on God's plan to send a Savior. For he writes: "A child is born to us, a son is given us ... His dominion is vast and forever peaceful ... He confirms and sustains by judgment and justice, both now and forever" (Is 9:5-6). Here the Prophet is speaking of the Messiah whose arrival Israel so eagerly awaited. This is the Messiah so anxiously looked to by modern men and women, especially when they have been immersed in the devastating experiences of war, of concentration camps, of brutality and contempt for human dignity.

It is here that the words of Jesús, he who is our salvation and our hope, take on a special meaning: "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome, and I will refresh you" (Mt 11:28). Christ himself carried a burden, and his burden—the Cross—was made heavier by the sins of us all. But Christ did not avoid the Cross; he accepted it and carried it willingly. Moreover, he now stands beside those weighed down by trials and persecutions, remaining beside them to the end. It is for all people and with all people that he carries the Cross to Calvary, and it is there that for all of us he is nailed to his Cross. He dies the death of a criminal, the most humiliating death known to the world at that time. That is why to those in our own century who carry terrible burdens he is able to say: Come to me! I am your Brother in suffering. There is no humiliation or bitterness which I do not know!]

5. It is precisely through the Gospel of the Cross and through his Resurrection that Christ lays the foundations for the advancement of God's Kingdom in the world. The presence of this Kingdom opens to us the dimension of eternity in God, and discloses the deepest meaning of our efforts to improve life here on earth. People everywhere thirst for a full and free life worthy of the human person. There is a great desire for political, social and economic institutions which will help individuals and nations to affirm and develop their dignity (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 9).

What kind of society is worthy of the human person? The Church responds with the unique perspective of salvation history. She proclaims the truth that the Word of God, through whom all things were made, was himself made flesh and dwelt among us. He entered the world's history—our history—as a man; he took on our history and made it complete. By his Resurrection he became Lord and was given full power in heaven and on earth. Thus through the power of his Spirit, Christ is now at work in our hearts and in our world. The Spirit instills in us a desire for the world to come, but he also inspires, purifies and strengthens those noble longings by which we strive to make earthly life more human (cf. *ibid.*, 38).

6. Dear Friends, we are gathered together in this enormous metropolis of New York, considered by many to be the zenith of modern civilization and progress, a symbol of America and American life. For more than two hundred years people of different nations, languages and cultures have come here, bringing memories and traditions of the "old country", while at the same time becoming part of a new nation. America has a reputation the world over, a reputation of power, prestige and wealth. But not everyone here is powerful; not everyone here is rich. In fact, America's sometimes extravagant affluence often conceals much hardship and poverty.

From the viewpoint of the Kingdom of God we must therefore ask a very basic question: have the people living in this huge metropolis lost sight of the blessings which belong to the poor in spirit? In the midst of the magnificent scientific and technological civilization of which America is proud, and especially here in Queens, in Brooklyn, in New York, is there room for the mystery of God? That mystery which is "revealed to the merest children" (Mt. 11:25); the mystery of the Father and the Son in the unity of the Holy Spirit; the mystery of divine love which is the source of everything? Is there room for the revelation of life—that transcendent life which Christ brings us at the price of his Cross and through the victory of his Resurrection?

The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is open to every aspect of earthly progress which helps people to discover and enter the space of divine life, the space of eternal salvation. This is the work of the Church; this is the work which the Holy Spirit will accomplish through all of us, if only we will heed the truth he reveals and be confirmed in goodness!

7. In practical terms, this truth tells us that there can be no life worthy of the human person without a culture—and a legal system—that honors and defends marriage and the family. The well-being of individuals and communities depends on the healthy state of the family. A few years ago, your National Commission on America's Urban Families concluded, and I quote: "The family trend of our time is the de-institutionalization of marriage and the steady disintegration of the mother-father child-raising unit ... No domestic trend is more threatening to the well-being of our children and to our long-term national security" (Report, January 1993). I quote these words to show that it is not just the Pope and the Church who speak with concern about these important issues. Society must strongly reaffirm the right of the child to grow up in a family in which, as far as possible, both parents are present. Fathers of families must accept their full share of responsibility for the lives and upbringing of their children. Both parents must spend time with their children, and be personally interested in their moral and religious education. Children need not only material support from their parents, but more importantly a secure, affectionate and morally correct family environment.

Catholic parents must learn to form their family as a "domestic Church", a church in the home as it were, where God is honored, his law is respected, prayer is a normal event, virtue is transmitted by word and example, and everyone shares the hopes, the problems and sufferings of everyone else. All this is not to advocate a return to some outdated style of living: it is to return to the roots of human development and human happiness!

8. The truth which Christ reveals tells us that we must support one another and work together with others, despite cultural, social or religious differences. It challenges us to be involved. It gives us the courage to see Christ in our neighbor and to serve him there. And, in imitation of our Divine Master who said, "Come to me, all you who are weary and find life burdensome" (Mt 11:28), we ought to invite others to come to us by stretching out a helping hand to those in need, by welcoming the newcomer, by speaking words of comfort to the afflicted. This is the goodness in which the Holy Spirit confirms us! This is how you—women and men; young people and old; married couples and singles; parents, children and families; students and teachers; professional people, those who work and those who are suffering the terrible burden of unemployment—this is how everyone can make a positive contribution to America and help to transform your culture into a vibrant culture of life.

This, dear Brothers and Sisters, is what it means to work for the Kingdom of God in America today. This is the way which leads to the true progress of nations and peoples; it is the path of justice and peace, the light which shines in the darkness, the yoke which is easy and the burden which is light. This is where our souls will find rest.

"Come, Holy Spirit, we stand in need of your grace. Make us grow in the heavenly knowledge you have revealed. Make it easy for us to understand it, and by our perseverance may it remain in us. Enlightened by that truth, we will be confirmed in goodness." Amen.