



The Holy See

PILGRIMAGE TO KAZAKHSTAN

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

Astana – Cathedral of the Vergin of Perpetual Help

Monday, 24 September 2001

1. Let the people "*...rebuild the house of the Lord, the God of Israel*" (Ezra 1:3)

With these words Cyrus, King of Persia, granted freedom to "the remnant of Israel" and ordered the exiles to *rebuild in Jerusalem the holy place*, where the name of God could be adored. This was a duty the exiles gladly accepted, and they set out with enthusiasm towards the land of their fathers.

We can imagine the excitement of their hearts, the haste of their preparations, the tears of joy and the hymns of gratitude which preceded and accompanied their steps as they returned to their Homeland. After the tears of the Exile, "the remnant of Israel" could laugh once again, as they hastened towards Jerusalem, the City of God. At last they could sing their songs of thanksgiving for the great wonders which the Lord had worked in their midst (cf. *Ps 126:1-2*).

2. Similar feelings fill our own hearts today, as we celebrate this Eucharist in honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Queen of Peace. After the Communist oppression, you too – not unlike exiles – once more return to *proclaim together your common faith*. Today, ten years after regaining your freedom, you remember the struggles of the past and you sing praise to the provident mercy of the Lord, who does not abandon his children in their distress. I have long looked forward to today's meeting in order to share your joy.

With fraternal affection I greet Bishop Jan Paweł Lenga of Karaganda, who this year celebrates his tenth anniversary as a Bishop. I thank him for the gracious words which he addressed to me and I

join him in thanking God for the good he has done in service of the Church. I would also have liked to visit his Diocese, but that was not possible. With similar affection I greet Bishop Tomasz Peta, the Apostolic Administrator of Astana, Bishop Henry Theophilus Howaniec, the Apostolic Administrator of Almaty, and the Reverend Janusz Kaleta, the Apostolic Administrator of Atyrau. I greet the Superiors of the Missions *sui iuris* and all my Brother Bishops here present.

My cordial greeting also goes to you, dear priests, men and women religious and seminarians from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan. I embrace you all *with deep appreciation for the generosity and fidelity* with which you carry out your labours. Through you I wish to be present to your communities and the individual Christians who form them. Dear Brothers and Sisters! Remain ever faithful to the Lord of life. Together rebuild his living temple which is the ecclesial community spread throughout this vast Eurasian region.

3. *Rebuild the temple of the Lord*: this is the mission to which you have been called and to which you have devoted yourselves. My thoughts turn at this time to your communities, once scattered and sorely tried. In heart and in spirit I relive the unspeakable trials of all those who suffered not only physical exile and imprisonment, but public ridicule and violence because they chose not to renounce the faith.

Here I wish to mention, among others, Blessed Oleksa Zarytsky, priest and martyr, who died in the gulag of Dolyinka; Blessed Mykyta Budka, Bishop, who died in the gulag of Karadzhar; Bishop Alexander Chira, for over twenty years the beloved and generous Pastor of Karaganda, who in his last letter wrote: "I consign my body to the earth, my spirit to the Lord, but my heart I give to Rome. Yes, with my final breath I desire to profess my complete fidelity to Christ's Vicar on earth". I also recall Father Tadeusz Federowicz, whom I know personally and who "invented" a new form of pastoral care for deportees.

In this Eucharist, I remember them all with gratitude and affection. *From their sufferings in union with the Cross of Christ the new life of your Christian community has blossomed.*

4. Like the exiles who returned to Jerusalem, you too will find *"brothers and sisters who will help you greatly"* (cf. *Ezra* 1:6). My presence among you today is meant to be a pledge of solidarity on the part of the universal Church. The challenging work before you depends, with God's necessary help, upon your wisdom, your commitment, and your sensitivity. *You are called to be the carpenters, the builders, the masons and the craftsmen of the spiritual temple to be rebuilt.*

Dear priests, the *spirit of communion* and of *genuine cooperation* which you must foster between yourselves and the lay faithful will be the secret to the success of this exalting and demanding mission. In your daily ministry let yourselves be guided by the new commandment given us by Christ on the eve of his Passion: *"Love one another"* (*Jn* 13:34). This is the theme which you have fittingly chosen for my Pastoral Visit. It commits you to living the mystery of communion in the

proclamation of the word of life, in liturgical worship, in caring for the younger generation, in training catechists, in promoting Catholic associations and in showing concern for those in material or spiritual need. In this way, *in union with your Ordinaries and together with the men and women religious, you will be able to rebuild the temple of the Lord!*

5. During these ten years of rediscovered liberty much has been accomplished, thanks to the tireless zeal for evangelization which has been your hallmark. External structures, however, must be matched by *a solid interior foundation*. It is important, then, to ensure the theological, spiritual and pastoral formation of those whom the Lord calls to his service.

I am very pleased at the opening of the new seminary in Karaganda for seminarians from the Republics of Central Asia. Together with the Diocesan Centre, you have chosen to dedicate it to a zealous priest, Father Władysław Bukowiński, who throughout the difficult years of Communism continued to exercise his ministry in that city. "We have been ordained not to spare ourselves" – he wrote in his memoirs – "but, if necessary, to give our lives for the flock of Christ". I myself had the good fortune to know him and to appreciate his deep faith, the wisdom of his words, and his unshakeable confidence in God's power. To him and to all those who spent their lives amid hardships and persecutions I wish to pay homage today, in the name of the whole Church.

May these faithful servants of the Gospel be an example and an encouragement for you too, dear consecrated men and women, who are called to be *a sign of complete self-giving and love in the service of God's Kingdom*. As I observed in my Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*: "The Church and society itself need people capable of devoting themselves totally to God and to others for the love of God" (No. 105). You are asked to offer that *spiritual uplift* which the world so greatly needs.

6. Before being heralds of the Gospel, we need to be *credible witnesses*. Now that the political and social climate has been freed from the burden of totalitarian oppression – and let us hope that the State will never again seek to limit the freedom of believers – there is a great need for every disciple of Christ *to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth* (cf. *Mt 4:13-14*). Indeed, this need is all the more urgent because of the spiritual devastation left behind by militant atheism, as well as the dangers present in today's hedonism and consumerism.

To the *power of witness*, dear Brothers and Sisters, add the *gentleness of dialogue*. Kazakhstan is a land of people of diverse origins, followers of different religions, heirs to illustrious cultures and a rich history. The sage Abai Kunanbai, an authoritative representative of Kazakh culture, spoke from a great heart when he said: "Precisely because we worship God fully and have faith in him, we have no right to claim that we must force others to believe in him and worship him" (*Sayings*, Chapter 45).

The Church has no wish to impose her own faith on others. It is clear, however, that this does not

exempt the Lord's disciples from communicating to others the *great gift* which they have received: *life in Christ*. "We should not fear that it will be considered an offence to the identity of others what is rather *the joyful proclamation of a gift* meant for all, and to be offered to all with the greatest respect for the freedom of each one: the gift of the revelation of the God who is love" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 56). The more we bear witness to the love of God, the more that love grows in our hearts.

7. Dear Brothers and Sisters, when your apostolic efforts are bathed in tears, when the road becomes steep and rocky, think of the good things the Lord is accomplishing by using your hands, your words and your hearts. *He has put you here as a gift for your neighbour*. May you ever be worthy of this mission.

Mary, Queen of Peace, sustain these your children. Today they entrust themselves to you with renewed confidence. Our Lady of Perpetual Help, from this Cathedral you embrace the whole Catholic community. Help the faithful to be generous and committed in bearing witness to their faith, so that the Gospel of your Son may resound throughout these vast, immense and beloved lands. Amen!