

Excerpts from Pope John Paul II's Homily at the Asian Synod's Opening Mass

The Asian Synod opened on Sunday April 19, with a Mass celebrated by the Holy Father in St. Peter's Basilica. The Holy Father based his homily, spoken in Italian, French and English, on the readings for the Second Sunday of Easter and the Synod's theme: *Jesus Christ, the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia; 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly'*. The following are excerpts from the Holy Father's homily taken from the English edition of *L'Osservatore Romano*, 22 April, 1998.

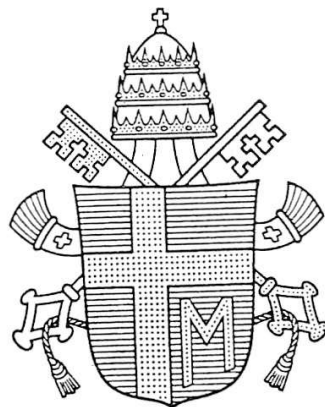
The Holy Father opened his homily by citing the Book of Revelations: "*Write what you see in a book and send it to the seven churches*" (Rv. 1:17). He said,

- ◆ The words of the book of Revelation sound so timely today. In fact, the churches mentioned were all located in Asia....
- ◆ The fruit of the synod's work will then be compiled in a book, which will constitute the post-synodal document destined for all the Churches of Asia. In it will be written what the Spirit will suggest, in a way similar to what John wrote at the end of the first century after Christ when he addressed the Book of Revelations to the Christian communities living in Asia at the time.
- ◆ During the Synod's work we will have to write about what we have witnessed. As successors of the Apostles, we are called to proclaim Christ crucified and risen. This is in fact the truth by which we advance towards the third millennium: *Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever!*
- ◆ The Church's faith is transmitted and remains living through this *line of witnesses*, which extends from generation to generation.
- ◆ Dear Brothers in the Episcopate who have come here, the Church you represent, built on the foundations of the Apostles, is assembled in Rome today on the threshold of the third millennium for the work of the Synod, in order to pass on to future generations the witness borne to Christ by the Apostles...

- ◆ The theme [*Jesus Christ the Saviour and his Mission of Love and Service in Asia, 'that they may have life, and have it abundantly'*] invites us to direct our gaze to Christ, from whose pierced Heart flows the inexhaustible source of eternal life which vivifies our human existence.
- ◆ This Synodal Assembly is a providential time of grace for the whole Christian people, and especially for the faithful of Asia, who are called to a fresh missionary outreach. In order that this favourable *time* may be truly fruitful, the figure of Jesus and his saving mission need to be presented once more in their full light. On everyone's lips there must resound with renewed awareness the profession of faith of the Apostle Thomas; [who is said to have brought the Gospel of India], 'My Lord and my God'.
- ◆ In effect, it is only by keeping her gaze fixed on Christ that the Church can adequately respond to the hopes and challenges of the Asian continent, and to those of the rest of the world. The launch of the new evangelization for the third millennium demands an ever deeper knowledge of Jesus and unfailing fidelity to his gospel.
- ◆ At the same time, the new evangelization calls for *respectful attention to Asian realities and healthy discernment in their regard*. This vast continent, which in history and age-old wisdom, is coming to the dawn of the year 2000 with all the variety of its peoples, its cultures, its traditions and its religions.
- ◆ Alongside the heritage of ancient civilizations, we see the signs of truly advanced technological and economic progress. There exists a notable difference between peoples, cultures, and ways of living. And yet there has been a long tradition of peaceful coexistence and mutual tolerance. Almost everywhere there are signs of the struggle for human advancement, and while difficulties and causes for concern are not lacking, notable signs of hope can also be seen. The ancient cultures of the continent, with their acknowledged wisdom, offer solid ground for building the Asia of the future.
- ◆ How can we ignore the fact that *more than three fifths of the world's inhabitants are Asian* and that an important part of them are young people? To this vast portion of the humanity of our time, dwelling on the continent of Asia, we must bring with enthusiasm and vigour the Easter proclamation echoed in

today's' liturgy: *We have contemplated, O God, the wonders of your love*" (responsorial psalm); *We have seen the Lord*" (Gospel).

- ◆And it is precisely to the Catholics of Mainland China and to their Pastors that the thoughts of all of us go at this moment. In order that also the Episcopate there might be represented in this Synodal Assembly, in addition to the Bishops who work in the Diocese of Hong Kong, I have invited to take part two other Bishops, namely, Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming, Bishop of Wanxian, and his Coadjutor, Bishop Joseph Xu Zhizuan. I hope that they will soon be able to take their places among us and bear witness to the vitality of those communities.
- ◆ We would like to listen to what the Spirit is saying to the Churches, so that they [the peoples of Asia] can proclaim Christ in the context of Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintosim and all those ways of thinking and living which were already rooted in Asia before the preaching of the Gospel arrived there. Moreover, we want to reflect together on how Christ's message is accepted by our contemporaries, how today the history of salvation continues among them and how the words of the Good News resonate in souls. We will ask ourselves in prayer and mutual listening how Christ, "*the stone which the builders rejected*" can still be the cornerstone on which to build the Church in Asia.



Homily of Pope John Paul II at Mass Closing the Asian Synod

1. *Iubilate Deo, omnis terra, psalmum dicite gloria nominis eius*
(Psalms 65 [66]: 1-2)

The Synodal Assembly which is about to conclude, like the others which I have already convoked in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year Two Thousand, intends to respond to the exhortation addressed to us in today's liturgy: *Acclaim God all the earth, sing psalms to the glory of his name.* The psalmist invites the earth to praise God; and we, in the epochal period in



which we are living, feel in a particular way the need to give God glory. This is the primary reason why the Bishops of the Church meet in regional and continental synodal assemblies.

After the Synod for Africa, which took place four years ago, the Special Assembly for Lebanon took place in 1995. In the autumn of last year the Assembly for America was held, with representatives from the Episcopacies of North, Central and South America and the Caribbean reflecting and discussing among themselves about the situation of the Church in their countries.

Today, however, we are concluding the synodal encounter of the Pastors of the Ecclesial Communities of the Asian continent. This synod has been in itself a canticle of praise to God. In fact, was

this not the primary purpose of our works? We wanted to express, with all of our depth, the glory which the Churches of the vast continent give to God, the Creator and Father. In every corner of the world, in fact, the service of the Church is turned toward the living person, who is the authentic glory of God.

God is praised by the lands of Asia and the oceans surrounding them, the Himalayas, with the highest peak in the world, and the immense rivers. God is praised by cities rich in millennial traditions, the centuries-old cultures of the continent with civilizations much more ancient than those of Europe.

The multiform and silent homage to the Creator finds its definitive achievement in man, who gives glory to God in a proper way, exclusive and unrepeatable. The synodal experience brings forth clearly that those living in each and every corner of Asia—from India to China, from Japan to Indochina, from Indonesia to all the other nations, from the heights of Tibet to the deserts of Central Asia—when they interpret the ineffable mystery of the plurimillennial and varied Asian traditions, try to express it in prayer and contemplation..

2. *I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should last (Jn 15:16).*

At the Cenacle, on the eve of His Passion, Jesus entrusted the task of continuing His mission among men to the apostles. Thanks to the faithful participation of numerous witnesses to the Gospel, His Word of salvation has spread almost everywhere in the world during the last two millenniums. In the text which we have just heard, the Lord emphasizes that He Himself chose and appointed His disciples, so that they may go out into the whole world and bring lasting fruits of salvation.

One of these was Saint Matthias, whose feast day we celebrate today. After Judas' betrayal, he joined the eleven apostles to become a witness to the Resurrection of Christ. We have received little information about him; we only know that he proclaimed the Gospel with courage and that he died the death of a martyr.

According to tradition, the Apostle Thomas was the one to bring the Gospel to India and to the heart of Asia. Since then, many missionaries have traveled through the immense Asian continent and have undertaken evangelization there, proclaiming Christ Jesus, the

Word made flesh, who died on the Cross and rose again on the third day to save the world.

Witnesses of the Lord's Resurrection, they showed new ways to people who, by reason of their philosophical and religious traditions, were used to seeking the Absolute in the depths of their being. The evangelizers followed the Apostle Paul's example, echoing his exhortation: "Since you have been raised up to be with Christ, you must look for the things that are above" (Col 3:1).

3. If it is true that God is in the world and that he has a certain degree of immanence, it is above all true that He is transcendent, "above" the world, and that He cannot be identified in the world alone. One must not only look for Him in the world, as if He were just the most profound mystery of all visible things. On the contrary, one must first of all look for Him "on high": He is the Lord of heaven and earth. In virtue of this absolute transcendence, the Son of God descended to the earth; he was made man by being born of a Virgin; He lived and He suffered death for the Truth that he announced. Moreover, in truth, he did not suffer death, but He confronted it. He did not want it to overcome him but he broke its chains; He returned to His Father whence He came. This way, Christ showed men living on earth that their destiny is union with God: created in the image and likeness of God, the human being can only be fulfilled in union with Him, the Redeemer and Saviour.

Yes, in Jesus Christ, the Father created the world; in Him, He redeemed it. By His death and Resurrection, Christ proclaimed and achieved the truth about creation and redemption, truth which is the content of the permanent mission entrusted to the Church.

4. This is the saving truth which Jesus passed on to the disciples together with "his" commandment: "That you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn. 15:12).

Dear Brothers and Sisters, you who have formed the Special Assembly for Asia of the Synod of bishops! Today the Crucified and Risen Lord again repeats these same words to you, summoning you once more to evangelize your continent. To you in a special way, my Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate, He says, "I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should last" (Jn. 16:16). And to everyone He says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (Jn. 15:17).

As the Successor of the Apostle Peter, I have the honour and joy to echo these words, having shared with you these past days the extraordinary experience of the Synod. Together we have experienced anew the love of Christ and together we have seen the fruits of the Holy Spirit's power at work in Asia. The Church's mission of evangelization is a service of love to the Asian continent. And although the Christian community is but "a little flock" in the total population, it is the means through which God pursues His saving plan, which He will bring to completion if He finds that everyone is ready to work with Him with a generous heart.

Dear Friends, this is precisely why I wish to say to you once more: remain in the Lord's love, like branches of the vine (cf. Jn 15:5). And then among the peoples of Asia you will bear the abundant fruit of new life.

5. Among the peoples of that Continent I cannot fail to mention, in particular, the Chinese nation, which is the most numerous. To you, Brothers and Sisters of the Catholic Church that is on Mainland China, I wish to express, once more, my affection and tell you how sorry I am that the Bishop of Wanxian and his Coadjutor could not come to Rome to take part personally in the synod. Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming's words expressing his loyalty to the Successor of Peter and his communion with the universal Church have touched our hearts. The Synod Fathers from every country in Asia, always considered their Chinese brothers as being here in spirit, and they hope that present difficulties may soon be overcome and that on some occasion in the near future these Bishops may be able to meet the other Pastors of the Church.

We all hope that, as the People's Republic of China gradually opens to the rest of the world, the Church in China will also be permitted to have more contact with the universal Church. We implore the Holy Spirit to pour out his gifts on the Chinese faithful and to lead them to the whole truth (cf. Jn 16:13), so that the proclamation of the Gospel in China, even in the midst of much suffering, will bring forth abundant fruit.

6. In the liturgy of the Easter season, we read the Acts of the Apostles, which help us to understand how in our time too the Church does not cease to add new chapters to the history of salvation. Just as Saint Luke composed the "Acts" so that future

generations of Christians would not forget their apostolic origins, so too have we, with this Synodal Assembly, written a fresh page of ecclesial life on the Asian continent in this century. This page is in addition, in a sense, to the story of the Acts of the Apostles.

In surveying the whole of Asia, the work of the Synod has enabled us to see how the Gospel has taken root in the great continent in the course of the last two thousands years. In that continent, Christians remain a numerical minority, it is true; and such a situation stands as a sort of constant challenge to them. It stimulates the Church to offer her witness with special courage. How could we forget that Jesus was born at that unique crossroads of the world where Asia meets both Africa and Europe? He came into the world for all the continents, but for Asia in a special way, and Asia could therefore claim a certain right to pride of place; it was in a part of Asia that Christ lived; there He accomplished the work of the world's redemption; there He instituted the Eucharist and the other sacraments; there He rose again from the dead.

7. "Out of the men who have been with us the whole time that the Lord Jesus was living with us, from the time when John was baptizing until the day when he was taken up from us" (Acts 1:21-22). Jesus, born in Asia, sowed the seed of salvation for all peoples in that continent.

At the end of the second millennium, the path of the successors of the Apostles continues in every corner of the Asian continent, where they proclaim the same truth and do so with the same unchanged apostolic and missionary zeal, repeating and bearing witness: "Jesus Christ is the Saviour."

Dear Brothers and Sisters, continue this mission of love and service in Asia. May the maternal protection of Mary, Mother of the Church and of the Asian people, sustain you; may the martyrs, the saints and the beatified of Asia intercede for you. Remain faithful to the love of Christ, who called and appointed you as His disciples "that you should go and bear fruit, and that your fruit should last" (Jn.15:16).

(English translation taken from the Holy See Press office)