

# Speech of Pope John Paul II- The Church and the Black Community

*Address given at a meeting with Black Catholic leadership*

*Superdome, New Orleans*

*September 12, 1987*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. "Go into the whole world and proclaim the Good News to all creation"(Mk 16:15). With these words, our Lord Jesus Christ directed the Church to speak his own message of life to the whole human family. The apostles first responded to the Savior's call and traveled throughout the known world, Sharing with every one who would listen what they had seen and heard (cf. 1 Jn 1:3), speaking about God's Kingdom and about reconciliation in Christ.

Today, almost two thousand years later, the church still seeks to respond generously to Christ's command. The world we must serve today is much bigger, and the people who long to hear the word of life are numerous indeed. While the words of the Lord remain true, "The harvest is good but laborers are scarce" (Mt 9:37), still we rejoice that the Holy Spirit has enriched the Church with many hands for the harvest. There are worthy laborers in every corner of the earth, people of every culture, who are eager to live the Gospel and to proclaim it by word and example.

I am especially happy to meet with you who make up the black Catholic leadership in the United States. Your great concern, both as blacks and as Catholics, is- and must always be- that all your black brothers and sisters throughout America may hear and embrace the saving and uplifting Gospel of Jesus Christ. I willingly join my voice to those of the Bishops of your country who are encouraging you to give priority to the great task of evangelization, to be missionaries of Christ's love and truth within your own black community throughout the United States, I send my greetings of respect and esteem.

## **All Are Called To Evangelize**

2. My dear brother Bishops, who share with me the burdens and joys of the episcopacy: I am pleased that the universality of the Gospel and the cultural diversity of your nation are increasingly mirrored in the composition of the American hierarchy. While your apostolic ministry draws you to serve all the faithful of your respective dioceses-and in collegial unity the whole Body of Christ-it is fitting for many reasons that your own black brothers and sisters should have a special right to your pastoral love and service. United with the Successor of Peter in the College of Bishops, you are a sign of the unity and universality of the Church and of her mission. As Bishops, we are entrusted with the task of preserving in its integrity the Good News of salvation and of presenting it as effectively as possible to our people, so that they may all discover in Jesus Christ "the way, and the truth, and the life" (Jn 14:6).

Our brothers in the priesthood, ministering in the person of Christ and in union with us, transmit the teaching of the faith and celebrate the sacred mysteries of salvation. How fruitful it is for the mission of the Church in America when so many priests from different racial and ethnic groups proclaim together Christ's liberating Gospel and thus bear witness to the fact that it rightfully belongs to everyone.

The Church in the United States is distinguished by its large number of deacons, among whom are several hundred from the black Catholic community. As heralds of the Gospel and servant ministers of Christ, dear brothers, you complete the threefold ministry of the Sacrament of Orders. In the Church you are called to the service of the word, of the Eucharist and of charity. Your generous response is a clear indication of the growing maturity of the black Catholic community, maturity emphasized by the black bishops of your country in their Pastoral Letter "What We Have Seen and Heard."

Even in those days-by the grace of God now long past-when your people struggled under the terrible burden of slavery, brave spirits within the community embraced the evangelical counsels and dedicated themselves to the religious life. Thus they bore eloquent witness to the power of the Holy Spirit accomplishing the work of spiritual freedom even in the moment of physical oppression. Black religious today offer a comparable witness to the Church and society, proclaiming God's kingdom to a world shackled by consumerism, mindless pleasure – seeking and irresponsible individualism-shackles of the spirit which are even destructive than the chains of physical slavery.

I am close to the whole black community in the great mission and responsibility of encouraging more and more young Americans of their race to respond to the Lord's invitation to religious life and the priesthood. I urge you to be faithful to prayer and to do all you can to ensure that those who are called will find the support and the assistance which they need in order to pursue these vocations and to preserve in them.

3. The Church's work of evangelization finds entry into the human community in a special way through the lives of lay people. As my predecessor Paul VI pointed out, the laity's "own field of evangelizing activity is the vast and complicated world of politics, society and economics, but also the world of culture, of the sciences and the arts, of international life, of the mass media" (*Evangeli Nuntiandi*, 70). By fulfilling worthily the broad range of their temporal involvement, laymen and women bear witness in a unique way to the universal call to holiness. The witness of their faithful lives speaks an uplifting message to the world.

I express my deep love and esteem for the black Catholic community in the United States. Its vitality is a sign of hope for society. Composed as you are of many lifelong Catholics, and many who have more recently embraced the faith, together with a growing immigrant community, you reflect the Church's ability to bring together a diversity of people united in faith, hope and love, sharing a communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit. I urge you to keep alive and active your rich cultural gifts. Always profess proudly before the whole Church and the whole world your love for God's word; it is a special blessing which you must forever

treasure as a part of your heritage. Help us all to remember that authentic freedom comes from accepting the truth and from living one's life in accordance with it-and the full truth is found only in Christ Jesus. Continue to inspire us by your desire to forgive-as Jesus forgave-and by your desire to be reconciled with all the people of this nation, even those who would unjustly deny you the full exercise of your human rights.

### **Evangelization and The Family**

4. I am sure that you share with me a special concern for that most basic human community, the family. Your faithful Christian families are a source of comfort in the face of the extraordinary pressures affecting society. Today, you must rediscover the spirit of family life which refuses to be destroyed in the face of even the most oppressive forces. Surely that spirit can be found in exploring your spiritual and cultural heritage. The inspiration you draw from the great men and women of your past will then allow your young people to see the value of a strong family life. Know that the pope stands united with black community as it rises to embrace its full dignity and lofty destiny.

The family is the first setting of evangelization, the place where the Good News of Christ is first received, and then, in simple yet profound ways, handed on from generation to generation. At the same time, families in our time vitally depend upon the Church to defend their rights and to teach the obligations and responsibilities which lead to the fullness of joy and life. Thus, I urge all of you, especially the clergy and religious, to work for the promotion of family values within the local community. And I remind those responsible for making and administering laws and public policies that social problems are never solved, but only worsened, by positions which weaken or destroy the family.

### **Solidarity with the Oppressed**

5. Even in this wealthy nation, committed by its Founding Fathers to the dignity and equality of all persons, the black community suffers a disproportionate share of economic deprivation. Far too many of your young people receive less than an equal opportunity for a quality education and for gainful employment. The Church must continue to join her efforts with the efforts of others who are working to correct all imbalances and disorders of a social nature. Indeed, the Church can never remain silent in the face of injustice, wherever it is clearly present.

In the most difficult hours of your struggle for civil rights amidst discrimination and oppression, God himself guided your steps along the way of peace. Before the witness of history the response of non-violence stands, in the memory of this nation, as a monument of honor to the black community of the United States. Today as we recall those who with Christian vision opted for non-violence as the only truly effective approach for ensuring and safeguarding human dignity, we cannot but think of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and of the providential role he played in contributing to the rightful human betterment of black Americans and therefore to the improvement of American society itself.

My dear brothers and sisters of the black community: it is the hour to give thanks to God for his liberating action in your history and in your lives. This liberating action is a sign and expression of Christ's Paschal Mystery, which in every age is effective in helping God's people to pass from bondage into their glorious vocation of full Christian freedom. And as you offer your prayer of thanksgiving, you must not fail to concern yourselves with the plight of your brothers and sisters in other places throughout the world. Black Americans must offer their own special solidarity of Christian love to all people who bear the heavy burden of oppression, whatever its physical or moral nature.

### **Mutual Enrichment**

6. The Catholic Church has made a profound contribution to the lives of many members of the black community in this land through the gift of education received in Catholic schools. Because of the splendid commitment of dioceses and parishes, many of you here today have joined us at the Table of unity and faith: a result of the evangelization carried out in these institutions. Catholic schools have a special place in the work of spreading the gospel of Christ. They are a great gift from God. Keep your Catholic schools strong and active. Their uncompromising Catholic identity and Catholic witness at every level must continue to enrich the black communities of this nation.
7. In addition to the schools, other means of evangelization should also be given priority. Among these means of social communication deserve special attention. The mass media are also a great gift of God's Providence and should be fully utilized in the service of the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. They can be of immense service to the millions of black people who long to hear the Good News of salvation proclaimed in ways that speak to their own heritage and traditions.

While remaining faithful to her doctrine and discipline, the Church esteems and honors all cultures; she respects them in all her evangelizing efforts among the various peoples. At the first Pentecost, those present heard the Apostles speaking in their own languages (cf. Acts 2:4f). With the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we try in every age to bring the Gospel convincingly and understandably to people of all races, languages and cultures. It is important to realize that there is no black Church, no white Church, no American Church; but there is and must be, in the one church of Jesus Christ, a home for blacks, whites, Americans, every culture and race. What I said on another occasion, I willingly repeat: "The Church is catholic...because she is able to present in every human context the revealed truth, preserved by her intact in its divine content, in such a way as to bring it into contact with the lofty thoughts and just expectations of every individual and every people" (Slavorum Apostoli, 18).

Dear brothers and sisters: your black cultural heritage enriches the Church and makes her witness of universality more complete. In a real way the Church needs you, just as you need the Church, for you are part of the Church and the Church is part of you. As you continue to place this heritage at the service of the whole Church for the spread of the Gospel, the Holy

Spirit himself will continue through you his work of evangelization. With a joyful and a hopeful heart, I entrust you and the whole black community to the loving care of Mary, Mother of our Savior. May she, who both listened to the word and believed in it, guide your lives and those future generations of black Catholics within the one People of God, the one Mystical Body of Christ. Through her intercession may grace be to all of you “who love our Lord Jesus Christ with unfailing love” (Eph 6:23).