

JOHN PAUL II

Address at the Liturgy of the Word

12 June 1999

1. “*Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord*” (Lk 1:45).

Once again in the course of our pilgrimage across Poland we meet Mary. It is a special gift of God’s grace that precisely here in Zamosc, where for generations Mary has been venerated in the Cathedral Shrine under the title of Mother of Divine Protection, we should celebrate a kind of second moment of the Solemnity of her Immaculate Heart. In today’s Liturgy we meet Mary of the Visitation. The journey she made after the Annunciation is well known: from Nazareth to the hill country of Judea, where her kinswoman Elizabeth lived. Mary goes to help Elizabeth while she prepares for motherhood. She journeys along the roads of her land carrying in her womb the supreme mystery.

We read in the Gospel that the revelation of this mystery took place in an extraordinary way. “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb” (Lk 1:42); with these words Elizabeth greets Mary. “And why is this granted to me, that the Mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Lk 1:43). Elizabeth already knows God’s plan and that which, at this moment, is a mystery between Mary and herself. She knows that her son, John the Baptist, is to prepare the way of the Lord. He is to become the herald of the Messiah, whom the Virgin of Nazareth has conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit. The meeting of the two mothers, Elizabeth and Mary, precedes these future events and in a sense prepares them. Blessed are you who believed in the word of God who announces to you the birth of the Redeemer of the world, says Elizabeth. And Mary replies with the words of the *Magnificat*: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (Lk 1:46-47). Truly the great works of God, the great mysteries of God come to pass in hiddenness, in the house of Zechariah. The whole Church will constantly recall them and will repeat with Elizabeth: “Blessed is she who believed”, and, together with Mary, the Church will sing the *Magnificat*.

The event which took place in the land of Judah is inexpressibly mysterious. Behold, God came into the world. He became man. By the power of the Holy Spirit he was conceived in the womb of the Virgin of Nazareth, and would be born in the stable of Bethlehem. But before all this comes to pass, Mary carries Jesus, as every mother carries her child in her womb. She carries not only his human life, but also his entire mystery, the mystery of the Son of God, the Redeemer of the world. So Mary’s visit to the home of Elizabeth is in a sense both something ordinary and at the same time a unique, extraordinary and unrepeatable event.

With Mary comes the Eternal Word, the Son of God. He comes to be present in our midst. Just as during those days the time before his birth had linked him to Nazareth and then to Judea, where Elizabeth lived, and then once for all to the little town of Bethlehem, where he was to come into the world, so now too, his every visit always links him to another place on earth, wherever his presence is celebrated in the Liturgy.

2. Today we read the Gospel of the Visitation in the land of Zamosc. The mystery of the coming of Mary and her Son becomes, in a way, ours too. How pleased I am to be able to celebrate this mystery with you in the community of the Diocese of Zamosc-Labaczów! It is a young Diocese, but one with a very rich religious and cultural tradition going back to the sixteenth century. Here, from the beginning, there have been close contacts with the Apostolic See: a special fruit of these is the celebrated Academy of Zamosc, the third after those of Kraków and Wilno, an academic institution in the Republic of Poland founded with the support of Pope Clement VIII. The Collegiate Church of Zamosc, which I had the honour to raise to the dignity of a Cathedral, is a silent but extremely eloquent witness of the heritage of past centuries. It houses not only magnificent monuments of architecture and religious art, but also the remains of those who shaped this great tradition. Today, as I visit this beautiful city and the land of Zamosc, I am happy to be able to return to this centuries-old treasury of our faith and culture.

I cordially greet all the faithful gathered here and those who are with us in spirit. I greet the Pastor of this community, Bishop Jan, with his Auxiliary Bishop Mariusz and all the priests and consecrated men and women. My greeting also goes to the representatives of the State and local Authorities. I wish to express my particular gratitude to those who are accompanying my pilgrimage by their prayers and by the offering of their suffering. I pray God that they may share in the graces of this visit.

3. The providential setting of the scene of Mary's Visitation within this exceptionally beautiful city and land reminds me of the Biblical story of creation, which receives its explanation and its fulfilment in the mystery of the Incarnation. During the days of creation God looked at his handiwork and saw that what he had made was good. It could not be otherwise. The harmony of nature reflected the utter perfection of the Creator. Finally, God created man. He created him in his own image and likeness. He entrusted to him the magnificence of the world so that, by enjoying it and using its goods in a free and rational way, he would cooperate actively in bringing God's work to perfection. The Scripture says that at that time "God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (*Gen 1:31*). But after man's original fall, the world – as his particular property – came in a sense to share his lot. Sin not only broke the bond of love between man and God and destroyed the unity of mankind, but it also disturbed the harmony of all creation. The shadow of death came down not only on the human race but also on everything that by God's will was meant to exist for man.

But if we speak of the world sharing in the effects of human sin, we also know that it too could not be deprived of a share in the divine promise of the Redemption. The time for the fulfilment of this promise for mankind and for all creation arrived when Mary, by the power of the Holy Spirit, became the Mother of the Son of God. He is the firstborn of

creation (cf. *Col* 1:15). Everything created was eternally in him. In coming to the world, he comes into what is his, as Saint John says (cf. *Jn* 1:11). He comes in order to embrace creation anew, to begin the work of the world's redemption, to restore to creation its original holiness and dignity. He comes to make us see, by his very coming, the particular dignity which belongs to created nature.

As I make my way across Poland, from the Baltic, through Great Poland, Mazovia, Warmia and Masuria, and then the eastern regions – from the region of Bialystok to that of Zamosc – I contemplate the beauty of this, my native country, and I am reminded of this particular aspect of the saving mission of the Son of God. Here, the blue of the sky, the green of the woods and fields, the silver of the lakes and rivers, all seem to speak with exceptional power. Here the song of the birds sounds so very familiar, so Polish. And all this testifies to the love of the Creator, the life-giving power of his Spirit and the redemption accomplished by the Son for man and for the world. All these creatures bespeak their holiness and dignity, regained when the One who was “the firstborn of all creation” took flesh from the Virgin Mary.

If today I speak of this holiness and dignity, I do so in a spirit of thankfulness to God, who has done such great things for us; but I do so likewise in a spirit of concern for the preservation of the goodness and beauty bestowed by the Creator. For there is a danger that everything that brings such joy to the eye and such exultation to the spirit can be destroyed. I know that the Polish Bishops voiced this concern ten years ago, appealing to all people of good will in a Pastoral Letter on the protection of the environment. They rightly wrote that “all man's activity, as the activity of a responsible agent, has a moral dimension. Destruction of the environment harms the good of creation given to man by God the Creator as something indispensable for his life and his development. We have a duty to make good use of this gift in a spirit of gratitude and respect. The realization that this gift is destined for all men, that it is a common good, also gives rise to a corresponding duty with regard to others. We therefore need to realize that every action which ignores God's rights over his world, as well as the rights of man bestowed upon him by the Creator, is in conflict with the commandment of love . . . We need to realize therefore that there can be a grave sin against the natural environment, one which weighs on our consciences, and which calls for grave responsibility towards God the Creator” (2 May 1989).

In speaking of responsibility before God, we know that it is not just a matter of what is nowadays called ecology. It is not enough to seek the cause of the world's destruction only in excessive industrialization, uncritical applications in industry and agriculture of scientific and technological advances, or in an unbridled pursuit of wealth without concern for the future effects of all these actions. Although it cannot be denied that these actions do cause great harm, it is easy to see that their source is deeper: it lies in man's very attitude. It appears that what is most dangerous for creation and for man is lack of respect for the laws of nature and the disappearance of a sense of the value of life.

The law written by God in nature and capable of being read by reason leads to respect for the Creator's plan, a plan which is meant for the benefit of mankind. This law establishes

a certain inner order which man discovers and which he must preserve. Any activity in conflict with this order inevitably does damage to man himself.

This happens when the sense of the value of life as such, and of human life in particular, disappears. How can nature be effectively defended if justification is claimed for acts which strike at the very heart of creation, which is human life? Is it really possible to oppose the destruction of the environment while allowing, in the name of comfort and convenience, the slaughter of the unborn and the procured death of the elderly and the infirm, and the carrying out, in the name of progress, of unacceptable interventions and forms of experimentation at the very beginning of human life? When the good of science or economic interests prevail over the good of the person, and ultimately of whole societies, environmental destruction is a sign of a real contempt for man. All who have at heart the good of man in this world need to bear constant witness to the fact that “respect for life, and above all for the dignity of the human person, is the ultimate guiding norm for any sound economic, industrial or scientific progress” (*Message for the 1990 World Day of Peace*, No. 7)

4. “All things were created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together . . . For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or heaven, making peace by the blood of his Cross” (*Col 1:16-17,19-20*). These words of Saint Paul seem to describe the Christian way to defend that good which is the whole created world. It is the way of reconciliation in Christ. Through the blood of his Cross and through his Resurrection, Christ has restored to creation its original order. Henceforth the whole world, with man at its centre, has been snatched from the slavery of death and corruption (cf. *Rom 8:21*) and in a certain sense has been created anew (cf. *Rev 21:5*); it now exists no longer for death but for life, for new life in Christ. Thanks to his union with Christ, man rediscovers his proper place in the world. In Christ he experiences anew that original harmony which existed between Creator, creation and man before man succumbed to the effects of sin. In Christ man re-reads his original call to subdue the earth, which is the continuation of God’s work of creation rather than the unbridled exploitation of creation.

The beauty of this land leads me to appeal its preservation for future generations. If you love our native land, do not let this appeal go unanswered! In a special way I call upon those who have been entrusted with responsibility for this country and its development, and I urge them not to neglect their duty of protecting it against environmental destruction. Let them devise programmes for the protection of the environment and ensure that they are properly put into effect! Above all, let them train people to show respect for the common good, for the laws of nature and of life! May they be supported by organizations which work for the protection of natural resources! In the family and in the schools there must be training in respect for life, goodness and beauty. All people of good will should cooperate in this great task. All followers of Christ ought to examine their own life-style, to ensure that the legitimate pursuit of prosperity does not suppress the voice of conscience which judges what is right and what is truly good.

5. In speaking of respect for the land, I cannot forget those who are most closely linked to it and know its value and dignity. I think of the farm-workers who, not only here in Zamosc but throughout Poland, perform the hard work in the fields, making them yield the products essential for the life of those living in the cities and villages. Only those who till the land can really testify that the barren earth does not produce fruit, but when cared for lovingly it is a generous provider. With gratitude and respect I bow before those who for centuries have made this land fruitful by the sweat of their brow, and who – when it was necessary to defend it – did not spare even their blood. With the same gratitude and respect I also speak to all who today are engaged in the hard work of tilling the land. May God bless the work of your hands!

I know that at a time of social and economic changes there are many problems which often painfully affect the Polish countryside. The process of reform needs to recognize the problems of farm-workers and resolve them in the spirit of social justice.

I speak of this in the land of Zamosc, where the rural question has been discussed for centuries. We need only recall the works of Szymon Szymonowic, or the work of the Rural Society founded in Hrubieszów two hundred years ago. Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński, as Bishop of this area and later Primate of Poland, often mentioned the importance of farming for the Nation and the State, and the need for all social groups to show solidarity with the rural communities. Today I cannot fail to take up this tradition. I do so by repeating with the Prophet these words filled with hope: “As the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations” (*Is* 61:11).

6. Let us look to Mary and invoke her in the words of Elizabeth: “Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (*Lk* 1:45).

Blessed are you, Mary, Mother of the Redeemer. Today we entrust to you the destiny of the land of Zamosc, of the Polish countryside and of all who live and work there, carrying out the Creator’s command to subdue it. Guide us with your faith in this new era which is opening up before us. Be with us together with your Son, Jesus Christ, who wishes to be for us the Way, and the Truth, and the Life.