

VESPER SERVICE AT THE CHURCH OF SAINTS ANDREW AND GREGORY "AL CELIO"

September 30, 1989

INTRODUCTION

The celebration of the first Vespers of the XXVI Sunday of the Year, September 30, 1989, in the Church of Saints Andrew and Gregory *al Celio*, presided over by His Holiness Pope John Paul II, with the participation of His Grace Lord Robert Runcie the Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of the Anglican Communion, is the setting for celebrating and honouring the memory of Pope Saint Gregory the Great, and the missionary whom he sent to preach the Good News to the Anglo-Saxons, Saint Augustine of Canterbury.

In fact, Saint Augustine of Canterbury was Prior of the monastery of Saint Andrew *ad clivum Scauri* when Pope Saint Gregory the Great chose him in 596 to lead the mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. Bede the Venerable has recorded in his *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum* the legend of Gregory's first meeting with the Angles in the market place and his well known words "non Angli sed Angeli".

The choice for this celebration of the Prayer of the Church not far from the monastery of Saint Andrew, makes it possible to recall the life and work of these two great Saints and this in continuity with the act of homage which was made by the Supreme Pontiff and the Primate of the Anglican Communion in Canterbury Cathedral in 1982.

(From the booklet
prepared for the Vesper Service)

THE POPE'S HOMILY DURING VESPERS

1. "Grace to you and peace from God, our Father" (Col 1:2).

We hear this greeting as we listen to the community of Colossae, in the reading appointed for the eve of the 26th Sunday of the year.

These same words I address to you this evening. I greet, first of all, my brother in Christ, the Archbishop of Canterbury: I warmly welcome you, together with the other representatives of the Anglican Communion who accompany you. I welcome you to Rome, the city that was stained with the blood of the Apostles Peter and Paul; I welcome you to this Church of Saint Gregory from which, fourteen hundred years ago, my predecessor Pope Saint Gregory the Great sent Saint Augustine to preach the "word of truth" (cf. Col 1:5) to the people of England. Augustine was prior of the monastery of Saint Andrew on the Caelian Hill which stood on the very spot where we are gathered this evening, and we have entered into the sequence of prayer and praise that has been offered to God in this place down through the centuries. I salute the representatives of the same living monastic tradition whom we join in prayer today. Moreover I recall the important role that monastic life has always played — not least in England — in receiving, living and handing on that "word of truth" (*ibid.*).

In sending Saint Augustine to preach to the Anglo-Saxon people, Saint Gregory was exercising the pastoral and missionary responsibility which is proper to the office of the Bishop of Rome. In his own writings we discover a profound and rich appreciation of the universal primacy entrusted to the Bishop who occupies the See of Peter. He it was who called the Bishop of Rome the "caput fidei" and who described the one who holds this office as the "servus servorum Dei" (*Ep. XIII, 39*).

2. It was as Bishop of Rome that seven years ago I myself went to England to visit the Catholic people there. My journey took me also to Canterbury, to the Cathedral Church of Saint Augustine. In making my pilgrimage to the shrine of the martyr, Saint Thomas Becket, I sought to play a part in

healing the terrible wounds inflicted on the Body of Christ in the sixteenth century. We prayed together there, Your Grace and I, for that wholeness, that fullness of life in Christ which is God's gift of unity.

My pilgrimage to Canterbury was motivated by obedience to the will of Christ our Lord who, on the night before he died prayed "that they all may be one" (Jn 17:21). Today the divisions among Christians require that *the primacy of the Bishop of Rome should also be a primacy in action and initiative in favour of that unity for which Christ so earnestly prayed*. I see our celebration of Evening Prayer together as a further moment in that ecumenical pilgrimage that Catholics and Anglicans, together with other Christians, are called to make. Our goal is to discover once more that common inheritance of faith which was shared before the tragic sequence of events which divided Christian Europe four centuries ago. We must find our common roots in that period of a thousand years when Christians in England were united in the faith that had been planted there by Saint Augustine.

In the Common Declaration we signed together at Canterbury, we established the *Second Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission* (ARCIC-II) to study doctrinal differences that still separate us. But as we meet today, we cannot but acknowledge that events in recent years have seriously aggravated the differences between us, making the work of the Commission more difficult. I wish today to confirm the members of the Commission in their arduous task as they study the roots and origins of the differences between us. May they be endowed with hope and courage as they seek to meet the challenge.

3. The integrity of the apostolic faith as delivered once and for all to the saints in the apostolic Tradition (cf. *Jude* 3), must be fully preserved if our unity is to be that for which Christ prayed. Responsibility for discerning the teaching and practice that are part of what Saint Paul calls the deposit which has been entrusted to us and which we must guard (cf. *1 Tim* 6:20) lies with the teaching authority of the Church. In the words of the Second Vatican Council, "the task of giving an authentic interpretation of the Word of God whether in its written form, or in the form of Tradition has been entrusted to the living teaching office of the Church alone" (*Dei Verbum*, 10). The specific role of bishops which is to be exercised in communion with the See of Peter in ensuring the unity and continuity of the faith is vital if we are to hand on the faith of Peter, Gregory and Augustine, if we are to evangelize once more the peoples of Europe and to preach the Gospel to the peoples of the world.

Saint Gregory was a man of vast experience. As the representative of the Church of Rome to the Church of Constantinople, he knew well that there could be variety in confessing and living out the faith, in its liturgical expression, as well as in spirituality, theology and Church discipline, while

preserving in all things the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace (cf. *Eph* 4:3). That was certainly also his hope and vision for the Church in England. Today the continent of Gregory and Augustine urgently needs to hear the "word of truth" (cf. *Col* 1:5) afresh. The tide of superstition rises high, as it did among the Colossians in the time of Saint Paul. We are surrounded by the forces of secularization that bring with them ignorance of the word of God. The people of our continent cry out for the "Good News" and woe to us if we do not preach it.

4. "*Grace to you and peace from God, our Father*"

When Saint Paul wrote these words to the Colossians, and when he thanked God for their "faith in Christ Jesus" and "love... for all the saints", he wrote very much in a spirit of hope and courage. But he was also writing with concern that some of the Christians at Colossae were wavering in their faith in Jesus Christ, the Lord and Saviour who by his Death and Resurrection has conquered all other principalities and powers, whether in heaven or on earth. This concern inspired in Paul the great hymn to Christ, the first-born of all creation.

"He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the Church" (*Col* 1:17-18).

Christ is our Head; all things have been subjected to him. He is our Lord. He is our beginning and our last end. As in the time of Saint Paul, so now, all our efforts to restore unity among Christians will be in vain if they are not carried out in total fidelity to the faith in Christ that was handed on by the Apostles.

5. It is my firm hope that our meeting in Rome will pave the way for the time when Rome and Canterbury will once more be fully able to proclaim together the "word of truth" as they did in the days of Gregory and Augustine. Today the Gospel has been preached far beyond our continent. We too can say with Paul that throughout the world the Gospel is "bearing fruit and growing". The *missionary task* gives new urgency to our ecumenical endeavours: we have a special responsibility to the developing countries of the world where the divisions originating in Europe have been transplanted.

We also have in view the tragic conflicts and divisions which scar the face of the contemporary world. Especially in these days we think of the people of the Middle East — a region which I know is ever in the thoughts and prayers of my beloved brother here today. If men and women are to know the peace of Christ, if they are to be reconciled in him who alone can bring peace to the world, then *Christians must be seen to be a community that is both reconciled and reconciling*.

How great is the harvest we are called upon to reap for Christ! How many are the wounded, the lost, the lonely in the teeming cities of our world! How many are the homeless and the hungry who

cry out for the Bread of Life and would make their home in Jesus Christ!

It is my prayer that during these days of the visit of the Archbishop of Canterbury to Rome, we may truly be led by God towards that unity that is his gift. The goal of all our striving must be the unity of all in Christ who is our Head. May our quest be a sign to the world of the peace and joy that have been given in Christ.

My dearly beloved brothers and sisters in Christ:

“Grace to you and peace from God, our Father”.

COMMEMORATION OF SAINTS GREGORY THE GREAT AND AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

After the singing of the Magnificat, the Holy Father and the Archbishop went together into the Chapel of St. Gregory, where they lit two candles to recall and honor the memory of Pope St. Gregory the Great, the apostle of the English nation, and St. Augustine of Canterbury, the missionary sent by Pope Gregory to preach the Gospel to the English.

When that ceremony was completed, the Archbishop of Canterbury gave his address.

ARCHBISHOP RUNCIE'S ADDRESS

From today's Vespers Reading: “Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing”.

From here St. Augustine took leave of St. Gregory the Great for England. In this hallowed and historic place I call to mind the story told of Gregory by the first historian of the English Church, the Venerable Bede. Bede recounts the well known tale that here in Rome Gregory once saw a group of fair-haired slaves for sale. He asked if they were Christians and from where they came. He was told they were pagans and he grieved. They were Angles but he said: not Angles but Angels. Bede recounts the story in respect of St. Gregory's apostolic zeal for the mission to the English which resulted in St. Augustine and his band of monks leaving this place for England in 596.

Seven years ago the Pope and the Archbishop of Canterbury stood together in the Cathedral Church of Christ which St. Augustine founded at Canterbury. Together we renewed the baptismal vows of the congregation in the place where Augustine had baptised the local populace into the faith of Christ nearly fourteen centuries ago.

My visit to Rome is not only a return for that visit to Canterbury in 1982, it is also an acknowledgement of the apostolic mission of the See of Rome centuries before, to which Anglicans, and all English-speaking Christians, the world over remain permanently indebted.

When St. Augustine set out from this place he carried with him a book of the Gospels. To this day those precious sixth century Italian gospels, once

the possession of the Monastery of St. Augustine at Canterbury, are venerated as precious relics of St. Augustine's mission. They are used on occasions of great solemnity. At the Enthronement of an Archbishop of Canterbury they are carried before him to remind him that without zeal for evangelization his ministry is nothing. When Pope John Paul II came to Canterbury Cathedral on his historic ecumenical pilgrimage they were carried before us both as we walked together in procession. And following Orthodox custom, the Gospels were then placed upon the ancient chair of St. Augustine to remind us both of their final sovereignty.

But the resonances of this holy place are not simply of the past. Historical remembrance prompts us to contemporary imperatives. The Archbishop of Canterbury cannot come to Rome, nor the Pope come to Canterbury, without being reminded of the Church's baptismal obligation: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt 28:19). And in our reading we hear of the Gospel which has both “come to us” and which is also “bearing fruit and growing in the whole world”.

Despite many failures in its history the Christian Church has always returned to this command and promise. In the centuries since Gregory and Augustine the Church has been extended far beyond the confines of the classical world. Even in our separation Anglican and Roman Catholic missionaries have gone out from England — and elsewhere — to all the corners of the earth. In the Continent of Africa especially Anglicans and Roman Catholics find themselves side by side in considerable numbers. Vigorous Christian communities proclaim the Gospel of the Kingdom, celebrate the Sacraments of the New Covenant and witness to God's love, justice, righteousness and peace.

In many other parts of the developing world separated Christians are beginning to recognize and to act upon their baptismal unity, their one apostolic calling and their common obligation to proclaim the Gospel — in spite of an inheritance of Christian division not of their making.

That disunity was made in Europe, the continent of Gregory and Augustine — disunity between East and West, Catholic and Protestant. It gravely impairs our ability to re-claim for Christ's Gospel a continent which is fast losing its Christian soul. We cannot re-discover European unity without re-appropriating Europe's Christian roots.

In the past Christian faith gave unity and coherence to culture and society. Christopher Dawson, the distinguished English Catholic writer, went as far as to say: “A religion is not worthy of the name which cannot embody itself in a culture”. When St. Augustine planted the Gospel in England he also founded a School — a school which continues to this day. When Kyril and Methodios evangelized the Slavs they created the Kyrillic alphabet and translated the Scriptures. In so doing

they laid the foundation for the culture of the Slavic peoples.

At the same time Christian disunity has also largely contributed to the disunity of Europe and the wider world. In my own country I long for Anglicans and Roman Catholics, together with other Christians, to work together much more closely. I long for them to bring the Gospel afresh to a society in which religious language has very largely lost its meaning. Since Your Holiness' visit to Canterbury the Churches in Britain have been seeking fresh ways of working together in the service of Christ and his Gospel.

Yet there are still many obstacles along the path to unity. My journey to Rome is not only to make a pilgrimage to the Church which sent Augustine on his apostolic mission, and to signal the unity we already enjoy, but also to talk with the successor of Gregory about the things that still estrange Canterbury and Rome and consequently hinder our common apostolic mission today.

Bede tells us that Augustine was troubled at variant customs in the Church and wrote to Gregory about this. Gregory told Augustine to take what was good from the Roman as well as other Churches, to make careful selection of them and teach them to the English Church:

“For things are not to be loved for the sake of a place, but places are to be loved for the sake of good things.

Therefore choose from every individual church whatever things are devout, religious and right” (Bede HE i 27 ii).

When, as Gregory's apostolic successor, you, Holy Father, were in Sweden recently you said:

“Unity not only embraces diversity but is verified in diversity”.

The variety of Christian discipleship throughout the world brings an enrichment which is true catholicity.

But there must be bounds to legitimate diversity. Realism and honesty prompt me to acknowledge that the action of some Anglican Provinces in opening the order of priesthood and episcopate to women seems to the Roman Catholic Church to have gone beyond these bounds.

When there is disagreement among Christians who have recently discovered how much they hold in common it is time to strengthen counsels. This has always been so from the time of the Council of Jerusalem recounted in the Acts of the Apostles.

Anglicans have experienced this in modern times in the need for bishops to take counsel in the Lambeth Conferences. They have been for us a God-given experience of collegiality which has enabled us to grow in inter-dependence in the Body of Christ.

At the same time from our dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church — and sharp conflict among Anglicans — we are also discovering the need of wider bonds of affection. Gregory's example of a primacy for the sake of unity and mission — which we also see embodied in the ministry of his successor, John Paul II — begins to find a place in Anglican thinking.

I tried to give voice to this at the last Lambeth Conference where I spoke of the need for a personal focus of unity. Within the Anglican Communion my own office is in part a response to this need. But for the universal Church I renew the plea I made at the Lambeth Conference: could not all Christians come to re-consider the kind of Primacy the bishop of Rome exercised within the Early Church, a “presiding in love” for the sake of the unity of the Churches in the diversity of their mission?

In Assisi, without compromise of faith, we saw that the bishop of Rome could gather the Christian Churches together. We could pray together, speak together and act together for the peace and well-being of humankind, and the stewardship of our precious earth. At that initiative of prayer for world peace I felt I was in the presence of the God who said “Behold I am doing a new thing”.

Our careful theological conversation must continue. There are many things which need discussion and resolution. But there is also an urgency in the need to proclaim and re-proclaim the Gospel to all the world. It is urgency which spurs us on to a new commitment to seek the unity Christ wills for his people.

Among the texts about Peter in the New Testament I recall the passage where Jesus says to Peter “Simon, Simon, behold Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat. I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22:31-32).

Our common prayer today in this holy place with my brother the bishop of Rome has “strengthened” me. It will strengthen Anglicans and Roman Catholics the world over who yearn for unity for the sake of the Gospel “which has come to us, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing”.