

Homily

*Washington Nationals Stadium
Thursday, 17 April 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

"Peace be with you!" (Jn 20:19). With these, the first words of the Risen Lord to his disciples, I greet all of you in the joy of this Easter season. Before all else, I thank God for the blessing of being in your midst. I am particularly grateful to Archbishop Wuerl for his kind words of welcome.

Our Mass today brings the Church in the United States back to its roots in nearby Maryland, and commemorates the bicentennial of the first chapter of its remarkable growth — the division by my predecessor, Pope Pius VII, of the original Diocese of Baltimore and the establishment of the Dioceses of Boston, Bardstown (now Louisville), New York and Philadelphia. Two hundred years later, the Church in America can rightfully praise the accomplishment of past generations in bringing together widely differing immigrant groups within the unity of the Catholic faith and in a common commitment to the spread of the Gospel. At the same time, conscious of its rich diversity, the Catholic community in this country has come to appreciate ever more fully the importance of each individual and group offering its own particular gifts to the whole. The Church in the United States is now called to look to the future, firmly grounded in the faith passed on by previous generations, and ready to meet new challenges — challenges no less demanding than those faced by your forebears — with the hope born of God's love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom 5:5).

In the exercise of my ministry as the Successor of Peter, I have come to America to confirm you, my brothers and sisters, in the faith of the Apostles (cf. Lk 22:32). I have come to proclaim anew, as Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, risen from the dead, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, and established as judge of the living and the dead (cf. Acts 2:14ff.). I have come to repeat the Apostle's urgent call to conversion and the forgiveness of sins, and to implore from the Lord a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in this country. As we have heard throughout this Easter season, the Church was born of the Spirit's gift of repentance and faith in the risen Lord. In every age she is impelled by the same Spirit to bring to men and women of every race, language and people (cf. Rev 5:9) the good news of our reconciliation with God in Christ.

The readings of today's Mass invite us to consider the growth of the Church in America as one chapter in the greater story of the Church's expansion following the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In those readings we see the inseparable link between the risen Lord, the gift of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and the mystery of the Church. Christ established his Church on the foundation of the Apostles (cf. Rev 21:14) as a visible, structured community which is at the same time a spiritual communion, a mystical body enlivened by the Spirit's manifold gifts, and the sacrament of salvation for all humanity (cf. Lumen Gentium, 8). In every time and place, the Church is called to grow in unity through constant conversion to Christ, whose saving work is proclaimed by the Successors of the Apostles and celebrated in the sacraments. This unity, in turn, gives rise to an unceasing missionary outreach, as the Spirit spurs believers to proclaim "the great works of God" and to invite all people to enter the community of those saved by the blood of Christ and granted new life in his Spirit.

I pray, then, that this significant anniversary in the life of the Church in the United States, and the presence of the Successor of Peter in your midst, will be an occasion for all Catholics to reaffirm their unity in the apostolic faith, to offer their contemporaries a convincing account of the hope which inspires them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), and to be renewed in missionary zeal for the extension of God's Kingdom.

The world needs this witness! Who can deny that the present moment is a crossroads, not only for the Church in America but also for society as a whole? It is a time of great promise, as we see the human family in many ways drawing closer together and becoming ever more interdependent. Yet at the same time we see clear signs of a disturbing breakdown in the very foundations of society: signs of alienation, anger and polarization on the part of many of our contemporaries; increased violence; a weakening of the moral sense; a coarsening of social relations; and a growing forgetfulness of God. The Church, too, sees signs of immense promise in her many strong parishes and vital movements, in the enthusiasm for the faith shown by so many young people, in the number of those who each year embrace the Catholic faith, and in a greater interest in prayer and catechesis. At the same time she senses, often painfully, the presence of division and polarization in her midst, as well as the troubling realization that many of the baptized, rather than acting as a spiritual leaven in the world, are inclined to embrace attitudes contrary to the truth of the Gospel.

"Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth!" (cf. Ps 104:30). The words of today's Responsorial Psalm are a prayer which rises up from the heart of the Church in every time and place. They remind us that the Holy Spirit has been poured out as the first fruits of a new creation, "new heavens and a new earth" (cf. 2 Pet 3:13; Rev 21:1), in which God's peace will reign and the human family will be reconciled in justice and love. We have heard Saint Paul tell us that all creation is even now "groaning" in expectation of that true freedom which is

God's gift to his children (Rom 8:21-22), a freedom which enables us to live in conformity to his will. Today let us pray fervently that the Church in America will be renewed in that same Spirit, and sustained in her mission of proclaiming the Gospel to a world that longs for genuine freedom (cf. Jn 8:32), authentic happiness, and the fulfillment of its deepest aspirations!

Here I wish to offer a special word of gratitude and encouragement to all those who have taken up the challenge of the Second Vatican Council, so often reiterated by Pope John Paul II, and committed their lives to the new evangelization. I thank my brother Bishops, priests and deacons, men and women religious, parents, teachers and catechists. The fidelity and courage with which the Church in this country will respond to the challenges raised by an increasingly secular and materialistic culture will depend in large part upon your own fidelity in handing on the treasure of our Catholic faith. Young people need to be helped to discern the path that leads to true freedom: the path of a sincere and generous imitation of Christ, the path of commitment to justice and peace. Much progress has been made in developing solid programs of catechesis, yet so much more remains to be done in forming the hearts and minds of the young in knowledge and love of the Lord. The challenges confronting us require a comprehensive and sound instruction in the truths of the faith. But they also call for cultivating a mindset, an intellectual "culture", which is genuinely Catholic, confident in the profound harmony of faith and reason, and prepared to bring the richness of faith's vision to bear on the urgent issues which affect the future of American society.

Dear friends, my visit to the United States is meant to be a witness to "Christ our Hope". Americans have always been a people of hope: your ancestors came to this country with the expectation of finding new freedom and opportunity, while the vastness of the unexplored wilderness inspired in them the hope of being able to start completely anew, building a new nation on new foundations. To be sure, this promise was not experienced by all the inhabitants of this land; one thinks of the injustices endured by the native American peoples and by those brought here forcibly from Africa as slaves. Yet hope, hope for the future, is very much a part of the American character. And the Christian virtue of hope — the hope poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, the hope which supernaturally purifies and corrects our aspirations by focusing them on the Lord and his saving plan — that hope has also marked, and continues to mark, the life of the Catholic community in this country.

It is in the context of this hope born of God's love and fidelity that I acknowledge the pain which the Church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors. No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention. Nor can I adequately describe the damage that has occurred within the community of the Church. Great efforts have already been made to deal honestly and fairly with this tragic situation, and to ensure that children — whom our Lord

loves so deeply (cf. Mk 10:14), and who are our greatest treasure — can grow up in a safe environment. These efforts to protect children must continue. Yesterday I spoke with your Bishops about this. Today I encourage each of you to do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation, and to assist those who have been hurt. Also, I ask you to love your priests, and to affirm them in the excellent work that they do. And above all, pray that the Holy Spirit will pour out his gifts upon the Church, the gifts that lead to conversion, forgiveness and growth in holiness.

Saint Paul speaks, as we heard in the second reading, of a kind of prayer which arises from the depths of our hearts in sighs too deep for words, in "groanings" (Rom 8:26) inspired by the Spirit. This is a prayer which yearns, in the midst of chastisement, for the fulfillment of God's promises. It is a prayer of unflinching hope, but also one of patient endurance and, often, accompanied by suffering for the truth. Through this prayer, we share in the mystery of Christ's own weakness and suffering, while trusting firmly in the victory of his Cross. With this prayer, may the Church in America embrace ever more fully the way of conversion and fidelity to the demands of the Gospel. And may all Catholics experience the consolation of hope, and the Spirit's gifts of joy and strength.

In today's Gospel, the risen Lord bestows the gift of the Holy Spirit upon the Apostles and grants them the authority to forgive sins. Through the surpassing power of Christ's grace, entrusted to frail human ministers, the Church is constantly reborn and each of us is given the hope of a new beginning. Let us trust in the Spirit's power to inspire conversion, to heal every wound, to overcome every division, and to inspire new life and freedom. How much we need these gifts! And how close at hand they are, particularly in the sacrament of Penance! The liberating power of this sacrament, in which our honest confession of sin is met by God's merciful word of pardon and peace, needs to be rediscovered and reappropriated by every Catholic. To a great extent, the renewal of the Church in America depends on the renewal of the practice of Penance and the growth in holiness which that sacrament both inspires and accomplishes.

"In hope we were saved!" (Rom 8:24)." As the Church in the United States gives thanks for the blessings of the past two hundred years, I invite you, your families, and every parish and religious community, to trust in the power of grace to create a future of promise for God's people in this country. I ask you, in the Lord Jesus, to set aside all division and to work with joy to prepare a way for him, in fidelity to his word and in constant conversion to his will. Above all, I urge you to continue to be a leaven of evangelical hope in American society, striving to bring the light and truth of the Gospel to the task of building an ever more just and free world for generations yet to come.

Those who have hope must live different lives! (cf. Spe Salvi, 2). By your prayers, by the witness of your faith, by the fruitfulness of your charity, may you point the way towards that vast horizon of hope which God is even now opening up to his Church, and indeed to all humanity: the vision of a world reconciled and renewed in Christ Jesus, our Savior. To him be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.