Dear “Slovak” pilgrims from the United States of America, I offer a warm and affectionate greeting to all of you. I welcome you on behalf of the Rector, Monsignor Vladimir Stahovec, and on behalf of all the priests and religious sisters that live and work in this house. Welcome to Rome and at the same time, let me also say, welcome to Slovakia, our beloved country. Indeed, this place - the Pontifical Slovak Institute and College of Saints Cyril and Methodius - is called by many pilgrims „a piece of Slovak soil in Rome.“ It is here where sons and daughters of the nation under the Tatras have met, lived and worked for years.

Faithful to our Fathers in Faith, the saintly Apostles of the Slavs, our ancestors dedicated this chapel and this institute to Saints Cyril and Methodius. These Greek brothers proclaimed the word of truth to our ancestors. In today’s first reading from the Letter of Saint James, we have just heard: „He chose to give us birth through the word of truth, that we might be a kind of first fruits of all he created“ (James 1:18). It is God, who led the steps of the brothers Cyril and Methodius to the Slavic nations to communicate to them this birth. We know that the first words of the Gospel that our forefathers heard from the Prologue of the Gospel of Saint John were: „In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God“ (John 1:1). In today’s reading, the Apostle James speaks of the word of truth, by which we have been born to new life.

Your pilgrimage - dear pilgrims - is a pilgrimage in honor of Saints Cyril and Methodius. We are glad that you have come to this residence, where these two holy men are at the center as its patrons. We can see them here in the middle of their disciples on the beautiful mosaic of Doctor Jozef Cincík, a Slovak who lived and created in the United States. The disciples of Saints Cyril and Methodius are dressed in liturgical robes, ready for their priestly ordination. Why this central scene? There are two reasons. The first is symbolic: the main activity of the Institute since its foundation until today has been to educate and mold new vocations to the priesthood. In the first half of its existence, before 1990, future priests were preparing in a Minor Seminary. Now, after 1990, the College offers appropriate conditions for priests already ordained for their post-graduate studies here in the Eternal City.

The second reason is historical: you might know that, after their arrival in Great Moravia in 863 a.d., the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius were charged with the task to educate young men for the ministry of evangelization. They brought their candidates to Rome in 867 a.d. This event is pictured at the small mosaic up on the left - a Slavic mission entering Rome. According to historical records, Pope Adrian II himself went out of the city walls to welcome this procession and to revere the precious relics of Pope Saint Clement being brought to Rome. Those relics had been discovered by the holy brothers during their previous mission to the Khasars, somewhere in the region of today’s Ukrainian peninsula, Crimea. Speaking of Saint Clement, he was the third successor of the Apostle Peter. His relics were considered to be very valuable, that is why their return was of great concern to the Pontiff. Apart from its historical importance, this event has the symbolic one too: Rome is the destination of many pilgrims, who desire to give respect to the holy places of Christianity. Our Institute welcomes Slovak pilgrims from our home country as well as from the whole world, serving them as their information and coordination center.

The second picture on the left speaks more about the central theme of the whole mosaic. You can see there, those young men, sons of the Slavic homeland. Saints Cyril and Methodius called for their ordination here in Rome, and their request met with success. Today, the same thing happens - Slovak bishops regularly send their priests to Rome. Where else, if not here, can they achieve knowledge in various theological disciplines? Here is the center of the Universal Church; here is the seat of the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of the Apostle Peter, the one who received the commission from the Lord to „feed my flock“ (John 21:15ff). We can notice the inscription above and under the figures of the mosaic: „Ubi Petrus ibi Ecclesia.“ „Where Peter is, there is the Church.“ This statement comes from the oldest Christian times.
Let us move to the right side of the mosaic. On the upper part, we can see another historical happening: Saints Cyril and Methodius bringing liturgical books, translated into the language of the Slavs, to Rome. They asked permission from the Pope to use the Slavic language in the Liturgy. It was a daring appeal, but the Holy Father complied with their request. The language of the old Slavs after Latin, Greek and Hebrew became the fourth liturgical tongue of the whole Church! That is why, as we can see, they first brought these liturgical books to the Basilica of the Virgin Mary called „Fatné“ - „by the manger“ - today the Basilica known as Santa Maria Maggiore (Saint Mary Major). It is here where they celebrated Mass in the language of the Slavs for the very first time.

This scene has symbolism for us, too. Translating, writing and publishing books in the printing offices at the Institute, here in Rome, and then successfully distributing them secretly to Slovakia has been a great apostolate of the Institute of Saints Cyril and Methodius during the long years of the totalitarian communist regime. Today, we need to explain why this apostolate was so important. The communist regime did not permit the publication of any religious literature, with the exception of some prayer books. Religious literature was against the atheist ideology. In Slovakia, there was a great hunger for religious books. Hundreds of thousands of books were sent from this Institute in Rome to the victimized Church in Slovakia. The official translation of the Roman Missal was prepared here, too. After that, each Slovak parish received its copy as a gift from the Holy Father. The translations of the Holy Scriptures and the Lectionary were also prepared here. Sincere thanks to the Lord for all the dedicated priests and sisters for their part in this important apostolate.

We have come to the last scene of the mosaic of Doctor Cincik: Methodius as the first Archbishop of the Slavs in Great Moravia. On his sides there stands the Princes and Earls of Great Moravia giving him support. We know that this condition did not last long and Methodius suffered persecution. This has a lot of symbolism in this scene, too. The Church in Slovakia has suffered much.

Its Pastors - let us here mention Blessed Pavol Gojdič, Blessed Vasil Hopko, Ján Vojaššák or Michal Buzalka - suffered in prison and along with them, hundreds of priests, religious men and women and laity. They suffered for their faithfulness to the Holy Church and the Successor of Saint Peter, the Pope. However, they persevered in their faith, steady to the message of Saints Cyril and Methodius.

On November 8, 1981, our Institute welcomed its most noble guest: today Blessed John Paul II. He celebrated Mass on this altar and gave his homily in the Slovak language. He said at the beginning of his homily that he too, like Pope Adrian II a long time ago, came outside the city walls to greet Slovaks. His eloquent speaking of the necessity to keep the heritage of our Fathers, as our priceless treasure and as the basis of our nation’s culture, seem to be prophetic even for us today. Who could have ever guessed, that in due time, the heritage of Saints Cyril and Methodius would be incorporated into the Preamble of the Constitution of the Slovak Republic? This emblem, the double-barred cross, pictured here under the mosaic of Our Lady of Sorrows by Doctor Cincik, even became the official sign of an inde-
pendent Slovak Republic. We always need to give thanks to God for these events!

Dear pilgrims: today our Pontifical Slovak Institute and Pontifical Slovak College do not need to publish books. We now have many Catholic publishing houses in Slovakia. Our seminaries are reopened; we have many Catholic schools, a Catholic media and even a Catholic University. Still, Slovak bishops send their priests to Rome to enrich their studies in theology, canon law, catechesis, history, philosophy and other disciplines. They find their home and support here at the Pontifical College. That is why its role is necessary and indispensable even today. It lives on, continuing history in a different way. The Institute has its symbolic meaning, almost as the mosaics of Doctor Cincik. It’s history reminds us, piece by piece, like this mosaic, that no struggles can be so difficult that the word of truth could not be proclaimed (again, from the first reading today from the Letter of Saint James).

The support of American Slovaks has always been, and even today, is vivid and necessary. We cannot forget here a great American Slovak, and even greater benefactor of this Institute, Bishop Andrej Grutka, first bishop of Gary, Indiana. His help, advice and solidarity with us Slovaks in Rome, was enormous. We owe him a debt of gratitude for his assistance in our many undertakings. He really was our father and pastor. Our gratitude extends to all American Slovaks, who have always been our great supporters.

Even today, we endeavor to work for the Church in Slovakia. Together with other spiritual sons and daughters of the Slovak nation - at home and abroad - we continue to build up the Church. There are many witnesses and martyrs that have borne the greatest sacrifices to keep our nation in the heritage of our fathers, Saints Cyril and Methodius. Therefore, let us again pray with the intercession of the Slovak Apostles: “Preserve the heritage of our Fathers, O Lord!”