



The Holy See

funeral Mass for Cardinal Ugo Poletti,
former Vicar of the Eternal City

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Thursday, 27 February 1997

1. “Scio quod Redemptor meus vivit” (Jb 19:25).

In the great silence that envelops the mystery of death, the voice of the ancient believer rises full of hope. Job implores salvation from the Living God, in whom every human event finds its meaning and definitive conclusion.

“I shall see God ... and my eyes shall behold, and not another” (Jb 19:27), the inspired text continues, allowing a glimpse of the merciful face of the Lord at the end of the earthly pilgrimage. “My Redeemer will stand upon the earth”, the sacred author stresses, basing his expectations and the support of his hope on the assistance of the Almighty’s goodness.

2. This firm hope guided the path of our late and beloved Cardinal Poletti throughout his life among us: a hope that rested on his unshakeable and simple faith, learned at home and in the Christian community of Omegna, in the Diocese of Novara, where he was born over 82 years ago.

It was precisely this relationship of trust and dialogue with the Lord that led young Ugo to perceive the divine call and to enter the seminary of Novara. It was this relationship, nourished by daily prayer, which sustained his first steps in his priestly ministry. He let himself be led by the Divine Master in every subsequent service to the Diocese of Novara, of which he was appointed ProVicar, and later, Vicar General. Beside his Bishop and teacher, Bishop Gilla Gremigni, formerly a parish priest in Rome, the Lord was preparing him to take on greater responsibility.

Appointed Auxiliary of Novara in 1958, six years later Bishop Poletti was entrusted with the

direction of the Pontifical Mission Societies. In 1967 he became Archbishop of Spoleto and, after barely two years, he was called to Rome as Vicegerent to assist the late Cardinal Dell'Acqua. In 1972, Pope Paul VI named him Pro-Vicar of the Diocese of Rome, and the following year created him a Cardinal and his Vicar General. In 1985 I entrusted him with the presidency of the Italian Episcopal Conference, an office he accepted with great willingness and carried out with his usual generosity until January 1991.

After he retired from guiding the Diocese of Rome, he willingly accepted the office of Archpriest of the Liberian Basilica, spending in the shadow of the “Salus Populi Romani” — “Spes certa poli”, as his episcopal motto says — the last silent but certainly no less fruitful years of his life.

3. “I have become all things to all men, that I might by all means save some. I do it all for the sake of the Gospel, that I may share in its blessings” (1 Cor 9:22-23). These words of the Apostle Paul, which have just been proclaimed, certainly point to the late Cardinal Ugo Poletti’s constant apostolic concern. We remember him today in his tireless self-giving to the Gospel cause, especially in his office as Cardinal Vicar, where he devoted his best energies to the service of the Church.

A particular love bound him to the city of Rome, which he considered his second homeland. He had sentiments of veneration for and sincere obedience to my venerable predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, sentiments which he later directed to me with equal cordiality, introducing me to the pastoral governance of this unique city, when Providence called me to the Chair of Peter. I recall with great feeling the many meetings I had with him and the enthusiasm with which he spoke of the Diocese, the priests, the religious, the laity, the problems of the ordinary people, of the lights and shadows discernible in the rapid changes in the texture of urban life.

Above all it was he who introduced me to a knowledge of the parishes, which I gradually began to visit. Thanks to his expert and wise guidance, I was able to grasp keenly the city’s complexity, acquiring an ever deeper understanding of the flock Providence has entrusted to me. For all these reasons, I feel it my duty today to express my sincere gratitude to dear Cardinal Poletti.

4. “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel”. The deceased Cardinal, from whom we are spiritually taking our leave today, made these words of St Paul his own. He saw the Church’s mission closely linked to the Eternal City’s concrete human and ecclesial reality. With particular zeal he devoted himself to reviving in the Diocese, along with an awareness of the deep link uniting it to the Roman Pontiff, the awareness and joy of contributing to his universal mission, rediscovering its own identity as a local Church.

Welcoming the impetus of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, he was able to give new vitality to the Diocese of Rome and its various components: the ecclesial conventions which aimed at regaining living and valuable forces for the city’s evangelization, in order to involve them

harmoniously in the activities of the Diocese, were milestones for the growth of diocesan life.

5. "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!". It could be said that the Apostle's cry constantly resonated in the deceased Cardinal's soul. His activity aimed at arousing in Romans a keen awareness of the extraordinary legacy of values inherited from their ancestors and the growing commitment to the city's historical mission for the future.

By listening to those who were close and those who were distant, the cultured and the simplest people, those responsible for public administration and those who were critical of institutions, he helped instil in priests, religious and committed laity an attitude of acceptance and tolerance which also had its influence on the life of the civil community.

With these intentions he began preparations for the Diocesan Synod, which was a further example of frank, positive dialogue between Christians and the citizens of the Eternal City.

6. "I know my own and my own know me" (Jn 10:14).

The words of the Gospel, which have just resounded in this basilica, show what the Pastor's attitude should be towards those entrusted to him. Was not Cardinal Poletti's episcopal ministry distinguished by this way of acting? Did he not strive to establish a personal and affectionate relationship with everyone?

We can say that perhaps the secret of his productive ecclesial service lies in this. "I am not an intellectual, but a man who tries to be close to the people", he said one day to a friend. With the heart of a pastor, he made "being close to people" a priority, devoting to this purpose both his energies and his remarkable theological, pastoral and administrative skills, acquired over his many years as a priest and Bishop.

The people of Rome knew him and were known by him. Over and above official functions, his pastoral zeal enabled him to establish a very human rapport in his many contacts during his visits to parishes, schools, associations and religious communities, as well as on the diocesan pilgrimages to Lourdes, for which he always sought to be present.

For this he was loved by the clergy and the people. I greet all who have come to show him their affection at this final leave-taking: Mr Oscar Luigi Scalfaro, President of the Italian Republic, Minister Giovanni Maria Flick, the other civil authorities, the many priests, men and women religious, and the vast representation of lay faithful.

7. "The Good Shepherd lays down his life for the sheep".

With today's funeral liturgy, illumined by the presence of the risen Christ, we extend a last farewell

to the mortal remains of this beloved Brother, my very capable assistant. We trustfully commend him to the Good Shepherd, as we invoke divine mercy on his chosen soul.

We give thanks to the Father for giving him to his Church. May Christ the Good Shepherd welcome him to his home of light and peace, and give him the reward reserved for his good and faithful servants.

And may the Virgin Mary, “Salus populi Romani”, to whom he was a devoted son, lead him to the joyful liturgy of heaven.

“In paradisum deducant te Angeli”, dilectissime Frater! Amen.

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