



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH OF THE SACRED HEART OF JESUS IN ROME

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 1 February 1998

1. *"Today this scripture has been fulfilled"* (Lk 4:21). Jesus begins his preaching in the synagogue of Nazareth by announcing to his fellow citizens that the ancient prophecies concerning the awaited Messiah are fulfilled in him. The "today" proclaimed by Christ is now valid for all time. This morning it resounds for us too in this church, reminding us of the timeliness of salvation. God comes to meet the men and women of all times in their concrete situation and invites them to accept the truth of the Gospel and to walk on the ways of goodness.

Jesus' words in Nazareth caused a strong reaction in those who were listening to him: some were positively fascinated, while others rejected him and even tried to kill him (cf. Lk 4:28-30). Jesus is thus revealed from very beginning as a sign of contradiction for all who meet him, and so he remains today for humanity in our time on the threshold of the third millennium.

2. *"I appointed you a prophet to the nations"* (Jer 1:5). The account of Jeremiah's vocation, which we heard in the first reading, also stresses the universality of salvation. In fact, the prophet's mission is not limited to the people of Israel, but expands to a universal dimension. The biblical text describes the sorrows and difficulties Jeremiah will encounter in the fulfilment of his task. The prophet, however, is at the same time guaranteed the necessary strength to bring to completion what has been entrusted to him. The Lord reassures him: "I am with you ... to deliver you" (Jer 1:19). God is fully involved in the prophet's mission and this promise is precisely the basis for the certitude of his belief that every obstacle will be surmounted.

What this significant passage from the Book of Jeremiah proclaims will be fulfilled in Jesus's mission, and later in that entrusted to the Church. In fulfilling the mandate received from Christ, the Christian community will have to face many difficulties down the centuries. However, it knows it can count on the strength of the Holy Spirit and on the mysterious but real presence of the risen Christ.

3. Dear brothers and sisters of Sacred Heart of Jesus Parish in Prati! As I greeted your brothers and sisters in Cuba, last week, today I greet you. I am pleased to celebrate the Eucharist here today with you in your lovely parish church, which is located not far from the Pope's home. I have passed in front of this church so many times and have been impressed by its distinctive façade, with its wealth of spires, pinnacles and statues, a unique example of the NeoGothic style in Rome.

I cordially greet the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishop of this area, your zealous parish priest, Fr Roberto Zambolin, and all his co-workers from the religious family of the Missionaries of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. My affectionate thoughts also turn to the parish workers, to the members of the various groups and to all who have made themselves available to support the various activities of the City Mission.

Today, I myself will inaugurate the phase of the Mission called the "Visit to Families". At the end of Mass in fact I will have the joy of visiting a family in this community, to whom I will leave as a memento a copy of the Acts of the Apostles, together with the Letter which I as Bishop of Rome have addressed to all the families of this beloved city. In meeting these people, I would in a way like to be close to all the parish families and to extend to them the invitation I made to all the families in the city: "Open your door to Christ!".

In the coming weeks, over 13,000 missionaries will visit Roman families and invite them to make room in their life for Christ, the one Redeemer of man. I ask everyone to welcome with trust and joy these missionaries who bring a message of hope. They are coming to homes to proclaim and witness to Christ and, at the same time, to express solidarity and friendship, offering concern for problems and bringing the comfort of faith. It will be the responsibility of the parish priests to organize meetings in the many listening centres which will be set up in all the parishes during the season of Lent. They will remind one and all of the various activities which are planned in every parish as part of the City Mission, which seeks to answer the deep need for God in our city.

4. The City Mission is also meant as a preparation for the Holy Year 2000, consisting not only of visible deeds but also and primarily of interior renewal, so that the Church and the people of Rome can give a fraternal welcome to the pilgrims of the Year 2000, witnessing to a courageous joyful faith.

Dear parishioners, your community, precisely because of its proximity to the seat of Peter, will be a significant meeting place with many pilgrims during the Holy Year. I invite you now to prepare for your task of offering them a fraternal welcome and a generous witness of common involvement in the prayer of praise, thanksgiving and intercession to God, who came to visit humanity 2,000 years ago and who constantly visits his Church.

Already your parish, which comprises a considerable number of inhabitants, is a stopover and a crossroads for pilgrims, citizens, politicians and professionals. Here there are many places of hospitality and meeting for young people and adults. Many public institutions have their offices here, starting with the Law Courts. Make sure that the parish pays attention to everyone and that it offers them the opportunity to listen to the proclamation of the Gospel.

5. Pay special attention to families and young people. Today the Italian Church is celebrating Pro-Life Day, and our diocesan community is beginning the Week for Families, which we will conclude together next Saturday in the Paul VI Auditorium at the Vatican. Every family unit, large or small, composed of the young and not-so-young, must feel loved

and supported by the Church. In every family life must find room and be welcomed. It should in any case always be served with generosity; it is an inviolable good that must be welcomed, loved and defended from the moment of conception until its natural end.

In particular, I urge you to commit yourselves to supporting the life of those who are poor, elderly or alone, encouraging the work of the St Vincent de Paul Society and the Senior Citizens' Club, which do so much in your parish.

Pay special attention to young people, who are numerous and active in this parish. May the Christian community help them to be open to love, to live their engagement as a moment of grace, to prepare properly for marriage. Here Christian families which are already formed have a particular and demanding role to fulfil: that of transmitting to their children and grandchildren the fundamental values of marriage, such as fidelity, indissolubility and openness to the gift of life.

And what should be said about Catholic schools, which have an important formative role in this preparation for life and education in Christian love? In their basic mission may they feel encouraged by the Pope and assisted by all believers. I would like affectionately to greet the Institute of the Religious Teachers Venerini, who have their generalate here, and the Institute of the Sisters of Nazareth, who also work at the service of youth. May God bless and make fruitful their efforts of Christian education in the scholastic world, also with the help of families.

6. *"If I ... have not love, I gain nothing"* (1 Cor 13:3). After presenting the variety of gifts and charisms, St Paul points to the supreme law of love as the "still more excellent way" (1 Cor 12:31). This biblical text, which today's liturgy presents in the second reading, reminds us that love must always be given pride of place: in the family, in society, in the parish, in the Church. Love is the soul of everything. It is a divine energy which gives strength to believers and makes them missionaries at the service of the Gospel.

Dear faithful of this parish of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, be witnesses to the Gospel of love. Spread God's love among everyone who lives, works, studies or spends his free time in this neighbourhood. Serve Christ's truth with tenacity, courage and fidelity. May the Lord, who promised to remain with his disciples always, accompany you on your way. Turn your gaze to him.

May Mary, Mother of Jesus, who is ceaselessly invoked by the Church, accompany you in the mission to families and make your parish community ever more fervent and zealous.

Amen!