



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH OF ST ACHILLES IN ROME

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 8 March 1998

1. *"This is my Son, my Chosen; listen to him"* (Lk 9:35). On this Second Sunday of Lent, the liturgy invites us to reflect on the striking account of Jesus' Transfiguration. In the solitude of Mount Tabor, in the presence of Peter, James and John, the only privileged witnesses to this important event, Jesus is clothed even externally in his glory as Son of God. His face becomes shining, his clothes dazzling. Moses and Elijah appear and talk with him about the fulfilment of his earthly mission, destined to end in Jerusalem with his death on the Cross and his Resurrection.

The Transfiguration makes visible for a moment the divine light that will be fully revealed in the paschal mystery. The Evangelist Luke underlines how this extraordinary fact takes place precisely within a context of prayer. "As he was praying", Jesus' face changed in appearance (cf. Lk 9:29). Following the example of Christ, the whole Christian community is invited to undertake the Lenten journey in a spirit of prayer and penance, to prepare to welcome the divine light that will shine at Easter.

2. In the second reading, taken from Paul's Letter to the Philippians, an urgent appeal to conversion is addressed to us: *"Mark those who so live as you have an example in us"* (3:17). With these words the Apostle offers his personal experience to help the faithful of Philippi to overcome a certain attitude of laxity and lack of commitment which was spreading in that community so dear to him.

The tone here becomes particularly strong and touching. St Paul turns to his Christians in Philippi "with tears", to warn them against those who "live as enemies of the cross of Christ", because they have their "minds set on earthly things" (*ibid.*, 3:18-19). He compares the difficulties of that community he had founded with the example of his own life, dedicated unreservedly to the cause of Christ and the proclamation of the Gospel.

How can we fail to note, in this regard, the timeliness of the Apostle's exhortation, which resounds on this Sunday of Lent, when the principal phase of the City Mission is now fully under way? This important pastoral programme in

preparation for the Jubilee involves all the members of the Church in Rome and, at the same time, is a very favourable occasion for helping the citizens to rediscover the values of the spirit, to deepen their love for Christ and to welcome the “Good News”, which is the salvation of man in his entirety.

3. Dear Brothers and Sisters of St Achilles Parish. I am pleased to be with you today and to celebrate the Eucharist in your church. My visit to your parish takes place precisely at the time when the whole Diocese of Rome is involved in the City Mission at the local level, with visits to families and with the centres for listening to the Gospel in the apartment blocks.

I am very attentively following this great apostolic undertaking, which aims at preparing the hearts of Romans to receive the grace of the Jubilee. I wish to encourage the men and women missionaries who are visiting the families in these days, and I remind them in particular of what I wrote in more general terms in the Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente*: “In our own day too, the Spirit is the principal agent of the new evangelization” (n. 45). Faced with the possible difficulties that this missionary work might encounter, may each of them have an increasing awareness of the action of the Holy Spirit, who accompanies us and “builds the kingdom of God within the course of history and prepares its full manifestation in Jesus Christ, stirring people’s hearts and quickening in our world the seeds of the full salvation which will come at the end of time” (*ibid.*).

4. Dear friends, to each of you I extend my affectionate greetings, beginning with the Cardinal Vicar and the Auxiliary Bishop for this area. I also cordially greet your energetic parish priest, Fr Giuseppe Ferdinandi, and the dear religious of the Third Order Regular of St Francis, his assistants, the permanent deacons, the extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, who do so much for the sick by visiting them and bringing them Holy Communion every Sunday, as well as the members of the numerous groups and ecclesial associations present in the parish.

Your community is also marked by the generous and active involvement of the laity, especially in the areas of service to the weakest and in various spiritual and cultural activities. I am pleased with this apostolic and missionary vitality and I hope that this evangelizing zeal will continue to grow.

In this favoured moment of grace created by the City Mission, I invite you all, dear faithful of St Achilles Parish, to intensify your efforts in spreading the saving word among the inhabitants of Rome through dialogue with individuals and families, making the most of the centres for listening to the Gospel in homes and the weekday celebration of the Word of God. Moreover, combine the proclamation of the Gospel with a concrete witness of charity, which becomes solidarity and sharing especially with the most needy.

I know that you are already working in this way, trying to strengthen the forms of spontaneous volunteer work in order to transform them into more stable and organized programmes of solidarity. I gladly encourage you to continue on this path, studying and carrying out courageous and well-planned forms of service to your brethren. To this end appropriately identify the new and old forms of poverty that are present even in this area. This means visiting unwed mothers and so

many lonely and elderly people in the neighbourhood; it is necessary to care for the sick and the suffering; understanding and hospitality must be extended to immigrants and migrants, so that everyone will feel the comfort of the Lord's presence and the fraternal support of the Christian community.

5. Families require thoughtful care, especially those which, for various reasons, are no longer able fully to live conjugal love. It is a difficult mission, I know, but how important and urgent it is! It is equally urgent and important to know how to attract young people, to transmit to them the Gospel of Christ and confidence in life. Be aware that every effort made in these fundamental areas of pastoral activity, so closely linked to each other, makes a valuable contribution to the new evangelization.

Your community is entrusted to the heavenly protection of St Achilles, in memory of the venerable patron saint of my Predecessor Pius XI, who promoted the construction of five new parishes in Rome and gave a strong impetus throughout Italy to Catholic Action. May the memory of this Pope of our era, who did so much for advancing the Catholic laity, spur you to a strong and generous apostolate, aimed at renewing our society with the leaven of the Gospel on the threshold of the third millennium.

6. May we be sustained on this apostolic journey by the awareness that God is faithful. In the first reading we listened to the account of God's covenant with Abraham. To the divine promise of descendants, Abraham replies "hoping against hope" (*Rom 4:18*); for this reason he becomes the father in faith of all believers. "*And he believed the Lord; and he reckoned it to him as righteousness*" (*Gn 15:6*). The covenant with the patriarch of the chosen people is later renewed in the great Covenant of Sinai. The latter finds its ultimate fulfilment in the New Covenant, made by God with all humanity not in the blood of animals but in that of his own Son made man, who offers his life for the redemption of the world.

May Mary, who like Abraham believed against all hope, help us to recognize Jesus as the Son of God and the Lord of our life. To her we entrust this Lent and the City Mission, so that they may be privileged moments of grace and bring a rich harvest of good not only to the Christian community but to all the inhabitants of Rome.

