



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH OF ST STEPHEN PROTOMARTYR IN ROME

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 26 April 1998

1. *"It is the Lord!"* (Jn 21:7). This exclamation of the Apostle John emphasizes the intense emotion experienced by the disciples on recognizing the risen Jesus, who appeared to them for the third time on the shore of the Sea of Tiberias.

John acts as spokesman for the sentiments of Peter and the other Apostles in the presence of the risen Lord. After a long night of loneliness and toil, the dawn arrives and his appearance radically changes everything: the darkness is overcome by light, the fruitless work becomes an easy and abundant catch of fish, the feeling of tiredness and loneliness is transformed into joy and peace.

Since then, these same sentiments enliven the Church. If at a superficial level it sometimes seems that the darkness of evil and the toil of everyday life have the upper hand, the Church knows with certainty that the light of Easter now shines eternally on those who follow Christ. The great message of the Resurrection fills the hearts of the faithful with inner joy and renewed hope.

2. The Acts of the Apostles, which the liturgy has us reread in this Easter season, describes the missionary vitality, rich in joy, which animated the first Christian community even amid difficulties and obstacles of every kind. This same vitality has continued down the centuries through the work of the Holy Spirit and the docile and generous cooperation of the faithful.

We read in the first reading today: "We are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit" (*Acts* 5:32). The Holy Spirit enlivens the apostolic commitment of Christ's disciples, sustaining them in their trials, enlightening them in their decisions, assuring effectiveness in their proclamation of the Easter mystery.

3. *Christ is truly risen! Alleluia!* Today too the Church continues to make the same joyful proclamation. “*Christ is truly risen!*”: these words are like a cry of joy and an invitation to hope. If Christ is risen, St Paul notes, our faith is not in vain. If we have died with Christ, we have risen with him: we must now *live as risen people*.

Dear brothers and sisters of St Stephen Protomartyr Parish, I greet you all with affection! My presence among you is linked in spirit with the visit that my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Paul VI, made to your community on Easter 1966, 32 years ago.

I cordially greet the Cardinal Vicar, the Vicegerent, your zealous parish priest, Mons. Vincenzo Vigorito, and all those who collaborate with him in leading the parish community. I address a special thought to those who are currently involved in the City Mission. I would like to encourage them to continue this missionary effort by proclaiming the Gospel in every way and in every circumstance, testifying that it renews human existence.

Everyone needs this saving Word: to everyone the risen Lord brings it personally. Dear parishioners, share this message of hope with those you meet at home, in school, at the office, in the workplace. Reach out especially to those who are alone, who are suffering and in precarious conditions, the sick and the marginalized. To each and every one of them proclaim: Christ is truly risen!

4. In this way, your community which, like many other Roman parishes, is relatively new but already has a history filled with many social and human problems, will increasingly become a place of solidarity and meeting, of joy and spiritual reinvigoration. This is what your parish has wanted to be since it began in 1953 through the work of the Passionist Fathers. Over the next 20 years the community grew considerably, due to the arrival of many immigrants particularly from the central and southern parts of Italy.

Many people moved to Rome in those years for financial reasons, separating themselves involuntarily from the traditions and values of their own regions. Some of you remember the difficulties of the beginning, with the related human and social problems, when the arches of the aqueduct had become places of shelter for so many immigrant families. To these difficult situations the parish tried to give concrete answers, according to its means, while always showing great courage and pastoral generosity.

Pope Paul VI, shocked at the situation of poverty that he saw here, personally supported various initiatives, including the creation of a public-health centre. Providentially, the Daughters of Christ the King later came to help the inhabitants of Tor Fiscale by establishing a school and day-care centre.

I cannot fail to recall dear Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who opened her first house in Europe here, which has now become the formation community for the Missionaries of Charity.

5. Thanks be to God, in recent years the situation has considerably improved after the construction of new housing in Tor Bella Monaca and New Ostia. However pockets of poverty and loneliness remain; the lack of housing, unemployment, especially among young people, truancy, the scourge of drugs, petty crime and prostitution.

You do not remain indifferent to all this. I am well aware of your generous efforts to proclaim the message of Christ by acts of courageous solidarity. The Pope, who is in your midst today, wishes by his presence to support you in this difficult, but exalting missionary and apostolic mission. Look to Christ: he is the life which does not die. He gives this life to whoever turns to him with sincere faith. Be witnesses and promoters of this life, putting the values of the Gospel at the foundation of a more just and united society.

I am also here today to praise and encourage you. To encourage the priests and religious who dedicate their efforts here, the committed laity who here, as in many other outlying areas of Rome, have too often been left to themselves, but have given and continue to give a valuable witness of love and care towards human life in all its stages. I wish to encourage especially those who dedicate themselves with perseverance to transmitting the values of the faith to their brothers and sisters, in particular to the poor and marginalized.

6. *“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might and honour and glory and blessing” (Rv 5:12).*

On this Third Sunday of Easter, we make our own the words of the heavenly liturgy recounted in Revelation. While we contemplate the glory of the Risen One, we ask the Lord that your community may be granted a future that is more serene and rich in hope.

May the Lord grant each of you a greater understanding of his mission in the service of the Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the risen Christ give you the courage of love; may he make you his witnesses! May he fill you with his Spirit so that, with the whole Church, supported by Mary's intercession, you may proclaim the song of glory of the redeemed: “To him who sits upon the throne and to the Lamb be blessing and honour and glory and might” (Rv 5:13).

Amen.

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