



The Holy See

JUBILEE OF CATECHISTS AND RELIGION TEACHERS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 10 December 2000

1. "*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*" (Lk 3: 4). Today John the Baptist speaks to us in these words. In a certain sense, his ascetic figure embodies the meaning of this time of expectation and preparation for the Lord's coming. In the desert of Judea he proclaims that the time has come for the fulfilment of the promises and that the kingdom of God is at hand: it is therefore urgent to forsake the ways of sin and believe in the Gospel (cf. Mk 1: 15).

What figure could be more fitting for your Jubilee than John the Baptist, dear catechists and Catholic religion teachers? I extend an affectionate greeting to all of you who have come from different countries representing many particular Churches. I thank Cardinal Darío Castrillón Hoyos, Prefect of the Congregation for the Clergy, and your two representatives for the kind words they addressed to me in the name of you all at the beginning of this celebration.

2. In the Baptist you are rediscovering today *the fundamental features of your ecclesial service*. By taking him as your model, you are encouraged to examine the mission entrusted to you by the Church. Who is John the Baptist? First of all he is a believer personally committed to a *demanding spiritual journey*, consisting of attentive and constant listening to the *Word of salvation*. He also bears witness to a *way of life that is detached and poor*; he shows great *courage in proclaiming God's will to everyone*, even to its ultimate consequences. He does not yield to the easy temptation to take a prominent role, but *humbly* lowers himself to exalt Jesus.

Like John the Baptist, the catechist too is called to point out Jesus as the awaited Messiah, the Christ. His task is to invite people to fix their gaze on Jesus and to follow him, for Jesus alone is the Teacher, the Lord and the Saviour. Like the Precursor, *it is Christ and not himself whom the catechist must emphasize*. Everything must be directed to him: to his coming, to his presence, to his mystery.

The catechist must be *a voice that refers to the Word*, a friend who leads to the Bridegroom. And yet, like John, *he too is indispensable in a certain sense*, because the experience of faith always needs a mediator who is also a witness. Who among us does not thank the Lord for an effective catechist - a priest, a man or woman religious, a lay person - to whom we owe our first practical and engaging explanation of the Christian mystery?

3. Your work, dear catechists and religion teachers, is more necessary than ever and requires on your part constant

fidelity to Christ and to the Church. For all the faithful have a right to receive from those who, by office or mandate, are responsible for catechesis and preaching *answers that are not subjective, but correspond with the Church's constant Magisterium*, with the faith that has always been taught authoritatively by those appointed teachers and lived exemplarily by the saints.

In this regard, I would like to recall here the important Apostolic Exhortation *Quinque iam anni* which the Servant of God Pope Paul VI addressed to the Catholic Episcopate *five years after the Second Vatican Council*, that is, exactly 30 years ago on 8 December 1970. He, the Pope, denounced the dangerous tendency to reconstruct, on psychological and sociological foundations, a Christianity uprooted from the uninterrupted Tradition that goes back to the faith of the Apostles (cf. *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, VIII [1970], 1420). It is your task, dear friends, to collaborate with the Bishops, so that the *necessary effort to make the message understandable* to the men and women of our time *will never betray the truth and continuity of the doctrine of the faith* (cf. *ibid.*, 1422).

However, an intellectual knowledge of Christ and his Gospel is not enough. For believing in him means *following him*. Therefore we must learn from the *Apostles*, from the *confessors* of the faith, from the *saints* of every age who helped to spread Christ's name and to make it loved by *the witness of a life* generously and joyously spent for him and for their brethren.

4. In this regard, today's Gospel passage invites us to make a careful examination of conscience. St Luke speaks of "ways to be made straight", of "valleys to be filled", of "mountains" and "hills to be brought low" so that all flesh may see the salvation of God (cf. Lk 3: 4-6). These "valleys to be filled" make us think of the gap that can be seen in some people between the *faith* they profess and the daily *life* they lead: The Council counted this dichotomy as "one of the gravest errors of our time" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 43).

The "paths to be straightened" also recall the situation of some believers who extract from the complete and unchangeable patrimony of the faith certain *subjectively selected elements*, actually in the light of the dominant mentality, and abandon the straight path of Gospel spirituality to follow vague values inspired by a conventional and irenic moralism. In fact, although the Christian lives in a multiethnic and multireligious society, he cannot fail to sense the urgency of the missionary mandate which prompted St Paul to exclaim: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9: 16).

The Gospel of Christ, the message of happiness for every person, whatever his age, class, culture or nation, should be courageously presented in every circumstance, in every context, favourable or not.

5. Aware of this, the Church has devoted even greater effort in recent decades to the *renewal of catechesis*, in accordance with the teachings and spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Here we need only mention a few important ecclesial initiatives such as *the Assemblies of the Synod of Bishops*, particularly the one in 1974 dedicated to evangelization, as well as the various documents of the Holy See and the Episcopates published in these decades. A special place is naturally held by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, published in 1992 and followed three years later by a new edition of the *General Directory for Catechesis*. This abundance of events and documents witnesses to the concern of the Church which, at the beginning of the third millennium, feels spurred by the Lord to commit herself with

renewed zeal to proclaiming the Gospel message.

6. The Church's catechetical mission faces important goals. The Episcopates are preparing the *national catechisms* which, in the light of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, will present an organic synthesis of the faith adapted to the "differences of culture, age, spiritual maturity and ecclesial condition" (*CCC, n. 24*). A hope rises from my heart and becomes a prayer: may the complete, universal Christian message *pervade every area and level of culture and social responsibility!* Above all, in accordance with a glorious tradition, may it be translated into the language of art and social communications, in order to reach the most varied human milieus!

At this solemn moment, with deep affection I encourage you who are engaged in various catechetical activities: from *parish catechesis*, which in a certain sense is the leaven of all the other forms, to catechesis in *Catholic schools, associations, movements and new ecclesial communities*. Experience teaches that the quality of catechetical activity largely depends on the caring and affectionate pastoral presence of *priests*. Dear priests, especially you, dear parish priests, do not let the courses of Christian initiation or the training of catechists lack your diligent efforts. Be close to them and accompany them. This is an important service which the Church is asking of you.

7. "*I pray always with joy in my every prayer for all of you, because of your partnership in the Gospel*" (Phil 1: 4-5). Dear brothers and sisters, I willingly make my own the words of the Apostle Paul offered to us again by today's liturgy, and I say to you: catechists of every age and state, you are *always present in my prayers*, and the thought of you, committed to spreading the Gospel in every part of the world and in every social situation, is a comfort and hope for me. Today I would like to pay tribute with you to your many colleagues who *paid with every kind of suffering and often even with their lives* for their fidelity to the Gospel and to the communities to which they were sent. May their example be an inspiration and encouragement to each of you.

"*All flesh shall see the salvation of God*" (Lk 3: 6), so said John the Baptist in the desert, foretelling the fullness of time. Let us make our own this cry of hope, as we celebrate the 2,000th Jubilee of the Incarnation. *May all flesh see in Christ the salvation of God!* This is why every person must meet him, know him and follow him. Dear friends, this is the Church's mission; this is your mission! *The Pope tells you: Go!* Like the Baptist, prepare the way for the Lord who comes.

May Mary Most Holy, Virgin of Advent and Star of the new evangelization, guide and help you. Be docile as she was to the divine Word and may her *Magnificat* spur you to praise and to prophetic courage. Thus the words of the Gospel will also be fulfilled through you: *all flesh will see the salvation of God!* Praised be Jesus Christ!

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