



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II FOR LENT 1998

Come, O blessed of my Father, for I was poor, marginalized and you welcomed me!

1. Dear Brothers and Sisters! Each year Lent recalls the mystery of Christ "lead by the Spirit in the desert" (Lk. 4:1). With this unique experience, Jesus gave witness to His complete surrender to the will of the Father. The Church offers the faithful this liturgical season so that they can renew themselves internally through the Word of God and may express in life the love which Christ instills in the heart of everyone who believes in Him.

This year, in preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, the Church contemplates the Mystery of the Holy Spirit. By this mystery the Church is being lead in the desert to experience with Christ the fragility of the human being, but also the closeness of God who saves. The prophet Hosea writes: 'I will allure her, and bring her into the desert, and speak tenderly to her (Hos 2:16). The season of Lent is, therefore, a journey of conversion in the Holy Spirit, encountering God in our life. In fact, the desert is a place of dryness and death, synonymous with solitude. At the same time, it is a place of dependence on God, of meditation and of the essential. For a Christian the desert journey represents a personal experience of inadequacy before God, thereby becoming more sensitive to the presence of the poor.

2. This year I wish to propose, for reflection by all the faithful, words inspired by the Gospel of Matthew: "Come, O blessed of my Father, for I was poor, marginalized and you welcomed me!" (cfr. Mt. 25: 34-36).

Poverty has different meanings. The first which comes to mind is the absence of sufficient material means. This poverty, which for many of our brothers crosses the line to misery, is a scandal. It assumes a multiplicity of forms and is found linked to various painful phenomena: the lack of the

necessary means of survival and primary health care; the absence of a home or its inadequacy and the consequent abnormal situations; the marginalization of the weakest from society and the unemployed from the productive sector; the loneliness of those having no one to count on; the condition of international refugees and those who suffer from war and its cruelties; the inequality of salaries; the absence of a family and the grave consequences which derive from this such as drugs and violence. The individual is humiliated by the lack of these necessities of life. It is a tragedy before which those who have the possibility to intervene cannot, in conscience, remain indifferent.

Another equally serious form of poverty exists. It is not the lack of material means but that of spiritual nourishment, of a response to essential questions, of hope for one's own existence. This poverty touches the soul and brings about grave sufferings. The consequences of this are right before our eyes and are often very sad, a life void of meaning. This kind of misery is mostly found in environments where people live in comfort, materially satisfied but without a spiritual orientation. Christ's word in the desert confirms this: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (*Mt* 4: 4). In the depth of his heart, he asks for meaning, he yearns for love.

The proclamation of the Gospel in word and deed is the response to this poverty. The Gospel brings salvation and also brings light even in the darkness of suffering because it conveys the love and mercy of God. In the end it is the hunger for God that consumes the human being. Without the comfort which comes from God, mankind is abandoned to himself, always in need and without the true source of life.

The Church continually combats all forms of poverty, because as Mother she is concerned that each and every person be able to live fully in dignity as a child of God. The Lenten Season is a special time for the members of the Church to recall their task towards helping their brethren.

3. Sacred Scripture constantly calls us to solicitude towards the poor, because God Himself is present in them: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and He will repay him for his deed." (*Prov.* 19: 17). New Testament Revelation teaches not to scorn the poor since Christ identifies Himself with them. In opulent societies and a world ever increasingly marked by a practical materialism invading every aspect of life, we cannot forget the strong words with which Christ admonishes the rich (cfr. *Mt.* 19: 23-24; *Lk* 6: 24-25; *Lk* 16: 19-31). In particular, we cannot forget that He Himself 'became poor so that by His poverty you might become rich' (*2 Cor.* 8: 9). The Son of God 'emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, ... He humbled Himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross' (*Phil.* 2: 7-8). By becoming fully human, including even in poverty, suffering and death, it is possible that in Christ every person can find himself.

In becoming poor Himself, Christ truly became one with each person living in poverty. That is why the words which inspire the theme of this Lenten Message are heard also at the Last Judgement

where Christ blesses those who recognized his image in the needy: "Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (*Mt 25: 40*). Therefore, those who truly love God welcome the poor. They really understand that God took on this condition so as to be totally united with mankind. Welcoming the poor is a sign of true love for Jesus Christ as proven by Saint Francis who kisses the leper because in him he recognized the suffering Christ

4. Every Christian feels called to share the pain and difficulty of the 'other' in whom God Himself is hidden. However, this opening to the needs of others implies a truly warm welcoming which is only possible in a personal commitment of poverty in spirit. Poverty, in fact, does not exist only in the negative sense. There is also a poverty which is blessed by God. This the Gospel calls "blessed" (*Mt 5: 3*). Thanks to this poverty in spirit, the Christian recognizes that salvation comes exclusively from God and makes him ready to serve his brother considering him 'better than yourself' (*Phil. 2: 3*). Spiritual poverty entails the fruit of the new heart which God gives us. In the season of Lent such fruit must mature through concrete behaviour such as: the spirit of service, the openness to look for the good of the other, the willingness to share with our brother, the commitment of combatting that pride which isolates us from our neighbour.

This atmosphere of welcoming is increasingly necessary in confronting today's diverse forms of distancing ourselves from others. This is profoundly evidenced in the problem of millions of refugees and exiles, in the phenomenon of racial intolerance as well as intolerance toward the person whose only "fault" is a search for work and better living conditions outside his own country and in the fear of all who are different and thus seen as a threat. In this way, the Word of the Lord acquires new relevance in the face of the needs of so many people who search for housing, struggle for work and seek education for their children. As regards these people, the welcoming of them remains a challenge for the Christian community which cannot ignore its obligation to respond so that everyone is able to find living conditions suitable to the dignity of a child of God!

I exhort every Christian, in this Lenten season, to evidence his personal conversion through a concrete sign of love toward those in need, recognizing in this person the face of Christ and repeating, as if almost face to face: "I was poor, I was marginalized ... and you welcomed me".

5. As a result of this commitment, the light of hope will again be ignited for many people. When with Christ the Church serves the person in need, she opens hearts to a new hope going beyond evil and suffering, beyond sin and death. In fact, the evils which afflict us, the vastness of problems, the immense number of those who suffer, represent an obstacle which cannot be humanly overcome. The Church offers its assistance, also of a material nature, to relieve these difficulties. At the same time the Church knows that she is able and must give much more. That what is expected from her, above all else, is a word of hope. Where material means are not able to alleviate the misery, for example in the case of corporal or spiritual ailments, the Church announces to the poor the hope that comes from Jesus Christ. In this time of preparation for Easter, I wish to repeat that proclamation. In preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, the

Church dedicates 1998 to the virtue of hope and I repeat to all -but in particular those who most feel themselves to be poor, alone, suffering, marginalized- the words of the Easter Sequence: "Christ, my hope, is risen". He has conquered the evil which constrains men to darkness, the sin which closes their hearts in selfishness, the fear of death which threatens them.

In the mystery of the death and resurrection of Christ, we see light for every human being. This Lenten Message is an invitation to open our eyes to the poverty of many. It also strives to indicate the path so as to encounter in Easter that Christ who, giving Himself to us as nourishment, inspires our hearts with faith and hope. Therefore I wish that this 1998 Lenten Season becomes the occasion for each Christian to experience poverty with the Son of God and to be an instrument of His love in the service of our brother in need.

From the Vatican, 9 September 1997

JOHN PAUL II