



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH
OF SANTA MARIA DEL ROSARIO AI MARTIRI PORTUENSI IN ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Third Sunday of Advent, 16 December 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice... The Lord is at hand" (Phil 4: 4-5). The entrance antiphon of Holy Mass on this Third Sunday of Advent begins with this invitation to joy, and for this very reason is called *"Gaudete"* Sunday. Actually, the whole of Advent is an invitation to rejoice because "the Lord comes", because he comes to save us. The Prophet Isaiah's words addressed to the Jewish people - exiled in Babylon after the destruction of the temple of Jerusalem and uncertain about being able to return to the Holy City in ruins - ring out comfortingly almost every day in these weeks. The Prophet assures them: "They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint" (Is 40: 31). And again, "they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away" (*ibid.*, 35: 10). The Advent liturgy constantly tells us that we must stir ourselves from the slumbers of habit and mediocrity, we must abandon sorrow and despair; we must lift up our hearts because "the Lord is at hand".

Today, there is another reason for us to rejoice, dear faithful of the Parish of *Santa Maria del Rosario ai Martiri Portuensi*: it is the dedication of your new parish church which stands on the very site where my beloved Predecessor, the Servant of God John Paul II, celebrated Holy Mass on 8 November 1998 on the occasion of his Pastoral Visit to your community. The solemn liturgy for the dedication of this church is an event of intense spiritual joy for the entire People of God who live in this neighbourhood. For my part, I gladly share in your legitimate pleasure at having your own welcoming and functional church at last. The place where it stands evokes a past of shining Christian witnesses. Indeed, precisely here, close by, are located the catacombs of Generosa,

where tradition has it that two brothers and their sister were buried: Simplicius, Faustinus and Viatrix (Beatrice) - victims of the persecution unleashed in the year 303. Part of their relics are preserved in Rome in the Church of St Nicholas in Prison at Monte Savello, and another part at Fulda, Germany, a city which has honoured the Portuensi Martyrs as its Co-Patrons since the eighth century thanks to the fact that St Boniface took their relics there. In connection with this, I greet the representative of the Bishop of Fulda and also Archbishop Carlo Liberati, Prelate of Pompei, a Marian Shrine with which your parish has arranged a spiritual "twinning".

The dedication of this parish church acquires a truly special meaning for you who live in this district. Are not these young martyrs, who died at that time for bearing witness to Christ, a powerful incentive to you Christians of today to persevere in faithfully following Jesus Christ? And does not the protection of the Virgin of the Holy Rosary require you to be men and women of deep faith and prayer as she was? Today too, although in different ways, there is opposition to the saving message of Christ and Christians are called, just as they were in the past, to account for their hope, to offer to the world their witness to the Truth of the One who saves and redeems! May this new church thus be a privileged place for growth in the knowledge and love of the One whom we shall welcome in a few days time, rejoicing in his Birth as Redeemer of the world and our Saviour.

Allow me now, making the most of the dedication of this beautiful new church, to thank all who have contributed to building it. I know how committed the Diocese of Rome has been for years now to assuring adequate parish premises to every district of this city, in constant growth. I first greet and thank the Cardinal Vicar and, with him, Auxiliary Bishop Ernesto Mandara, Secretary of the Roman Work for the Preservation of the Faith and the Provision of New Churches in Rome. I greet and thank you in particular, dear parishioners who have worked in various ways to build this parish centre. It joins the more than 50 parish churches already functioning, thanks to the considerable financial effort of the Diocese and of the many faithful and citizens of good will, as well as the collaboration of public institutions. On this Sunday which is precisely dedicated to supporting this praiseworthy work, I ask everyone to continue their generous commitment.

I would then like to greet with affection Bishop Benedetto Tuzia, Auxiliary of the Western Sector, and your parish priest, Fr Gerard Charles McCarthy, whom I thank for his warm words to me at the beginning of our solemn celebration. I greet his collaborators, the priests who belong to the Priestly Brotherhood of the Missionaries of St Charles Borromeo, to whom the pastoral care of this parish was entrusted in 1997 and who are represented here by Mons. Massimo Camisasca, Superior General. I greet the Sisters Oblates of Divine Love and the Missionaries of St Charles who work with dedication in this community, and all the groups of children, young people, families and the elderly who enliven life in the parish. I also extend a cordial greeting to the various ecclesial movements present here, including Ardent Marian Youth, Communion and Liberation, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, the Brotherhood of St Mary of the Angels and the Little St Therese Volunteers Group. Furthermore, I am eager to encourage all those who, together with the parish

Caritas, seek to meet the many needs in the neighbourhood, especially by responding to the expectations of the poorest and neediest. Lastly, I greet the Authorities present and the personages who have desired to take part in our liturgical assembly. Dear friends, today we are experiencing a day that crowns everyone's efforts, labour and sacrifices and the community's commitment to building itself up to be a mature Christian community, anxious to have a place reserved definitively for the worship of God. The special wealth of words and symbols of today's celebration helps us to understand the profound value of what we are doing. Let us, therefore, briefly consider the teaching that comes to us from the Readings just proclaimed.

The First Reading is taken from the Book of Nehemiah, a book that tells of the reconstitution of the Jewish community after the Exile, the dispersion and the destruction of Jerusalem. Thus, it is the Book about the new origins of a community and is full of hope, even through great difficulties still loomed ahead. Two great figures stand out in the heart of the passage which has just been read: a priest, Ezra, and a lay man, Nehemiah, respectively the religious and civil Authorities of that time. The text describes the solemn moment when the small Jewish community was officially reconstituted after the dispersion; it was the moment of the public re-proclamation of the law on which this community's life was based, and all this took place in an atmosphere of simplicity, poverty and hope. People listened to this proclamation in an atmosphere of great spiritual intensity. Some began to weep for joy at being able once again to listen in freedom to the Word of God after the tragedy of the destruction of Jerusalem and to begin salvation history once again. And Nehemiah cautioned them, saying that it was a feast day and that in order to have strength from the Lord, it was necessary to rejoice, expressing gratitude for God's gifts. The Word of God is strength and it is joy.

Does not this Old Testament Reading also inspire deep emotion in us? How many memories flood your minds at this moment! How much effort in building the community year after year! How many dreams, how many projects, how many difficulties! Now, however, we are given the opportunity to proclaim and listen to God's Word in a beautiful church, which is conducive to recollection and inspires joy; the joy of knowing that not only the Word of God is present, but the Lord himself: a church which desires to be a constant reference to unwavering faith and to the commitment to developing as a united community. Let us thank God for his gifts and thank all who have served as artisans in this church's construction and of the living community gathered in it.

In the Second Reading from the Book of Revelation, a marvellous vision is recounted for us. God's project for his Church and for all humanity is a holy city, Jerusalem, coming down from Heaven, gleaming with divine glory. The author describes this marvellous city, comparing it with the most precious gems, and finally explains that it is founded on the person and message of the Apostles. By saying this, the Evangelist John suggests to us that the living community is the true, new Jerusalem, and that the living community is more sacred than the material temple which we are dedicating. And to build this living temple, this new city of God in our cities, to build this temple - which you are -, much prayer is needed and it is necessary to make the most of every opportunity

offered by the liturgy, catechesis and the numerous pastoral, charitable, missionary and cultural activities which keep your promising parish "youthful". May the care we show for the material building - sprinkling it with holy water, anointing it with oil, incensing it - be a sign and an encouragement for intensifying our care in defending and promoting the temple of people, formed by you, dear parishioners.

Lastly, the Gospel passage we heard tells of a conversation between Jesus and his followers, and in particular with Peter; a conversation wholly focused on the Person of the divine Teacher. The people had sensed something about him; some believed he was John the Baptist brought back to life, others said he was Elijah returned to the earth, still others, the Prophet Jeremiah, in every case placing him in the category of great religious figures. Instead, Peter, speaking on behalf of the disciples who knew Jesus well, declares that Jesus is far more than a prophet or a great historical religious person: he is the Messiah - he is Christ the Son of the living God. And Christ the Lord says to him solemnly: you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church. Peter, the poor man with all his weaknesses and with his faith, becomes the rock associated, precisely because of his faith, with Jesus; he is the rock on which the Church was founded. Thus, once again, we see that Jesus Christ is the true steadfast rock on which our faith stands, on which the whole Church - hence, also this parish - is built. And we meet Jesus in listening to the Sacred Scriptures. He is present and makes himself our food in the Eucharist, he dwells in the community, in the faith of the parish community. Everything, therefore, in the church building and in the Church community speaks of Jesus, everything is related to him, everything refers to him. And the Lord Jesus gathers us in the great community of the Church of all times and all places, in close communion with the Successor of Peter as a rock of unity. The action of the Bishops and priests, the apostolic and missionary commitment of every member of the faithful, is to proclaim and to witness with his or her words and life that he, the Son of God made man, is our one Saviour.

Let us ask Jesus to guide your community and make it ever more faithful to his Gospel; let us ask him to inspire many holy priestly, religious and missionary vocations; to make all parishioners willing to follow the example of the holy Portuensi Martyrs. Let us entrust our prayers to the motherly hands of Mary, Queen of the Rosary. May she obtain that the last words of the First Reading come true for us today: "the joy of the Lord is our strength" (cf. Neh 8: 10). Only the joy of the Lord and the power of faith in him can make your parish's progress fruitful. And thus may it be!

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