



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND TEACHERS
OF ROME IN PREPARATION FOR CHRISTMAS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Thursday, 16 December 2010

“Be patient, therefore, brethren, until the coming of the Lord” (Jas 5:7).

With these words the Apostle James has ushered us into the process of immediate preparation for Holy Christmas which, at this Vespers Liturgy, I have the joy of beginning with you, dear students and distinguished teachers of the Athenaeums of Rome.

I address my cordial greeting to you all and in particular to the large group of those who are preparing to receive Confirmation. I express my deep appreciation of your dedication to the Christian animation of our City's culture. I thank Prof. Renato Lauro, Rector Magnificent of the University of Rome Tor Vergata, for his words of greeting to me on behalf of you all. I address a special and respectful greeting to the Cardinal Vicar and to the various academic and institutional Authorities.

The invitation of the Apostle points out to us the way that leads to Bethlehem, freeing our hearts from every ferment of intolerance and false expectation which can always lurk within us if we forget that God has already come. He is already at work in our personal and community story and asks to be received.

The God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob has revealed himself, he has shown his Face and has taken up residence in our flesh, in Jesus, Son of Mary — true God and true man — whom we shall meet once again in the Grotto of Bethlehem. To return there, to that humble, narrow place, is not merely a journey in spirit: it is the path we are called to take, experiencing this day God's closeness and his action that renews and sustains our existence.

Christian patience and constancy, of which St James speaks, are not synonymous with apathy or resignation; rather, they are virtues of those who know that they can and must not build on sand but on the rock; virtues of those who can respect the times and ways of the human condition and therefore avoid clouding the deepest expectations of the mind with utopian or transient hopes that subsequently disappoint.

“Behold, the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth” (Jas 5:7). Dear friends, this invitation which refers to the rural world and which marks time with nature’s seasons may sound surprising to us, immersed as we are in an ever more dynamic society.

Yet the comparison the Apostle chose calls us to turn our gaze to the one true “farmer”, the God of Jesus Christ, to his most profound mystery which was revealed in the Incarnation of the Son. Indeed, the Creator of all things is not a despot who orders and intervenes peremptorily in history; rather, he is like a farmer who sows the seed and tends it while it grows so it may bear fruit.

With him, man too can be a good farmer who loves history and builds it in depth, recognizing and contributing to the growth of the seeds of good that the Lord has given to us. So let us too journey on to Bethlehem, our eyes fixed on God, patient and faithful, who knows how to wait, how to stop and how to respect the seasons of our existence. The Child whom we shall meet is the full manifestation of the mystery of love of God, who loves by giving his life, who loves in a disinterested manner, who teaches us to love and asks only to be loved.

“Strengthen your hearts”. The journey to the Grotto of Bethlehem is a journey of inner liberation, an experience of profound freedom, because it impels us to come out of ourselves and to go towards God who has made himself close to us, who heartens us with his presence and with his freely-given love, who precedes and accompanies us in our daily decisions, who speaks to us in the secrecy of our hearts and in the Sacred Scriptures.

He wants to imbue our lives with courage, especially in the moments when we feel tired and overworked, and need to rediscover the serenity of the journey and feel joyfully that we are pilgrims bound for eternity.

“The Lord’s coming is at hand”. This is the announcement that fills this celebration with emotion, as well as hastening our steps on the way to the Grotto. The Child we shall find between Mary and Joseph is the *Logos-Love*, the Word who can give our life its full consistence.

God has opened for us the treasures of his profound silence and, with his Word, has communicated himself to us. In Bethlehem the everlasting today of God brushes against our fleeting time that receives from it orientation and light for the journey through life.

Dear friends of the universities of Rome who are walking on the fascinating and demanding path

of research and cultural creativity, the Incarnate Word asks you to share with him the patience of “building”. Building your own lives and building society are not tasks that can be accomplished by distracted or superficial minds and hearts. They require profound educational action and continuous discernment that must involve the whole of the academic community, encouraging that synthesis between intellectual formation, moral discipline and religious commitment which Bl. John Henry Newman proposed in his *The Idea of a University*.

People in our time feel the need for a new class of intellectuals who can interpret social and cultural dynamics by offering solutions that are practical and realistic, rather than abstract.

The university is called to play this indispensable role and the Church gives it her convinced and effective support. The Church of Rome, in particular, has been for many years devoted to supporting the university’s vocation and to serving it with the simple and discreet contribution of numerous priests who work in the chaplaincies and institutions of the Church.

I would like to express my appreciation to the Cardinal Vicar and to his collaborators for the pastoral programme of university ministry which, this year, in tune with the diocesan project is summed up succinctly by the theme: “*Ite, missa est...* in the courtyard of the Gentiles”.

The greeting at the end of the Eucharistic celebration, “*Ite, missa est*”, invites everyone to be witnesses of that love which transforms human life and thereby grafts in society the shoot of the civilization of love. Your programme that offers the City of Rome a culture at the service of the integral development of the human person, as I pointed out in the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, is a concrete example of your commitment to promoting academic communities in which one develops and practises what Giovanni Battista Montini — when he was Chaplain to FUCI — called “intellectual charity”.

The community of the Roman universities, with its wealth of State, private, Catholic and Pontifical institutions, is called to perform an important historical task: to overcome the assumptions and prejudices that sometimes prevent the development of authentic culture.

By working in synergy, in particular with the theological faculties, the Roman universities can show that a new dialogue and new collaboration are possible between the Christian faith and the various branches of knowledge, without confusion and without separation but sharing the same aspiration to serve the human being in his fullness.

I hope that the forthcoming International Symposium on the theme: “The university and the challenge of knowledge: towards what future?” will constitute an important stage on this renewed journey of research and commitment. In this perspective I would like also to encourage the initiatives promoted by the General Administration for Cooperation to Development of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs, which has involved universities on all the continents, most recently also those

of the Middle East, represented here by several Rectors.

Dear young university students, the remembrance of the World Youth Day Cross has reverberated at this gathering. At the end of the celebration, the African University Delegation will hand over the Icon of Mary *Sedes Sapientiae* to the Spanish University Delegation. So begins the Marian effigy's pilgrimage to all the universities in Spain, a sign that directs us towards the meeting next August in Madrid.

The presence of young university students trained and anxious to communicate to their peers the fruitfulness of the Christian faith, not only in Europe but throughout the world, is very important.

With Mary who goes before us on our journey of preparation I make an appointment with you in Madrid, and I am very confident of your generous and creative commitment.

I entrust the entire university community of Rome to her, *Sedes Sapientiae*. Let us prepare with her to encounter the Child in the Bethlehem Grotto: he is the Lord who comes for us! Amen.

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