



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH
OF "SANTA MARIA DELLE GRAZIE" IN CASAL BOCCONE

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Third Sunday of Advent - "Gaudete" Sunday, 11 December 2011

[Video]

Photo Gallery

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Parish of Santa Maria della Grazie,

We have heard Isaiah's prophesy, "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted... to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (Is 61:1-2). These words spoken so many centuries ago, ring out, in a very up-to-date way for us too, today, while we are halfway through Advent and already look forward to the great Solemnity of Christmas. These are words that revive hope, that prepare us to welcome the Lord's salvation and announce the inauguration of a season of grace and liberation.

Advent is precisely a time of waiting, of hope and of preparation for the Lord's coming. The figure and preaching of John the Baptist invite us to make this commitment, as we heard in the Gospel that has just been proclaimed (cf. Jn 1:6-8, 19-28). John had withdrawn into the wilderness to live a very austere life and to invite people to conversion, also by the example of his life. He conferred on them a baptism of water, a single rite of penance which distinguished it from the many rites of external purification of the sects of that time.

So who was this man? Who was John the Baptist? The response he himself gave is surprisingly humble. He was not the Messiah, he was not the light. He was neither Elijah come back to the earth nor the great prophet awaited. He was the Forerunner, a simple witness, totally subordinate to the One he proclaimed; a voice in the wilderness, as in our day too, in the wilderness of the

great cities of this world, of the great absence of God, we need voices that simply announce to us “God exists. He is always near, even if he seems absent”.

John the Baptist was a voice in the wilderness and a witness to the light; and this moves our hearts, for in this world where there are so many shadows, so much darkness, we are all called to be witnesses of light. This is the mission of the Season of Advent itself: to be witnesses of light, and we can only be this if we carry the light within us, if we are not only certain that the light exists, but also that we have seen a ray of light.

In the Church, in God’s word, in the celebration of the sacraments, in the Sacrament of Confession with the forgiveness that we receive, in the celebration of the Blessed Eucharist where the Lord gives himself into our hands and hearts, we touch the light and receive this mission: to bear witness today that there is light, and to carry the light in our time.

Dear brothers and sisters, I am very glad to be with you on this beautiful, “*Gaudete*” Sunday, the Sunday of joy that tells us that “even in the midst of so many doubts and difficulties, joy exists because God exists and is with us!”.

I cordially greet the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishop of the sector, your parish priest, Fr Domenico Monteforte, whom I thank not only for his kind words to me on behalf of you all, but also for the beautiful gift of the parish history. And I greet the parochial vicar. I also greet the religious communities, the Sisters, Apostles of the Consolata, the Religious Teachers Venerini and the Guanellians; they are a precious presence in your parish and an important spiritual and pastoral resource for the life of the community as witnesses of light!

I also greet all those who are involved in the parish context. I am referring to the catechists — I thank them for their work — the members of the prayer group inspired by the Renewal in the Holy Spirit and the young people of the Gioventù Ardente Mariana Movement.

Next I would like to extend my thoughts to all the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, especially the elderly, the sick, those who are lonely or in difficulty, without forgetting the large Filipino community which is well integrated and plays an active part in the fundamental moments of community life.

Your parish came into being in one of the typical suburbs of the Agro Romano. It was canonically established in 1985 with this beautiful title: Santa Maria delle Grazie [St Mary of Grace], it took its first steps in the 1960s when, at the initiative of a group of Dominican Fathers led by the memorable Fr Gerard Reed, a small chapel was set up in a family home that was later moved to larger premises and served as the parish church until 2010, last year. In that year, in fact, as you know the building in which we are celebrating the Eucharist was dedicated precisely on 1 May. This new church is a privileged space for growing in the knowledge and love of the One whom we

shall welcome in a few days' time in the joy of his Birth.

As I look at this church and at the parish buildings, I see them as the result of your patience, dedication and love and I would like to encourage you with my presence to bring into being, better and better, the Church of living stones which you yourselves are.

Each one of you must feel you are an element of this living building. The community is built with the contribution that each one makes, with the commitment of all; and I am thinking in a special way of the field of catechesis, that of the liturgy and that of charity: pillars that support Christian life.

Yours is a young community, I saw it in greeting your children. It is young because it is made up of young families — especially with regard to the new settlements — and because so many children and boys and girls live in it, thanks be to God! I warmly hope that through the contribution of competent and generous people, your educational commitment may develop ever better and that your parish, also with the help of the Vicariate of Rome, may set up as soon as possible a well-structured after-school recreation and prayer centre with sufficient space for games and meeting-rooms, so as to meet the need of the young generations to develop in faith and in a healthy sociability.

I congratulate you on your work in preparing the boys and girls and young people to receive the sacraments. The challenge we are facing consists in planning and proposing a true and proper itinerary of formation in faith which involves all those who are receiving Christian initiation, helping them not only to receive the sacraments but to live them out, in order to be true Christians. This aim, *to receive*, must be *to live*, as we heard in the First Reading: justice must sprout, just as the seed sprouts from the ground. Live the sacraments so that justice, law and love will sprout likewise.

In this regard, the diocesan pastoral work that is currently being reviewed and that concerns, precisely, Christian initiation, is a favourable opportunity to deepen and live the Sacraments we have already received — such as Baptism and Confirmation — and those we continue to receive for nourishment on our journey of faith, Penance and the Eucharist. For this reason, necessary in the first place is attention to the relationship with God through listening to his word, through your response to the word in prayer and through the gift of the Eucharist.

I know that in your parish prayer meetings take place and *lectio divina* and that Eucharistic adoration is organized. These are precious initiatives for spiritual growth at the personal and community levels. I warmly urge more and more of you to take part in them. In a special way I would like to recall the importance and centrality of the Eucharist. May the centre of your Sunday be Holy Mass which should be rediscovered and lived as a day of God and of the community, a day on which to praise and celebrate the One who was born for us, who died and rose for our

salvation and asks us to live together joyfully and to be a community open and ready to receive every person who is lonely or in difficulty.

Do not lose your sense of Sunday and be faithful to the Eucharistic gathering. The early Christians were prepared to give their lives for this. They realized that this is life and gives life.

In coming to see you I cannot but know that a great challenge is posed to your territory by religious groups who claim to be the depositaries of the Gospel truth. In this regard it is my duty to recommend you to be alert and to deepen your knowledge of the reasons for faith and for the Christian message; so that you may transmit it in a way that guarantees the authentic millenary tradition of the Church. May you — as St Peter says — always be prepared “to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pet 3:15); put into practice the language of love and brotherhood that is comprehensible to all, but without forgetting the commitment to purifying and strengthening your own faith in the face of the dangers and snares that may threaten it in these times.

Overcome the limitations of individualism, withdrawal into self and the fascination of relativism that views any kind of behaviour as licit, and of the attraction exercised by forms of religious sentiment that exploit the deepest needs and aspirations of the human soul, offering prospects of easy but deceptive gratification. Faith is a gift of God but demands of us a response, a decision to follow Christ, not only when he heals and alleviates but also when he speaks of love even to the point of self-gift.

Another point on which I want to insist is the witnessing to charity that must characterize your community life. In recent years you have seen it increase rapidly, in the number of its members too, but you have also seen it help many people in difficulty and in situations of hardship who need you, who need your material aid, but also and above all need your faith and your testimony as believers. Make sure that the face of your community is always able to express in practice the love of God, who is rich in mercy, and invite people to approach him with trust.

I would like to address a special word of affection and friendship to you, dear boys and girls and young people who are listening to me, as well as to your peers who live in this parish. History's today and tomorrow and the future of faith are entrusted especially to you who are the new generations. The Church expects much of your enthusiasm, your ability to look ahead, to be inspired by ideals and your desire for radicalism in the decisions of life. The parish is accompanying you and I would like you also to feel my encouragement.

“Brethren.... Rejoice always” (1 Thes 5:16). This invitation to joy which St Paul addressed to the Christians of Thessalonica in that time, also characterizes this Sunday, commonly known as “*Gaudete*” Sunday. It resonates from the very first words of the Entrance Antiphon: “Rejoice in the Lord always; again I say, rejoice! The Lord is at hand”; St Paul, in prison, wrote these words to the

Christians of Philippi (cf. Phil 4:4-5) and also addresses them to us.

Yes, we are glad because the Lord is near us and in a few days, on Christmas night, we shall be celebrating the mystery of his birth. Mary, who was the first to hear the Angel's invitation: "Hail, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" (Lk 1:28), points out to us the way to reach true joy, which comes from God. St Mary of Grace, Mother of Divine Love, pray for us all. Amen!

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