



The Holy See

**HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
DURING THE MASS
FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS AND PROFESSORS**

*Saint Peter's Basilica
Thursday, 12 December 1996*

1. "*Shower, O heavens, from above*" (*Rorate caeli*).

Advent is expressed in this supplication taken from the book of the prophet Isaiah. "Shower, O heavens, from above, and let the skies rain down righteousness; ... let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth" (cf. Is 45:8).

These are words of the prophet Isaiah. He is referring to the situation of his homeland, and from his observation of the parched land that needs water to blossom, he draws the analogy that expresses his people's expectation: the expectation of the promised Messiah, the Saviour of Israel. Isaiah knows that the fulfilment of the promise can only come "from above", *from God*, like the rain that falls from the clouds. At the same time, in a no less precise way, the prophet foretells that the Messiah, the Saviour of the world, will be born *on earth, as the blessed fruit of the root of Jesse*, according to the Lord's promise. He will come among the Chosen People and will be the fulfilment of that great "advent" that is the Old Covenant.

In the *first reading*, God speaks to his people: "Fear not, I will help you.... I will help you ... your Redeemer is the Holy One of Israel" (Is 41:13-14). "When the poor and needy seek water, and there is none, and their tongue is parched with thirst, I, the Lord, ... will open rivers on the bare heights, and fountains in the midst of the valleys; I will make the wilderness a pool of water, and the dry land springs of water" (Is 41:17-18). Thanks to this providential irrigation, the desert will bloom and produce fruit in abundance.

This metaphor, eloquent for those who have visited the desert areas of Palestine, recalls another harvest, the *harvest of souls*. The awaited Messiah will change the destiny of the people of Israel and of humanity: he will be able to draw an abundant harvest of the redeemed from a sterile desert.

The *responsorial psalm* proclaims the goodness and mercy of God on all that he created: “all your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your saints shall bless you! They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power” (Ps 145 [144]:10-11).

As happens a number of times during Advent, the *Gospel passage* presents the figure of John the Baptist. It is Jesus himself who speaks of him to the crowd: “Among those born of women there has risen no one greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he” (Mt 11:11). And he adds: “From the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven has suffered violence, and men of violence take it by force” (Mt 11:12). John the Baptist prepared the people for the kingdom of God, however only *those who follow Christ become members of it*. And this not without “violence” against one’s own passions and the forces of evil. It is these peaceful “men of violence” who conquer the kingdom for themselves, for others, for the world.

2. Dear brothers and sisters, today we renew the traditional Advent appointment with the students of Rome universities. I am pleased to see you here and I am glad to observe that the students are accompanied by an ever-increasing number of rectors and professors of the Roman and Italian universities.

I cordially greet you all: the Cardinal Vicar, the Viceregent, the various academic authorities, the chaplains of the university groups and their assistants. I greet you all, dear university students, both men and women. Our *meeting* today, to which I attach great importance, *has become*, in a way, *an appointment with the whole university world of Italy*. I brought with me the custom of meeting the university students of Kraków, where the university apostolate developed in difficult times, times during which the Marxist regime was making a systematic effort to spread atheism. The Church, through her pastoral service, promoted Christian values and the dimension of faith, hope and charity in the universities and among the young people. “My most memorable experience of that period”, I wrote in my book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, “was the discovery of the fundamental importance of youth. What is youth? It is not only a period of life that corresponds to a certain number of years, it is also a time given by Providence to every person and given to him as a responsibility. *During that time he searches, like the young man in the Gospel, for answers to basic questions*; he searches not only for the *meaning of life* but also for *a concrete way* to go about living his life. This is the most fundamental characteristic of youth” (pp. 120-121).

3. The aim of this annual meeting, that prepares us to live Christmas intensely, *is the deepening of our Christian awareness and consequently of our behaviour*.

What does it mean to be a Christian? It means that we are intimately marked with the mystery of Christ: *Christianus alter Christus*. It means that we are aware of the redemption carried out by Christ. Each one of us is a redeemed person. Redeemed are our souls and our bodies. Redeemed are marriage and the family; peoples and nations. And human work, both physical and intellectual is redeemed, as also is social life, culture, politics. The Second Vatican Council, in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*, stressed this very strongly. To be a Christian means *to share in the mystery of the redemption, to live it in all aspects of human life and vocation*.

What then does it mean to live the mystery of the redemption as a university student, as a university lecturer, as an educator? What does it mean to live it as engaged couples, as married couples, as persons that Christ calls to the

priesthood or to the consecrated life? What does it mean to live the mystery of the redemption in every profession and field of employment? The *university apostolate* wishes to provide answers to these questions. Before our Advent meeting, I met representatives of the university pastoral workers of Rome to sense the atmosphere in the various academic areas. This is an *essential dialogue*, that must spread and be more deeply studied.

I am saying this as the Bishop of Rome, but at the same time as a priest who, over a period of 50 years of ministry, has had the chance to experience the value of the youth apostolate: it requires a great deal of sacrifice, but it brings great joy.

4. In particular, it is a matter of working in the delicate area of the formation of young people in culture. It is precisely on culture that the Church in Italy is focusing her attention for a widespread revival of pastoral activity. But, as I recalled at the Ecclesial Convention of Palermo, *the generating nucleus of every authentic culture is formed from its approach to the mystery of God*, in which the social order centred on personal dignity and responsibility has its ultimate foundation. And it is starting from this that we must contribute to the establishment of a culture that is soundly anchored in the values of the Gospel.

Dear university students, you are the living energy of such a cultural project, its freshness and its future. May your commitment to study, to cultural and scientific research, find meaningful unity in the promotion of a new humanism, to build a new society.

I wish here to express my satisfaction to you, students, for the journey that you have begun in preparation for your second *diocesan convention* to be held next April on the theme “*The Gospel and culture in the university*”. Dear young people, give your contribution generously and, together with your teachers, dedicate much space to the reflection and study of these themes. You will thus be a living part of these processes of cultural elaboration that must characterize the life of the university and you will be able to make a solid and convincing profile of your commitment in this journey of human and Christian growth emerge. The initiative of the *University Theological Weeks* is a beginning and a precious contribution in this direction; I encourage you to participate in it with that passion for truth that stimulates the intellect and opens onto vaster horizons.

In this perspective the features of the *chaplains* that have always accompanied the spiritual care of university communities are enriched. They become more fully authentic pastoral centres of cultural and spiritual growth. Consider this reality as yours, dear university students of Rome, enliven it with your presence, motivate its vitality, open it to encounters and cultural confrontation. The lamp that I will give to the representatives of your chaplaincies at the end of today’s celebration is a sign of and commitment to this renewal that you must pursue together.

I would like to recall here another appointment that concerns you. It is *the meeting of young people in Paris*, next August, for the World Youth Day. There, in the capital of modernity, together we will give testimony to the splendour of the truth that emanates from the light of Christ. In this regard, I am pleased to greet the group of French university students who are studying in Rome and who wished to be here with us this evening.

5. “Shower, O heavens, from above; ... let the earth open, that salvation may sprout forth” (cf. Is 45:8). These words are addressed to each one of us; they are the wish for the Church that is in Rome, for the ecclesial community of the

university environment. May this “earth” which is all of us — men and women of the Year of the Lord 1996 —open once again and bring forth the Saviour on the night of Christmas. May the Lord come into the world, as he came almost 2,000 years ago to Bethlehem. May men, especially those who live in the university world, hear the words: “I bring you good news of a great joy ... for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour” (cf. Lk 2:10-11). And, like the shepherds on the night of Bethlehem, may they go in great haste to adore him.

Amen!

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