



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH OF OUR LADY OF VALME IN ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 15 December 1996

1. "*Gaudete in Domino semper. Iterum dico: Gaudete! ... Dominus prope*". "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.... The Lord is at hand" (Phil 4:4-5). It is from these words taken from St Paul's letter to the Philippians, that this Sunday takes the liturgical name "Gaudete". Today the liturgy urges us to rejoice because the birth of the Lord is approaching: in fact it is only 10 days away.

In his Letter to the Thessalonians, the Apostle exhorts us thus: "Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances.... May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thes 5:16-18;23).

This is a typical *Advent exhortation*. Advent is the liturgical season that prepares us for the Lord's birth, but it is also the time of expectation for the *definitive return of Christ* for the last judgement, and St Paul refers, in the first place, to this second coming. The very fact that the conclusion of the liturgical year coincides with the beginning of Advent suggests that "the beginning of the time of salvation" is in some way linked to the "end of time". This exhortation typical of Advent always applies: "The Lord is at hand!".

2. In today's liturgy the prospect of Christ's coming at Christmas, so near now, seems to prevail. The echo of joy at the Messiah's birth resounds in the *Magnificat*, the canticle that wells up in Mary during her visit to the elderly wife of Zechariah. Elizabeth greets Mary with the words: "And why is this granted me, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For behold, when the voice of your greeting came to my ears, the babe in my womb leaped for joy. And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:43-45). Advanced in age and by now beyond all hope of possible motherhood, Elizabeth had realized that the extraordinary grace granted her was closely linked to the divine plan of salvation. The son who was to be born of her had been foreseen by God as the Precursor called to prepare the way for Christ (cf. Lk 1:76) And Mary replies with the words of the *Magnificat*, repeated in the responsorial psalm today: "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded

the low estate of his handmaiden.... He who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name” (Lk 1:46-49).

3. John the Baptist is one of the most significant biblical figures we meet during this important season of the liturgical year. In the fourth Gospel we read: “There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light” (Jn 1:6-8). To the question “Who are you?”, John the Baptist responds: “I am not the Christ”, nor Elijah, nor any other of the prophets (cf. Jn 1:19-20). And faced with the insistence of those sent from Jerusalem, he says: “I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” (Jn 1:23).

With this quote from Isaiah, in a certain sense he reveals his identity and clarifies his special role in the history of salvation. And when the representatives of the Sanhedrin ask him why he is baptizing, although he is neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor any other prophet, he answers: “I baptize with water; but among you stands one whom you do not know, even he who comes after me, the thong of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie” (Jn 1:26-27).

John the Baptist’s witness re-echoes in the Advent verse: “The Lord is at hand!”. The different perspectives of the night of Bethlehem and the baptism in the Jordan converge in the same truth: we must shake off our inertia and prepare the way of the Lord who comes.

4. Dear brothers and sisters of the parish of Our Lady of Valme, I am pleased to celebrate the Eucharist with you on this Third Sunday of Advent! I affectionately greet the Cardinal Vicar, the new Auxiliary Bishop of the Western Sector, Bishop Vincenzo Apicella, your parish priest and his assistants, both priests and laity, of the *Obra de la Iglesia*. From its beginning your parish was entrusted to this religious family, whose foundress, Mother Trinidad Sánchez Moreno, I greet. This year, on 7 December, she celebrated her 50th anniversary of religious life.

This day of celebration permits us all to give thanks to God for this beautiful church, recently opened and dedicated to Our Lady of Valme. “Valme”, as is well known, is an invocation in Spanish that dates to the 13th century, when King St Ferdinand, in difficulty while attempting to reconquer Seville, asked the heavenly Mother for assistance: “Valimi, Signora”, “Help me, my Lady”. Since then many of the faithful in Spain and in other parts of the world continue to repeat “Valimi”, help me Mary, and be our support.

This morning we too turn with hope to the Blessed Virgin, entrusting her with the projects and hopes of your parish community. I am aware of your commitment in putting Mass and the adoration of the Eucharist at the centre of your parish life, as well as of your care for liturgical celebrations and your devotion to Mary, Mother of God and of the Church, which motivates you. I know the great faith that nourishes your heartfelt support of the Successor of Peter and your Bishops, as you strive to grow in fraternal charity and in the ardent desire to bring everyone the Gospel of Christ, the one Saviour of mankind.

I encourage you to continue on the path you have undertaken, as I congratulate you, among other things, for the initiative called “Linking Apartments”, an effective form of apostolic activity to make the inhabitants of your area feel the closeness of Jesus and of the ecclesial community.

5. This apostolic activity, as indeed all your other pastoral efforts, fits well into the city mission which involves all of Rome. Within the framework of its gradual development, it is planned that after Christmas every family in the city will be given a copy of Mark's Gospel. This Gospel contains the teachings of the Apostle Peter, of whom the Evangelist was the faithful disciple and interpreter right here in Rome. I have wished to accompany this gift with a letter in which I personally as it were offer this Gospel text to all Romans.

My hope is that the Good News of Christ will enter every home and help families to rediscover that only in Christ can man find salvation. In him it is possible to find the interior peace, hope and strength necessary to face life's various situations each day, even those most onerous and difficult. In the letter accompanying the Gospel, I recalled that Jesus is not a figure of the past. He is the Word of God who even today continues to shed light on man's path; his actions are the expression of the Father's love for every human being.

6. “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring glad tidings to the lowly, to heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to announce a year of favour from the Lord” (Is 61:1-2).

In the synagogue of Nazareth, at the moment of beginning his public ministry, Christ will apply these words of the prophet Isaiah to himself. Today he repeats them for us during this liturgical assembly, and in repeating them he invites us to rejoice again with the words of Isaiah: “I rejoice heartily in the Lord, in my God is the joy of my soul; for he has clothed me with a robe of salvation, and wrapped me in a mantle of justice” (Is 61:10).

The prophet's joyful proclamation is echoed in what St Paul writes in the passage from his Letter to the Thessalonians we have just heard. Isaiah affirms: “I rejoice heartily in the Lord” (Is 61:10), and Paul exhorts: “Rejoice! The Lord is at hand!” (cf. Phil 4:4-5; 1 Thes 5:16, 23).

The Lord Jesus is at hand at every moment of our life. He is at hand if we consider him in the perspective of Christmas, but he is also at hand if we look at him on the banks of the Jordan when he officially receives his messianic mission from the Father; lastly, he is at hand in the perspective of his return at the end of time.

Christ is at hand! He comes by virtue of the Holy Spirit to announce the Good News; he comes to cure and to set free, to proclaim a time of grace and salvation, in order to begin, already on the night of Bethlehem, the work of the world's redemption.

Let us therefore rejoice and exult! The Lord is at hand; he is coming to save us.

Amen!

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