



The Holy See

FIRST SUNDAY OF ADVENT

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 30 November 1997

1. *"But watch at all times, praying that you may have the strength ... to stand before the Son of Man" (Lk 21:36).*

Christ's words, taken from Luke's Gospel, introduce us to the profound meaning of the liturgy we are celebrating. On this First Sunday in Advent, which marks the beginning of the second year of immediate preparation for the Jubilee of the Year 2000, the exhortation to watch and pray so as to be ready to meet the Lord sounds as vibrant and timely as ever.

Our thoughts turn immediately to next Christmas, when once again we will kneel at the newborn Saviour's cradle. But we are also thinking of the great date of the Year 2000, when the whole Church will relive, with particular intensity, the mystery of the Incarnation of the Word. We are invited to hasten our steps towards that goal, letting ourselves be guided, especially during this liturgical year, by the light of the Holy Spirit. Indeed, "the primary tasks of the preparation for the Jubilee thus include a renewed appreciation of the presence and activity of the Spirit, who acts with in the Church" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 45).

In this perspective, the Committee for the Great Jubilee continues to carry out its work with praiseworthy effort. Its valuable ecclesial service deserves to be encouraged, especially in this phase, which is now so close to the historic date. Thanks to the initiatives of encouragement and co-ordination set in motion by this central office, the People of God will be given ever better guidance and motivation on their way to crossing the threshold of the third millennium.

2. Today the Church in Rome is also gathered in this basilica for another reason: the presentation of the Cross to the men and women missionaries who are taking on the task of proclaiming the

Gospel in the various milieus of this metropolis.

We have heard the words of the Apostle Paul: "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love to one another and to all men" (1 Thes 3:12). It is precisely with this hope that the Bishop of Rome presents the Cross to all of you, dear missionaries, and to your parish communities. Is it not here that we find the secret to the success of the City Mission? Jesus himself has linked the effectiveness of the disciples' Gospel preaching to their mutual love: "that they may all be one ... in us, so that the world may believe ..." (Jn 17:21).

The Mission's success depends on the intensity of love. The third Person of the Holy Trinity is subsistent love. Who better than he can pour out love into our hearts (cf. Rom 5:5)? Thus there is a providential coincidence between the opening of the second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee, dedicated to the Holy Spirit, and the presentation of the Cross to you, who during this year will have the leading role in the Mission throughout the city. I assure you of special help from the Holy Spirit, whom the Mission recognizes as its primary, undisputed agent.

3. *"Open the door to Christ, your Saviour!"*. This is the invitation at the heart of the City Mission, but it must first echo in our own hearts. We ourselves must first open the doors of our conscience and our life to Christ the Saviour, making ourselves docile to the Spirit's action, so that we are more and more conformed to the Lord. Indeed, he cannot be proclaimed unless his image is reflected and brought to life in us by the grace and action of the Spirit.

Dear missionaries, have a strong love for the individuals and families you will meet. People need love, understanding and forgiveness. Be especially attentive and close to those families having difficulties with their faith, their marriage, or because of poverty and suffering. Every family in Rome must see your acts and your words as so many signs of God's mercy and the Church's welcome. As far as possible, even after your visit, maintain a personal relationship with the families you meet and with each individual member.

Love the Church to which you belong and who sends you out as missionaries. Teach others to love her by your words and example. Share with her your passion for men's salvation. Love the Church which is holy, because she was purified by the blood Christ shed on the cross.

Strive to be holy too! Accept St Paul's exhortation re-echoed in the second reading, "so that he may establish your hearts unblamable in holiness" (1 Thes 3:13). The call to mission stems from the call to holiness. Respond to it generously. Open the doors of your life to the gift of the Holy Spirit, the Sanctifier, who renews the face of the earth and turns hearts of stone into hearts of flesh capable of loving as Christ loved us (cf. Jn 15:12).

4. As you visit every home and the families of your parishes, you will be able to say with the Apostle Paul: I came to you in weakness and in much fear and trembling, to proclaim to you Jesus

Christ and him crucified (cf. 1 Cor 2:1-3). The true strength of your missionary service lies in the simplicity of your proclamation, accompanied by love for the persons you visit. Compared to the many persuasive and attractive human messages which bombard peoples' lives every day, the Gospel can perhaps seem weak and poor when viewed superficially, but in reality it is the most powerful and effective word that can be spoken, because it penetrates hearts and, thanks to the Holy Spirit's mysterious action, leads to conversion and the encounter with God.

I would like to make my own the Apostle's invitation to grow and to distinguish yourselves by doing good: "you learned from us how you ought to live and to please God ... you do so more and more" (1 Thes 4:1). In fact, the Mission must be a suitable occasion for each parish to begin a new relationship with the people living in its territory, so that it is better able to reach everyone with the offer of faith, to be more available to requests and expectations and more present in each person's daily life. Thus the parish can be more authentically itself in its generous apostolic and missionary commitment to those who live outside it.

5. Dear missionaries of Rome! Today I say to each of you what I wrote to young people on 8 September last, inviting them to be willing to accept and help those who would like to approach the faith and the Church. May none of those the Father sets on our path go astray! (cf. *Letter to the Young People of Rome*, n. 9; *L'Osservatore Romano*, 14 September 1997, p. 6).

I also repeat it to you, *priests* and *deacons*, that you may rekindle the gift of God that is in you through the laying on of the Bishop's hands (cf. 2 Tm 1:6). With the Good Shepherd's love and concern, go in search of all who have strayed and are awaiting a gesture, a word from you to be able to rediscover God's love and forgiveness.

I would like to point the Mission out to you, *men* and *women religious*, as a fertile ground for giving a strong witness of joyful Gospel service. I ask cloistered religious, in particular, to put themselves at the very heart of the Mission by their constant prayer of adoration and contemplation of the mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection.

Once again I say to you, dear *young people* and *children*: your active participation in the City Mission is an indispensable gift for the community. Take the lead in the most beautiful and thrilling adventure to which you can devote your life: that of proclaiming Christ and his Gospel. With your gifts and talents made available to the Lord, you can and must contribute to the work of salvation in our beloved city.

I also renew my invitation to you, dear *Christian families*, rich in the gift of faith and love; I invite you to live your call to mission with dedication, offering your service to the other families who live near by, with friendship, solidarity and courage in presenting the truth of the Gospel.

I address a special thought to you, dear friends who are *sick, elderly or alone*. You have been

entrusted with a task of great importance in the Mission: offer your daily prayers and sufferings for the success of this apostolic undertaking, so that the Lord's grace may accompany the missionaries' visits to families and make the hearts of those who welcome them open and disposed to conversion.

6. "*Behold the days are coming ... when I will fulfil the promise I made*" (Jer 33:14). By the Spirit's action, the Lord leads the history of salvation down the ages until its ultimate fulfilment. "Send forth your Spirit and renew the face of the earth!". As you did for Mary, the Virgin of Advent, send your Spirit upon us. Send your Spirit, O Lord, on the city of Rome and renew its face! Send your Spirit into the whole world that is preparing to enter the third millennium of the Christian era.

Help us to accept, like Mary, the gift of your divine presence and protection. Help us to be docile to the promptings of the Spirit, so that we can proclaim with courage and apostolic zeal the Word who became flesh and came to dwell among us: Jesus Christ, God made Man, who has redeemed us by his Death and Resurrection. Amen!

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