



The Holy See

20th ANNIVERSARY OF PONTIFICATE

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 18 October 1998

1. *"When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?" (Lk 18:8).*

Throughout the 2,000 years of the Christian era, this question which Christ once asked his disciples has often challenged the men whom divine Providence has called to take up the Petrine ministry. I am thinking at the moment of all my Predecessors, recent and remote. I am thinking especially of myself and of what happened on 16 October 1978. At today's celebration, I give thanks to the Lord with you for these 20 years of Pontificate.

I remember that 26 August 1978, when the words addressed to my immediate Predecessor by the first Cardinal in the order of precedence and Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church rang out in the Sistine Chapel: "Do you accept your canonical election as Supreme Pontiff?". "I accept", Cardinal Albino Luciani replied. "By what name do you wish to be called?", Cardinal Villot continued. "John Paul" was the answer.

At the time who would have thought that a few weeks later this same question would be addressed to me as his successor? To the first question: "Do you accept", I replied: "In the obedience of faith before Christ my Lord, abandoning myself to the Mother of Christ and the Church, and conscious of the great difficulties, I accept". And to the next question: "By what name do you wish to be called", I too said: "John Paul".

After the Resurrection, Christ asked Peter three times: "Do you love me?" (cf. *Jn 21:15-17*). The Apostle, aware of his own weakness, answered: "Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you", and received from him the mandate: "*Feed my sheep*" (*Jn 21:17*). The Lord entrusted this mission to Peter and, through him, to all his successors. He addressed these same words to the one who is speaking to you today, when he was entrusted with the task of strengthening the faith of his brethren.

How many times my thoughts have returned to Jesus' words, which Luke has recorded for us in

his Gospel. Shortly before facing his Passion, Jesus said to Peter: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and you, when you have turned again, *strengthen your brethren*” (Lk 22:31-33). “Strengthening his brethren in the faith” is thus one of the essential aspects of the pastoral service entrusted to Peter and his successors. In today’s liturgy Jesus asks the question: “When the Son of man comes, will he find faith on earth?”. This is a question that challenges everyone, but in particular the successors of Peter.

“When he comes, will he find...?”. His coming draws closer with the passing of each year. In celebrating the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, we always say after the consecration: “We proclaim your death, O Lord, we proclaim your resurrection; we await your return in glory”.

When he comes, will he find faith on earth?

2. This Sunday’s *liturgical readings* can suggest a *twofold answer* to his question.

We find the first in St Paul’s exhortation to his trusted co-worker, Timothy. The Apostle writes: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word, be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching” (2 Tm 4:1-2).

This text presents in summary form a precise plan of action. Indeed, the apostolic ministry, especially the ministry of Peter, consists *first and foremost in teaching*. Anyone who teaches divine truth must himself “remain faithful”, as the Apostle also writes to Timothy, “to what he has learned and believed” (2 Tm 3:14).

The Bishops, and even more so the Pope, must constantly return to the sources of wisdom that lead to salvation. They must love God’s word. After 20 years of service in the Chair of Peter, I cannot fail to ask myself a few questions today. Have you observed all this? Are you a diligent and watchful teacher of faith in the Church? Have you sought to bring the great work of the Second Vatican Council closer to the people of today? Have you tried to satisfy the expectations of believers within the Church, and that hunger for truth which is felt in the world outside the Church?

And St Paul’s invitation echoes in my thoughts: “I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word” (2 Tm 4:1-2)! Preach the word! This is my duty, to do all I can so that when the Son of man comes, he will find faith on earth.

3. There is another answer we can draw from the first biblical reading taken from the Book of Exodus. It presents the symbolic image of Moses *in prayer with his hands held up to heaven*, while from a hilltop he follows the battle his people are fighting against the Amalekites. Whenever Moses

raised his hands Israel prevailed, and since Moses felt his arms growing weary, a stone was found for him to sit on while Aaron and Hur, one on each side, held up his hands. And he continued to pray until sunset when Joshua defeated Amalek (cf. *Ex 17:11-13*).

This image has extraordinary expressive power: *the image of the pastor at prayer*. It would be hard to find a more eloquent reference for all the situations in which the new Israel, the Church, must combat various "Amalekites". In a certain sense, everything depends on Moses raising up his hands.

The shepherd's prayer supports the flock. This is certain. However, it is also true that *the people's prayer supports whoever has the task of leading them*. So it has been since the beginning. When Peter was imprisoned in Jerusalem to be condemned to death, like James, after the festival, the whole Church prayed for him (cf. *Acts 12:1-5*). The Acts of the Apostles recount that he was miraculously released from prison (cf. *Acts 12:6-11*).

So it has happened countless times down the ages. I myself can attest to this, since I have experienced it personally. The prayer of the Church is very powerful!

4. Here I would like to thank all who have expressed their solidarity to me in recent days. Thank you for your many messages of congratulations; thank you especially for constantly remembering me in prayer. I am thinking in a special way of the sick and suffering, who are close to me with the offering of their pain. I am thinking of the cloistered monasteries and the many men and women religious, of the young people and families who never cease praying with one voice to the Lord for me and my universal ministry. During these days I have felt the Church's heart beating close beside me!

I thank all of you present in St Peter's Square, who have joined today in my prayer of praise to God for 20 years of service to the Church and to the world as Bishop of Rome. I extend a special word of gratitude to the President of Italy and to all who have accompanied him here this morning to honour me with their presence.

With fraternal affection I also thank Cardinal Camillo Ruini who, at the beginning of the celebration, expressed the fidelity you all feel to Christ and to the Successor of Peter. I am deeply moved by the presence of so many Cardinals, Archbishops and Bishops, and especially by the priests of the Diocese of Rome and the Curia who are taking part in this solemn Eucharistic concelebration. At this moment, dear friends, I would like to tell you how much I have appreciated your support during these years of service to the Church in the Chair of Peter. I would like publicly to express my gratitude to the city of Rome and to Italy for the warm welcome they have given me since the very first days of my Petrine ministry. I ask the Lord to reward you generously for all you have done and are doing to assist me in the task I have been given.

Dear brothers and sisters of Rome, Italy and the world! This is the meaning of our prayerful assembly in St Peter's Square: to give thanks to God for his provident care in constantly guiding and sustaining his People on their journey through history; to renew, on my part, the "yes" I gave 20 years ago, trusting in divine grace; to offer, on your part, a commitment to pray always for this Pope, so that he may fulfil his mission.

With all my heart I once again entrust my life and ministry to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Redeemer and Mother of the Church. To her I repeat with filial abandonment: *Totus tuus!*

Amen.

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