



The Holy See

JUBILEE OF THE ELDERLY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday 17 September 2000

1. "Who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8: 29). This is the question Christ puts to his disciples after asking them about the common opinion of the people. He thus deepens the dialogue with the disciples, as if obliging them to make a more direct and personal response. Peter replies promptly and with clear faith on behalf of all: "You are the Christ" (Mk 8: 29)!

Jesus' dialogue with the Apostles, which rings out in this square today on the occasion of the Jubilee of the Elderly, impels us to think deeply about the meaning of the event we are celebrating. In the Jubilee Year, which recalls the 2,000th anniversary of Christ's birth, the whole Church raises to the Lord in a very special way "a great prayer of praise and thanksgiving, especially for the gift of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of the Redemption which he accomplished" (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 32).

"Who do you say that I am?". With regard to this question which continues to challenge us, *we are here to make Peter's answer our own*, recognizing in Christ the Word made flesh, the Lord of our life.

2. Dear brothers and sisters who have come on pilgrimage to Rome for your Jubilee! I offer you my most cordial welcome, and I am pleased to celebrate this special moment of grace and ecclesial communion with you.

I greet you all with affection. I extend a particular greeting to Cardinal James Francis Stafford and to all my confrères in the Episcopate and in the priesthood who are here. I send a special thought to all the elderly Bishops and priests throughout the world, as well as to those who, in the religious or secular life, have spent their energies fulfilling the duties incumbent on their state. Thank you for

your example of love, dedication and fidelity to the vocation you received!

I would like to express my appreciation to those who have faced difficulties and hardships in order not to miss this event. However, at the same time, my thoughts also turn to all those elderly persons, alone or ill, who have not been able to leave their homes, but have joined us in spirit and are following this celebration on radio or television. I assure everyone who is in a precarious or particularly difficult situation of my warm closeness and remembrance in prayer.

3. The Jubilee of the Elderly that we are celebrating today has special importance in view of the increasing numbers of elderly people in contemporary society. Celebrating the Jubilee means first of all accepting *Christ's message for these people*, but at the same time *treasuring the message of experience and wisdom which they bring* in this particular season of their life. For many of them old-age is the time *to reorganize their lives*, making the most of the experience and abilities acquired.

In fact, as I had the opportunity to stress in the Letter to the Elderly (cf. n. 13) - *old age is even a time of grace* which is an invitation to be united with a deeper love to Christ's saving mystery and to participate more profoundly in his plan of salvation. The Church looks with love and trust upon you elderly people, dedicating herself to encouraging the fulfilment of a human, social and spiritual context in which every person can live this important stage of his life fully and with dignity.

In these very days, the Pontifical Council for the Laity has made a contribution to this aspect of pastoral care by promoting reflection on the theme: "*The gift of a long life: responsibility and hope*". I deeply appreciated this initiative and hope that this symposium will encourage in the families, religious and lay staff of homes which take in the elderly and in all who work in services for them the desire to contribute actively to the renewal of a specific social and pastoral commitment.

In fact, much can still be done to increase awareness of the elderly's needs, to help them express their abilities as well as possible, to facilitate their active integration in the life of the Church and, especially, to ensure that their personal dignity is respected and valued always and everywhere.

4. *This Sunday's readings*, which invite us to examine the way in which God's saving plan is fulfilled, shed light on all of this. From the book of the prophet Isaiah we have heard *the description of the suffering Servant*, which is a portrait of a person who makes himself totally available to God. "The Lord God has opened my ear, and I was not rebellious, I turned not backward" (*Is* 50: 5). The Servant of Yahweh accepts the mission entrusted to him, even if it is arduous and full of pitfalls: his trust in God gives him the necessary strength and resources to achieve it, remaining firm even in adversity.

The mystery of suffering and redemption announced by the figure of the Servant of Yahweh is

fulfilled in Christ. As we heard in today's Gospel, Jesus began to teach the Apostles "that the Son of man must suffer many things" (Mk 8: 31). At first sight, this prospect seems humanly difficult to accept, as the immediate reaction of Peter and the Apostles shows (cf. Mk 8: 32-35). And how could it be otherwise? Suffering can only create fear! But precisely in the redemptive suffering of Christ lies *the true answer to the challenge of pain*, which weighs so much on our human condition. Indeed, Christ took upon himself our sufferings, he assumed our pain, casting a new light of hope and life upon them through his Cross and his Resurrection.

5. Dear brothers and sisters, elderly friends! In a world like this which often makes a myth of strength and power, *it is your mission to witness to the values which truly count*, going beyond appearances, and which endure forever because they are engraved on the heart of every human being and guaranteed by the Word of God.

Precisely as so-called "senior citizens", you have a specific contribution to make to the development of a *genuine "culture of life"* - *you have, we have, because I also belong to your age group* - witnessing that every moment of our existence is a gift of God, and that every season of human life has special treasures to put at the disposal of all.

You yourselves can experience how time spent without the disturbance of so many occupations can encourage a deeper reflection and a fuller dialogue with God in prayer. Your maturity also spurs you to share with those who are younger the wisdom accumulated with experience, sustaining them in their effort of growth and dedicating time and attention to them at the moment when they are opening themselves to the future and seeking their own way in life. You can accomplish a truly precious task for them.

Dear brothers and sisters! The Church looks to you with great esteem and trust. *The Church needs you!* But civil society also needs you! This is what I said a month ago to the young people, and what I say today to you, to us, elderly people! The Church needs us! But civil society also needs us! May you be able to use generously the time you have at your disposal and the talents God has granted to you in being open to assisting and supporting others. Help proclaim the Gospel as catechists, leaders of the liturgy, witnesses of Christian life. Devote time and energy to prayer, to reading the word of God and to reflection upon it.

6. "I by my works will show you my faith" (Jas 2: 18). With these words, the Apostle James invited us not to be afraid of openly and courageously expressing our faith in Christ in our daily lives, especially in works of charity and solidarity with those who are in need (cf. vv. 15-16). Today I thank the Lord not only for all the brothers and sisters who witness to this active faith in daily service to the elderly, but also for all elderly people who, to the best of their ability, still continue to do their utmost for others.

In this festive celebration of the Jubilee of the Elderly you would like to renew *your profession of*

faith in Christ, the one Saviour of man, and *your adherence to the Church*, in the commitment to a life lived under the banner of love.

Today we would like to give thanks together for the gift of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of the Redemption he accomplished. Let us continue the pilgrimage of our daily lives in the certainty that human history in general and the events of each person's life are part of a divine plan on which the mystery of Christ's Resurrection sheds light.

We ask Mary, the Virgin pilgrim in the faith and our heavenly Mother, to accompany us on the path of life and to help us say, like her, our "yes" to God's will, singing our *Magnificat* with her in everlasting, heartfelt trust and joy.

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