



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF OUR LADY OF SUFFRAGE AND ST. AUGUSTINE OF CANTERBURY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 1 April 2001

1. *"The Lord has done great things for us"* (cf. Ps 125 [126]: 3). These words, which we repeated as the refrain to the Responsorial Psalm, beautifully summarize the biblical themes presented today on the Fifth Sunday of Lent. Already in the first reading, taken from the so-called "Second Isaiah", the anonymous prophet of the Babylonian exile announces the salvation that God has prepared for his people. The departure from Babylon and the return to the homeland will be like a new and greater Exodus.

At that time God had freed the Hebrews from slavery in Egypt and overcome the obstacle of the sea; now he brings his people back to the promised land, marking out a safe path through the desert. *"Behold, I am doing a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert"* (Is 43: 19).

"A new thing": we Christians know that, when the Old Testament speaks of "new realities", the ultimate reference is to the truly great "newness" in history: Christ, who came into the world to free mankind from the slavery of sin, evil and death.

2. *"Woman ... has no one condemned you? ... neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again"* (Jn 8: 10-11). Jesus is newness of life for those who open their hearts and, after acknowledging their sins, receive his saving mercy. In today's Gospel text, the Lord offers this gift of his love to the adulteress, who is forgiven and restored to her full human and spiritual dignity. He also offers it to her accusers, but their spirit remains closed and impenetrable.

Here is an invitation to meditate on the paradoxical refusal of his merciful love. It is as though the

trial against Jesus were already beginning, a trial that we will relive in a few days during the events of his Passion: it will result in his unjust sentence to death on the cross. On the one hand, the redeeming love of Christ, freely offered to everyone; on the other, the closure of those who, moved by envy, seek a motive to kill him. Accused even of opposing the Law, Jesus is "put to the test": if he absolves the woman caught in flagrant adultery, it will be said that he has transgressed the precepts of Moses; if he condemns her, it will be said that he is inconsistent with his message of mercy towards sinners.

But Jesus does not fall into the trap. By his silence he invites everyone to self-reflection. On the one hand, he invites the woman to acknowledge the wrong committed; on the other, he invites her accusers not to shrink from an examination of conscience: *"Let him who is without sin among you be the first to throw a stone at her"* (Jn 8: 7).

The woman's situation is certainly serious. But the message flows precisely from this situation: in whatever condition we find ourselves, we can always open ourselves to conversion and receive forgiveness for our sins. *"Neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again"* (Jn 8: 11). On Calvary, by the supreme sacrifice of his life, the Messiah will seal for every man and woman the infinite gift of God's pardon and mercy.

3. Dear brothers and sisters, I am very pleased to be here today with you in this newly founded parish. Resulting from the consolidation of the Parishes of Our Lady of Suffrage and St Augustine of Canterbury, it was consecrated a year ago by the Cardinal Vicar, whom I greet with affection. Together with him I greet the Bishop for this area, your dear parish priest, Fr Giulio Ramiccia, and the priests who work with him. I express my cordial gratitude to all who welcomed me in your name at the beginning of Holy Mass.

My gratitude also goes to the sisters who live and work in this area: the Minim Sisters of Our Lady of Suffrage, the Daughters of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of the Congregation of Our Lady of Mount Carmel, the Nursing Sisters of Mercy and the *Adsis* Community. I affectionately embrace those who are cared for in these places throughout the parish and those who serve them daily. I greet the members of the pastoral and the finance councils, as well as the members of the various groups and associations of your community. I greet you, children, and everyone here, extending my thoughts to the residents of the entire district of Torre Maura.

4. I come among you on the Sunday that our Diocese dedicates in a special way to the witness of charity. In your parish, as in other suburban neighbourhoods of the city, there are many situations of hardship: from drug addiction to usury, from prostitution to youth problems, from unemployment to the difficult integration of immigrants.

Your community is quite active in these areas and it tries to give concrete answers to those who live in serious difficulties. Dear friends, during this time of Lent intensify your concern for those in

need. Together with fasting and prayer, charity is one of the distinctive elements of the Lenten journey. Therefore, spread more and more good and make concern for the "least" one of the cornerstones of your pastoral activity.

Use every means to help the residents of your area to discover that Christ and his Gospel answer the real needs of the individual and the family. May this spirit inspire the programme of family visits, which began on the occasion of the City Mission and which you are now appropriately continuing.

I am now thinking with special affection of you, dear young people, who were the protagonists of the last World Youth Day in the heart of the Great Jubilee. I know that in your parish you welcomed about 1,500 young people from various parts of the world. I congratulate you for what you did in a spirit of self-denial, offering the adults proof of your goodwill. Continue to make your mark in the community by your evangelical fidelity, so that through you many of your peers may encounter Jesus. I await you next Thursday in St Peter's Square, with all the young people of Rome, to prepare ourselves to celebrate the World Youth Day which, as you know, will be next Sunday, Palm Sunday.

5. *"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3: 8). To know Christ! On this last stage of our Lenten journey we are encouraged even more by the liturgy to deepen our knowledge of Jesus, to contemplate his suffering and merciful face, and to prepare ourselves to experience the splendour of his resurrection. We cannot remain on the surface. We must have a deep, personal experience of the richness of Christ's love. Only in this way, as the Apostle says, can we "know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that if possible [we] may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3: 10).*

Like Paul, every Christian is on a journey; the Church is on a journey. Let us not stop, brothers and sisters, or slow our pace. On the contrary, let us strive with all our strength for the goal to which God calls us. Let us run towards Easter, now close at hand. May Mary, the Virgin of the Way, guide and accompany us with her protection. May she, the Virgin whom you venerate here as "Our Lady of Suffrage", intercede for us now and at the hour of our death, of our final encounter with Christ. Amen!