



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE SUPREME PONTIFF
JOHN PAUL II
CONCERNING
PILGRIMAGE TO THE PLACES
LINKED TO THE HISTORY OF SALVATION**

*To all who are preparing
to celebrate in faith the Great Jubilee*

1. After years of preparation, we find ourselves at the threshold of the Great Jubilee. Much has been done during these years throughout the Church to plan for this event of grace. But now, as in the last stage of preparation for a journey, the time has come for the finishing touches. The Great Jubilee is not just a series of functions to be held, but a great interior experience to be lived. External factors make sense only in so far as they express a deeper commitment which touches people's hearts. It was in fact this inner dimension that I wished to point out to everyone in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* and the Jubilee Bull of Indiction *Incarnationis Mysterium*, both of which were well received by a great many people. In them the Bishops found helpful suggestions, and the themes proposed for the different years of preparation have been amply meditated upon. For all of this I wish to thank the Lord and to express my sincere appreciation to the Pastors and the entire People of God.

Now, the imminence of the Jubilee prompts me to offer some thoughts connected with my own desire, God willing, to make a special Jubilee pilgrimage, to visit some of the places which are closely linked to the Incarnation of the Word of God, the event which the Holy Year of 2000 directly recalls.

My meditation therefore turns to the "places" in which God has chosen to "pitch his tent" among us (*Jn* 1:14; cf. *Ex* 40:34-35; *1 Kgs* 8:10-13), thus enabling man to encounter him more directly. In a sense, I am completing what I wrote in *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, in which the dominant perspective, against the background of the history of salvation, was the fundamental relevance of

“time”. In fact, the spatial dimension is no less decisive than the temporal in the concrete accomplishment of the mystery of the Incarnation.

2. At first sight, it may seem puzzling to speak of precise “spaces” in connection with God. No less than time, is not space completely subject to God's control? Everything has come from his hands and there is no place where God cannot be found: “The Lord's is the earth and its fullness, the world and all its people. It is he who set it on the seas, on the waters he made it firm” (*Ps 24:1-2*). God is equally present in every corner of the earth, so that the whole world may be considered the “temple” of his presence.

Yet this does not take away from the fact that, just as time can be marked by *kairoi*, by special moments of grace, space too may by analogy bear the stamp of particular saving actions of God. Moreover, this is an intuition present in all religions, which not only have sacred times but also sacred spaces, where the encounter with the divine may be experienced more intensely than it would normally be in the vastness of the cosmos.

3. In relation to this common religious tendency, the Bible offers its own specific message, setting the theme of “sacred space” within the context of the history of salvation. On the one hand, Scripture warns against the inherent risks of defining space of this kind, when this is done as a way of divinizing nature: here we should recall the powerful anti-idolatrous polemic of the Prophets in the name of fidelity to Yahweh, the God of the Exodus. On the other hand, the Bible does not exclude a cultic use of space, in so far as this expresses fully the particularity of God's intervention in the history of Israel. Sacred space is thus gradually “concentrated” in the Jerusalem Temple, where the God of Israel wishes to be honoured and, in a sense, encountered. The eyes of Israelite pilgrims turn to the Temple and great is their joy when they reach the place where God has made his home: “I rejoiced when I heard them say, 'Let us go to God's house'. And now our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem!” (*Ps 122:1-2*).

In the New Testament, this “concentration” of sacred space reaches its summit in Christ, who is, in his person, the new “temple” (cf. *Jn 2:21*), in which dwells the “fullness of Godhead” (*Col 2:9*). With his coming, worship was destined radically to surpass material shrines in order to become worship “in spirit and truth” (*Jn 4:24*). In Christ, then, the Church too is considered by the New Testament to be a “temple” (cf. *1 Cor 3:17*), as is the individual disciple of Christ, since each is inhabited by the Holy Spirit (cf. *1 Cor 6:19*; *Rm 8:11*). Clearly, this does not mean that Christians cannot have places of worship, as the history of the Church well shows; but it must not be forgotten that these are intended only to serve the liturgical and fraternal life of the community, at the same time knowing that the presence of God by its nature cannot be restricted to any one place, since his presence, which has its fullest expression and communication in Christ, pervades all space.

The mystery of the Incarnation therefore reshapes the universal experience of “sacred space”, on the one hand relativizing it, and on the other hand underlining its importance in new terms. The

very “taking of flesh” by the Word (*Jn 1:14*) is in fact a reference to space. In Jesus of Nazareth, God has assumed the features typical of human nature, including a person's belonging to a particular people and a particular land. “*Hic de Virgine Maria Iesus Christus natus est*” – these words take on a peculiar eloquence in Bethlehem, inscribed over the place where, according to tradition, Jesus was born: “Here Jesus Christ was born of the Virgin Mary”. The physical particularity of the land and its geographical determination are inseparable from the truth of the human flesh assumed by the Word.

4. For this reason, in the perspective of the two thousandth anniversary of the Incarnation, I have a strong desire to go personally to pray in the most important places which, from the Old to the New Testament, have seen God's interventions, which culminate in the mysteries of the Incarnation and of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. These places are already indelibly etched in my memory, from the time when in 1965 I had the opportunity to visit the Holy Land. It was an unforgettable experience. Today I still gladly go back to what I wrote then, pages full of emotion. “I come across these places which you have filled with yourself once and for all. ... Oh place ... You were transformed so many times before you, His place, became mine. When for the first time He filled you, you were not yet an outer place; you were but His Mother's womb. How I long to know that the stones I am treading in Nazareth are the same which her feet touched when she was Your only place on earth. Meeting You through the stone touched by the feet of Your Mother. Oh, corner of the earth, place in the holy land – what kind of place are you in me? My steps cannot tread on you; I must kneel. Thus I confirm today you were indeed a place of meeting. Kneeling down I imprint a seal on you. You will remain here with my seal – you will remain – and I will take you and transform you within me into the place of new testimony. I will walk away as a witness who testifies across the millennia” (Karol Wojtyła, *Poezje. Poems*, Wydawnictwo Literackie, Kraków 1998, p. 168).

When I wrote those words, more than thirty years ago, I could not have imagined that the witness to which I pledged myself then I would render today as the Successor of Peter, at the service of the whole Church. It is a witness which sets me in a long procession of people, who for two thousand years have gone in search of the “footprints” of God in that land, rightly called “holy”, pursuing them as it were in the stones, the hills, the waters which provided the setting for the earthly life of the Son of God. Since ancient times the travel diary of the pilgrim woman Egeria has been well known. How many pilgrims, how many saints, have followed her path down the centuries! Even when events in history disturbed the essentially peaceful nature of pilgrimage to the Holy Land, giving it an aspect which, whatever the intentions involved, was hard to reconcile with the image of the Crucified One, more sensitive Christian souls sought only to find the living memory of Christ on that soil. And Providence decreed that, alongside the brethren of the Eastern Churches, for Western Christianity it would be the sons of Francis of Assisi, the saint of poverty, gentleness and peace, who in truly evangelical style would give expression to the legitimate Christian desire to protect the places where our spiritual roots are found.

5. It is in this spirit, God willing, that I intend on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 to follow the traces of the history of salvation in the land in which it took place.

The starting-point will be certain key places of the Old Testament. In this way I wish to express the Church's awareness of her irrevocable links with the ancient people of the Covenant. For us too Abraham is our "father in faith" *par excellence* (cf. *Rom 4*; *Gal 3:6-9*; *Heb 11:8-19*). In the Gospel of John we read the words which one day Christ said of him: "Abraham rejoiced that he was to see my day; he saw it and was glad" (8:56).

The first stage of the journey which I hope to make is linked to Abraham. In fact, if it be God's will, I would like to go to Ur of the Chaldees, the present-day Tell el-Muqayyar in southern Iraq, the city where, according to the biblical account, Abraham heard the word of the Lord which took him away from his own land, from his people, from himself in a sense, to make him the instrument of a plan of salvation which embraced the future people of the Covenant and indeed all the peoples of the world: "The Lord said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. ... By you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves'" (*Gn 12:1-3*). With these words, the great journey of the People of God began. It is not only those who boast physical descent from him who look to Abraham, but also all those, and they are countless, who regard themselves as his "spiritual" offspring, because they share his faith and unreserved abandonment to the saving initiative of the Almighty.

6. The experience of the people of Abraham unfolded over hundreds of years, touching many places in the Near East. At the heart of this experience there are the events of the Exodus, when the people of Israel, after the hard trial of slavery, went forth under the leadership of Moses towards the Land of freedom. Three moments mark that journey, each of them linked to mountainous places charged with mystery. There rises first of all, in the early stage, Mount Horeb, as Sinai is sometimes called in the Bible, where Moses received the revelation of God's name, the sign of his mystery and of his powerful saving presence: "I am who I am" (*Ex 3:14*). No less than Abraham, Moses was asked to entrust himself to God's plan, and to put himself at the head of his people. Thus began the dramatic event of the liberation, which Israel would always remember as the founding experience of its faith.

On the journey through the desert, it was again Sinai which was the setting for the sealing of the Covenant between Yahweh and his people, thus linking the mountain to the gift of the Ten Commandments, the ten "words" which commit Israel to a life fully obedient to the will of God. In reality, these "words" are indicative of the pillars of the universal moral law written in every human heart, but they were given to Israel within the context of a mutual pact of fidelity, whereby the people undertook to love God, recalling the wonders he had done in the Exodus, and God guaranteed his enduring kindness: "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, from the house of slavery" (*Ex 20:2*). God and the people pledged themselves to each

other. If, in the vision of the burning bush, the place of the “name” and of the “plan” of God, Horeb, was above all “the mountain of faith”, now for the pilgrim people in the desert it became the place of encounter and of the mutual pact, in a sense therefore “the mountain of love”. How often down the centuries, in denouncing the faithlessness of the Covenant people, did the Prophets see it as a kind of “marital” infidelity, a genuine betrayal of God the bridegroom by the people, his bride (cf. *Jer 2:2; Ezek 16:1-43*).

At the end of the Exodus journey, there rises another peak, Mount Nebo, from which Moses could see the Promised Land (cf. *Dt 32:49*), without the joy of setting foot there but certain in the knowledge of having reached it. His gaze from Nebo is the very symbol of hope. From that mountain he could see that God had kept his promises. Once more, however, he had to abandon himself trustingly to the divine omnipotence for the sake of the final accomplishment of the plan that had been foretold.

It will probably not be possible for me on my pilgrimage to visit all these places. But I would like at least, please God, to visit Ur, the place of Abraham's origins, and then go to the famous Monastery of Saint Catherine, on Sinai, near the mountain of the Covenant, which in a way speaks of the entire mystery of the Exodus, the enduring paradigm of the new Exodus which was to be fully accomplished on Golgotha.

7. These and other itineraries of the Old Testament are full of meaning for us, but clearly the Jubilee Year, the solemn commemoration of the Incarnation of the Word, draws us above all to the places where Jesus lived his life.

First of all, I very much want to visit Nazareth, the town linked to the actual moment of the Incarnation and the place where Jesus grew “in wisdom, age and grace before God and men” (*Lk 2:52*). Here Mary heard the Angel's greeting: “Hail, O full of grace, the Lord is with you!” (*Lk 1:28*). Here Mary spoke her *fiat* to the message that called her to be mother of the Saviour and, overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, to become the womb that would welcome the Son of God.

And how could I not then visit Bethlehem, where Christ was born, and the shepherds and the wise men gave voice to the adoration of all humanity? At Bethlehem too there rang forth for the first time that greeting of peace which, spoken by the Angels, would continue to echo from generation to generation until our own day.

Especially charged with meaning will be the visit to Jerusalem, the place of the death on the Cross and of the Resurrection of the Lord Jesus.

Certainly, there are many other places associated with the earthly life of the Saviour and so many of them deserve to be visited. How can we forget, for instance, the Mount of the Beatitudes, or the Mount of the Transfiguration, or Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus entrusted the keys of the

Kingdom of Heaven to Peter, establishing him as the foundation of his Church (cf. *Mt* 16:13-19)? In the Holy Land, from north to south, we may say that everything recalls Christ. But I will have to be satisfied with the more important places, and Jerusalem in a sense sums them all up. There, please God, I intend to immerse myself in prayer, bearing in my heart the whole Church. There I shall contemplate the places where Christ gave his life and took it up again in the Resurrection, imparting to us the gift of his Spirit. There my wish would be to cry out once more the great consoling certainty that “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (*Jn* 3:16).

8. Among the places in Jerusalem most closely tied to the earthly life of Christ, I will have to visit the Upper Room, where Jesus instituted the Eucharist, the source and summit of the Church's life. Here too, according to tradition, the Apostles were gathered in prayer with Mary, the Mother of Christ, when on the day of Pentecost the Holy Spirit was poured out upon them. Then began the final stage of the journey of the history of salvation, the time of the Church, Body and Bride of Christ, a people making its pilgrim way through time, called to be the sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the entire human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 1).

The visit to the Upper Room is thus meant to be a return to the very origins of the Church. The Successor of Peter, who in Rome lives at the place where the Prince of the Apostles faced martyrdom, cannot but constantly retrace the steps to the place where Peter, on the day of Pentecost, began to proclaim in a loud voice with the inebriating power of the Spirit, the “good news” that Jesus Christ is Lord (cf. *Acts* 2:36).

9. The visit to the Holy Places of the Redeemer's earthly life leads logically to the places which were important for the infant Church and which saw the missionary outreach of the first Christian community. There are many of them, if we follow the account of Luke in the Acts of the Apostles. But in particular I would also like to be able to pause in meditation in two cities linked especially to the story of Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. I am thinking first of all of Damascus, the place which recalls his conversion. The future Apostle was in fact on his way to that city in the role of persecutor, when Christ himself crossed his path: “Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me?” (*Acts* 9:4). From there, the zeal of Paul, now conquered by Christ, spread with unstoppable force to affect a large part of the then known world. The cities evangelized by him were many. It would be nice to be able to visit Athens, where Paul gave his magnificent speech in the Areopagus (cf. *Acts* 17:22-31). If we consider the role played by Greece in shaping the culture of the ancient world, we understand how that speech of Paul's can in a sense be considered the very symbol of the Gospel's encounter with human culture.

10. Abandoning myself completely to the divine will, I would be happy if this plan could be put into effect at least in its main points. It would be an exclusively religious pilgrimage in its nature and purpose, and I would be saddened if anyone were to attach other meanings to this plan of mine. Indeed, spiritually I am already on this journey, since even to go just in thought to those places

means in a way to read anew the Gospel itself; it means to follow the roads which Revelation itself has taken.

To go in a spirit of prayer from one place to another, from one city to another, in the area marked especially by God's intervention, helps us not only to live our life as a journey, but also gives us a vivid sense of a God who has gone before us and leads us on, who himself set out on man's path, a God who does not look down on us from on high, but who became our travelling companion.

The pilgrimage to the Holy Places thus becomes a highly meaningful experience and in a sense is evoked by every other Jubilee pilgrimage. The Church cannot forget her roots. Indeed, she must return to them again and again if she is to remain completely faithful to God's plan. This is why I wrote in the Bull *Incarnationis Misterium* that the Jubilee, celebrated at the same time in the Holy Land, in Rome and in all the local Churches throughout the world, "will have, as it were, two centres: on the one hand, the City where Providence chose to place the See of the Successor of Peter, and on the other hand, the Holy Land, where the Son of God was born as a man, taking our flesh from a Virgin whose name was Mary" (No. 2).

While this focus on the Holy Land expresses the Christian duty to remember, it also seeks to honour the deep bond which Christians continue to have with the Jewish people from whom Christ came according to the flesh (cf. *Rom* 9:5). Much ground has been covered in recent years, especially since the Second Vatican Council, in opening a fruitful dialogue with the people whom God chose as the first recipients of his promises and of the Covenant. The Jubilee must be another opportunity to deepen the sense of the bonds that unite us, helping to remove once and for all the misunderstandings which, sad to say, have so often through the centuries marked with bitterness the relationship between Christians and Jews.

Nor can we forget that the Holy Land is also dear to the followers of Islam, who look to it with special veneration. I dearly hope that my visit to the Holy Places will provide an opportunity to meet them as well, so that, without compromising clarity of witness, there may be a strengthening of the grounds for mutual understanding and esteem, as well as for cooperation in the effort to witness to the value of religious commitment and the longing for a society more attuned to God's designs, a society which respects every human being and all creation.

11. In this journey through the places where God chose to pitch his "tent" among us, great is my desire to be welcomed as a pilgrim and brother not only by the Catholic communities, whom I shall meet with special joy, but also by the other Churches which have lived uninterruptedly in the Holy Places and have been their custodians with fidelity and love of the Lord.

More than any other pilgrimage which I have made, the one I am about to undertake in the Holy Land during the Jubilee event will be marked by the desire expressed in Christ's prayer to the Father that his disciples "may all be one" (*Jn* 17:21), a prayer which challenges us more vigorously

at the exceptional time which opens the Third Millennium. For this reason, I trust that all our brothers and sisters in faith, in a spirit of openness to the Holy Spirit, will see in my pilgrim steps in the land travelled by Christ a “doxology” for the salvation which we have all received, and I would be happy if we could gather together in the places of our common origin, to bear witness to Christ our unity (cf. *Ut Unum Sint*, 23) and to confirm our mutual commitment to the restoration of full communion.

12. It therefore only remains for me to extend a warm invitation to the entire Christian community to set out spiritually upon the path of the Jubilee pilgrimage. This can be done in the many ways that I suggested in the Bull of Indiction. But it is certain that many will also do so by actually journeying to the places that have been particularly important in the history of salvation. In any event, we must all make that inward journey which seeks to move us away from whatever, in us and around us, is contrary to God's law, so as to be able to encounter Christ fully, professing our faith in him and receiving the abundance of his mercy.

In the Gospel, Jesus seems always to be travelling about. He seems to be in a hurry to move from one place to another in order to proclaim the imminent coming of God's Kingdom. He proclaims and he calls. His “Follow me” prompted the Apostles' ready response (cf. *Mk* 1:16-20). Let us all feel touched by his voice, his call, his summons to a new life.

I say this especially to young people, before whom life is opening up like a journey full of surprises and promises.

I say it to everyone: let us set out in the footsteps of Christ!

May the journey that I intend to make in the Jubilee Year be an image of the journey of the whole Church in her desire to be ever more ready to respond to the voice of the Spirit, in order to go more quickly to meet Christ, the Bridegroom: “The Spirit and the Bride say, 'Come!'” (*Rev* 22:17).

From the Vatican, on 29 June, the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, in the year 1999, the twenty-first of my Pontificate.