



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 2002

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We are preparing to follow the path of Lent, which will lead us to the solemn celebration of the central mystery of faith, the mystery of the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. We are preparing for the favourable time which the Church offers the faithful so that they may contemplate the work of salvation accomplished by our Lord on the Cross. The heavenly Father's saving plan was completed in the free and total gift to us of the only begotten Son. "No one takes my life from me, but I lay it down of my own accord" (*Jn 10:18*), Jesus declares, leaving no doubt that he decides to sacrifice his own life for the salvation of the world. In confirmation of so great a gift of love, the Redeemer goes on: "Greater love has no one than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (*Jn 15:13*).

Lent, the providential time for conversion, helps us to contemplate this stupendous mystery of love. It is a return to the roots of our faith, so that by pondering the measureless gift of grace which is Redemption, we cannot fail to realize that all has been given to us by God's loving initiative. In order to meditate upon this aspect of the mystery of salvation, I have chosen as the theme for this year's Lenten Message the Lord's words: "You received without paying, give without pay" (*Mt 10:8*).

2. God has freely given us his Son: who has deserved or could ever deserve such a privilege? Saint Paul says: "All have sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God, but they are justified by his grace as a gift" (*Rom 3:23-24*). In his infinite mercy God loved us, not permitting himself to be blocked by the grievous state of separation to which man had been consigned by sin. He graciously stooped down to our weakness, and made it the cause of a new and still more wondrous outpouring of his love. The Church does not cease to proclaim this mystery of infinite goodness, exalting God's free choice and his desire not to condemn man but to draw him back

into communion with himself.

“You received without paying, give without pay”. May these words of the Gospel echo in the heart of all Christian communities on their penitential pilgrimage to Easter. May Lent, recalling the mystery of the Lord’s Death and Resurrection, lead all Christians to marvel in their heart of hearts at the greatness of such a gift. Yes! We have received without pay. Is not our entire life marked by God’s kindness? The beginning of life and its marvellous development: this is a gift. And because it is gift, life can never be regarded as a possession or as private property, even if the capabilities we now have to improve the quality of life can lead us to think that man is the “master” of life. The achievements of medicine and biotechnology can sometimes lead man to think of himself as his own creator, and to succumb to the temptation of tampering with “the tree of life” (*Gn 3:24*).

It is also worth repeating here that not everything that is technically possible is morally acceptable. Scientific work aimed at securing a quality of life more in keeping with human dignity is admirable, but it must never be forgotten that human life is a gift, and that it remains precious even when marked by suffering and limitations. A gift to be accepted and to be loved at all times: received without pay and to be placed without pay at the service of others.

3. In setting before us the example of Christ offering himself for us on Calvary, Lent helps us in a unique way to understand that life is redeemed in him. Through the Holy Spirit, Jesus renews our life and makes us sharers in the divine life which draws us into the intimate life of God and enables us to experience his love for us. This is a sublime gift, which the Christian cannot fail to proclaim with joy. In his Gospel, Saint John writes: “This is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent” (*Jn 17:3*). This life is passed on to us in Baptism, and we must nourish it constantly by responding to it faithfully, both individually and communally, through prayer, the celebration of the Sacraments and evangelical witness.

Since we have received this life freely, we must in turn offer it freely to our brothers and sisters. This is what Jesus asked of the disciples when he sent them out as his witnesses in the world: “You received without paying, give without pay”. And the first gift to be given is the gift of a holy life, bearing witness to the freely given love of God. May the Lenten journey be for all believers an unceasing summons to enter more deeply into this special vocation of ours. As believers, we must be open to a life marked by “gratuitousness”, by the giving of ourselves unreservedly to God and neighbour.

4. “What do you have,” Saint Paul asks, “that you did not receive?” (*1 Cor 4:7*). The demand which follows this recognition is that of loving our brothers and sisters, and of dedicating ourselves to them. The more needy they are, the more urgent the believer’s duty to serve them. Does not God permit human need so that by responding to the needs of others we may learn to free ourselves from our egoism and to practise authentic Gospel love? The command of Jesus is clear: “If you love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even the tax-collectors do the same?”

(Mt 5:46). The world prizes human relationships based on self-interest and personal gain, and this fosters an egocentric vision of life, in which too often there is no room for the poor and weak. Every person, even the least gifted, must be welcomed and loved for themselves, regardless of their qualities and defects. Indeed, the greater their hardship, the more they must be the object of our practical love. This is the love to which the Church, through her countless institutions, bears witness in accepting responsibility for the sick, the marginalized, the poor and the exploited. In this way, Christians become apostles of hope and builders of the civilization of love.

It is highly significant that Jesus spoke the words “You received without paying, give without pay” as he sent the Apostles out to spread the Gospel of salvation, which is his first and foremost gift to humanity. Christ wants his Kingdom, which is already close at hand (cf. Mt 10:5ff.), to be spread through gestures of gratuitous love accomplished by his disciples. This is what the Apostles did in the early days of Christianity, and those who met them saw them as bearers of a message greater than themselves. In our own day too the good done by believers becomes a sign, and often an invitation to believe. When, like the Good Samaritan, Christians respond to the needs of their neighbour, theirs is never merely material assistance. It is always a proclamation of the Kingdom as well, and speaks of the full meaning of life, hope and love.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters! Let this be how we prepare to live this Lent: in practical generosity towards the poorest of our brothers and sisters! By opening our hearts to them, we realize ever more deeply that what we give to others is our response to the many gifts which the Lord continues to give to us. We have received without paying, let us give without pay!

What better time is there than Lent for offering this testimony of gratuitousness which the world so badly needs? In the very love which God has for us, there lies the call to give ourselves freely to others in turn. I thank all those throughout the world – lay people, religious and priests – who offer this witness of charity. May it be true of all Christians, whatever the circumstances in which they live.

May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Fair Love and Hope, be our guide and strength on this Lenten journey. Assuring you all of an affectionate remembrance in my prayers, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing to each of you, especially to those engaged day after day on the many frontiers of charity.

From the Vatican, 4 October 2001, Feast of Saint Francis of Assisi.

