



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 2004

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The evocative rite of the imposition of ashes marks the beginning of the holy season of Lent, when the Liturgy once more calls the faithful to radical conversion and trust in God's mercy.

This year's theme - "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me.*" (Mt 18:5) - invites us to reflect on the condition of children. Today Jesus continues to call them to himself and to set them as an example to all those who wish to be his disciples. Jesus' words call upon us to see how children are treated in our families, in civil society, and in the Church. They are also an incentive to rediscover the simplicity and trust which believers must cultivate in imitation of the Son of God, who shared the lot of the little ones and the poor. Saint Clare of Assisi loved to say that Christ, "lay in a manger, lived in poverty on the earth and died naked on the Cross." (*Testament, Franciscan Sources*, No. 2841).

Jesus had a particular love for children because of "their simplicity, their joy of life, their spontaneity, and their faith filled with wonder" (*Angelus Message*, 18 December 1994). For this reason he wishes the community to open its arms and its heart to them, even as he did: "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me*" (Mt 18:5). Alongside children Jesus sets the "very least of the brethren:" the suffering, the needy, the hungry and thirsty, strangers, the naked, the sick, and the imprisoned. In welcoming them and loving them, or in treating them with indifference and contempt, we show our attitude towards him, for it is in them that he is particularly present.

2. The Gospel recounts the childhood of Jesus in the simple home of Nazareth, where he was obedient to his parents and "*increased in wisdom and in years, and in favour with God and man*" (Lk 2:52). By becoming himself a child, he wished to share our human experience. "*He emptied*

himself," writes the Apostle Paul, *"taking the form of a slave, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a Cross"* (Phil 2:7-8). When at twelve years old he remained in the Temple in Jerusalem, he said to his parents who anxiously looked for him: *"How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"* (Lk 2:49). Indeed, his whole life was marked by a trusting and filial obedience to his heavenly Father. *"My food,"* he said, *"is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work"* (Jn 4:34).

In the years of his public life Jesus often insisted that only those who become like children will enter the Kingdom of Heaven (cf. Mt 18:3; Mk 10:15; Lk 18:17; Jn 3:3). In his teaching, young children become a striking image of the disciple who is called to follow the divine Master with childlike docility: *"Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the Kingdom of Heaven"* (Mt 18:4).

"To become" one of the least and "to receive" the little ones: these are two aspects of a single teaching which the Lord repeats to his disciples in our time. Only the one who makes himself one of the "least" is able to receive with love the "least" of our brothers and sisters.

3. Many believers strive faithfully to follow these teachings of the Lord. Here I would mention those parents who willingly take on the responsibility of a large family, mothers and fathers who, rather than considering success in their profession and career as the highest value, make every effort to pass on to their children those human and religious values that give true meaning to life.

With great admiration I also think of all those committed to caring for underprivileged children and those who alleviate the sufferings of children and their families resulting from war and violence, inadequate food and water, forced immigration and the many forms of injustice present in the world.

Together with such great generosity, however, a word must be said about the selfishness of those who do not "receive" children. There are young people who have been profoundly hurt by the violence of adults: sexual abuse, forced prostitution, involvement in the sale and use of drugs; children forced to work or enlisted for combat; young children scarred forever by the breakup of the family; little ones caught up in the obscene trafficking of organs and persons. What too of the tragedy of AIDS and its devastating consequences in Africa? It is said that millions of persons are now afflicted by this scourge, many of whom were infected from birth. Humanity cannot close its eyes in the face of so appalling a tragedy!

4. What evil have these children done to merit such suffering? From a human standpoint it is not easy, indeed it may be impossible, to answer this disturbing question. Only faith can make us begin to understand so profound an abyss of suffering. By becoming *"obedient unto death, even death on a Cross"* (Phil 2:8), Jesus took human suffering upon himself and illuminated it with the

radiant light of his resurrection. By his death, he conquered death once for all.

During Lent, we prepare to relive the Paschal Mystery, which sheds the light of hope upon the whole of our existence, even its most complex and painful aspects. Holy Week will again set before us this mystery of salvation in the evocative rites of the Easter Triduum.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us set out with trust on our Lenten journey, sustained by fervent prayer, penance and concern for those in need. In particular, may this Lent be a time of ever greater concern for the needs of children, in our own families and in society as a whole: for they are the future of humanity.

5. With childlike simplicity let us turn to God and call him, as Jesus taught us in the prayer of the "Our Father", "*Abba*," "Father."

Our Father! Let us repeat this prayer often during Lent; let us repeat it with deep emotion. By calling God "Our Father," we will better realize that we are his children and feel that we are brothers and sisters of one another. Thus it will be an easier for us to open our hearts to the little ones, following the invitation of Jesus: "*Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me*" (Mt 18:5).

In this hope, I invoke upon each of you God's blessings, through the intercession of Mary, Mother of the Word of God made man and Mother of all humanity.

From the Vatican, 8 December 2003

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