



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO ROMAN AND FRENCH YOUNG PEOPLE**

Thursday, 20 March 1997

1. “*Non sum dignus, non sum dignus*”. So, dear young people, over the last few days I read a French book: *Jean Paul II le résistant*. The Pope is resistant. Today I see that I have earned a new title: “disruptive”, because I have disrupted your programme. But we must come “ad rem”. Do you know what coming “ad rem” means? I do not want to examine you in Latin. “Ad rem” means getting to the point, to the subject, to what is written here on the papers I have in my hands. Then we will see.

“Mission means: pass the Word!”.

Dear young people of Rome, this is the slogan that has reverberated more than once in today’s meeting and that well summarizes the meaning of what the Church of Rome is celebrating: the city mission. In fact what is the city mission if not our joint commitment to receive and transmit to everyone, in our daily living, the Word of God which goes straight to the heart of man? The Word of God, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews, “living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb 4:12).

2. Dear young people, I am saying this to tell you in advance about the handing on of this Word. I am handing on to you, that is, *I am “passing” on to you Mark’s Gospel.*

Gospel means “good news” and the “good news” is Jesus, the Son of God, who became man to save the world. The heart of the Gospel is precisely the preaching of Jesus, his actions, his Death and Resurrection; it is Jesus Christ, he himself, Jesus Christ, the Son of God, who died and rose again for everyone.

During our meeting you listened to the reading of a very significant passage from Mark's Gospel: Jesus' twofold question to his disciples — "Who do men say that I am?"; "And who do you say that I am?" — and Peter's reply on behalf of them all: "You are the Christ" (cf. Mk 8:27-30). This answer is the synthesis of Mark's Gospel: all that you can read before is a slow, progressive journey towards this proclamation *that* Jesus is the Messiah. All that follows is a continuous explanation of how Jesus is the Messiah. He is the Messiah — and this is something absolutely new — when in obedience to the Father, on the Cross, he dies for love of us. Seeing his death, the Roman centurion exclaims: "Truly this man was the Son of God" (Mk 15:39). Here we see condensed Mark's missionary concern and his deepest conviction. In the presence of the greatest act of love a person can make, "to lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:13), it is possible to be converted, to change one's life. Even the centurion, who does not belong to the chosen people, *recognizes Jesus as the Son of God, the Saviour* not only of a people or a nation, but of every man and woman who accepts him and acknowledges him in the moment of his extreme humiliation, in his extreme abasement.

3. Dear young people, in the passage from Mark's Gospel that refers to the Resurrection, the angel says to the women: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen, he is not here.... He is going before you to Galilee" (Mk 16:6-7), as if to tell us not to stand idle before the tomb. If you want to meet him — the angel repeats to all of us — follow the road that Jesus shows you. "He is going before you to Galilee", and to see him alive and risen you must join him wherever he makes his appointment with you. Two episodes in Mark that make us think.

If this is the content of the Gospel, it demands to be "passed on", transmitted to others. And here is the mission, the apostolic mission, the mission of the women, the first apostles like the Magdalene, the mission of Peter, of the Twelve, and now the city mission; the mission of the citizens, of all of you, people of Rome, because the city mission is a unique occasion for you also, dear young people of the Roman parishes, associations and movements, to "pass on" the Word of God and not to miss your appointment with him. To know Jesus in his Word; to know Jesus crucified and risen through his Word, through the Gospel of Mark.

The city mission first of all means understanding that there is no authentic Christianity if there is no *mission activity*, that Jesus is a gift of God that must be brought to everyone.

The city mission means learning from Christ to come out of ourselves, from our groups, from our parishes, from our beautiful assemblies, to bring his Gospel to the many friends we know who are waiting with us for the salvation that only Christ knows how and is able to give.

4. Go, then. Young people to young people. But who are the young people? You are the young people of Rome!

From the many meetings I have had with you over these years, I have formed a clear enough idea

of what you young people are like.

You have many positive aspirations, many desires; you want to be and you consider yourselves protagonists of life. You want to live in freedom and throw yourselves freely into doing things that you like to do best.

However, this freedom can be a risk. Yes, freedom is a risk: it is a great challenge and a great risk. It can be used well and it can be used badly. If freedom does not obey the truth it can crush you. There are many who are crushed by their freedom. This happens when their freedom is not guided by what is true. It cannot be a blind force left to instinct. Freedom must be guided by the truth.

It is the truth that makes us truly free and this truth comes from Christ, indeed it is Christ. We read in John's Gospel: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (Jn 8:31-32).

It is therefore good for you to know *Jesus Christ, the unifying centre of your existence*, and to make him known to your friends. This is why today I am giving you his Gospel and I ask you to be its courageous missionaries. Go into all the world. Jesus made his Gospel known to his Apostles and then he said: go into all the world. I am saying this to you, young people of Rome: go into all that world which is Rome.

So, know Jesus Christ! *Be the first to know him.* Through constant reading and meditation, through prayer which is a constant dialogue between life and the Word of Jesus. To see means already to take action.

So I say to you: know the Gospel. You, first of all. Know the Gospel by seeking help from wise guides and witnesses to Christ. Ask for help to know and live that love which is the heart of the Gospel. From whom? From your parents, your grandparents, your teachers, your priests, your catechists, the leaders of the groups and movements to which you belong. They all help to serve you, helping you to know the Gospel better. By knowing the Gospel, you will encounter Christ and do not be afraid of what he may ask of you.

Because Christ is also demanding, thank God! He is demanding! When I was young like you, this Christ was demanding and he convinced me. Were he not demanding, there would be nothing to listen to, to follow. But if he is demanding, it is because he offers values and it is the values he preaches that are demanding.

5. At the same time *make the Gospel of Christ known to your friends, to other young people* who are not here today and who do not usually associate with your groups. All those who are outside the parish, outside the pastoral milieu, they too are waiting for this Word. Christ is also seeking them through you. So, this gives you an idea of how the young people's city mission must be

carried out.

This mission asks you to make generous efforts in this direction. You must be serious about listening to Jesus, following Jesus and witnessing to what you believe. See, judge and act: let these three words also accompany you.

It is not enough to go to church or to your groups. The time has come when you must reach out to those who do not come, to those who are looking for the meaning of life and do not find it because no one proclaims it to them. You must be people who know how to announce this good news. The time has come for the whole Church of Rome to open her doors and reach out to the men and women, the young people who live in this city as though Christ did not exist.

What does Christ ask of you? Jesus asks you not to be ashamed of him and to commit yourselves to proclaiming him to your peers. Make your own this phrase of Paul to the Romans: "I am not ashamed of the Gospel: it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who has faith". This is what Paul wrote to the Romans, to us (Rom 1:16). Do not be afraid, because Jesus is with you!

Do not be afraid of getting lost: *the more you give of yourselves, the more you will find yourselves!* This is the logic of a sincere self-giving, as the Second Vatican Council teaches.

Many of your friends do not have guides, reference points, to which they can turn in order to learn to know Jesus and overcome those moments of difficulty, disillusionment and uneasiness that can arise. How can we fail to think then of your less fortunate peers who have to reckon with even more serious problems such as unemployment, the resulting difficulty in forming a family, drug addiction or other forms of escape from reality? As you know well, many do not even have the support of a family, because today many families are experiencing a disturbing crisis. You, dear young people, must become a family for them, reference points for your peers. Become friends to those who have no friends, become family to those who have no family, community to those who have no community. This is the city mission of Rome's young citizens. The Pope too is a citizen of Rome. In the next few months [at the beginning of 1998, ed. note], as a good citizen of Rome, I intend to visit the Campidoglio. Let us hope that my young fellow citizens may be with me.

6. The Word of God, as I wrote in the [Message](#) to young people for the [12th World Youth Day](#), "is not an imposition, unhinging the doors of conscience; it is a persuasive voice, a free gift that, if it is to have a saving effect in each one's concrete existence, calls for an attitude of readiness and responsibility, a pure heart and a free mind" (n. 6; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 28 August 1996, p. 2). *Sow the Word*. It will be up to the soil to accept it or not. Jesus respects each person's freedom. When he calls you to follow him, he always starts by saying "If you want to..." (cf. Mt 19: 21).

Engage in dialogue, in order to proclaim the word of God. *Dialogue is the method of your mission:*

a dialogue that first of all demands a meeting on the level of *personal relations* and that seeks to bring the interlocutors out of their isolation, their mutual mistrust, in order to create mutual esteem and sympathy. A dialogue that demands a meeting on the level of *seeking the truth*; and again, on the level of *action*, which tries to establish the conditions for collaboration on *concrete objectives of service* to one's neighbour. A dialogue that requires the Christian to be *convinced of the truth*, to be clearly aware that we are witnesses to Christ, the way, the truth and the life.

I know that a lot of efforts have already been made in the Diocese, including the training of missionaries, and, in the near future, the educators of young people. I encourage you all to continue in this direction by exercising your creativity, so that together you can "pass the Word" to everyone.

7. Dear young people of Rome, at the end of this meeting, allow me to thank you for coming and also for your warm welcome. It was so warm that at one stage I was wondering if I could survive this meeting!

I thank the Cardinal Vicar for his words and Carmela, the girl who greeted me on my arrival and even cordially kissed me; I thank all those who prepared and co-ordinated this meeting, and they are many; I thank all those who gave their personal testimony and who put their artistic talents at the service of the Gospel and young people. And they are numerous! I was not able to see much, but what I was able to see and hear engrossed me.

At this point I would also like to greet *a delegation of French young people* who, in preparation for the Paris meeting, through the magazine *Phosphore* wrote to the Pope and wished to entrust their letters to him. I thank all those who wished, in this way, to be in touch with us.

Dear French friends, take the Pope's cordial greeting and that of the young people of Rome gathered here with you today to your peers. Tell them that we will be pleased to meet them from 18 to 24 August in Paris and that we are preparing for this meeting with intense prayer.

The Holy Father then greeted the young French delegation with these extemporaneous words:

We will be very happy to meet you in Paris. You young French people must testify to our wish to prepare and you must show all the more availability on your part. I know that the French Bishops and the youth of France are full of enthusiasm. May you continue in your efforts.

So at the end, before giving you the Gospel, I wish to make an *appointment with you all for World Youth Day*, whose theme will be: "Teacher, where are you staying? Come and see" (Jn 1:38-19). I know that you are already getting organized and that from Rome large numbers of you will be leaving for Paris. It will be a great occasion for experiencing together the joy of the Gospel.

Those will be days when the Word, if allowed to act, will touch your lives, to plan exciting projects for your personal future and for the future of the Church and society.

Let us call upon Our Lady "Salus Populi Romani". May she accompany us in this spiritual journey towards our meeting in Paris. And as I assure each of you and your families of a special remembrance in my prayer, I cordially bless you all.

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