



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL I *GENERAL AUDIENCE* *Wednesday, 13 September 1978* My first greeting goes to my bishop confrères, of whom I see many here. Pope John, in a note of his, which was also published, said: "This time I gave the retreat on the Seven Lamps of Sanctification". Seven virtues, he meant, that is, faith, hope, charity, prudence, justice, fortitude, temperance. Who knows if the Holy Spirit will help the poor Pope today to illustrate at least one of these lamps, the first one, faith. Here in Rome there was a poet, Trilussa, who also tried to speak of faith. In a certain poem of his, he said: "That little old blind woman, whom I met / the evening I lost my way in the middle of the wood, / said to me: —If you don't know the way / I'll accompany you, for I know it / If you have the strength to follow me / from time to time I'll call to you, right to the bottom there, where there is a cypress, / right to the top there, where there is a cross. I answered: that may be ... but I find it strange / that I can be guided by some one sightless ... / The blind woman, then, took my hand / and sighed: Come on. —It was faith." As a poem, it is delightful; as theology, defective. It is defective because when it is a question of faith, the great stage manager is God. Because Jesus said: "No one comes to me unless my Father draws him". St Paul did not have faith, in fact he was persecuting the faithful. God waits for him on the way to Damascus: "Paul", he says to him, "don't take it into your head to rear up, to kick, like a restive horse. I am that Jesus whom you are persecuting. I need you. You must change!" Paul surrendered; he changed, leading a completely different life. Some years afterwards, he will write to the Philippians: "that time, on the way to Damascus, God seized me; since then I have done nothing but run after him, to see if I, too, am able to seize him, imitating him, loving him more and more." That is what faith is: to surrender to God, but transforming one's life. A thing that is not always easy! Augustine has told of the journey of his faith; especially in the last few weeks it was terrible; reading, one feels his soul almost shudder and writhe in interior conflicts. On the one hand, God calls him and insists; on the other hand, his old habits, "old friends", he writes, ... ; "and they pulled me gently by my mantle of flesh and they said to me: 'Augustine, what! You are abandoning us? Look out, you won't be able to do this any more, you won't be able ever again to do that other.'" A hard thing! "I felt", he says, "like one who is in bed, in the morning. He is told: 'Out, Augustine, get up! Finally the Lord gave me a sharp tug, and I came out. You see, one mustn't say: 'Yes, but; yes, but later'. One must say: 'Yes, Lord! At once!' This is faith. To respond to the Lord generously. But who says this 'yes'? He who is humble and trusts God completely! "My mother used to tell me when I was a boy: "When you were little, you were very ill. I had to take you from one doctor to another and watch over you whole nights; do you believe me?" How could I have said: "I don't believe you, Mamma"? "Of course I believe, I believe what you tell me, but I believe especially in you." And so it is in faith. It is not just a question of believing in the things that God revealed, but in him who deserves our faith, who has loved us so much and done so much for our sake. It is also difficult to accept some truths, because the truths of faith are of two kinds; some pleasant, others unpalatable to our spirit. For example, it is pleasant to hear that God has so much tenderness for us, even more tenderness than a mother has for her children, as Isaiah says. How pleasant and congenial it is! There was a great French bishop, Dupanloup, who used to say to the rectors of seminaries: "with the future priests, be fathers, be mothers".

It is agreeable. Other truths, on the contrary, are hard to accept. God must punish, if I resist. He runs after me, he begs me to repent and I say: "No!" I almost force him to punish me. This is not agreeable. But it is a truth of faith. And there is a last difficulty, the Church. St Paul asked: "Who are you, Lord?" —"I am that Jesus whom you are persecuting". A light, a flash, crossed his mind. I do not persecute Jesus, I don't even know him: I persecute the Christians. It is clear that Jesus and the Christians, Jesus and the Church are the same thing: indissoluble, inseparable. Read St Paul: "Corpus Christi quod est Ecclesia". Christ and the Church are only one thing. Christ is the Head, we, the Church, are his limbs. It is not possible to have faith and to say, "I believe in Jesus, I accept Jesus but I do not accept the Church." We must accept the Church, as she is. And what is this Church like? Pope John called her "Mater et Magistra". Teacher also. St Paul said: "Let everyone accept us as Christ's aids and stewards and dispensers of his mysteries." When the poor Pope, when the bishops, the priests, propose the doctrine, they are merely helping Christ. It is not our doctrine, it is Christ's; we must just guard it and present it. I was present when Pope John opened the Council on 11 October 1962. At a certain point he said: "We hope that with the Council the Church will take a leap forward." We all hoped so; but a leap forward, on what way? He told us at once: on certain and immutable truths. It never even occurred to Pope John that the truths could go forward, and then, gradually, change. Those are the truths: we must walk along the way of these truths, understanding them more and more, bringing ourselves up-to-date, proposing them in a form suited to the new times. Pope Paul too had the same thought. The first thing I did, as soon as I was made Pope, was to enter the private Chapel of the Pontifical Household. Right at the back Pope Paul had two mosaics made: St Peter and St Paul: St Peter dying, St Paul dying. But under St Peter: are the words of Jesus: "I will pray for you, Peter, that your faith may never fail." Under St Paul, on whom the sword falls: "I have run my race, I have kept the faith." You know that in his last address on 29 June, Paul VI said: "After fifteen years of pontificate, I can thank the Lord that I have defended the faith, that I have kept the faith". The Church is also a mother. If she continues Christ, and Christ is good, the Church too must be good; good to everyone. But if by chance there should sometimes be bad people in the Church? We have our mother. If mother is sick, if my mother by chance should become lame, I love her even more. It is the same, in the Church. If there are, and there are, defects and shortcomings, our affection for the Church must never fail. Yesterday, and I conclude, I was sent the issue of "Città Nuova". I saw that they have reported, recording it, a very short address of mine, with an episode. A certain British preacher MacNabb, speaking in Hyde Park, had spoken of the Church. When he finished, someone asked to speak and said: "Yours are fine words. But I know some Catholic priests who did not stay with the poor and became rich. I know also Catholic husbands who have betrayed their wives. I do not like this Church made of sinners." The Father said: "There's something in what you say. But may I make an objection?" — "Let's hear it." — He says: "Excuse me, but am I mistaken or is the collar of your shirt a little greasy?" — He says: "Yes, it is, I admit." — "But is it greasy because you haven't used soap, or because you used soap but it was no use?" "No", he says, I haven't used soap. "You see. The Catholic Church too has extraordinary soap: the gospel, the sacraments, prayer. The gospel read and lived; the sacraments celebrated in the right way; prayer well used, would be a marvellous soap, capable of making us all saints. We are not all saints, because we have not used this soap enough. Let us try to meet the hopes of the Popes who held and applied the Council, Pope John, Pope Paul. Let us try to improve the Church, by becoming better ourselves. Each of us and the whole Church could recite the prayer I am accustomed to recite: "Lord, take me as I am, with my defects, with my shortcomings, but make me become as you want me to be." I must say a word also to our dear sick, whom I see there. You know, Jesus said: "I hide behind them; what is done for them is done for me." So we venerate the Lord himself in their persons and we hope that the Lord will be close to them, and help and sustain them. On our right, on the other hand, there are the newlyweds. They have received a great sacrament. Let us wish that this sacrament which they have received will really bring not only goods of this world, but more spiritual graces. Last century there was in France a great

professor, Frederick Ozanam. He taught at the Sorbonne, and was so eloquent, so capable! His friend was Lacordaire, who said: "He is so gifted, he is so good, he will become a priest, he will become a great bishop, this fellow!" No! He met a nice girl and they got married, Lacordaire was disappointed and said: "Poor Ozanam! He too has fallen into the trap!" But two years later, Lacordaire came to Rome, and was received by Pius IX. "Come, come, Father", he says. "I have always heard that Jesus established seven sacraments. Now you come along and change everything. You tell me that he established six sacraments, and a trap! No, Father, marriage is not a trap, it is a great sacrament!" So let us express again our best wishes for these dear newlyweds: may the Lord bless them!