



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday 15 December 1999

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. "Mindful of the words of the Lord: *"By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another"* (Jn 13: 35), Christians can yearn for nothing more ardently than to serve the people of this age with an ever growing generosity and success" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 93).

This task, which the Second Vatican Council gave us at the end of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, responds to the fascinating challenge of building a world enlivened by the law of love, a *civilization of love*, "founded on the universal values of peace, solidarity, justice and liberty, which find their full attainment in Christ" (*Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 52).

This civilization is based on recognition of the universal sovereignty of God the Father, the inexhaustible source of love. Precisely on the acceptance of this fundamental value, a sincere examination at the end of the millennium should be made for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, in order to set out more promptly towards the future that awaits us.

We have seen the decline of ideologies which deprived so many of our brethren of spiritual reference-points, but the baneful fruits of a secularism that breeds religious indifference continue to exist, especially in more developed regions. The return to a confused religiosity, caused by fragile compensatory needs and the search for a psycho-cosmic balance, which appears in many of the new religious paradigms that proclaim a religiosity without reference to a transcendent and personal God, is certainly not a valid response to this situation.

Instead, we must carefully analyze the reason for this loss of the sense of God and courageously proclaim the message of the Father's face, revealed by Jesus Christ in the light of the Spirit. This revelation does not diminish but exalts the dignity of the human person created in the image of God-Love.

2. In recent decades, the loss of the sense of God has coincided with the advance of a nihilistic culture that impoverishes the meaning of human life and, in the ethical field, relativizes even the fundamental values of the family and of respect for life. This does not often occur visibly, but through a subtle methodology of indifference that makes all kinds of behaviour seem normal, so that moral problems are no longer acknowledged. It is paradoxically demanded that the State recognize as "rights" many forms of conduct which threaten human life, especially the weakest and the most defenceless, not to mention the enormous difficulties in accepting others because they are different, inconvenient, foreign, sick or disabled. It is precisely this ever more prevalent rejection of others because of their otherness that challenges our conscience as believers. As I said in the Encyclical *Evangelium vitae*: "We are confronted by an even larger reality, which can be described as a veritable structure of sin ... characterized by the emergence of a culture which denies solidarity and in many cases takes the form of a veritable "culture of death"" (n. 12).

3. In face of this death-loving culture our responsibility as Christians is expressed in commitment to the "new evangelization", one of whose most important fruits is the civilization of love.

"The Gospel, and therefore evangelization, are certainly not identical with culture, and they are independent in regard to all cultures" (*Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 20), but they possess a regenerating power that can have a positive influence on culture. The Christian message does not demean cultures by destroying their particular features; on the contrary, it acts within them, making the most of that original potential which their genius can express. The Gospel's influence on culture purifies and uplifts what is human, making the beauty of life, the harmony of peaceful coexistence and the originality that every people contributes to the human community shine resplendently. This influence finds its strength in a love that does not impose but proposes, relying on free assent in an atmosphere of respect and mutual acceptance.

4. The Gospel message of love liberates human needs and values, such as solidarity, the yearning for freedom and equality, and respect for pluralism in forms of expression. The cornerstone of the civilization of love is recognition of the value of the human person and, concretely, of all human beings. Christianity's great contribution is recognized precisely in this area. In fact, the anthropological doctrine of the human person as a relational being gradually developed precisely from reflection on the mystery of the Trinitarian God and on the person of the Word made flesh. This precious discovery gave rise to the idea of a society which has made the human person its starting-point and goal. The Church's social teaching, which the spirit of the Jubilee invites us to reflect on again, has also helped to base the laws of social coexistence on the rights of the person. The Christian vision of the human being as the image of God, in fact, implies

that the rights of the person, by their very nature, demand the respect of society, which does not create but merely recognizes them (cf. *Gaudium et spes*, n. 26).

5. The Church realizes that this doctrine can remain a dead letter if social life is not enlivened by the influence of authentic religious experience, especially by a Christian witness continuously nourished by the Holy Spirit's creative and healing action. She knows that the crisis of society and of contemporary man is largely caused by the reduction of the human person's specific spiritual dimension.

Christianity makes its contribution to building a more human society precisely by providing it with soul and by proclaiming the demands of God's law, on which all social organization and legislation should be based if they intend to guarantee human advancement, liberation from every kind of slavery and true progress.

The Church makes this contribution principally through the witness given by Christians, particularly lay people, in their daily lives. Indeed, contemporary man accepts the message of love more from witnesses than from teachers, and if he does accept it from teachers, it is because they are authentic witnesses (cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, n. 41). This is the challenge to be met so that new horizons will be opened for the future of Christianity and of humanity itself.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors the Holy Father said:

I warmly welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Sweden, Japan and the United States of America. I pray that you will be strengthened in your love of God this Christmas, so that you will enter the Jubilee Year with renewed hearts and minds. Upon all present I invoke the joy and peace of our Lord Jesus Christ.