



The Holy See

TE DEUM AND FIRST VESPERS OF THE SOLEMNITY OF MARY, MOTHER OF GOD

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

*St Ignatius Church
Wednesday 31 December 1997*

1. "*Ubi venit plenitudo temporis, misit Deus Filium suum...*". "When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons" (Gal 4:4).

The Latin expression *plenitudo temporis* intends to show that the mystery of the Incarnation marks the fullness of time. The Son of God, by becoming man, entered the temporal dimension, and by his presence, brought it into eternity. Jesus Christ, the Word, the Son one in being with the Father, God from God, belongs in himself to the divine dimension of eternity but, by becoming man, in himself accepted the temporal dimension. The birth of the Redeemer in Bethlehem thus gave rise to a new way of counting the years: in fact: it is customary to speak of "before" and "after" Christ.

2. *Christus heri et hodie, Principium et Finis, Alpha et Omega. Ipsius sunt tempora et saecula. Ipsi gloria et imperium per universa aeternitatis saecula.* The liturgy proclaims these words during the Easter Vigil, while the numbers of the year are carved on the paschal candle, the symbol of the risen Christ. Time belongs to Christ. In becoming man, the Son of God accepted time, which he subjected to himself, as a measure of his earthly existence. Through him, the history of man and salvation meet and are united.

Today, the last day of the year, let us look at the days, the weeks, the months that have passed, as at another fragment of salvation history, which concerns us all. In the spiritual atmosphere that marks this Christmas season, the Diocese of Rome, in communion with all Christianity throughout the world, pauses this evening to reflect on 1997, another solar year we will soon have left behind.

3. Dear brothers and sisters, with regard to our diocesan community, the year ending today is pre-eminently associated with the *City Mission* which, after a period of preparation, has increasingly involved the parishes and all ecclesial realities. It is a place for carrying out community and ongoing evangelization, which with God's grace is proving to be a particularly effective way of proclaiming the Gospel to the inhabitants of our metropolis.

Last Lent, about 12,000 missionaries, mostly lay people, visited the city's families, bringing them as a gift the Gospel of Mark. The act of entering homes with the Gospel and the warm welcome the missionaries have usually been given are in themselves highly significant: Romans, even those who do not go to church or only rarely, are waiting to meet the Lord. This is also confirmed by the remarkable interest and widescale participation resulting from the meetings on the theme of faith and the search for God that were held in the Cathedral Basilica of St John Lateran. Through them, a sincere dialogue was established between those who proclaim Christ and those who are seeking complete answers to life's basic questions.

The *Mission* invites us to look to the future, to prepare the ground for the evangelization of our city in the perspective of the third millennium. With this in mind, in the last part of the year we paid special attention to young people, whom I myself addressed in a special Letter on 8 September, the feast of the Birth of Mary, urging them to be protagonists in proclaiming and witnessing to Christ among their contemporaries. I hope that passion for the Gospel will make increasing headway in the souls of many young Romans.

4. During this celebration, as we embrace the entire city community in our prayer, I wish to address a cordial greeting to dear Cardinal Ruini with his Auxiliary Bishops, to Cardinal Canestri and Fr Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, to whose religious is entrusted the Church that has welcomed us. The greeting is also extended to all the city's inhabitants: in the first place, to the mayor, who again this year wished to be present at this ceremony to offer, on behalf of the Administration, the traditional votive chalice. With him, I greet the members of the Municipal Administration and Council whom I will have the joy to meet next 15 January, during my visit to the Capitoline. I address a special thought to the president of the region, to the prefect of Rome and to all the other authorities present. I greet the social workers who serve the people, and the volunteer workers involved in numerous activities. A special mention goes to everyone who is in difficulty and is spending these festive days in hardship and suffering. To one and all I assure my affectionate thoughts, strengthened by constant prayer.

As we end 1997, a trusting plea rises spontaneously to the Lord: that he may give his Spirit of wisdom and strength to preachers of the Gospel and open the hearts, consciences and lives of each one fearlessly to receive Christ who comes.

In reviewing the past year, I would also like to thank the Lord who allowed me to visit other parish communities, thus reaching a total of 265 parishes since the beginning of my episcopal ministry in

Rome. Everywhere I have found living communities, although in a variety of social conditions, which are keen to grow in faith and in active witness to Christian charity.

This network of parishes, which covers the entire territory of the Diocese and whose structures are also being completed in view of the Great Jubilee, is a resource of incalculable value for the city of Rome. In fact, it encourages the strengthening of social relations marked by mutual knowledge, friendship and solidarity. It greatly contributes to the education of children and young people and to the moral capacity of families, to hospitality for the marginalized and to the care of the lonely and suffering.

5. To function efficiently, each parish community, like every specific form of diocesan pastoral ministry, needs the generous and faithful service of its priests. I therefore thank the Lord that last 20 April I could ordain 30 new priests for our Diocese.

The Roman Seminary, together with the other seminaries in which our diocesan clergy are trained, offers through the Lord's grace an effective formative course in which serious study is accompanied by an intense life of prayer and commitment to authentic fraternal communion. As I encourage those in charge of formation to continue their praiseworthy work, I am thinking first and foremost of Cardinal Ugo Poletti, whom the Lord called to himself on 25 February this year. We remember him today, as we reiterate our gratitude to God for the good that he achieved in this Church and in this city. With Cardinal Poletti, we also entrust to the Lord the other priests who died during the year, including beloved Mons. Luigi Di Liegro. The testimony and work of the priests who devoted their lives to God and to their brothers and sisters is a legacy and a valuable example for the clergy and for the whole diocesan community.

Another reason for deep gratitude to the Lord is the noticeable increase in the number of priestly vocations, which promises great hope for the future of our community. Here I express the wish that a similar increase, rich in promising apostolic fruits for everyone, may also be noted in vocations to the consecrated life, especially female religious vocations. And I am sure that this will happen, if priests and parish communities generously support the work the institutes of consecrated life are undertaking in this area.

6. Dear brothers and sisters, we have paused to consider some aspects of what God has done in our Diocese this year. In glancing back to the past months, the desire to ask forgiveness and give thanks to God comes naturally to us: to ask forgiveness for the sins committed and the omissions and faults remembered, commending them all to divine mercy; and then to give thanks for all that God has given us day after day.

This is why we sing the *Te Deum*: we praise God and give him thanks for the good he has granted to us, which marked the various moments of the year that has now ended:

*Salvum fac populum tuum, Domine,
et benedic hereditati tuae...*
*Per singulos dies benedicimus te;
et laudamus nomen tuum in saeculum,
et in saeculum saeculi.*
Amen!

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