



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO VERCELLI AND TURIN (ITALY)
(MAY 23-24, 1998)

**BEATIFICATION OF THE SERVANTS OF GOD:
GIOVANNI MARIA BOCCARDO,
TERESA GRILLO MICHEL,
AND TERESA BRACCO**

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Solemnity of the Ascension, 24 May 1998

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses" (Acts 1:8).

1. Jesus speaks these words before his Ascension into heaven. With them he outlines for his Church her future programme, her *mission*, and calls those who have been his *witnesses* to carry it out.

First of all, the Apostles who had "seen" the events of the Passion: they had been overcome with fear when he was crucified, and later rejoiced at his Resurrection. In the paschal mystery, Christ thus expresses the whole truth of his divine sonship and his messianic mission. On the road to Emmaus, he explains to the two disciples that the Messiah had to bear all these things in order to enter into the Father's glory (cf. *Lk 24:26*). Now, at the moment when he is leaving the world to return to heaven, he asks "his" followers to bear witness to these events in Jerusalem, in Judea, in Samaria and to the ends of the earth.

The teaching they must spread is not an abstract system of ideas, but *the Word about a living reality*. And it is precisely by virtue of this Word that the Church will spread throughout the world.

This Word, taken beyond the borders of Palestine by the first witnesses, *has given rise to countless throngs of other*

witnesses in every corner of the globe, most of whose names we do not know; but the Church retains a vivid memory of others. This is the case, for example, of those who are proclaimed blessed here in Turin today: Teresa Bracco, Giovanni Maria Boccardo and Teresa Grillo Michel.

2. *Fr Giovanni Maria Boccardo* was a man of deep spirituality and, at the same time, a dynamic apostle, a promoter of the religious life and the laity, ever attentive to discerning the signs of the times. Through prayerful listening to the God's word, he developed a faith that was profound and very much alive. He wrote: "Yes, my Lord, whatever you want, I want too".

What can be said of his tireless zeal for the poorest? He cared for every form of human misery with the spirit of St Cajetan of Thiene, a spirit which he instilled in the women's congregation he founded to care for the elderly and the suffering and for the education of youth. He made his own the Gospel motto: "Seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness" (cf. *Mt* 6:33).

Like the holy Curé of Ars, to whom he was devoted, he showed his parishioners the way to heaven by word and especially by example. On the day he entered Pancalieri as parish priest, he said to the faithful: "I come to you, dear friends, to live like one of you, as your father, brother and friend, and to share with you life's joys and pains'.... I come to you as the servant of you all and each of you can consider me at your disposal, and I will always count myself fortunate and happy to be able to serve you, with no other desire than to do good to all".

He always declared himself a devoted son of Our Lady and turned to her with constant trust. To anyone who asked him: "Is it very difficult to gain paradise?", he answered: "Be devoted to Mary, who is its 'Gate', and you will enter". His example is still vivid in the memory of the people who from this day on can call upon him as their intercessor in heaven.

3. *Teresa Grillo Michel* is another shining witness of Gospel charity. She was called by the Lord to spread love especially among the very poor, through the congregation of the Little Sisters of Divine Providence which she founded.

From a well-to-do aristocratic family, she first embraced the marital vocation, being wedded to Giovanni Battista Michel, a captain of the Bersaglieri. However, widowed at the age of 36 and without children, she felt spurred to devote herself totally to the service of the lowliest. Thus she became a mother to so many of the abandoned: orphans, the elderly, the sick. When she began her work in Alessandria, the city of her birth, she said: "The poor are increasing faster than I can manage, and I wish I could open my arms further to welcome so many under the wings of divine Providence".

The Eucharist was the heart of her spiritual life and that of her sisters, and she wanted its image to be seen on their religious habit. From prolonged prayer before the Blessed Sacrament, Teresa drew inspiration and support for her daily dedication, as well as for her courageous missionary projects which several times took her as far as Brazil.

This generous daughter of Piedmont follows in the steps of the saints and blessed who, down the centuries, have brought to the world the message of divine love through active service to their needy brethren. Let us thank God for the living witness given by the holiness of this woman who enriches your region and the whole Church.

4. If in Giovanni Maria Boccoardo and Teresa Grillo Michel it is the virtue of charity which is especially brilliant, in *Teresa Bracco* it is the virtue of chastity that shines out, and she was its champion and witness to the point of martyrdom. She was 23 years old when, during the Second World War, she chose to die rather than yield to a soldier who was threatening her virginity. That courageous stance was the logical consequence of a firm desire to remain faithful to Christ, in accordance with the intention she had several times expressed. When she learned what had happened to other young women in that time of turmoil and violence, she exclaimed without hesitation: "I would rather die than be violated!".

That is what happened during a round-up. Martyrdom crowned her journey of Christian maturation, developed day after day with the strength she drew from daily Eucharistic Communion and a deep devotion to the Virgin Mother of God.

What a significant Gospel witness for the young generations who are approaching the third millennium! What a message of hope for those who are striving to run counter to the spirit of the world! To young people in particular, I hold up this young woman whom the Church is proclaiming blessed today so that they may learn from her clear faith, witnessed to in daily commitment, moral consistency without compromises and the courage of sacrificing even life if necessary, in order not to betray the values that give it meaning.

Thinking of the rural environment in which Teresa grew up, I am pleased to address an affectionate word to the farmers who have come in large numbers from the Langhe and the entire Piedmont to honour her and to entrust themselves to her intercession. I would also like to send my greetings to the nuns of the Trinity Charterhouse, which stands near the place of Teresa's martyrdom. Faithful to the Rule that commits them to prayer and contemplation in solitude and silence, these sisters of ours are physically absent but spiritually present at this solemn celebration.

5. The figures of the new blessededs direct our thoughts toward that heaven which the Lord entered in the mystery of his Ascension. The Letter to the Hebrews has spoken of it in strongly evocative terms, putting before our eyes Christ who has entered like a High Priest not "into a sanctuary made with hands ... but into heaven itself ... to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (*Heb 9:24, 26*). This perspective enables us to understand better *the message of the Shroud*, a moving icon of Christ's Passion. I thank the Lord who has given me the opportunity to return to Turin once again, to contemplate this extraordinary testimony to Christ's suffering.

I am pleased once again to greet everyone present, starting with the Archbishop of Turin, dear Cardinal Giovanni Saldarini, together with the Bishops of Piedmont and the civil authorities present, including the representative of the Italian Government, to whom I extend a special greeting. I greet the clergy, the religious, the committed laypeople and all those present, especially the pilgrims who have come with devotion to pay homage to the Shroud.

The Shroud! What an eloquent message of suffering and love, of death and immortal life! It enables us to understand the conditions Jesus wished to endure before ascending into heaven. In its dramatic eloquence, this most precious Linen offers us a most significant message for our life: the source of all Christian life is the redemption won for us by the Saviour, who for our sake took on our human condition, suffered, died and rose again. The Holy Shroud speaks to us of all these things. It is a unique witness.

6. The blessededs we are venerating for the first time today accepted this saving message and made it their own. In

contemplating them, the Church rejoices. She rejoices in the Spirit, because in them she already glimpses the heavenly homeland, that glorious house of God where we are all expected. "In my Father's house there are many rooms ... I go to prepare a place for you" (*Jn* 14:2), Jesus had said to his disciples on the eve of his Passion. The new blessed have reached the place prepared for them by Christ after ascending into heaven.

The task now passes to us, who are still pilgrims on our earthly way. After Jesus' Ascension, two angels asked the Apostles: "Why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus ... will come in the same way" (*Acts* 1:11). The question is also addressed to us: we are now in the time of active and watchful waiting for Christ's glorious return.

Enlivened by keen hope, our spirit rejoices and cries out: "Come, Lord Jesus!". The response, given to us in the book of Revelation, fills our heart and that of every believer with joy: "Surely I am coming soon'. Amen" (cf. *Rv* 22:20).