



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO CHIAVARI AND BRESCIA (ITALY)
(SEPTEMBER 18-20, 1998)

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
ON THE OCCASION OF THE CENTENARY OF THE BIRTH
OF THE SERVANT OF GOD PAUL VI
AND THE BEATIFICATION OF GIUSEPPE TOVINI**

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

*Brescia
Sunday, 20 September, 1998*

1. *"Peter, do you love me?"* (cf Jn 21:15).

At this solemn Eucharistic celebration which closes the centenary of the birth of the Servant of God Paul VI, the Gospel was proclaimed in which Christ asks Peter if he loves him. Before entrusting him with the office of Head of the Apostolic College and the mission of being the cornerstone of the Church's unity, Christ questions Peter about love: *"Do you love me?"*. He does so because the service to which he intends to call him is a loving service to God, to the Church, to humanity.

In the first reading we heard words from the book of the prophet Isaiah: *"The Spirit of God ... has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted"* (Is 61:1). They call to mind the Gospel witness of Giuseppe Tovini, who today I had the joy of raising to the honours of the altar. He died the same year that Giovanni Battista Montini was born. The future Pope would testify again and again that his father and family friends told him many episodes about Tovini's commitment to Catholicism and the initiatives promoted by him with other courageous Brescians. I am pleased that the beatification of this outstanding figure has taken place during the closing of the centenary celebration of Paul VI's birth.

I affectionately greet you all, dear brothers and sisters taking part in this solemn Eucharistic assembly. I greet dear Archbishop Bruno Foresti, Cardinal Martini and all the Bishops of Lombardy and the other visiting Bishops. I extend a special greeting to Archbishop Giovanni Battista Re, born in this land and educated in the seminary of Brescia. With him I also greet Archbishop Pasquale Macchi, who for so many years was the private secretary of Pope Paul VI. I also extend my respectful greetings to the representative of the Government and all the authorities present.

With deep affection I greet you, city of Brescia, so rich in works of Christian inspiration; I greet your priests, religious and the many lay people who in their various ecclesial and civil offices have distinguished themselves by their religious, social and cultural commitment.

2. “*Peter, do you love me?*”. We can say that Paul VI’s life was a response to Christ’s question: a great proof of love for God, the Church and mankind. He loved God as a gracious and caring Father, and during the important moments of his life, especially those burdened with difficulties and suffering, he displayed a very strong sense of the divine fatherhood.

When, as Archbishop of Milan, he decided to hold a popular mission to instil new energy in the city’s Christian tradition, he chose as his basic theme: *God is Father*. Then on 6 August, 20 years ago, as he neared the end of his earthly life at Castel Gandolfo, he wanted to recite the *Our Father* as his last prayer.

And what can be said of his passionate love for Christ? His was an essentially Christocentric spirituality. In the homily to mark the beginning of his Pontificate, he explained that he had chosen the name of Paul because the Apostle “loved Christ supremely, because he greatly wanted and strove to bring the Gospel of Christ to all nations, because he offered his life in Christ’s name” (30 June 1963, in *Insegnamenti* I, [1963], pp. 24-25). On another occasion he added that it is impossible to leave Christ out of consideration, “if we want to know something certain, full, revealed about God; or rather, if we want to have a living, direct and authentic relationship with God” (*General Audience*, 18 December 1968; *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 26 December 1968, p. 3).

3. To his love for God the Father and for Christ the Teacher, Paul VI joined an intense love for the Church, for which he spent all his physical, intellectual and spiritual energies, as the touching confession he made in *Pensiero alla morte* testifies: “The Church ... I could say that I have always loved her; ... and that I think I have lived for her and for nothing else” (cf. *Pubblicazione dell’Istituto Paolo VI*, Brescia 1988, pp. 28-29).

Flowing spontaneously from this love for Christ and for the Church was his pastoral passion for man, with an acute insight into the sufferings and expectations of the contemporary age. Few have known, as he, to interpret the anxieties, desires, toils and aspirations of the men of our century. He wished to walk at their side; to do this he made himself a pilgrim on their roads, meeting them where they lived and struggled to build a world of greater attention and respect for the dignity of

every human being.

He wanted to be the servant of Church which evangelized the poor, called with every person of goodwill to build that “civilization of love” in which not only the crumbs of economic and civil progress go to the poor, but where justice and solidarity should reign.

4. The roots of Pope Montini’s particular sensitivity to the great social questions of our century are sunk deep in his Brescian origins. In his own family and then during the years of his youth in Brescia, he breathed that atmosphere, that fervour of activity which made Brescian Catholicism one of the significant landmarks of the Catholic presence in the social and political life of the country. Addressing his fellow citizens at the beginning of his Pontificate, Paul VI expressed this debt of gratitude: “Brescia! The city which not only gave me birth but is such a part of the civil, spiritual and human tradition, teaching me as well the meaning of life in this world and always offering me a framework which, I think, will withstand future experiences ordained over the years by divine Providence” (cf. *Address to a Pilgrimage from Milan and Brescia*, 29 June 1963, in *Insegnamenti I* [1963], p. 647).

5. Bl. Giuseppe Tovini was certainly a great witness of the Gospel incarnated in Italy's social and economic history in the last century. He is resplendent for his strong personality, his profound lay and family spirituality, and for his generous efforts to improve society. Between Tovini and Giovanni Battista Montini there is — as a matter of fact — a close, profound spiritual and mental bond.

In fact, the Pontiff himself wrote of Tovini: “The impression he left on those I first knew and esteemed was so vivid and so real that I frequently heard comments and praise of his extraordinary personality and his many varied activities; astonished, I heard admiring expressions of his virtue and sorrowful regrets at his early death” (cf. Preface by Giovanni Battista Montini to the biography of Giuseppe Tovini by Fr Antonio Cistellini in 1953, p. I).

6. Fervent, honest, active in social and political life, Giuseppe Tovini proclaimed the Christian message, always in fidelity to the guidance of the Church’s Magisterium. His constant concern was to defend the faith, convinced that — as he said at a congress — “without faith our children will never be rich; with faith they will never be poor”. He lived at a sensitive time in the history of Italy and the Church, and it was clear to him that one could not respond fully to God’s call without being generously and selflessly involved in social problems.

His was a prophetic vision and he responded with apostolic daring to the needs of the times, which in the light of new forms of discrimination required of believers a more incisive leadership in temporal affairs.

Aided by the legal skills and rigorous professionalism that distinguished him, he promoted and

directed many social organizations, and also held political office in Cividate Camuno and Brescia in the desire to make Christian doctrine and morality present among the people. He considered commitment to education a priority, and prominent among his many initiatives was his defence of schools and the freedom of teaching.

With humble means and great courage he laboured tirelessly to preserve for Brescian and Italian society what was most particularly its own, that is, its religious and moral heritage.

Tovini's honesty and integrity were rooted in his deep, vital relationship with God, which he constantly nourished with the Eucharist, meditation and devotion to the Blessed Virgin. From listening to God in daily prayer, he drew light and strength for the great social and political battles he had to wage to safeguard Christian values. The Church of St Luke, with its beautiful image of the Immaculata and where his mortal remains now rest, is a witness to his piety.

On the threshold of the third millennium, Giuseppe Tovini, whom today we contemplate in heavenly glory, spurs us on. I invite you in particular, dear lay faithful of Brescia and Italy, to look to this great social apostle, who was able to give hope to those without voice in the society of his time, so that his example will be an incentive and encouragement to everyone to work generously today and always to *defend* and to *spread* the truth and the demands of the Gospel. May he protect you from heaven and sustain you by his intercession.

Dear Brescians, you have received a great religious and civil heritage: treasure it as an incomparable patrimony, and bear active witness to it with that ingenuity and integrity, that fidelity and perseverance which distinguished Paul VI and Giuseppe Tovini.

7. *"I have fought the good fight.... The Lord stood by me"* (2 Tm 4:7,17) These words from the second reading of the Mass summarize the spiritual experience of the two figures we recall today with devout admiration. We thank God for their witness: it is a precious gift, not only for Brescia, but for Italy and for all humanity. Their memory must not fade with the passing of time. In different fields and with different responsibilities, they sowed so much good; they fought the good fight: the fight for Truth and the civilization of Love.

May Mary, Mother of the Church, help us take up their legacy and follow in their footsteps so that we too will be allowed to answer Christ like the Apostle Peter: *"Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you"* (Jn 21:17). Amen!