



# The Holy See

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VISIT TO ST MATTHIAS THE APOSTLE PARISH (ROME)

## *HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II*

*Fourth Sunday of Lent, 14 March 1999*

1. "*Rejoice, Jerusalem, and all of you who love her, rejoice with her*" (Entrance Antiphon).

Today's liturgy begins with this invitation to rejoice. It gives a particularly cheerful tone to this Fourth Sunday of Lent, traditionally called *Laetare* Sunday. Yes, we should rejoice because the true Lenten spirit is a search for the deep joy which is the fruit of our friendship with God. We rejoice because Easter is now close at hand, and in a little while we will celebrate our freedom from evil and sin, thanks to the new life brought to us by Christ who died and rose again.

On our way to Easter, the liturgy urges us to retrace the catechumenal journey with those who are preparing to receive Baptism. Last Sunday, we meditated on the gift of the living water of the Spirit (cf. Jn 4:5-42); today we reflect near the pool of Siloam with the man born blind, to embrace Christ, the light of the world (cf. Jn 9:1-41).

"*He went and washed and came back seeing*" (Jn 9:7). Like the blind man, we must let ourselves be enlightened by Christ and renew our faith in the suffering Messiah, who reveals himself as the light of our life: "*I am the light of the world; he who follows me ... will have the light of life*" (Gospel Acclamation; cf. Jn 8:12).

Water and light are essential elements of life. It is for this reason that Jesus elevates them to signs which reveal the great mystery of man's participation in the divine life.

2. Dear brothers and sisters of St Matthias the Apostle Parish, I am delighted to be with you on this *Laetare* Sunday. I offer my affectionate greetings to the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishop of this area, your parish priest, Mons. Vincenzo Josia, the priests who work with him and all of you

who live, pray and bear witness to the Gospel in this neighbourhood. Today I would especially like to remember the first beloved parish priest of this community, Mons. Desiderio Pirovano, whom the Lord called to himself almost a year ago, after suffering a long illness which he faced with exemplary dignity and faith.

I know that your parish, now 35 years old, is characterized by good participation of the faithful in sacramental and ecclesial life. I am pleased with this, and thank the Lord with you for this spiritual and community wealth, which should make you even more committed to missionary activity aimed at those who do not yet share the same spiritual experience. For this reason, the City Mission which, please God, we will conclude together on 22 May next at the solemn Pentecost Vigil in St Peter's Square, is of real help to you. It is necessary that your missionary commitment continue afterwards with suitable initiatives. In fact, it must involve the parish communities and the whole Diocese to an ever greater extent, so that all the baptized will be ready to respond courageously to the human and spiritual challenges of the present time. In this context, it is important to make the most of the propensity for and openness to the Gospel found in society, without stopping at appearances, but looking at the heart of situations. This is what the first reading recalls through the person and mission of the prophet Samuel: "*Man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart*" (1 Sam 16:7). In every person we meet, even in those who openly profess not to be interested in the things of the Spirit, the need for God is real: it is the task of believers to proclaim and bear witness to the liberating truth of the Gospel, offering the light of Christ to everyone.

3. Dear parishioners of St Matthias the Apostle! I am delighted with your community's efficient organization. I am referring especially to the *many initiatives for children and young people*, which are part of the religious education classes and the programmes of Diocesan Catholic Action. Continue to give your time and energy generously to children, adolescents and young people, who are the Church's hope in the new millennium. Direct all your formative work to teaching them to grow in their knowledge of Jesus, the only Saviour of the world, to helping them to experience God's mercy and to translate what they learn in catechesis and in the experience of community prayer into a strong witness of life. May the meeting this coming Thursday, 25 March, in Paul VI Auditorium in preparation for the 14th World Youth Day be a significant moment on this journey of religious enrichment. Dear young people of this parish, come in large numbers and prepare your spirit, so that this event, which has now become the Pope's meeting with the young people of the Diocese, will be an authentic experience of faith for all.

Is it not true that today, more than ever, the younger generation has a keen desire for truth and are more and more tired of pursuing empty illusions? It is vital to present the Gospel to them with strength and love, and to help them combine faith with life in order to resist the many temptations of the modern world. This is why, like the man born blind in today's Gospel passage, encountering Jesus in a personal way is indispensable.

4. This morning when entering your impressive church, I noted how even the architectural structure has been designed so that the attention of the faithful is focused on the place where the *Eucharistic Mystery* is celebrated. The Eucharist, the summit and source of Christian life, is Jesus present among us, who makes himself food and drink for our salvation. A true community, an authentic Church, will only be such if it learns to grow in the school of the Eucharist and nourishes itself at the table of the Word and the Bread of eternal life. All of us need to learn how to be transformed by the Eucharistic Mystery. On this subject, our thoughts naturally turn to the *International Eucharistic Congress* which will take place in Rome from 18 to 25 June 2000.

The Eucharist, the supreme Mystery of love, also calls for a commitment of solidarity and active closeness to those in need. I would like to encourage you to do even more in this important area, in order to be credible witnesses to God's providential love for every human creature. There are many individuals and families among you who are in need of support; there are also poor people who live around the parish. Helping your brothers and sisters in difficulty, opening the arms of your heart to them, helps foster that climate of brotherhood and friendship which the world needs. Only in this way will we be true apostles of Jesus, who left us the commandment of love as a rule of life; only in this way will we be children of light, that is, of Truth and Love.

5. "*Walk as children of light*" (Eph 5:8).

May the words of the Apostle Paul in the second reading be an incentive for us to take this path of conversion and spiritual renewal. By virtue of Baptism, Christians are "filled with light"; they have already received the light of Christ. Therefore, they are called to conform their life to the gift of God: to be children of light!

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord open the eyes of your faith just as he did with the man born blind, so that you learn to recognize his face in those of your brothers and sisters, especially those of the neediest.

May Mary, who offered Christ to the entire world, help us to welcome him into our families, into our communities and into all the living and working areas of our city.

Amen!

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