



The Holy See

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER

"DAY OF PARDON"

Sunday, 12 March 2000

1. *"We implore you, in Christ's name: be reconciled to God! For our sake God made him who did not know sin to be sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God" (2 Cor 5: 20-21).*

These are words of St Paul which the Church rereads every year on Ash Wednesday, at the beginning of Lent. In the Lenten season, the Church desires to be particularly united to Christ, who, moved inwardly by the Holy Spirit, began his messianic mission by going into the wilderness and fasting there for 40 days and 40 nights (cf. *Mk* 1: 12-13).

At the end of that fast he was tempted by Satan, as we are told briefly by the Evangelist Mark in today's liturgy (cf. 1: 13). Matthew and Luke, on the other hand, deal more amply with Christ's struggle in the desert and with his definitive victory over the tempter: "Begone, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God and him only shall you serve" (*Mt* 4: 10).

The One speaking in this way is he "who did not know sin" (2 *Cor* 5: 21), Jesus, "the Holy One of God" (*Mk* 1: 24).

2. *"He made him who did not know sin to be sin" (2 Cor 5: 21).* A few moments ago, in the second reading, we heard this surprising assertion made by the Apostle. What do these words mean? They seem, and in effect are, a paradox. How could God, who is holiness itself, "make" his Only-begotten Son, sent into the world, "to be sin"? Yet this is exactly what we read in the passage from St Paul's Second Letter to the Corinthians. We are in the presence of a mystery: a mystery which at first sight is baffling, but is clearly written in divine Revelation.

Already in the Old Testament, the Book of Isaiah speaks of it with inspired foresight in the fourth song of the Servant of Yahweh: "We had all gone astray like sheep, each following his own way; but the Lord laid upon him the guilt of us all" (*Is* 53: 6).

Although Christ, the Holy One, was absolutely sinless, he agreed to take our sins upon himself. He agreed in order to redeem us; he agreed to bear our sins to fulfil the mission he had received from the Father, who - as the Evangelist John

writes - "so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him ... may have eternal life" (Jn 3: 16).

3. Before Christ who, out of love, took our guilt upon himself, we are all invited to make a *profound examination of conscience*. One of the characteristic elements of the Great Jubilee is what I described as the "purification of memory" (Bull *Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 11). As the Successor of Peter, I asked that "in this year of mercy the Church, strong in the holiness which she receives from her Lord, should kneel before God and implore forgiveness for the past and present sins of her sons and daughters" (ibid.). Today, the First Sunday of Lent, seemed to me the right occasion for the Church, gathered spiritually round the Successor of Peter, to implore divine forgiveness for the sins of all believers. *Let us forgive and ask forgiveness!*

This appeal has prompted a thorough and fruitful reflection, which led to the publication several days ago of a document of the International Theological Commission, entitled: *"Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past"*. I thank everyone who helped to prepare this text. It is very useful for correctly understanding and carrying out the authentic request for pardon, based on the *objective responsibility* which Christians share as members of the Mystical Body, and which spurs today's faithful to recognize, along with their own sins, the sins of yesterday's Christians, in the light of careful historical and theological discernment.

Indeed, "because of the bond which unites us to one another in the Mystical Body, all of us, though not personally responsible and without encroaching on the judgement of God who alone knows every heart, bear the burden of the errors and faults of those who have gone before us" (*Incarnationis mysterium*, n. 11). The recognition of past wrongs serves to *reawaken our consciences to the compromises of the present*, opening the way to conversion for everyone.

4. *Let us forgive and ask forgiveness!* While we praise God who, in his merciful love, has produced in the Church a wonderful harvest of holiness, missionary zeal, total dedication to Christ and neighbour, we cannot fail to recognize *the infidelities to the Gospel committed by some of our brethren*, especially during the second millennium. Let us ask pardon for the divisions which have occurred among Christians, for the violence some have used in the service of the truth and for the distrustful and hostile attitudes sometimes taken towards the followers of other religions.

Let us confess, even more, *our responsibilities as Christians for the evils of today*. We must ask ourselves what our responsibilities are regarding atheism, religious indifference, secularism, ethical relativism, the violations of the right to life, disregard for the poor in many countries.

We humbly ask forgiveness for the part which each of us has had in these evils by our own actions, thus helping to disfigure the face of the Church.

At the same time, as we confess our sins, *let us forgive the sins committed by others against us*. Countless times in the course of history Christians have suffered hardship, oppression and persecution because of their faith. Just as the victims of such abuses forgave them, so let us forgive as well. The Church today feels and has always felt obliged to *purify her memory* of those sad events from every feeling of rancour or revenge. In this way the Jubilee becomes for everyone a favourable opportunity for a profound conversion to the Gospel. The acceptance of God's forgiveness leads to the commitment to forgive our brothers and sisters and to be reconciled with them.

5. But what does the word "reconciliation" mean to us? To grasp its precise sense and value, we must first recognize the possibility of division, of separation. Yes, man is the only creature on earth who can have a relationship of communion with his Creator, but he is also *the only one who can separate himself from him*. Unfortunately, he has frequently turned away from God.

Fortunately many people, like the prodigal son spoken of in the Gospel of Luke (cf. *Lk* 15: 13), after leaving their father's house and squandering their inheritance, reach the very bottom and realize how much they have lost (cf. *Lk* 15: 13-17). Then they set out to return home: "I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned...'" (*Lk* 15: 18).

God, clearly represented by the father in the parable, welcomes every prodigal child who returns to him. He welcomes him through Christ, in whom the sinner can once again become "righteous" with the righteousness of God. He welcomes him, because for our sake he made his eternal Son to be sin. Yes, only through Christ can we become the righteousness of God (cf. *2 Cor* 5: 21).

6. "*God so loved the world that he gave his only Son*". Here, in synthesis, is what the mystery of the world's redemption means! We must fully understand the value of the great gift the Father has given us in Jesus. We must keep the eyes of our soul fixed on Christ - the Christ of Gethesmane, Christ scourged, crowned with thorns, carrying the cross and, finally, crucified. Christ took upon himself the burden of the sins of all people, the burden of our own sins, so that through his saving sacrifice we might be reconciled to God.

Today, Saul of Tarsus who became St Paul, stands before us as a witness: he had an extraordinary experience of the power of the Cross on the way to Damascus. The risen Christ revealed himself to him in all his dazzling power: "'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'... 'Who are you, Lord?' ... 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting'" (*Acts* 9: 4-5). Today Paul, who had such a powerful experience of the Cross of Christ, addresses a fervent prayer to us: "*We beg you not to receive the grace of God in vain*". This grace is offered to us, St Paul insists, by God himself, who tells us today: "*In an acceptable time I have heard you; on a day of salvation I have helped you*" (*2 Cor* 6: 1-2).

Mary, Mother of forgiveness, help us to accept the grace of forgiveness which the Jubilee generously offers us. Make the Lent of this extraordinary Holy Year an acceptable time, a time of reconciliation, a time of salvation for all believers and for everyone who is searching for God!

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