



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME
FOR THEIR ANNUAL LENTEN MEETING***

Thursday, 26 February 2004

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Priests of Rome,*

1. I am delighted with this meeting that is once again taking place at the beginning of Lent, giving me an opportunity to see you, listen to you and share your hopes and pastoral concerns. I offer an affectionate greeting to each one of you, thanking you for your service to the Church of Rome. I greet and thank the Cardinal Vicar, the Vicegerent, the Auxiliary Bishops and those of you who have addressed me.

We are meeting at a time when I am about to resume my encounters with the parishes of Rome in which most of you carry out your daily ministry. I have very much been looking forward to this direct contact with the parish communities I have not yet been able to visit, because this is part of my task as Bishop of this beloved Church of Rome.

2. The Cardinal Vicar's words and subsequently your addresses have shed light on the various aspects of the pastoral programme centred on the family to which our Diocese is committed this year and the next, within the framework of that "ongoing mission" which, after the Great Jubilee and the positive experience of the "City Mission", constitutes the backbone of our pastoral activity.

Dear Priests, putting the family at the centre, or rather, recognizing the centrality of the family in God's design for humanity and thus in the life of the Church and society, is an indispensable task that has motivated these 25 years of my Pontificate, and even earlier, my ministry as a Priest and Bishop and also my commitment as a scholar and university lecturer.

I therefore rejoice at sharing with you your concern for the families of our beloved Diocese of Rome on this happy occasion.

3. If it is to be authentic and fruitful, our service to families must always lead to the source, that is, to God who is love and who lives in himself a mystery of personal communion of love. In creating humanity in his image out of love, God has inscribed a vocation in the hearts of men and women, and hence, the capacity for love and communion and for bearing the responsibility they carry. This vocation can be fulfilled in two specific ways: through marriage and through virginity or celibacy. Both, therefore, are an actuation, each in its own way, of the most profound truth of man and of his being created in the image of God (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, n. 11).

Marriage and the family thus cannot be considered a mere product of historical circumstances or a superstructure imposed from outside on human love. On the contrary, they are an inner need of this love to fulfil itself in its own truth and in the fullness of the reciprocal gift of self. Even those features of spousal union that today are all too often misunderstood or rejected, such as unity, indissolubility and openness to life, are instead requests for the authenticity of the covenant of love. It is in this very way that the bond which unites the man and the woman becomes an image and symbol of the covenant between God and his People, which finds its definitive fulfilment in Jesus Christ. Therefore, among the baptized marriage is a sacrament, an effective sign of grace and salvation.

4. Dear Priests of Rome, let us never tire of proposing, proclaiming and witnessing to this great truth about love and Christian marriage. Our vocation, of course, is not that of marriage, but the priesthood and virginity for the sake of the Kingdom of God. However, it is precisely in celibacy, joyfully welcomed and protected, that we in turn are called to live the truth about love in a way that is different though just as full, giving ourselves totally with Christ to God, to the Church, and to our brothers and sisters in humanity.

Thus, our virginity “keeps alive in the Church a consciousness of the mystery of marriage and defends it from any reduction and impoverishment” (*Familiaris Consortio*, n. 16).

5. I have very often stressed the fundamental and indispensable role of the family, both in the life of the Church and in civil society. But precisely in order to sustain Christian families in their demanding tasks, the pastoral solicitude of us priests is essential.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, I therefore recalled that the Bishop is “the person principally responsible in the diocese for the pastoral care of the family” (n. 73). Likewise, dear Priests, your responsibility to families “extends not only to moral and liturgical matters but to personal and social matters as well” (*ibid.*). You are called in particular to “support the family in its difficulties and sufferings” (*ibid.*), caring for its members and helping them to live their lives as husbands and wives, parents and children in the light of the Gospel.

6. In fulfilling this important mission, many of us will be able to draw very valid help from the experience we have lived in our own families, from the witness of faith and trust in God, of love and dedication, of the capacity for sacrifice and forgiveness that we received from our own parents and relatives. The daily contact with Christian families entrusted to our ministry, however, offers us constantly renewed examples of life in accordance with the Gospel and thus stimulates and comforts us in turn to live our own specific vocation with fidelity and joy.

Therefore, dear Priests, we must consider our apostolate with families a source of grace, a gift that the Lord offers us even before we see it as a specific pastoral duty.

So do not be afraid to spend yourselves for families, to dedicate to them your time, energy and the spiritual gifts the Lord has given you. Be caring and trustworthy friends to them as well as pastors and teachers. Accompany them and sustain them in prayer; suggest to them the Gospel of marriage and the family with truth and love, without reservations or arbitrary interpretations. Be spiritually close to them in the trials life often holds in store, helping them to understand that the Church is always mother for them as well as teacher. Also teach the young to understand and appreciate the true meaning of love and thus to prepare themselves for forming authentic Christian families.

7. The erroneous and frequently aberrant forms of behaviour that are publicly proposed, flaunted and exalted, and likewise the daily contact with the difficulties and crises that many families experience can also give rise in us to the temptation of distrust and resignation.

Dear Priests of Rome, it is exactly this temptation that we must overcome with God's help, first of all within us, in our hearts and in our minds. In fact, the plan of God who inscribed in man and woman the vocation to love and to the family is still the same today. The action of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the dead and risen Christ, is just as powerful. No error, no sin, no ideology and no human deceit can demolish the profound structure of our being, which needs to be loved and is in turn capable of true love.

Thus, however great the difficulties, our confidence in the present and future of the family is all the stronger and our service to families as priests must be all the more generous and zealous.

Dear Priests, thank you for this meeting. With this trust and with these hopes, I entrust each one of you and every family in Rome to the Holy Family of Nazareth, and I wholeheartedly bless you and your communities.

At the end of the meeting, the Holy Father spoke extemporaneously:

“Est tempus concludendi”, especially looking at those of our brothers who have had to remain standing throughout because there was no seat for them, not one more seat: we are numerous.

I would like to thank the Cardinal Vicar and the Episcopal College of Rome for organizing this meeting. I would now like to sum it up.

In the first place, Rome: what does Rome mean? The Petrine City and every parish is Petrine. There are 340 parishes in Rome. I have visited 300 of them but still have 40 left to visit. However, we will begin this Saturday to complete the number of visits. Let us hope everything will go well.

Next, Rome is not only parishes: it is seminaries, universities and different institutions. At this meeting, we have spoken directly or indirectly of all these institutions.

The theme is the family. Family means: “male and female he created them”; it means love and responsibility. From these two words spring all the consequences. We have heard a lot said of these consequences with regard to marriage, the family, parents, children, school.

I am deeply grateful to all of you because you have described these consequences, this reality. This concern certainly belongs to the parish. I learned long ago, when I was in Krakow, to live beside couples and families. I also followed closely the process that leads two people, a man and a woman, to create a family, and with marriage, to become spouses, parents, with all the consequences that we know.

Thank you for focusing your pastoral concern on families and for seeking to solve all those problems that the family can bring with it. I hope you will proceed in this most important area, because the future of the Church and of the world passes through the family. I hope you will be able to prepare this good future for Rome, for your Homeland of Italy and for the world. Many, many good wishes!

Here is the text that I had prepared, but I laid it aside! You will find it in *L'Osservatore Romano*.

Here are some phrases written in Romanesco [the Roman dialect]: “Dàmoſe da fà!” (let us keep busy), “Volèmoſe bene!” (let us love one another), “Semo Romani!” (we are Romans). I never learned Romanesco: does that mean that I am not a good Bishop of Rome?