



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO OUR LADY STAR OF EVANGELIZATION PARISH OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

II Sunday of Advent, 10 December 2006

*Dear Brothers and Sisters of the
Parish of Our Lady Star of Evangelization,*

I am pleased to be with you for the dedication of this beautiful new parish church: the first that I have dedicated to the Lord since I took up office as Bishop of Rome. The solemn liturgy for the dedication of a church is a moment of intense and common spiritual joy for all God's people who live in the area: I wholeheartedly join in your joy today.

I greet with affection the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, Camillo Ruini, Bishop Paolino Schiavon, Auxiliary Bishop of the Southern Sector, and Auxiliary Bishop Ernesto Mandara, Secretary of the Roman Commission for the Preservation of Faith and for the Provision of New Churches in Rome. I extend my deep gratitude to them and to all who have contributed in various capacities to making this new parish centre a reality.

This church is being inaugurated during the Season of Advent, which the Diocese of Rome for the past 16 years has dedicated to increasing awareness and collecting funds in order to build new churches on the city's outskirts. It comes in addition to more than 50 parish complexes that have already been built in recent years, thanks to the financial efforts of the Vicariate, the contributions of numerous faithful and the attention of the civil Authorities.

I ask all the faithful and citizens of good will to persevere generously in this task so that neighbourhoods that are still without a church may have their parish centre as soon as possible.

Especially in our broadly secularized social context, the parish is a beacon that radiates the light of the faith and thus responds to the deepest and truest desires of the human heart, giving meaning

and hope to the lives of individuals and families.

I greet your parish priest, the priests who work with him, the members of the Parish Pastoral Council and the other lay people involved in the various pastoral activities. I greet each one of you with affection. Your community is lively and young!

It is young because it was founded in 1989, and especially because of the effective beginning of its activities. It is young because in this North Torrino district the majority of families are young, so children and young people abound.

Thus, the laborious but fascinating task of educating children in the life and joy of faith is incumbent on your community. I am confident that together, in a spirit of sincere communion, you will be involved in preparation for the sacraments of Christian initiation and will help your children, who from now on will find here welcoming premises and adequate structures to grow in love and in fidelity to the Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have dedicated a church - a building in which God and man desire to meet: a house that unites us, in which we are attracted to God, and being with God unites us with one another.

The three Readings of this solemn liturgy are intended to show us under very different aspects the meaning of a sacred building as a house of God and a house of men and women.

We have before us, in these three Readings that we have heard, three important themes: the Word of God, which gathers people together, in the First Reading; the city of God, which in the Second Reading appears at the same time as a bride; and lastly, the profession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God Incarnate, expressed first of all by Peter, who thus founded the living Church which is manifest in the physical building of every church. Let us now listen more attentively to what the three Readings tell us.

First of all, there is the account of the rebuilding of the People of Israel, of the Holy City Jerusalem and of the temple subsequent to their return from the Exile. After the great optimism of the homecoming, the people - on arrival - found themselves facing a wasteland. How were they to rebuild it?

The external rebuilding, so necessary, could not proceed unless the people were first rebuilt as a people - unless a common criterion of justice was developed that would unite them all and regulate the life and activity of each one.

The people who had returned needed, so to speak, a "constitution", a fundamental law for their life. And they knew that this constitution, if it was to be just and lasting, if it was to lead definitively

to justice, could not be the result of their own autonomous intention.

True justice cannot be invented by man: rather, it has to be discovered. In other words, it must come from God, who is justice. The Word of God, therefore, rebuilds the city.

What the Reading tells us is a reminder of the Sinai event. It brings to life the event of Sinai: the holy Word of God, which shows men and women the way of justice, is solemnly read and explained. Thus, it becomes present as a force from within which builds the country anew. This happens on New Year's Day. God's Word ushers in a new year, it ushers in a period of history.

The Word of God is always a renewing force which gives meaning and order to our time. At the end of the Reading is joy: people are invited to the solemn banquet; they are urged to make a gift to those who have nothing and thereby to unite everyone in the joyful communion that is based on the Word of God.

This Reading ends in these beautiful words: the joy of the Lord is our strength. I believe that it is not difficult to see that these words of the Old Testament are really true for us today.

The church building exists so that God's Word may be listened to, explained and understood by us; it exists so that God's Word may be active among us as a force that creates justice and love. It exists in particular so that in it the celebration in which God wants humanity to participate may begin, not only at the end of time but already today. It exists so that the knowledge of justice and goodness may be awakened within us, and there is no other source for knowing and strengthening this knowledge of justice and goodness other than the Word of God. It exists so that we may learn to live the joy of the Lord who is our strength.

Let us pray to the Lord to gladden us with his Word; to gladden us with faith, so that this joy may renew us and the world!

Thus, may the reading of the Word of God, the renewal of the revelation of Sinai after the Exile, serve then for communion with God and among men and women. This communion is expressed in the rebuilding of the temple, the city and its walls.

The Word of God and the rebuilding of the city in the *Book of Nehemiah* are closely connected: on the one hand, without the Word of God there is neither city nor community; on the other, the Word of God does not remain only a discourse but leads to constructing, it is a Word that builds.

The following texts from the Book of Nehemiah on the construction of city walls seem at first reading to be very practical and even prosaic in their details. However, they constitute a truly spiritual and theological theme.

A prophetic word of that age states that God himself built a wall of fire to encircle Jerusalem (cf. Zec 2: 8ff.). God himself is the city's living defence, and not only in that time but always. Thus, the Old Testament account introduces us into the vision of *the Apocalypse*, which we heard as the Second Reading.

I would like to stress two aspects of this vision. The city is the bride. It is not merely a building of stone. All that is said about the city in grandiose images refers to something alive: to the Church of living stones, where even now the future city is being formed.

It refers to the new people who, in the breaking of the bread, become one body with Christ (cf. I Cor 10: 16ff.).

Just as in their love man and woman become "one flesh", so Christ and humanity gathered in the Church become through Christ's love "one spirit" (cf. I Cor 6: 17; Eph 5: 29ff.). Paul calls Christ the new, the last Adam: definitive man. And he calls him "a life-giving spirit" (I Cor 15: 45). With him, we become one; with him, the Church becomes a life-giving spirit. The holy City, where there is no longer a temple because it is inhabited by God, is the image of this community that is formed from Christ.

The other aspect that I wanted to mention are the 12 foundations of the city, above which are the names of the Twelve Apostles. The foundations of the city are not built of material stones but of living beings - they are the Apostles, with the witness of their faith. The Apostles remain the pillars that support the new city, the Church, through the ministry of Apostolic Succession: through the Bishops.

The candles we light on the walls of the church in the places where anointings will take place are reminiscent precisely of the Apostles: their faith is the true light that illumines the Church and at the same time, the foundation that supports the Church. The Apostles' faith is not something antiquated. Since it is a truth, it is the foundation on which we stand, the light by which we see.

We come to the Gospel. How often have we heard it! Peter's profession of faith is the steadfast foundation of the Church. With Peter, let us say to Jesus: "You are Christ, the Son of the living God". The Word of God is not only a word. In Jesus Christ it is present in our midst as a Person.

This is the deepest purpose of this sacred building's existence: the church exists so that in it we may encounter Christ, Son of the living God. God has a Face. God has a Name. In Christ, God was made flesh and gave himself to us in the mystery of the Most Holy Eucharist.

The Word is flesh. It is given to us under the appearances of bread and thus truly becomes the Bread on which we live. We live on Truth. This Truth is a Person: he speaks to us and we speak to him. The Church is the place of our encounter with the Son of the living God and thus becomes

the place for the encounter among ourselves. This is the joy that God gives us: that he made himself one of us, that we can touch him and that he dwells among us. The joy of God is our strength.

Thus, the Gospel finally introduces us into the period in which we live today. It leads us towards Mary, whom we honour as the Star of Evangelization.

At a crucial time in history, Mary offered herself, her body and soul, to God as a dwelling place. In her and from her the Son of God took flesh. Through her the Word was made flesh (cf. Jn 1: 14). Thus, it is Mary who tells us what Advent is: going forth to meet the Lord who comes to meet us; waiting for him, listening to him, looking at him.

Mary tells us why church buildings exist: they exist so that room may be made within us for the Word of God; so that within us and through us the Word may also be made flesh today.

Thus, we greet her as the Star of Evangelization: Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us so that we may live the Gospel. Help us not to hide the light of the Gospel under the bushel of our meagre faith. Help us by virtue of the Gospel to be the light of the world, so that men and women may see goodness and glorify the Father who is in Heaven (cf. Mt 5: 14ff.). Amen!

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