



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF "SANTA MARIA CONSOLATRICE"

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Fourth Sunday of Advent, 18 December 2005

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It really is a great joy for me to be with you this morning and to celebrate Holy Mass with you and for you. Indeed, my Visit to *Santa Maria Consolatrice*, the first Roman parish I have been to since the Lord wished to summon me to be Bishop of Rome, is for me, in a very real and concrete sense, a return home.

I remember very well that 15 October 1977 on which I took possession of this titular church of mine. Fr Ennio Appignanesi was parish priest and Fr Enrico Pomili and Fr Franco Camaldo were the parochial vicars. The master of ceremonies assigned to me was Mons. Piero Marini. Well, here we all are together again! This is truly a great joy to me.

Since then, our reciprocal bond has grown gradually stronger and deeper. It is a bond in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose Eucharistic Sacrifice I have so often celebrated and whose Sacraments I have so often administered in this church. It is a bond of affection and friendship that truly warmed my heart and still warms it today. It is a bond that has bound me to you all, and especially to your parish priest and the other priests of the parish. It is a bond that did not weaken when I became titular Cardinal of the suburbicarian Diocese of Velletri-Segni; a bond that has acquired a new and deeper dimension because I am now Bishop of Rome and your Bishop.

Moreover, I am particularly glad that my visit today, as Fr Enrico has already said, is taking place in the year in which you are celebrating the 60th anniversary of your parish, the 50th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of our beloved parish priest, Mons. Enrico Pomili, and lastly, the 25th anniversary of the episcopal ordination of Archbishop Ennio Appignanesi. It is a year,

therefore, in which we have special reasons for thanking the Lord.

I now greet with affection Mons. Enrico himself and thank him for his very kind words to me. I greet Cardinal Camillo Ruini, Vicar, Cardinal Ricardo María Carles Gordò, titular of this church, hence, my successor to this Title, Cardinal Giovanni Canestri, formerly your deeply loved parish priest, Archbishop Luigi Moretti, Vicegerent and Bishop of the Eastern Sector of Rome; we have already greeted Archbishop Ennio Appignanesi, your former parish priest, and Bishop Massimo Giustetti, your former parochial vicar.

I extend an affectionate greeting to your current parochial vicars and to the women religious of *Santa Maria Consolatrice*. They have been in Casalbertone since 1932 as precious collaborators of the parish and true messengers of mercy and consolation in this neighbourhood, especially for the poor and for children. With the same sentiments, I greet each one of you, all the families in the parish and all who, in their various capacities, work in the parish services.

Let us now meditate briefly on the most beautiful Gospel of this Fourth Sunday of Advent, which for me is one of the loveliest passages of Sacred Scripture. And so as not to take too long, I would like to reflect on only three words from this rich Gospel.

The first word on which I would like to meditate with you is the Angel's greeting to Mary. In the Italian translation the Angel says: "Hail, Mary". But the Greek word below, "Kaire", means in itself "be glad" or "rejoice".

And here is the first surprising thing: the greeting among the Jews was "Shalom", "peace", whereas the greeting of the Greek world was "Kaire", "be glad". It is surprising that the Angel, on entering Mary's house, should have greeted her with the greeting of the Greeks: "Kaire", "be glad, rejoice". And when, 40 years later, the Greeks had read this Gospel, they were able to see an important message in it: they realized that the beginning of the New Testament, to which this passage from Luke referred, was bringing openness to the world of peoples and to the universality of the People of God, which by then included not only the Jewish people but also the world in its totality, all peoples. The new universality of the Kingdom of the true son of David appears in this Greek greeting of the Angel.

However, it is appropriate to point out straightaway that the Angel's words took up a prophetic promise that is found in the Book of the Prophet Zephaniah. We find the same greeting almost literally. Inspired by God, the Prophet Zephaniah says to Israel: "Shout for joy, O daughter Zion!... the Lord [is with you and] is in your midst". We know that Mary was very familiar with the Sacred Scriptures. Her *Magnificat* is a fabric woven of threads from the Old Testament. We may thus be certain that the Blessed Virgin understood straightaway that these were the words of the Prophet Zephaniah addressed to Israel, to the "daughter Zion", considered as a dwelling place of God. And now the surprising thing, which must have given Mary food for thought, is that these words,

addressed to all Israel, were being specifically addressed to her, Mary. And thus, it must clearly have appeared to her that she herself was the "daughter Zion" of whom the Prophet spoke, and that the Lord, therefore, had a special intention for her, that she was called to be the true dwelling place of God, a dwelling place not built of stones but of living flesh, of a living heart, that God was really intending to take her, the Virgin, as his own true temple. What an intention! And as a result, we can understand that Mary began to think with special intensity about what this greeting meant.

However, let us now reflect in particular on the first word: "Rejoice, be glad". This is the first word that resounds in the New Testament as such, because the Angel's announcement to Zechariah of the birth of John the Baptist is the word that still rings out on the threshold between the two Testaments. It is only with this dialogue which the Angel Gabriel has with Mary that the New Testament really begins. We can therefore say that the first word of the New Testament is an invitation to joy: "rejoice, be glad!". The New Testament is truly "Gospel", the "Good News" that brings us joy. God is not remote from us, unknown, enigmatic or perhaps dangerous. God is close to us, so close that he makes himself a child and we can informally address this God.

It was the Greek world above all that grasped this innovation, that felt this joy deeply, for it had been unclear to the Greeks whether there was a good God, a wicked God or simply no God. Religion at that time spoke to them of so many divinities: therefore, they had felt they were surrounded by very different divinities that were opposed to one another; thus, they were afraid that if they did something for one of these divinities, another might be offended and seek revenge.

So it was that they lived in a world of fear, surrounded by dangerous demons, never knowing how to save themselves from these forces in conflict with one another. It was a world of fear, a dark world. Then they heard: "Rejoice, these demons are nothing; the true God exists and this true God is good, he loves us, he knows us, he is with us, with us even to the point that he took on flesh!".

This is the great joy that Christianity proclaims. Knowing this God is truly "Good News", a word of redemption.

Perhaps we Catholics who have always known it are no longer surprised and no longer feel this liberating joy keenly. However, if we look at today's world where God is absent, we cannot but note that it is also dominated by fears and uncertainties: is it good to be a person or not? Is it good to be alive or not? Is it truly a good to exist? Or might everything be negative? And they really live in a dark world, they need anaesthetics to be able to live. Thus, the words: "Rejoice, because God is with you, he is with us", are words that truly open a new epoch. Dear friends, with an act of faith we must once again accept and understand in the depths of our hearts this liberating word: "Rejoice!".

We cannot keep solely for ourselves this joy that we have received; joy must always be shared. Joy must be communicated. Mary went without delay to communicate her joy to her cousin Elizabeth. And ever since her Assumption into Heaven she has showered joy upon the whole

world, she has become the great Consoler: our Mother who communicates joy, trust and kindness and also invites us to spread joy. This is the real commitment of Advent: to bring joy to others. Joy is the true gift of Christmas, not expensive presents that demand time and money.

We can transmit this joy simply: with a smile, with a kind gesture, with some small help, with forgiveness. Let us give this joy and the joy given will be returned to us. Let us seek in particular to communicate the deepest joy, that of knowing God in Christ. Let us pray that this presence of God's liberating joy will shine out in our lives.

The second word on which I would like to meditate is another word of the Angel's: "Do not fear, Mary", he says. In fact, there was reason for her to fear, for it was a great burden to bear the weight of the world upon herself, to be the Mother of the universal King, to be the Mother of the Son of God: what a burden that was! It was too heavy a burden for human strength to bear! But the Angel said: "Do not fear! Yes, you are carrying God, but God is carrying you. Do not fear!".

These words, "Do not fear", must have deeply penetrated Mary's heart. We can imagine how in various situations the Virgin must have pondered on those words, she must have heard them again.

At the moment when Simeon said to her: "This child is destined to be the downfall and the rise of many in Israel, a sign that will be opposed - and you yourself will be pierced with a sword", at that very moment in which she might have succumbed to fear, Mary returned to the Angel's words and felt their echo within her: "Do not fear, God is carrying you". Then, when contradictions were unleashed against Jesus during his public life and many said, "He is crazy", she thought once again of the Angel's words in her heart; "Do not fear", and went ahead. Lastly, in the encounter on the way to Calvary and then under the Cross, when all seemed to be destroyed, she again heard the Angel's words in her heart: "Do not fear". Hence, she stood courageously beside her dying Son and, sustained by faith, moved towards the Resurrection, towards Pentecost, towards the foundation of the new family of the Church.

"Do not fear": Mary also addresses these words to us. I have already pointed out that this world of ours is a world of fear: the fear of misery and poverty, the fear of illness and suffering, the fear of solitude, the fear of death. We have in this world a widely developed insurance system; it is good that it exists. But we know that at the moment of deep suffering, at the moment of the ultimate loneliness of death, no insurance policy will be able to protect us. The only valid insurance in those moments is the one that comes to us from the Lord, who also assures us: "Do not fear, I am always with you". We can fall, but in the end we fall into God's hands, and God's hands are good hands.

The third word: at the end of the colloquium, Mary answered the Angel, "I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me as you say". Thus, Mary anticipated the "Our Father's" third invocation:

"Your will be done". She said "yes" to God's great will, a will apparently too great for a human being; Mary said "yes" to this divine will, she placed herself within this will, placed her whole life with a great "yes" within God's will, and thus opened the world's door to God.

Adam and Eve, with their "no" to God's will, had closed this door. "Let God's will be done": Mary invites us too to say this "yes" which sometimes seems so difficult. We are tempted to prefer our own will, but she tells us: "Be brave, you too say: 'Your will be done', because this will is good". It might at first seem an unbearable burden, a yoke impossible to bear; but in reality, God's will is not a burden, God's will gives us wings to fly high and thus we too can dare, with Mary, to open the door of our lives to God, the doors of this world, by saying "yes" to his will, aware that this will is the true good and leads us to true happiness. Let us pray to Mary, Comfort of the Afflicted, our Mother, the Mother of the Church, to give us the courage to say this "yes" and also to give us this joy of being with God and to lead us to his Son, to true life. Amen!

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