



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF ST FELICITY AND HER CHILDREN, MARTYRS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Sunday, 25 March 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the Parish of St Felicity and her Children, Martyrs,

I have willingly come to visit you on this Fifth Sunday of Lent, also known as Passion Sunday. I offer you all my cordial greeting. I first address my thoughts to the Cardinal Vicar and to Auxiliary Bishop Enzo Dieci. I then greet with affection the Vocationist Fathers, to whom the Parish has been entrusted since its foundation in 1958, and especially to Fr Eusebio Mosca, your parish priest, whom I thank for the beautiful words with which he has briefly presented to me your community's situation. I greet the other priests, men and women religious, catechists and committed lay people, and all those who make their own contribution in various ways to the multiple activities of the Parish - pastoral, educational and for human advancement -, directed with priority attention to children, young people and families. I greet the Filipino community, quite numerous in your territory, who meet here every Sunday for Holy Mass celebrated in their own language. I extend my greeting to all the inhabitants of the Fidene neighbourhood; they are very numerous and increasingly consist of people from other parts of Italy and various countries in the world.

Here, as elsewhere, situations of both material and moral hardship are not absent, situations that require of you, dear friends, a constant commitment to witnessing that God's love, fully manifested in the Crucified and Risen Christ, actually embraces everyone without distinctions of race and culture.

This is basically the mission of every parish community, called to proclaim the Gospel and to be a place of acceptance and listening, formation and fraternal sharing, dialogue and forgiveness. How can a Christian community stay faithful to this mandate? How can it become increasingly a

family of brothers and sisters enlivened by Love? The Word of God we have just heard, which resounds with special eloquence in our hearts during this Lenten Season, reminds us that our earthly pilgrimage is fraught with difficulties and trials, as was the journey through the desert of the Chosen People before they reached the Promised Land. But divine intervention, Isaiah assures us in the First Reading, can make it easy, transforming the wilderness into a luxuriant country flowing with water (cf. *Is* 43: 19-20). The Responsorial Psalm echoes the Prophet: while it evokes the joy of the return from the Babylonian Exile, it implores the Lord to intervene on behalf of the "prisoners" who depart weeping but who return rejoicing because God is present and, as in the past, will also do "great things for us" in the future.

This very awareness, this hope that after difficult times the Lord will always show us his presence and love, must enliven every Christian community, provided by its Lord with abundant spiritual provisions in order to cross the desert of this world and make it into a fertile garden. These provisions are docile listening to his Word, the Sacraments and every other spiritual resource of the liturgy and of personal prayer. The love that impelled Jesus to sacrifice himself for us transforms us and makes us capable in turn of following him faithfully. Continuing what the liturgy presented to us last Sunday, today's Gospel passage helps us understand that only God's love can change man's life and thus every society from within, for it is God's infinite love alone that sets him free from sin, which is the root of all evil. If it is true that God is justice, we should not forget that above all he is love. If he hates sin, it is because he loves every human person infinitely. He loves each one of us and his fidelity is so deep that it does not allow him to feel discouraged even by our rejection.

Today, in particular, Jesus brings us to inner conversion: he explains why he forgives us and teaches us to make forgiveness received from and given to our brothers and sisters the "daily bread" of our existence.

The Gospel passage recounts the episode of the adulterous woman in two vivid scenes: in the first, we witness a dispute between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees concerning a woman caught in flagrant adultery who, in accordance with the prescriptions of the Book of Leviticus (cf. 20: 10), was condemned to stoning. In the second scene, a brief but moving dialogue develops between Jesus and the sinner-woman. The pitiless accusers of the woman, citing the law of Moses, provoke Jesus - they call him "Teacher" (*Didáskale*) -, asking him whether it would be right to stone her. They were aware of his mercy and his love for sinners and were curious to see how he would manage in such a case which, according to Mosaic law, was crystal clear. But Jesus immediately took the side of the woman. In the first place, he wrote mysterious words on the ground, which the Evangelist does not reveal but which impressed him, and Jesus then spoke the sentence that was to become famous: "Let him who is without sin among you (he uses the term *anamártetos* here, which is the only time it appears in the New Testament) be the first to throw a stone at her" (*Jn* 8: 7) and begin the stoning. St Augustine noted, commenting on John's Gospel, that: "The Lord, in his response, neither failed to respect the law nor departed from his meekness". And Augustine added that with these words, Jesus obliged the accusers to look into

themselves, to examine themselves to see whether they too were sinners. Thus, "pierced through as if by a dart as big as a beam, one after another, they all withdrew" (in *Io. Ev. tract* 33, 5).

So it was, therefore, that the accusers who had wished to provoke Jesus went away one by one, "beginning with the eldest to the last". When they had all left, the divine Teacher remained alone with the woman. St Augustine's comment is concise and effective: "relicti sunt duo: misera et Misericordia, the two were left alone, the wretched woman and Mercy" (*ibid.*). Let us pause, dear brothers and sisters, to contemplate this scene where the wretchedness of man and Divine Mercy come face to face, a woman accused of a grave sin and the One who, although he was sinless, burdened himself with our sins, the sins of the whole world. The One who had bent down to write in the dust, now raised his eyes and met those of the woman. He did not ask for explanations. Is it not ironic when he asked the woman: "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" (8: 10). And his reply was overwhelming: "neither do I condemn you; go, and do not sin again" (8: 11). Again, St Augustine in his Commentary observed: "The Lord did also condemn, but condemned sins, not man. For if he were a patron of sin, he would say, "neither will I condemn you; go, live as you will; be secure in my deliverance; however much you sin, I will deliver you from all punishment'. He said not this" (*Io. Ev. tract.* 33, 6).

Dear friends, from the Word of God we have just heard emerge practical instructions for our life. Jesus does not enter into a theoretical discussion with his interlocutors on this section of Mosaic Law; he is not concerned with winning an academic dispute about an interpretation of Mosaic Law, but his goal is to save a soul and reveal that salvation is only found in God's love. This is why he came down to the earth, this is why he was to die on the Cross and why the Father was to raise him on the third day. Jesus came to tell us that he wants us all in Paradise and that hell, about which little is said in our time, exists and is eternal for those who close their hearts to his love. In this episode too, therefore, we understand that our real enemy is attachment to sin, which can lead us to failure in our lives. Jesus sent the adulterous woman away with this recommendation: "Go, and do not sin again". He forgives her so that "from now on" she will sin no more. In a similar episode, that of the repentant woman, a former sinner whom we come across in Luke's Gospel (cf. 7: 36-50), he welcomed a woman who had repented and sent her peacefully on her way. Here, instead, the adulterous woman simply receives an unconditional pardon. In both cases - for the repentant woman sinner and for the adulterous woman - the message is the same. In one case it is stressed that there is no forgiveness without the desire for forgiveness, without opening the heart to forgiveness; here it is highlighted that only divine forgiveness and divine love received with an open and sincere heart give us the strength to resist evil and "to sin no more", to let ourselves be struck by God's love so that it becomes our strength. Jesus' attitude thus becomes a model to follow for every community, which is called to make love and forgiveness the vibrant heart of its life.

Dear brothers and sisters, on the Lenten journey we are taking, which is rapidly reaching its end, we are accompanied by the certainty that God never abandons us and that his love is a source of

joy and peace; it is a powerful force that impels us on the path of holiness, if necessary even to martyrdom. This is what happened to the children and then to their brave mother, Felicity, the patron Saints of your Parish. Through their intercession, may the Lord grant you an ever deeper encounter with Christ and docile fidelity to follow him, so that, as happened for the Apostle Paul, you too may sincerely proclaim: "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them as refuse, in order that I may gain Christ..." (*Phil 3: 8*). May the example and intercession of these Saints be a constant encouragement to you to follow the path of the Gospel without hesitation and without compromise. May the Virgin Mary, whom we will contemplate tomorrow in the mystery of the Annunciation of the Lord and to whom I entrust all of you and the entire population of this suburb of Fidene, obtain for you this generous fidelity. Amen.

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