



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH
OF "SANTA MARIA LIBERATRICE" AT MONTE TESTACCIO

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Third Sunday of Lent, 24 February 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

After the example of my venerable Predecessors, the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II, who visited your parish respectively on 20 March 1966 and 14 January 1979, I too have come among you today to meet your community and preside at the Eucharistic celebration in your beautiful church dedicated to St Mary "Liberatrice". I have come for a very special event, the centenary of the consecration of the present-day church and the transfer of the title of the parish of "Our Lady of Providence", which already existed in this neighbourhood of Testaccio, to "Santa Maria Liberatrice". It was St Pius X who entrusted the parish to the spiritual sons of Don Bosco, and under the indefatigable guidance of Bl. Fr Michele Rua, St John Bosco's first disciple, they built the church in which we are now gathered. The Salesians were really already carrying out their social and apostolic activity here in Testaccio, a district that has preserved its own specific territorial and cultural character. Although we are in the heart of the Roman metropolis, very familiar relations among people have persisted and while the situation has somewhat changed in the past 20 years, the people are still strongly rooted in their own territory, in the identity of the neighbourhood and in their attachment to religious traditions. I know, for example, that your patronal feast of St Mary "Liberatrice" every year gathers families and citizens who for various reasons have moved elsewhere.

Dear friends, I have willingly come to share your joy in the jubilee you are celebrating and I have desired to enrich it with the possibility of gaining a Plenary Indulgence throughout the centenary year. I greet you all with affection. First of all, I greet the Cardinal Vicar, Auxiliary Bishop Ernesto Mandara of the Central Sector and Fr Manfredo Leone, your parish priest. I warmly thank him and

his Salesian confreres for the pastoral service they carry out together in your parish, and I am also grateful to him for his kind words to me on behalf of you all. I also greet the guests of the Salesian residence for priests whose headquarters are located on the parish premises, and the various Religious Communities present in the territory: the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians; the Daughters of Divine Providence and the Good Shepherd Sisters. I greet the men and women Cooperators and Salesian alumni, the parish associations, the various groups committed to the animation of catechesis, the liturgy, charity and the reading and deepening of the Word of God, the *Confraternity of Santa Maria Liberatrice*, the youth groups and those who encourage meetings and formation for engaged couples and established families. I address an affectionate greeting to the children of the catechism classes and to all who attend the prayer and recreation centre run by the parish and the Daughters of Mary, Help of Christians. I would then like to extend my thoughts to all the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, especially the elderly, the sick and people who are alone and in difficulty. I am remembering each and all at this Holy Mass.

Dear brothers and sisters, let me now ask myself, together with you, what is the Lord telling us on this most important anniversary for your parish? In today's biblical texts for the Third Sunday of Lent, useful ideas for meditation can be found that are particularly appropriate for this important occasion. Through the symbol of water, which we find in the First Reading and in the Gospel passage on the Samaritan woman, the Word of God transmits to us an ever lively and timely message: God thirsts for our faith and wants us to find the source of our authentic happiness in him. Every believer is in danger of practising a false religiosity, of not seeking in God the answer to the most intimate expectations of the heart but on the contrary, treating God as though he were at the service of our desires and projects.

In the First Reading we see the Jewish People suffer in the desert from lack of water and, in the grip of discouragement, complain and react violently, as on other occasions. They even reached the point of rebelling against Moses and almost of rebelling against God. The sacred author says: "They put the Lord to the proof by saying, "Is the Lord among us or not?" (Ex 17: 7). The people demanded from God that he meet their expectations and needs, rather than abandoning themselves trustfully into his hands, and in their trial lost their trust in him. How often does this also happen in our lives? In how many circumstances, rather than conforming docilely to the divine will, do we want God to implement our own plans and grant our every desire? On how many occasions does our faith prove frail, our trust weak, our religious sense contaminated by magical and merely earthly elements? In this Lenten Season, as the Church invites us to make a journey of true conversion, let us accept with humble docility the recommendation of the Responsorial Psalm: "Oh, that today you would hear his voice: "Harden not your hearts as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the desert, where your fathers tempted me; they tested me though they had seen my works"" (Ps 95[94]: 7-9).

The symbolism of water returns with great eloquence in the famous Gospel passage that recounts Jesus' meeting with the Samaritan woman in Sychar, by Jacob's well. We immediately perceive a

link between the well, built by the great patriarch of Israel to guarantee his family water, and salvation history where God gives humanity water welling up to eternal life. If there is a physical thirst for water that is indispensable for life on this earth, there is also a spiritual thirst in man that God alone can satisfy. This is clearly visible in the dialogue between Jesus and the woman who came to Jacob's well to draw water. Everything begins with Jesus' request: "Give me a drink" (cf. Jn 4: 5-7). At first sight it seems a simple request for a little water in the hot midday sun. In fact, with this question, addressed moreover to a Samaritan woman - there was bad blood between the Jews and the Samaritans - Jesus triggers in the woman to whom he is talking an inner process that kindles within her the desire for something more profound. St Augustine comments: "Although Jesus asked for a drink, his real thirst was for this woman's faith (*In Io ev. Tract. XV, 11: PL 35, 1514*). In fact, at a certain point, it was the woman herself who asked Jesus for the water (cf. Jn 4: 15), thereby demonstrating that in every person there is an inherent need for God and for salvation that only God can satisfy. It is a thirst for the infinite which only the water that Jesus offers, the living water of the Spirit, can quench. In a little while, in the Preface we shall hear these words: Jesus "asked the woman of Samaria for water to drink, and had already prepared for her the gift of faith. In his thirst to receive her faith, he awakened in her heart the fire of your love".

Dear brothers and sisters, in this dialogue between Jesus and the Samaritan woman we see outlined the spiritual itinerary that each one of us, that every Christian community, is ceaselessly called to rediscover and follow. Proclaimed in this Lenten Season, this Gospel passage acquires a particularly important value for catechumens who are already approaching Baptism. This Third Sunday of Lent is in fact linked to the so-called "first scrutiny", which is a sacramental rite of purification and grace. The Samaritan woman thus becomes the figure of the catechumen enlightened and converted to the faith, who longs for the living water and is purified by the Lord's action and words. Yet we who have already been baptized but are also still on the way to becoming true Christians, find in this Gospel episode an incentive to rediscover the importance and meaning of our Christian life, the true desire of God who lives in us. As he did with the Samaritan woman, Jesus wishes to bring us to powerfully profess our faith in him so that we may then proclaim and witness to our brethren the joy of the encounter with him and the marvels that his love works in our existence. Faith is born from the encounter with Jesus, recognized and accepted as the definitive Revealer and Saviour in whom God's Face is revealed. Once that the Lord has won the Samaritan woman's heart, her life is transformed and she runs without delay to take the Good News to her people (cf. Jn 4: 29).

Dear brothers and sisters of the Parish of *Santa Maria Liberatrice!* This morning, Christ's invitation to let ourselves be involved in his demanding Gospel proposal rings out loud and clear for every member of your parish community. St Augustine said that God thirsts after our thirst for him, that is, he desires to be desired. The further the human being distances himself from God, the more closely God pursues him with his merciful love. The liturgy encourages us today, also taking into account the Lenten Season in which we are living, to review our relationship with Jesus, to tirelessly seek his Face. And this is indispensable so that you, dear friends, can continue in the

new cultural and social context the work of evangelization and human and Christian education carried out for more than a century by this parish, which also includes in the ranks of her parish priests Venerable Luigi Maria Olivares. Always open your hearts wider to the pastoral work in the missionary context, which impels every Christian to meet people - particularly youth and families - where they live, work and spend their leisure time, in order to proclaim to them God's merciful love. I know that you are dedicating similar attention and concern to the care of vocations to the Priesthood and the Consecrated Life, proposing to children, young people and families the topic of vocations, which is of the utmost importance for the future of the Church. I encourage you then to persevere in the task of education, which constitutes the typical charism of every Salesian parish. May the after school prayer and recreation centre, the school and the moments for catechesis and prayer be enlivened by authentic educators, witnesses whose hearts are especially close to children, adolescents and youth. May St Mary "*Liberatrice*", whom you love and venerate so deeply and who raised Jesus as a child and adolescent together with her husband Joseph, protect families and Religious in their task as formators and give them the joy, as Don Bosco desired, of seeing "good Christians and honest citizens" grow up in this neighbourhood. Amen!

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