



## The Holy See

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Following in the [footsteps of the Servant of God John Paul II](#), today I have come on pilgrimage to Pompeii to venerate the Virgin Mary, Queen of the Holy Rosary, together with you. I have come in particular to entrust to the Mother of God, in whose womb the Word was made flesh, the [Assembly of the Synod of Bishops](#) which is under way at the Vatican on the theme of the *Word of God in the life and mission of the Church*. My Visit also coincides with [World Mission Sunday](#); contemplating in Mary she who accepted within her the Word of God and gave him to the world, we shall pray at this Mass for all those in the Church who spend their energy in the service of proclaiming the Gospel to all the nations. Thank you, dear brothers and sisters, for your welcome! I embrace you all with fatherly affection, and I am grateful to you for the prayers you raise ceaselessly to Heaven for the Successor of Peter and for the needs of the universal Church.

I address a cordial greeting in the first place to Archbishop Carlo Liberati, Prelate of Pompeii and Pontifical Delegate for this Shrine, and I thank him for his words expressing your sentiments. I extend my greeting to the civil and military Authorities present here, and in a special way to the government Representative, the Minister for Cultural Assets and Activities and the Mayor of Pompeii, who, on my arrival, addressed words of reverent welcome to me on behalf of all the townspeople. I greet the priests of the Prelature, the men and women religious who offer their daily service at the Shrine, among whom I am pleased to mention the Dominican Sisters Daughters of the Holy Rosary of Pompeii and the Brothers of the Christian Schools. I greet the volunteers involved in various services and the zealous apostles of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii. And how can I forget at this moment the people who are suffering, the sick, the elderly alone, young people in difficulty, prisoners, and all those in burdensome conditions of poverty and social and financial hardship? I would like to assure each and every one of my spiritual closeness and convey a testimony of my affection. I entrust you all to Mary, each one of you, dear faithful and inhabitants of this region, and you too, who are united in spirit with this celebration via radio and television, I entrust you all to Mary and invite you to trust always in her maternal support.

Let us now allow her, our mother and teacher, to guide us in reflecting on the Word of God that we have just heard. The First Reading and the Responsorial Psalm express the joy of the People of Israel at the salvation given by God, salvation that is liberation from evil and the hope of a new life.

The oracle of Zephaniah is addressed to Israel who is designated with such names as "daughter of Zion" and "daughter of Jerusalem", and is invited to rejoice: "Sing aloud... rejoice and exult!" (Zep 3: 14). It is the same appeal that the Angel Gabriel addresses to Mary at Nazareth "Hail, full of grace" (Lk 1: 28). "Do not fear, O Zion" (Zep 3: 16), the Prophet says; "Do not be afraid, Mary" (Lk 1: 30), the Angel says. And the reason for trust is the same: "The Lord your God is in your midst; a warrior who gives victory" (Zep 3: 17), the Prophet says; "The Lord is with you" (Lk 1: 28), the Angel assures the Virgin. The Canticle of Isaiah also ends: "Shout and sing for joy, O inhabitant of Zion, for great in your midst is the Holy One of Israel" (Is 12: 6). The Lord's presence is a source of joy, for wherever he is, evil is overcome and life and peace triumph. I would like in particular to emphasize Zephaniah's wonderful expression, which in addressing Jerusalem says: the Lord "will renew you in his love" (3: 17). Yes, God's love has this power: to renew all things, starting from the human heart which is his masterpiece and in which the Holy Spirit best brings about his transforming action. With his grace, God renews man's heart, forgiving him his sins, reconciling him and instilling in him an impetus for good. All of this is expressed in the lives of the Saints and we see it here in particular in the apostolic work of Bl. Bartolo Longo, Founder of the new Pompeii. And so, in this hour, we open our hearts to this love, renewer of man and of all things.

From its beginnings, the Christian community has seen the personification of Israel and Jerusalem in a female figure as an important and prophetic approach to the Virgin Mary, who is recognized precisely as a "daughter of Zion" and the archetype of the people who "found grace" in the eyes of the Lord. This is an interpretation we find again in the Gospel account of the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2: 1-11). The Evangelist John sheds symbolic light on the fact that Jesus is the Bridegroom of Israel, the new Israel that all of us are in faith, the spouse who has come to bring the grace of the new Covenant, represented by the "good wine". At the same time the Gospel emphasizes Mary's role, who at the beginning is called "the Mother of Jesus" but the Son himself later addresses her as "woman" and this has a very profound meaning: indeed, it implies that Jesus, to our wonder, before kinship places the spiritual bond according to which Mary herself impersonates the beloved Bride of the Lord, that is, the People he has chosen to shower his blessings upon the whole human family. The symbol of the wine, together with that of the banquet, reposes the theme of joy and of the feast. In addition, the wine, like the other biblical images of the vineyard and the vine, alludes metaphorically to love: God is the owner of the vineyard, Israel is the vineyard, a vineyard that will find its perfect fulfilment in Christ, of whom we are the branches; and the wine is the fruit, that is, love, because it is exactly love that God expects of his children. And we pray to the Lord, who has given Bartolo Longo the grace to bring love in this land, so that also our life and our heart bears this fruit of love and thus renews the earth.

The Apostle Paul also urges us to love in the Second Reading from the Letter to the Romans. We find outlined in this passage the itinerary of life of a Christian community, whose members are renewed by love and strive to renew themselves ceaselessly, to discern God's will always and not to relapse into conformity with a worldly mindset (cf. 12: 1-2). The new Pompeii, even with the

limitations proper to any human reality, is an example of this new civilization, which emerged and developed under Mary's motherly gaze. And the characteristic of Christian civilization, as my venerable Predecessors so often affirmed, is love: God's love that is expressed in love of neighbour. I also wished to dedicate my first Encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, to this fundamental reality of the Church. Now when St Paul writes to the Christians of Rome: "Never flag in zeal, be aglow with the Spirit, serve the Lord (12: 11), we are reminded of Bartolo Longo and the many charitable initiatives he implemented for his neediest brethren. Impelled by love, he was able to plan a new city which then sprung up around the Marian Shrine, as if to be the radiation of the light of her faith and hope. It became a citadel of Mary and of charity, but not one that was isolated from the world not, as people say "a cathedral in the desert" but rather integrated into the territory of this valley to redeem and advance it. The Church's history, thanks be to God, is rich in experiences of this kind and also today a great number can be counted in every part of the world. These are experiences of fraternity, that show the face of a different society, placed as leaven within the civil context. The power of love, in fact, is irresistible: it is love that truly drives the world onwards!

Who could have thought that a Marian Shrine of world-wide importance would have come into being here, beside the ruins of ancient Pompeii; as well as so many social practices aimed to express the Gospel in concrete service to those most in difficulty? Wherever God arrives, the desert blooms! Bl. Bartolo Longo, with his personal conversion, also bore witness to this spiritual power that transforms the human being from within and makes him capable of doing great things in accordance with God's plan. Remembering the early times after his arrival in Pompeii, Bartolo Longo thanked the Lord with these words: "The first fruit of your grace inspired within me an irrepressible, insatiable desire for you, truth, light, food, the peace of man, your creature" (Bartolo Longo, *Storia del Santuario di Pompei*, 1990, p. 58). The episode of Bartolo Longo's spiritual crisis and conversion appears very relevant today. In fact, in the period of his university studies in Naples, influenced by immanentist and positivist philosophers, he had drifted from the Christian faith. He had become a militant anti-clerical, and even indulged in spiritualistic and superstitious practices. His conversion, with the discovery of God's true Face, contains a very eloquent message for us since, unfortunately, such tendencies are not lacking in our day. In this Pauline Year, I am pleased to emphasize that like St Paul, Bartolo Longo was transformed from persecutor to apostle: an apostle of Christian faith, of Marian devotion and, in particular, of the Rosary, in which he found a synthesis of the whole Gospel.

This city, which Longo refounded, is thus a historical demonstration of how God transforms the world: filling the human heart with love and making it a "vehicle" of religious and social renewal. Pompeii is an example of how faith can work in the human city, inspiring apostles of charity who place themselves at the service of the lowly and the poor and act to ensure that the dignity of the least is respected and that they find acceptance and advancement. Here in Pompeii one realizes that love for God and love for neighbour are inseparable. Here the genuine Christian people, the people who face life with sacrifices, find the strength to persevere in good without stooping to

compromises. Here, at Mary's feet, families rediscover or reinforce the joy of love that keeps them together. Appropriately, therefore, in preparation for my Visit today, a special "pilgrimage of families for the family" took place exactly a month ago to entrust this fundamental nucleus of society to Our Lady. May the Blessed Virgin watch over every family and over the entire Italian people!

May this Shrine and this city continue above all to be ever linked in a unique Marian gift: the prayer of the Rosary. When we see, in the famous painting of Our Lady of Pompeii, the Virgin Mother and the Child Jesus giving the Rosary beads to St Catherine of Siena and St Dominic respectively, we immediately understand that this prayer leads us through Mary to Jesus, as Pope John Paul II taught us in his Letter *Rosarium virginis Mariae*, in which he explicitly mentions Bl. Bartolo Longo and the charism of Pompeii. The Rosary is a spiritual "weapon" in the battle against evil, against all violence, for peace in hearts, in families, in society and in the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, in this Eucharist, the inexhaustible source of life and hope, of personal and social renewal, let us thank God because in Bartolo Longo he has given us a luminous witness of this Gospel truth. And let us once again turn our hearts to Mary with the words of the Supplication that in a little while we shall be reciting together: "As our Mother, thou art our Advocate and our Hope. To thee, amidst sighs, do we lift up our hands, crying for mercy!" Amen.