



The Holy See

MASS ON THE OCCASION OF TAKING POSSESSION OF THE CHAIR OF THE BISHOP OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL I

Patriarchal Archbasilica of St John Lateran

Saturday, 23 September 1978

Heartfelt thanks to the Cardinal Vicar for the delicate words with which—in the name of the Episcopal Council, the Chapter of the Lateran, the Clergy, the men and women Religious, and of the faithful—he decided to express the devotion and the intentions of effective collaboration in the diocese of Rome. The first concrete evidence of this collaboration is the immense sum placed at my disposal in order to provide with a church and a parochial structure a peripheral area of the City hitherto deprived of this essential community help for the Christian life. Truly touched, I thank you.

The Master of Ceremonies has chosen the three lessons for this solemn liturgy. He has judged them suitable, and I wish to explain them to you.

The first lesson (Is 60:16) can be referred to Rome. Everyone knows that the Pope acquires authority over the whole Church in as much as he is Bishop of Rome, that is, successor of Peter in this city. Thanks especially to Peter, the Jerusalem of which Isaiah spoke can be considered a figure, a foretelling of Rome. Of Rome, too, in as much as it is the See of Peter, the place of his martyrdom and the centre of the Catholic Church, it can be said: "the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen ... the nation shall come to your light" (Is 60:2). Recalling the pilgrimages of the Holy Year and those that continue with a constant flow during the normal years, one can, with the prophet, address Rome as follows: "Lift up your eyes round about and see; ... your sons shall come from afar ... the abundance of the sea shall be turned to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you" (Is 60:4,5). This is an honour for the Bishop of Rome and for you all. But it is also a responsibility. Shall the pilgrims find here a model of a true Christian community? With the help of

God shall we, bishop and faithful, be able to cause to come true here the words of Isaiah, written under those first cited, namely: "Violence shall no more be heard in your land ... your people shall all be righteous" (Is 10:18, 21)? A few moments ago, Professor Argan, Syndic of Rome, made me a courteous address of greetings and good wishes. Some words of his caused me to think of one of the prayers that I recited as a child with Mamma. It went like this: "the sins that cry for vengeance in the presence of God are ... to oppress the poor, to defraud the workers of a just wage." In his turn, the Parish Priest questioned me at school on the Catechism: "Why are the sins that cry for vengeance in the presence of God among the more grievous and harmful?" Reply: ... "Because they are directly contrary to the good of mankind and are most hateful in as much as, more than others, they provoke the chastisements of God" (*Catechism of Pius X*, 154). Rome will be a true Christian community if God is honoured by you not merely with a multitude of the faithful in the churches, not merely with private life that is lived morally, but also with love for the poor. These, the Roman deacon Lawrence said, are the true treasures of the Church. They must be helped, however, by those who can, to have more and to be more, without becoming humiliated and offended by ostentatious riches, by money squandered on futile things and not invested—in so far as is possible—in enterprises of advantage to all.

The second lesson (Heb 13:7-8; 15-17; 20-21) can be applied to the faithful of Rome. As I have said, the Master of Ceremonies has chosen it. I confess that when it speaks of obedience it places me in a slight embarrassment. Today, when personal human rights are confronted with the rights of authority and of the law, it is so difficult to convince! In the Book of Job there is a description of a war-horse: he leaps like a locust and snorts; he paws the ground with his hoof, then he hurls himself fiercely forward; when the trumpet sounds he neighs with delight; he smells the battle from afar, the cries of the captains and the noise of the troops (cf. Job 39:10-25). The symbol of liberty. Authority, on the contrary, is like the prudent rider: he mounts the horse and, now with gentle voice, now making judicious use of the spurs, of the bridle and of the whip, he urges it on or controls its impetuous course, curbs it and restrains it. To reconcile the horse and the rider, liberty and authority, has become a social problem. It is likewise with the Church. At the Council there was an attempt to resolve it in the fourth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*. Here are the Conciliar indications for the "rider": "The sacred pastors know very well how much the laity contribute to the welfare of the whole Church. They know that they themselves were not established by Christ to undertake alone the whole salvific mission of the Church to the world, but that it is their exalted office to be shepherds of the faithful and to recognise the latter's contribution and charisms in such a way that all, in their measure, will with one mind cooperate in the common task" (*Lumen Gentium*, 30). Further, the pastors are also aware that "in the decisive battles it is at times from the front that the happiest initiatives begin" (*Lumen Gentium*, 37, note 7). On the other hand, here is a conciliar indication for the "high-spirited war-horse", that is, for the laity: "the faithful should acquiesce to the bishop as the Church to Jesus Christ and as Jesus Christ to the Father" (*Lumen Gentium*, 27). Let us pray that the Lord will aid both the bishop and the faithful, both the rider and the horses. It has been said to me that in the diocese of Rome there are numerous persons who devote themselves to the faithful, numerous catechists; many also await a signal to intervene and

to collaborate. May the Lord help us all to build at Rome a living and active Christian community. It is not pointlessly that I have quoted the fourth chapter of *Lumen Gentium*: it is the chapter on "ecclesial communion". What has been said, however, has special reference to the laity. The priests, the men and women religious, have a special position, bound as they are either to the promise or to the vow of obedience. I recall, as one of the solemn points of my existence, the moment in which, with my hands in those of the bishop, I said: "I promise". From that time, I considered myself bound for my whole life, and never have I thought that it was a matter of an unimportant ceremony. I hope that the priests of Rome think likewise. To them and to the Religious, St Francis de Sales would recall the example of St John the Baptist who lived in the desert, far from the Lord, yet so greatly desiring to be near to him. Why? Through obedience: "He knew", writes the saint, "that to find the Lord outside of obedience meant to lose him" (F. de Sales, *Oeuvres*, Annecy, 1806, p. 321).

The third lesson (Mt 28: 16-20) reminds the Bishop of Rome of his duties. The first is to teach, proposing the Lord's word with fidelity both to God and to the listeners; with humility, but with fearless sincerity. Among my holy predecessors, bishops of Rome, there are two who are also Doctors of the Church: St Leo, conqueror of Attila, and St Gregory the Great. In the writings of the first are very high theological thought and a sparkling Latin style that is marvellously designed; I do not think that I could imitate him, not even from afar. The second, in his books, is "like a father who instructs his children and sets them apart out of his solicitude for their eternal salvation" (I. Schuster, *Liber Sacramentorum*, vol. 1, Turin 1920, p. 46). I would like to try to imitate the second, who dedicates the entire third book of his *Regula Pastoralis* to the theme of how teaching should be done, that is, how the pastor should instruct. For forty whole chapters Gregory indicates in a concrete way various forms of instruction according to the various circumstances of social conditions, age, health, and moral temperament of the hearers. Poor and rich, cheerful and melancholic, superiors and subjects, learned and ignorant, cheeky and shy, and so forth; all are there in this book, it is like the valley of Jehoshaphat. At the second Vatican Council, there was a seemingly new thing which came to be called "pastoral approach", not indeed that which was taught to the pastors, but that which the pastors did to face up to the needs, the anxieties, the hopes of men. This "new" approach had already been applied many centuries earlier by Gregory, both in preaching and in the government of the Church.

The second duty, expressed in the word "baptize", refers to the sacraments and to the whole of the liturgy. The diocese of Rome has followed the programme of the CEI "Evangelization and Sacraments". It already knows that evangelization, sacraments, and holy life are three moments on the one course; evangelization prepares for the sacrament, the sacrament draws him who has received it to live in a Christian way. I should like this great concept to be applied in ever increasing measure. I should like also that Rome should in fact give a good example of Liturgy celebrated devoutly and without ill-placed "creativity". Certain abuses in liturgical matters have succeeded, through reaction, in favouring attitudes that have led to a taking up of positions that in themselves cannot be upheld and are in contrast with the Gospel. In appealing with affection and

with hope to the sense of responsibility of everyone, before God and the Church, I should like to be able to give an assurance that every liturgical irregularity will be diligently avoided.

And now I have come to the last episcopal duty: "to teach and to observe"; it is the diaconia, the service of guiding and governing. Although already for twenty years I have been Bishop at Vittorio Veneto and at Venice, I admit that I have not yet "learned the job" well. At Rome I shall put myself in the school of St Gregory the Great who writes: "(the pastor) should, with compassion, be close to each one who is subject to him; forgetful of his rank he should consider himself on a level with the good subjects, but he should not fear to exercise the rights of his authority against the wicked. Remember: while every subject lifts up to heaven that which he has done well, no one dares to censure that which he has done badly; when he puts down vices he does not cease, with humility, to recognize himself as on the level of the brother whom he has corrected; and he considers that he is all the more a debtor before God, in as much as his actions remain unpunished before men" (St Gregory the Great, *Regula Pastoralis*, Part Two, cc. 5 and 6 passim).

The explanation of the lessons ends here. Let me add only one more thing: it is God's law that one cannot do good to anyone if one does not first of all wish him well. On account of this, St Pius V, on becoming Patriarch of Venice, exclaimed in San Marco: "What would become of me, Venetians, if I did not love you?" I say something similar: I can assure you that I love you, that I desire only to enter into your service and to place the poor powers that I have, however little they are, at the disposal of all.