



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 28 March 1979*

"Paenitemini et date eleemosynam" (cf. Mk 1:15 and Lk 12:33).

Today we do not listen willingly to the word "alms". We feel something humiliating in it. This word seems to suppose a social system in which there reigns injustice, the unequal distribution of goods, a system which should be changed with adequate reforms. And if these reforms were not carried out, the need of radical changes, especially in the sphere of relations among men, would loom up on the horizon of social life. We find the same conviction in the texts of the Prophets of the Old Testament, on which the liturgy often draws during Lent. The *Prophets* consider this problem at the religious level: there is no true conversion to God, there can be no real "religion" without putting right offences and injustices in relations among men, in social life. Yet in this context the Prophets exhort to almsdeeds.

They do not even use the word "alms", which, moreover, in Hebrew is "sedaqah", that is, precisely "justice". They ask for help for those who are victims of injustice and for the needy: not so much by virtue of mercy as rather by virtue of the duty of active charity.

"Is not this the fast that I choose: to loose the bonds of wickedness, / to undo the thongs of the yoke, / to let the oppressed go free, / and to break every yoke? / Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, / and bring the homeless poor into your house; / when you see the naked, to cover him, / and not to hide yourself from your own flesh?" (Is 58:6-7).

The Greek word "eleemosyne" is found in the late books of the Bible and the practice of almsdeeds is a verification of an authentic religious spirit. Jesus makes almsdeeds a condition of access to his kingdom (cf. Lk 12:32-33) and of real perfection (Mk 10:21 and paral.). On the other hand, when Judas—in front of the woman who anointed the feet of Jesus—uttered the remark: "Why was this ointment not sold for three hundred denarii and given to the poor?" (Jn 12:5), Christ defended the woman, answering: "*The poor you always have with you, but you do not always*

*have me*" (Jn 12:8). Both sentences offer food for deep thought.

## 2. What does the word "alms" mean?

The Greek word "eleemosyne" comes from "éleos", which means compassion and mercy. Originally it indicated the attitude of the merciful man and, later, all works of charity for the needy. This word, transformed, has remained in nearly all European languages.

In French: "aumône"; Spanish: "limosna"; Portuguese: "esmola"; German: "Almosen"; English: "Alms".

Even the Polish expression "jalmuzna" is the transformation of the Greek word.

We must differentiate here the objective meaning of this word from the meaning we give it in our social conscience. As can be seen from what we have already said before, we often attribute, in our social conscience, a negative meaning to the word "alms". Various circumstances have contributed to this and continue to contribute to it today. On the contrary, "alms" in itself, *as help for those who need it, as "letting others share in one's own goods* absolutely does not give rise to such negative associations. We may not agree with the person who gives alms, because of the way in which he does it. We may also not be in agreement with the person who stretches out his hand asking for alms, in that he does not try to earn his own living. We may disapprove of the society, the social system, in which almsdeeds are necessary. However, the fact itself of giving help to those who need it, the fact of sharing one's own goods with others, must inspire respect.

We see how, in understanding verbal expressions, it is necessary to free oneself from the influence of various incidental circumstances: circumstances that are often improper, which affect their ordinary meaning. These circumstances, moreover, are sometimes positive in themselves (for example, in our case the aspiration to a just society, in which there would be no need of alms. because a just distribution of property would reign there.

When the Lord Jesus speaks of alms, when he asks for almsdeeds to be practised, he always does so in the sense of bringing help to those who need it, sharing one's own goods with the needy, that is, in the simple and essential sense, which *does not permit us to doubt the value of the act denominated with the term "alms"*, but on the contrary, urges us to approve it: as a good act, as an expression of love for one's neighbour and as a salvific act.

Moreover, at a moment of particular importance, Christ utters these significant words: *"The poor you always have with you"* (Jn 12: 8). He does not mean by these words that changes of social and economic structures are not important and that we should not try different ways to eliminate injustice, humiliation, want and hunger. He means merely that *man will have needs* which cannot be satisfied unless with help for the needy and by sharing one's own goods with others... Of what

help are we speaking? What sharing? Is it only a question of "alms", understood in the form of money, of material aid?

3. Certainly Christ does not remove alms from our field of vision. He thinks also of pecuniary, material alms, but in his own way. More eloquent than any other, in this connection, is *the example of the poor widow*, who put a few small coins into the treasury of the temple: from the material point of view, an offering that could hardly be compared with the offerings given by others. Yet Christ said: "This poor widow has put in... all the living that she had" (Lk 21:3-4). So it is, above all, the *interior value of the gift* that counts: the readiness to share everything, the readiness to give oneself.

Let us here recall St Paul: "If I give away all I have... but have not love, I gain nothing" (1 Cor 13:3). St Augustine, too, writes well in this connection: "if you stretch out your hand to give, but have not mercy in your heart, you have not done anything; but if you have mercy in your heart, even when you have nothing to give with your hand, God accepts your alms" (*Enarrat. in Ps. CXXV, 5*).

We are here touching the heart of the problem. In Holy Scripture and according to the evangelical categories, "alms" means in the first place an interior gift. It means the *attitude of opening "to the other"*. Precisely *this attitude is an indispensable factor of "metanoia", that is, conversion*, just as prayer and fasting are also indispensable. St Augustine, in fact, expresses himself well: "how quickly the prayers of those who do good are granted! And this is man's justice in the present life: fasting, alms, prayer" (*Enarrat. in Ps. XLII, 8*): prayer, as an opening to God; fasting, as an expression of self-mastery also in depriving oneself of something, in saying "no" to oneself; and finally alms, as opening "towards others". The Gospel draws this picture clearly when it speaks to us of repentance, of "metanoia". Only with a total attitude—in his relationship with God, with himself and with his neighbour—does man *reach conversion and remain in the state of conversion*.

"Alms" understood in this way has a meaning which is in a certain sense decisive for this conversion. To convince ourselves of this, it is enough to recall the image of the Last Judgment that Christ gave us:

"For I was hungry and you gave me food. I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me. I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him, `Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?' And the King will answer them: `Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25:35-40).

And the Fathers of the Church will then say with St Peter Chrysologus: "The poor man's hand is the treasury of Christ, since Christ receives everything that the poor man receives" (*Sermo VIII*, 4), and with St Gregory of Nazianzus: "The Lord of all things wants mercy, not sacrifice; and we give it through the poor" (*De pauperum amore*, XI).

Therefore, this opening to others, which is expressed by "help", by "sharing" food, a glass of water, a good word, consolation, a visit, precious time, etc., this interior gift offered to the other man, *arrives directly at Christ, directly at God*. It decides the meeting with him. It is conversion.

We can find many texts in the Gospel that confirm this, and also in the whole of Scripture. "Alms" understood according to the Gospel, according to the teaching of Christ, has a definitive, decisive meaning in our conversion to God. If alms be lacking, our life does not yet converge fully towards God.

4. In the cycle of Lenten reflections, it will be necessary to come back to this subject. Today, before concluding, let us dwell for another moment on *the real meaning of "alms"*. It is very easy, in fact, to falsify the idea, as we noted at the beginning. Jesus also gave a warning about the superficial, "exterior" attitude of almsdeeds (cf. Mt 6:4; Lk 11:41). This problem is still a living one. If we realize the essential significance that "alms" has for our conversion to God for the whole of Christian life, we must avoid, at all costs, all that falsifies the meaning of alms, mercy, works of charity, all that may distort their image in ourselves. In this field, it is very important to cultivate interior sensitivity as regards the real needs of our neighbour, in order to know in what we must help him, how to act in order not to wound him, and how to behave in order that what we give, what we bring to his life, may be a real gift, a gift not dimmed by the ordinary negative meaning of the word "alms".

.We see, therefore, what a field of work—wide and at the same time deep—opens before us, if we want to put into practice the call "Paenitemini et date eleemosynam" (cf. Mk 1:15 and Lk 12:33). It is a field of work not only for Lent, but for every day. For the whole of life.

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*Addressing the students:*

Dear Pupils of the Elementary and Secondary Schools of Rome, who have come with your fellow students from other Italian towns and together with other boys and girls belonging to Catholic associations!

The Pope receives you with fatherly affection and thanks you warmly for the visit you desired to pay him.

This meeting, as you know, takes place in the liturgical season of Lent, the purpose of which is fervent preparation for Easter.

I am sure that your Teachers and Assistants have instructed you about the importance of this period, urging you to meditate on the mystery of our Redemption: Jesus, our brother, took our place in order to expiate sin, and to do so he had to suffer the passion and death on the Cross: I hope that, reflecting on God's infinite love, you will feel more and more the duty of prayer and mortification, by means of which, purified in spirit and in body, one is more deeply united with the heavenly Father.

And now it is necessary to carry out the work: to relive in the worthiest way the unique and unrepeatable event of the history of mankind—the Resurrection of the Divine Saviour—making use of the means which he himself put at our disposal, that is, the sacraments of Penance and the Eucharist, which give the ineffable joy of sharing in Christ's triumph. In this way you will faithfully carry out St Paul's invitation: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:1-2).

And with this wish I give you the Apostolic Blessing, which I wish to extend to all your dear ones.

*Addressing the newly-weds:*

A special greeting and my fatherly good wishes go now to you newly-weds. May your married life—begun with a sacred ceremony with which your eyes and ears, and still more your souls, are yet filled—become better every day, strengthened by mutual love and by a reciprocal active sense of responsibility. Maintain for a long time, maintain forever, the vital power that supports you today and which makes you look to the future with joyous hope.

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