



The Holy See

RITE OF POSSESSION OF THE CHAIR OF THE BISHOP OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

*Basilica of St John Lateran
Sunday, 12 November 1978*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The day has come on which Pope John Paul II arrives in the Basilica of St John Lateran to take possession of his Chair as Bishop of Rome. I wish to kneel down in this place and kiss the threshold of this temple, which has been for so many centuries "the dwelling of God with men" (Rev 21:3): God the Saviour with the People of the Eternal City, Rome. With all those present here I repeat the words of the psalm: "I was glad when they said to me, / 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!' / Our feet have been standing / within your gates, O Jerusalem! / Jerusalem, built as a city / which is bound firmly together, / in which the tribes go up, / the tribes of the Lord, / as was decreed for Israel, / to give thanks to the name of the Lord" (Ps 122/121).

Is not this an image of today's event? The ancient generations came up to this place: generations of Romans, generations of bishops of Rome, successors of St Peter, and they sang this hymn of joy, which I repeat today with you. I join these generations, I, the new Bishop of Rome, John Paul II, Polish by origin. I stop on the threshold of this temple and I ask you to welcome me in the Lord's name. I beg you to welcome me as you welcomed my Predecessors throughout the centuries, as you welcomed, only a few weeks ago, John Paul I, so beloved by the whole world! I beg you to welcome me too. The Lord says: "You did not choose me, but I chose you" (Jn 15:16). This is the only appeal I can make: I am not here by my own will. The Lord has elected me. In the Lord's name I beg you therefore: welcome me!

2. At the same time, I express my cordial greeting to all. I greet the Lords Cardinals and Brothers

in the Episcopate who have wished to take part in this ceremony and, particularly, I wish to greet you, dear Brother Cardinal Vicar, Mons. Vicegerent and the Auxiliary Bishops of Rome; you beloved Priests of this Diocese of mine; you Sisters and Brothers of so many religious Orders and Congregations. I address a respectful greeting to the Government and Civil Authorities with gratitude for the Delegations which are present here.

I greet you all! And this "all" means "each one in particular". Even if I do not mention your names one by one, I intend nonetheless to greet each of you, calling you by your name! You Romans! How many centuries does this greeting go back? It takes us back to the difficult beginnings of the faith and of the Church, which precisely here, in the capital of the ancient Empire, overcame, for three centuries, its trial by fire: a proof of life. And it emerged victorious. Glory to the Martyrs and Confessors! Glory to Holy Rome! Glory to the Apostles of the Lord! Glory to the catacombs, and to the basilicas of the Eternal City!

3. Entering the Basilica of St John Lateran today, there flashes before my eyes the moment when Mary crosses the threshold of the house of, Zechariah to greet Elizabeth, the mother of John. The Evangelist writes that at this greeting "the babe leaped in her womb" (Lk 1:41) and so many Fathers and writers have added, since the most remote times, that from that moment John received the Saviour's grace. And therefore he himself was the first to proclaim Him. He was the first, with the whole people of Israel, to wait for Him on the banks of the Jordan. And it was he who showed Him to the people with the words: "Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!" (Jn 1:29). The Lamb of God means the Redeemer, it means the Saviour of the world!

This Basilica, dedicated to St John the Baptist as well as to St John the Evangelist, is rightly consecrated to the Most Holy Saviour. It is as if, today also, as throughout the centuries, we hear this voice ringing out on the banks of the Jordan. The voice of the Forerunner, the voice of the Prophet, the voice of the Bridegroom's Friend. John spoke as follows: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (Jn 3:30).

This first confession of faith in Christ the Saviour was, as it were, the key which closed the Old Covenant, a time of expectation, and opened the New Covenant, a time of fulfilment. This first fundamental confession of faith in the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world, had already been heard by the future Apostles of Christ on the banks of the Jordan. It was probably heard also by Simon Peter. It helped him to proclaim later, at the beginning of the New Covenant: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16).

It is right, therefore, that Peter's Successors should come to this place to receive, as Peter once received it, the confession of John: "Behold, the Lamb of God", and transfer it to the new age of the Church, proclaiming: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God".

4. In the framework of this marvellous meeting of the old and the new, I wish today, as the new

Bishop of Rome, to begin my ministry to the People of God of this City and of this Diocese, which became, because of St Peter's mission, the first in the large family of the Church, in the family of the sister-dioceses. The essential content of this ministry is the commandment of charity: this commandment which makes us, men, friends of Christ: "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (Jn 15:14). "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love" (Jn 15:9).

O Eternal City, O dear Brothers and Sisters, O Roman citizens! Your new Bishop wishes above all that we should remain in Christ's love, and that this love should always be stronger than our weaknesses. May it help us to model the spiritual face of our community, because, in the presence of this love, hatred, envy, all maliciousness and perversity disappear, in great as in little things, in social questions as in interpersonal ones. May love be the strongest! With what joy, and at the same time with what gratitude I have recently followed the numerous episodes (television brought them close to me) in which, owing to lack of personnel in the hospitals, so many persons, adults and in particular young people, offered themselves as volunteers to serve the sick with care. If pursuit of justice is valid in professional life, social love must be all the more vigilant. I wish, therefore, for my new Diocese, for Rome, this love that Christ willed for his disciples.

Love constructs; only love constructs!

Hatred destroys. Hatred does not construct anything. It can only disintegrate. It can disorganize social life, it can at the most bring pressure to bear on the weak, without, however, building up anything.

For Rome, for my new Diocese, and at the same time for the whole of the Church and for the world, I desire love and justice. Justice and love, so that we may be able to construct.

With regard to this construction, St Paul teaches us today (in the second reading), as he once taught the Christians of Ephesus, when he wrote: ".And his (Christ's) gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers... for building up the body of Christ" (Eph 4:11,12). And I, continuing this thought in the light of the Second Vatican Council and referring in particular to the Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, would add that Christ calls us to become fathers and mothers of a family, sons and daughters, doctors, engineers, lawyers, technicians, scientists, educators, students, pupils, anyone whomsoever! Each one has his place in this building up of the Body of Christ, just as each one has his place and his task in the building up of the common good of men, of society, of the nation, of humanity. The Church is building herself up in the world. She is building herself up with living men. At the beginning of my episcopal service, I ask each of you to find and define his own place in this work of construction.

I ask further of all you Romans, without exception, all of you who are present here today and all of those whom the voice of your new Bishop reaches: Go in spirit to the bank of the Jordan, where

John the Baptist taught: John, who is the patron saint of this Basilica, the cathedral of Rome. Listen once more to what he said, indicating the Christ:

"Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". Behold, the Saviour!

Believe in Him with renewed faith, with faith as fervent as that of the first Roman Christians, who persevered here for three centuries of ordeals and persecutions.

Believe with renewed faith—as it is necessary for us, Christians of the second millennium which is about to end—in Christ, the Saviour of the world! Amen.

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