



The Holy See

CELEBRATION OF THE EUCHARIST
IN THE BASILICA OF SAINT PAUL OUTSIDE THE WALLS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 17 December 1978

1. After the taking possession of St John Lateran's Basilica, which is the cathedral of the Bishop of Rome, after the moving visit to St Mary Major's Basilica on the Esquiline, where I was able, at the beginning of my pontificate, to express all my confidence and my complete abandonment into the hands of Mary, the Mother of the Church, today I am granted the possibility of coming here.

The Basilica of St Paul's outside the Walls—one of the four most important temples of the Eternal City—calls forth special thoughts and sentiments in the heart of him who, as Bishop of Rome, has become the Successor of St Peter. Peter's vocation—unique by the will of Christ himself—is united through a singular tie with the person of Paul of Tarsus. Both Peter and Paul found themselves here in Rome at the end of their earthly pilgrimage; both came here for the same purpose: to bear witness to Christ. For the same cause they both suffered death here and, as tradition narrates, that happened on the same day. They both constitute the foundation of this Church which invokes them, remembering them together as her Patron Saints. And although Rome is Peter's See, we all realize what a deep stamp was left by Paul—his conversion, his person, his mission—on the beginnings of this See, on its foundations.

The fact that St Peter found himself in Rome, that he came here from Jerusalem through Antioch, that he carried out his pastoral mandate here, that he ended his life here, was an expression of that universality of the Gospel, of Christianity, of the Church, of which St Paul was a resolute and intrepid herald from the beginning. At the moment when he, a persecutor, was converted, we hear the words ring out: "He is a chosen instrument of mine to carry my name before the Gentiles and kings and the sons of Israel" (Acts 9:15).

Rome was not the only goal of the apostolic life and pilgrimage of Paul of Tarsus. It should rather be said that his aim was the *universum* of the Roman empire of that time (as his journeys and his letters testify). Rome was the last stage of these journeys. Paul arrived here already as a captive, imprisoned for the cause to which he had dedicated himself entirely: the cause of universalism, that cause, which struck at the very foundations of a certain rabbinical view of the Chosen People and its Messiah. Prosecuted because of this very activity, Paul had appealed as a Roman citizen to Caesar. "You have appealed to Caesar; to Caesar you shall go" (Acts 25: 12). And thus Paul found himself in Rome as a prisoner waiting for Caesar's sentence. He found himself here, while the principle of the universality of the Church, of the People of God of the new Covenant, had already been sufficiently affirmed, and in fact consolidated in an irreversible way in the life of the Church herself. And then Paul, who at the beginning of his mission, after his conversion, had considered it his particular duty "videre Petrum" (to see Peter) was able to arrive here in Rome to meet Peter again: here, in this city, in which the universality of the Church has found her bulwark in Peter's Chair for centuries and millennia.

What I have said about Paul of Tarsus, the Apostle of the Gentiles and a great Saint, is very little. A great deal more could and should be said, but I am obliged to limit myself to these references.

2. And now allow me to speak of that Pontiff who chose the name of the Apostle of the Gentiles: Paul VI. The circumstances of time and place induce me particularly to speak of him. But, above all, this is a need of the heart: I wish, in fact, to speak of him whom I rightly consider not only as my predecessor, but actually as a father. Again I feel that I could and should speak at length, but here, too, owing to the tyranny of time, my talk will have to be a short one. I wish to thank all those who honour the memory of this great Pontiff. I wish to thank his fellow citizens of Brescia for the recent solemn act dedicated to his memory, and I wish to thank Cardinal Pignedoli for having taken part in it. We will return, and more than once, to what he did and to what he was.

Why did he choose the name Paul? (after many centuries this name has returned to the yearbook of the Bishops of Rome). Certainly because he felt a special affinity with the Apostle of the Gentiles. Does not Paul VI's pontificate testify, moreover, how deeply aware he was, like St Paul, of Christ's new call to the universalism of the Church and of Christianity according to the measure of our times? Did he not scrutinize, with extraordinary insight, the signs of the times of this difficult age, as Paul of Tarsus did? Did he not feel called, like this Apostle, to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth? Did he not remain, like St Paul, inwardly calm even when "the ship was caught and could not face the wind"? (cf. Acts 27:15).

Paul VI, the Servant of the servants of God, the successor of Peter, who had chosen the name of the Apostle of the Gentiles, had inherited his charism along with his name.

3. Coming to St Paul's Basilica today, I wish to be united in a new bond of love and ecclesial unity with the community of Benedictine Fathers, who have guarded this place in prayer and work for

centuries.

I wish furthermore, as the new Bishop of Rome, to visit the parish of which St Paul's Basilica is the seat.

This ancient and venerable Basilica, indeed, which throughout the centuries has always been a goal of pilgrimages and which was outside the walls of Rome, has, in these last few decades—as a result of the urbanistic development of the city—been erected a parish, becoming in this way the centre of the religious life of the inhabitants of this sector.

Thus we have here three aspects which, although quite distinct, are as many facets of the same reality, the Abbey, the Basilica, the Parish, three bodies which nourish one another, bestowing on the faithful abundant spiritual fruit.

I then extend my greeting to the various associations which collaborate with the parish on the pastoral plane; I greet the catechists, I greet with fatherly affection the religious men and women who are carrying out their activity within the parish, with special attention for those who work at the Pontifical Youth Centre of St Paul's which organizes inter-parish activity on behalf of the young.

To all the faithful, my cordial greeting, my blessing and my encouragement to love their parish. And finally, I address a special thought to the suffering, either because they are afflicted with sickness, or because they are in straits for lack of work, assuring them that I will remember them specially in my prayers.

4. "Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico vobis, gaudete ...": rejoice always in the Lord: I repeat to you, rejoice. These words of today's liturgy, that is, of the third Sunday of Advent are taken from St Paul. The same words were repeated by Paul VI in the *exhortation* on Christian joy published by him (cf. *Gaudete in Domino*).

Today I join them whole-heartedly and cry to you, beloved Brothers and Sisters: "iterum dico vobis, gaudete"—I repeat, rejoice!

"Dominus... prope est"—The Lord is near!