



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH
OF ST BARTHOLOMEW THE APOSTLE IN ROME

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 21 December 1997

1. "*Blessed is she who believed*" (Lk 1:45). The first beatitude mentioned in the Gospels is reserved for the Virgin Mary. She is proclaimed blessed because of her attitude of total trust in God and full acceptance of his will, shown by the 'yes' spoken at the time of the Annunciation.

By proclaiming herself "the handmaid of the Lord" (Gospel acclamation; cf. Lk 1:38), Mary expresses the faith of Israel. She is the fulfilment of the long wait for salvation which, starting in the garden of Eden, passes through the Patriarchs and the history of Israel, to reach that "city of Galilee named Nazareth" (Lk 1:26). Because of Abraham's faith, the great work of salvation begins to be revealed; because of Mary's faith, the new times of the Redemption are inaugurated.

In today's Gospel passage we listened to the account of the Mother of God's visit to her elderly relative, Elizabeth. The first meeting between John the Baptist and Jesus takes place through their mothers' greeting. St Luke tells us that Mary "went with haste" (cf. Lk 1:39) to Elizabeth. This anxiety to visit her cousin indicates her wish to be of assistance to her during her pregnancy, but above all her desire to rejoice with her that the time of salvation had arrived. In the presence of Mary and the incarnate Word, John leapt for joy and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit (cf. Lk 1:41).

2. We find reflected in Mary's visitation the hopes and expectations of the humble, God-fearing people who were awaiting the fulfilment of the prophetic promises. The first reading from the Book of the Prophet Micah announces the coming of a new king, after God's heart. A king who will not try to display greatness and power, but who will rise from humble origins like David and, like him, will be wise and faithful to the Lord. "*But you, Bethlehem ... who are little ... from you shall come forth ... one who is to be ruler*" (5:2). This promised king will care for his people with the strength of

God himself and will bring peace and security to the ends of the earth (cf. Mi 5:4). All these ancient promises will be fulfilled in the Child of Bethlehem.

3. Dear brothers and sisters of St Bartholomew the Apostle Parish, I am pleased to celebrate the Eucharist with you on this Fourth Sunday of Advent, as we now approach Christmas. I greet you all affectionately. I greet the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, the Auxiliary Bishop of this area, your parish priest, Fr Alfonso Carlos Urréchua Lábano, and his closest co-workers. I particularly mention the members of the Institute of Identes Missionaries, to whom this parish belongs.

As I recalled a few moments ago, today's Gospel offers us the "missionary" episode of Mary's visit to Elizabeth. By accepting the divine will, Mary offered her active co-operation so that God could become man in her maternal womb. She bore the divine Word within her as she went to visit her elderly cousin who, in turn, was awaiting the Baptist's birth. In this act of human solidarity, Mary demonstrated that authentic charity which grows within us when Christ is present.

4. Beloved parishioners of St Bartholomew the Apostle, may everything your community does always be inspired by this Gospel message! I am well aware of how committed you are to spreading the Gospel in your district, and I know of the challenges and difficulties you encounter. These are spiritual challenges, but social and economic challenges are present as well. I am thinking especially of the scourge of drugs which, unfortunately, ensnares many young people of this neighbourhood, as in other parts of the city. I am thinking of the lack of centres offering healthy recreation and opportunities for cultural growth to adolescents and adults. I am thinking of the situations of isolation, sometimes even physical, in which many people here live.

In view of these situations, you are not idle. Indeed, enlivened by apostolic and missionary zeal, your community never ceases to bear witness to the hope that the Gospel brings those who accept it and make it their rule of life. I encourage you, dear people, to continue in this direction. Whoever actively participates in parish life cannot fail to hear the baptismal call to be close to those who are tried by hardship and suffering. Bring to each one the Christmas message: Do not be afraid, Christ is born for us! Spread this proclamation everywhere now that you are involved in the City Mission. Go to where people live, and be prepared, as far as you can, to help them escape from every form of isolation. To each and every one, proclaim and witness to Christ and to the joy of his Gospel.

This mission is yours, dear families: the Church calls you to mobilize yourselves to transmit the faith and especially to live it deeply yourselves. It is your task, first of all, to build a new solidarity that will facilitate the prevention and recovery of those who unfortunately fall into the grip of drug dependency. I would like to assure the families affected by this sad phenomenon that the Church is close to them and invites them not to submit passively, but to react with courage and determination, relying on divine help and the active support of their brothers and sisters, to combat this scourge of our time, which continues to ruin the bodies and minds of so many young people.

However, convinced that medical and social interventions are not enough, the Church asks for an increasingly convinced witness to human and Christian values in society and for authentic solidarity to individuals, especially if they are weak and lonely.

As Christmas approaches, may today's celebration inspire in everyone the enthusiasm to love life, to defend it and to promote it by every legitimate means. This is the best way to celebrate Christmas, by sharing with every person of goodwill the joy of salvation that the incarnate Word brought to the world.

I hope also that the Christmas season and the beginning of the new year will renew a strong missionary fervour in each individual. May this community and the whole Diocese see a rebirth of the zeal experienced by the ancient Christian community of Rome described in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. Acts 28:15, 30).

5. "Lo, I have come to do your will, O God" (Heb 10:7). In presenting the mystery of the Incarnation, the Letter to the Hebrews describes the attitude of the divine Word as he enters the world: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body you have prepared for me" (10:5). The true and perfect sacrifice, offered by Jesus to the Father, is that of full adherence to the plan of salvation. The total obedience to the Father that marks Jesus' earthly life from the very first instant will be definitively fulfilled in the mystery of Easter. Thus the paschal dimension is already present at Christmas. This is the beginning of Jesus' Redemption, which will be totally fulfilled by his Death and Resurrection.

May Mary, model of faith for all believers, help us prepare worthily to welcome the Lord who comes. Together with St Elizabeth we acknowledge the great things that the Lord accomplished in her. "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb!" (Lk 1:42). May Jesus, the blessed fruit of the Virgin Mary's womb, bless your families, the young people, the elderly, the sick and those who are alone. May he, who became a child to save mankind, bring everyone light, hope and joy.

Amen!