



The Holy See

JUBILEE OF GOVERNMENT LEADERS, MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT AND POLITICIANS

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday 5 November 2000

1. *"Hear, O Israel!" (Dt 6:3,4)*

The word of God, in a solemn yet loving way, has just invited us to "hear". To hear "today", "now", and to do so not as individuals or in private but *together*: "Hear, O Israel!".

This summons is directed this morning in a particular way to you, the Government Leaders, Members of Parliament, Politicians and Public Administrators who have come to Rome to celebrate your Jubilee. I greet all of you cordially, with a special thought for the Heads of State present among us.

In the celebration of the Liturgy, the event of our Covenant with God becomes present, here and now. What response does God expect from us? The command which we have just received in the proclamation of the Biblical text is peremptory: we need first and foremost *to listen*. Not a passive and uninvolved listening. The Israelites understood very well that God expected from them an active and responsible answer. That is why they promised Moses: "Speak to us all that the Lord our God will speak to you, and we will hear and do it" (Dt 5:27).

In taking on this responsibility, they knew they were dealing with a God whom they could trust. God loved his people and he desired their happiness. In exchange, *he asked for love*. In the "*Shema Israel*", which we heard in the First Reading, together with the demand for faith in the one God, there is expressed *the fundamental commandment* of love for him: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Dt 6:5).

2. Man's relationship with God is not one of fear, of slavery or oppression; rather, it is a relationship of serene trust born of a free choice motivated by love. The love which God expects from his people is their response to that faithful and

solicitous love which he first made known in all the various stages of salvation history.

For this very reason the *Commandments*, before being a legal code and a set of juridic regulations, were understood by the Chosen People *as an event of grace*, as a sign of their being privileged to belong to the Lord. It is significant that Israel never speaks of the Law as a burden, but rather as a gift and a grace: "Happy are we, O Israel", exclaims the Prophet, "for we know what is pleasing to God" (*Bar 4:4*).

The people knew that the Decalogue involves a binding commitment, but they also knew that it is *the condition for life*: Behold, says the Lord, I am setting before you life and death, good and evil; and I command you to observe my commands, *that you may have life* (cf. *Dt 30:15*). By his Law God does not intend to coerce man's will, but rather to set it free from everything that could compromise its authentic dignity and its full realization.

3. Distinguished Government Leaders, Members of Parliament and Politicians: I have been reflecting *on the meaning and the value of the divine Law*, because this is a subject which very closely affects you. Does not your daily work consist of creating just laws and seeking to have them accepted and applied? In doing this you are convinced that you are rendering an important service to man, to society and to freedom itself. And rightly so. Human law, in fact, if just, is never *against*, but *in the service of* freedom. This was already perceived by the ancient sage who said: "*Legum servi sumus, ut liberi esse possimus*" – "We are servants to the law, so that we might be free" (Cicero, *De Legibus*, II:13).

The freedom to which Cicero referred, however, is found chiefly on the level of outward relationships between citizens. As such, it can risk being reduced to a commensurate balancing of respective interests, and even of counterbalancing selfish interests. But the freedom of which the word of God speaks *is one rooted in the human heart*, a heart which God can liberate from selfishness and open up to a selfless love.

It is not by chance that, in the Gospel we have just heard, Jesus answers the scribe who asks him what is the first of all the commandments by quoting the "*Shema*": "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength" (*Mk 12:30*). The emphasis is placed on the "all": the love of God can only be "totalitarian". But God alone is able to purify the human heart from selfishness and to "free it" for its full capacity to love.

People whose hearts have thus been "reclaimed" are able to open themselves to their brothers and sisters and take responsibility for them with the same care with which they are concerned for themselves. That is why Jesus goes on to say: "The second (commandment) is this: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself'" (*Mk 12:31*). Anyone who loves God with all his heart and acknowledges him as the "one God", and thus as the Father of all, cannot fail to look upon everyone whom he meets on the way as a brother or a sister.

4. *Love your neighbour as yourself*. This saying surely strikes a chord in your hearts, dear Government Leaders, Members of Parliament, Politicians and Public Administrators. To each of you, today, on the occasion of your Jubilee, it poses a fundamental question: how, in your delicate and demanding service to the State and to its citizens, can you carry out this commandment? The answer is clear: *by living your involvement in politics as a service to others*. An approach as magnificent as it is demanding! It cannot in fact be reduced to some generic restatement of principles or a declaration of

good intentions. Political service is lived in a precise and daily commitment which calls for great *competence* in the fulfilment of one's duties and *unswerving morality* in the selfless and accountable exercise of power.

On the other hand, the personal integrity of the politician also needs to find expression in a *correct conception of the social and political life* which he or she is called to serve. From this standpoint, Christian politicians need to make constant reference to those principles which *the Church's social doctrine* has developed in the course of time. These principles, as we know, do not constitute an "ideology" and even less a "political programme"; rather, they offer a fundamental approach to understanding the human person and society in the light of the universal ethical law present in the heart of every human being, a law which is clarified by the revelation of the Gospel (cf. *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 41). You, dear brothers and sisters engaged in political life, must be eloquent and effective proponents of these principles.

Certainly, the application of these principles to the complexities of political life will often and inevitably meet up with situations, problems and circumstances which can legitimately give rise to diverse concrete judgements. Yet at the same time there is no justification for a pragmatism which, even with regard to essential and fundamental values of social life, would reduce politics to the mere balancing of interests or, worse yet, to a matter of demagoguery or of winning votes. If legislation cannot and must not be coextensive with the whole of the moral law, neither can it run "counter" to the moral law.

5. All of this takes on particular importance in the present situation of profound change which has seen the emergence of a *new dimension of politics*. The decline of ideologies has been accompanied by a crisis of partisan alliances, which in turn calls for a new way of understanding political representation and the role of institutions. There is a need to *rediscover the true meaning of participation* and to involve more citizens in seeking suitable ways of advancing towards an ever more satisfactory attainment of the common good.

In this undertaking, Christians must guard against yielding to the temptation to violent conflicts, which often cause great suffering to the community. *Dialogue remains the irreplaceable instrument* for every constructive confrontation, both within States and in international relations. And who could better take on the "burden" of this dialogue than a Christian politician, who every day must measure up to what Christ has called "the first" of the commandments, the commandment of love?

6. Distinguished Government Leaders, Members of Parliament, Politicians, Public Administrators: at the beginning of the new century and the new millennium, those responsible for public life are faced with many demanding responsibilities. It is precisely with this in mind that, in the context of the Great Jubilee, I have wished, as you know, to offer you the support of a special *Patron*: the martyr *Saint Thomas More*.

Thomas More's life is truly an example for all who are called to serve humanity and society in the civic and political sphere. The eloquent testimony which he bore is as timely as ever at an historical moment which presents crucial challenges to the consciences of everyone involved in the field of governance. As a statesman, he always placed himself *at the service of the person*, especially the weak and the poor. Honour and wealth held no sway over him, guided as he was by an outstanding sense of fairness. Above all, he *never compromised his conscience*, even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice so as not to disregard its voice. Invoke him, follow him, imitate him! His intercession will not fail –

even in the most difficult of situations – to bring you strength, goodnaturedness, patience and perseverance.

This is the hope which we now wish to strengthen with the power of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, in which Christ once more becomes nourishment and direction for our lives. May the Lord help you to become politicians after his own heart, emulators of Saint Thomas More, courageous witnesses of Christ and conscientious servants of the State.

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