



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF ST. HENRY

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

First Sunday of Lent

17 February 2002

1. *"Have mercy on us, Lord, for we have sinned!"*. The invocation of the responsorial psalm which we have just heard, expresses the sentiment that motivates us on this First Sunday of Lent. We are at the beginning of a special journey of penance and conversion. We realize that this is a favourable opportunity to *recognize sin* that clouds our relationship with God and with our brothers and sisters. *"I recognize my sin"*, the Psalmist proclaims, *"for I know my transgressions and my sin is ever before me. Against you, you only, have I sinned, and done that which is evil in your sight"* (Ps 50 [51],5-6).

The passage from the Book of Genesis that we have just heard (cf. Gn 3,1-7), clearly shows what sin is and what are its consequences for the life of the human being. Our first parents gave in to the enticement of the tempter, *abruptly breaking off their dialogue of confidence and love with God*. Evil, suffering and death entered the world and one will have to wait for the promised Saviour *to re-establish, even more wonderfully, the original plan of the Creator* (cf. *ibid.*, 3,8-24).

By turning to the will of the Father, Christ resists the threefold temptation of the Evil One

2. The Messiah did not avoid the insidious action of the Evil One, as St Matthew tells in today's Gospel: *"Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil"* (Mt 4,1). In the desert, He is subjected to a threefold temptation, which however, he resisted with firmness. Jesus firmly asserted that it is not lawful to put God to the test; it is not permissible to worship any other god; one cannot determine by oneself one's own fate. For every believer the final source of guidance is the Word that proceeds from the mouth of the Lord.

In these few lines I have outlined the programme of our Lenten journey. We too are called *to cross*

the desert of everyday life, facing the recurring temptation to create distance between ourselves and God. We are invited to imitate the attitude of the Lord, who *willingly obeys the Word of his heavenly Father*, and in this way re-establishes the hierarchy of values according to the original plan of God.

3. *Dear Brothers and Sisters, of St Henry's parish!* Yours is the 301st parish that I have the joy of visiting, continuing my pastoral pilgrimage in our diocese. As I already had the opportunity to underline, these welcome Sunday meetings give me a special opportunity to "exercise my mission as Bishop of Rome, successor of Peter, in a more concrete way" (*Letter to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, L'Osservatore Romano*, p. 4, 16 December 2001).

I greet Cardinal Ruini, the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishop of the Sector, Bishop Dieci, your busy parish priest, Fr Romano Esposito, and the young parish vicars. With a grateful thought to all who welcomed me at the beginning of this celebration, I now greet the members of the Pastoral Council, of the Council for the Economic Affairs, and other parish associations. I affectionately salute each one of you here present, and I bring to mind all the members of this young and promising Christian community, and those who live in this part of Rome.

4. Yours is a *young community*, born in 1998 from the "mother Parish" of Saint Alexander. It consists mainly of recently formed families, who settled in this neighbourhood in the last decade. Only since June 1999 does it have a real parish church. A flock of children and young people live here who bring life and cheer it up.

I am thinking of those who belong to the "Ardent Marian Youth Group" (*Gioventù Ardente Mariana*), of those who are following the journey of re-discovering their own Baptism, of the Caritas group and of the Centre for the elderly and immigrants, of the "Community of love", that desires to help young married and engaged couples to live the Christian sacrament of Marriage. I am thinking of all the lectors, altar servers and choir members, who contribute to fill the liturgical celebrations with life and participation.

I also know that you are working *to support families*, and that you are concerned with the education of children, first of all, with those who are preparing to receive the sacraments of Christian initiation, and then with those who use the parish recreational centre. To involve the parents while you are catechizing their children is undoubtedly an excellent method for helping families to live together these sacramental events.

I know that with equal generosity you prepare to collaborate in the various initiatives that the Diocese of Rome is planning: the ecclesial congress on the subject of vocations, that will be held in June, and other events like the one for young persons in St Peter's Square this coming 21 March. Continue your generosity and God will make your work fruitful for the good of all.

5. "As through the disobedience of one man all have been made sinners, so now through the obedience of one man all have been made just " (Rom 5,19). This consoling word of the Apostle Paul to the Romans comforts us on our spiritual journey. Over the world, in which evil and sin often hold sway, *the light of Christ shines victoriously*. With his passion and resurrection he has defeated sin and death, opening to believers the gates of eternal salvation. The liturgy today gives us this encouraging message.

To participate fully in the victory of Christ, relying on the light of the word of God, we should dedicate ourselves to changing our way of thinking and acting.

"Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and steadfast spirit within me" (Ps 50 [51],10). Let us make our own the prayer of the Psalmist. It is a most fitting prayer for the time of Lent.

Create, Lord, a clean heart in me! Renew us in your love! O Virgin Mary obtain for us a new heart and a steadfast spirit. May we come to celebrate Easter, renewed and reconciled with God and our brothers and sisters.

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