



The Holy See

**LETTER OF THE POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO CHILDREN
IN THE YEAR OF THE FAMILY**

Dear children,

Jesus is born

In a few days we shall celebrate Christmas, the holy day which is so full of meaning for all children in every family. This year it will be even more so, because this is the *Year of the Family*. Before the Year of the Family ends, I want to write to you, the children of the whole world, and to share with you in the joy of this happy time of year.

Christmas is the feast day of a Child, of a Newborn Baby. So it is your feast day too! You wait impatiently for it and get ready for it with joy, counting the days and even the hours to the Holy Night of Bethlehem.

I can almost see you: you are setting up the Crib at home, in the parish, in every corner of the world, recreating the surroundings and the atmosphere in which the Saviour was born. Yes, it is true! At Christmastime, the stable and the manger take centre place in the Church. And everyone hurries to go there, to make a spiritual pilgrimage, like the shepherds on the night of Jesus' birth. Later, it will be the Magi arriving from the distant East, following the star, to the place where the Redeemer of the universe lay.

You too, during the days of Christmas, visit the Cribs, stopping to look at the Child lying in the hay. You look at his Mother and you look at Saint Joseph, the Redeemer's guardian. As you look at the *Holy Family*, you think of your own family, the family in which you came into the world. You think of your mother, who gave you birth, and of your father. Both of them provide for the family and for your upbringing. For it is the parents' duty not only to have children but to bring them up from the moment of their birth.

Dear children, as I write to you I am thinking of when many years ago I was a child like you. I too used to experience the peaceful feelings of Christmas, and when the star of Bethlehem shone, I would hurry to the Crib together with the other boys and girls to relive what happened 2000 years ago in Palestine. We children expressed our joy mostly in song. How beautiful and moving are the Christmas carols which in the tradition of every people are sung around the Crib! What deep thoughts they contain, and above all what joy and tenderness they express about the Divine Child who came into the world that Holy Night!

The days which follow the birth of Jesus are also feast days: so *eight days afterwards*, according to the Old Testament tradition, the Child was given a name: he was called *Jesus*. *After forty days*, we commemorate his presentation in the Temple, like every other first-born son of Israel. On that occasion, an extraordinary meeting took place: Mary, when she arrived in the Temple with the Child, was met by the old man Simeon, who took the Baby Jesus in his arms and spoke these prophetic words: "Lord, now let your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel" (*Lk 2:29-32*). Then, speaking to his Mother Mary, he added: "Behold, this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel, and for a sign that is spoken against (and a sword will pierce through your own soul also), that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed" (*Lk 2:34-35*). So already in the very first days of Jesus' life we heard the foretelling of the Passion, which will one day include his Mother Mary too: on Good Friday she will stand silently by the Cross of her Son. Also, not much time will pass after his birth before the Baby Jesus finds himself facing a grave danger: the cruel king Herod will order all the children under the age of two years to be killed, and for this reason Jesus will be forced to flee with his parents into Egypt.

You certainly know all about these events connected with the birth of Jesus. They are told to you by your parents, and by priests, teachers and catechists, and each year you relive them spiritually at Christmastime together with the whole Church. So you know about these dramatic aspects of Jesus' infancy.

Dear friends! In what happened to the Child of Bethlehem you can *recognize what happens to children throughout the world*. It is true that a child represents the joy not only of its parents but also the joy of the Church and the whole of society. But it is also true that in our days, unfortunately, many children in different parts of the world are suffering and being threatened: they are hungry and poor, they are dying from diseases and malnutrition, they are the victims of war, they are abandoned by their parents and condemned to remain without a home, without the warmth of a family of their own, they suffer many forms of violence and arrogance from grown-ups. How can we not care, when we see the suffering of so many children, especially when this suffering is in some way caused by grown-ups?

Jesus brings the Truth

The Child whom we see in the manger at Christmas grew up as the years passed. When he was *twelve years old*, as you know, he went for the first time with Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. There, in the crowds of pilgrims, he was separated from his parents and, with other boys and girls of his own age, he stopped to listen to the teachers in the Temple, for a sort of "catechism lesson". The holidays were good opportunities for handing on the faith to children who were about the same age as Jesus. But on this occasion it happened that this extraordinary boy who had come from Nazareth not only asked very intelligent questions but also started to give profound answers to those who were teaching him. The questions and even more the answers astonished the Temple teachers. It was the same amazement which later on would mark Jesus' public preaching. The episode in the Temple of Jerusalem was simply the beginning and a kind of foreshadowing of what would happen some years later.

Dear boys and girls who are the same age as the twelve-year-old Jesus, are you not reminded now of *the religion lessons* in the parish and at school, lessons which you are invited to take part in? So I would like to ask you some questions: What do you think of your religion lessons? Do you become involved like the twelve-year-old Jesus in the Temple? Do you regularly go to these lessons at school and in the parish? Do your parents help you to do so?

The twelve-year-old Jesus became so interested in the religion lesson in the Temple of Jerusalem that, in a sense, he even forgot about his own parents. Mary and Joseph, having started off on the journey back to Nazareth with other pilgrims, soon realized that Jesus was not with them. They searched hard for him. They went back and only on the third day did they find him in Jerusalem, in the Temple. "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously" (*Lk 2:48*). How strange is Jesus' answer and how it makes us stop and think! "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (*Lk 2:49*). It was an answer difficult to accept. The evangelist Luke simply adds that Mary "kept all these things in her heart" (*2:51*). In fact, it was an answer which would be understood only later, when Jesus, as a grown-up, began to preach and say that for his Heavenly Father he was ready to face any sufferings and even death on the cross.

From Jerusalem Jesus went back with Mary and Joseph to Nazareth where he was obedient to them (*Lk 2:51*). Regarding this period, before his public preaching began, the Gospel notes only that he "increased in wisdom and in stature, and in favour with God and man" (*Lk 2:52*).

Dear children, in the Child whom you look at in the Crib you must try to see also the twelve-year-old boy in the Temple in Jerusalem, talking with the teachers. He is the same grown man who later, at thirty years old, will begin to preach the word of God, will choose the Twelve Apostles, will be followed by crowds thirsting for the truth. At every step he will confirm his extraordinary teaching with signs of divine power: he will give sight to the blind, heal the sick, even raise the dead. And among the dead whom he will bring back to life there will be the twelve-year-old daughter of Jairus, and the son of the widow of Naim, given back alive to his weeping mother.

It is really true: this Child, now just born, once he is grown up, as Teacher of divine Truth, *will show an extraordinary love for children*. He will say to the Apostles: "Let the children come to me, do not hinder them", and he will add: "for to such belongs the kingdom of God" (*Mk 10:14*). Another time, as the Apostles are arguing about who is the greatest, he will put a child in front of them and say: "Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven" (*Mt 18:3*). On that occasion, he also spoke harsh words of warning: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believes in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (*Mt 18:6*).

How *important children are in the eyes of Jesus!* We could even say that *the Gospel is full of the truth about children*. The whole of the Gospel could actually be read as the "Gospel of children".

What does it mean that "unless you turn and become like children, you will not enter the kingdom of heaven"? *Is not Jesus pointing to children as models* even for grown-ups? In children there is something that must never be missing in people who want to enter the kingdom of heaven. People who are destined to go to heaven are simple like children, and like children are full of trust, rich in goodness and pure. Only people of this sort can find in God a Father and, thanks to Jesus, can become in their own turn children of God.

Is not this the main message of Christmas? We read in Saint John: "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (*Jn 1:14*); and again: "To all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power *to become children of God*" (*Jn 1:12*). Children of God! You, dear children, are sons and daughters of your parents. God wants us all to become his adopted children by grace. Here we have the real reason for Christmas joy, the joy I am writing to you about at the end of this Year of the Family. *Be happy in this "Gospel of divine sonship"*. In this joy I hope that the coming Christmas holidays will bear abundant fruit in this Year of the Family.

Jesus gives himself

Dear friends, there is no doubt that an unforgettable meeting with Jesus is *First Holy Communion*, a day to be remembered as one of life's most beautiful. The Eucharist, instituted by Christ at the Last Supper, on the night before his Passion, is a Sacrament of the New Covenant, rather, the greatest of the Sacraments. In this Sacrament, the Lord becomes food for the soul under the appearances of bread and wine. Children receive this Sacrament solemnly a first time-in First Holy Communion-and are encouraged to receive it afterwards as often as possible in order to remain in close friendship with Jesus.

To be able to receive Holy Communion, as you know, it is necessary to have received *Baptism*: this is the first of the Sacraments and the one most necessary for salvation. Baptism is a great event! In the Church's first centuries, when Baptism was received mostly by grown-ups, the ceremony ended with receiving the Eucharist, and was as solemn as First Holy Communion is

today. Later on, when Baptism began to be given mainly to newborn babies-and this is the case of many of you, dear children, so that in fact you do not remember the day of your Baptism-the more solemn celebration was transferred to the moment of First Holy Communion. Every boy and every girl belonging to a Catholic family knows all about this custom: First Holy Communion is *a great family celebration*. On that day, together with the one who is making his or her First Holy Communion, the parents, brothers, sisters, relatives, godparents, and sometimes also the instructors and teachers, generally receive the Eucharist.

The day of First Holy Communion is also *a great day of celebration in the parish*. I remember as though it were yesterday when, together with the other boys and girls of my own age, I received the Eucharist for the first time in the parish church of my town. This event is usually commemorated in a family photo, so that it will not be forgotten. Photos like these generally remain with a person all through his or her life. As time goes by, people take out these pictures and experience once more the emotions of those moments; they return to the purity and joy experienced in that meeting with Jesus, the One who out of love became the Redeemer of man.

For how many children in the history of the Church has the Eucharist been a source of spiritual strength, sometimes even heroic strength! How can we fail *to be reminded*, for example, *of holy boys and girls* who lived in the first centuries and are still known and venerated throughout the Church? Saint Agnes, who lived in Rome; Saint Agatha, who was martyred in Sicily; Saint Tarcisius, a boy who is rightly called the "martyr of the Eucharist" because he preferred to die rather than give up Jesus, whom he was carrying under the appearance of bread.

And so down the centuries, up to our own times, *there are many boys and girls among those declared by the Church to be saints or blessed*. Just as Jesus in the Gospel shows special trust in children, so his Mother Mary, in the course of history, has not failed to show *her motherly care for the little ones*. Think of Saint Bernadette of Lourdes, the children of La Salette and, in our own century Lucia, Francisco and Jacinta of Fatima.

Earlier I was speaking to you about the "Gospel of children": has this not found in our own time a particular expression in the spirituality of Saint Theresa of the Child Jesus? It is absolutely true: Jesus and his Mother often choose children and give them important tasks for the life of the Church and of humanity. I have named only a few who are known everywhere, but how many others there are who are less widely known! The Redeemer of humanity seems *to share with them his concern for others*: for parents, for other boys and girls. He eagerly awaits their prayers. *What enormous power the prayer of children has!* This becomes a *model for grown-ups themselves*: praying with simple and complete trust means praying as children pray.

And here I come to an important point in this Letter: at the end of this Year of the Family, dear young friends, it is to your prayers that I want to entrust the problems of your own families and of all the families in the world. And not only this: I also have other intentions to ask you to pray for.

The Pope counts very much on your prayers. We must pray together and pray hard, that humanity, made up of billions of human beings, may become more and more the family of God and able to live in peace. At the beginning of this Letter I mentioned the unspeakable suffering which many children have experienced in this century, and which many of them are continuing to endure at this very moment. How many of them, even in these days, are becoming victims of the hatred which is raging in different parts of the world: in the Balkans, for example, and in some African countries. It was while I was thinking about these facts, which fill our hearts with pain, that I decided to ask you, dear boys and girls, to take upon yourselves the duty of *praying for peace*. You know this well: *love and harmony build peace, hatred and violence destroy it*. You instinctively turn away from hatred and are attracted by love: for this reason the Pope is certain that you will not refuse his request, but that you will join in his prayer for peace in the world with the same enthusiasm with which you pray for peace and harmony in your own families.

Praise the name of the Lord!

At the end of this Letter, dear boys and girls, let me recall the words of a Psalm which have always moved me: *Laudate pueri Dominum!* Praise, O children of the Lord, praise the name of the Lord! Blessed be the name of the Lord from this time forth and for evermore! From the rising of the sun to its setting may the name of the Lord be praised! (*Ps 112/113:1-3*). As I meditate on the words of this Psalm, the faces of all the world's children pass before my eyes: from the East to the West, from the North to the South. It is to you, young friends, without distinction of language, race or nationality, that I say: *Praise the name of the Lord!*

And since people must praise God first of all with their own lives, do not forget what the twelve-year-old Jesus said to his Mother and to Joseph in the Temple in Jerusalem: "Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (*Lk 2:49*). People praise God *by following the voice of their own calling*. God calls every person, and his voice makes itself heard even in the hearts of children: he calls people to live in marriage or to be priests; he calls them to the consecrated life or perhaps to work on the missions... Who can say? Pray, dear boys and girls, that you will find out what your calling is, and that you will then follow it generously.

Praise the name of the Lord! The children of every continent, on the night of Bethlehem, look with faith upon the newborn Child and experience the great joy of Christmas. They sing in their own languages, praising the name of the Lord. The touching melodies of Christmas spread throughout the earth. They are tender and moving words which are heard in every human language; it is like a festive song rising from all the earth, which blends with the song of the Angels, the messengers of the glory of God, above the stable in Bethlehem: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased!" (*Lk 2:14*). The highly favoured Son of God becomes present among us as a newborn baby; gathered around him, the children of every nation on earth feel his eyes upon them, eyes full of the Heavenly Father's love, and they rejoice because God loves them. People cannot live without love. They are called to love God and their neighbour, but

in order to love properly they must be certain that God loves them.

God loves you, dear children! This is what I want to tell you at the end of the Year of the Family and on the occasion of these Christmas feast days, which in a special way are your feast days.

I hope that they will be joyful and peaceful for you; I hope that during them you will have a more intense experience of the love of your parents, of your brothers and sisters, and of the other members of your family. This love must then spread to your whole community, even to the whole world, precisely through you, dear children. Love will then be able to reach those who are most in need of it, especially the suffering and the abandoned. What joy is greater than the joy brought by love? What joy is greater than the joy which you, O Jesus, bring at Christmas to people's hearts, and especially to the hearts of children?

*Raise your tiny hand, Divine Child,
and bless these young friends of yours,
bless the children of all the earth.*

From the Vatican, 13 December 1994.

JOHN PAUL II

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