



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 2001

Love is not resentful (1 Cor 13:5)

1. "Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem" (*Mk 10:33*). With these words, the Lord invites the disciples to journey with him on the path that leads from Galilee to the place where he will complete his redemptive mission. This journey to Jerusalem, which the Evangelists present as the crowning moment of the earthly journey of Jesus, is the model for the Christian who is committed to following the Master on the way of the Cross. Christ also invites the men and women of today to "go up to Jerusalem". He does so with special force in Lent, which is a favourable time to convert and restore full communion with him by sharing intimately in the mystery of his Death and Resurrection.

For believers, therefore, Lent is the appropriate time for a profound re-examination of life. In today's world, there is much generous witness to the Gospel, but there are also baptized people who, when faced with the demanding call to "go up to Jerusalem", remain deaf and resistant, even at times openly rebellious. There are situations where people's experience of prayer is rather superficial, so that the word of God does not enter deeply into their lives. Even the Sacrament of Penance is thought by many to be unimportant and the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is seen as a mere duty to be performed.

How should we respond to the invitation to conversion that Jesus addresses to us in this time of Lent? How can there be a serious change in our life? First of all, we must open our hearts to the penetrating call that comes to us from the Liturgy. The time of preparation for Easter is a providential gift from the Lord and a precious opportunity to draw closer to him, turning inward to listen to his promptings deep within.

2. There are Christians who think they can dispense with this unceasing spiritual effort, because they do not see the urgency of standing before the truth of the Gospel. Lest their way of life be upset, they seek to take words like "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (*Lk 6:27*) and render them empty and innocuous. For these people, it is

extremely difficult to accept such words and to translate them into consistent patterns of behaviour. They are in fact words which, if taken seriously, demand a radical conversion. On the other hand, when we are offended or hurt, we are tempted to succumb to the psychological impulses of self-pity and revenge, ignoring Jesus' call to love our enemy. Yet the daily experiences of human life show very clearly how much forgiveness and reconciliation are indispensable if there is to be genuine renewal, both personal and social. This applies not only to interpersonal relationships, but also to relationships between communities and nations.

3. The many tragic conflicts which grievously wound humanity, some of them stirred by mistaken religious motives, have sown violence and hatred between peoples and even at times between groups and factions within the same nation. With a distressing sense of powerlessness, we sometimes see a revival of hostilities which we had thought were finally settled, and it seems that some peoples are caught in an unstoppable spiral of violence, which continues to claim victim after victim, without any real prospect of resolution. And hopes for peace, heard all around the world, come to nothing: for the commitment required to move towards the longed-for reconciliation fails to take hold.

Faced with this disturbing scenario, Christians cannot remain indifferent. That is why, during the Jubilee Year just concluded, I gave voice to the Church's plea to God for forgiveness for the sins of her children. We well know that the sins of Christians have marred the unblemished face of the Church, but trusting in the merciful love of God, who keeps no account of evil when there is repentance, we can confidently set forth on our journey once more. God's love is clearly revealed where sinful and ungrateful man is readmitted to full communion with the divinity. Seen in this light, "purification of memory" is above all a renewed proclamation of the mercy of God, a confession which the Church at every level is called to make again and again with fresh conviction.

4. The only path to peace is forgiveness. Forgiveness given and received enables a new kind of relationship among people, breaking the spiral of hatred and revenge and shattering the chains of evil which bind the hearts of those in conflict with one another. For nations in search of reconciliation and for those who hope for peaceful co-existence between individuals and peoples, there is no other way than this: forgiveness given and received. How full of salutary lessons are the words of the Lord: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and the good and sends rain on the just and the unjust" (*Mt 5:44-45*)! To love those who have offended us is to disarm them and to turn even a battle-field into an arena of mutual support and cooperation.

This is a challenge not only to individuals but also to communities, peoples and humanity as a whole. In a special way it concerns families. It is not easy to be converted to forgiveness and reconciliation. To choose reconciliation can seem problematic enough when we ourselves are at fault. But if the fault is someone else's, reconciliation may even seem a senseless humiliation. An inner conversion is required if this step is to be taken; the courage to be humbly obedient to Jesus' command is needed. His word leaves no doubt: not only those who provoke hostility but also those who are its victim must seek reconciliation (cf. *Mt 5:23-24*). Christians must make peace even when they feel that they are victims of those who have struck and hurt them unjustly. This was how the Lord himself acted. He expects his disciple to follow him, and in this way cooperate in redeeming his brothers and sisters.

In our own time, forgiveness appears more and more essential if there is to be genuine social renewal and a

consolidation of peace in the world. In proclaiming forgiveness and love of enemies, the Church is aware of adding to the spiritual heritage of all humanity a new mode of human relationships; an arduous mode, to be sure, but one that is also rich in hope. In this, the Church knows she can rely on the help of the Lord, who never abandons those who turn to him in times of difficulty.

5. "Love is not resentful" (1 Cor 13:5). With these words from the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul recalls that forgiveness is one of the highest forms of the practice of charity. The season of Lent is a favourable time to explore still more deeply the meaning of this truth. Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Father gives us in Christ his pardon, and this impels us to live in love, seeing others not as an enemies but as brothers and sisters.

May this time of penance and reconciliation encourage believers to think and act according to true charity, open to every human circumstance. This inner disposition will ensure that believers will bear the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22) and that with a heart renewed they will offer material help to those in need.

A heart reconciled with God and neighbour is a generous heart. In the holy season of Lent the "collection" assumes a special meaning, because it is not a matter of giving from one's surplus in order to soothe one's conscience, but of taking upon oneself in a spirit of fraternal concern the misery present in the world. To look upon the sorrowing face and the suffering of so many brothers and sisters cannot fail to prompt us to share at least some part of our own possessions with those who are in difficulty. And the Lenten offering becomes still more meaningful if those who make it are set free from resentment and indifference, which are obstacles that keep us far from communion with God and with others.

The world expects Christians to bear unequivocal witness to communion and solidarity. On this point, the words of the Apostle John are most enlightening: "If any of you has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 Jn 3:17).

Brothers and sisters! In commenting upon the Lord's teaching as he journeys to Jerusalem, Saint John Chrysostom recalls that Christ does not leave the disciples ignorant of the struggles and sacrifices that await them. Jesus stresses that it is hard but not impossible to renounce oneself when one can count on God's help bestowed on us "through communion with the person of Christ" (PG 58, 619s).

That is why, in this Lenten season, I wish to invite all believers to an ardent and trusting prayer to the Lord, that he may grant each of us a fresh experience of his mercy. Only this gift will help us to receive and live ever more joyfully and generously the love of Christ which "does not insist on its own way, ... is not resentful, ... does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right" (1 Cor 13:5-6).

With these sentiments, I entrust the Lenten journey of the entire community of believers to the protection of the Mother of Mercy, and I cordially impart to each of you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 7 January 2001

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