



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 1997

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. The season of Lent recalls the forty years spent by Israel in the desert while on its way to the promised land. During that time the people experienced what it meant to live in tents, without a fixed abode, totally lacking security. How often they were tempted to return to Egypt, where at least there was a supply of bread even though it was the food of slaves. In the insecurity of the desert God himself provided water and food for his people, protecting them from every danger. For the Hebrews the experience of being total dependent on God thus became the path to freedom from slavery and the idolatry of material things.

The Lenten season is meant to help believers, through a commitment to personal purification, to relive this same spiritual journey, by becoming more aware of poverty and of life's uncertainties and by rediscovering the providential presence of the Lord who invites us to open our eyes to the needs of our brothers and sisters in need. In this way Lent also becomes a season of solidarity with individuals and peoples in so many parts of the world who find themselves in very difficult situations.

2. For Lent 1997, the first year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, I would like to pause and reflect on the tragic situation of the homeless. As a text for meditation I suggest the following words taken from Matthew's Gospel: "Come, O blessed of my Father, for I was homeless and you took me in" (cf. 25:34-35). The home is the place of family communion, where from the love of husband and wife children are born and learn how to live; in the home children learn those fundamental moral and spiritual values which will make them the citizens and Christians of tomorrow. In the home too, the elderly and the sick experience an atmosphere of closeness and affection and support, also in times of suffering and physical decline.

But how many people there are, unfortunately, who have been uprooted from the atmosphere of human warmth and welcome typical of the home! I think of refugees, victims of wars and natural disasters, and those forced to migrate for economic reasons. I also think of families evicted from their homes, those unable to find housing, and the many elderly people whose pensions do not enable them to find a decent and affordable place to live? At times these hardships lead to other tragedies such as alcoholism, violence, prostitution and drug addiction. Last June, while the World Conference on Human Settlements, Habitat II, was meeting in Istanbul, I called attention to these serious problems at the Sunday Angelus. I emphasized their great urgency and recalled once again that the right to housing belongs not only to the individual as such, but also to the family, made up of several individuals. The family, as the basic cell of society, has a full right to housing adequate to its needs, so that it can develop a genuine domestic communion. The Church recognizes this fundamental right and is aware of her obligation to work together with others in order to ensure that it is recognized in practice.

3. Many passages in the Bible highlight the duty to help the homeless.

In the Old Testament, the Torah teaches that strangers and the homeless in general, inasmuch as they are exposed to all sorts of dangers, deserve special concern from the believer. Indeed, God clearly and repeatedly recommends hospitality and generosity towards the stranger (cf. Dt 24:17-18, 10:18-19; Num 15:15; etc.), reminding Israel of how precarious its own existence had once been. Later, Jesus identified himself with the homeless: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt 25:35), and taught that charity towards those in this situation will be rewarded in heaven. The Lord's Apostles urge the various communities which they had founded to show hospitality to one another, as a sign of communion and the newness of their life in Christ.

It is from God's own love that Christians learn to help the needy and to share with them their own material and spiritual goods. Such concern not only provides those experiencing hardship with material help but also represents an opportunity for the spiritual growth of the giver, who finds in it an incentive to detachment from worldly goods. But there is a higher motivation which Christ indicated to us by his own example when he said: "The Son of man has no where to lay his head" (Mt 8:20). By these words the Lord wished to show his total openness to his Heavenly Father, whose will he was determined to carry out without letting himself be hindered by the possession of worldly goods: for there is always a danger that earthly realities will take the place of God in the human heart.

Lent is thus a providential opportunity for fostering the spiritual detachment from riches necessary if we are to open ourselves to God. It is He to whom, as Christians, we must direct our entire lives, for we know that in this world we have no fixed abode, since "our commonwealth is in heaven" (Phil 3:20). At the end of Lent, the celebration of the Paschal Mystery shows how the Lenten journey of purification culminates in the free and loving gift of self to the Father. It is by taking this path that Christ's disciples learn how to rise above themselves and their selfish interests in order

to encounter in love their brothers and sisters.

4. The Gospel call to be close to Christ who is "homeless" is an invitation to all the baptized to examine their own lives and to treat their brothers and sisters with practical solidarity by sharing their hardships. By openness and generosity, as a community and as individuals, Christians can serve Christ present in the poor, and bear witness to the Father's love. In this journey Christ goes before us. His presence is a source of strength and encouragement: he sets us free and makes us witnesses of Love.

Dear Brothers and Sisters! Let us fearlessly go up with Christ to Jerusalem (cf. Lk 18:31) and accept his invitation to conversion, so that we may cling more fervently to God, the holy and merciful One, especially during the Lenten season of grace. I pray that this Lent will enable all to hear the Lord's plea to open their hearts to all those in need. Invoking Mary's heavenly protection in a special way upon the homeless, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 25 October 1996.

JOHN PAUL II