



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

MEETING WITH THE FAITHFUL

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Mission Dolores Basilica, San Francisco
Thursday, 17 September 1987

Dear Archbishop Quinn,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. Thank you for your very kind welcome to *San Francisco*. It is a joy to be here with all of you. As I begin my pastoral visit to your historic city, I extend fraternal greetings to all the citizens of this metropolitan area. In the love of Christ I greet my brothers and sisters of the Catholic community. And in a special way I welcome this opportunity to be with you who are present in this *basilica dedicated to Our Lady of Sorrows*. May the grace and peace of God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all.

San Francisco! Both in name and by history you are linked to the *spirit of Saint Francis of Assisi*. And thus, as I come to your city on this pastoral visit, I think of all that Saint Francis means, not only to yourselves but to people all around the world. There is something about this man, who was born over eight hundred years ago in a little Italian town, that continues in our day to inspire people of vastly different cultures and religions.

Saint Francis was a man of peace and gentleness, a poet and lover of beauty. He was a man of poverty and simplicity, a man in tune with the birds and animals, enchanted by all of God's creation. Above all, Francis was a man of prayer whose whole life was shaped by *the love of Jesus Christ*, and he wished to live in a way that spoke in the clearest terms of the everlasting love

of God.

As I come today, then, to the city of San Francisco, I come in the spirit of this saint whose *whole life proclaims the goodness and mercy of God*.

2. Accordingly, I wish to speak to you about the all-embracing love of God. Saint John says: "*Love, then, consists in this: not that we have loved God but that he has loved us and has sent his Son as an offering for our sins*" (1Jo. 4, 10). God's love for us is freely given and unearned, surpassing all we could ever hope for or imagine. He does not love us because we have merited it or are worthy of it. God loves us, rather, because he is true to his own nature. As Saint John puts it, "*God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God in him*" (*Ibid.* 4, 16).

The greatest proof of God's love is shown in the fact that he loves us in our human condition, with our weaknesses and our needs. Nothing else can explain the mystery of the Cross. The Apostle Paul once wrote: "You can depend on this as worthy of full acceptance: that *Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners*. Of these, I myself am the worst. But on that very account I was dealt with mercifully, so that in me, as an extreme case, Jesus Christ might display *all his patience*, and that I might become an example to those who would later have faith in him and again everlasting life" (1Tim. 1, 15-16).

The love of Christ is more powerful than sin and death. Saint Paul explains that Christ came to forgive sin, and that his love is greater than any sin, stronger than all my personal sins or those of anyone else. This is the faith of the Church. This is the Good News of God's love that the Church proclaims throughout history, and that I proclaim to you today: God loves you with an everlasting love. He loves you in Christ Jesus, his Son.

3. God's love has many aspects. In particular, *God loves us as our Father*. The parable of the prodigal son expresses this truth most vividly. You recall that moment, in the parable, when the son came to his senses, decided to return home and set off for his father's house. "*While he was still a long way off, his father caught sight of him and was deeply moved. He ran out to meet him, threw his arms around his neck, and kissed him*" (Luc. 15, 20). This is the fatherly love of God, a love always ready to forgive, eager to welcome us back.

God's love for us as our Father is a strong and faithful love, a love which is full of mercy, a love which *enables us to hope for the grace of conversion* when we have sinned. As I said in my encyclical on the Mercy of God: "The parable of the prodigal son expresses in a simple but profound way *the reality of conversion*. Conversion is the most concrete expression of the working of love and of the presence of mercy in the human world... Mercy is manifested in its true and proper aspect when it restores to value, promotes and *draws good from all the forms of evil* existing in the world" (Ioannis Pauli PP. II *Dives in Misericordia*, 6).

It is the reality of God's love for us as our father that explains why Jesus told us *when we pray* to address God as "*Abba, Father*" (Cfr. *Luc. 11, 2; Matth. 6, 9*).

4. It is also true to say that *God's love for us is like that of a mother*. In this regard, God asks us, through the prophet Isaiah: "Can a mother forget her infant, be without *tenderness for the child of her womb*? Even should she forget, *I will never forget you*" (*Is. 49, 15*).

God's love is tender and merciful, patient and full of understanding. In the Scriptures, and also in the living memory of the Church, the love of God is indeed depicted and has been experienced as *the compassionate love of a mother*.

Jesus himself expressed a compassionate love when he wept over Jerusalem, and when he said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem... How often would I have gathered your children together *as a hen gathers her brood under her wings*" (*Luc. 13, 34*).

5. Dear friends in Christ: the love of God is so great that it goes *beyond the limits of human language*, beyond the grasp of artistic expression, beyond human understanding. And yet, it is *concretely embodied in God's Son, Jesus Christ*, and in his Body, the Church. Once again this evening, here in Mission Dolores Basilica, I repeat to all of you the ageless proclamation of the Gospel!

God loves you! God loves you all, without distinction, without limit. He loves those of you who are elderly, who feel the burden of the years. He loves those of you who are sick, those who are suffering from AIDS and from AIDS-Related Complex. He loves the relatives and friends of the sick and those who care for them. He loves us all with an unconditional and everlasting love.

In the spirit of Saint Francis, then, I urge you all to open your hearts to God's love, to respond by your prayers and by the deeds of your lives. Let go of your doubts and fears, and let the mercy of God draw you to his heart. *Open the doors of your hearts* to our God who is rich in mercy.

"*See what love the Father has bestowed on us*
in letting us be called children of God!
Yet that is what we are" (*1Jo. 3, 1*).

Yes, that is what we are today and forever: children of a loving God!

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