



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE PRIESTS AND DEACONS OF ROME

Thursday, 18 February 1999

1. Dear priests of Rome, parish priests, parochial vicars, priests involved in other forms of ministry, and you, permanent deacons or those preparing for the priesthood, welcome! I am happy to meet you as I usually do at the beginning of Lent, and I extend my affectionate greetings to one and all.

In the Cardinal Vicar's introduction and then in your remarks, we heard about the progress of the City Mission and the concrete experiences you have had. I will also reflect on this central point in the pastoral care of the Diocese, which represents Rome's specific preparation for the Great Jubilee and so has rightly been the constant theme of our meetings in recent years.

In fact, the City Mission is now in its final phase and is especially dedicated to the various places where people live and work. We started it by giving crucifixes to the missionaries on the First Sunday of Advent, the same day I promulgated the Bull of Indiction of the Great Jubilee, while the event that concludes our journey has been set for next Pentecost.

2. The decision not to limit the Mission to families who live in the parish territory but to reach out also to the many places in this vast city where people work, study and spend their free time, or even suffer and are cared for, was undoubtedly a courageous and demanding one. We made it because we were convinced of the Mission's importance, or rather, of its necessity, if we really want Christ's Gospel to be proclaimed and made known to every person and in all the circumstances and situations of life (cf. 1 Cor 9:16-23). May that special abundance of grace associated with the Great Jubilee, which we are rapidly approaching, sustain us and give us strength.

Moreover, in taking the Mission to these situations, we are only putting into practice that pastoral principle repeatedly recalled during the diocesan Synod: the principle that each parish and the entire ecclesial community must seek and find themselves outside themselves, that is, precisely

where the People of God actually live.

It is clear that the practical fulfilment of this task is primarily entrusted to the lay faithful who actually live and work in these various milieus. Indeed, the more effective the Mission is in each individual situation, the more will those who live and work in these places each day be able to apply it and put it into practice. Therefore last 8 December, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception and the third anniversary of the first announcement of the City Mission, I wrote a Letter to all my fellow believers who live and work in Rome, inviting them to be courageous and consistent missionaries of the Gospel.

3. What I have already recalled to you priests in years past also applies to the Mission in these places, taken as a whole and in each of its implications. Dear friends, since you are the Bishops' closest co-workers, it is to you that the ministry of proclaiming the Gospel to all is principally entrusted. Mission, the Church's vocation and fundamental task, is not primarily the work of individual believers but of the entire community, hence first and foremost, of the community's leaders.

In many important situations, you priests are directly present because of your specific ministry. Thus you are in many schools as religion teachers, in clinics and prisons as chaplains; in Rome some chaplains are bearing great fruit in the workplace. I cannot fail to mention all those who are involved on the "frontiers" of charity, at the side of the disadvantaged, minors in difficulty, young people with chemical dependency problems, immigrants and the homeless. In each of these areas, at the side of all these brothers and sisters, you are called to be a living sign of God's love, of the salvation Christ has brought us, of the Church's motherly concern. You are and must be missionaries and evangelizers always and everywhere.

Dear permanent deacons, at your own level you participate in the sacred ministry and yet, with regard to work and the family, you share the same state as our lay brothers and sisters; thus you are in a particularly favourable situation to bear witness and to evangelize in the places where you are involved. The Mission in these situations is a special call for you and a valuable opportunity to develop your specific ministry.

4. However, our task as ordained ministers in relation to this type of Mission is not limited to what we can do directly by working within each individual situation. Each of us, in fact, although he may not be entrusted with an apostolate in one of these places, has an essential formative role in which he can and must prepare and support the lay faithful who are called to bear witness to Christ in every situation of life.

Here we touch on a most important subject that concerns the way we conceive and exercise our ministry as pastors. The horizon of the Church's task must not be limited to the smooth functioning of the parish or of any other institution directly entrusted to our care. Rather we must embrace in

spirit the entire Church in her essential missionary dimension, which places her at the service of the integral salvation of man.

In this light, our formative work should not only be concerned with developing a laity that can take on responsibilities in the parish or Church community. We must be even more concerned to form authentic Christian consciences, so that each lay person or priest can integrate their own lives and bear credible and joyous witness to the Gospel in every situation and context. Likewise, we should try to make the lay faithful more clearly aware that the Church's evangelizing mission involves them and is entrusted to them. This normally occurs through their actions and the witness of their lives, as well as through their ability and readiness to give an account for the hope which, as believers in Christ, they have received and bear (cf. 1 Pt 3:15).

This same missionary zeal must also characterize the basic elements of spiritual formation and growth: prayer, which puts us in God's presence; catechesis, which nourishes faith and helps people look at every reality with the eyes of faith; repentance and conversion of heart, increasing our openness to the love of God and of our brothers and sisters. Only in this way can the growth of the witness and missionary become one with that of the Christian.

5. This is how the Christian presence in our beloved city of Rome can become more effective and persuasive in the new millennium which is about to begin. In some cases the workplace is where secularization appears more advanced, and to speak about God and Jesus Christ can seem difficult and almost out of place. But in reality, God is never a stranger; Christ is never a stranger. The eternal Son of God "worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved" (*Gaudium et spes*, n. 22): he is and remains, wherever our humanity is at stake, the only Redeemer of man. I remember that 20 years ago, precisely in this season of Lent, I promulgated the Encyclical *Redemptor hominis*.

Therefore, in confidently beginning the Mission in these places, may everyone be very aware that it is a long-term project. It is an integral and indispensable part of the new evangelization, which must be ever more firmly rooted and developed in the pastoral care of the diocesan community.

6. Dear priests, the missionary impulse arises from that flame of love which the Lord has kindled in our hearts by the gift of his Holy Spirit, and is first of all expressed in the concrete language of love. Thus the City Mission, in this final year of preparation for the Jubilee, which is dedicated to God the Father and aimed at stressing the theological virtue of charity (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, nn. 51-51), should pay special attention to "evangelizing the poor" (Mt 11:5), by making their living conditions less dreary and precarious.

In your pastoral ministry, you have first-hand experience of how unemployment and poverty are increasing. Thus it becomes more and more necessary to identify new opportunities and ways so that Rome, on the basis of its spiritual and civil mission and by making the most of the human,

cultural and religious heritage which has developed over the centuries, can further its civil and economic development, also for the benefit of the whole Italian nation and the world (cf. *Letter to those who live and work in Rome*, n. 8). The charity of Christ urges us, then, to be present and involved in every context where our city's future is being concretely prepared.

Dear priests and deacons, I know of your daily efforts, labours and the difficulties you must often face. I would like to assure you that I am always close with my affection and prayer. May the Virgin Mary, the perfect example of love for God and neighbour, support each of us on our way and obtain for everyone that total responsiveness to the Lord's call which she expressed at the moment of the Annunciation and then at the foot of the Cross (cf. *Tertio millennio adveniente*, n. 54).

With these sentiments, I cordially impart a special Blessing to you all, which I willingly extend to your parishes and to those you meet in the course of the City Mission.

Among these parishes, the last one I visited was St Fulgentius and the next will be St Raymond Nonnatus. The liturgical memorial of St Raymond Nonnatus is celebrated at the end of August; now all that is left is for me to visit the parish dedicated to him in Rome.