



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE CLERGY OF ROME

Thursday, 1 March 2001

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Priests!*

1. I greet you with affection and I thank you for attending this annual meeting of the clergy of Rome at the beginning of Lent. It is a meeting that I cherish, because of the opportunity it gives me to be personally close to those who are directly involved in the pastoral care of the faithful belonging to this dear Church of Rome.

I greet and thank the Cardinal Vicar, the Vicegerent, the Auxiliary Bishops and all who have addressed me.

2. "At the acceptable time I have listened to you, and helped you on the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6: 2).

The Apostle's exhortation, which we heard during the solemn Ash Wednesday liturgy, invites us to begin the penitential journey of Lent with sentiments of deep gratitude to the Lord. At this acceptable time, a time of grace, he comes to meet his people, in order to guide them to Easter on the path of conversion and reconciliation.

Lent is an important season which should be observed in parishes and in every ecclesial reality with great spiritual and pastoral intensity. Many commitments and projects await you, scheduled programmes that should be regularly carried out at the catechetical, liturgical and charitable level. But the preoccupation of "doing" must never prevail over those crucial spiritual and interior factors

which are the only firm basis for your necessary and intense pastoral activity.

3. I especially urge you, dear priests, to foster your personal spiritual progress in this holy season. The faithful draw great benefit for understanding and welcoming the spiritual riches of Lent from the priest's example and witness, and rediscover the parish as a "school" of prayer, "where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help, but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly *"falls in love"* (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 33).

Lent is the acceptable time in every community to foster that spirituality of communion which flows from a more intense encounter with the Lord into mutual relations, making it possible to relish "how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell in unity" (*Ps* 133: 1). From this standpoint, priestly communion, which is expressed in lived brotherhood between parish priests and curates, between elderly and young priests, and especially with confrères who are ill or in difficulty is decisive.

Within the presbyterate, each individual is called to regard others as "those who are a part of me" and to see first what is positive in their brothers, to welcome it and prize it as "a gift for me", "resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust and jealousy" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 43).

4. The commitment to communion includes that listening to the People of God which use participatory structures, promoted with conviction and seriousness, but also all the opportunities offered to us each day for accepting peoples' requests and meeting their most practical needs.

I am thinking of the many people who, because of work or their busy pace of life, need to be welcomed and guided in catechesis and in preparation for the sacraments with different times, schedules and forms that correspond to their needs. We must reach out to them with openness and kindness, delighted to meet and approach especially those who do not regularly participate in our communities.

I am also thinking of the many families who, during the Lenten season, open the doors of their homes to receive the traditional blessing of the missionaries, to which the City Mission gave such a positive start.

5. As our communities are coming out of themselves to bring the message of the Lord who died and rose again to every home and workplace, we come into contact with the many old and new forms of suffering and poverty in Rome's families and neighbourhoods. You priests, who live daily with the people, know the great expectations and trust which the poor and, in general, all the suffering place in the Christian community.

Therefore, like Christ the Good Shepherd, go and seek out every man, woman, child, young or

elderly person who is looking for a sign of affection, solidarity and fraternal sharing in his situation of material or moral and spiritual poverty. This network of concrete, personalized love is the first missionary way which produces the new "'creativity' in charity" (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 50) that opens hearts to the Gospel message.

6. This Lent coincides with a moment that is particularly significant and full of prospects for our Diocese: for in every parish and ecclesial reality, spiritual and pastoral discernment are under way, leading to the great convention to be held in June.

As I recalled in my Letter to the Church of Rome, repeating the invitation of *Novo millennio ineunte*, we can look to the future in an attitude of faith and Christian hope, and thus "put out into the deep", in order to live the present with enthusiasm and to open ourselves confidently to the future.

The convention is meant to begin a new and fruitful season of evangelization in our city. The permanent mission is a goal which we must pursue with all our energies, a mission centred on Christ, the only Saviour, promoted by the whole People of God, sustained by communion among all its members, directed to each person, family and context, witnessed to by Christians of mature faith, who can have an impact on the mentality and culture of the whole city through their work, convictions and lifestyle.

7. I once again express my deep gratitude to you for the willingness and generosity you showed during the Jubilee. If this great event took place calmly, offering pilgrims from every corner of the earth a living witness of traditional Roman hospitality, full of human and spiritual warmth, it is largely due to the parishes, families, religious communities and many volunteers, young people and adults who were generously involved in service and hospitality.

My gratitude goes especially to Rome's young people, who did their utmost during World Youth Day to offer hospitality to their peers and who accompanied them with friendship and brotherhood in their unforgettable experiences of faith and communion. These young people - large numbers of whom attend our traditional gathering in the Vatican on the Thursday before Palm Sunday - are a great missionary resource for the Church of Rome and for the whole city.

Dear priests, love these young people with the very heart of Christ, and have confidence in each of them. Support their enthusiasm and teach them to bear witness to the faith among their peers. Do not be afraid to invite them to say "yes" courageously and without reservation to even the most demanding calls, such as the vocation to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. Accompany them on the journey of Christian growth with the celebration of the sacrament of Penance and spiritual direction. Your joy in being priests and your choice of a poor life freely dedicated to the Gospel and to others are the most effective way to sow vocations in the hearts of young people.

8. Lent is the acceptable time for our sanctification. It is so for every baptized person and even more so for us priests, who are called to "celebrate each day what we live and to live what we celebrate", the Lord's paschal sacrifice, the first and eternal source of holiness and grace. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Mother of priests in particular, sustain us on this demanding journey. May the intercession of holy priests, such as the Curé of Ars and the many Roman priests and pastors raised to the glory of the altars, help us. May the example of so many brothers, whose humble service and generous dedication to the Church of Rome we appreciate, encourage us.

I cordially bless you and with you I bless your communities.

Before he began his address, the Holy Father said in answer to a question about communion among priests:

Regarding this last question, how to create this communion among priests, I think that the methods are sufficiently well known: living together, praying together, deciding together and then working together. This is more or less the method of communion followed in the Roman Curia and in the Diocese of Rome, with the Cardinal Vicar, his Bishop collaborators and the priests. I think that today's meeting is exactly this, the expression of a wider communion, not only with the Curia, the parishes and the deaneries, but with all the clergy of Rome. I think this is the answer to the last question. Now I have prepared a speech that is longer, more programmatic.

After his address the Holy Father added:

In conclusion, I want to tell you that for me, as for us all, this Holy Year remains a great encouragement. We saw the crowds gathering in front of St Peter's Basilica to pass through the Holy Door. We saw the countless confessions being heard. We saw young people going to confession *en masse*. Obviously *en masse* means in large numbers, but they went to confession individually. We saw all that. So we see that the harvest is great, but the labourers perhaps are not quite enough. But we thank God for those there are. A thank you to God and to all of you, the priests of Rome. Thank you for the vocations we have in the Roman Seminary, which I visited last Saturday. So I would like to close with an invitation to optimism. An optimism that we owe to the great experience of the Jubilee Year. It seems that what the Jubilee Year brought us is visible even to those who are not perhaps our friends. Even the secular press clearly says so: they have to recognize the facts, the concrete experience. Thanks be to God! A great thank-you to God. I also wish you Christian courage for the Lenten period and a Happy Easter.

The Holy Father led the recitation of the Angelus and gave his Blessing. He then spoke extemporaneously.

Regarding the question about communion among priests, I would like to add that it is important for priests to live together, eat together, dine together. With this in mind, *buon appetito!*