



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE ROMAN PARISH OF «DIO PADRE MISERICORDIOSO»

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

IV Sunday of Lent, 26 March 2006

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This Fourth Sunday of Lent, traditionally known as "*Laetare Sunday*", is permeated with a joy which, to some extent, attenuates the penitential atmosphere of this holy season: "Rejoice Jerusalem!", the Church says in the Entrance Antiphon, "Be glad for her... you who mourned for her".

The refrain of the Responsorial Psalm echoes this invitation: "The memory of you, Lord, is our joy".

To think of God gives joy. We spontaneously ask ourselves: but why should we rejoice? One reason, of course, is the approach of Easter. The expectation of Easter gives us a foretaste of the joy of the encounter with the Risen Christ.

The deepest reason, however, lies in the message offered by the biblical readings that the liturgy presents to us today and that we have heard. They remind us that despite our unworthiness, God's infinite mercy is destined for us. God loves us in a way that we might call "obstinate" and enfolds us in his inexhaustible tenderness.

This is what already emerges from the First Reading from the Book of Chronicles in the Old Testament (cf. II Chr 36: 14-16, 19-23). The sacred author offers us a concise and meaningful interpretation of the history of the Chosen People, who suffered God's punishment as a consequence of their rebellious behaviour: the temple was destroyed and the people in exile no longer had a land; it truly seemed that God had forgotten them.

Then, however, they saw that God, through punishment, pursues a plan of mercy. It was to be the destruction of the Holy City and the temple - as I said -, it was to be an exile that would move the

people's hearts and bring them back to their God so that they might know him more deeply.

And then the Lord, demonstrating the absolute primacy of his initiative over every purely human effort, was to make use of a pagan, King Cyrus of Persia, to set Israel free.

In the text we have heard, the anger and mercy of the Lord alternate in a dramatic sequence, but love triumphs in the end, for God is love.

How can we fail to grasp from the memory of those distant events a message valid for all times, including our own? In thinking of the past centuries, we can see that God continues to love us even when he punishes us. Even when God's plans pass through trial and punishment, they always aim at an outcome of mercy and forgiveness.

This is what the Apostle Paul confirmed for us in the Second Reading, recalling that "God, who is rich in mercy, out of the great love with which he loved us, even when we were dead through our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ" (Eph 2: 4-5).

To express this reality of salvation the Apostle, together with the term "mercy", *eleos* in Greek, uses the word for love, *agape*, taken up and further amplified in the most beautiful statement which we heard in the Gospel passage: "God so loved the world that he gave his Only-begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life" (Jn 3: 16).

As we know, that "giving" on the part of the Father had a dramatic development: it even went to the point of the sacrifice of the Son on the Cross.

If Jesus' entire mission in history is an eloquent sign of God's love, his death, in which God's redeeming tenderness is fully expressed, is quite uniquely so. Always, but particularly in this Lenten Season, our meditation must be centred on the Cross. In it we contemplate the glory of the Lord that shines out in the martyred body of Jesus.

God's greatness, his being love, becomes visible precisely in this total gift of himself. It is the glory of the Crucified One that every Christian is called to understand, live and bear witness to with his life.

The Cross - the giving of himself on the part of the Son of God - is the definitive "sign" par excellence given to us so that we might understand the truth about man and the truth about God: we have all been created and redeemed by a God who sacrificed his only Son out of love.

This is why the Crucifixion, as I wrote in the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, "is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form" (n. 12).

How should we respond to this radical love of the Lord?

The Gospel presents to us a person by the name of Nicodemus, a member of the Sanhedrin of Jerusalem who sought out Jesus by night. He was a well-to-do man, attracted by the Lord's words and example, but one who hesitated to take the leap of faith because he was fearful of others. He felt the fascination of this Rabbi, so different from the others, but could not manage to rid himself of the conditioning of his environment that was hostile to Jesus, and stood irresolute on the threshold of faith.

How many people also in our time are in search of God, in search of Jesus and of his Church, in search of divine mercy, and are waiting for a "sign" that will touch their minds and their hearts!

Today, as then, the Evangelist reminds us that the only "sign" is Jesus raised on the Cross: Jesus who died and rose is the absolutely sufficient sign. Through him we can understand the truth about life and obtain salvation.

This is the principal proclamation of the Church, which remains unchanged down the ages. The Christian faith, therefore, is not an ideology but a personal encounter with the Crucified and Risen Christ. From this experience, both individual and communitarian, flows a new way of thinking and acting: an existence marked by love is born, as the saints testify.

Dear friends, this mystery is particularly eloquent in your parish, dedicated to "God, the merciful Father". It was desired, as we well know, by my beloved Predecessor John Paul II in memory of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, to effectively condense that extraordinary spiritual event.

In meditating on the Lord's mercy that was revealed totally and definitively in the mystery of the Cross, the text that John Paul II had prepared for his meeting with the faithful on 3 April, Sunday *in Albis*, the Second Sunday of Easter last year, comes to my mind.

In the divine plans it was written that he would leave us precisely on the eve of that day, Saturday, 2 April - we all remember it well -, and for that reason he was unable to address his words to you. I would like to address them to you now, dear brothers and sisters. "To humanity, which sometimes seems bewildered and overwhelmed by the power of evil, selfishness and fear, the Risen Lord offers his love that pardons, reconciles and reopens hearts to hope. It is a love that converts hearts and gives peace".

The Pope, in this last text which is like a testament, then added: "How much the world needs to understand and accept Divine Mercy!" (*Regina Caeli Reflection*, read by Archbishop Leonardo Sandri, Substitute of the Secretariat of State, to the faithful gathered in St Peter's Square, 3 April 2005; *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition, 6 April, p. 1, n. 2).

To understand and accept God's merciful love: may this be your commitment, first of all in your families and then in every neighbourhood milieu.

I hope for this with all my heart as I offer you my cordial greeting, starting with the priests who care for your community under the guidance of the parish priest, Fr Gianfranco Corbino, to whom I offer sincere thanks for having interpreted your sentiments in a beautiful presentation of this building, this "barque" of Peter and of the Lord.

I next extend my greeting to the Cardinal Vicar, Cardinal Camillo Ruini, and to Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, the titular of your church, to the Vicegerent and the Bishop of the Eastern Sector of Rome and to all those who cooperate actively in the various parish services.

I know that yours is a young community, barely 10 years old, which spent its early days in precarious conditions while waiting for the completion of its current structures.

I also know that rather than discouraging you, the initial problems impelled you to unanimous apostolic work with special attention to the area of catechesis, the liturgy and charity.

Continue, dear friends, on the path on which you have set out, striving to make your parish a true family in which fidelity to the Word of God and the Church's Tradition may become, day after day, more and more your rule of life.

I know, moreover, that because of its original architectural structure, your church attracts many visitors. Make them appreciate not only the particular beauty of this sacred building, but especially the riches of a lively Community, eager to witness to the love of God, the merciful Father. That love is the true secret of Christian joy to which today, *Laetare* Sunday, invites us.

As we turn our gaze to Mary, "Mother of holy joy", let us ask her to help us deepen the reasons for our faith, so that, as today's liturgy urges us, renewed in the spirit and with a joyful heart, we may respond to the eternal and boundless love of God.

Amen!

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