



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION AT THE PARISH
OF ST GAUDENTIUS IN TORRE NOVA IN ROME

HOMILY OF THE POPE JOHN PAUL II

*Fourth Sunday of Lent
Sunday, 9 March 1997*

1. “God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

These words, spoken by Jesus during his conversation with Nicodemus, effectively summarize the main theme of today’s liturgy. Indeed, they refer to the salvation brought to the world by the only-begotten Son of God, revealing it in its profound meaning as a work of the “God who is rich in mercy”: *Dives in misericordia*.

St Paul, writing to the Ephesians, echoes the Gospel: “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). Thus we are brought to a paschal perspective: in fact, what is salvation if it is not participation in Christ’s death and resurrection?

The Apostle then presents the work of salvation, showing the fruits of good that it produces in the life of believers. He considers redemption a new creation; that creation roots man in Jesus Christ, enabling him to perform good deeds according to God’s plan (cf. Eph 2:10).

2. Salvation and redemption, which God offers man through the death of his only-begotten Son, are described in the first reading and in the responsorial psalm as deliverance from slavery, with a reference to the slavery in Babylon experienced by the children of Israel after the collapse of the kingdom of Judah. This sad experience is poetically re-echoed in the psalmist’s lament:

“By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion” (cf. Ps 137 [136]:1). The author of this psalm evokes with vivid imagery the suffering of exile and the nostalgia for Jerusalem felt by the deported: “Let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy!” (cf. Ps 137 [136]: 5-6).

The Second Book of Chronicles reminds us that the deportation to Babylon was a punishment inflicted by Yahweh on his people for their grave sins, especially that of idolatry. Nonetheless, the period of slavery was meant for their repentance and conversion, and it ended when Cyrus, King of Persia, permitted the Israelites to return to their land and rebuild the temple that had been torn down in Jerusalem.

In a certain sense, Cyrus represents the Messiah awaited by Israel. He is an image of the promised Redeemer who was to set the People of God free from the slavery of sin and bring them into the kingdom of true freedom.

3. Dear brothers and sisters of St Gaudentius Parish in Torre Nova, I am very glad to celebrate the Eucharist today in this new parish church with your young community. I cordially greet the Cardinal Vicar and the Vicegerent, your dear parish priest, Fr Virginio Bolchini, the parochial vicar and all the priests who work with him in leading the parish. Your parish priest comes from the Diocese of Novara and this gives me the opportunity to express my warm gratitude to the Bishop and to the whole Diocese of Novara for its generosity in offering the Church in Rome several priests to carry out their ministry among us.

I also extend a special greeting to the Sisters of Mary Help of Christians and of Our Lady of Ransom, and especially to the members of the Sant'Egidio Community who have supported, enlivened and promoted pastoral care and charity in this neighbourhood since 1977.

The new church is dedicated to St Gaudentius, patron of Novara. How can we fail at this time to think of the late Cardinal Ugo Poletti, another native of that beloved Diocese, whom God has recently called to himself? Under the protection of St Gaudentius, this distinguished and generous co-worker began his priestly and episcopal ministry in Novara and then continued it in this Church of Rome, which was so dear to him. May the Lord reward him for his tireless service to the Gospel, given generously throughout his life!

4. Dear friends, yours is a young community. The parish is young because it was only recently founded and young indeed are the parishioners, including a substantial number of young men and women. Attention to the new generations must therefore be one of your pastoral priorities. All too frequently young people, so rich in potential and talent, find themselves without work, without adequate training, without the support of a real family. Thus they are often easy prey to loneliness, to the lack of goals, to disappointment, when they do not end up in the snare of drug addiction, crime and other forms of delinquency.

Your parish community was recently founded, but the first settlement in this area dates back to 1600, when Beatrice Cenci had a tower built in the castle and a church dedicated to St Clement. These became a natural stopping place for pilgrims wishing to visit the memorials of the Apostles, as they approached the city of Rome. In the next few years a great number of believers and tourists will be flocking to Rome for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. I hope they will find welcoming communities of living faith. May the city mission, which is also being celebrated in this parish with enthusiasm and generosity, be like a construction site of the Spirit, open and industrious, for building a diocesan community of ever greater generosity and solidarity.

5. *“The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light”* (Jn 3:19).

Today’s Liturgy of the Word presents the antithesis between slavery and freedom, illustrated by the Old Testament readings, alongside the antithesis between darkness and light, developed in the Gospel. The latter contrast is proposed by Jesus in his conversation with Nicodemus, and expresses in a discursive form one of the characteristic features of John’s Gospel, already present in the very first words of the Prologue: “In the beginning was the Word.... In him was life, and the life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it” (Jn 1:1:4-5).

This same radical contradiction between light and darkness is present in the discussion with Nicodemus: “The light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light.... For every one who does evil hates the light.... But he who does what is true comes to the light, that it may be clearly seen that his deeds have been wrought in God” (Jn 3:19-21).

How can we not emphasize the reference to divine judgement? Man is judged not only by an external judge, but by that interior light which is made known through the voice of an upright conscience. This is what the Second Vatican Council recalled in the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*: “Deep within his conscience, man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey.... His conscience is man’s most secret core, and his sanctuary. There he is alone with God whose voice echoes in his depths” (n. 16).

Dear brothers and sisters, in our Lenten journey to Easter, which is now close at hand, let us be guided by the voice of God who calls us through our conscience. Thus we can go out to meet him with a holy life rich in good works, always in conformity with his will and according to his heart.

Amen!

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