



The Holy See

JUBILEE IN PRISONS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 9 July 2000

1. *"I was in prison"* (Mt 25: 36): these words of Christ re-echoed for us today in the Gospel passage proclaimed a few moments ago. They set before our mind's eye the image of Christ actually imprisoned. We can almost see him again on Holy Thursday evening in Gethsemane: he, innocence personified, surrounded like a criminal by an armed band from the Sanhedrin, captured and brought before the court of Annas and Caiaphas. The long hours of the night follow, as he awaits trial in Pilate's Roman court. The trial takes place on Good Friday morning in the praetorium: Jesus stands before the Roman procurator, who questions him. Over his head hangs the request for the death penalty by the torture of the cross. We next see him tied to a pillar to be scourged. Then he is crowned with thorns.... *Ecce homo* - "Here is the man". Pilate said these words, counting perhaps on a humane reaction from those present. The answer was: "Crucify him, crucify him!" (Lk 23: 21). And when at last they untied his hands, it was to nail them to the cross.

2. Dear brothers and sisters, Jesus Christ - *the prisoner* - appears before us who are gathered here. "I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25: 36). He is asking to be found in you and in so many other people touched by various forms of human suffering: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 40). These words contain, we could say, the "programme" of the Jubilee in Prisons which we are celebrating today. They invite us to live them as a commitment to the dignity of all people, that dignity which flows from God's love for every human person.

I thank everyone who has wished to participate in this Jubilee event. I extend a respectful greeting to the authorities who are attending: the Minister of Justice, the Head of the Prison Administration Department, the Warden of this prison, the Commander of the Police Detachment, together with

the officers who work with him.

Above all I greet each of you prisoners with fraternal affection. I stand before you as a witness to God's love. I come to tell you that *God loves you* and wants you to follow a path of rehabilitation and forgiveness, of truth and justice. I would like to listen to each of your personal stories. What I cannot do myself can be done by your chaplains who are at your side in Christ's name. I extend my cordial greetings to them and to all who carry out this most demanding task in all the prisons of Italy and the world. I also feel obliged to express my appreciation to the volunteers who work with the chaplains in being close to you with appropriate programmes. With their help too, prison life can acquire human features and *be enriched by a spiritual dimension*, which is most important for your life. This dimension, offered for each one's free acceptance, should be considered an essential element in a penal system that is more in conformity with human dignity.

3. The first reading, in which the prophet Isaiah describes several significant traits of the future Messiah, sheds light on just such a project: "He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged until he has established justice in the earth" (*Is 42: 1-4*). At the centre of this Jubilee there is Christ, the *prisoner*; at the same time there is Christ the *lawgiver*. It is he who establishes the law, proclaims it and strengthens it. However *he does this not with arrogance, but with meekness and love*. He heals what is sick, strengthens what is bruised. Where a faint flame of goodness still burns, he revives it with the breath of his love. He forcefully proclaims justice and heals wounds with the balm of mercy.

In Isaiah's text another series of images opens the prospect of life, joy and freedom: the future Messiah will come and open the eyes of the blind and *bring out the prisoners from the dungeon* (cf. *Is 42: 7*). Dear brothers and sisters, I imagine that particularly these last words of the prophet will find an immediate, hope-filled echo in your hearts.

4. However, the message of God's Word must be accepted with its full meaning. The "dungeon" from which the Lord comes to release us is first of all *the one where the spirit is chained*. Sin is the prison of the spirit. In this regard, how can we forget Jesus' profound words: "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin" (*Jn 8: 34*)? This is the slavery from which he above all came to save us. For he said: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples and you will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (*Jn 8: 31*)

However, the prophet Isaiah's words about liberation should be understood in the light of the whole history of salvation, which culminates in Christ, the Redeemer who took upon himself the sin of the world (cf. *Jn 1: 29*). God cares about the total liberation of the human person, a liberation not only concerns physical and external conditions, but is first and foremost a liberation of the heart.

5. The hope of this liberation - the Apostle Paul reminds us in the second reading - is found

throughout creation: "The whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now" (*Rom 8: 22*). Our sin has disrupted God's plan, and its effects are not only felt in human life but also in creation itself. This *cosmic dimension of the effects of sin* becomes almost tangible in ecological disasters. No less worrying is the damage caused by sin to the human psyche, to human biology itself. Sin is devastating. It drives peace from hearts and causes a chain of sufferings in human relationships. I imagine how frequently you can observe this truth as you reflect on your personal histories or listen to those of your cell mates.

This is precisely the slavery from which the Spirit of God comes to deliver us. He, the Gift *par excellence* which Christ obtained for us, "helps us in our weakness ... intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (*Rom 8: 26*). If we follow his promptings, he achieves our complete salvation, "adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies" (*Rom 8: 23*).

6. Therefore, he, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, must be the one who works in your hearts, dear brother and sister prisoners. *The Holy Spirit must pervade this prison where we are meeting* and all the prisons of the world. Christ, the Son of God, became a prisoner; he let them tie his hands and then nail them to the cross precisely so that his Spirit could touch the heart of every man. The Spirit of Christ, the Redeemer of the world, must breathe even where people are chained in prisons according to the logic of a still necessary human justice. Punishment cannot be reduced to mere retribution, much less take the form of social retaliation or a sort of institutional vengeance. Punishment and imprisonment have meaning if, while maintaining the demands of justice and discouraging crime, *they serve the rehabilitation of the individual* by offering those who have made a mistake an opportunity to reflect and to change their lives in order to be fully reintegrated into society.

Let me ask you, then, to aim with all your strength at a new life in the encounter with Christ. Society as a whole can only rejoice at your progress. The very people you have hurt will feel perhaps that they have received more justice by seeing your inner transformation than merely the penalty you have paid.

I hope that each of you will experience the liberating love of God. May the Spirit of Jesus Christ, who makes all things new (cf. *Rv 21: 5*), come down among you and among all the world's prisoners, filling your hearts with trust and hope.

May you be accompanied by the gaze of Mary, "*Regina Caeli*", "Queen of Heaven", to whose motherly tenderness I entrust you and your families.

At the end of Mass the Holy Father thanked the prison authorities for their welcome and again spoke to the prisoners. I thank the Minister, the Head of the Prison Administration and your representative for their words to me. With them I thank all the authorities present, expressing to everyone my heartfelt gratitude for the cordial welcome I have received. As I take

my leave of you, dear prisoners, I would again like to offer you my greeting, which I also extend to your relatives. I know quite well that each of you is looking forward to the day when, having served your time, you will regain your freedom and return to your family. Aware of this, in the Message I sent to the whole world for this Jubilee Day, in the footsteps of my Predecessors and in the spirit of the Holy Year, I asked for a gesture of clemency in your regard by a "reduction of the term of punishment". I requested this in the profound conviction that such an action would be a sign of sensitivity to your condition which could encourage you to regret what you have done and lead you to personal repentance. With this in mind, I extend my warmest wishes to everyone. I would like to add one last word: we cannot forget that this Roman prison is called "Regina Coeli". This name instils very great hope. I would like you all to have this hope which comes from the "Regina Coeli". Thank you very much. Praised be Jesus Christ.

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