



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II

TO THE ARCHBISHOP OF RAVENNA-CERVIA

ON OCCASION OF THE 1450th ANNIVERSARY

OF THE DEDICATION OF

THE BASILICA OF ST. APOLLINARIS IN CLASSE To my Venerable Brother

*Luigi Amaducci Archbishop of Ravenna-Cervia*¹. The renowned and ancient Archdiocese of Ravenna, which you lead with zeal and wisdom, is preparing to celebrate the 1450th anniversary of the dedication of the Basilica of St Apollinaris in Classe, consecrated by Archbishop Maximian in 549, barely a year after the dedication of the Basilica of St Vitalis. The event is especially important because the basilica, a church of rare beauty, is considered the cradle of the Christian faith in this region and preserves the body of its first Bishop, St Apollinaris, who evangelized Ravenna in the second half of the second century and later became patron of the city, the Diocese and the entire region. During the celebration of this significant event, I would like to be united in spirit with the people of Ravenna, who are giving fervent thanks to the Lord for the countless benefits they have received throughout their long history of faith. The city, famous for its memories of a glorious past and for the splendid monuments that adorn it, owes its greatness to the skill and diligence of its children, who were and are the attentive and hard-working artisans of its civil and economic development. It also benefited from some particular circumstances which made it a very important political and cultural centre, open to dialogue with the East. From here shone the last rays of the Western Empire in the turbulent period of its tragic setting; from here came the providential fusion of young energy from the peoples of Northern Europe with the cultural riches of the Roman genius; from here the first witnesses to the Christian faith spread to the surrounding region. Among them St Apollinaris holds a significant place as the first Bishop of the Church of Ravenna, who, by his labour and suffering, laid the firm foundations of the city's Christian history.² As is well known, the famous sacred monument desired by Archbishop Ursicinus (534-538) and built under the supervision of Julian Argentarius, patron of Ravenna, where the important Roman port was located - hence the name "in Classe" - offers the visitor a view, framed by the triumphal arch, of Christ in the act of blessing, surrounded by the Evangelists; then in the apse vault stands a great jeweled cross with the face of the transfigured Christ in the centre, and below, among many symbolic figures, is an image of St Apollinaris in a gesture of priestly prayer. Thus the basilica's very structure, marked by a splendid series of columns, shows Christ as the centre of faith and God's response to the expectations of the restless human heart to every pilgrim who crosses its threshold in search of light and peace. The Church of Ravenna will not fail to offer anew this perennially valid response, taking her cue from the celebrations planned. They are providentially part of the preparations for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, which will also be a renewed call for the people of Ravenna to follow Christ courageously and to listen to his words, as they continue to give the joyful and united response of faith which has always marked their history. In this perspective I hope that the extraordinary synthesis of faith and beauty, which Gospel-inspired artists expressed so many centuries ago

in the church's architectural lines and mosaic creations, will arouse in every visitor a deep desire to know the Lord, in order to bear witness to him in word and deed, after the example of the holy Bishop Apollinaris.³ Down the centuries the basilica and its adjacent monastery became, in fact, an active centre of evangelization, thanks to the labours of authentic witnesses of Christ, including the monk St Romuald. In April 1001 he took part in the great assembly of Bishops and dignitaries which Pope Sylvester II held precisely at this church in Classe and which was also attended by Emperor Otto III. It was at that meeting that the evangelizing mission to the Slavs was planned and organized, in continuity with all that St Adalbert had accomplished. For this mission three of Romuald's monks were chosen, Bruno, Benedict and John. Sealing their service to the Gospel with martyrdom, they are now venerated as heavenly protectors in both Ravenna and Poland. As your Church thanks God for the good she has spread over the centuries, she is motivated to have a renewed awareness of the ever pressing duty to proclaim the Good News of Christ to those who have not yet heard it. I hope that, through the intercession of the first Bishop and of his fellow-citizen saints who were apostles to the Slavs, numerous priestly and religious vocations will arise in this Church, so that the Word of the Lord will also bring joy and salvation to the men and women of today.⁴ Venerable and dear Brother in the Episcopate, in times that were particularly trying and difficult the Church of Ravenna was able to enshrine in her monuments the marvellous greatness of the Gospel message. May her children today find new ways to communicate this message of peace and brotherhood which flow from faith in the one Father and in the one Redeemer. For over 14 centuries, the Basilica of St Apollinaris in Classe has transmitted in its splendid mosaics the eternal truth of the Gospel, whose radiant centre is the crucified and risen Christ. How can we not hope that this saving truth will be reflected with renewed vibrance in the Church of "living stones" in Ravenna, so that the new generations can find in Christ that peace which is a gift of God and an expression of his eternal love? I entrust these wishes to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, so tenderly loved by Ravenna's faithful. May she be for one and all the Queen of peace and mercy! With these sentiments, I impart the favour of my Apostolic Blessing to you, venerable Brother, successor of the Holy Bishop Apollinaris, to my Brother Bishops taking part in the celebrations, to the authorities, to the clergy, to the beloved people of Ravenna and to all the inhabitants of Emilia-Romagna. *From the Vatican, 23 July 1999.* © Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana