



The Holy See

**ADDRESS TO THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
TO THE PARISH PRIESTS AND THE CLERGY
OF THE ROME DIOCESE**

Thursday, 9 March 2000

"Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel".

1. The Lord's invitation, which we heard again yesterday during the rite of giving ashes, opened the season of Lent and marks the journey of God's people to Easter. Conversion and faith in Christ, the one Saviour, are at the heart of the Jubilee pilgrimage which you have made in St Peter's Basilica today, dear priests of the presbyterate of Rome. I affectionately greet the Cardinal Vicar, the Vicegerent, the Auxiliary Bishops and each of you. I am pleased to meet you, as I do every year at the beginning of Lent, for a moment of deep communion between the Bishop of Rome and his priests. Common prayer and friendship foster priestly unity

This year the Jubilee characterizes our meeting and makes it even richer in spiritual and ecclesial themes. The passage through the Holy Door, the profession of faith and especially the sacrament of Reconciliation which you have celebrated show everyone that the priest himself, the minister of God's forgiveness, needs to receive this forgiveness in a spirit of faith, humility and deep trust. As steward of the divine mysteries, he must appear to his faithful first and foremost as one "saved" who continually receives from God and the Church the grace to live in union with Christ, the source of his ministry's effectiveness.

The sacrament of Penance renews that "life in the Spirit" and that Gospel radicalism which must distinguish the life and ministry of the priest. It is also a great help for overcoming any acquiescence in those forms of self-justification characteristic of the mentality and culture of our time, which lead to a loss of the sense of sin and prevent one from experiencing the consoling joy of God's forgiveness.

2. For the priest's spiritual life and apostolic work, a relationship of communion and brotherhood with the Bishop and with other priests is also very important. For the growth of this relationship, each of you must make a generous commitment; the pressure of your pastoral activity must not prevent you from fostering that deep unity with your brothers which is nourished by common prayer, meeting and dialogue, and the fostering of sincere friendship. Participation in continuing formation programmes, spiritual and pastoral help for brothers with particular needs, assistance to sick or elderly priests, willingness to dialogue and meet also with those who have left the priesthood, show a desire to follow the ways of communion and reconciliation with success and dedication. A united and harmonious presbyterate that can work together is a powerful witness to the faithful and increases the effectiveness of your ministry.

3. Reconciliation with the Lord and mutual communion open new possibilities for meeting those who expect from us, pastors of the Church, signs of attention and special pastoral care. Families must be your primary concern. During the city mission they received the message of Christ, the one Saviour, and this year too they expect another visit to continue this positive and beneficial experience. Therefore every parish is called to put great effort, with the valuable help of missionaries, into repeating the Lenten meeting with all families, to make the powerful message of the Jubilee echo in people's hearts: "God loves you and has sent Jesus Christ his Son to save you".

A visit strengthens the sense of belonging to the community for many people who often live on its fringes but who do not refuse, but in fact are waiting for opportunities and concrete signs of listening and dialogue which will help them to overcome loneliness and anonymity and to form a new network of human and spiritual relationships on the basis of a faith which was never completely rejected or forgotten.

We priests, as the first missionaries of the Gospel and following the example of Jesus the Good Shepherd who goes in search of the lost sheep, must dedicate ourselves with special pastoral charity to families in trouble, to those who live far from the Church and have serious problems of faith or morals, to those whose members are suffering from sickness or old age, and those which are going through particularly painful situations because of divisions between spouses or children. The Holy Year, a year of great pardon and of God's mercy, gives everyone the possibility of being heard, accepted and encouraged to find ways of reconciliation with the Lord and with his brethren, even when everything seems lost or irreversible. What seems impossible to man is not impossible for God, when we open ourselves to him with humility and responsiveness to the grace of his forgiveness.

4. It will also be your concern to see that the message of God's mercy and the living experience of his forgiveness reach, through the active efforts of lay Christians, every area of life and work, in order to reaffirm the power of Christ's love, which overcomes divisions and misunderstandings and re-establishes more fraternal and harmonious relationships. No area or situation of life is foreign to

the Gospel or to the active evangelizing presence of the priest and of every baptized person. You must also pay special pastoral attention to young people, to whom Christ turns his loving gaze even when they abandon the Christian community that raised them with the faith and the sacraments.

How many adolescents and young people of our city do not know they are loved and sought by the Lord, because no one tells them and no one reaches out to them with sincere friendship and brotherhood where they are found: in places of study or work, sport or free time, in the streets of their neighbourhood!

This task first involves young believers, who are called to be missionaries to their peers and to rediscover, in communities and groups, that the joy of faith in Christ should be communicated and offered to everyone without fear and with apostolic courage. However, we cannot forget that the priest, by vocation, is an evangelizer and spiritual father to the young people entrusted to him by the Lord. They need to find in their priest an available and sincere friend, but also a witness who lives his calling with joy and with spiritual and moral consistency. Then they will be helped, in turn, to discover, and to accept the vocation that gives their whole life meaning and value. The preparation and celebration of the next World Youth Day is a truly providential opportunity to renew youth ministry and to instil new vocational and missionary zeal in parishes, movements and groups.

5. Celebrating the Jubilee means opening our hearts to our poorer brothers and sisters, seeing in them the presence of the suffering Christ who asks to be welcomed with active love. In the Letter I sent to the whole diocesan and urban community, I stressed that the Church of Rome "has, down the centuries, written bright pages of welcome, especially during Jubilees, with concrete and lasting signs of love for neighbour".

Today "Roman charity", which is practised by offering hospitality to poor and needy pilgrims, also spurs the diocesan community, families and every ecclesial reality to be willing to extend hospitality, especially during important events, such as the Jubilees for young people and for families, in which numerous pilgrims from all over the world will participate. Nor can the entire diocesan community fail to care for the many poor who live in our city. Sensitivity and attention to our neediest brothers and sisters will certainly be active if Christian communities know how to receive from the Eucharist, the bread of new life for the world, that special power of love which can also change society, making it more just, peaceful and united.

The sign of charity that will be inaugurated during the International Eucharistic Congress represents the commitment of the diocesan community to bear witness to its encounter with the Lord, in the sacrament of his Body given and his Blood shed, by practical service to the poor.

6. *"Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel".*

May the invitation of the Ash Wednesday liturgy support and accompany our Lenten journey as we follow Christ, the Door of salvation and our Peace, to make fruitful with his grace the ministry of reconciliation, which in this favourable time and throughout the Holy Year we are called to exercise with special dedication. May Mary most holy, Mother of Mercy, who goes before us on the path of faith and charity, guide the Jubilee pilgrimage of the Church of Rome, of her priests and of her faithful, so that the Lord's gift of reconciliation will be received with a humble, trusting and sincere heart.

Lastly, I would like to add that this morning I celebrated Holy Mass for the intentions of all my brother priests in the Roman presbyterate.

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