



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY

St. Louis, January 27, 1999

“In this way the love of God was revealed to us: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might have life through him” (1 Jn 4:9).

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In the Incarnation, God fully reveals himself in the Son who came into the world (cf. *Tertio Millennio Adveniente*, 9). Our faith is not simply the result of our searching for God. In Jesus Christ, it is God who comes in person to speak to us and to show us the way to himself.

The Incarnation also reveals the truth about man. In Jesus Christ, the Father has spoken the definitive word about our true destiny and the meaning of human history (cf. *ibid.*, 5). “In this is love: not that we have loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as an expiation for our sins” (1 Jn 4:10). The Apostle is speaking of the love that inspired the Son to become man and to dwell among us. Through Jesus Christ we know how much the Father loves us. In Jesus Christ, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, each one of us can share in the love that is the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Saint John goes on: “Whoever acknowledges that Jesus is the Son of God, God remains in him and he in God” (1 Jn 4:15). Through faith in the Son of God made man we abide in the very heart of God: “God is love, and whoever remains in love remains in God and God in him” (1 Jn 4:16). These words open to us the mystery of the Sacred Heart of Jesus: the love and compassion of Jesus is the door through which the eternal love of the Father is poured out on the world. In celebrating this Mass of the Sacred Heart, let us open wide our own hearts to God’s saving mercy!

2. In the Gospel reading which we have just heard, Saint Luke uses the figure of the Good Shepherd to speak of this divine love. The Good Shepherd is an image dear to Jesus in the Gospels. Answering the Pharisees who complained that he welcomed sinners by eating with them, the Lord asks them a question: Which of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, would not leave the ninety-nine in the desert and go after the lost one until he finds it? “And when he does find it, he sets it on his shoulders with great joy and, upon his arrival home, he calls together his friends and neighbors and says to them: 'Rejoice with me because I have found my lost sheep'” (*Lk 15:5-6*).

This parable highlights the joy of Christ and of our heavenly Father at every sinner who repents. God’s love is a love that searches us out. It is a love that saves. This is the love that we find in the Heart of Jesus.

3. Once we know the love that is in the Heart of Christ, we know that every individual, every family, every people on the face of the earth can place their trust in that Heart. We have heard Moses say: “You are a people sacred to the Lord, your God . . . the Lord set his heart on you and chose you . . . because the Lord loved you” (*Deut 7:6-8*). From Old Testament times, the core of salvation history is God’s unfailing love and election, and our human answer to that love. Our faith is our response to God’s love and election.

Three hundred years have passed since December 8, 1698, when the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass was offered for the first time in what is now the City of St. Louis. It was the Feast of the Immaculate Conception of our Blessed Mother, and Father Montigny, Father Davion and Father St. Cosme set up a stone altar on the banks of the Mississippi River and offered Mass. These three centuries have been a history of God's love poured out in this part of the United States, and a history of generous response to that love.

In this Archdiocese, the commandment of love has called forth an endless series of activities for which – today – we give thanks to our heavenly Father. St. Louis has been the Gateway to the West, but it has also been the gateway of great Christian witness and evangelical service. In fidelity to Christ's command to evangelize, the first pastor of this local Church, Bishop Joseph Rosati – who came from the town of Sora, very near Rome – promoted outstanding missionary activity from the beginning. In fact, today we can count forty-six different Dioceses in the area which Bishop Rosati served.

In this area, numerous Religious Congregations of men and women have labored for the Gospel with exemplary dedication, generation after generation. Here can be found the American roots of the evangelizing efforts of the Legion of Mary and other associations of the lay apostolate. The work of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, made possible by the generous support of the people of this Archdiocese, is a real sharing in the Church’s response to Christ’s command to evangelize. From St. Louis, Cardinal Ritter sent the first *Fidei Donum* priests to Latin America in

1956, giving practical expression to the exchange of gifts which should always be a part of the communion between the Churches. This solidarity within the Church was the central theme of last year's Special Assembly for America of the Synod of Bishops, and it is the central idea of the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in America* – the Church in America – which I have just signed and issued at the Shrine of Our Lady of Guadalupe in Mexico City.

4. Here, by the grace of God, charitable activities of every kind have been a vibrant part of Catholic life. The Saint Vincent de Paul Society has had a privileged place in the Archdiocese from the beginning. Catholic Charities have for years performed exceptional work in the name of Jesus Christ. Outstanding Catholic health care services have shown the human face of the loving and compassionate Christ.

Catholic schools have proven to be of priceless value to generations of children, teaching them to know, love and serve God, and preparing them to take their place with responsibility in the community. Parents, teachers, pastors, administrators and entire parishes have sacrificed enormously to maintain the essential character of Catholic education as an authentic ministry of the Church and an evangelical service to the young. The goals of the Strategic Pastoral Plan of the Archdiocese – evangelization, conversion, stewardship, Catholic education, service to those in need – have a long tradition here.

Today, American Catholics are seriously challenged to know and cherish this immense heritage of holiness and service. Out of that heritage you must draw inspiration and strength for the new evangelization so urgently needed at the approach of the Third Christian Millennium. In the holiness and service of St. Louis's own Saint Philippine Duchesne, and of countless faithful priests, religious and laity since the Church's earliest days in this area, Catholic life has appeared in all its rich and varied splendor. Nothing less is asked of you today.

5. As the new evangelization unfolds, it must include a special emphasis on the family and the renewal of Christian marriage. In their primary mission of communicating love to each other, of being co-creators with God of human life, and of transmitting the love of God to their children, parents must know that they are fully supported by the Church and by society. The new evangelization must bring a fuller appreciation of the family as the primary and most vital foundation of society, the first school of social virtue and solidarity (cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, 42). As the family goes, so goes the nation!

The new evangelization must also bring out the truth that "the Gospel of God's love for man, the Gospel of the dignity of the person and the Gospel of life are a single and indivisible Gospel" (*Evangelium Vitae*, 2). As believers, how can we fail to see that abortion, euthanasia and assisted suicide are a terrible rejection of God's gift of life and love? And as believers, how can we fail to feel the duty to surround the sick and those in distress with the warmth of our affection and the support that will help them always to embrace life?

The new evangelization calls for followers of Christ who are unconditionally pro-life: who will proclaim, celebrate and serve the Gospel of life in every situation. A sign of hope is the increasing recognition that the dignity of human life must never be taken away, even in the case of someone who has done great evil. Modern society has the means of protecting itself, without definitively denying criminals the chance to reform (cf. *Evangelium Vitae*, 27). I renew the appeal I made most recently at Christmas for a consensus to end the death penalty, which is both cruel and unnecessary.

As the new millennium approaches, there remains another great challenge facing this community of St. Louis, east and west of the Mississippi, and not St. Louis alone, but the whole country: to put an end to every form of racism, a plague which your Bishops have called one of the most persistent and destructive evils of the nation.

6. Dear Brothers and Sisters, the Gospel of God's love, which we are celebrating today, finds its highest expression in the Eucharist. In the Mass and in Eucharistic Adoration we meet the merciful love of God that passes through the Heart of Jesus Christ. In the name of Jesus, the Good Shepherd I wish to make an appeal – an appeal to Catholics throughout the United States and wherever my voice or words may reach – especially to those who for one reason or another are separated from the practice of their faith. On the eve of the Great Jubilee of the two thousandth anniversary of the Incarnation, Christ is seeking you out and inviting you back to the community of faith. Is this not the moment for you to experience the joy of returning to the Father's house? In some cases there may still be obstacles to Eucharistic participation; in some cases there may be memories to be healed; in all cases there is the assurance of God's love and mercy.

The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 will begin with the opening of the Holy Door in Saint Peter's Basilica in Rome: this is a powerful symbol of the Church – open to everyone who feels a need for the love and mercy of the Heart of Christ. In the Gospel Jesus says: "I am the door; whoever enters through me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture" (cf. *Jn* 10:9).

Our Christian life can be seen as a great pilgrimage to the house of the Father, which passes through the door that is Jesus Christ. The key to that door is repentance and conversion. The strength to pass through that door comes from our faith and hope and love. For many Catholics, an important part of the journey must be to rediscover the joy of belonging to the Church, to cherish the Church as the Lord has given her to us, as Mother and Teacher.

Living in the Holy Spirit, the Church looks forward to the Millennium as a time of far-reaching spiritual renewal. The Spirit will truly bring about a new springtime of faith if Christian hearts are filled with new attitudes of humility, generosity and openness to his purifying grace. In parishes and communities across this land holiness and Christian service will flourish if "you come to know and believe in the love God has for you" (cf. 1 *Jn* 4:16).

Mary, Mother of Mercy, teach the people of St. Louis and of the United States to say yes to your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ!

Mother of the Church, on the way to the Great Jubilee of the Third Millennium, be the Star which safely guides our steps to the Lord!

Virgin of Nazareth, two thousand years ago you brought into the world the Incarnate Word: lead the men and women of the new Millennium to the One who is the true light of the world! Amen.