



The Holy See

JUBILEE PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II
TO MOUNT SINAI
CELEBRATION OF THE WORD AT MOUNT SINAI

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

St. Catherine's Monastery, 26 February 2000

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. In this year of the Great Jubilee, our faith leads us to become pilgrims in the footsteps of God. We contemplate the path he has taken through time, revealing to the world the magnificent mystery of his faithful Love for all humankind. Today, with great joy and deep emotion, the Bishop of Rome is a pilgrim to Mount Sinai, drawn by this holy mountain which rises like a soaring monument to what God revealed here. Here he revealed his name! Here he gave his Law, the Ten Commandments of the Covenant!

How many have come to this place before us! Here the People of God pitched their tents (cf. *Ex* 19:2); here the prophet Elijah took refuge in a cave (cf. *1 Kgs* 19:9); here the body of the martyr Catherine found a final resting- place; here a host of pilgrims through the ages have scaled what Saint Gregory of Nyssa called “the mountain of desire” (*The Life of Moses*, II, 232); here generations of monks have watched and prayed. We humbly follow in their footsteps, to “the holy ground” where the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob commissioned Moses to set his people free (cf. *Ex* 3:5-8).

2. God shows himself in mysterious ways – as the fire that does not consume – according to a logic which defies all that we know and expect. He is the God who is at once close at hand and far-away; he is in the world but not of it. He is the God who comes to meet us, but who will not be possessed. He is “I AM WHO I AM” – the name which is no name! I AM WHO I AM: the divine

abyss in which essence and existence are one! The God who is Being itself! Before such a mystery, how can we fail to “take off our shoes” as he commands, and adore him on this holy ground?

Here on Mount Sinai, the truth of “who God is” became the foundation and guarantee of the Covenant. Moses enters “the luminous darkness” (*The Life of Moses*, II, 164), and there he is given the Law “written with the finger of God” (*Ex* 31:18). But what is this Law? It is the Law of life and freedom! At the Red Sea, the people had experienced a great liberation. They had seen the power and fidelity of God; they had discovered that he is the God who does indeed set his people free as he had promised. But now on the heights of Sinai, this same God seals his love by making the Covenant that he will never renounce. If the people obey his Law, they will know freedom for ever. The Exodus and the Covenant are not just events of the past; they are for ever the destiny of all God’s people!

3. The encounter of God and Moses on this Mountain enshrines at the heart of our religion the mystery of liberating obedience, which finds its fulfilment in the perfect obedience of Christ in the Incarnation and on the Cross (cf. *Phil* 2:8; *Heb* 5:8-9). We too shall be truly free if we learn to obey as Jesus did (cf. *Heb* 5:8).

The Ten Commandments are not an arbitrary imposition of a tyrannical Lord. They were written in stone; but before that, they were written on the human heart as the universal moral law, valid in every time and place. Today as always, the Ten Words of the Law provide the only true basis for the lives of individuals, societies and nations. Today as always, they are the only future of the human family. They save man from the destructive force of egoism, hatred and falsehood. They point out all the false gods that draw him into slavery: the love of self to the exclusion of God, the greed for power and pleasure that overturns the order of justice and degrades our human dignity and that of our neighbour. If we turn from these false idols and follow the God who sets his people free and remains always with them, then we shall emerge like Moses, after forty days on the mountain, “shining with glory” (Saint Gregory of Nyssa, *The Life of Moses*, II, 230), ablaze with the light of God!

To keep the Commandments is to be faithful to God, but it is also to be faithful to ourselves, to our true nature and our deepest aspirations. The wind which still today blows from Sinai reminds us that God wants to be honoured in and through the growth of his creatures: *Gloria Dei, homo vivens*. In this sense, that wind carries an insistent invitation to dialogue between the followers of the great monotheistic religions in their service of the human family. It suggests that in God we can find the point of our encounter: in God the All Powerful and All Merciful, Creator of the universe and Lord of history, who at the end of our earthly existence will judge us with perfect justice.

4. The Gospel Reading which we have just listened to suggests that Sinai finds its fulfilment on another mountain, the Mountain of the Transfiguration, where Jesus appears to his Apostles

shining with the glory of God. Moses and Elijah stand with him to testify that the fullness of God's revelation is found in the glorified Christ.

On the Mountain of the Transfiguration, God speaks from the cloud, as he had done on Sinai. But now he says: "This is my beloved Son; listen to him" (*Mk 9:7*). He commands us to listen to his Son, because "no one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (*Mt 11:27*). And so we learn that the true name of God is FATHER! The name which is beyond all other names: ABBA! (cf. *Gal 4:6*). And in Jesus we learn that our true name is SON, DAUGHTER! We learn that the God of the Exodus and the Covenant sets his people free because they are his sons and daughters, created not for slavery but for "the glorious liberty of the children of God" (*Rom 8:21*).

So when Saint Paul writes that we "have died to the law through the body of Christ" (*Rom 7:4*), he does not mean that the Law of Sinai is past. He means that the Ten Commandments now make themselves heard through the voice of the Beloved Son. The person delivered by Jesus Christ into true freedom is aware of being bound not externally by a multitude of prescriptions, but internally by the love which has taken hold in the deepest recesses of his heart. The Ten Commandments are the law of freedom: not the freedom to follow our blind passions, but the freedom to love, to choose what is good in every situation, even when to do so is a burden. It is not an impersonal law that we obey; what is required is loving surrender to the Father through Christ Jesus in the Holy Spirit (cf. *Rom 6:14; Gal 5:18*). In revealing himself on the Mountain and giving his Law, God revealed man to man himself. Sinai stands at the very heart of the truth about man and his destiny.

5. In pursuit of this truth, the monks of this Monastery pitched their tent in the shadow of Sinai. The Monastery of the Transfiguration and Saint Catherine bears all the marks of time and human turmoil, but it stands indomitable as a witness to divine wisdom and love. For centuries monks from all Christian traditions lived and prayed together in this Monastery, listening to the Word, in whom dwells the fullness of the Father's wisdom and love. In this very Monastery, Saint John Climacus, wrote *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, a spiritual masterpiece that continues to inspire monks and nuns, from East and West, generation after generation. All this has taken place under the mighty protection of the Great Mother of God. As early as the third century Egyptian Christians appealed to her with words of trust: We have recourse to your protection, O Holy Mother of God! *Sub tuum praesidium confugimus, sancta Dei Genetrix!* Through the centuries, this Monastery has been an exceptional meeting place for people belonging to different Churches, traditions and cultures. I pray that in the new millennium the Monastery of Saint Catherine will be a radiant beacon calling the Churches to know one another better and to rediscover the importance in the eyes of God of the things that unite us in Christ.

6. I am grateful to the many faithful from the Diocese of Ismaylah, led by Bishop Makarios, who have come to join me in this pilgrimage to Mount Sinai. The Successor of Peter thanks you for

your steadfastness in faith. God bless you and your families!

I cordially greet His Beatitude Makari, Coptic Orthodox Bishop of All Sinai and, with gratitude for his presence, ask him to take my prayerful good wishes to the faithful of his Diocese.

In particular I wish to thank Archbishop Damianos for his kind words of welcome, and for the hospitality which he and the monks have given us today. May the Monastery of Saint Catherine be a spiritual oasis for members of all the Churches in search of the glory of the Lord which settled on Mount Sinai (cf. *Ex* 24:16). The vision of this glory prompts us to cry out in overflowing joy: "We give thanks to you, O holy Father, for your holy name, which you have made to dwell in our hearts" (*Didache*, X). Amen.

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