



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 4 April 1979

Beloved Sisters and Brothers,

1. Today I wish to return once more to the subjects of our three Lenten meditations, prayer, fasting, almsdeeds; and particularly the latter. If prayer, fasting, and almsdeeds form our conversion to God, a conversion that is expressed more exactly by the Greek term "metanoia", if they constitute the main subject of the Lenten liturgy, a penetrating study of this liturgy persuades us that "almsdeeds" has a special place in it. We tried to explain it briefly last Wednesday, referring to the teaching of Christ and of the Old Testament Prophets which often rings out in the Lenten liturgy.

However, there is need to bring this subject up to date, to express it, so to speak, not only in a language of modern terms, but also in a language of the present human reality: interior and social at the same time. How can words spoken thousands of years ago, in a completely different historico-social context, words addressed to men with such a different mentality from that of today, refer to the present reality? What crucial points of our present-day injustice, of human iniquities, of the various inequalities which have not at all disappeared from the life of humanity—although the watchword "equality" has been written on different banners—must these words strike?

The discreet words which Christ addressed one day to the traitor apostle ring out with unusual forcefulness: "The poor you always have with you, but you do not always have me" (Jn 12:8).

"You will always have poor people among you." After the abyss of these words, no man has ever been able to say what Poverty is... When God is questioned, he answers that it is precisely he who is the Poor Man: "Ego sum pauper." (Léon Bloy, *La femme pauvre*, II. 1. Mercure de France

1948).

2. The call to repentance, to conversion, means a call to interior opening "to others". Nothing in the history of the Church and in the history of man can replace this call. *This call* has infinite destinations. It is *addressed to every man*, and it is addressed to each one for reasons specific to each one. So everyone must see himself in the two aspects of the destination of this call. Christ demands of me an opening to the other. But to what other? To the one who is here, at this moment! It is not possible to "postpone" this call of Christ to an indefinite moment, in which that "qualified" beggar will appear and stretch out his hand.

I must be open to every man, ready to "be helpful". Be helpful, how? It is well known that sometimes we can "make a present" to the other with a single word. But with a single word we can also strike him painfully, offend him, wound him; we can even "kill him" morally. It is necessary, therefore, to accept this call of Christ in those ordinary everyday situations of coexistence and contact where each of us is always the one who can "give" to others and, at the same time, the one who is able to accept what others can offer him.

To realize Christ's call to open inwardly to others, means living always ready to find oneself at the other end of the destination of this call. I am the one who gives to others even when I accept, when I am grateful for every good that comes to me from others. I cannot be closed and ungrateful. I cannot isolate myself. To accept Christ's call to opening to others requires, as can be seen, *a re-elaboration of the whole style of our daily life*. It is necessary to accept this call in the real dimensions of life; not postpone it to different conditions and circumstances, to the occasion when the necessity will present itself. It is necessary to persevere continually in this interior attitude. Otherwise, when that "extraordinary" opportunity turns up, it may happen that we do not have an adequate disposition.

3. Understanding practically, in this way, the meaning of Christ's call to "be helpful" to others in everyday life, we do not want to limit the meaning of this dedication only to everyday events, so to speak, of small dimensions. Our "being helpful" *must regard also distant events*, the needs of our neighbour with whom we are not in touch every day, but of whose existence we are aware. Yes, today, we know far better the needs, the sufferings, the injustices of men who live in other countries, in other continents. We are far from them geographically, we are divided by linguistic barriers, by frontiers set up by the individual States... We cannot penetrate directly into their hunger, their want, the ill-treatment, the humiliation, the tortures, imprisonment, social discriminations, their condemnation to an "interior exile" or to "proscription"; however, we know that they are suffering, and we know that they are men like us, our brothers. "Brotherhood" was not inscribed only on the banners and standards of modern revolutions. *Christ already proclaimed a long time ago*, "you are all brethren" (Mt 23:8). And, even more, he gave this brotherhood an indispensable point of reference: he taught us to, say "Our Father". *Human brotherhood presupposes the divine paternity*.

Christ's call to open "to the other", to one's "brother", precisely one's brother, has a radius of extension that is always concrete and always universal. It concerns each one because it refers to all. The extent of this opening is not so much—and not merely—the other's closeness as his needs: I was hungry, I was thirsty, I was naked, in prison, sick... We answer this call by seeking the man who is suffering, following him even beyond the frontiers of States and continents. In this way *that universal dimension of human solidarity* is created—through the heart of each of us. *The mission of the Church is to guard this dimension*: not to limit herself to some frontiers, to some political trends, to some systems. To guard universal human solidarity particularly with those who are suffering; to preserve it in consideration of Christ, who formed just this dimension of solidarity with man once and for all. "For the love of Christ controls us, because we are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died. And he died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5:14 f). And he gave it to us as our task once and for all. He gave it to the Church as her task. He gave it to everyone. He gave it to each of us. "Who is weak, and I am not weak? Who is made to fall, and I am not indignant." These are the words of St Paul (2 Cor 11:29).

Therefore, in our conscience—in the individual conscience of the Christian—in the social conscience of the various environments, of the nations, *special areas of solidarity* must, I would say, be formed precisely with those who are suffering most. We must work systematically, in order that the areas of particular human needs, of great sufferings, of wrongs and injustice, may become areas of Christian solidarity of the whole Church and, through the Church, of individual societies and of the whole of humanity.

4. If we live in conditions of prosperity or of welfare, we must be all the more aware of the whole "geography of hunger" on the earthly globe. We must turn our attention all the more to human misery as a mass phenomenon: we must arouse our sense of responsibility and stimulate readiness for active and effective help. If we live in conditions of freedom, of respect for human rights, we must suffer all the more for the oppression of societies which are *deprived of freedom*, of men who are deprived of fundamental human rights. And this regards religious liberty too. Particularly where religious liberty is respected, we must take part in the sufferings of the people, sometimes whole religious communities and whole Churches, who *are denied the right to religious life according to their own confession or their own rite*.

Am I to call such situations by their name? Certainly. This is my duty. But we cannot stop only at this. All of us, in every place, must endeavour to assume an attitude of Christian solidarity with our brothers in the faith who are undergoing discrimination and persecution. It is also necessary to seek forms in which this solidarity can be expressed. This has always, from the most ancient times, been the tradition of the Church. In fact, it is well known that the Church of Jesus Christ did not enter the history of mankind "in a position of force", but through centuries of persecution. And it is just these centuries that have created the deepest tradition of Christian solidarity.

Today, too, this solidarity is *the force of a real renewal*. It is *the indispensable way for the self-fulfilment of the Church* in the modern world. It is the verification of our faithfulness to Christ, who said: "The poor you always have with you" (Jn 12:8), and again: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 24:40). Our conversion to God is carried out only along the way of this solidarity. I bless you with great affection.

Before addressing the pilgrims of the various nations in their own languages, I should like to turn my mind to a particular situation which I have very much at heart. The grave and worrying news arriving from Uganda during these days is for me a cause of profound sorrow. Uganda, as you know, is the country which gave a warm welcome to my Predecessor Paul VI during his historic visit to Africa. Now it is a theatre of bloody conflict causing victims and destruction. I invite you to join with me in prayer that God may alleviate the sufferings of that sorely tried people and ensure to them and to the whole African continent the desired gift of a just and stable peace.

To the young people:

I now wish to address a special word to the large number of young people, come from various parts, who are taking part in this meeting.

Welcome, beloved young people!

To this impressive Audience, which wishes to be also a feast of hearts, you bring an extraordinary note of joy, goodness, and hope. I greet you cordially and express my gratitude to you.

As I have already had occasion to say many times, the Church trusts you and your enthusiasm for every noble, great cause; she must trust you, because you are the men of the future. Looking at your faces, we see the future! In the light of your eyes, the year two thousand shines. It is an impressive and exalting sight which, at the same time, is also the demand of true human and Christian formation.

Looking at you, I think of what you will be; and your generous commitment gives me comfort.

I want to address to you today only one recommendation: remember that the world needs innocence. All values are important and necessary, for the development of the person and of society and for the smooth course of civil life. But the Christian knows that the principal and absolute value is the "grace" of God, which is participation in the very life of the Holy Trinity and the presence of God in one's soul. In a word, the first value for everyone is innocence of life, maintained by means of observance of the Ten Commandments—that is, the moral law—and by means of prayer and the sacraments.

In fact, Jesus himself warned us: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life? Or what shall a man give in return for his life?" (Mt 16:24-26).

And again, Jesus beseeches us not to move away from him who is "the true vine"—that is, not to lose "grace"—in order not to become dry and useless branches: "Abide in me and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing" (Jn 15:4-6).

Therefore, I too exhort you like Jesus: keep innocence! Live in God's grace. Do not let yourselves be attracted, enveloped, swept along and suffocated by evil, which—as you know—always exists in the world and also in ourselves, in view of our nature, which is, certainly, redeemed, but wounded by original sin.

I entrust you to the Blessed Virgin, to whom I call you to pray to every day, and I willingly bless you all!

To the sick:

A special, affectionate thought to all of you sick people in body or in spirit, who have come from various nations to visit the Pope.

What a significant, cordial and interesting meeting is this one, which takes place between those who represent suffering Humanity and the Vicar on earth of him who willed to be the "Man of sorrows" for the purpose of giving value, comfort and hope to the suffering of every human existence!

The present liturgical period leads us to consider Christ, who, in his agony in the garden of Gethsemane, accepted trouble, anguish and deep sadness (cf. Mk 14:33). He prayed, he entrusted himself completely to the will of the Heavenly Father and had comfort and strength enough to drain the cup of sorrow (*ibid.* 14: 36).

Beloved sick people, keep your eyes fixed on Christ, your Friend, your Model, your Consoler! Following his example, you will obtain that your trouble will change into serenity, your anguish into hope, and your sadness into joy; your suffering will become purification and merit for our souls, as well as a precious contribution to the spiritual good of the Church (cf. Col 1:24).

I willingly bless you, your dear ones, and all those who assist you lovingly.

To the newly-weds:

Allow me, finally, to address you, newly-weds, who, as usual, are numerous and animated with the deep desire to pay a filial homage to the Pope, to listen to his word and receive his blessing.

With great pleasure I see among you the group of couples belonging to the Focolari Movement, who come from various European countries.

Beloved sons and daughters, see to it that the new families, sprung from affection of the heart and from the free consent of your will, sealed by the divine grace of the Sacrament of Marriage, will always be deeply imbued with strong and fruitful love. Remain firm on the rock of unity and faithfulness, and be vivified by those Christian virtues which found and guarantee the peace and prosperity of the domestic hearth which you have just lit.

I invoke the continual assistance of the Lord on your newly-founded families and I willingly impart my special Blessing to you all.

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