



The Holy See

EASTER MASS FOR THE UNIVERSITY STUDENTS OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

5 April 1979

1. "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you!" (Lk 22:15).

These words of Christ's come into my mind today, as we meet together round the altar of St Peter's Basilica to take part in the celebration of the Eucharist. Right from the beginning, since I have been granted the privilege of standing at this altar, I have greatly desired to meet you, young people studying at the University and colleges of this city. I missed you, University students of the Pope's diocese. I had the desire, let me tell you, to feel you near. I have been accustomed to such meetings for years. In the period of Lent—and also of Advent—I often had the privilege of finding myself in the midst of University students in Krakow, on the occasion of the closing of the spiritual exercises which gathered thousands of participants. On this day I meet you. I greet cordially all of you here present. And in you and through you I greet all your fellow students, your Professors, researchers, your faculties, organizations, and those in charge of your circles. I greet the whole of "academic" Rome.

In this period in which, every year, Christ speaks to us again in the life of the Church with his "Passover", the need of being with him is revealed in human hearts, particularly in young hearts. The time of Lent, the Holy Week, the Sacred Triduum, are not just a memory of events that occurred nearly two thousand years ago, but constitute a special invitation to participation.

2. Passover means "passing over".

In the Old Testament it meant the exodus from the "house of slavery" of Egypt and the passing over the Red Sea, under the special protection of the Lord God, towards the "Promised Land". The

wandering lasted for forty years. In the New Testament *this historic Passover was accomplished in Christ during three days*: from Thursday evening to the Sunday morning. And it means the passing through death to the resurrection, and at the same time the exodus from the slavery of sin towards participation in God's life by means of Grace. Christ says in today's Gospel: "If anyone keeps my word, he will never see death." (Jn 8:51). These words indicate at the same time what the Gospel is. It is the book of eternal life, towards which go the innumerable ways of man's earthly pilgrimage. Each of us walks on one of those roads. The Gospel teaches about each of them. And the mystery of this sacred book consists just of this. The fact that it is read a great deal springs from this, and its relevance today comes from this. In the light of the Gospel our life acquires a new dimension. It acquires its definitive meaning. Therefore life itself is shown to be a passing over.

3. *Human life a passing over.*

This life is not one whole, enclosed definitively between the date of birth and the date of death. It is open to the last fulfilment in God. Each of us feels painfully the close of life, the limit set by death. Each of us is in some way conscious of the fact that *man is not contained completely in these limits, and that he cannot die definitively*. Too many questions not spoken and too many problems unsolved—if not in the dimension of personal, individual life at least in that of the life of human communities: families, nations, humanity—stop at the moment of the death of every man. In fact, none of us lives alone. Various circles pass through each man. Also St Thomas said: "Anima humana est quodammodo omnia" (Comm. in Arist. *De Anima*, III, 8, lect. 13). We bear in us the need of "universalization". At a given moment, death interrupts all this...

Who is Christ? He is the Son of God, who assumed human life in its temporal orientation towards death. He accepted the necessity of death. Before death overtook him, he was repeatedly threatened by it. The Gospel of today reminds us of one of these threats: "...they took up stones to throw at him" (Jn 8:59).

Christ is he who accepted the whole reality of human dying. And for that very reason he is the One who *made a radical change in the way of understanding life*. He showed that life is a passing over, not only to the limit of death, but to a new life. Thus the cross became for us the supreme Chair of the truth of God and of man. We must all be pupils—no matter what our age is—of this Chair. Then we will understand that the cross is also the *cradle* of the new man.

Those who are its pupils look at life in this way, perceive it in this way. And they teach it in this way to others. They imprint this meaning of life on the whole of temporal reality: on morality, creativity, culture, politics, economics. It has very often been affirmed—as, for example, the followers of Epicurus sustained in ancient times, and as some followers of Marx do in our times for other reasons—that this concept of life distracts man from temporal reality and that it cancels it in a certain sense. The truth is quite different. *Only this conception of life gives full importance to all the*

problems of temporal reality. It opens the possibility of placing them fully in man's existence. And one thing is certain: this conception of life does not permit shutting man up in temporary things, it does not permit subordinating him completely to them. It decides his freedom.

4. *Life is a test.*

Giving human life this "paschal" meaning, that is, that it is a passing over, that it is a passing over to freedom, Jesus Christ taught with his word and even more with his own example that it is a test. The test corresponds to the importance of the forces accumulated in man. Man is created "for" the test, and called to it right from the beginning. It is necessary to think deeply of this call, meditating on the first chapters of the Bible, especially the first three. Man is described there not only as a being created "in the image of God" (Gen 1:26-27), but at the same time he is described as a being who undergoes a test. And this is—if we analyse the text properly—*the test of thought, of the "heart" and of the will, time test of truth and love.* In this sense, it is at the same time *the test of the Covenant* with God. When this first Covenant was broken, God made another one. Today's readings recall the Covenant with Abraham, which was a way of preparation for the coming of Christ.

Christ confirms this meaning of life: it is man's great test. And for this very reason it has a meaning for man. It has not a meaning, on the contrary, if we believe that in life man must only take advantage, use, "take", and even struggle implacably for the right to take advantage, use, "take"...

Life has its meaning when it is considered and lived as a test of an ethical character. Christ confirms this meaning, and at the same time defines the adequate dimension of this test that human life is. Let us re-read carefully, for example, the Sermon on the Mount, and also chapter 25 of Matthew's Gospel the image of the judgment. This alone is enough to renew in us the fundamental Christian consciousness of the meaning of life.

The concept of "test" is closely connected with the concept of responsibility. Both are addressed to our will, to our acts. Accept, dear friends, both these concepts—or rather both realities—as elements of the construction of one's own humanity. This humanity of yours is already mature and, at the same time, is still young. It is in the phase of the definitive formation of one's life project. This formation takes place particularly in the "academic" years, in the time of higher studies. Perhaps that personal life project is suspended at present over many unknown factors. Perhaps you still lack a precise vision of your place in society, of the work for which you are preparing through your studies. This is certainly a great difficulty; but difficulties of the kind must not paralyse your initiatives. They must not give rise only to aggression. Aggression itself will not solve anything. It will not change life for the better. Aggression can only make it "bad in another way".

I hear you denounce, in your language which is so frank, the senility of ideologies and the ideal inadequacy of the "social machine". Well, to promote man's true dignity—also intellectual

dignity—and not let yourselves, in your turn, be trapped in various forms of sectarianism, do not forget that it is indispensable to acquire a deep formation based on the teaching that Christ left us in his words and in the example of his own life. Try to accept the difficulties you must face precisely as *a part of that test which is the life of every man*. It is necessary to undertake this test with all responsibility. It is at the same time a personal responsibility—for my life, for its future pattern, for its value—and also a social responsibility, for justice and peace, for the moral order of one's own native environment and of the whole of society. It is a responsibility for the real common good. A man who has such an awareness of the meaning of life does not destroy, but constructs the future. Christ teaches us this.

5. And he also teaches us that human life has the meaning of a *testimony to truth and to love*. Not long ago, I had the opportunity to express myself on this subject, speaking to University students of Mexico and of the many nations of Latin America. I take the liberty of quoting some thoughts of that [address](#), which is, perhaps, of interest to European and Roman students too. Today there exists a worldwide involvement of commitments, fears and at the same time, hopes, ways of thinking and evaluating, which troubles your young world. On that occasion I pointed out, among other things, that it is necessary to promote an "integral culture, which will aim at the complete development of the human person, in which there will stand out the values of intelligence, will, conscience, and brotherhood, which are all based on God the Creator and which have been marvellously exalted in Christ (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 61)". To scientific formation, that is, it is necessary to add a deep moral and Christian formation, that will be deeply lived and will bring about a more and more harmonious synthesis between faith and reason, between faith and culture, between faith and life. To unite dedication to precise scientific research and the testimony of a true Christian life, that is the stirring commitment of every University student (cf. John Paul II, *Address to Catholic University Students in Mexico*, [31 January 1979]; AAS LXXI, 1979, pp. 236-237). And I repeat to you too what I wrote in February to the students of Latin-American schools: "Studies must comprise not only a given quantity of knowledge acquired in the course of specialization but also a special spiritual maturity which presents itself as responsibility for truth: for truth in thought and in action" (AAS LXXI, 1979, p. 253).

Let these few quotations suffice.

A great tension exists in the modern world. All things considered, this is a tension over the sense of human *life*, the meaning we can and must give to this *life* if it is to be *worthy of man*, if it is to be *such that it is worth living*. There also exist clear symptoms of moving away from these dimensions; in fact, materialism in different forms, inherited from the last centuries, is capable of coercing this meaning of life. But materialism does not at all form the deepest roots of European or world culture. It is not at all a correlative or a full expression of epistemological or ethical realism.

Christ—allow me to put it in this way—*is the greatest realist in the history of man*. Reflect a little on this formulation. Meditate on what it can signify.

It is precisely by virtue of this realism that Christ bears witness to the Father, and bears witness to man. He himself, in fact, knows "what is in man" (Jn 2:25). He knows! I repeat it without wishing to offend any of those who have tried at any time or are trying today to understand what man is, and wish to teach it.

And precisely on the basis of this realism, Christ teaches that human life has a meaning insofar as it is a testimony of truth and love.

Think this over, you who as students *must be particularly sensitive to truth* and to testimony of truth. You are, so to speak, the professionals of intelligence, since you are engaged in the study of humanistic and scientific disciplines, in view of preparation for the office that is waiting for you in society.

Think it over, you who having *young hearts feel how much need of love is born in them*. You who are looking for a form of expression for this love in your lives. There are some who find this expression in exclusive dedication of themselves to God. The vast majority are those who find the expression of this love in marriage, in family life. Prepare for that thoroughly. Remember that love as a noble sentiment is a gift of the heart; but at the same time it is a great task that must be assumed in favour of the other one, in favour of her, in favour of him. Christ is waiting for such a love of yours. He wishes to be with you when it is formed in your hearts, and when it matures in the sacramental oath. And afterwards, and always.

6. Christ says "I have earnestly desired to eat this passover with you!" (Lk 2:15). When he ate it for the first time with the disciples he spoke *words that are particularly cordial and particularly binding*: "No longer do I call you servants... but I have called you friends..." (Jn 15:15); "This is my commandment, that you love one another." (Jn 15:12). Remember these words of Christ's farewell speech, from the Gospel of John, now, in the period of the Lord's Passion. Think about them again.

Purify your hearts in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Those who accuse the call, of the Church to repentance as coming from a "repressive" mentality, are lying. Sacramental Confession is not a repression but a liberation; it does not restore feelings of guilt, but cancels the guilt, dissolves the evil done, and bestows the grace of forgiveness. The causes of evil are not to be sought outside man, but first and foremost inside his heart; and the remedy starts also from the heart. Then Christians, through the sincerity of their commitment of conversion, must rebel against the levelling down of man and proclaim with their own lives the joy of true liberation from sin by means of Christ's forgiveness. The Church does not have a project of her own ready for the University, for society, but she has a project of man, of the new man, born again from Grace. Find the interior truth of your consciences again. May the Holy Spirit grant you the grace of a sincere repentance, of a firm purpose of amendment, and of a sincere confession of sins.

May he grant you deep spiritual joy.

"The Day which the Lord has made" (Ps 117/118:24) is approaching.

Be prepared for this Day!

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