



The Holy See

JOHN PAUL II

HOMILY - TE DEUM VESPERS

Tuesday, 31 December 1996

1. *“When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, ... so that we might receive adoption as sons”* (Gal 4:4-5).

We have reached the end of a solar year: in a few hours 1996 will give way to the new year, after reaching, so to speak, its chronological fullness and the climax of the journey begun 366 days ago.

We could say that the expression “when the time had fully come” has a “historical” value because it reminds us that the year now ending is bringing us rapidly closer to the *beginning of the third millennium*. Nevertheless, with this phrase in the Letter to the Galatians St Paul wishes to call to mind a deeper dimension which refers *to all that was fulfilled in the cave at Bethlehem*: “God sent forth” into the world “his Son, born of woman” (Gal 4:4). The mysterious event of the Holy Night lives again in these words: the only-begotten and eternal Son of God “by the power of the Holy Spirit became incarnate of the Virgin Mary and was made man” (Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed). He entered the history of mankind and, as it were, surpassed it.

Can God’s entry into history be otherwise defined than as a transcending of history itself? When God became man, time, in its sequence of years, centuries and millenniums, was brought into the dimension of divine eternity: in fact, by coming into the world through his Only-Begotten Son, God wanted to unite the dimensions of time and eternity. Referring to this, today’s liturgy makes us aware of a new vision: by the Incarnation of the Word, human time is called to share in the eternity of God.

2. How does all this happen? The reading from today’s Vespers answers this question: “God sent forth his Son” into the world, “born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). This is why the Word was made flesh and came to dwell among us, so that by welcoming him we might receive adoption as children.

In the Prologue of his Gospel, the Apostle John proclaims with wonder: "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us To all who received him ... he gave power to become children of God" (Jn 1:14; 12). The Only-Begotten Son, one in being with the Father, comes into the world so that through sanctifying grace all people may be born again, for they have been called to the lofty privilege of being "filii in Filio", sons in the Son, by divine adoption.

3. The Church professes this truth about the fullness of time and today wishes to proclaim it in an altogether unique way.

As Bishop of Rome and Successor of the Apostle Peter, whose mission is to proclaim the Gospel *Urbi et Orbi*, I have special reasons this evening to praise God for the "fullness of time" and for the salvation, which has been at work in the world through the Church's ministry. I have particular cause to thank the Lord for what is being accomplished by our ecclesial community, the heart of the universal Church, particularly in service to the city of Rome: in fact, she is sent in the first place to the citizens of Rome, as once the Apostles Peter and Paul were sent. Two thousand years have passed since then and in the span of these two millenniums the mandate conferred on the Church of Rome has yielded countless good fruits.

This evening, in this magnificent church located in the heart of Rome, we wish to mention in our thanksgiving every benefit wrought by God through the apostolic ministry, both in the universal Church and in our city. I would particularly like to thank the Lord for the results achieved in this year now ending, during which, as the second millennium draws to a close, we have begun our immediate preparation for the Great Jubilee.

4. I still have before my eyes the magnificent spectacle of the last Vigil of Pentecost. On that occasion, the various components of the Church in Rome, Bishops, priests, religious families and lay faithful, representing the entire People of God, solemnly began their immediate preparation for the Holy Year by starting the *great city mission*.

My thoughts likewise go to the parishes and communities which have experienced the grace of a Pastoral Visit during the current year: the parishes of St Anthony of Padua in Circonvallazione Appia, Pope St Cletus, St Julius, St Vincent Pallotti, St Mary Cause of our Joy, St Bibiana, Bl. Josemaría Escrivá and St Maddalena of Canossa in the first part of the year, and recently St Jerome Emiliani and Our Lady of Valme. So far 251 parishes have been visited and 77 are still waiting.

For these events and for your service to the Church of Rome, I thank the Cardinal Vicar and you, dear Brothers, the Auxiliary Bishops, together with the parish priests and curates and the other priests who work in our city. I thank the men and women religious as well as the lay people involved in various apostolic activities, and I extend a cordial and fraternal greeting to all. I would also like to express my gratitude to all the faithful of the Diocese of Rome. Thank you, brothers and sisters! Thank you, Roman families, "domestic churches" (cf. *Lumen gentium*, n. 11), the first and basic cells of society! Thank you, members of the many communities, associations and movements involved in vitalizing our city's Christian life!

I greet Fr Peter-Hans Kolvenbach, Superior General of the Society of Jesus, and the Jesuit priests who work in this church.

I likewise offer a cordial greeting to the civil authorities present and especially to the Mayor of Rome, whom I thank for the

gift of the chalice which, according to a beautiful tradition, is repeated every year. I deeply hope that the commitment of all to give the city a face more consonant with the values of faith, culture and civilization that emanate from its vocation and its 2,000-year-old history, will never be lacking, particularly in view of the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000.

5. Dear brothers and sisters, drawing further inspiration and encouragement from the words of the Apostle Paul to the Galatians recalled in this liturgy of Vespers, let us together serve the one cause of Redemption: since God sent his Only-Begotten Son so that we might receive adoption as children (cf. Gal 4:5), there can be no greater task for us than to be totally at the service of the divine plan.

“My soul magnifies the Lord!” (Lk 1:46). May this canticle, which welled up in Mary’s heart as she visited St Elizabeth, become an expression of our thanksgiving today. The Church repeats it every day, recalling all the benefits which she is aware of having received. “And my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden” (Lk 1:47). So the Church in Rome sings with Mary, rediscovering each day her weakness, but at the same time the wonders God works in her.

“For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me, and holy is his name. And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation” (Lk 1:48-50).

We are here to proclaim the mercies wrought by the Lord during the year now ending. We are here to prepare ourselves, with hearts full of gratitude, to cross at midnight the threshold of 1997.

Te Deum laudamus...

We praise you, God, we acclaim you as the Lord.

O everlasting Father, all the world bows down before you

Have mercy on us Lord, have mercy on us. In you we put our trust:

We shall not be put to shame.

Amen!

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