



The Holy See

EASTER VIGIL

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Holy Saturday, 29 March 1997

1. *"Let there be light!"* (Gn 1:3). During the Easter Vigil, the Liturgy proclaims these words taken from the Book of Genesis. They constitute an eloquent theme running through this wonderful celebration. At the beginning the "new fire" is blessed, and is used to light the Paschal candle, which is then carried in procession to the altar. The candle enters and moves forward at first in darkness, until the moment when, after the intonation of the third *"Lumen Christi"*, light returns in the whole Basilica. In this way, an interconnection has been made between *the elements of darkness and light, of death and life*. Against this background the biblical account of creation is retold. God says: "Let there be light" (Gn 1:3). This is, in a certain sense, *the first step towards life*. On this night there is to take place a singular passing from death to life, and the rite of light, together with the words from the Book of Genesis, offer the first proclamation of this.

2. In the Prologue to his Gospel, Saint John writes of the Word made flesh: "In him was life, and the life was the light of men" (1:4). This holy night therefore becomes an extraordinary manifestation *of that life which is the life of men*. The whole Church takes part in this manifestation and, in a special way, *the catechumens* who during this Vigil receive Baptism. In this solemn celebration Saint Peter's Basilica welcomes you, *dear Brothers and Sisters, who in a little while will be baptized into Christ our Passover*. Two of you come from Albania and two from Zaire, countries which are experiencing tragic moments in their history: may the Lord hear the cries of the poor and lead them on the path to peace and freedom! Others of you come from Benin, from Cape Verde, from China, from Taiwan. I pray for each of you, who in this assembly represent the firstfruits of the new humanity redeemed by Christ, that you may always be faithful witnesses to his Gospel. The Liturgical Readings of this Easter Vigil link together *the two elements of fire and water*. The element of fire, which gives light, and the element of water, which becomes the matter of the sacrament of rebirth, namely of Holy Baptism. "Unless one is born of water and the Spirit, he cannot enter the kingdom of God" (Jn 3:5). The passing of the Israelites through the Red Sea, that is to say their liberation from slavery in Egypt, is a figure and a sort of anticipation of the Baptism which frees us from the slavery of sin.

3. The many different themes which in this Easter Vigil Liturgy find expression in the Biblical Readings come together and blend into a single image. In the most complete manner, it is the Apostle Paul who presents these truths in his Letter to the Romans, which has just been read: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6:3-4). These words lead us *to the very heart of the Christian truth*. Christ's death, his redeeming death, is the

beginning of the passage to life, revealed in his resurrection. "If we have died with Christ," Saint Paul continues, "we believe that we shall also live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him" (Rom 6:8-9).⁴ Carrying the torch of God's Word in her hands, the Church which celebrates the Easter Vigil halts as it were at a final threshold. She stops *with great expectation* throughout this night. At the tomb, we await the event that took place two thousand years ago. The first witnesses of that extraordinary event were the women of Jerusalem: they came to the place where Jesus had been buried on Good Friday and found the tomb empty. A voice surprised them: "You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He has risen, he is not here; see the place where they laid him. But go, tell his disciples and Peter that he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him, as he told you" (Mk 16:6-7). No one saw with his own eyes the Resurrection of Christ. The women who had come to the tomb were the first to learn of the event that had already taken place. The Church, gathered for the Easter Vigil, listens anew, in silent expectation, to this testimony and then manifests her great joy. We have just heard it proclaimed from the lips of the deacon: "*Annuntio vobis gaudium magnum . . .*", "*I announce to you tidings of great joy, Alleluia!*". Let us welcome this news with open hearts, let us share together in the Church's great joy. Christ is truly risen! Alleluia! ©

Copyright 1997 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana