



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE PARISH OF ST AGAPITUS IN ROME

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 1 March 1998

1. *“Jesus ... was led by the Spirit for forty days in the wilderness, tempted by the devil” (Lk 4:1-2).*

Before he began his public activity, Jesus, moved by the Holy Spirit, withdrew into the wilderness for 40 days. Here, as we read today in the Gospel, he was put to the test by the devil who presented him with three temptations that are common in every person's life: the pleasure of material possessions, the seduction of human power and the presumption of subordinating God to our own interests.

Jesus' victorious struggle against the tempter does not end with the days he spent in the desert, but continues during the years of his public life and culminates in the dramatic events of Easter. It is precisely by his death on the Cross that the Redeemer ultimately overcomes evil, liberating humanity from sin and reconciling it with God. From the beginning, the Evangelist Luke appears to predict the fulfilment of salvation on Golgotha. Indeed, he ends the narrative of the temptations by mentioning Jerusalem where, in fact, Jesus' paschal victory would be sealed.

The scene of Christ's temptations in the desert are renewed every year at the beginning of Lent. The liturgy invites believers to enter the desert with Jesus and to follow him on the distinctive penitential journey of this Lenten season which began last Wednesday with the austere rite of ashes.

2. *“If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (Rom 10:9).* The words of the Apostle Paul, which we have just heard, clearly explain the style and form of our Lenten pilgrimage. What is penance, if not a humble and sincere return to the sources of faith, by promptly rejecting temptation and sin and increasing our prayerful intimacy with the Lord?

Indeed, Christ alone can free man from what enslaves him to evil and selfishness: from the frantic search for material possessions, from the thirst for power and control over others and over things, from the illusion of easy success, from the

frenzy of consumerism and hedonism which ultimately destroy the human being.

Dear brothers and sisters, this is what the Lord clearly asks of us in order to enter the true atmosphere of Lent. He wants us to learn in the wilderness of these 40 days how to face the enemy of our souls in the light of the Word of salvation. The Holy Spirit, to whom this second year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is specially dedicated, gives life to our prayer so that we are ready courageously to undertake the constant struggle to overcome evil with good.

3. Dear faithful of St Agapitus Parish, I am pleased to be with you today while the great City Mission is under way in preparation for the Jubilee. As I had the opportunity to say last Thursday at my meeting with the Roman clergy, it is a providential pastoral project which prepares our Diocese to cross the threshold of the new millennium entirely renewed. Rome has a unique mission to fulfil, called as she is to welcome the pilgrims who will come from all over the world for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. This is why it is necessary for her to bear ever more joyful and exemplary witness to her faith in the risen Christ, Redeemer of man and Lord of history. It is important that the people of Rome receive from believers the proclamation and witness of the Gospel of hope and solidarity. Dear brothers and sisters of this parish, you must see yourselves as the courageous evangelizers of those who live in this neighbourhood.

4. I now extend my cordial greetings to everyone, starting with the Cardinal Vicar and the Vicegerent. I next greet Fr Isidoro Del Lungo, your zealous pastor since 1977, but who has been in this parish for 30 years, the curate and the other assistants. I extend a special greeting to the associations that work in this area, as well as to the Brothers of Charity of Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the volunteer workers who run the Casa Serena, a praiseworthy centre for people in trouble.

Many of you remember the origins of the parish, which was established 40 years ago in an area adjacent to the little suburb of Prenestino, a shantytown which grew up in 1934, was extended illegally in the post-war period and demolished in 1980. Parish life began in modest premises and was later transferred to a shed to accommodate liturgical celebrations to this day. In the meantime, a second shed was built which on Sundays, at the most crowded times, serves as an additional place of worship.

If at the beginning there were many understandable hardships, the very lack of proper pastoral structures resulted, we could say providentially, in fostering an atmosphere of greater solidarity in the community, also because the number of its inhabitants did not increase with the years. I would like to address an affectionate greeting to every person who lives in your neighbourhood, to those who come to the parish regularly and to those instead who have possibly fallen away from the faith; to the lonely and the elderly, who account for a large part of your community; to the sick and to those who are experiencing particular difficulty, to the children, young people and families.

I know that Renewal in the Holy Spirit was an ecclesial experience which made a positive mark on the life of the parish. With gratitude to the Lord, I am thinking of all those who, aided by this particular spiritual journey, have returned to the faith and to the Church. I extend my greetings to the Padre Pio Prayer Groups and to the other movements and parish groups. In your Christian community may there always be a place for everyone and, in sharing the charisms proper to each spiritual experience, may you always be concerned to cultivate that harmonious mutual acceptance which is indispensable for effective and fraternal evangelization.

5. *"Then we cried to the Lord ... and the Lord heard our voice"* (Dt 26:7). The profession of faith of the people of Israel recounted in the first reading presents the basic element around which the whole of the Old Testament tradition revolves: deliverance from slavery in Egypt and the birth of the chosen people.

The Passover of the Old Covenant constitutes the preparation and proclamation of the definitive Passover in which the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world will be sacrificed.

Dear brothers and sisters, at the beginning of the Lenten journey let us return to the roots of our faith to prepare through prayer, penance, fasting and charity to participate with hearts inwardly renewed in Christ's Passover.

May the Blessed Virgin help us with worthy fruits of conversion during this Lent to share Christ's journey from the desert of temptations to Jerusalem, in order to celebrate with him the Passover of our Redemption.

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