



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS

JOHN PAUL II

FOR LENT 1995

*"The Spirit of the Lord... has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim... recovery of sight to the blind..." (Lk 4:18).*

My dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

1. During the season of Lent, I would like to reflect with all of you on a hidden evil which deprives a great number of poor people of many possibilities for progress. It likewise deprives them of victory over marginalization and hinders them from attaining true freedom. I am speaking of illiteracy. Pope Paul VI reminded us that "lack of education is as serious as lack of food; the illiterate person is a starved spirit" (*Populorum Progressio*, 35).

This terrible affliction helps to keep vast multitudes of people in a state of underdevelopment, with all the scandalous misery which that brings. Abundant testimonies from different continents, as well as the meetings which I have had in the course of my apostolic travels, confirm my conviction that where there is illiteracy there is more hunger, disease and infant mortality, as well as humiliation, exploitation and all kinds of suffering, than there is elsewhere.

A person who can neither read nor write finds great difficulties in making use of modern work methods; he is as it were condemned to be ignorant of his rights and duties; he is truly poor. We must realize that hundreds of millions of adults are illiterate, that tens of millions of children cannot go to school, either because there is no school nearby or because poverty prevents them from attending. They are stunted precisely when their lives should be blossoming and are prevented from exercising their fundamental rights. This is the human throng which reaches out to us, asking us for a gesture of brotherhood.

2. We know that when individuals, families and communities have access to education and to different levels of training, they can make better progress on all fronts. Literacy allows the person to develop his possibilities, to broaden his talents, to enrich his relationships. The Second Vatican Council affirmed: "It is one of the properties of the human person that he can achieve true and full humanity only by means of culture" (*Gaudium et Spes*, 53). Intellectual formation is a decisive element for developing that human culture which helps make people more self-sufficient and free. It also makes possible a better formation of conscience and a better perception of moral and spiritual responsibilities.

Among the situations which cause concern in our time, we often hear of the increasing world population. In this area, it is preferable that families should themselves take responsibility. In the Consistory of June 1994, the Cardinals unanimously declared that "education and development are much more effective responses to the growing world population than are any coercion and all artificial forms of population control"(1). The family itself as an institution is supported when its members can make use of written communication; they are no longer passive subjects of programmes imposed on them to the detriment of their freedom and the responsible control of their fertility; they are the active subjects of their own development.

3. Faced with the seriousness of the living conditions of our brothers and sisters who are kept at a distance from modern culture, we have a duty to show them our complete solidarity. Actions undertaken to favour access to reading and writing are the first condition for helping the impoverished to mature intellectually and to lead their lives more independently. Literacy and education are an essential duty and investment for humanity's future, for "the fulfilment of the whole man and of every man", as Paul VI said (*Populorum Progressio*, 42).

In the midst of the peoples, the greater the number of those enjoying a sufficient education, the better will the people be able to take their destiny into their own hands. In this, literacy training helps cooperation between nations and peace in the world. The equal dignity of individuals and peoples requires the international community to take steps to overcome the damaging inequalities which the illiteracy of millions of human beings still causes.

4. My gratitude goes to all the individuals and organizations engaged in the work of solidarity which is the education of the illiterate. I speak particularly to social and religious organizations, to teachers, schoolchildren and students, to all people of good will, and I invite them to share still more generously their material and cultural goods: I hope they will do so in their own localities, and support the work of organizations specifically involved in promoting literacy in other parts of the world.

5. Progress in educating the illiterate will also make further evangelization possible, this to the extent that literacy will enable each of our brothers and sisters to grasp the Christian message in a more personal manner and to reinforce listening to the Word of God by reading it themselves.

Making direct access to the Holy Scriptures possible for the greatest possible number of people, and in their own language, can only enrich the reflection and meditation of those seeking the meaning and direction of their lives.

I strongly urge the pastors of the Church to take to heart and encourage this great service to humanity. For it is a matter of linking to the proclamation of the Good News the transmission of a knowledge which enables our brothers and sisters to assimilate for themselves the meaning of this message, to experience all its richness and to make it an integral part of their culture. In our time, can we not say that to work for literacy is to contribute to the building up of communion in real and active brotherly love?

6. Through the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of Jesus and our own Mother, I pray that God will hear our voices and touch our hearts, that this Lent of 1995 will mark a new stage in the conversion which our Lord Jesus Christ preached, from the very beginning of his Messianic mission, for the sake of all nations (cf. Mt 4: 12-17)

In this hope, I cordially impart to you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 7 September 1994.

JOHN PAUL II

(1) Call of the Cardinals for the protection of the family, 14 June 1994.
