



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF HIS HOLINESS POPE JOHN PAUL II FOR LENT 1996

"Give them something to eat" (Mt 14:16)

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. Once again the Lord is calling us to follow him along the journey of Lent. Each year all the faithful are invited to respond anew as individuals and as a community to our baptismal vocation and to bear fruits of conversion. Lent is a journey of evolving, creative reflection which inspires penance and gives new impetus to every aspect of our commitment to follow the Gospel. It is a journey of love which opens the hearts of believers to our brothers and sisters and draws them to God. Jesus asks his disciples to live and to radiate charity; this new commandment of love represents the authoritative summation of the Decalogue entrusted by God to Moses on Mount Sinai. Each day we encounter people who are hungry, thirsty or sick, people who are outcasts or migrants. During this season of Lent we are invited to pay greater heed to the suffering written on their faces, faces which challenge us to acknowledge the various aspects of poverty that continue in our time.

2. The Gospel makes it clear that the Redeemer is especially compassionate to those in difficulty. He speaks to them of the Kingdom of God and heals the body and spirit of those who are in need of care. He then says to his disciples, "Give them something to eat". However the disciples realize that they only have five loaves of bread and two fish. Like the disciples in Bethsaida, we today are aware that the means at our disposal are certainly insufficient to meet the needs of the nearly eight hundred million people who suffer from hunger and malnutrition, and who still struggle, on the threshold of the Year 2000, for survival.

What can we do? Do we leave things as they are, and resign ourselves to being helpless? This is the question that, at the beginning of Lent, I would like to pose to each member of the faithful and to the whole Church. The crowds of starving people children, women, the elderly, immigrants,

refugees, the unemployed - raise to us their cry of suffering. They implore us, hoping to be heard. How can we not open our ears and our hearts and start to make available those five loaves and two fish which God has put into our hands? If each one of us contributes something, we can all do something for them. Of course this will require sacrifices, which call for a deep inner conversion. Certainly it will involve changing our exaggerated consumerist behaviour, combatting hedonism, resisting attitudes of indifference and the tendency to disregard our personal responsibilities.

3. Hunger is a great tragedy afflicting humanity. We urgently need to acknowledge this fact and to offer resolute and generous support to the various Organizations and Movements founded to alleviate the sufferings of those who risk death from starvation, giving special consideration to those people not reached by government or international programmes. It is necessary to continue the fight against hunger both in less developed countries and in highly industrialized nations where, unfortunately, there is an ever growing gap separating the rich from the poor.

The earth has the resources necessary to feed all humanity. We need to learn to use them intelligently, respecting the environment and the rhythms of nature, guaranteeing fairness and justice in business dealings and ensuring a distribution of wealth which takes into account the duty of solidarity. Some might object that this is a grand and unachievable utopia. Yet the social teaching and activity of the Church demonstrates the contrary: where men and women turn to the Gospel, this project of sharing and solidarity becomes a remarkable reality.

4. Even as we witness the destruction of great quantities of products necessary for human life, we are saddened to see the disturbing spectacle of long lines of people waiting their turn at soup-kitchens or around convoys of humanitarian organizations committed to distributing needed supplies. Even in great modern cities, it is not uncommon to see people sorting through refuse bins once the local markets have closed.

When we consider scenes such as these, symptomatic as they are of profound contradictions, how can our hearts fail to rebel against them? How can we not feel spontaneously moved to Christian charity? Authentic Christian solidarity, however, is no mere transient feeling. Only as the result of a patient and responsible training from childhood on does solidarity become a fundamental personal attitude which affects all our actions and areas of responsibility. A general process of consciousness raising is needed, a process capable of involving society as a whole. The Catholic Church, in full cooperation with other religious denominations, seeks to offer her own distinctive contribution to such a process. This is a fundamental work of human promotion and of fraternal sharing, one which requires that the poor themselves be involved, in whatever way they can.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters! I entrust to you these Lenten reflections, so that you can ponder them as individuals and as a community under the guidance of your Pastors. I urge you to take significant practical steps which are able to multiply the few loaves and fish at our disposal. This

will provide effective help in addressing the various forms of hunger and will be an authentic way of living this providential period of Lent, a season of conversion and reconciliation.

As you carry out these demanding resolutions, I gladly impart to each of you my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of strength and consolation. May the Lord grant us the grace to set out generously, in prayer and penance, on the path towards the celebration of Easter.

Given at Castelgandolfo, on 8 September, the Feast of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary, in the year 1995, the seventeenth of my Pontificate.

JOHN PAUL II