



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE GATHERED IN THE VATICAN BASILICA

28 March 1979

Beloved Young People,

The grandiose and exalting sight of this Basilica, erected on the tomb of the Prince of Apostles and first Vicar of Christ, which, every Wednesday, quivers with festive joy at your youthful presence, is always a cause of consolation and hope for me, and induces me to undertake a simple and direct dialogue, every time with new intensity.

Welcome to you all. To each of you, personally, I address my greeting and my thanks. In particular, I wish to mention the "Youth Pilgrimage" of Civita Castellana and Caprarola, led by the Bishop, Monsignor Marcello Rosina; the Pilgrimage of three thousand students from the Diocese of Tursi-Lagonegro, also presided over by their Bishop, Monsignor Vincenzo Franco; and also the two thousand boys and girls who are pupils of the Institutes of the Roman Union of the Ursulines, coming from various regions of Italy.

Dear boys and girls, we are passing with intense commitment through the sacred time of Lent, which prepares us for Easter and which urges us to deepen and live our responsibility as Christians, baptized, living members of the Mystical body of Christ. On preceding Wednesdays I spoke of our responsibility to God, which we could sum up in the word "worship": that is, the recognition of God in his reality as Absolute, Creator and Father. I also referred to the duty towards ourselves, which can be summed up in another expression dear to ecclesial tradition: fasting, understood as renunciation of things, in order to obtain mastery over them, which will make us ready for good, capable of sacrifice, open to love.

I now wish to refer precisely to this love, this availability with regard to one's neighbour, to the other, a dimension so congenial to youthful conscience today, submitting to your attention the third

ascetic exercise characterising the Lenten period, that of alms "Repent... give alms" (cf. Mk 1:15 and Lk 12:33).

Hearing the word "alms", your sensibility as young lovers of justice, eager for an equal distribution of riches, might feel wounded and offended. It seems to me I can feel it. On the other hand, do not think you are alone in having such an interior reaction; it is in harmony with the innate hunger and thirst for justice that everyone brings with him. Also the prophets of the Old Testament, when they call the People of Israel to conversion and to the true religion, indicate the redress of injustices, suffered by the weak and defenceless, as the main way for the restoration of a genuine relationship with God (cf. Is 58:6-7).

Yet the practice of almsdeeds is recommended in the whole sacred Text, both in the Old and in the New Testament: from the Pentateuch to the Sapiential Books, from the book of Acts to the Apostolic Letters. Well, through a study of the semantic evolution of the word, on which less genuine incrustations have been formed, we must find again the real meaning of alms and, above all, the determination and the joy of almsdeeds.

A Greek word, alms etymologically means compassion and mercy. Various circumstances and influences of a reductive mentality have distorted and deconsecrated its original meaning sometimes reducing it to that of a spiritless and loveless act.

But alms, in itself, must be understood essentially as the attitude of a man who perceives the need of others, who wishes to share his own property with others. Who will say that there will not always be another, in need of help—spiritual in the first place—support, comfort, brotherhood and love? The world is always too poor in love.

Thus defined, to give alms is an act of very high positive value, the goodness of which must not be doubted, and which must find in us a fundamental readiness of heart and spirit, without which there is no real conversion to God.

Even if we do not have at our disposal riches and concrete capacities to meet the needs of our neighbour, we cannot feel dispensed from opening our heart to his necessities and relieving them as far as possible. Remember the widow's mite; she threw into the treasury of the temple only two small coins but with them all her great love: "for she out of her poverty had put in all the living that she had" (Lk 21:4).

Dear boys and girls, the subject is an attractive one, it would take us far; I leave it to your reflection to continue it. Let my affection, my good will and my blessing accompany you towards the joy of Easter.

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