



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF THE HOLY FATHER
POPE JOHN PAUL II
TO THE YOUNG PEOPLE
GATHERED TO PREPARE FOR PALM SUNDAY**

Piazza San Giovanni (Rome)

Thursday, 2 April 1998

1. *"Take up your Cross"!*

Dear young people of Rome, the theme of today's meeting echoes the words of Jesus proclaimed just now: *"If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me"* (Mk 8:34). These words make it possible to appreciate the value and significance of this *celebration, in preparation for the Cross.*

In fact - as you well know - the World Youth Day Cross which I myself presented to young people in 1984, at the end of the Holy Year of the Redemption, is about to arrive in Rome. After its journeys on the various continents, it is now returning to our city, the centre of the Christian world. Next Sunday, at the end of *Palm Sunday Mass* in St Peter's Square, a representation of young Parisians will hand it over to some young Italians and in this way preparation will begin for the World Youth Day of the Year 2000 that will take place here in Rome, the heart of the Great Jubilee.

Young Romans who are gathered here this evening, my affectionate greetings to each one of you. With you, I extend the most cordial welcome to the French young people who have come for this important presentation, and to the 500 representatives of the Italian Dioceses. I greet the Cardinal Vicar and thank him for the words he has addressed to me on your behalf. I thank all those who have prepared this festive afternoon and all who are taking part in it, enlivening it with their accounts and their artistic performances. A greeting too, to those who have joined us by radio and television.

2. Thus it is a celebration for *the arrival of the Cross*, of your Cross! The Cross is first accepted in the heart and then carried through life. We have met today to remind each other of it in this

square, between the Holy Stairs which recall Christ's Passion, and the neighbouring Church of the Holy Cross in Jerusalem, where the relic of the Cross is venerated.

Down the centuries, the Cross has been embraced by many Christians: how can we not give thanks to God for this? And you, young people of Rome, you are witnesses of how, during the City Mission too, the message of death and resurrection which comes from the Cross becomes a proclamation of hope that overwhelms and consoles, strengthens the spirit and makes hearts peaceful. How appropriate Jesus' words sound: "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself" (Jn 12:32) and "they shall look on him whom they have pierced" (Jn 19:37)!

Today we would like to proclaim forcefully the *Gospel of the Cross*, that is, Jesus who died and was raised for the forgiveness of sins. This saving proclamation which guarantees believers eternal life has never ceased to ring out in the world since the day of Easter. It is the Good News that arrived in this Rome of ours with the Apostles Peter and Paul, and spread from here to so many parts of Europe and the world.

3. Dear young people, we are certainly right to say that *the Cross is at home in Rome*. In a certain sense, Rome is the city of the Cross: Here, in fact, proclaimed and lived by so many martyrs and saints in the past and today, it has as it were sealed and written the city's history.

The Cross is concealed in the very name of Rome. If we read Roma (Rome) backwards, we say the word "Amor". Is not the Cross the *message of the love of Christ*, of the Son of God, who loved us to the point of being nailed to the wood of the Cross? Yes, the Cross is the first letter in God's alphabet.

4. Just as it is not foreign to Rome, the Cross is not foreign to the life of every man and woman of any age, people or social condition. In the course of this encounter, you have become acquainted with various persons, more or less wellknown and famous. In different ways they have encountered and are encountering the mystery of the Cross; they have been touched and almost marked by it. Yes, *the Cross is written into man's life*. Wanting to exclude it from one's own life is like wanting to ignore the reality of the human condition. This is how it is! We are made for life, yet we cannot eliminate suffering and trials from our personal experience. And you too, dear young people, do you not experience the reality of the Cross every day? Then when there is no peace in the family, when it becomes difficult to study, when sentiments are not reciprocated, when it is almost impossible to find work, when plans for having a family have to be delayed for financial reasons, when you must contend with illness, loneliness and when there is a risk of falling prey to a dangerous emptiness of values, is it not the Cross that challenges you?

A widespread culture of the ephemeral, which gives value only to what appears beautiful and gives pleasure, would like to make you believe that the Cross should be removed. This cultural

trend promises success, rapid promotion and self assertion at all costs; it is an invitation to sexuality lived irresponsibly and a life devoid of interests and respect for others. Open your eyes wide, dear young people; this is not the way that leads to joy and to life, but the path that sinks into sin and death. Jesus says: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it" (Mt 16:24-25).

Jesus does not deceive us. With the truth of his words, which sound harsh but fill the heart with peace, he reveals to us the secret of authentic life. By accepting the condition and destiny of man, he overcame sin and death and, rising, transformed the Cross from a tree of death into a tree of life. He is God-with-us, Christ is God-with-us, Emmanuel, (Mt 1:23), who came to share our whole life. He does not leave us alone on the cross. Jesus is the faithful love that does not abandon us and knows how to turn the night into the dawn of hope. If the Cross is accepted, it generates salvation and brings peace, as is evidenced by the many beautiful testimonies given by young believers. *Without God, the Cross crushes us; with God, it redeems and saves us.*

5. As you know, all this is possible through the sacrament of Baptism, which binds us intimately to Christ, dead and risen, and gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of love who was born from the paschal mystery and is poured out in abundance on those who strengthen their Baptism with the subsequent sacrament of Confirmation. In Piazza San Giovanni, a few steps from one of the world's most famous baptisteries, I would like to recall that living one's Baptism means accepting the Cross with faith and love, not only for its value as a trial, but also for its inseparable dimension of salvation and resurrection.

This is why it is right that we are celebrating today in this square in front of the cathedral of Rome, as we wait for the Cross. In the heart of the City Mission - whose theme is "Open the door to Christ your Saviour" - we would like to shout to every one who lives in our City: "*Take up your Cross!*", accept it, do not let yourself be crushed by events, but conquer evil and death with Christ! If you make the *Gospel of the Cross* your life project, if you follow Jesus all the way to the Cross, you will find yourself fulfilled!

Dear young people, at the end of our evocative meeting, take up your Cross and carry it as a message of love, forgiveness and missionary commitment through the streets of Rome, through the various regions of Italy and to every corner of the world.

May Mary, who stayed faithfully at the foot of the Cross together with the Apostle John, guide you; may the many Roman saints and martyrs protect you. I too am close to you with my prayer, as I affectionately bless you all.

The Holy Father then spoke extemporaneously:

When I saw these banners, these flagthrowers, I immediately thought of Siena. But the Cardinal then told me that they are not from Siena but from Rome. At a certain point I thought: perhaps St Catherine of Siena is coming to Rome, perhaps the Pope has not behaved well and she has come once again to correct him like a son, but it looks as though he is not so bad.

And in the end, even were St Catherine to come, with so many young people I would not be afraid.

Praised be Jesus Christ! Happy Easter! Goodbye until Sunday!

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