



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE DIOCESE OF ROME

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the end of the Great Jubilee I wish to write you this letter in which, as in an informal conversation, I return to some of the emotions stirred by this extraordinary experience of faith, love and conversion which we have experienced together.

Rome will never be able to forget the numerous crowds of pilgrims from every corner of the earth, who walked its streets, prayed in its basilicas and churches and professed one faith in Christ the Lord and Saviour at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul and those of the martyrs.

The pilgrims, in turn, will not be able to forget the warmth of the joyful and fraternal hospitality of the families, religious communities and parishes of this marvellous city, which showed the world once again its universal vocation and gave proof that she "presides in love over all the Churches".

1. Gratitude

For all these experiences I give thanks with you to the Lord. I recall, in particular, some events that marked the life of the Diocese and were prepared and celebrated with great spiritual intensity and a generous spirit of service: the Diocesan Jubilee, the week of the International Eucharistic Congress with the inspiring Eucharistic procession from St John's Basilica to St Mary Major, the Jubilee of Families and especially the joyful and enthusiastic Jubilee of Young People, which will remain deeply etched in the memory of all who had the grace to take part in it. As I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte*, it will not be easy for the young people themselves, or for the volunteers, the families, the parishes and the religious communities who welcomed them with friendship and kindness, to forget this event in which Rome became "young with the young" (cf. n. 9).

The great Jubilee events, but also the no less important daily activities of the Holy Year, could take

place in the best possible way due to the dedication and commitment of the priests, religious and many faithful of the Diocese. Thank you, Church of Rome, for opening yourself to the grace of the Jubilee and for having accepted this grace with all the enthusiasm of your heart!

I would especially like to mention the volunteers, the families, the parishes and the religious communities who dedicated themselves with enthusiasm and sacrifice to offering hospitality to the pilgrims and to serving the very poor, the disabled and the suffering. In particular, I am thinking of all who welcomed the great number of young people to World Youth Day with joy and responsible commitment.

2. *A glance at the past...*

Since the now distant Vigil of Pentecost of 1986, the journey of the Church of Rome has been marked and nourished by a series of great tasks and events. First of all, the Pastoral Synod for the full acceptance and implementation in our Diocese of the Second Vatican Council's teachings: communion and mission were the key ideas guiding the work of the Synod, whose sessions were themselves a great experience of communion. The Book of the Synod remains the reference-point and *vademecum* for our pastoral activity.

Then, on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1995, I called the Church of Rome to the great "City Mission", in preparation for the Holy Year and to carry out the missionary commitment made at the Synod. Here the key idea was that of the "People of God in mission" and everyone in fact - priests, deacons, religious and, above all, many lay people - became, with faith, courage and dedication, missionaries in families, schools, the workplace and more or less everywhere in the city.

This was followed by the wonderful spiritual experience of the Jubilee, which increased the communion and cooperation of all the realities, vocations and charisms that enrich our Diocese, and gave us further confirmation of how there are many individuals and families, in addition to those who usually take part in the life of our communities, in which we still find the roots of faith and a desire for contact with God and for a life that is not captive to mere ambition and earthly interests.

3. *...to plan for the future*

We can look forward, then, in an attitude of faith and Christian hope, and, as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* (n. 1), "put out into the deep" (cf. *Lk* 5: 4), to "live the present with enthusiasm" and to "look forward to the future with enthusiasm", in the certainty that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever!" (*Heb* 13: 8): for a new and fruitful season of evangelization in our city and throughout the world awaits us.

As we thank the Lord for the gifts we have received, we also ask ourselves about the best ways to make them bear further fruit; in particular, we seek the possible and effective ways to renew our ordinary pastoral work so that it can become permanently and concretely missionary. The great "Diocesan Convention" is dedicated to this goal, and, in response to my invitation, you have scheduled this for next June and are now preparing for it in the parishes, prefectures and other ecclesial circles.

The Apostolic Letter *Novo millennio ineunte* offers a basic outline for the preparation and orientation of this Convention, indicating the decisive factors for the life and witness of the Christian community in Rome as in every other part of the world: each local Church, and so too the Church of Rome, is called to identify "the specific features of a detailed pastoral plan - goals and methods, formation and enrichment of the people involved, the search for the necessary resources - which will enable the proclamation of Christ to reach our people, mould communities, and have a deep and incisive influence in bringing Gospel values to bear in society and culture" (n. 29).

But there is something even more important than reflection and pastoral planning and which alone can give them and all apostolic activity the right direction, fruitfulness and efficacy. I am referring, as you have already understood, to that contemplation of the face of Christ (cf. *Novo millennio ineunte*, II) which becomes the prayer, yearning for holiness and participation in liturgical and sacramental life from which flows the "*high standard of ordinary Christian living*" (ibid., n. 31).

Brothers and sisters of the Church of Rome, I especially urge you, always but particularly in this period when we are making a community discernment in view of future commitments, to allow great room for prayer and for listening to the word of God and to make the most of the Eucharist, especially on Sundays. Our communities "must become genuine 'schools' of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly 'falls in love'" (ibid., n. 33). May the rediscovery of the sacrament of Reconciliation, which we experienced during the Holy Year, continue now and be supported by appropriate catechesis and the generous availability of priests in the confessional.

4. *Ecclesial communion*

I already stressed how pastoral discernment must take place in a spirit of communion. For communion "embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church" (ibid., n. 42). We must therefore "make the Church the home and the school of communion" (ibid., n. 43): this is the challenge that awaits us, "if we wish to be faithful to God's plan and respond to the world's deepest yearnings" (ibid.).

It is a question, above all, of increasing the "spirituality of communion", which helps us to

overcome every vain search for personal success and to exploit all the charisms with which the Lord enriches his Church, and which, "by prompting a trust and openness wholly in accord with the dignity and responsibility of every member of the People of God, supplies institutional reality with a soul" (ibid., n. 45).

There can be many ways and concrete forms for fostering communion in our Diocese, so rich in various spiritual and pastoral experiences, but it is crucial, to this end, that every parish and religious community, every ecclesial reality, and even each baptized person, particularly those who have greater pastoral responsibilities, ask themselves sincerely: what contribution can I make to the growth of full communion in the Church? How can I help to make her the home and school of communion?

5. *Missionary formation*

On the basis of mutual communion, it will be easier to develop that commitment to Christian formation with a specifically missionary thrust that the passing years make ever more clearly necessary. In today's social and cultural context, and given that so many families are unable to provide their children with primary Christian formation, it is our ecclesial communities, beginning with the parishes, that must take up the task of their entire formation, starting with their childhood years and continuing without interruption to their youth, adulthood and old age.

It is a question of forming authentic Christians; this cannot happen without the deep personal involvement of teachers and those who are taught. But it also means giving this whole process a strongly missionary character that will make Christians willing and able to bear clear witness to their faith in all the circumstances of their lives. Only in this way can the "permanent mission", which is our great pastoral goal, become a concrete reality, not only through special programmes, but also and above all in the fabric of our Diocese's daily life with all its various dimensions.

6. *Vocational promotion*

Although every Christian receives his own vocation from the Lord and needs adequate formation to be able to respond to it, the vocations of special consecration, particularly to the priesthood and the consecrated life, retain all their special value. Even the Church of Rome, which has been blessed by God in recent years with the gift of many priestly ordinations, feels today the need to "implement an extensive *plan of vocational promotion*, based on personal contact and involving parishes, schools and families in the effort to foster a more attentive reflection on life's essential values. These reach their fulfilment in the response which each person is invited to give to God's call, particularly when the call implies a total giving of self and of one's energies to the cause of the kingdom" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 46).

I ask each believer and every ecclesial institution, particularly the communities of contemplative

life, to intensify their prayer for vocations. It is the first task and the most necessary. This must be followed by attentive care in promoting, guiding and fostering each individual vocation. It is a task for the whole Diocese and includes the specific responsibility of our diocesan seminaries, which I wish to assure that they are constantly in my thoughts and are especially remembered in my prayer.

7. The ways of permanent mission

The courage to dare and the wisdom of discernment must be expressed especially in planning and developing those forms of mission which we already experienced during the City Mission and which must now be suitably integrated into ordinary pastoral activity and even enriched with new concerns. I am thinking in particular of those fundamental decisions and initiatives such as the visits to families (which were followed by organizing the home centres for listening to the Gospel), the missionary witnesses in living and working environments, the dialogue in the light of faith with the cultural institutions of our city. If these decisions are to find a suitable background and support, however, catechesis, liturgical activity and the various initiatives of our communities must acquire features that are more clearly missionary. They can do this by always focusing on the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the only Saviour, and by making this witness respond to the questions, concerns and expectations which is interwoven with the daily life of our people.

At the very moment when the missionary commitment is spurring our parishes and the various ecclesial contexts to come out of themselves in order to offer the meeting with Christ to everyone, we are encountering many old and new forms of suffering and poverty in the homes and neighbourhoods of Rome. For us too, now is "the time for a new 'creativity' in charity, not only by ensuring that help is effective but also by 'getting close' to those who suffer, so that the hand that helps is seen not as a humiliating handout but as a sharing between brothers and sisters" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 50). On this frontier of charity, where the Church of Rome has been engaged throughout her entire history, I ask for a united and generous presence that involves every Church member.

No less necessary is a constant attention to the vast world of culture in the variety of its expressions. The "Christian-oriented cultural project" that represents one of the great priorities of the Church in Italy must make ever more concrete advances especially in Rome. It is not only a question of being present in places more specifically devoted to fostering and communicating culture, but also of being able to make an impression on the mentality and culture through daily pastoral activity. It will also be necessary to make every believer aware of what his work, convictions and lifestyle can contribute to the formation of a more Christian social environment in the city.

I do not need to stress the importance of family ministry for a far-reaching missionary commitment at this historical moment when the family itself, even in Rome, is experiencing a deep and

widespread crisis. Precisely for this reason we cannot be satisfied with attention to the family that is occasional or limited to the closest and most open families. The Church's maternal face must be seen instead, as far as possible, in every family through the work of the Bishops, but also through the witness and concern of Christian families who can "show convincingly that it is possible to live marriage fully in keeping with God's plan and with the true good of the human person - of the spouses, and of the children who are more fragile" (*Novo millennio ineunte*, n. 47).

World Youth Day, in its celebration and in all its preparatory work, in which the Diocese of Rome distinguished itself, gave us proof that it would be an unforgivable mistake not to trust in that "special gift of the Spirit of God" which young people are for Rome and for the Church (cf. *ibid.*, n. 9). We could see with our own eyes that many young people are in love with Christ and know how to overcome the insidious temptation of separating Christ from the Church. These young people can and must become the first missionaries to their friends and peers: the new apostolic enthusiasm that we intend to give to the whole life of our Church requires that their capacity for being authentic and credible witnesses to the Lord should be cultivated and developed through an attitude of trust and suitable formation.

8. *The love of Christ impels us (2 Cor 5: 14)*

Dear brothers and sisters, the months from now until the June Convention will give you an opportunity to listen to the Spirit who speaks to his Church and to listen to one another, in order to discover together the most effective ways to make the commitment to the new evangelization a permanent one.

But we are well aware of how all the enthusiasm, energy and devotion of the evangelizers comes from that source which is the love of God, poured out into our hearts by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

This love embraces, in Christ, all our fellow men and women, who are called like us to faith and salvation. In particular, it embraces everyone who lives in this great city, poor and rich, young and old, Italians and foreigners. And with them it embraces the entire city, to whose authentic human and civil progress we wish to make, as believers in Christ, the most sincere contribution. Let us undertake, then, especially to live the preparation for the Convention and all that will follow *as an act of love*.

May Mary Most Holy, *Salus Populi Romani*, the Apostles Peter and Paul and all the saints of the Church of Rome sustain us by their intercession so that together we may all fulfil with fidelity and trust the mission that the Lord entrusts to us.

As a sign of my great affection I cordially give everyone my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of the grace and joy that come from the Holy Spirit.

From the Vatican, 14 February 2001.

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