



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE CATHOLIC LAITY OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Sistine Chapel

Sunday, 26 November 1978

1. I wish to express in the first place my great joy at this meeting of ours today. I thank the Cardinal Vicar of Rome who, together with the Auxiliary Bishops, organized this meeting, in which there participate the representatives of the laity of this first diocese in the Church, whose Bishop I have just become, by the Will of Christ. All the organizations of the apostolate of the laity in the diocese of Rome are present here in the person of their representatives, accompanied by the spiritual Assistants of the individual organizations. Assuming my episcopal service in Rome, after twenty years' experience in the Archdiocese of Krakow, I must declare in the first place that I attach great importance to the apostolate of the laity, with regard to which, in the preceding circumstances so different from those I find here, I tried always to do my best. A particular reason for my joy is the fact that we meet on the feast of Christ the King of the Universe, which, of all the days in the liturgical year, is perhaps the most suitable one, also because of some traditions, to assume the duty of our collaboration. We are undertaking this collaboration of ours, dear Brothers and Sisters, in the celebration of the Holy Sacrifice in order to return in this way to the Upper Room, which became, both on Holy Thursday and on the day of Pentecost, the extraordinary place of the "sending of the apostles".

2. The divine word of today's liturgy, which we are listening to with the utmost attention, brings us into the depth of the mystery of Christ the King. All the readings speak of it. I wish particularly to call your attention to St Paul's words to the Corinthians; he makes a comparison between the two dimensions of human existence: the one that is our participation in Adam and the one we obtain in Christ. Man's participation in Adam means disobedience: "Non serviam"—I will not serve. And that very "I will not serve" in which it seemed to man that he could hear the signal of liberation and the challenge of his own greatness pitted against God himself, became the source of sin and death. And we are still witnesses how that ancient "I will not serve" brings a multiple dependence and slavery in man. It is a subject for deep analysis, which it is difficult to make now in all its extension. We must be content with a mere reference. Christ, the new Adam, is he who enters man's history just "to serve". "The Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life" (Mt 20: 28): this is, in a certain sense, the fundamental definition of his Kingdom. In this service, according to the model of Christ, man finds again his full dignity, his marvellous vocation, his kingliness. It is worth recalling here the words of the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* on the Church, in chapter IV which is dedicated to the laity in the Church and their apostolate: "Since he wishes to continue his witness and his service through the laity also, the supreme and eternal priest, Christ Jesus, vivifies them

with his spirit and ceaselessly impels them to accomplish every good and perfect work. To those whom he intimately joins to his life and mission he also gives a share in his priestly office, to offer spiritual worship for the glory of the Father and the salvation of man ... And so, worshipping everywhere by their holy actions, the laity consecrate the world itself to God." (*Lumen Gentium*, 34). To serve God means to reign. In this task, which expresses the attitude of Christ himself and of his followers, the inheritance of sin is broken. And the "kingdom of truth and life, the kingdom of holiness and grace, the kingdom of justice, love and peace" is initiated (Preface for the feast of Christ the King).³ Today's liturgy lets us see, as it were, two stages of serving-reigning. The first stage is the Church's life on earth; the second one is of judgment. The true meaning of the first stage becomes understandable through the significance of the second. Before the Son of man presents himself before each of us, and before all, as Judge who will separate "the sheep from the goats", he is always with us as the Shepherd who looks after his sheep. He wishes to share the same solicitude with us, with each of us. He wishes his service to become ours in the widest meaning of the word. "Ours" means not only the service of the bishops, priests and religious, but also, in the widest sense of the word, of the laity. Of all. Because this service-solicitude requires the participation of all. "I was hungry.. I was thirsty.. I was a stranger... naked... sick... in prison... ", persecuted, oppressed, troubled, unconscious, doubtful, abandoned, threatened (perhaps even in the mother's womb). There is an enormous range of needs and duties that we must catch a glimpse of, that we must place before our eyes, if we wish to be "in solidarity with Christ". Because, when all is said and done, that is just what it amounts to: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25 :40). Christ is on man's side; and he is on the side of both parties; on the side of the one who is waiting for solicitude, service and charity; and on the side of the one who renders service, bears solicitude, shows love. There exists, therefore, a great space for our solidarity with Christ. a great space for the apostolate of all, for the apostolate of the laity in particular. Unfortunately it becomes impossible once more in the framework of this short homily to make a more detailed analysis of this subject. However, the words of today's liturgy urge us to reread them again, to meditate on them and to put into practice all that has become, in such ample dimensions, the subject of the teaching of the Council on the lay apostolate. In the past the concept of the apostolate seemed to be almost reserved only for those who are "in their official capacity" the successor of the Apostles, who express and guarantee the apostolicity of the Church. The Second Vatican Council revealed what large fields of apostolate were always accessible to the laity. At the same time it again stimulated to this apostolate. It is enough to quote just one sentence of the decree *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, which in a certain sense contains and sums up everything: "The Christian vocation is, of its nature, a vocation to the apostolate as well" (n. 2).⁴ My dear Brothers and Sisters! I wish to express my particular joy at this meeting with you, who have made, here in Rome, the truth on the Christian vocation, understood as the call to the apostolate of the laity, the programme of your life. I am glad and I hope that you will keep me informed of your problems, and introduce me to the various fields of your activity. I am happy to be able to enter upon these paths along which you are already walking, to be able to accompany you along them and also to guide you as your Bishop. It was for this very reason that I so much wanted us to be able to meet on the feast of Christ the King of the Universe. I want him to receive us himself. Perhaps it is necessary for him to hear from us this question, which his different interlocutors so often asked him: "What shall I do?" (Lk 18:18); what are we to do? I will recall again what his Mother said at Cana in Galilee to the servant of the steward of the feast: "Do whatever he tells you" (Jn 2:5). We turn our eyes to this Mother; hope is born in us again and we answer: we are ready! © Copyright 1978 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana