



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II FOR LENT 1999

The Lord will prepare a banquet for all peoples (cf. *Is 25:6*)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The season of Lent which we are about to observe is yet another gift from God, who wants to help us to rediscover ourselves as his sons and daughters, created and made new through Christ by the love of the Father in the Holy Spirit.

1. The Lord will prepare a banquet for all peoples. These words which inspire the present Lenten Message lead us first to reflect upon the gracious providence of the Heavenly Father towards all men and women. We see this providence in the very act of creation, when God “saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (*Gen 1:31*). It is then confirmed in the privileged relationship with the people of Israel, whom God chooses as his own people to begin the work of salvation. Finally, in Jesus Christ this gracious providence comes to its fulness: in him, the blessing of Abraham is shared with all peoples and through faith we receive the promise of the Spirit (cf. *Gal 3:14*).

Lent is the favourable time to offer to the Lord sincere thanks for the wonders he has done for humanity in every age, and especially in the Redemption when he did not spare his own Son (cf. *Rom 8:32*).

The discovery of God’s saving presence in the flux of human experience spurs us to conversion. It gives us the sense of being loved by God and impels us to praise and glorify him. With Saint Paul we repeat: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him in love” (*Eph 1:3-4*). God himself invites us to undertake a journey of penance and inner purification in order to renew our faith. He calls us ceaselessly to himself, and whenever we experience the defeat inflicted by sin he shows us the way back to his house, where we find again that unique loving care which he has lavished on us in Christ. Thus, gratitude fills our hearts because of the experience of love which the Father shows us.

2. The Lenten journey prepares us for the celebration of Christ's Passover, the mystery of our salvation. Anticipating this mystery, there is the banquet which the Lord celebrates with his disciples on Holy Thursday, offering himself under the signs of bread and wine. In the Eucharistic celebration, as I wrote in the Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, "the Risen Lord becomes really, substantially and enduringly present. . . and the Bread of Life is offered as a pledge of future glory" (No. 39).

The banquet is a sign of joy, because in it we see the intense communion of all who take part. The Eucharist is therefore the realization of the banquet for all the peoples foretold by the Prophet Isaiah (cf. *Is* 25:6), and we cannot fail to see in it an eschatological meaning. Through faith, we know that the Paschal Mystery has already been accomplished in Christ; but it has still to be accomplished fully in each of us. In his Death and Resurrection, the Son of God has bestowed upon us the gift of eternal life, which begins in the Paschal Mystery but will have its definitive fulfilment in the eternal Easter of heaven. Many of our brothers and sisters can bear their situation of misery, discomfort and sickness only because they are certain that one day they will be called to the eternal banquet of heaven. Lent therefore directs our gaze beyond the present time, beyond history, beyond the horizon of this world, towards perfect and eternal communion with the Most Holy Trinity.

The blessing which we receive in Christ breaks down for us the wall of time and opens to us the door which leads us to a full share in the life of God. "Blessed are those invited to the wedding-banquet of the Lamb" (*Rev* 19:9): we cannot forget that in this banquet – anticipated in the Sacrament of the Eucharist – our life finds its final goal. Christ has gained for us not only new dignity in our life on earth, but above all the new dignity of the children of God, called to share eternal life with him. Lent invites us to overcome the temptation of seeing the realities of this world as definitive and to recognize that "our homeland is in heaven" (*Phil* 3:20).

3. In contemplating this wonderful call which comes to us from the Father in Christ, we cannot fail to see the love the Father has for us. This year of preparation for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 is meant to help us renew our sense that God is the Father who in the beloved Son shares with us his own life. From the history of salvation which he accomplishes with us and for us, we learn to live with new fervour the life of charity (cf. *1 Jn* 4:10ff.) – the theological virtue which in my Apostolic Letter *Tertio Millennio Adveniente* I urged people to explore more deeply during 1999.

The experience of the Father's love urges Christians to give of themselves to others, obeying a logic of service and solidarity in openness to their brothers and sisters. The arenas in which the Church through the centuries has borne witness to God's love in her word and action are vast. Still today we see immense areas in which the work of Christians must bring to bear the charity of God. New forms of poverty and the pressing questions which trouble many hearts await a concrete and appropriate response. Those who are lonely, those on the margins of society, the hungry, the victims of violence, those who have no hope must be able to experience, in the Church's loving

care, the tenderness of the Heavenly Father who, from the very beginning of the world, has kept every individual in mind in order to fill each one with his blessings.

4. If we live Lent with our eyes fixed on the Father, it becomes a unique time of charity, manifested in our works of spiritual and corporal mercy. Our thoughts go especially to those excluded from the banquet of everyday consumerism. There are many like Lazarus who knock on the door of society – all those who have no share in the material benefits which progress has brought. There are situations of persistent misery which cannot but impinge upon the conscience of Christians, reminding them of their duty to address these situations both as individuals and as a community.

It is not only individuals who have opportunities to show their readiness to invite the poor to share in their prosperity. International institutions, national governments and the centres controlling the world economy must all undertake brave plans and projects to ensure a more just sharing of the goods of the earth, both within individual countries and in relations between nations.

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters, as we begin the journey of Lent I address this Message to you in order to encourage you along the path of conversion, a path which leads to an ever deeper knowledge of the mystery of goodness which God has in store for us. May Mary, Mother of mercy, strengthen us as we go. She knew the Father's loving plan and was the first to welcome it; she believed and she is "blessed among women" (*Lk 1:42*). She was obedient in suffering and so was the first to share in the glory of the children of God.

May Mary comfort us with her presence; may she be "a sure sign of hope" (*Lumen Gentium*, 68) and intercede with God, that there may be for us a fresh outpouring of divine mercy.

From the Vatican, 15 October 1998

JOHN PAUL II