

## Lent 2001: Papal Lenten Message

"Behold, we are going up to Jerusalem" (Mk 10:33). With these words, the Lord invites the disciples to journey with him along the road that leads from Galilee to the place where he will complete his redemptive mission. The road towards Jerusalem, which the Evangelists present as the crowning point of Jesus' earthly journey, is the model for the Christian who is committed to following the Teacher on the Way of the Cross. Also the men and women of today are asked by Christ to "go up to Jerusalem". He insists on this, particularly in Lent, a propitious time for self-conversion and for finding full communion with Him, intimately taking part in the mystery of his death and resurrection.

Lent, therefore, represents for believers the opportune occasion for a profound re-examination of life. In the contemporary world, alongside the generous testimonies of the Gospel, there are baptised who, in the face of the demanding appeal to set out "up to Jerusalem", offer indifferent resistance and sometimes even open rebellion. There are situations in which the experience of prayer is lived in a somewhat superficial way, in a way that the word of God does not penetrate into life. Even the Sacrament of Penance itself is thought by many to be insignificant and the celebration of Sunday Liturgy only as a duty to be fulfilled.

How is one to accept the invitation to conversion that Jesus addresses to us also in this Lenten Season? How can a serious change in life come to be realised? It is necessary first of all to open the heart to the touching messages of the liturgy. The period that leads to Easter represents a providential gift of the Lord and a precious opportunity to draw closer to him, turning inward and listening to his voice within us.

2. Some Christians think they are able to do without such a constant spiritual effort because they do not heed the urgency of confronting themselves with the truth of the Gospel. So as not to disturb their way of living, they attempt to empty and make innocuous words such as: "Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you" (Lk 6:27). For these persons such words sound so difficult to accept and translate into a coherent conduct of life. In fact, they are words that, if taken seriously, demand a radical conversion. Instead, when one is offended or hurt, one is tempted to give in to the psychological mechanisms of self-pity and revenge, ignoring the invitation of Jesus to love one's enemy. Nevertheless, daily human events clearly evidence how much forgiveness and reconciliation are undeniably needed for bringing about a real personal and social renewal. This is valid in interpersonal relations but also among communities as well as nations.

3. The numerous and tragic conflicts which tear at humanity, sometimes also arising from misunderstood religious motives, have left marks of hatred and violence among peoples. Occasionally, this occurs also among groups and factions within a nation itself. In fact, with a sad sense of helplessness, we assist at times to the return of skirmishes, which were believed definitively settled. This gives the impression that some people are involved in a spiral of unstoppable violence that will continue to reap victims upon victims, without a concrete solution envisioned. The desires for peace that arise from every part of the world are thus ineffective: the necessary commitment to move toward the desired agreement does not appear to take root.

In the face of this alarming scenario, Christians cannot remain indifferent. It is for this reason that, in the Jubilee Year just concluded I spoke out asking God's pardon for the Church and for the sins of Her children. We are well aware that the guilt of Christians somewhat darkened the spotless face. However, trusting in God's merciful

love, which does not take into account evil in the face of repentance, we are also able to continually return with confidence to the path. The love of God finds its highest expressions precisely when man, sinful and thankless, is brought back to full communion with him. In this perspective, the "purification of the memory" is above all the renewed confession of Divine mercy, a confession that the Church, at the various levels, is called each time to acknowledge as Her own with renewed conviction.

4. The only way to peace is forgiveness. To accept and give forgiveness makes possible anew quality of rapport between men, interrupting the spiral of hatred and revenge and breaks the chains of evil which bind the heart of rivals. For nations in search of reconciliation and for those hoping for peaceful coexistence among individuals and peoples, there is no other way than forgiveness received and offered. How rich are the beneficial teachings which resonate in the words of the Lord: "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good and sends rain on the just and on the unjust (Mt 5:44-45)! To love the one who offends you disarms the adversary and is able to transform a battlefield into a place of supportive co-operation.

This is a challenge that concerns individuals but also communities, peoples and all humanity. It concerns families in a special way. It is not easy to convert one's self to forgiveness and reconciliation. To reconcile can already seem problematic when at the origin there is self-guilt. If then the other is guilty, to reconcile one's self can be seen even as an unreasonable humiliation. To take this path, it is necessary to experience interior conversion; the courage of humble obedience to the command of Jesus is necessary. His word leaves no doubt: not only the one who provokes the estranged, but also the one who suffers must find reconciliation (cf. Mt 5:23-24). The Christian must make peace even when feeling as the victim of one who has unjustly offended and struck. The Lord himself acted in this manner. He waits for the disciples to follow him, co-operating in this way in the brotherly redemption.

In our times, forgiveness appears more and more as a necessary dimension for an authentic social renewal and for the strengthening of peace in the world. The Church, announcing forgiveness and love of enemies, is conscious to inspire in the spiritual patrimony of all humanity a new way of relating to each other; a somewhat difficult way but rich in hope. In this the Church knows to rely on the help of the Lord, who never abandons one who turns to him in difficulty.

5. "Love is not resentful" (1 Cor 13:5). In this expression from the First Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul recalls that forgiveness is one of the highest forms of practising charity. Lent represents a propitious time to further deepen the significance of this virtue. Through the Sacrament of Reconciliation, the Father gives to us in Christ his forgiveness and this encourages us to live in love, considering the other not as an enemy but as a brother.

May this time of penance and reconciliation encourage believers to think and act in the sign of authentic charity, open to all the human dimensions. This inner attitude will lead them to carry the fruits of the Spirit (cf. Gal 5:22) and to offer with a new heart material help to those who are in need.

A heart reconciled with God and with neighbour is a generous heart. In the holy days of Lent the "offering" assumes a deeper meaning, because it is not just giving something from the surplus to relieve one's conscience, but to truly take upon one's self the misery present in the world. To look at the suffering face and the conditions of misery of many brothers and sisters forces us to share at least part of our own

goods with those in difficulty. The Lenten offering brings about an added richness of meaning if the one making the offering is freed from resentment and indifference, obstacles which keep us far from communion with God and with our brothers and sisters.

The world expects from Christians a consistent witness of communion and solidarity. In this context the words of the Apostle John are very enlightening: "But if any one has the world's goods and sees his brother in need, yet closes his heart against him, how does God's love abide in him?" (1 Jn 3:17).

Brothers and Sisters! Saint John Chrysostom, commenting on the teaching of Our Lord on the way to Jerusalem, recalls that Christ does not leave the disciples ignorant of the struggles and sacrifices that awaited them. He underscores that to renounce the "I" is difficult. However it is not impossible when one is able to count on the help of God granted us "through the communion with the person of Christ" (PG 58, 619 s).

That is why, in this Lenten Season, I want to invite all believers to an ardent and confident prayer to the Lord, because it allows each person to experience anew his mercy. Only this gift will help us to welcome and live the love of Christ in an ever more joyful and generous way, a love which "does not insist on its own way; it is not resentful; it does not rejoice at wrong, but rejoices in the right" (1 Cor 13:5-6).

With these sentiments I invoke the protection of the Mother of Mercy on the Lenten journey of the entire Community of believers and impart my heartfelt Apostolic Blessing on each of you.

From the Vatican, 7 January 2001.