



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION AT THE PARISH
OF ST ANDREW IN AVELLINO (ITALY)

HOMILY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II

Sunday, 16 February 1997

1. *“Behold I establish my covenant with you”* (Gn 9:8).

The Liturgy of the Word for this First Sunday of Lent presents us with the covenant God made through Noah with men and creation after the flood. Once again we have heard the solemn words spoken by God: “Behold, I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you.... I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth” (Gn 9:9-11).

This covenant has a characteristic value of its own in the Old Testament. God, Creator of man and of all living beings, had with the flood destroyed, in a certain sense, all that he had brought into being. This punitive decision had been provoked by the spread of sin in the world after the original fall of our first parents.

However, the waters had spared Noah and his family along with the animals he had taken with him into the ark. In this way man and the other living beings were saved, and, having survived the Creator’s punishment, after the flood they constituted the beginning of a new covenant between God and creation.

The rainbow was the tangible sign of this covenant: “I set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant which is between me and you” (Gn 9:13-15).

2. Today's readings therefore allow us to consider man and the world in which we live in a new way. Indeed, the world and man not only represent the reality of life as an expression of God's creative work, but are also images of the covenant. All creation speaks of this covenant.

Down the various ages of history men have continued to commit sins, perhaps even greater than those described before the flood. However, from the words of the covenant God made with Noah we realize that now there is no sin that can bring God to destroy the world he himself created.

Today's liturgy opens our eyes to a new vision of the world. It helps us to become aware of the world's value in the eyes of God, who included the whole work of creation in the covenant made with Noah and committed himself to preserving it from destruction.

3. Lent began last Wednesday with the distribution of ashes, and today is the first Sunday in this important season, which is related to the 40-day fast begun by Christ after his baptism in the Jordan. St Mark, who accompanies us in the Sunday liturgy this year, writes in this regard: "The Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. And he was in the wilderness 40 days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels ministered to him" (Mk 1:12-13).

St Matthew, in the parallel passage, notes only the answer the Lord gave the tempter who challenged him to turn stones into bread: "If you are the Son of God command these stones to become loaves of bread" (Mt 4:3). Jesus replies: "It is written, man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4; cf. Gospel acclamation). This is one of Christ's three answers to Satan, who sought to ensnare and overcome him by referring to the three concupiscences of fallen human nature.

At the beginning of Lent, Christ's victory over the devil gives us an indication of how to defeat evil with asceticism, of which fasting is an expression, in order to live this season in a genuine way.

4. Dear brothers and sisters of St Andrew Avellino Parish! I am pleased to be with you today to celebrate the Lord's Day on this First Sunday of Lent! I greet the Cardinal Vicar, the Auxiliary Bishop of the area, your zealous parish priest, Fr Giuseppe Grazioli, and all of you who are taking part in this Eucharistic celebration. I extend an affectionate greeting to the pre-school children with their mothers, to the boys and girls who are preparing to receive Confirmation or First Communion, to the young people and to the members of the senior citizens' centre, to the cultural group and the choir, to the editors of the parish bulletin and the Caritas volunteers, to the catechists and to the members of the pastoral council. To all without exception I offer my greetings and my encouragement to live in full communion with the Church and to witness generously to the Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, may your parish, which is a significant gathering place in this suburb, always be safe for children and young people, a meeting point for adults and the elderly and a

place of listening and sharing for all. This new and functional church, inaugurated and dedicated by the Cardinal Vicar on 20 October last, will not fail to foster participation in liturgical life and will allow each of you an ever greater communion and authentic spiritual solidarity.

5. "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand, repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). These words of the Evangelist Mark re-echo in our hearts. The Gospel opens with the mission of Jesus, a mission that will be brought to fulfilment in the paschal events. The Church continues this mission in time, a mission to which each of us is called to make his own personal contribution, by proclaiming and bearing witness to Christ, who died and rose for the world's salvation.

The *city mission* that will take place in Lent next year at the parish level fits within this context. Today, precisely in preparation for this mission, the distribution of the Gospel officially begins, so that it will reach every family and area of the city. With great joy I have also given your representatives a copy of the Gospel of Mark, disciple and faithful interpreter of the Apostle Peter.

6. St Peter writes in his First Letter: "For Christ also died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous ... [in the spirit] he went and preached to the spirits in prison, who formerly did not obey, when God's patience waited in the days of Noah, during the building of the ark, in which a few, that is, eight persons were saved through water" (1 Pt 3:18-20). Peter's words refer to the covenant with Noah, mentioned in the first reading. This covenant represents a model, a symbol, a figure of the New Covenant which God made with all humanity in Jesus Christ, through his death on the Cross and his Resurrection. If the Old Covenant primarily concerned creation, the New Covenant, based on Christ's paschal mystery, is the Covenant of Redemption.

In the text we have heard, the Apostle Peter refers to the sacrament of Baptism. The destructive waters of the flood give way to the sanctifying waters of Baptism. Baptism is the fundamental sacrament in which the Covenant of man's redemption is realized. Since the origin of Christian tradition, the whole of Lent has been a preparation for Baptism which was administered to catechumens at the solemn Easter Vigil.

Dear brothers and sisters, especially in this Lenten season let us renew our awareness of our Covenant with God. God made a covenant with Noah and included it in the work of creation. Christ, Redeemer of man and of all man, brought the Creator's work to completion by his Death and Resurrection.

We have been redeemed by the blood of Christ. Christ died for sins once for all, the righteous for the unrighteous.

Amen!

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