



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
FOR THE TEACHERS AND STUDENTS
OF ROME'S UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

Tuesday, 15 December 1998

1. *"The Lord is near to those who seek him"* (Resp. Psalm, Italian Lectionary).

The words of the responsorial psalm recall the meaning of Advent and emphasize the attitude we must have if we are fully to live this liturgical season. The message is particularly significant for those who are led by their faith and professional commitment to make this search an important dimension of their lives.

Today, this message is addressed especially to you, distinguished and beloved representatives of the universities of Rome and Italy: rectors, teachers and students, ever more numerous at this traditional Advent gathering in preparation for the holy feast of Christmas. I extend a cordial welcome to you all. I greet the Minister for Universities and Scientific Research and the other academic authorities; I greet the delegation of administrators who are attending this gathering for the first time. I thank the rector and the student who, in a certain sense, have spoken in the name of the whole Roman and Italian academic community.

2. Our gathering takes place in the liturgical season of Advent, which offers profound and inspiring messages. Before the Lord who is now close at hand — *"Dominus prope!"* (Phil 4:5) — and to the King whom we must worship — *"Regem venturum, dominum, venite adoremus"* (From the *Roman Breviary*) — we must let ourselves be challenged by the great questions of life. These questions, which are always timely, concern man's origins and his end. These are questions which were asked by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Gaudium et spes*. These questions constantly accompany us and, indeed, it could be said that they are always with us. Who am I? Where do I come from and where am I going? What is the meaning of my life and of my being a human creature? Why do I have this eternal "restlessness" in me, as St Augustine liked to call it? Why must I constantly fulfil the requirements of morality, distinguish good from evil, do good and avoid and vanquish evil? These are questions no one can avoid. Sacred Scripture, starting with the Book of

Genesis, offers exhaustive answers to them. And these answers represent in some way the content of the Church's Advent, which makes the past present and directs us to the future.

"The Lord is near to those who seek him", today's liturgy says, opening fascinating horizons for us. "Near" and "far" are categories linked to distances that can be measured in space, hours, years, centuries and millenniums. However, the context of Advent invites us to consider the profound spiritual dimension of this distance, that is, its reference to God. What is it and how is it possible to perceive nearness or farness from God? Is it not in man's "restless heart" that the spiritual dimension of God's nearness or distance is most perceptibly and appropriately revealed?

3. Man is all this: visibility and mystery, nearness and distance from God, fragile possession and continuous searching. Only by understanding these inner co-ordinates of the human being can we understand Advent as a time of waiting for the Messiah.

Who is the Messiah, Redeemer of the world? Why does he come and in what does his coming consist? Once again, to penetrate this movement we must refer to the Book of Genesis. It reveals to us that it is sin and its entry into history which created the distance between man and God, eloquently symbolized by the expulsion of Adam and Eve, our first parents, from earthly paradise.

God himself then shows that man's distance created by sin is not irreversible. Indeed, he urges humanity to await the Anointed One, who will come through the power of the Holy Spirit to confront evil, indeed, the prince of lies. The Book of Genesis expressly announces that he is the Son of woman and invites us to await him and to prepare to receive him worthily. In explaining and expanding the announcement, the later books of the Old Covenant, speak of the Messiah who will be born in Israel, the people chosen by God from among all the peoples.

As "the fullness of time" (*Gal 4:4*) approaches, its expectation is fulfilled and its meaning and value are better and better understood. With John the Baptist, this waiting becomes a concrete question, which the followers of the Precursor ask Christ: "Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?" (*Lk 7:19*). This same question will be put to him many times. We know that Christ's answer was the cause of his death and crucifixion, but we can say indirectly that it was also the cause of his resurrection, of the full manifestation of his Messiahship. This is what is known as salvation history. In this marvellous way the promise made to humanity after the original sin would be fulfilled.

4. Dear brothers and sisters, the Advent season is given to us so that once again we can make this question our own: "Are you the Messiah? Are you the Son of God?". It is not simply a question of imitating the disciples of John the Baptist or of repeating the past; on the contrary, we must intensely experience the questions and hopes of our day.

Daily experience and the events of every age show that humanity and each individual are always awaiting the answer Christ gives. Christ advances in history; he reaches out to us as the awaited fulfilment of human history. We will find the definitive answer to the question haunting the human spirit about the Messiah's coming only in him who fills the fleeting horizon of time and earthly realities, however marvellous and attractive.

For you, dear students and distinguished teachers, waiting for Christ must also be translated into a daily quest for the

truth that illumines the paths of life in all its expressions. Truth then spurs us to love, to the authentic witness that transforms one's personal life and the very structures of society.

Biblical revelation clearly stresses the profound, intrinsic link between truth and love, when it urges us to "speak the truth in love" (*Eph 4:15*), and especially when Jesus, who reveals the Father, says: "I am the way, and the truth and the life" (*Jn 14:16*).

It is in love that we reach the summit of the knowledge of God, that love which illumines and transforms the human heart with the Truth of Christ. Man needs love; he needs truth, if he is not to squander the fragile treasure of freedom.

5. In the university we find *a living sign of the Gospel in the chapel*. I am pleased to see that more and more of them are being established in the city's various university centres. This evening I wish to give each and every one of them *the cross of the City Mission*. Dear friends, love the university chaplaincies, willingly give your support to the many important pastoral activities that are continually offered there.

Here I wish to express my appreciation to those teachers who are devoting time and energy *to preparing the Jubilee of University Teachers* and to those who are actively working on the *World Day of Youth in the Year 2000*, after the one in Paris. I am also pleased to see that *cultural groups* are being formed in the various faculties, and I hope that they will serve the Word which, sown in the most daring fields of research, makes them bear fruit for mankind's benefit.

I likewise pray that the programme of *university catecheses on the Our Father*, which are becoming more intensive in this year of the Mission dedicated to the various milieus, will help every believer to deepen his sense of being called to be a Gospel leaven in the university world.

6. "*Regem venturum, Dominum, venite adoremus!*"

The Advent season, especially the Christmas Novena which we will begin tomorrow, spurs us to turn our gaze to the Lord who comes. It is the certainty of his glorious return which gives meaning to our waiting and to our daily work. As we look at him with the inner attitude of Mary, the Virgin who listens, our daily efforts, sometimes difficult and tiring, are invigorated and our diligent searching becomes fruitful.

"The Lord is near to those who seek him!", the liturgy tells us again and again in these days. Let us turn our eyes to him and call upon him:

Come, Lord Jesus! Come, Redeemer of man! Come to save us!

Dominus prope: the Lord is near to those who seek him!

Come, let us adore him!

Amen!

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