



The Holy See

ADVENT MASS FOR THE FACULTY AND STUDENTS OF THE ROMAN STATE UNIVERSITIES

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Tuesday, 10 December 2002

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. *"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God" (Is 40,1).*

With this invitation the section of the Book of Isaiah known as the "Book of Consolation" begins. In it the Second Isaiah brings to the people in exile the *joyful proclamation of liberation*. The time of punishment is over; Israel can look forward confidently to the future: at long last it awaits the return to its native soil.

This joyful proclamation *also applies to us*. Basically, we are all travellers on the road of life. Life is a long road on which each human being, a pilgrim of the Absolute, struggles to find a safe and stable dwelling place. The passing of time confirms to the human person that this dwelling place is not to be found here on earth. Our true and definitive home is heaven. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews will say: *"For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city which is to come"* (Heb 13,14).

In this perspective the word of the prophet is consoling. He confirms for us that *God walks with us*: *"Comfort, comfort my people... And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together"* (Is 40,1.5). In the night of Bethlehem, the Word of God became *our travelling companion*. He took our flesh and accepted to share even to death our condition. So then in faith we can accept in all its force his hopeful wish: *"Comfort, comfort my people!"*.

2. With this sense of intimate joy, I greet you, distinguished rectors and professors, and you, dear

students of the Roman universities. I express my gratitude to each one of you for not wanting to miss our traditional meeting in the Advent season.

I especially greet the [Italian] Vice Minister for Universities, and the delegation of Italian university rectors present at this celebration, and the representatives of the historic European universities. I thank the Rector of the University of "Tor Vergata" and the student of "La Sapienza" for their kind expression of your sentiments. I feel completely at home with you.

The mystery of Christmas brings a message of truth about God's realization of his saving plan
3. Let us listen to the prophet. He helps us to understand better the message of joy that the mystery of Christmas brings to the people of every time and culture. The birth of Christ *is a consoling proclamation for all humanity*.

Yes, *"the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together"* (Is 40,5). We can all contemplate it and be enlightened by it. Before this glory, the prophet continues, *"all flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field"* (Is 40,7).

The glory of God and the glory of humanity: can human glory ever compare with divine glory? Can any power on earth ever compare with the Lord? The great persons of the earth like Nebuchadnezzar, Darius, Cyrus are *"like grass"*, like the flower that *"fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it"* (Is 40,7). Nothing resists God. With his omnipotence, he alone rules the universe and guides the fortunes of persons and history.

Let us reflect on the century that has just ended and on our times: how fragile have the powers proven to be that claimed to impose their supremacy! Even when science, technology and culture claim omnipotence, basically they prove to be like grass that soon shrivels, like a flower that withers and dies.

4. May these words of the prophet that we have heard resound in every heart. They do not mortify human freedom; on the contrary, they enrich it by guiding it on paths of genuine human progress. In this light, the *pastoral care of the university*, which the Church promotes with great care in centres of study and scientific research, can be of great help.

I remember my own experience of the university. From daily contact with students and professors I learned that it is essential to provide *an integral formation* that will prepare young people for life: an education that educates them to assume their role in the *family* and in *society* with responsibility and with not just a professional, but also a human and spiritual competence. From those years that left their mark on my life, I drew useful lessons which I sought to put forward in my essay on Christian ethics, *"Love and Responsibility"*, and in my play about marriage, *"The Jeweller's Shop"*.

5. Let us return to the prophet's text, which today's liturgy offers us. It is a page, rich in meaning, that to the discouraged people foretold: "*Behold, the Lord God comes with might, his arm rules for him*" (Is 40,10). As we will understand better in the mystery of Christmas, tenderness and mercy permeate God's omnipotence. It is *a power of love*, that prefers to bend down to the weak and humble.

The Gospel, just proclaimed, helps us to perceive more deeply this message of hope. The pastor, whom Jesus depicts, leaves ninety-nine sheep on the hills to go in search of the one who was lost (cf. Mt 18,12-14). God does not conceive of humanity as *an anonymous mass*, but he dwells on *each person*, he personally takes care of each one. Christ is the true Shepherd who in his arms gathers his flock: "*he will carry the lambs in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young*" (Is 40,11).

6. The parable of the lost sheep is very telling. Sheep, unlike other animals, for example the dog, are *unable to find their way home* and need the guidance of the shepherd. We are like that, unable to save ourselves by our own efforts. We need the intervention from on High. At Christmas this prodigy of love takes place: *God became one of us* to help us find the road that leads to happiness and salvation.

Distinguished rectors and professors, dear students, let us open our hearts to the Child who will be born for us in Bethlehem! Let us prepare to receive his light to guide our steps and his love that gives vigour to our lives. May the Blessed Virgin, Seat of Wisdom, accompany us in our attentive expectation.

With these sentiments, I express my cordial best wishes to you and to your families. May the celebration of Christmas be peaceful and holy! To all of you a Blessed Advent and Merry Christmas! Amen.

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