



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY

OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO RIO DE JANEIRO, ON THE OCCASION OF THE

2nd WORLD MEETING FOR FAMILIES

(OCTOBER 2-6, 1997) **LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II**

TO THE PRISONERS

IN THE FREI CANECA PENITENTIARY

Dear Brothers,

On the occasion of the Second World Meeting with Families, my thoughts turn to you who are in the Frei Caneca Penitentiary. I do not hide the fact that I suffer with you for your loss of freedom. I can image what that means. I suffer even more because I am aware that many of your families cannot count on your presence as fathers and sons, sometimes the only ones who can save them from destitution. I would therefore like to assure you that the Church is beside you in this time of trial. Christ wants to be with you, supporting you with his word and the certainty of his friendship.

Today the Pope turns to you with this Letter, to bear witness to you of Christ's love and the ecclesial community's attention. Christ and the Apostles experienced the reality of "prison", and St Paul was jailed several times. Jesus says in the Gospel: "I was in prison and you came to me" (Mt 25:36). He feels solidarity with your condition and encourages everyone who shares your problems.

His death on the Cross is also a supreme witness to love and acceptance. Crucified between two men condemned to the same punishment, he promises salvation to the good thief who repented: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). An act of extreme mercy, an extreme gift, which can give confidence even to those who feel totally lost. With this act of forgiveness, the Lord speaks to humanity in every age.

The plan of salvation is for everyone. *No one should feel excluded.* Christ knows every person intimately; with his justice he overcomes every human injustice; with his mercy, he conquers evil and sin. So let the Lord dwell in your hearts! Entrust your hardship to him! He will help you bear it. In private and in silence, you can take part in the meeting that families are currently having in Rio

de Janeiro. Indeed, through your prayers, your sacrifices and your personal renewal, you contribute to the success of this great Feast of Families, and to the conversion of your brothers and sisters.

I would like to take this opportunity to encourage the directors and staff of this penitentiary to support in the best possible way human coexistence, which should always be marked by respect for human dignity and the common good of society.

Lastly, may I express my appreciation of Rio de Janeiro's prison ministry, as I hope that this archdiocesan service will continue to offer human comfort and religious guidance to all who are going through difficult moments in their life.

Dear friends, let me say to you today: "Take heart! The Lord is with you. Do not despair. Make this time of sorrow a time of reparation and personal purification. Be reconciled with God and with your neighbour". With the help of your families, your friends and the Church, which is close to you especially today, I hope you will find a place in society and continue to serve it as good citizens and people responsible for the common good.

Through the intercession of Mary our Mother, Comfort of the Afflicted, I cordially bless you and all your families.

From the Vatican, 30 September 1997.

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II