



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE ARCHBISHOP OF PADUA FOR THE FEAST OF THE EVANGELIST LUKE

To my Venerable Brother Antonio Mattiazzo

Archbishop-Bishop of Padua

1. Among the glories of this Church, the special relationship that links her to the memory of the Evangelist Luke is highly significant. According to tradition, his relics are preserved in the splendid Basilica of St Justina: a precious treasure and truly remarkable gift that arrived there after a providential journey. For, according to ancient testimonies, St Luke died in Boeotia and was buried in Thebes. From there, as St Jerome relates (cf. *De vir. ill.*, VI, I), his bones were brought to Constantinople, to the Basilica of the Holy Apostles. Subsequently, according to sources that historical research is still exploring, they were transferred to Padua.

An opportune occasion for reviving attention and veneration for this "presence", which is rooted in the city's Christian history, has now been offered by the recognition of the body of the holy Evangelist, as well as by the International Congress dedicated to him. The intention was to give it a significant ecumenical dimension, which was also stressed by the fact that the Orthodox Archbishop of Thebes, Hieronymus, has asked to be given a fragment of the relics, to be placed where the first tomb of the Evangelist is still venerated today.

The celebrations taking place on the occasion of this Congress offer a new incentive for this beloved Church in Padua to rediscover the true treasure that St Luke has left us: the Gospel and the Acts of the Apostles.

While congratulating you on the efforts made in this regard, I wish to reflect briefly on several aspects of Luke's message, so that this community may draw guidance and encouragement from it for its spiritual and pastoral journey.

2. As a minister of God's Word (cf. *Lk* 1: 2), Luke leads us to knowledge of the discreet yet penetrating light that radiates from it, while illustrating the reality and events of history. The theme of the Word of God, the golden thread woven through the two works that comprise Luke's writing, also unites the two periods treated by him: the time of Jesus and that of the Church. As if narrating the "history of the Word of God", Luke's story follows its advance from the Holy Land to the ends of the earth. The journey proposed by the third Gospel is profoundly marked by listening to this Word which, like a seed, must be received with goodness and promptness of heart, overcoming the obstacles that prevent it from taking root and bearing fruit (cf. *Lk* 8: 4-15).

An important aspect that Luke highlights is the fact that the Word of God mysteriously grows and spreads even through suffering and in a context of opposition and persecution (cf. *Acts* 4: 1-31; 5: 17-42; *passim*). The Word that St Luke points to is called to become for each generation a spiritual event capable of renewing life. Christian life, instilled and sustained by the Spirit, is an interpersonal dialogue that is based precisely on the Word which the living God addresses to us, asking us to receive it without reservation in mind and heart. In short, it means becoming disciples who are willing to listen to the Lord with sincerity and openness, following the example of Mary of Bethany, who "had chosen the better portion", because she "sat at the Lord's feet and listened to his teaching" (cf. *Lk* 10: 38-42).

In this perspective, I wish to encourage, in the pastoral programming of this beloved Church, the proposal of "Biblical Weeks", the biblical apostolate and pilgrimages to the Holy Land, that place where the Word became flesh (cf. *Jn* 1: 14). I would also like to urge everyone - priests, religious and lay people - to practise and promote *lectio divina*, so that meditation on Sacred Scripture will become an essential element of their lives.

3. "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me" (*Lk* 9: 23).

To be a Christian for Luke means to follow Jesus on the path that he takes (*Lk* 9: 57; 10: 38; 13: 22; 14: 25). It is Jesus himself who takes the initiative and calls us to follow him, and he does it decisively, unmistakably, thus showing his extraordinary identity, his mystery of being the Son who knows the Father and reveals him (cf. *Lk* 10: 22). At the origin of the decision to follow Jesus lies the fundamental option in favour of his person. If we have not been attracted by the face of Christ, it is impossible to follow him with fidelity and constancy. This is also because Jesus walks a difficult road; he lays down extremely demanding conditions and heads for a paradoxical destiny, that of the Cross. Luke emphasizes that Jesus does not like compromises and requires a commitment of the whole person, a decisive detachment from any nostalgia for the past, from family demands, from material possessions (cf. *Lk* 9: 57-62; 14: 26-33).

Man will always be tempted to lessen these radical demands and to adapt them to his own weaknesses, or to give up the path undertaken. But the authenticity and quality of the Christian community's life depends precisely on this. A Church that lives by compromise would be like salt that has lost its taste (cf. *Lk* 14: 34-35).

We must abandon ourselves to the power of the Spirit, who is able to infuse light and especially love for Christ; we must open ourselves to the inner fascination that Jesus works in the hearts of those who aspire to authenticity, while fleeing from half measures. This is certainly difficult for human beings, but it becomes possible with the grace of God (cf. *Lk* 18: 27). On the other hand, if following Christ means carrying the Cross each day, the latter in turn is the tree of life leading to the resurrection. Luke, who emphasizes the radical requirements for following Christ, is also the Evangelist who describes the joy of those who become Christ's disciples (cf. *Lk* 10: 20; 13: 17; 19: 6, 37; *Acts* 5: 41; 8: 39; 13: 48).

4. The importance that Luke gives in his writings to the presence and action of the Spirit is well known, beginning with the Annunciation, when the Paraclete descends on Mary (cf. *Lk* 1: 35), until Pentecost, when the Apostles, moved by the gift of the Spirit, receive the necessary strength to announce the grace of the Gospel throughout the world (cf. *Acts* 1: 8; 2: 1-4). It is the Holy Spirit who moulds the Church. Among the characteristics of the first Christian community, St Luke describes the model which the Church should reflect in every age: it is a community that is united in "one heart and soul", diligent in listening to the Word of God; a community that lives by prayer, that joyfully breaks the Eucharistic bread, that

opens its heart to the needs of the poor, even to sharing its material goods with them (*Acts* 2: 42-47; 4: 32-37). All ecclesial renewal must draw the secret of its authenticity and freshness from this inspiring source.

Beginning with the mother Church of Jerusalem, the Spirit widens their horizons and spurs the Apostles and witnesses all the way to Rome. The history of the early Church unfolds against the background of these two cities: a Church that grows and spreads despite the opposition that threatens her from without and the crises that burden her progress from within. But throughout this whole journey, Luke's real concern is to present the Church in the essence of her mystery: this mystery consists in the everlasting presence of the Lord Jesus who, by acting in her by the power of his Spirit, imbues her with consolation and courage in the trials on her way through history.

5. According to a pious tradition, Luke is thought to have painted the image of Mary, the Virgin Mother. But the real portrait that Luke draws of Jesus' Mother is the one that emerges from the pages of his work: in scenes that have become familiar to the People of God, he draws an eloquent image of the Virgin. The Annunciation, the Visitation, the Nativity, the Presentation in the Temple, life in the home of Nazareth, Jesus' discussion with the doctors and his being lost, and Pentecost have provided abundant material down the centuries for the ever new creations of painters, sculptors, poets and musicians.

So it is fitting that a reflection on the theme of art was planned for the International Congress, accompanied by an exhibition of valuable works.

What is most important however is to discover that, through pictures of Marian life, Luke introduces us to *Mary's interior life*, helping us at the same time to understand her *unique role in salvation history*.

Mary is the one who says *fiat*, a personal and total "yes" to God's invitation, calling herself the "handmaid of the Lord" (Lk 1: 38). This attitude of total assent to God and unconditional acceptance of his Word represents the highest model of faith, the anticipation of the Church as the community of believers.

The life of faith grows and develops in Mary through *sapiential meditation* on the words and events of Christ's life (cf. Lk 2: 19, 51). She "ponders in her heart" to understand the deep meaning of his words, in order to assimilate it and share it with others.

The *Magnificat hymn* (cf. Lk 1: 46-55) shows another important aspect of Mary's "spirituality": she embodies the figure of the *poor person*, capable of putting all her trust in God, who casts down the mighty from their thrones and raises up the lowly.

Luke also describes the figure of Mary in the early Church, showing that she is present in the Upper Room as they await the Holy Spirit: "All these [the 11 Apostles] with one accord devoted themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with his brethren" (*Acts* 1: 14).

The group gathered in the Upper Room forms the original nucleus of the Church. Within it Mary carries out a double role: on the one hand, she intercedes for the birth of the Church through the Holy Spirit; on the other, she shares her

experience of Jesus with the newborn Church.

Luke's work thus offers the Church in Padua a powerful stimulus to make the most of the "*Marian dimension*" of Christian life as she follows the way of Christ.

6. Another essential dimension of Christian and Church life, on which Luke's account throws vivid light, is that of the *evangelizing mission*. Luke indicates the permanent foundation of this mission, that is, the uniqueness and universality of the salvation wrought by Christ (cf. *Acts* 4: 12). The saving event of Christ's death and resurrection does not close the history of salvation, but marks the beginning of a new phase, characterized by the mission of the Church, which is called to communicate the fruits of the salvation achieved by Christ to all nations. For this reason, Luke's Gospel is followed, as its logical consequence, by the history of the mission. It is the Risen One himself who gives the missionary "mandate" to the Apostles: "Then he opened their minds to understand the Scriptures, and said to them, "Thus it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you; but stay in the city, until you are clothed with power from on high" (*Lk* 24: 45-49).

The Church's mission begins at Pentecost "from Jerusalem" to expand "to the ends of the earth". Jerusalem does not mean just a geographical point. Rather it signifies a *focal point* of salvation history. The Church does not leave Jerusalem to abandon her, but to graft the pagan nations onto the olive tree of Israel (cf. *Rom* 11: 17).

It is the Church's task to put the leaven of God's kingdom (cf. *Lk* 13: 20-21) into history. A demanding task, it is described in the *Acts of the Apostles* as a tiring and difficult journey, but one that is entrusted to "witnesses" full of enthusiasm, initiative and joy, who are ready to suffer and give their lives for Christ. This inner energy is communicated to them by their communion of life with the Risen One and by the power of the Spirit that he gives.

What a great resource it can be for the Church in Padua to compare herself constantly with the message of the Evangelist, whose mortal remains she preserves!

7. In the light of Luke's vision, I hope that this diocesan community, in total docility to the breath of the Spirit, will be able to bear witness to Jesus Christ with creative boldness, both in its own territory and, in accord with its wonderful tradition, in missionary cooperation with the Churches of Africa, Latin America and Asia.

May this missionary commitment be further encouraged by this Jubilee Year, which celebrates the 2,000th anniversary of Christ's birth and calls the Church to a profound renewal of life. It is precisely the Gospel of Luke that recalls the discourse in which Jesus, at the synagogue of Nazareth, proclaimed "the year of grace of the Lord", announcing salvation as liberation, healing and good news to the poor (cf. *Lk* 4: 14-20). The Evangelist also presents the healing power of the Saviour's merciful love in touching passages such as those of the lost sheep and the prodigal son (cf. *Lk* 15).

Our time needs this message more than ever. I therefore fervently encourage this community so that its commitment to the new evangelization may be ever stronger and more effective. I also urge you to continue to develop the ecumenical initiatives you have begun with some Orthodox Churches in terms of cooperation in works of charity, theological study

and pastoral activities. May the International Congress on St Luke be a significant step on the journey of this Church, helping her to be rooted ever more deeply in the soil of God's Word and to open herself with renewed enthusiasm to communion and mission.

With these wishes, I sincerely impart to you, venerable Brother, and to all those entrusted to your pastoral care, a special Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 15 October 2000.

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