
A PASTORAL PROGRAMME FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM



After having looked on the face of Christ, true God and true man, crucified and risen, Pope John Paul II invites us, in his Apostolic Letter for the beginning of the new millennium, to commit ourselves to our world with a lively awareness of the presence of Jesus. «Jesus says: 'It isn't a formula which will save you, but a Person and the assurance – 'I am with you always!' – that Person inspires in us!»

A PROGRAMME OF TRANSFORMATION

« It is not therefore a matter of inventing a “new programme”. The programme already exists: it is the plan found in the Gospel and in the living Tradition, it is the same as ever. Ultimately, it has its centre in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem. This is a programme which does not change with shifts of times and cultures, even though it takes account of time and culture for the sake of true dialogue and effective communication. This programme for all time is the programme for the Third Millennium.

HOLINESS

« I have no hesitation in saying that all pastoral initiatives must be set in relation to holiness. At first glance, it might seem impractical to recall this elementary truth as the foundation of the pastoral planning in which we are involved at the start of the new millennium. Can holiness ever be “planned”? What might the word “holiness” mean in the context of a pastoral plan? In fact, to place pastoral planning under the heading of holiness is a choice filled with consequences. It implies the conviction that, since Baptism is a true entry into the holiness of God through incorporation into Christ and the indwelling of his Spirit, it would be a contradiction to settle for a life of mediocrity, marked by a minimalist ethic and a shallow religiosity. To ask catechumens: “Do you wish to receive Baptism?” means at the same time to ask them: “Do you wish to become holy?” It means to set before them the radical nature of the Sermon on the Mount: “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect!” (Mt. 5:48). This ideal of perfect must not be misunderstood as if it involved some kind of extraordinary existence, possible only for a few “uncommon heroes” of holiness. The ways of holiness are many, according to the vocation of each individual. The time has come to repropose wholeheartedly to everyone this high standard of ordinary Christian living...

PRAYER

« This training in holiness calls for a Christian life distinguished above all in the art of prayer. The Jubilee Year has been a year of more intense prayer, both personal and communal. But we well know that prayer cannot be taken for granted. We have to learn to pray: as it were learning this art ever anew from the lips of the Divine Master himself, like the first disciples: “Lord, teach us to pray!” (Lk. 11:1). Prayer develops that conversation with Christ which makes us his intimate friends: “Abide in me and I in you” (Jn. 15:4). This reciprocity is the very substance and soul of the Christian life, and the condition of all true pastoral life. Our Christian communities must become genuine “schools” of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart “falls in love”.

THE SUNDAY EUCHARIST

« Our principal attention must be given to the liturgy, “the summit towards which the Church’s action tends and at the same time the source from which comes all her strength” [Const. On the Liturgy, 10]. In the twentieth century, especially since the Council, there has been a great development in the way the Christian community celebrates the Sacraments, especially the Eucharist. It is necessary to continue in this direction, and to stress particularly the Sunday Eucharist and Sunday itself experienced as a special day of faith, the day of the Risen Lord and of the gift of the Spirit, the true weekly Easter. Precisely through sharing in the Eucharist, the Lord’s Day also becomes the Day of the Church, when she can effectively exercise her role as the sacrament of unity.

THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

« I am also asking for renewed pastoral courage in ensuring that the day-to-day teaching of Christian communities persuasively and effectively presents the practice of the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It is the face of Christ that must be rediscovered through the Sacrament of Penance, which for the faithful is “the ordinary way of obtaining forgiveness and the remission of serious sins committed after Baptism” [“Dies Domini,” 31] It is probably necessary that Pastors should arm themselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting it and leading people to appreciate it. We must not give in to passing crises! The Lord’s gifts – and the Sacraments are among the most precious – come from the One who well knows the human heart and is the Lord of history.

THE PRIMACY OF GRACE

« If in the planning that awaits us we commit ourselves more confidently to a personal activity that gives communal prayer its proper place, we shall be observing an essential principle of the Christian view of life: the primacy of grace. God of course asks us really to cooperate with his grace, and therefore invites us to invest all our resources of intelligence and energy in serving the cause of the Kingdom. But it is fatal to forget that “without Christ we can do nothing” (Cf. Jn 15:5).

LISTENING TO THE WORD; PROCLAIMING THE WORD

« Great progress has certainly been made in devout listening to Sacred Scripture and attentive study of it. Individuals and communities now make extensive use of the Bible. But it is above all the work of evangelization and catechesis which is drawing new life from attentiveness to the Word of God. To nourish ourselves with the word in order to be “servants of the Word” in the work of evangelization: this is surely a priority for the Church at the dawn of the new millennium. We must rekindle in ourselves the impetus of the beginnings and allow ourselves to be filled with the ardour of the apostolic preaching which followed Pentecost. We must revive in ourselves the burning conviction of Paul, who cried out: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor. 9:16). [Apostolic Letter translation by Zenit News Agency]

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