





Urbi et Orbi

HISTORY AND ORIGINS

While popes have always given blessings, the *Urbi et Orbi* (“to the city and the world”) has special significance as the most solemn form of papal blessing. The blessing dates back to the period of the Roman Empire when the words *urbis et orbis* were first used in the title of the Basilica of St. John Lateran. Originally built in the fourth century during the reign of the emperor Constantine, the first cathedral of Rome has been known as “the mother and head of all churches in the city and the world” (*omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput*).

For many centuries the blessing was imparted from St. John Lateran as well as from several of the more prominent churches of Rome during various holy days throughout the year. In modern times,

Urbi et Orbi blessings occur on Christmas, Easter, and just after a papal election. They are usually given from the central *loggia*, or balcony, of St. Peter's Basilica at noon. The pope speaks briefly and concludes his address with greetings in numerous languages to the throngs that fill St. Peter's Square. Traditionally attached to the blessing is an opportunity for the faithful to gain a plenary indulgence.

The extraordinary *Urbi et Orbi* on March 27, 2020 was unique. It was held at dusk and at the doors of St. Peter's Basilica opened to an empty square. Pope Francis did not use the traditional form of the Apostolic Blessing, but rather the Rite of Eucharistic Benediction. As with all *Urbi et Orbi* blessings, the event created an opportunity for the pope to address Catholics not only in the city of Rome but also scattered throughout the world.







GOSPEL READING

Mark 4:35–41

The Bible is the Word of God and Catholics reverence it as such. This gospel was chosen to bring both encouragement and hope to the world in a time of darkness, uncertainty, and fear.

On that day, when evening had come, he said to them, “Let us go across to the other side.” And leaving the crowd behind, they took him with them in the boat, just as he was. Other boats were with him. A great windstorm arose, and the waves beat into the boat, so that the boat was already being swamped. But he was in the stern, asleep on the cushion; and they woke him up and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing?” He woke up and rebuked the wind, and said to the sea, “Peace! Be still!” Then the wind ceased, and

there was a dead calm. He said to them, “Why are you afraid? Have you still no faith?” And they were filled with great awe and said to one another, “Who then is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?”







HOMILY BY POPE FRANCIS

The pope has many official titles. Among them are Successor of Peter, Bishop of Rome, Vicar of Christ, Supreme Pontiff of the Universal Church, Sovereign of the Vatican City State, and Servant of the Servants of God. While we often see the papacy as the highest position of leadership and power in the Church, it is more accurately understood as the office of shepherd and teacher of all Christians. All bishops are the successors of the original apostles. When the pope preaches, he is exercising the teaching office, known as the magisterium, of the Church.

When evening had come” (Mk 4:35). The gospel passage we have just heard begins like this. For weeks now it has been evening. Thick darkness has gathered over our squares, our streets and our cities; it has taken over our lives, filling everything with a deafening silence and a distressing

void, that stops everything as it passes by; we feel it in the air, we notice in people's gestures, their glances give them away. We find ourselves afraid and lost. Like the disciples in the gospel we were caught off guard by an unexpected, turbulent storm. We have realized that we are on the same boat, all of us fragile and disoriented, but at the same time important and needed, all of us called to row together, each of us in need of comforting the other. On this boat . . . are all of us. Just like those disciples, who spoke anxiously with one voice, saying "We are perishing" (v. 38), so we too have realized that we cannot go on thinking of ourselves, but only together can we do this.

It is easy to recognize ourselves in this story. What is harder to understand is Jesus' attitude. While his disciples are quite naturally alarmed and desperate, he stands in the stern, in the part of the boat that sinks first. And what does he do? In spite of the tempest, he sleeps on soundly, trusting in the

Father; this is the only time in the gospels we see Jesus sleeping. When he wakes up, after calming the wind and the waters, he turns to the disciples in a reproaching voice: “Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” (v. 40).

Let us try to understand. In what does the lack of the disciples’ faith consist, as contrasted with Jesus’ trust? They had not stopped believing in him; in fact, they called on him. But we see how they call on him: “Teacher, do you not care if we perish?” (v. 38). Do you not care: they think that Jesus is not interested in them, does not care about them. One of the things that hurts us and our families most when we hear it said is: “Do you not care about me?” It is a phrase that wounds and unleashes storms in our hearts. It would have shaken Jesus too. Because he, more than anyone, cares about us. Indeed, once they have called on him, he saves his disciples from their discouragement.

The storm exposes our vulnerability and uncovers those false and superfluous certainties around which we have constructed our daily schedules, our projects, our habits, and priorities. It shows us how we have allowed to become dull and feeble the very things that nourish, sustain, and strengthen our lives and our communities. The tempest lays bare all our prepackaged ideas and forgetfulness of what nourishes our people's souls; all those attempts that anesthetize us with ways of thinking and acting that supposedly "save" us, but instead prove incapable of putting us in touch with our roots and keeping alive the memory of those who have gone before us. We deprive ourselves of the antibodies we need to confront adversity.

In this storm, the façade of those stereotypes with which we camouflaged our egos, always worrying about our image, has fallen away, uncovering once more that (blessed) common belonging,

of which we cannot be deprived: our belonging as brothers and sisters.

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Lord, your word this evening strikes us and regards us, all of us. In this world, that you love more than we do, we have gone ahead at breakneck speed, feeling powerful and able to do anything. Greedy for profit, we let ourselves get caught up in things, and lured away by haste. We did not stop at your reproach to us, we were not shaken awake by wars or injustice across the world, nor did we listen to the cry of the poor or of our ailing planet. We carried on regardless, thinking we would stay healthy in a world that was sick. Now that we are in a stormy sea, we implore you: “Wake up, Lord!”

“Why are you afraid? Have you no faith?” Lord, you are calling to us, calling us to faith. Which is not so much believing that you exist, but coming to you and trusting in you. This Lent your call reverberates urgently: “Be converted!”, “Return to me with all