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Homily for the Solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul

June 29, 2005

by Pope Benedict XVI



The feast of the holy Apostles Peter and Paul is at once a grateful memorial of great witnesses of Jesus Christ and a solemn confession in favor of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church. It is above all a feast of catholicity. The sign of Pentecost -- the new community that speaks in all tongues and unites all peoples in one people, in one family of God -- became a reality.

Our liturgical assembly, in which are gathered bishops from all parts of the world, people of many cultures and nations, is an image of the family of the Church spread over the whole earth. Strangers have become friends; beyond all borders, we recognize ourselves as brothers. With this, the mission of St. Paul has been fulfilled, who knew how "to be a minister of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles ... so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (Romans 15:16).

The aim of the mission is a humanity that has itself become a living glorification of God, the true worship that God expects: This is the most profound meaning of catholicity -- a catholicity that has already been given to us and toward which we must continue to orient ourselves. Catholicity does not express only a horizontal dimension, the coming together of many people in unity; it also expresses a vertical dimension: only by turning our gaze to God, only by opening ourselves to him can we truly become only one.

Like Paul, Peter also came to Rome, the city that was the place of convergence of all peoples and which precisely because of this could become the first of all

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expressions of the universality of the Gospel. Undertaking the journey from Jerusalem to Rome, Peter surely felt himself guided by the voices of the prophets, by the faith and by the prayer of Israel.

Also a part of the proclamation of the Old Covenant is, in fact, the mission to the whole world: The People of Israel were destined to be light to the Gentiles. The great psalm of the Passion, Psalm 21, whose first verse "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" Jesus pronounced on the cross, ended with the vision: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him" (Psalm 21:28). When Peter and Paul came to Rome the Lord, who invoked that psalm on the cross, was risen; this victory of God would now have to be proclaimed to all peoples, thus fulfilling the promise with which the psalm concluded.

Catholicity means universality -- multiplicity that becomes unity; unity that still remains multiplicity. From Paul's word on the universality of the Church we already saw that part of this unity is the capacity of peoples to overcome themselves, to look toward the one God.

The true founder of Catholic theology, [*St. Irenaeus of Lyon*](#), expressed this link between catholicity and unity in a very beautiful way: "This doctrine and this faith the Church, disseminated throughout the world, guards diligently, forming almost one single family: the same faith with only one soul and one heart, the same preaching, teaching, tradition as if having one voice. Churches of Germany do not have a different faith or tradition, as neither do those of Spain, of Gaul, of Egypt, of Libya, of the East, of the center of the earth, as the sun creature of God is only one and identical in the whole world, so the light of true preaching shines everywhere and enlightens all men who wish to come to the cognition of truth" ("Adversus Haereses" I, 10,2).

The unity of men in their multiplicity became possible because God, this one God of heaven and earth, showed himself to us; because the essential truth of our life, of our "from where?" and "to where?", became visible when he showed himself to us and in Jesus Christ made us see his face, himself. This truth of the essence of our being, of our living and our dying, truth that by God was made visible, unites us and makes us become brothers. Catholicity and unity go together. And unity has a content: the faith that the apostles transmitted to us on behalf of Christ.

I am happy that yesterday -- on the feast of St. Irenaeus and the vigil of the solemnity of Sts. Peter and Paul -- I was able to give to the Church a new guide for the transmission of the faith, which helps us to know better as well as to live better the faith that unites us: [*the Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*](#). What in the large Catechism, through the testimonies of the saints of all centuries and with the reflections matured in theology, is presented in a detailed manner, is here recapitulated in its essential contents, which are later to be translated in daily language and made ever more concrete.

The book is structured as a conversation with questions and answers; 14 images associated with various areas of the faith invite one to contemplation and meditation. They summarize, so to speak, in a visible way that which the word develops in detail. At the beginning there is a sixth-century icon of Christ, which is found on Mount Athos and represents Christ in his dignity as Lord of the earth, but also as herald of the Gospel, which he has in hand.

"I am He who is" -- this mysterious name of God proposed in the Old Covenant -- is referred to there as his own name: Everything that exists comes from him; he is the original source of every being. And because he is one, he is also always present, always close to us and at the same time always precedes us: as "indicator" on the path of our life, he himself being, in fact, the way. This book cannot be read as a novel. It must be meditated on calmly in its individual parts and its content allowed, through the images, to penetrate the soul. I hope it will be received in this way and will become a good guide in the transmission of the faith.

We said that the catholicity and the unity of the Church go together. The fact that between them the dimensions are rendered visible to us in the figures of the holy apostles, indicates to us already the subsequent characteristic of the Church: she is apostolic.

What does this mean? The Lord instituted Twelve Apostles, just as twelve were the sons of Jacob, indicating to him by this as tribal head of the People of God that, having now become universal, from now on comprises all the peoples. St. Mark tells us that Jesus called the apostles "to be with him, and to be sent out" (Mark 3:14). It seems almost a contradiction. We would say: Either they are with him or they are sent and undertake the journey.

There is a word on the angels by the holy Pope Gregory the Great that helps us to resolve the contradiction. He said that the angels are always sent and at the same time are always before God: "Wherever they are sent, wherever they go, they always move in the bosom of the Father" (Homily 34,13). Revelation describes bishops as "angels" of their Church, and we can therefore make this application: The apostles and their successors should always be with their Lord and just like this -- wherever they go -- be always in communion with him and live out of this communion.

The Church is apostolic because it confesses the faith of the apostles and seeks to live it. It is a unity that characterizes the Twelve called by the Lord, but there exists at the same time continuity in the apostolic mission. In his first letter St. Peter described himself as an "elder" with the elders to whom he was writing (5:1). And with this he expressed the principle of the apostolic succession: the same ministry he had received from the Lord now continues in the Church thanks to priestly ordination. The Word of God is not only written but, thanks to the

testimonies that the Lord in the sacrament has inserted in the apostolic ministry, remains a living word.

Thus I now turn to you, dear brother bishops: I greet you with affection, together with your relatives and with the pilgrims of the respective dioceses. You are about to receive the pallium from the hands of the Successor of Peter. We had it blessed, as from Peter himself, putting it beside his tomb. Now it is an expression of our common responsibility before the "Arch-Shepherd" Jesus Christ, of whom Peter speaks (2 Peter 5:4).

The pallium is an expression of our apostolic mission. It is an expression of our communion, which has its visible greatness in the Petrine ministry. Linked with the unity, as well as with the apostolicity, is the Petrine ministry, which gathers visibly the Church of all parts and of all times, defending in this way each one of us from sliding into false autonomies, which too easily are transformed into internal particularizations of the Church and can so compromise her internal independence. Together with this we do not want to forget that the meaning of all the functions and ministries is, at the end, that "we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ," so that the body of Christ will grow "and build itself up in love" (Ephesians 4:13,16).

In this perspective I greet from my heart and with gratitude the delegation of the Orthodox Church of Constantinople, which is sent by ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, to whom I address a cordial remembrance. Led by Metropolitan Ioannis, it has come to our feast and participates in our celebration. Even if we still do not agree on the question of the interpretation and of the capacity of the Petrine ministry, we are however together in the apostolic succession, we are profoundly united with the others by the episcopal ministry and by the sacrament of the priesthood and we confess together the faith of the apostles as it is given in Scripture and as it is interpreted in the great Councils.

In this hour of the world, full of skepticism and doubts but rich in the desire for God, we acknowledge again our common mission to witness together Christ the Lord and, on the basis of that unity that is already given to us, to help the world believe. And we entreat the Lord with all our heart to guide us to full unity so that the splendor of the truth, which alone can create unity, will again become visible in the world.

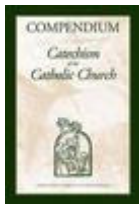
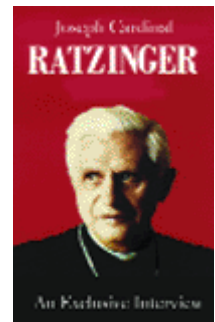
Today's Gospel speaks to us of the confession of St. Peter from which the Church took her beginning: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16). Having spoken today of the one, catholic and apostolic Church, but not yet of the holy Church, we wish to recall at this moment another confession of Peter pronounced in the name of the Twelve at the hour of the great abandonment: "We have believed, and have come to know, that you are the holy one of God" (John 6:69).

What does it mean? Jesus, in the great priestly prayer, talks about consecrating himself for the disciples, alluding to the sacrifice of his death (John 17:19). With this Jesus expresses implicitly his function of true Supreme Priest who realizes the mystery of the "Day of Reconciliation," no longer only in the substitutive rites, but in the concreteness of his own body and blood. The word "the holy one of God" in the Old Testament indicates Aaron as Supreme Priest who had the duty to accomplish the sanctification of Israel (Psalm 105:16; see Sirach 45:6). Peter's confession in favor of Christ, whom he declares the holy one of God, is in the context of the Eucharistic discourse, in which Jesus announces the great Day of Reconciliation through the offering of himself in sacrifice: "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (John 6:51).

Thus, in the background of this confession, is the priestly mystery of Jesus, his sacrifice for all of us. Better still, it is always sanctified again by the purifying love of Christ. Not only has God spoken: He has loved us very realistically, loved us to the point of his own Son's death. It is precisely from here that we are shown all the grandeur of the revelation that has the wound inscribed in the heart of God himself. Now each one of us can say personally with St. Paul: "the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Galatians 2:20). Let us pray to the Lord so that the truth of this word will be profoundly imprinted, with its joy and responsibility, in our hearts; let us pray so that irradiated by the Eucharistic celebration, it will become ever more the force that shapes our lives.

Be sure to check out Dr. D'Ambrosio's article on [Sts. Peter and Paul](#) and the reading from [Saint Augustine!](#)

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Sometimes referred to as the "Mini Catechism."