



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 5 April 2006

'Safeguarding the gift'

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the new series of Catecheses that began a few weeks ago, we are considering the origins of the Church so as to understand Jesus' original plan and thereby grasp the essential of the Church that lives on through the changing times. Thus, we also understand the reason for our being in the Church and how we must strive to live it at the dawn of a new Christian millennium.

In thinking about the newborn Church, we can discover two aspects: a first aspect is strongly highlighted by St Irenaeus of Lyons, a martyr and great theologian of the end of the second century, the first to have given us a theology that was to a certain extent systematic. St Irenaeus wrote: "Wherever the Church is, God's Spirit is too; and wherever God's Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace; for the Spirit is truth" (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 24, 1: PG 7, 966).

Thus, a deep bond exists between the Holy Spirit and the Church. The Holy Spirit builds the Church and gives her the truth; he pours out love, as St Paul says, into the hearts of believers (cf. Rom 5: 5).

Then there is a second aspect. This deep bond with the Spirit does not eradicate our humanity, with all of its weaknesses. So it is that from the start the community of the disciples has known not only the joy of the Holy Spirit, the grace of truth and love, but also trials that are constituted above all by disagreements about the truths of faith, with the consequent wounds to communion.

Just as the fellowship of love has existed since the outset and will continue to the end (cf. I Jn 1: 1ff.), so also, from the start, division unfortunately arose. We should not be surprised that it still

exists today. "They went out from us, but they were not of us", John says in his First Letter, "for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they are not of us" (I Jn 2: 19).

Thus, in the events of the world but also in the weaknesses of the Church, there is always a risk of losing faith, hence, also love and brotherhood. Consequently, it is a specific duty of those who believe in the Church of love and want to live in her to recognize this danger too and accept that communion is no longer possible with those who have drifted away from the doctrine of salvation (cf. II Jn 9: 11).

That the newborn Church was well aware of the possible tensions in the experience of communion is clearly shown by *John's First Letter*: no voice is more forcefully raised in the New Testament to highlight the reality and duty of fraternal love among Christians; but the same voice is addressed with drastic severity to adversaries of the Church who used to be members of the community but now no longer belong to it.

The Church of love is also the Church of truth, understood primarily as fidelity to the Gospel entrusted by the Lord Jesus to his followers. It was being made children of the same Father by the Spirit of truth that gave rise to Christian brotherhood: "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (Rom 8: 14).

However, if the family of God's children is to live in unity and peace, it needs someone to keep it in the truth and guide it with wise and authoritative discernment: this is what the ministry of the Apostles is required to do.

And here we come to an important point. The Church is wholly of the Spirit but has a structure, the apostolic succession, which is responsible for guaranteeing that the Church endures in the truth given by Christ, from whom the capacity to love also comes.

The first brief description in the Acts sums up very effectively the convergence of these values in the life of the newborn Church: "And they devoted themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship (*koinonia*), to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2: 42). Communion is born from faith inspired by apostolic preaching, it is nourished by the Breaking of Bread and prayer, and is expressed in brotherly love and service.

We have before us the description of fellowship in the newborn Church with the riches of its internal dynamism and visible expressions: the gift of communion is safeguarded and promoted in particular by the apostolic ministry, which in turn is a gift for the entire community.

The Apostles and their successors are therefore the custodians and authoritative witnesses of the deposit of truth consigned to the Church, and are likewise the ministers of charity. These are two

aspects that go together.

They must always be mindful of the inseparable nature of this twofold service which in fact is only one: truth and love, revealed and given by the Lord Jesus. In this regard, their service is first and foremost a service of love: and the charity they live and foster is inseparable from the truth they preserve and pass on.

Truth and love are the two faces of the same gift that comes from God and, thanks to the apostolic ministry, is safeguarded in the Church and handed down to us, to our present time!

And the love of the Trinitarian God also reaches us through the service of the Apostles and their successors, to communicate to us the truth that sets us free (cf. Jn 8: 32)!

All this, which we see in the newborn Church, impels us to pray for the Successors of the Apostles, for all the Bishops and for the Successors of Peter, so that together they may truly be at the same time custodians of truth and love; so that, in this regard, they may truly be apostles of Christ and that his light, the light of truth and love, may never be extinguished in the Church or in the world.

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To special groups:

I am happy to offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the class from the NATO Defense College and the groups from England, Denmark, the Faroe Islands and the United States of America. May your time in Rome strengthen your faith and renew your love for the Lord and his Church. May God bless you all!

Lastly, I address a cordial greeting to the *sick*, the *newly-weds* and the *young people*, among whom I greet in particular the students from Ponte Felcino. In this last part of Lent I urge you to continue with commitment on your spiritual journey towards Easter.

Dear *young people*, intensify your witness of faithful love to the Crucified Christ. May you, dear *sick people*, look at the Lord's Cross, to offer up the trial of illness courageously. And you, dear *newly-weds*, ensure that your spousal union is always enlivened by divine love.

In his greeting to the Spanish-speaking pilgrims, the Holy Father mentioned the fifth centenary of St Francis Xavier's birth on 7 April. He announced that Cardinal Antonio María Rouco Varela would preside on this day as the Pope's Special Envoy at the celebrations at the Shrine of Javier, Navarre, Spain. The Pope also encouraged prayer for peace in the region.

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