



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 22 November 2006

St Paul and the Church

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, we are ending our encounters with the Apostle Paul by dedicating one last reflection to him. Indeed, we cannot take our leave of him without considering one of the decisive elements of his activity and one of the most important subjects of his thought: the reality of the Church.

We must first of all note that his initial contact with the Person of Jesus happened through the witness of the Christian community of Jerusalem. It was a turbulent contact. Having met the new group of believers, he immediately became a fierce persecutor of it. He acknowledged this himself at least three times in as many of his Letters: "I persecuted the Church of God" (I Cor 15: 9; Gal 1: 13; Phil 3: 6), as if to describe his behaviour as the worst possible crime.

History shows us that one usually reaches Jesus by passing through the Church! In a certain sense, this proved true, we were saying, also for Paul, who encountered the Church before he encountered Jesus. In his case, however, this contact was counterproductive; it did not result in attachment but violent rejection.

For Paul, adherence to the Church was brought about by a direct intervention of Christ, who in revealing himself on the road to Damascus identified himself with the Church and made Paul realize that persecution of the Church was persecution of himself, the Lord.

In fact, the Risen One said to Paul, persecutor of the Church: "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?" (Acts 9: 4). In persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ.

Paul, therefore, was at the same time converted to Christ and to the Church. This leads one to understand why the Church later became so present in Paul's thoughts, heart and activity.

In the first place, she was so present that he literally founded many Churches in the various cities where he went as an evangelizer. When he spoke of his "anxiety for all the Churches" (II Cor 11: 28), he was thinking of the various Christian communities brought into being from time to time in Galatia, Ionia, Macedonia and in Achaea.

Some of those Churches also caused him worry and chagrin, as happened, for example, in the Churches of Galatia, which he saw "turning to a different gospel" (Gal 1: 6), something he opposed with grim determination.

Yet, he felt bound to the Communities he founded in a way that was far from cold and bureaucratic but rather intense and passionate. Thus, for example, he described the Philippians as "my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown" (Phil 4: 1).

On other occasions he compared the various Communities to a letter of recommendation, unique in its kind: "You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men" (II Cor 3: 2).

At yet other times, he showed a real feeling for them that was not only paternal but also maternal, such as when he turned to those he was addressing, calling them: "My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4: 19; cf. also I Cor 4: 14-15; I Thes 2: 7-8).

Paul also illustrates for us in his Letters his teaching on the Church as such. Thus, his original definition of the Church as the "Body of Christ", which we do not find in other Christian authors of the first century, is well known (cf. I Cor 12: 27; Eph 4: 12; 5: 30; Col 1: 24).

We find the deepest root of this surprising designation of the Church in the Sacrament of the Body of Christ. St Paul said: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body" (I Cor 10: 17). In the same Eucharist, Christ gives us his Body and makes us his Body. Concerning this, St Paul said to the Galatians: "You are all one in Christ" (Gal 3: 28). By saying all this, Paul makes us understand that not only does the belonging of the Church to Christ exist, but also a certain form of equality and identification of the Church with Christ himself.

From this, therefore, derive the greatness and nobility of the Church, that is, of all of us who are part of her: from our being members of Christ, an extension as it were of his personal presence in the world. And from this, of course, stems our duty to truly live in conformity with Christ.

Paul's exhortations concerning the various charisms that give life and structure to the Christian community also derive from this. They can all be traced back to a single source, that is, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, knowing well that in the Church there is no one who goes without them, for, as the Apostle wrote, "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (I Cor 12: 7).

It is important, however, that all the charisms cooperate with one another for the edification of the community and do not instead become the cause of a rift.

In this regard, Paul asked himself rhetorically: "Is Christ divided?" (I Cor 1: 13). He knows well and teaches us that it is necessary to "maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call" (Eph 4: 3-4).

Obviously, underlining the need for unity does not mean that ecclesial life should be standardized or levelled out in accordance with a single way of operating. Elsewhere, Paul taught: "Do not quench the Spirit" (I Thes 5: 19), that is, make room generously for the unforeseeable dynamism of the charismatic manifestations of the Spirit, who is an ever new source of energy and vitality.

But if there is one tenet to which Paul stuck firmly it was mutual edification: "Let all things be done for edification" (I Cor 14: 26). Everything contributes to weaving the ecclesial fabric evenly, not only without slack patches but also without holes or tears.

Then, there is also a Pauline Letter that presents the Church as Christ's Bride (cf. Eph 5: 21-33). With this, Paul borrowed an ancient prophetic metaphor which made the People of Israel the Bride of the God of the Covenant (cf. Hos 2: 4, 21; Is 54: 5-8). He did so to express the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and his Church, both in the sense that she is the object of the most tender love on the part of her Lord, and also in the sense that love must be mutual and that we too therefore, as members of the Church, must show him passionate faithfulness.

Thus, in short, a relationship of communion is at stake: the so to speak *vertical* communion between Jesus Christ and all of us, but also the *horizontal* communion between all who are distinguished in the world by the fact that they "call on the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Cor 1: 2).

This is our definition: we belong among those who call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we clearly understand how desirable it is that what Paul himself was hoping for when he wrote to the Corinthians should come to pass: "If an unbeliever or an uninitiated enters while all are uttering prophecy, he will be taken to task by all and called to account by all, and the secret of his heart will be laid bare. Falling prostrate, he will worship God, crying out, "God is truly among you"" (I Cor 14: 24-25).

Our liturgical encounters should be like this. A non-Christian who enters one of our assemblies ought finally to be able to say: "God is truly with you". Let us pray to the Lord to be like this, in communion with Christ and in communion among ourselves.

To special groups

My prayerful greetings go to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the groups from England, Malta, Japan and the United States of America. I greet especially the Salvatorian Sisters, the American Friends of the Vatican Library and the Delegation from the Association of the Order of Malta. May your visit to the city of the Apostles Peter and Paul renew your love for Christ and his Church, and may God's Blessing be upon you all.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. Next Sunday, the last of Ordinary Time, we will be celebrating the Solemnity of Christ the King. Dear *young people*, put Jesus at the centre of your life and you will receive from him light and courage in every daily decision. May Christ, who made the Cross his royal throne, help you, dear *sick people*, to understand the redemptive value of suffering lived in union with him. As I remind you, dear *newly-weds*, that this very day is the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* that encouraged pastoral care of the family in the Church, I express the hope that you will persevere on your way in marriage ever united to Christ.

And at the end of this Audience in the rain, I would like to thank you all for your patience, but also to thank the Lord who has given us moments of light and a pause in the rain.

Appeal for Lebanon

I learned with deep sorrow the news of the assassination of the Hon. Mr Pierre Gemayel of the Ministry for Industry of the Lebanese Government. As I firmly condemn this brutal attack, I assure the bereaved family and the beloved Lebanese People of my prayers and spiritual closeness.

In the face of the dark forces that are seeking to destroy the Country, I invite all Lebanese not to allow themselves to be conquered by hatred but rather to strengthen their national unity, justice and reconciliation, and to work together to build a future of peace. Finally, I ask the Leaders of countries who have that Region's future at heart to contribute to a global and negotiated solution to the various situations of injustice that have now marked it for too many years.

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