



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 14 January 2009

Saint Paul (18):

The Theological vision of the Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In St Paul's correspondence there are two Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians that to a certain extent can be considered twins. In fact, they both contain expressions that are found in them alone, and it has been calculated that more than a third of the words in the Letter to the Colossians are also found in the Letter to the Ephesians. For example, while in Colossians we read literally the invitation: "admonish one another. Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Col 3: 16), in his Letter to the Ephesians St Paul likewise recommends "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, sing praise to the Lord with all your heart" (Eph 5: 19). We could meditate upon these words: the heart must sing with psalms and hymns, and the voice in the same way, in order to enter the tradition of prayer of the whole of the Church of the Old and New Testaments. Thus we learn to be with ourselves and one another and with God. In addition, the "domestic code" that is absent in the other Pauline Letters is found in these two in other words, a series of recommendations addressed to husbands and wives, to parents and children, to masters and slaves (cf. Col 3: 18-4: 1 and Eph 5: 22-6: 9 respectively).

It is even more important to notice that only in these two Letters is the title "head" *kefalé* given to Jesus Christ. And this title is used on two levels. In the first sense, Christ is understood as head of

the Church (cf. Col 2: 18-19 and Eph 4: 15-16). This means two things: first of all that he is the governor, the leader, the person in charge who guides the Christian community as its leader and Lord (cf. Col 1: 18: "He is the head of the body, the Church"). The other meaning is then that, as head, he innervates and vivifies all the members of the body that he controls. (In fact, according to Colossians 2: 19, it is necessary "[to hold] fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, [is] nourished and knit together"). That is, he is not only one who commands but also one who is organically connected with us, from whom comes the power to act in an upright way.

In both cases, the Church is considered subject to Christ, both in order to follow his supervision the commandments and to accept all of the vital influences that emanate from him. His commandments are not only words or orders but a vital energy that comes from him and helps us.

This idea is developed particularly in Ephesians where, instead of being traced back to the Spirit (as in 1 Corinthians 12), even the ministries of the Church are conferred by the Risen Christ. It is he who established "that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers" (4: 11). And it is from him that "the whole body grows, and... joined firmly together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love" (4: 16). Christ, in fact, fully strives to "present to himself a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort" (Eph 5: 27). In saying this he tells us that the power with which he builds the Church with which he guides the Church, with which he also gives the Church the right direction is precisely his love.

The first meaning is therefore Christ, Head of the Church; both with regard to her direction and, above all, with regard to her inspiration and organic revitalization by virtue of his love. Then, in a second sense, Christ is not only considered as head of the Church but also as head of the heavenly powers and of the entire cosmos. Thus, in Colossians, we read that Christ has "disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over them in him" (2: 15). Similarly, in Ephesians we find it written that with his Resurrection God placed Christ "far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come" (1: 21). With these words the two Letters bring us a highly positive and fruitful message. It is this: Christ has no possible rival to fear since he is superior to every form of power that might presume to humble man. He alone "loved us and gave himself up for us" (Eph 5: 2). Thus, if we are united with Christ, we have no enemy or adversity to fear; but this therefore means that we must continue to cling firmly to him, without loosening our grip!

For the pagan world that believed in a world filled with spirits for the most part dangerous and from which it was essential to protect oneself the proclamation that Christ was the only conqueror and that those with Christ need fear no one seemed a true liberation. The same is also true for the paganism of today, since current followers of similar ideologies see the world as full of dangerous powers. It is necessary to proclaim to them that Christ is triumphant, so that those who are with

Christ, who stay united to him, have nothing and no one to fear. I think that this is also important for us, that we must learn to face all fears because he is above all forms of domination, he is the true Lord of the world.

Even the entire cosmos is subject to him and converges in him as its own head. The words in the Letter to the Ephesians that speak of God's plan "to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth" (1: 10) are famous. Likewise, we read in the Letter to the Colossians that "in him all things were created, in Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (1: 16), and that "making peace by the Blood of his Cross.... reconcile[d] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven" (1: 20). Therefore there is not, on the one hand, the great material world and, on the other, this small reality of the history of our earth, of the world of people: it is all one in Christ. He is the head of the cosmos; the cosmos too was created by him, it was created for us to the extent that we are united with him. It is a rational and personalistic vision of the universe. I would say that it would have been impossible to conceive of a vision more universalistic than this, and that it befits the Risen Christ alone. Christ is the *Pantokrator* to which all things are subordinate. Our thoughts turn precisely to Christ the Pantocrator, who fills the vault of the apse in Byzantine churches, sometimes depicted seated on high, above the whole world, or even on a rainbow, to show his equality with God himself at whose right hand he is seated (cf. Eph 1: 20; Col 3: 1) and thus also his incomparable role as the guide of human destiny.

A vision of this kind can only be conceived by the Church, not in the sense that she wishes to misappropriate that to which she is not entitled, but in another double sense: both to the extent that the Church recognizes that Christ is greater than she is, given that his lordship extends beyond her confines, and to the extent that the Church alone not the cosmos is described as the Body of Christ. All of this means that we must consider earthly realities positively, since Christ sums them up in himself, and at the same time we must live to the full our specific ecclesial identity, which is the one most homogeneous to Christ's own identity.

Then there is also a special concept which is typical of these two Letters, and it is the concept of "mystery". The "mystery of [God's] will" is mentioned once (Eph 1: 9) and, other times, as the "mystery of Christ" (Eph 3: 4; Col 4: 3) or even as "God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2: 2-3). This refers to God's inscrutable plan for the destiny of mankind, of peoples and of the world. With this language the two Epistles tell us that the fulfilment of this mystery is found in Christ. If we are with Christ, even if our minds are incapable of grasping everything, we know that we have penetrated the nucleus of this "mystery" and are on the way to the truth. It is he in his totality and not only in one aspect of his Person or at one moment of his existence who bears within him the fullness of the unfathomable divine plan of salvation. In him what is called "the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph 3: 10) takes shape, for in him "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2: 9). From this point on, therefore, it is not possible to reflect on and worship God's will, his sovereign instruction, without comparing ourselves personally with Christ in Person, in whom that "mystery" is incarnate and may be tangibly

perceived. Thus one arrives at contemplation of the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3: 8) which are beyond any human understanding. It is not that God did not leave footprints on his journey, for Christ himself is God's impression, his greatest footprint; but we realize "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of this mystery "which surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3: 18-19). Mere intellectual categories prove inadequate here, and, recognizing that many things are beyond our rational capacities, we must entrust them to the humble and joyful contemplation not only of the mind but also of the heart. The Fathers of the Church, moreover, tell us that love understands better than reason alone.

A last word must be said on the concept, already mentioned above, of the Church as the spousal partner of Christ. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul had compared the Christian community to a bride, writing thus: "I feel a divine jealousy for you", for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband" (11: 2). The Letter to the Ephesians develops this image, explaining that the Church is not only a betrothed bride, but the real bride of Christ. He has won her, so to speak, and has done so at the cost of his life: as the text says, he "gave himself up for her" (Eph 5: 25). What demonstration of love could be greater than this? But in addition, he was concerned about her beauty: not only the beauty already acquired through Baptism, but also that beauty "without stain or wrinkle" that is due to an irreproachable life which must grow in her moral conduct every day (cf. Eph 5: 26-27). It is a short step from here to the common experience of Christian marriage; indeed, it is not even very clear what the initial reference point of the Letter was for its author: whether it was the Christ-Church relationship, in whose light the union of the man and woman should be seen, or whether it was the experiential event of conjugal union, in whose light should be seen the relationship between Christ and the Church. But both aspects illuminate each other reciprocally: we learn what marriage is in the light of the communion of Christ and the Church, we learn how Christ is united to us in thinking of the mystery of matrimony. In any case, our Letter presents itself as nearly a middle road between the Prophet Hosea, who expressed the relationship between God and his people in terms of the wedding that had already taken place (cf. Hos 2: 4, 16, 20), and the Seer of the Apocalypse, who was to propose the eschatological encounter between the Church and the Lamb as a joyful and indefectible wedding (cf. Rv 19: 7-9; 21: 9).

There would be much more to say, but it seems to me that from what has been expounded it is already possible to realize that these two Letters form a great catechesis, from which we can learn not only how to be good Christians but also how to become truly human. If we begin by understanding that the cosmos is the impression of Christ, we learn our correct relationship with the cosmos, along with all of the problems of the preservation of the cosmos. Let us learn to see it with reason, but with a reason motivated by love, and with the humility and respect that make it possible to act in the right way. And if we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ, that Christ gave himself for her, we learn how to live reciprocal love with Christ, the love that unites us to God and makes us see in the other the image of Christ, Christ himself. Let us pray the Lord to help us to meditate well upon Sacred Scripture, his word, and thus truly learn how to live well.

To special groups

I am glad to greet the St Thérèse of Lisieux pilgrimage which, together with the Bishops of Bayeux-Lisieux and of Sées, has accompanied the reliquary of Bl. Louis and Zélie Martin, the parents of St Thérèse of the Child Jesus who so profoundly shared in this mystery of Christ's love. I also offer my best wishes to the contemplative Women Religious of the Holy Family from Bordeaux, as well as to the young members of the *Institution Jeanne d'Arc* from Colombes.

I extend a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience. May your time in Rome strengthen you to imitate St Paul in "giving thanks always and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God the Father" (Eph 5: 20)!

Lastly, I address as usual the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday the liturgy recalled St Hilary, Bishop of Poitiers who "defended the divinity of Christ your Son" (cf. Liturgy), an ardent champion of the faith and teacher of truth. May his example sustain you, dear *young people*, in the constant and courageous search for Christ; may it encourage you, dear *sick people*, to offer up your sufferings so that the Kingdom of God may spread throughout the world; and may it help you, dear *newlyweds*, to be witnesses of Christ's love in family life. I ask you to join in my prayer to implore an abundance of divine graces on the Sixth World Meeting of Families that is taking place in these days in Mexico City. May this important ecclesial event express once again the beauty and value of the family, inspiring in it new energy for this irreplaceable fundamental cell of society and of the Church.

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