



The Holy See

CHRISM MASS IN SAINT PETER'S BASILICA

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Holy Thursday, 13 April 2006

*Dear Brothers in the Episcopate
and in the Priesthood,*

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Holy Thursday is the day on which the Lord gave the Twelve the priestly task of celebrating, in the bread and the wine, the Sacrament of his Body and Blood until he comes again. The paschal lamb and all the sacrifices of the Old Covenant are replaced by the gift of his Body and his Blood, the gift of himself. Thus, the new worship was based on the fact that, in the first place, God makes a gift to us, and, filled with this gift, we become his: creation returns to the Creator. So it is that the priesthood also became something new: it was no longer a question of lineage but of discovering oneself in the mystery of Jesus Christ. He is always the One who gives, who draws us to himself. He alone can say: "This is my Body... this is my Blood". The mystery of the priesthood of the Church lies in the fact that we, miserable human beings, by virtue of the Sacrament, can speak with his "I": *in persona Christi*. He wishes to exercise *his* priesthood through us. On Holy Thursday, we remember in a special way this moving mystery, which moves us anew in every celebration of the Sacrament. So that daily life will not dull what is great and mysterious, we need this specific commemoration, we need to return to that hour in which he placed his hands upon us and made us share in this mystery.

Let us reflect once again on the signs in which the Sacrament has been given to us. At the centre is the very ancient rite of the imposition of hands, with which he took possession of me, saying to me: "You belong to me". However, in saying this he also said: "You are under the protection of my hands. You are under the protection of my heart. You are kept safely in the palm of my hands, and this is precisely how you find yourself in the immensity of my love. Stay in my hands, and give me yours". Then let us remember that our hands were anointed with oil, which is the sign of the Holy Spirit and his power. Why one's hands? The human hand is the instrument of human action, it is the symbol of the human capacity to face the world, precisely to "take it in hand". The Lord has laid

his hands upon us and he now wants our hands so that they may become his own in the world. He no longer wants them to be instruments for taking things, people or the world for ourselves, to reduce them to being our possession, but instead, by putting ourselves at the service of his love, they can pass on his divine touch. He wants our hands to be instruments of service, hence, an expression of the mission of the whole person who vouches for him and brings him to men and women. If human hands symbolically represent human faculties and, in general, skill as power to dispose of the world, then anointed hands must be a sign of the human capacity for giving, for creativity in shaping the world with love. It is for this reason, of course, that we are in need of the Holy Spirit.

In the Old Testament, anointing is the sign of being taken into service: the king, the prophet, the priest, each does and gives more than what derives from himself alone. In a certain way, he is emptied of himself, so as to serve by making himself available to One who is greater than he. If, in today's Gospel, Jesus presents himself as God's Anointed One, the Christ, then this itself means that he is acting for the Father's mission and in unity with the Holy Spirit. He is thereby giving the world a new kingship, a new priesthood, a new way of being a prophet who does not seek himself but lives for the One with a view to whom the world was created. Today, let us once again put our hands at his disposal and pray to him to take us by the hand, again and again, and lead us. In the sacramental gesture of the imposition of hands by the Bishop, it was the Lord himself who laid his hands upon us. This sacramental sign sums up an entire existential process. Once, like the first disciples, we encountered the Lord and heard his words: "Follow me!" Perhaps, to start with, we followed him somewhat hesitantly, looking back and wondering if this really was the road for us. And at some point on the journey, we may have had the same experience as Peter after the miraculous catch; in other words, we may have been frightened by its size, by the size of the task and by the inadequacy of our own poor selves, so that we wanted to turn back. "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5: 8). Then, however, with great kindness, he took us by the hand, he drew us to himself and said to us: "Do not fear! I am with you. I will not abandon you, do not leave me!" And more than just once, the same thing that happened to Peter may have happened to us: while he was walking on the water towards the Lord, he suddenly realized that the water was not holding him up and that he was beginning to sink. And like Peter we cried, "Lord, save me!" (Mt 14: 30). Seeing the elements raging on all sides, how could we get through the roaring, foaming waters of the past century, of the past millennium? But then we looked towards him... and he grasped us by the hand and gave us a new "specific weight": the lightness that derives from faith and draws us upwards. Then he stretched out to us the hand that sustains and carries us. He supports us. Let us fix our gaze ever anew on him and reach out to him. Let us allow his hand to take ours, and then we will not sink but will serve the life that is stronger than death and the love that is stronger than hatred. Faith in Jesus, Son of the living God, is the means through which, time and again, we can take hold of Jesus' hand and in which he takes our hands and guides us. One of my favourite prayers is the request that the liturgy puts on our lips before Communion: "...never let me be separated from you". Let us ask that we never fall away from communion with his Body, with Christ himself, that we do not fall away from the

Eucharistic mystery. Let us ask that he will never let go of our hands....

The Lord laid his hand upon us. He expressed the meaning of this gesture in these words: "No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you" (Jn 15: 15). I no longer call you servants but friends: in these words one could actually perceive the institution of the priesthood. The Lord makes us his friends; he entrusts everything to us; he entrusts himself to us, so that we can speak with he himself - *in persona Christi capitis*. What trust! He has truly delivered himself into our hands. The essential signs of priestly ordination are basically all a manifestation of those words: the laying on of hands; the consignment of the book - of his words that he entrusts to us; the consignment of the chalice, with which he transmits to us his most profound and personal mystery. The power to absolve is part of all this. It also makes us share in his awareness of the misery of sin and of all the darkness in the world, and places in our hands the key to reopen the door to the Father's house. I no longer call you servants but friends. This is the profound meaning of being a priest: becoming the friend of Jesus Christ. For this friendship we must daily recommit ourselves. Friendship means sharing in thought and will. We must put into practice this communion of thought with Jesus, as St Paul tells us in his Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2: 2-5). And this communion of thought is not a purely intellectual thing, but a sharing of sentiments and will, hence, also of actions. This means that we should know Jesus in an increasingly personal way, listening to him, living together with him, staying with him. Listening to him - in *lectio divina*, that is, reading Sacred Scripture in a non-academic but spiritual way; thus, we learn to encounter Jesus present, who speaks to us. We must reason and reflect, before him and with him, on his words and actions. The reading of Sacred Scripture is prayer, it must be prayer - it must emerge from prayer and lead to prayer. The Evangelists tell us that the Lord frequently withdrew - for entire nights - "to the mountains", to pray alone. We too need these "mountains": they are inner peaks that we must scale, the mountain of prayer. Only in this way does the friendship develop. Only in this way can we carry out our priestly service, only in this way can we take Christ and his Gospel to men and women.

Activism by itself can even be heroic, but in the end external action is fruitless and loses its effectiveness unless it is born from deep inner communion with Christ. The time we spend on this is truly a time of pastoral activity, authentic pastoral activity. The priest must above all be a man of prayer. The world in its frenetic activism often loses its direction. Its action and capacities become destructive if they lack the power of prayer, from which flow the waters of life that irrigate the arid land.

I no longer call you servants, but friends. The core of the priesthood is being friends of Jesus Christ. Only in this way can we truly speak *in persona Christi*, even if our inner remoteness from Christ cannot jeopardize the validity of the Sacrament. Being a friend of Jesus, being a priest, means being a man of prayer. In this way we recognize him and emerge from the ignorance of simple servants. We thus learn to live, suffer and act with him and for him. Being friends with Jesus is par excellence always friendship with his followers. We can be friends of Jesus only in

communion with the whole of Christ, with the Head and with the Body; in the vigorous vine of the Church to which the Lord gives life. Sacred Scripture is a living and actual Word, thanks to the Lord, only in her. Without the living subject of the Church that embraces the ages, more often than not the Bible would have splintered into heterogeneous writings and would thus have become a book of the past. It is eloquent in the present only where the "Presence" is - where Christ remains for ever contemporary with us: in the Body of his Church. Being a priest means becoming an ever closer friend of Jesus Christ with the whole of our existence. The world needs God - not just any god but the God of Jesus Christ, the God who made himself flesh and blood, who loved us to the point of dying for us, who rose and created within himself room for man. This God must live in us and we in him. This is our priestly call: only in this way can our action as priests bear fruit. I would like to end this Homily with a word on Andrea Santoro, the priest from the Diocese of Rome who was assassinated in Trebizond while he was praying. Cardinal Cé recounted to us during the Spiritual Exercises what Fr Santoro said. It reads: "I am here to dwell among these people and enable Jesus to do so by lending him my flesh.... One becomes capable of salvation only by offering one's own flesh. The evil in the world must be borne and the pain shared, assimilating it into one's own flesh as did Jesus". Jesus assumed our flesh; let us give him our own. In this way he can come into the world and transform it. Amen!

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