



The Holy See

OPENING OF THE ECCLESIAL CONVENTION
OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME (JUNE 13-16, 2011)

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

Monday, 13 June 2011

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Our hearts full of gratitude to the Lord, we are meeting in this Basilica of St John Lateran for the opening of the annual Diocesan Convention. Let us give thanks to God who this evening permits us to have an experience of the first Christian community whose members “were of one heart and soul” (Acts 4:32). I thank the Cardinal Vicar for the words he has so courteously addressed to me on behalf of all. I offer each one of you my most cordial greeting, assuring you of my prayers for you yourselves and for those of you who are unable to be here to share in this important stage in the life of our Diocese, and in particular for those who are going through moments of physical or spiritual suffering.

I learned with pleasure that in this pastoral year you began to put into practice the instructions that resulted from last year’s Convention. I trust that in the future too every community, especially parish communities, will persevere, with the help offered by the Diocese, in its commitment to focus especially on the Eucharistic celebration — particularly on Sundays — by preparing pastoral workers properly and by striving to ensure that the Mystery of the Altar is lived increasingly as a source from which to draw strength for a more effective witness of charity that will renew the social fabric of our city.

The theme of this new stage in the review of your pastoral work, “The Joy of Nurturing Christian Faith in the Church of Rome — Christian Initiation”, will fit in with the process that has already been started. Indeed, for many years now our Diocese has been committed to reflecting on the

transmission of faith. I remember that in this very Basilica, in an intervention during the Synod for Rome, I quoted a few words that Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote to me in a short letter: “Faith must never be presupposed but proposed”. This is just how it is. Faith is not preserved in the world by itself, it is not automatically passed on to the human heart, but must always be proclaimed. Moreover if the proclamation of faith is to be effective it must stem in turn from a heart that believes and loves, a heart that adores Christ and believes in the power of the Holy Spirit! This is what happened from the outset, as the biblical episode chosen to illuminate the pastoral verification reminds us. It is taken from chapter 2 of the Acts of the Apostles in which St Luke, immediately after recounting the event of the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, presents the first discourse that St Peter addressed to everyone. The profession of faith placed at the end of the discourse – “God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified” (Acts 2:36) — is the happy announcement which for centuries the Church has not ceased to repeat to every human being.

When they heard this proclamation — we read in the Acts of the Apostles — all of them “were cut to the heart” (2:37). This reaction was certainly brought into being by God’s grace: they all realized that this proclamation fulfilled the promises and made each one of them merely to desire conversion and forgiveness for their sins. Peter’s words were not limited to merely announcing the events but revealed their meaning, connecting what happened to Jesus with God’s promises, with the expectations of Israel and hence with those of every man and woman. The people of Jerusalem realized that Jesus’ resurrection could illuminate human existence. And, in fact, this event gave rise to a new understanding of human dignity and of the eternal destiny of human beings, of the relationship between man and woman, of the ultimate meaning of suffering and of the commitment to building society. The response of faith is born when the person discovers, through God’s grace, that believing means finding true life, “full life”. St Hilary of Poitiers, one of the great Fathers of the Church, wrote that he became a believer the moment he understood, in listening to the Gospel, that for a truly happy life both the possession and the tranquil enjoyment of things were insufficient and that there was something more important and precious: the knowledge of the truth and the fullness of the love given by Christ (cf. *De Trinitate* 1,2).

Dear friends, the Church, each one of us, must bring to the world this joyful news that Jesus is Lord, the One in whom God’s closeness and love for every individual man and woman, and for humanity in its entirety, was made flesh. This proclamation must ring out anew in the regions that have an ancient Christian tradition. Bl. John Paul ii spoke of the need for a new evangelization addressed to all those who, although they have heard talk of the faith, no longer appreciate, no longer know the beauty of Christianity; on the contrary, at times they even view it as an obstacle to achieving happiness. Therefore today I would like to repeat what I said to the young people at the World Youth Day in Cologne: “the happiness you are seeking, the happiness you have a right to enjoy has a name and a face: it is Jesus of Nazareth, hidden in the Eucharist”!

If people forget God it is partly because the Person of Jesus is often reduced to that of the figure

of a wise man and his divinity weakened, if not denied. This manner of thinking is an obstacle to understanding the radical newness of Christianity, because if Jesus were not the Only Son of the Father then God did not come to visit human history either. We only have human ideas about God. The incarnation, on the other hand, belongs to the heart of the Gospel! Therefore may there be a growing commitment to a renewed season of evangelization, which is not only the task of some of the members of the Church but rather of them all. Evangelization tells us that God is close: God has shown himself to us. In this period of history, is this not the mission that the Lord entrusts to us: to proclaim the newness of the Gospel, like Peter and Paul when they reached our city? Should we not today too show the beauty and reasonableness of faith, carry God's light to the people of our time, with courage, with conviction, with joy? There are many people who have not encountered the Lord: special pastoral care should be dedicated to them. Beside the children and young people of Christian families who ask to begin the process of Christian initiation, there are adults who have not received Baptism or who have drifted away from the faith and from the Church. This pastoral attention is especially urgent today and asks us to commit ourselves with confidence, sustained by the certainty that God's grace works in the human heart today too. Every year I myself have the joy of baptizing several young people and adults at the Easter Vigil and of incorporating them in the body of Christ, in communion with the Lord, and thus in communion with God's love.

However, who is the messenger of this joyful proclamation? Certainly, it is every baptized person. Especially parents, whose task it is to ask for Baptism for their children. How great is this gift which the liturgy calls the gateway to our salvation, the beginning of life in Christ, the source of new humanity (cf. Preface of Baptism)! All fathers and mothers are called to cooperate with God in the transmission of the inestimable gift of life and also to make known the One who is Life. And life is not really transmitted if one does not know the foundation and the perennial source of life as well. Dear parents, the Church, as a loving mother, wishes to support you in your fundamental task. Children stand in need of God from an early age, because people need God from the beginning and have the ability to perceive his greatness, they know how to appreciate the value of prayer — to speak to this God — and the rites and thus how to discern the difference between good and evil. May you therefore be able to guide them, accompanying them in the faith, in this knowledge of God, in this friendship with God, and in this knowledge of the difference between good and evil. Accompany them in faith from the most tender age.

And how is it possible to cultivate the seed of eternal life as the child gradually grows up? St Cyprian reminds us: "No one can have God as Father unless they have the Church as Mother". And this is why we do not say "my Father", but "Our Father", because it is only in the "we" of the Church, of the brothers and sisters, that we are children. The Christian community has always accompanied the formation of children and young people, not only helping them to understand intelligently the truths of faith, but also to live experiences of prayer, charity and brotherhood. The word of faith risks remaining mute if it does not find a community that puts it into practice, making it lively and attractive, as an experience of the reality of the true life. Still today, after-school prayer

and recreation centres, summer camps and small and important experiences of service are a precious help to adolescents who are undertaking the process of Christian initiation in order to develop a consistent commitment to life. I therefore encourage them to take this path which leads to discovery of the Gospel, not as a utopia but as the full form of life. All this should be proposed especially to those who are preparing to receive the sacrament of Confirmation, so that the gift of the Holy Spirit may strengthen the joy of being generated as children of God. I therefore invite you to dedicate yourselves enthusiastically to the rediscovery of this sacrament so that those who are already baptized may receive the seal of the faith as a gift from God and fully become witnesses of Christ.

For all this to prove effective and fruitful, knowledge of Jesus must develop and must be extended beyond the celebration of the sacraments. This is the task of catechesis, as Bl. John Paul ii recalled: “The specific character of catechesis, as distinct from the initial conversion — bringing proclamation of the Gospel, has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae*, n. 19). Catechesis is an ecclesial action and it is therefore necessary that catechists give witness to and teach the faith of the Church and do not give their own interpretation of it. For this very reason the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was compiled. This evening I present it in spirit to all of you anew so that the Church of Rome may be committed with fresh joy to educating in the faith. The structure of the *Catechism* derives from the experience of the catechumenate in the early Church and takes up the fundamental elements that make a person Christian: faith, the sacraments, the commandments, the “Our Father”.

For all these reasons it is necessary to teach silence and interiority. I trust that in the parishes of Rome the itineraries of Christian initiation will teach prayer so that it may permeate life and help people discover the Truth that dwells in our hearts. And we truly find it in personal conversation with God. Fidelity to the faith of the Church, then, must be conjugated with a “creative catechetics” which will take into account the context, culture and age of those to whom it is addressed. The patrimony of history and art that Rome preserves is a further way in which to bring people close to faith: many things speak to us of the reality of faith here in Rome. I invite you all to make the most in catechesis of this “path of beauty” which leads to the One who, according to St Augustine, is Beauty, so ancient and yet ever new.

Dear brothers and sisters, I would like to thank you for your generous and invaluable service in this fascinating work of evangelization and catechesis. Do not be afraid to commit yourselves to the Gospel! Despite the difficulties you will encounter in reconciling the requirements of the family and of work with those of the community in which you are carrying out your mission, always trust in the help of the Virgin Mary, Star of Evangelization. Even Bl. John Paul ii, who did his utmost to the very end to proclaim the Gospel in our city and had a special soft spot for young people, intercedes for us with the Father. As I assure you of my constant prayers, I warmly impart to all of

you an Apostolic Blessing.

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