



The Holy See

SOLEMN LITURGY FOR THE FUNERAL RITES OF
THE LATE CARDINAL GIOVANNI VILLOT

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

13 March 1979 Beloved Brothers and Sons, 1. We are gathered here around the coffin of our brother. He passed away so unexpectedly. Just a week ago it was difficult to think that he would leave us, that his hour was so near. It was difficult to think so. He still seemed full of life and strength — in accordance with his age, of course — but he seemed full of it... We felt deeply grieved when we learned from the doctors that, in spite of these appearances, his organism was exhausted and defenceless. He has left us. The Lord of life has called him to Him. "Deus, cui omnia vivunt...". At this moment, in front of his coffin, we gather around the altar. We celebrate the Holy Sacrifice: we who lived so close to him every day. This liturgy of ours, this concelebration is, in a certain sense, a continuation of all the days spent together with him, of all the meetings, the conversations, the collaboration. 2. The Cardinals and I have still clearly in our minds what he said to us, as Camerlengo of the Holy Roman Church, on two solemn occasions, during the celebration of the votive Mass to the Holy Spirit "pro eligendo Summo Pontifice". Twice: first, after Pope Paul VI's death and then, just a few weeks later, after the death of Pope John Paul I. He spoke here, in this very place. Let us recall what he said: "At this moment, a serious and delicate one, Lords Cardinals, the sacred liturgy gathers us all together and causes us to pray for the election of the Pope, which, with the Lord's help, we are about to begin. We know that, in accordance with his ineffable promise, Jesus is in our midst... The thought occurs to us spontaneously, Lords Cardinals, that Jesus is addressing us particularly, at this solemn hour of the Conclave — as he addressed the apostles gathered in the Upper Room — that he is looking into our eyes, one by one, asking us for complete correspondence (in the limits, of course, of our human weakness) with his will, with his forestalling love, by means of a deeper union with him, a truer brotherly charity among ourselves, and, above all, convinced faithfulness in carrying out the task that is assigned to us." And again, on the 14 October following, commenting on the words of Jesus: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (Jn 15:15), he observed: "Let us reflect, Brothers, that all of us — it is certain — but in a very special way the one we will elect, must give our life for the multitude of the redeemed: "ut amici Christi efficiantur". The whole mystical mission of the Church is contained in this concept; and, since God uses men as ordinary

instruments, it can clearly be seen what is the spirit that must animate those he chooses to exercise an office as pastor, as guide, and to make the Gospel message known for the first time. We ourselves, to the extent to which we wish to consider ourselves — with all our failings — his friends, are such only and exclusively by virtue of his death." He prepared the Conclave twice, together with the whole College of Cardinals. He was the Secretary of State of Pope Paul VI and later of John Paul I. After my election, he expressed his readiness to leave this office. I asked him to remain, however, at least for a certain time; and he remained. He served the Church with his experience, his advice, his competence. I am grateful to him for this. And I cannot but express my regret that this cooperation has been interrupted so suddenly.³ At this moment, it is difficult to consider the whole life of the deceased. Our frequent meetings go back to the times of the Second Vatican Council in which he was very active in the capacity of Under-Secretary. Following upon the death of his predecessor, he was called to the archepiscopal see of Lyons, and also entered the College of Cardinals. After the Council, he was called to enter the direct service of the Holy See as Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Clergy. In May 1969 Pope Paul VI called him to the office of his Secretary of State. He brought to this key-post his pastoral experience as a bishop and before that as a priest, matured in long years of service of the Church in France, which boasts the title of firstborn daughter of the universal Church". In the future, biographers will show us the life and work of Cardinal Giovanni Villot in all their fullness. Today, allow us to repeat only the words of the Gospel: "If anyone serves me, he must follow me; and where I am, there shall my servant be also: if any one serves me, the Father will honour him" (Jn 12:26). Just so. This one thing only is important, it is, in fact, the essential thing. He followed Christ. He was always there where he called him. He served. The measure of his whole life is in this service.⁴ The measure of life. Yes. This life has already its measure, it is already completed, it has reached its end. We are in the presence of this completion. And in this consists the grandeur of the moment we are living now, the dignity of this meeting in which are fulfilled, in our Brother, the Lord's words: "unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone: but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (Jn 12:24). Only then. When it dies... It is necessary to die in order that man's life may bear full fruit. The hour has come in which Cardinal Giovanni Villot's life can produce its full fruit in God. No life of man in his earthly dimensions can bear such fruit; and it is a fruit that goes beyond life, exclaiming: "I know that my Redeemer lives", as Job exclaimed in his ordeal (cf. Job 19:25).⁵ Death is always man's last experience, and it is inescapable. A difficult experience, before which the human soul feels fear. Did not Christ himself say: "Now is my soul troubled. And what shall I say, Father, save me from this hour"? And he added at once: "No, for this purpose I have come to his hour. Father, glorify thy name" (Jn 12:27). Father, glorify! There remains that last cry of the soul, in such contrast with the experience of death, with the experience of the destruction of the body, in which "the whole creation has been groaning in travail together until now"! (Rom 8:22). Yet, groaning and suffering the pains of death, it does not cease to wait "with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God" (Rom 8:19). And we know "that the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us" (Rom 8:18). Let us too, then, before this coffin, in the spirit of that special communion that united us, give expression to these desires: Father, forgive! Father, absolve! Father, purify! Purify in the measure of the holiness of

your Face. And finally: Father, glorify! With all humility, but at the same time with all the realism of our faith and hope, let us raise this prayer beside the coffin of our Brother, Cardinal Giovanni Villot, Secretary of State.

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