



The Holy See

VESPERS ON THE OCCASION OF THE REOPENING
OF THE RECENTLY RESTORED PAULINE CHAPEL
IN THE VATICAN APOSTOLIC PALACE *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI*

Pauline Chapel

Saturday, 4 July 2009

Images of celebration

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, a few days after the Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul and the conclusion of the Pauline Year, my wish to reopen the Pauline Chapel for worship is fulfilled. We have taken part in solemn celebrations in honour of the two Apostles in the Papal Basilicas of [St Paul](#) and St Peter. This evening, to complete them, as it were, we gather in the heart of the Apostolic Palace, in the Chapel desired by Pope Paul III and designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, the place of prayer reserved for the Pope and the Pontifical Family. The paintings and decorations adorning this chapel particularly the two large frescoes by Michelangelo Buonarotti which were the last works of his long life are especially effective in encouraging meditation and prayer. They depict the conversion of Paul and the crucifixion of Peter.

The eye is first drawn to the faces of the two Apostles. It is evident from their placement alone that these two faces play a central role in the iconographic message of the Chapel. But, aside from their positioning, they immediately attract us "beyond" the image: they call us to question and lead us to reflect. First of all, let us dwell a moment on Paul: why is he portrayed with such an elderly face? It is the face of an old man, whereas we know and Michelangelo also knew it well that the calling of Saul on the road to Damascus occurred when he was about 30 years old. The artistic choice takes us outside pure realism; it makes us go beyond the simple narration of events to introduce us to a deeper level. The face of Saul-Paul which is that of the artist himself, who by

then was old, troubled and in search of the light of truth represents the human being in need of a greater light. It is the light of divine grace, indispensable in order to gain a new perspective from which to perceive reality, oriented towards the "hope laid up for you in heaven", as the Apostle writes in the initial greeting of the *Letter to the Colossians* which we have just heard (1: 5).

The face of Saul fallen to the ground is lit from above, by the light of the Risen One and, despite its dramatic nature, the figure inspires peace and instils a sense of security. It expresses the maturity of a man illuminated from within by Christ the Lord, while around him a flurry of events occurs in which all of the figures seem to be within a vortex. The grace and peace of God have enveloped Saul, they have internally conquered and transformed him. It is the same "grace" and the same "peace" that he was to announce to all his communities on his apostolic journeys, with the maturity of one who has aged not in years, but spiritually, a gift from the Lord himself. Therefore, in Paul's face we can already perceive the heart of the spiritual message of this Chapel: the wonder, that is, of Christ's grace which transforms and renews mankind through the light of his truth and his love. This is what constitutes the newness of conversion, the call to faith which finds its fulfilment in the mystery of the Cross.

From Paul's face let us pass to that of Peter, depicted at the moment when his inverted cross is being hoisted up and he turns to look at the onlooker. This face too surprises us. Here the age represented is the correct one, but it is the expression that amazes and questions us. Why this expression? It is not an image of suffering, and Peter's body communicates a surprising degree of physical vigour. The face, especially the forehead and eyes, seems to express the state of mind of a man confronting death and evil. There is a bewilderment, a sharp, projected gaze that seems almost to search for something or someone in the final hour. And the eyes also stand out also in the faces of those surrounding him. Agitated glances emerge, some even frightened or confused. What does all of this mean? It is what Jesus had predicted to his Apostle: "When you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and another will gird you and carry you where you do not want to go". And the Lord had added: "Follow me" (John 21: 18,19). In this precise moment the culmination of the *sequela* is reached: the disciple is no longer with his Master, and now tastes the bitterness of the cross, of the consequences of sin that separates from God, of all the absurdity of violence and falsehood. If one comes to this chapel to meditate, one cannot escape the radicalism of the question posed by the cross: the Cross of Christ, Head of the Church, and the cross of Peter, his Vicar on earth.

The two faces on which our gaze rests are opposite each other. One might therefore imagine that Peter's face is actually turned towards the face of Paul, who in turn does not see but bears within him the light of the Risen Christ. It is as though Peter, in the hour of supreme trial, were seeking that light which gave true faith to Paul. It is in this sense, then, that the two images can become the two acts of a single drama, the drama of the Paschal Mystery: Cross and Resurrection, death and life, sin and grace. The chronological order of the events portrayed might be inverted, nevertheless the plan of salvation emerges, the plan that Christ realized in himself by bringing it to

fruition, as we have just sung in the hymn of the *Letter to the Philippians*. For those who come to pray in this chapel, and above all for the Pope, Peter and Paul become teachers of faith. With their witness they invite us to go deeper, to meditate in silence upon the mystery of the Cross, which accompanies the Church until the end of time, and to absorb the light of the faith. It is thanks to this light that the apostolic Community can extend to the ends of the earth the missionary and evangelizing action entrusted to it by the Risen Christ. Solemn celebrations with the people are not held here. This is where the Successor of Peter and his collaborators meditate in silence and adore the living Christ, present above all in the Most Holy Sacrament of the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is the Sacrament in which the whole work of Redemption is concentrated: in Jesus as Eucharist we can contemplate the transformation of death into life, of violence into love. Hidden beneath the veils of the bread and the wine, we recognize through the eyes of faith the same glory that was manifested to the Apostles after the Resurrection. It is the same glory that Peter, James and John contemplated as a foretaste on the mountain, when Jesus was transfigured before them: a mysterious event, the Transfiguration, which the large painting in this Chapel by Simone Cantarini presents anew with unique force. In fact, however, the entire chapel the frescoes of Lorenzo Sabatini and Federico Zuccari, the decorations of numerous other artists brought here on another occasion by Pope Gregory XIII all of it flows together into a single, unique hymn of the triumph of life and grace over death and sin, in a symphony of worship and of love for Christ the Redeemer that is highly evocative.

Dear friends, at the end of this brief meditation, I would like to thank all those who have cooperated so that we may once again enjoy this completely restored sacred place: Prof. Antonio Paolucci and his predecessor Dr Francesco Buranelli, who, as Directors of the [Vatican Museums](#), have always had this extremely important restoration at heart; the various specialists who, under the artistic direction of Prof. Arnold Nesselrath, worked on the frescoes and on the rest of the Chapel's decorations and, in particular, the Master Inspector Maurizio de Luca and his assistant, Maria Pustka, who directed the work and themselves worked on the two murals of Michelangelo, availing themselves of the consultation of an international commission composed of scholars of notable fame. My recognition goes likewise to Cardinal Giovanni Lajolo and his collaborators at the Governorate, who devoted special attention to the work. And naturally I extend a warm and dutiful "thank you" to the praiseworthy Catholic patrons, Americans and others, as well as to the *Patrons of the Arts*, generously committed to the protection and appraisal of the cultural patrimony of the Vatican, who made possible the result we admire today. May the expression of my most cordial gratitude reach each and every one of you.

We shall shortly be singing the *Magnificat*. May Mary Most Holy, Teacher of prayer and of adoration, together with Sts Peter and Paul, obtain abundant graces for those who are gathered in faith within this Chapel. And this evening, thankful to God for his wonders, and especially for the Death and Resurrection of his Son, may we lift up to him our praise also for this work that reaches its completion today. "To him who by the power at work within us is able to do far more abundantly

than all that we ask or think, to him be the glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever! Amen" (Eph 3: 20-21).

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