



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 10 December 2008

Saint Paul (16):

Theology of the sacraments

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In following St Paul, we saw two things in the [Catechesis last Wednesday](#). The first is that our human history has been polluted from the outset by the misuse of created freedom which seeks emancipation from the divine Will. Thus, it does not find true freedom but instead opposes truth and consequently falsifies our human realities. It falsifies above all the fundamental relationships: with God, between a man and a woman, between humankind and the earth. We said that this contamination permeates the whole fabric of our history and that this hereditary defect has continued to spread within it and can now be seen everywhere. This was the first thing. The second is this: we have learned from St Paul that a new beginning exists *in* history and *of* history in Jesus Christ, the One who is man and God. With Jesus, who comes from God, a new history begins that is shaped by his "yes" to the Father and is therefore not founded on the pride of a false emancipation but on love and truth.

However, the question now arises: how can we enter this new beginning, this new history? How does this new history reach me? We are inevitably linked to the first, contaminated history through our biological descendance, since we all belong to the one body of humanity; but how is communion with Jesus, how is new birth achieved in order to enter into the new humanity? How does Jesus come into my life, into my being? The fundamental response of St Paul and of the

whole of the New Testament is that he comes through the action of the Holy Spirit. If the first history starts, so to speak, with biology, the second starts with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ. At Pentecost this Spirit created the beginning of the new humanity, the new community, the Church, the Body of Christ.

However we must be even more concrete: how can this Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, become my Spirit? The answer is that this happens in three ways that are closely interconnected. This is the first: the Spirit of Christ knocks at the door of my heart, moves me from within. However since the new humanity must be a true body, since the Spirit must gather us together and really create a community, since overcoming divisions and creating a gathering of the dispersed is characteristic of the new beginning, this Spirit of Christ uses two elements visibly aggregated: the Word of the proclamation and the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular. In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul says: "If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved" (10: 9), in other words, you will enter the new history, a history of life and not of death. St Paul then continues: "But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?" (Rm 10: 14-15). In an ensuing passage he says further: "faith comes from what is heard" (Rm 10: 17). Faith is not a product of our thought or our reflection; it is something new that we cannot invent but only receive as a gift, as a new thing produced by God. Moreover, faith does not come from reading but from listening. It is not only something interior but also a relationship with Someone. It implies an encounter with the proclamation; it implies the existence of the Other, who it proclaims, and creates communion.

And lastly, proclamation: the one who proclaims does not speak on his own behalf but is sent. He fits into a structure of mission that begins with Jesus, sent by the Father, passes through the Apostles the term "apostles" means "those who are sent" and continues in the ministry, in the missions passed down by the Apostles. The new fabric of history takes shape in this structure of missions in which we ultimately hear God himself speaking, his personal Word, the Son speaks with us, reaches us. The Word was made flesh, Jesus, in order really to create a new humanity. The word of proclamation thus becomes a sacrament in Baptism, which is rebirth from water and the Spirit, as St John was to say. In the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul speaks of Baptism in a very profound way. We have heard the text but it might be useful to repeat it: "Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life" (6: 3-4).

In this Catechesis I cannot of course enter into a detailed interpretation of this far from easy text. I would like to note briefly just three points. The first: "we have been baptized" is a passive. No one can baptize himself, he needs the other. No one can become Christian on his own. Becoming Christian is a passive process. Only by another can we be made Christians and this "other" who

makes us Christians, who gives us the gift of faith, is in the first instance the community of believers, the Church. From the Church we receive faith, Baptism. Unless we let ourselves be formed by this community we do not become Christians. An autonomous, self-produced Christianity is a contradiction in itself. In the first instance, this "other" is the community of believers, the Church, yet in the second instance this community does not act on its own either, according to its own ideas and desires. The community also lives in the same passive process: Christ alone can constitute the Church. Christ is the true giver of the sacraments. This is the first point: no one baptizes himself, no one makes himself a Christian. We become Christians.

This is the second point: Baptism is more than a cleansing. It is death and resurrection. Paul himself, speaking in the Letter to the Galatians of the turning point in his life brought about by his encounter with the Risen Christ, describes it with the words: I am dead. At that moment a new life truly begins. Becoming Christian is more than a cosmetic operation that would add something beautiful to a more or less complete existence. It is a new beginning, it is rebirth: death and resurrection. Obviously in the resurrection what was good in the previous existence reemerges.

The third point is: matter is part of the sacrament. Christianity is not a purely spiritual reality. It implies the body. It implies the cosmos. It is extended toward the new earth and the new heavens. Let us return to the last words of St Paul's text. In this way he said, "we too might walk in newness of life". It constitutes an examination of conscience for all of us: to walk in newness of life. This applies to Baptism.

We now come to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I have already shown in other Catecheses the profound respect with which St Paul transmits verbally the tradition of the Eucharist which he received from the witnesses of the last night themselves. He passes on these words as a precious treasure entrusted to his fidelity. Thus we really hear in these words the witnesses of the last night. We heard the words of the Apostle: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my Body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11: 23-25). It is an inexhaustible text. Here too, in this Catechesis, I have only two brief remarks to make. Paul transmits the Lord's words on the cup like this: this cup is "the new covenant in my Blood". These words conceal an allusion to two fundamental texts of the Old Testament. The first refers to the promise of a new covenant in the Book of the Prophet Jeremiah. Jesus tells the disciples and tells us: now, at this moment, with me and with my death the new covenant is fulfilled; by my Blood this new history of humanity begins in the world. However, also present in these words is a reference to the moment of the covenant on Sinai, when Moses said: "Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words" (Ex 24: 8). Then it was the blood of animals. The blood of animals could only be the expression of a desire, an expectation of the true sacrifice, the true worship. With the gift of the cup, the Lord gives us the true sacrifice. The one true sacrifice is

the love of the Son. With the gift of this love, eternal love, the world enters into the new covenant. Celebrating the Eucharist means that Christ gives us himself, his love, to configure us to himself and thereby to create the new world.

The second important aspect of the teaching on the Eucharist appears in the same First Letter to the Corinthians where St Paul says: "the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (10: 16-17). In these words the personal and social character of the Sacrament of the Eucharist likewise appears. Christ personally unites himself with each one of us, but Christ himself is also united with the man and the woman who are next to me. And the bread is for me but it is also for the other. Thus Christ unites all of us with himself and all of us with one another. In communion we receive Christ. But Christ is likewise united with my neighbour: Christ and my neighbour are inseparable in the Eucharist. And thus we are all one bread and one body. A Eucharist without solidarity with others is a Eucharist abused. And here we come to the root and, at the same time, the kernel of the doctrine on the Church as the Body of Christ, of the Risen Christ.

We also perceive the full realism of this doctrine. Christ gives us his Body in the Eucharist, he gives himself in his Body and thus makes us his Body, he unites us with his Risen Body. If man eats ordinary bread, in the digestive process this bread becomes part of his body, transformed into a substance of human life. But in holy Communion the inverse process is brought about. Christ, the Lord, assimilates us into himself, introducing us into his glorious Body, and thus we all become his Body. Whoever reads only chapter 12 of the First Letter to the Corinthians and chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans might think that the words about the Body of Christ as an organism of charisms is only a sort of sociological and theological parable. Actually in Roman political science this parable of the body with various members that form a single unit was used referring to the State itself, to say that the State is an organism in which each one has his role, that the multiplicity and diversity of functions form one body and each one has his place. If one reads only chapter 12 of the First Letter to the Corinthians one might think that Paul limited himself to transferring this alone to the Church, that here too it was solely a question of a sociology of the Church. Yet, bearing in mind this chapter 10, we see that the realism of the Church is something quite different, far deeper and truer than that of a State organism. Because Christ really gives his Body and makes us his Body. We really become united with the Risen Body of Christ and thereby are united with one another. The Church is not only a corporation like the State is, she is a body. She is not merely an organization but a real organism.

Lastly, just a very brief word on the Sacrament of Matrimony. In the Letter to the Corinthians there are only a few references whereas in the Letter to the Ephesians he has truly developed a profound theology of Matrimony. Here Paul defines Matrimony as a "great mystery". He says so "in reference to Christ and the Church" (5: 32) A reciprocity in a vertical dimension should be pointed out in this passage. Mutual submission must use the language of love whose model is

Christ's love for the Church. This Christ-Church relationship makes the theological aspect of matrimonial love fundamental, exalting the affective relationship between the spouses. A genuine marriage will be well lived if in the constant human and emotional growth an effort is made to remain continually bound to the efficacy of the Word and to the meaning of Baptism. Christ sanctified the Church, purifying her through the washing with water, accompanied by the Word. Apart from making it visible, a participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord does no more than seal a union rendered indissoluble by grace.

And lastly let us listen to St Paul's words to the Philippians: "the Lord is at hand" (Phil 4: 5). It seems to me that we have understood that the Lord is close to us throughout our life through the Word and through the sacraments. Let us pray that by his closeness we may always be moved in the depths of our being so that joy may be born that joy which is born when Jesus really is at hand.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, including groups from Australia and the United States. I greet especially the newly professed Missionaries of Charity from various countries. Upon all of you, and upon your families and loved ones, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May Our Lady of Loreto whose Memorial we are celebrating today help you, dear *young people*, to prepare your hearts to welcome Jesus who saves us with the power of his love; may she comfort you, dear *sick people*, who in your experience of illness share with Christ the burden of the Cross, and may she encourage you, dear *newlyweds*, who have recently founded your family, to grow increasingly in that love which Jesus gave to us in his Nativity.

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