



The Holy See

HOLY MASS TO COMMEMORATE THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE DEATH
OF THE SERVANT OF GOD POPE PIUS XII

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Peter's Basilica

Thursday, 9 October 2008

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The passage from the Book of Sirach and the Prologue to St Peter's First Letter, proclaimed as the First and Second Readings, offer us important ideas for reflection at this Eucharistic celebration during which we are commemorating my Venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God [Pius XII](#). Exactly 50 years have passed since his death in the early hours of 9 October 1958. Sirach, as we have heard, reminded whomever intended to follow the Lord that they must prepare themselves to face trials, difficulties and suffering. He recommended that in order not to succumb to them they needed an upright and steadfast heart, patience and fidelity to God as well as firm determination in pursuing the path of good. Suffering refines the heart of the Lord's disciple, just as gold is purified in the crucible: "Accept whatever is brought upon you", the sacred author writes, "and in changes that humble you be patient. For gold is tested in the fire, and acceptable men in the furnace of humiliation" (2: 4-5).

In the passage that has been presented to us, St Peter, for his part, goes further when he asked Christians of the communities of Asia Minor, which were being "afflicted by various trials", to "rejoice" in spite of all (1 Pt 1: 6). Trial is in fact necessary, he observes, "so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to [your] praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 1: 7). And then for the second time he urges them to rejoice, indeed to exult, with "unutterable and exalted joy" (v. 8).

The profound reason for this spiritual rejoicing is to be found in love for Jesus and the certainty of his invisible presence. It is he who makes the faith and hope of believers indestructible, even in the most arduous and complicated events of life.

In the light of these biblical texts we may interpret the earthly life of Pope Pacelli and his long service to the Church, which began in 1901, under Leo XIII, and continued with St Pius X, Benedict XV and Pius XI. Above all, these biblical texts help us to understand from what source he drew courage and patience in his Pontifical ministry during the tormented years of the Second World War and in the post-war period, equally complex, of reconstruction and of the difficult international relations which have passed into history known by the significant appellation "Cold War".

"Miserere mei, Deus, secundum magnam misericordiam tuam": with this invocation of Psalm 51[50], Pius XII began his Testament. And he continued: "These words, which, aware of my unworthiness and insufficiency, I pronounced at the moment in which with trepidation I accepted the election as Supreme Pontiff, I now repeat with even greater justification". At the time he had two years to live. Abandonment in the merciful hands of God: this was the attitude constantly cultivated by my Venerable Predecessor, the last of the Popes to have been born in Rome, who belonged to a family which had been close to the Holy See for years. In Germany, where he had been Apostolic Nuncio, first in Munich and then in Berlin until 1929, he was appreciated especially for having collaborated with Benedict xv in the attempt to stop the "senseless slaughter" of the Great War and for having realized from the outset, the danger constituted by the monstrous National-Socialist ideology with its pernicious anti-Semitic and anti-Catholic roots. He was created a Cardinal in December 1929 and, shortly afterwards, became Secretary of State. For nine years he was a faithful collaborator of Pius XI, in an epoch marked by various brands of totalitarianism: Fascist, Nazi and Soviet-Communist, which he respectively condemned in the Encyclicals *Non abbiamo bisogno*, *Mit brennender sorge* and *Divini Redemptoris*.

"He who hears my word and believes... has eternal life" (Jn 5: 24). Jesus' assurance, which we heard in the Gospel, reminds us of the hardest years of Pius XII's Pontificate when, realizing the lack of any human security, he also felt the strong need to cleave to Christ the one certainty that never fails through a constant, ascetic effort. The Word of God thus became a light on his journey, a journey on which Pope Pacelli had to console evacuees and the persecuted; he had to wipe away tears of pain and mourn the innumerable victims of the War. Christ alone is man's true hope; only by trusting in him can the human heart open itself to the love that conquers hate. This knowledge accompanied Pius XII in his ministry as Successor of Peter, a ministry that began precisely when the menacing clouds of a new world war were gathering over Europe and the rest of the world. He sought to avoid this conflict in every way. "The danger is imminent, but there is still time. Nothing is lost with peace; all can be lost with war!", he had cried in his Radio Message of 24 August 1939 (*aas*, xxxi, 1939, p. 334).

The war highlighted the love he felt for his "beloved Rome", a love attested by the intense charitable work he promoted on behalf of the persecuted, without distinction of religion, race, nationality or political affiliation. When the city was occupied and he was repeatedly advised to leave the Vatican to seek safety, his determined answer was always the same: "I will not leave Rome and my duty even if it means I should die" (cf. *Summarium*, p. 186). Relatives and other witnesses also mentioned the deprivation of food, heating, clothes, comforts to which he voluntarily subjected himself in order to share the condition of the people, so harshly tried by the bombing and the consequences of war (cf. A. Tornielli, *Pius XII, Un uomo sul trono di Pietro*). And how can we forget his Christmas Radio Message in December 1942? His voice broken by emotion, he deplored the situation of "*hundreds of thousands of men and women who, without any fault of their own, sometimes only because of their nationality or race, have been consigned to death or to a slow decline*" (AAS, xxxv, 1943, p. 23), with a clear reference to the deportation and extermination of the Jews. He often acted secretly and silently because, in the light of the practical situations of that complex period of history, he foresaw that only in this way could he avoid the worst and save the greatest possible number of Jews. Numerous and unanimous attestations of gratitude for his interventions were addressed to him at the end of the war, as well as at the time of his death, from the highest authorities of the Jewish world such as, for example, Israel's Minister for Foreign Affairs Golda Meir, who wrote: "When fearful martyrdom came to our people, the voice of the Pope was raised for its victims. The life of our times was enriched by a voice speaking out about great moral truths above the tumult of daily conflict" and concluded with emotion: "We mourn a great Servant of peace".

Unfortunately, the debate in history on the figure of the Servant of God [Pius XII](#) which has not always been the calmest failed to highlight all the aspects of his multi-faceted Pontificate. He addressed an enormous number of Discourses, Allocutions and Messages to scientists, doctors, exponents of the most widely varied categories of work. Today, some of these are still extraordinarily relevant and continue to be a reliable reference point. Paul VI, who was his faithful collaborator for many years, described him as an erudite man, a scholar, open to modern forms of research and culture, and whose fidelity both to the principles of human rationality and to the intangible deposit of the truth of the faith was always firm and consistent. Paul VI considered him a precursor to the Second Vatican Council (cf. Angelus, 10 March 1974). From this perspective many of his documents deserve mention, but I limit myself to citing just a few. In the Encyclical [Mystici Corporis](#), published on 29 June 1943 while the War was raging, he described the spiritual and visible relations that unite people with the Incarnate Word and suggested integrating in this perspective all the principal themes of ecclesiology, offering for the first time a dogmatic and theological synthesis that was to form the basis of [Lumen gentium](#), the Conciliar Dogmatic Constitution on the Church.

A few months later, on 20 September 1943, with the Encyclical [Divino afflante Spiritu](#), he established the doctrinal norms for the study of Sacred Scripture, bringing to the fore its importance and role in Christian life. This is a Document that witnesses to great openness to

scientific research on the biblical texts. How can we fail to mention this Encyclical while the work of the Synod is underway on precisely *"The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church"*? It was thanks to the prophetic intuition of Pius XII that a serious study of the characteristics of ancient historiography was initiated, for a better understanding of the nature of the Sacred Books that does not diminish them or deny their historical value. The examination of "literary genres" which aimed at understanding better what the sacred author had wished to express was viewed with some suspicion until 1943, partly because of the abuses that had occurred. The Encyclical recognized its correct application, declaring legitimate its use not only for the study of the Old Testament but also of the New. "In the present day indeed this art which is called textual criticism and which is used with great and praiseworthy results in the editions of profane authors, is also quite rightly employed in the case of the Sacred Books, because of that very reverence which is due to the Word of God", the Pope explained. And he added: "for its very purpose is to ensure that the sacred text be restored, as perfectly as possible, be purified from the corruptions due to the carelessness of the copyists and be freed, as far as may be done, from glosses and omissions, from the interchange and repetition of words and from all other kinds of mistakes, which are wont to make their way gradually into writings handed down through many centuries" (*Divino afflante Spiritu*, n. 17; AAS xxxv, 1943, p. 336).

The third Encyclical I would like to mention is *Mediator Dei*, on the liturgy, published on 20 November 1947. With this Document, the Servant of God gave an impetus to the liturgical movement, insisting on the "chief element of divine worship", that "must be interior. For we must always live in Christ and give ourselves to Him completely, so that in Him, with Him and through Him the heavenly Father may be duly glorified", he wrote. "The sacred liturgy requires that these two elements be intimately linked with each other.... Otherwise religion clearly amounts to mere formalism, without meaning and without content" [n. 24]. Then we cannot omit to mention the considerable impetus that this Pontiff gave to the Church's missionary activity with the Encyclicals *Evangelii praecones* (1951) and *Fidei donum* (1957), bringing to the fore every community's duty to proclaim the Gospel to the peoples, as the Second Vatican Council was to do with courageous energy. Moreover, Pope Pacelli demonstrated his love for the missions at the very beginning of his Pontificate, when in October 1939, he chose to ordain personally 12 Bishops from mission countries, among whom were one Indian, one Chinese and one Japanese Prelate, the first African Bishop and the first Bishop of Madagascar. Finally, one of his constant pastoral concerns was the promotion of the role of lay people, so that the ecclesial community could avail itself of all available energies and resources. For this too, the Church and the world are grateful to him.

Dear brothers and sisters, while we pray that the cause of Beatification of the Servant of God Pius XII may proceed successfully, it is good to remember that holiness was his ideal, an ideal that he did not fail to propose to all. It was for this reason that he promoted the causes of Beatification and Canonization of people who belonged to different nations, people from all the states of life, roles and professions and allowed ample room for women. As a sign of steadfast hope, he held up to humanity Mary herself, the Woman of salvation, proclaiming the Dogma of the Assumption during

the Holy Year of 1950. In our world, assailed as it was then by preoccupations and worries about its future, in this world where, perhaps more than in any other epoch, the distancing of many from truth and virtue lets us glimpse scenarios devoid of hope, Pius xii invites us to turn our gaze to Mary, taken up into heavenly glory. He invites us to call on her confidently, so that she may make us appreciate increasingly the value of life on earth and help us to turn our gaze to the true destination to which we are all bound: eternal life which, as Jesus assures us, those who listen to and obey his words already possess. Amen!

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