



The Holy See

SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL
HOLY MASS FOR THE
IMPOSITION OF THE SACRED PALLIUM
ON METROPOLITAN ARCHBISHOPS
HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI
Vatican Basilica

Monday, 29 June 2009 Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I address my cordial greeting to you all with the words of the Apostle by whose tomb we stand: "May grace and peace be multiplied to you" (1 Pt 1: 2). I greet in particular the Members of the Delegation of the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople and the numerous Metropolitans who will receive the pallium today. In the opening prayer of this solemn day we ask the Lord that the Church may always follow the teaching of the Apostles from whom she first received the announcement of the faith. The request we address to God at the same time calls us into question: are we following the teaching of the great founder Apostles? Do we really know them? In the Pauline Year that ended yesterday, we endeavoured to listen anew to him, the "teacher of the Gentiles", hence to learn anew the alphabet of faith. We endeavoured to recognize Christ with Paul and through Paul, and thus to find the way to an upright Christian life. In the Canon of the New Testament, in addition to the Letters of St Paul, there are also two other Letters under the name of St Peter. The first ends with an explicit greeting from Rome, which, however, appears under the apocalyptic pseudonym of Babylon: "She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings" (1 Pt 5: 13). By calling the Church of Rome "likewise chosen", he sets her within the great community of all the local Churches in the community of all those whom God has gathered, so that in the "Babylon" of this world's time they might build up his People and introduce God into history. *St Peter's First Letter* is a greeting addressed from Rome to the Christendom of all epochs. It invites us to listen to "the teaching of the Apostles", which shows us the way to life. This Letter is a very rich text that wells up from the heart and touches the heart. Its centre is and how could it be otherwise? the figure of Christ who is illustrated as the One who suffers and loves, as Crucified and Risen: "When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten.... By his wounds you have been healed" (1 Pt 2: 23f.). Then starting from the centre that is Christ, the Letter is also an introduction to the fundamental Christian Sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist and a discourse addressed to priests in which Peter describes himself as a fellow priest with them. He speaks to Pastors of all generations as one who was personally made responsible by the Lord for tending his sheep and has thus

received a specific priestly mandate. So what does St Peter tell us precisely in the Year for Priests about the priest's task? First of all he understands the priestly ministry as being based totally on Christ. He calls Christ the "Shepherd and Guardian of... souls" (2: 25). Where the Italian [and the English] translation speak of "Guardian", the Greek text uses the word *episcopos* (bishop). A little further on, Christ is described as the chief Shepherd: *archipoimen* (5: 4). It is surprising that Peter should call Christ himself a Bishop, Bishop of souls. What did he mean by this? The Greek term "*episcopos*" contains the verb "to see"; for this reason it is translated as "guardian", in other words "supervisor". Yet external supervision, as might befit a prison guard, is certainly not what is meant here. Rather it means watching over, from above seeing from the lofty position of God. Seeing from God's perspective is seeing with love that wants to serve the other, wants to help him to become truly himself. Christ is the "Bishop of souls", Peter tells us. This means: he sees us from the perspective of God. In seeing from God's viewpoint, one has an overall vision, one sees the dangers as well as the hopes and possibilities. From God's perspective one sees the essential, one sees the inner man. If Christ is the Bishop of souls, the objective is to prevent the human soul from becoming impoverished and to ensure that the human being does not lose his essence, the capacity for truth and love; to ensure that he becomes acquainted with God; that he does not get lost in blind alleys; that he does not end in loneliness but remains altogether open. Jesus, the "Bishop of souls", is the prototype of every episcopal and presbyteral ministry. To be a Bishop, to be a priest, means in this perspective to assume the position of Christ. It means thinking, seeing and acting from his exalted vantage point. It means starting from Christ in order to be available to human beings so that they find life. Thus the word "Bishop", is very close to the term "Shepherd"; indeed the two concepts become interchangeable. It is the shepherd's task to feed and tend his flock and take it to the right pastures. Grazing the flock means taking care that the sheep find the right nourishment, that their hunger is satisfied and their thirst quenched. The metaphor apart, this means: the word of God is the nourishment that the human being needs. Making God's word ever present and new and thereby giving nourishment to people is the task of the righteous Pastor. And he must also know how to resist the enemies, the wolves. He must go first, point out the way, preserve the unity of the flock. Peter, in his discourse to priests, highlights another very important thing. It is not enough to speak. Pastors must make themselves "examples to the flock". (5: 3). When it is lived, the word of God is brought from the past into the present. It is marvellous to see how in saints the word of God becomes a word addressed to our time. In such figures as Francis and then again, as Padre Pio and many others, Christ truly became a contemporary of their generation, he emerged from the past to enter the present. This is what being a Pastor means a model for the flock: living the word now, in the great community of holy Church. Very briefly, I would like to call your attention further to two other affirmations in the *First Letter of St Peter* which concern us in a special way in our time. There is first of all the sentence, today discovered anew, on the basis of which medieval theologians understood their task, the task of the theologian: "in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to anyone who calls you to account for the hope that is in you". (3: 15). Christian faith is hope. It paves the way to the future. And it is a hope that possesses reasonableness, a hope whose reason we can and must explain. Faith comes from the eternal Reason that entered our world and showed us the true God.

Faith surpasses the capacity of our reason, just as love sees more than mere intelligence. But faith speaks to reason and in the dialectic confrontation can be a match for reason. It does not contradict it but keeps up with it and goes beyond it to introduce us into the greater Reason of God. As Pastors of our time it is our task to be the first to understand the reason of faith. It is our task not to let it remain merely a tradition but to recognize it as a response to our questions. Faith demands our rational participation, which is deepened and purified in a sharing of love. It is one of our duties as Pastors to penetrate faith with thought, to be able to show the reason for our hope within the debates of our time. Yet although it is so necessary thought alone does not suffice. Just as speaking alone does not suffice. In his baptismal and Eucharistic catechesis in chapter 2 of his Letter, Peter alludes to the Psalm used by the ancient Church in the context of communion, that is, to the verse which says: "O taste and see that the Lord is good!" (Ps 34[33]: 8; 1 Pt 2: 3). Tasting alone leads to seeing. Let us think of the disciples of Emmaus: it was only in convivial communion with Jesus, only in the breaking of the bread that their eyes were opened. Only in truly experienced communion with the Lord were they able to see. This applies to us all; over and above thinking and speaking, we need the experience of faith, the vital relationship with Jesus Christ. Faith must not remain theory: it must be life. If we encounter the Lord in the Sacrament, if we speak to him in prayer, if in the decisions of daily life we adhere to Christ then "we see" more and more how good he is; then we experience how good it is to be with him. Moreover the capacity to communicate faith to others in a credible way stems from this certainty lived. The Curé d'Ars was not a great thinker; but he "tasted" the Lord. He lived with him even in the details of daily life, as well as in the great demands of his pastoral ministry. In this way he became "one who sees". He had tasted so he knew that the Lord is good. Let us pray the Lord that he may grant us this ability to taste, and that we may thus become credible witnesses of the hope that is in us. Lastly, I would like to point out another small but important statement of St Peter. Right at the beginning of his Letter he tells us that the goal of our faith is the salvation of souls (cf. 1: 9). In the world of language and thought of the Christianity of today this is a strange, and for some, perhaps even shocking assertion. The word "soul" had fallen into discredit. It is said that this could lead to a division of man into spiritual and physical, body and soul, whereas in reality he would be an indivisible unit. In addition, "the salvation of souls" as a goal of faith seems to indicate an individualistic Christianity, a loss of responsibility for the world overall, in its corporeity and in its materiality. Yet none of this is found in St Peter's Letter. Zeal for the witness in favour of hope and responsibility for others characterizes the entire text. To understand what he says on the salvation of souls as a destination of faith, we must start from another angle. It remains true that the lack of care for souls, the impoverishment of the inner man, not only destroys the individual but threatens the destiny of humanity overall. Without the healing of souls, without the healing of man from within there can be no salvation for humanity. To our surprise, St Peter describes the true ailment of souls as ignorance, that is, not knowing God. Those who are not acquainted with God, or at least do not seek him sincerely, are left outside true life (cf. 1 Pt 1: 14). Yet another word from the Letter could be useful to understand better the formula "salvation of souls". "Purify your souls by obedience to the truth" (cf. 1: 22). It is obedience to the truth that purifies the soul and it is coexistence with falsehood that pollutes it. Obedience to the truth begins with the small truths of

daily life that can often be demanding and painful. This obedience then extends to obedience without reservations before the Truth itself that is Christ. This obedience not only purifies us but above all also frees us for service to Christ and thus for the salvation of the world, which nevertheless always begins with the obedient purification of one's own soul through the truth. We may point out the way towards the truth only if by obedience and patience we let ourselves be purified by the truth. And now I address you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate, who will shortly receive the pallium from my hands. It was woven from the wool of lambs which the Pope blesses on the Feast of St Agnes. In this way it also recalls the lambs and sheep of Christ, which the Risen Lord entrusted to Peter with the task of tending them (cf. Jn 21: 15-18). The pallium recalls the flock of Jesus Christ which you, dear Brothers, must tend in communion with Peter. It reminds us of Christ himself, who, as the Good Shepherd, took the lost sheep, humanity, on his shoulders to bring it home. It reminds us that he, the supreme Pastor, wanted to make himself the Lamb, to take upon himself from within the destiny of us all; to carry us and to heal us from within. Let us pray the Lord that he will grant us to be just Pastors following in his footsteps, "not under compulsion but willingly, as God would have you do it... eagerly... examples to the flock" (1 Pt 5: 2f). Amen.

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