



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CURIA
FOR THE TRADITIONAL EXCHANGE OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS**

*Clementine Hall
Monday, 22 December 2008*

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and the Presbyterate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Nativity of the Lord is at hand. Every family feels the desire to come together to enjoy the special, unique atmosphere that this holy day is able to bring about. This morning, the family of the Roman Curia also comes together, following a fine custom which gives us the joy of meeting and exchanging greetings in this special spiritual milieu.

To each of you I offer a cordial greeting, full of gratitude for your valued collaboration with the ministry of the Successor of Peter. I warmly thank Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Dean of the College of Cardinals, who has expressed the sentiments of all present, as well as those serving in the various offices of the Holy See, including the Papal Representations.

I began by mentioning the special atmosphere of Christmas. I like to think of it as a kind of prolongation of that mysterious joy, that deep exultation that enveloped the Holy Family, the angels and the shepherds of Bethlehem on the night of Jesus' birth. I would describe it as an "atmosphere of grace", recalling Saint Paul's words in the Letter to Titus: "*Apparuit gratia Dei Salvatoris nostri omnibus hominibus*" (cf. *Tit 2:11*).

The Apostle says that the grace of God has appeared "for all". I would say that this also reveals the mission of the Church and, in particular, that of the Successor of Peter and his collaborators: to help make the grace of God, the Redeemer, ever more visible to everyone and to bring

salvation to all.

The year now drawing to a close has been enriched by our commemoration of some important dates in the recent history of the Church; yet it has also been rich in events capable of guiding us along the path to the future. Fifty years ago [Pope Pius XII](#) died; fifty years ago, [John XXIII](#) was elected to the papacy. Forty years have passed since the publication of the Encyclical [Humanae Vitae](#), and thirty years since the death of its author, [Pope Paul VI](#). The significance of these events has been recalled and reflected upon in many ways during the past year, so I do not wish to add anything more in this present meeting

At the same time, our thoughts have also gone back even further, beyond the events of the past century, and, here too, have directed us towards the future: on the evening of 28 June, gathered in the [Basilica of Saint Paul Outside-the-Walls](#) with the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew I, and representatives from many other Churches and Ecclesial Communities, [we inaugurated the Pauline Year in commemoration of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles](#) some two thousand years ago.

For us, Paul is not a figure of the past. Through his Letters he still speaks to us today. And whoever enters into conversation with him, is led by him towards the Crucified and Risen Christ.

The Pauline Year is a year of pilgrimage, not only in the sense of an outward journey towards the places associated with Paul. It is also, and above all, a pilgrimage of the heart, with Paul, towards Jesus Christ. In a word, Paul teaches us also that the Church is the Body of Christ, that the Head and the Body are inseparable, and that there can be no love for Christ without love for his Church and her living community.

Three specific events of the year now ending stand out in particular. First of all the [World Youth Day in Australia](#), a great celebration of faith that brought together more than two hundred thousand young people from every part of the world. It also brought them closer, not only outwardly – geographically – but also, by their shared joy in being Christian, it brought them closer interiorly.

In addition, there were the two visits, one to the United States and the other to France, in which the Church became visible to the world and for the world as a spiritual force pointing out paths of life and, through her witness to her faith, bringing light to the world. Indeed, those days radiated light: they radiated confidence in the value of life and in commitment to goodness.

Lastly, we must remember the [Synod of Bishops](#). Pastors from all over the world assembled around the Word of God raised up in their midst, around the Word of God whose great manifestation is found in Sacred Scripture.

We saw once more the grandeur of something which we take too much for granted in our daily lives: the fact that God speaks, that God answers our questions; the fact that, with human words, he speaks to us personally. We can listen to him; hear him, come to know him and understand him. We can also realize that he can enter our life and shape it, and that we can emerge from our own lives to enter into the immensity of his mercy.

Thus, we realized once again that, in his Word, God is speaking to each one of us, that he speaks to the heart of everyone: if our hearts are alert, and our inner ears are open, we can learn to listen to the word he personally addresses to each of us.

Yet it is precisely when we hear God speaking to each of us so personally, that we also realize that his Word is present in order to draw us close to one another, and to enable us to emerge from the purely personal. This Word has forged a shared history, and it wants to continue to do so.

We then realized once more that – precisely because the Word is so personal – we can understand it correctly and completely only as part of the “we” of the community established by God. We are always aware that we can never entirely exhaust that Word, and that it has something new to say to each generation.

We understood, of course, that the biblical writings were compiled in particular historical periods, and in this sense it is, first of all, a book from the past. Yet we saw that their message does not remain in the past, nor can it be confined to the past. God, after all, always speaks to the present, and we listen to the Bible properly only when we discover this “present moment” of God, who calls to us here and now.

Finally, it was important to experience the fact that in the Church there is also a Pentecost today – in other words, the Church speaks in many tongues, and not only outwardly, in the sense that all the great languages of the world are represented in her, but, more profoundly, inasmuch as present within her are various ways of experiencing God and the world, a wealth of cultures, and only in this way do we come to see the vastness of human existence and, as a result, the vastness of the Word of God.

Yet we also learned that Pentecost is still “on the way”, still incomplete: there are many languages that still await the Word of God contained in the Bible. It was also moving to hear the many stories of lay faithful from every part of the world who not only live the Word of God but also suffer for it. A valuable contribution was also made by a rabbi who spoke on the sacred Scriptures of Israel, which are our own sacred Scriptures as well.

An important moment for the Synod, and indeed for the journey of the Church as a whole, was when Patriarch Bartholomew, in an insightful analysis, offered us an approach to the Word of God in the light of the Orthodox tradition.

Now we hope that the experiences and the fruits of the Synod may have a constructive influence on the life of the Church: on our personal relationship with the Sacred Scriptures, on their interpretation in the liturgy and catechesis, as well as in scientific research, so that the Bible will not remain a Word from the past, but that its vitality and timeliness will be appreciated and brought to light against the vast horizon of its fullness of meaning.

The presence of the God's Word – of God himself – in this present hour of history was also a theme of this year's [Pastoral Visits](#): the real meaning of these visits can only be to serve this presence. On occasions like these, the Church takes on a public profile and, with her, so does the faith itself, and, if nothing else, also the question of God.

This public manifestation of faith is a challenge to anyone who wishes to understand the present time and the forces at work within it. The phenomenon of [World Youth Day](#), in particular, has increasingly become a subject of debate, in an attempt to understand this species, so to speak, of youth culture.

Australia had never seen so many people coming from all continents, not even during the Olympics, as it did during [World Youth Day](#). And although fears were expressed beforehand that this mass influx of young people might create some problems for public order – clogging traffic, disrupting daily life, sparking violence and drug abuse – all these fears proved unfounded. The event was a celebration of joy, a joy that in the end spread even to the doubtful, and when all was said and done, no one was inconvenienced.

Those days were festive for everyone. Indeed, it was only then that people came to realize what a celebration really is – an event where people, so to speak, step outside themselves, beyond themselves, and thus are truly with themselves and with others.

What, then, really happens at a [World Youth Day](#)? What are the forces at play? Popular analyses tend to view these days as a variant of contemporary youth culture, a sort of rock festival in an ecclesial key, with the Pope as its main attraction.

Such analyses presume that, with or without faith, these festivals would be basically the same; and thus the whole question of God can be set aside. Even some Catholics would seem to agree, seeing the whole event as a huge spectacle, magnificent perhaps, but of no real significance for the question of faith and the presence of the Gospel in our time. They might be ecstatic celebrations, but in the end they would really change nothing, nor have any deeper effect on life.

This, however, leaves completely unexplained the real nature of these [Youth Days](#) and the specific character of their joy, and their power to build communion. First of all, it has to be realized that [World Youth Days](#) do not consist only of the one week when they are brought to the attention of the world.

They are preceded by a long process of preparation both practical and spiritual. The Cross, accompanied by the icon of the Mother of the Lord, goes on pilgrimage to many countries. Faith, in its own way, needs to see and to touch. The encounter with the World Youth Day Cross, which is touched and carried, becomes an interior encounter with the One who died for us on the Cross. The encounter with the Cross awakens within the young people the remembrance of the God who chose to become man and to suffer with us.

We also see the woman he gave to us as our Mother. The solemn [World Youth Days](#) are nothing if not the culmination of a long process in which the young people turn to one another and then, together, turn to Christ.

In Australia it was not by chance that the *Way of the Cross*, winding through the city, became the high point of those days. Once again, it summed up everything that had occurred in previous years, while pointing to the One who gathers us together: to that God who loves us all the way to the Cross.

Thus, the Pope himself is not the star around which everything revolves. He is completely and solely a Vicar. He points beyond himself to the Other who is in our midst. In the end, the solemn liturgy is the centre of the whole event, because in it there takes place something that we ourselves cannot bring about, yet something for which we are always awaiting. Christ is present. He comes into our midst. The heavens are rent and the earth filled with light. This is what makes life joyful and free, uniting people with one another in a joy that cannot be compared to the ecstasy of a rock festival.

Friedrich Nietzsche once said: "The important thing is not to be able to organize a party but to find people who can enjoy it".

According to Scripture, joy is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Gal 5:22*). This fruit was abundantly visible during those days in Sydney. Just as a long journey precedes the celebration of [World Youth Day](#), a continuing journey follows it. Friendships are formed which encourage a different way of life and which give it deep support. The purpose of these great Days is, not least, to inspire such friendships and so to create places of living faith in the world, places which are, at the same time, settings of hope and practical charity.

Joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit – thus we come to the central theme of [Sydney](#), which was the Holy Spirit. In looking back, I would again like to mention, albeit summarily, the whole approach which this theme implies. With the testimony of Scripture and Tradition in mind, it is easy to recognize four aspects of the theme of "the Holy Spirit".

1. First of all there are the words found at the beginning of the Creation account, which speak of the Creator Spirit who sweeps over the face of the abyss, who creates the world and renews it

constantly. Faith in the Creator Spirit is an essential part of the Christian creed. The fact that matter has a mathematical structure, is spirit-filled, is the basis of the modern natural sciences.

It is only because matter is structured intelligently that our mind can interpret and actively refashion it. The fact that this intelligible structure comes from the same Creator Spirit who also gave us our own spirit, brings with it both a duty and a responsibility.

Our faith in creation is the ultimate basis of our responsibility for the earth. The earth is not simply our property, which we can exploit according to our interests and desires. Rather, it is a gift of the Creator, who designed its innate order and has thus given us guidelines which we, as stewards of his creation, need to respect. The fact that the earth and the cosmos mirror the Creator Spirit also means that their rational structures which, beyond their mathematical order, become almost tangible in scientific experimentation, also have an inherent ethical orientation.

The Spirit who fashioned them, is more than mathematics – he is Goodness in person who, in and through the language of creation, points out to us the way of an upright life.

Since faith in the Creator is an essential part of the Christian creed, the Church cannot and must not limit herself to passing on to the faithful the message of salvation alone. She has a responsibility towards creation, and must also publicly assert this responsibility. In so doing, she must not only defend earth, water and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect man from self-destruction. What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood.

If the Church speaks of the nature of the human being as man and woman, and demands that this order of creation be respected, this is not some antiquated metaphysics. What is involved here is faith in the Creator and a readiness to listen to the “language” of creation. To disregard this would be the self-destruction of man himself, and hence the destruction of God’s own work.

What is often expressed and understood by the term “gender” ultimately ends up being man’s attempt at self-emancipation from creation and the Creator. Man wants to be his own master, and alone – always and exclusively – to determine everything that concerns him. Yet in this way he lives in opposition to the truth, in opposition to the Creator Spirit.

Rain forests deserve indeed to be protected, but no less so does man, as a creature having an innate “message” which does not contradict our freedom, but is instead its very premise.

The great scholastic theologians described marriage, understood as the life-long bond between a man and a woman, as a sacrament of creation, which the Creator himself instituted and which Christ – without modifying the “message” of creation – then made part of the history of his covenant with humanity.

An integral part of the Church proclamation must be a witness to the Creator Spirit present in nature as a whole, and, in a special way, in the human person, created in God's image.

From this perspective, we should go back to the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: the intention of Pope Paul VI was to defend love against sex as a consumer good, the future against the exclusive claims of the present, and human nature against its manipulation.

2. Let me now briefly mention the other dimensions of pneumatology. If the Creator Spirit is manifest first of all in the silent grandeur of the universe, in its intelligent structure, faith also tells us something unexpected: namely, that this Spirit speaks, as it were, with human words, that he entered into history and, as a force that shapes history, is also a Spirit who speaks. Indeed, he is the Word who, in the writings of both the Old and New Testament, comes forth to meet us.

In one of his letters, Saint Ambrose expressed marvellously what this means for us: "Even now, as I read the divine Scriptures, God is walking in the Garden" (*Epistulae*, 49, 3). Today, in reading Scripture, we too can, in a sense, roam about the garden of Paradise and encounter God who walks there.

There is a deep inner connection between the theme of *World Youth Day in Australia* and that of the *Synod of Bishops*. The two themes of "the Holy Spirit" and "the Word of God" go hand in hand. In reading Scripture, we learn that Christ and the Holy Spirit are also inseparable. If Paul, with disconcerting conciseness, says: "the Lord is the Spirit" (2 *Cor* 3:17), he does so not only against the backdrop of the unity of the Son and the Holy Spirit in the life of the Trinity, but also their unity in the history of salvation. In the Passion and Resurrection of Christ, the veil of the merely literal sense is torn away, and the presence of the God who speaks becomes visible.

In reading the Scripture with Christ, we learn to hear in human words the voice of the Holy Spirit, and we discover the unity of the Bible.

3. This now brings us to the third dimension of pneumatology, which consists, precisely, in the inseparability of Christ and the Holy Spirit. This is perhaps most beautifully seen in Saint John's account of the Risen Christ's first appearance to the disciples. The Lord breathes on his disciples, and thus bestows the Holy Spirit upon them. The Holy Spirit is the breath of Christ. And just as the breath of God on the morning of Creation changed the dust of the earth into a living man, so the breath of Christ admits us to ontological communion with the Son, making us a new creation. Hence it is the Holy Spirit who prompts us to say together: "Abba! Father!" (cf. *Jn* 20:22; *Rm* 8:15).

4. The link between Spirit and Church thus naturally emerges as a fourth dimension. In his *First Letter to the Corinthians*, chapter 12, and in his *Letter to the Romans*, chapter 12, Paul described the Church as the Body of Christ, and thus as an organism of the Holy Spirit, in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit fuse individuals into a single living whole.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Body of Christ. In the fullness of this Body we discover our task, we live for one another and in dependence on others, drawing deep life from the One who lived and suffered for us all and who, through his Spirit, draws us to himself in the unity of all God's children. As Augustine says in this regard: "Do you too desire to live from the Spirit of Christ? Then be in the Body of Christ" (*Tract. in Jo. 26, 13*).

Thus, with the theme of "the Holy Spirit" which guided the days in [Australia](#) and, more implicitly, the weeks of the Synod as well, the whole breadth of the Christian faith becomes visible. It is a breadth which, from responsibility for Creation and for man's living in harmony with Creation, leads, through the themes of Scripture and of salvation history, to Christ and thence to the living community of the Church, in her ranks and responsibilities as well as in her immensity and freedom, which find expression both in the multiplicity of charisms and in the pentecostal image of the multitude of languages and cultures.

An integral part of any celebration is joy. A celebration can be organized, joy cannot. It can only be offered as a gift; and in fact it has been given to us in abundance. For this we are grateful. Just as Paul describes joy as a fruit of the Holy Spirit, so John in his Gospel closely links the Spirit to joy. The Holy Spirit gives us joy. And he is joy. Joy is the gift that sums up all the other gifts. It is the expression of happiness, of being in harmony with ourselves, which can only come from being in harmony with God and with his creation.

It is part of the nature of joy to spread, to be shared. The Church's missionary spirit is nothing other than the drive to share the joy that has been given to us. May that joy always be alive in us, and thus shine forth upon our troubled world. This is my hope at the end of this year, and, in thanking all of you for your efforts and work, I ask that this God-given joy be bestowed upon us in abundance also in the New Year.

I entrust these wishes to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, *Mater divinae gratiae*, praying that we may be able to experience the Christmas celebrations in the joy and peace of the Lord. With these sentiments, I cordially impart to all of you, and to the great family of the Roman Curia, my Apostolic Blessing.