



The Holy See

OPENING OF THE PASTORAL CONVENTION
OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME ON THE THEME:
"CHURCH MEMBERSHIP AND PASTORAL CO-RESPONSIBILITY"

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

Tuesday, 26 May 2009

*Your Eminence,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate,
and in the Priesthood,
Dear Men and Women Religious,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Continuing what is by now a happy tradition, this year too I am glad to open the Diocesan Pastoral Convention. To each one of you who represent here the entire diocesan community, I address with affection my greeting and heartfelt thanks for the pastoral work you carry out. Through you, I extend to all the parishes my cordial greeting in the words of the Apostle Paul: "To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (Rm 1: 7). I cordially thank the Cardinal Vicar for the encouraging words interpreting your sentiments that he has addressed to me and for the help that he offers me, together with the Auxiliary Bishops, in the daily apostolic service to which the Lord has called me as Bishop of Rome.

It has just been recalled that in the past decade the Diocese initially focused its attention on the family; then for another three years, on teaching the faith to the new generations, seeking to respond to the "educational emergency", a challenge to all that is far from easy; and lastly, again with a reference to education, prompted by the Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, you gave attention to the theme of teaching hope. As I thank the Lord with you for all the good he has granted us to do I

am thinking in particular of the parish priests and priests who spare no effort in guiding the communities entrusted to them I wish to express my appreciation of the pastoral decision to give time to reviewing the ground covered, with a view to focusing on certain fundamental contexts of ordinary pastoral work, in the light of past experience, to explain them better and to make them more broadly shared. This commitment, which you have already been monitoring for several months in all the parishes and in the other ecclesial contexts, must be based on a renewed awareness of our being Church and of the pastoral co-responsibility which, in Christ's name, we are all called to exercise. And it is precisely on this aspect that I would like to reflect now.

The Second Vatican Council, desiring to pass on, pure and integral, the doctrine on the Church that had developed in the course of 2,000 years, gave the Church a "more deeply considered definition", illustrating first of all the enigmatic nature, that is, as a "reality imbued with the divine presence, hence always capable of new and deeper exploration" (Paul VI, *Inaugural Address at the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council*, 29 September 1963). Well, the Church, which originates in the Trinitarian God, is a mystery of communion. As communion, the Church is not merely a spiritual reality but lives in history, so to speak, in flesh and blood. The Second Vatican Council describes her "in the nature of sacrament a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of unity among all men" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). And the very essence of sacrament is that the invisible is tangible in the visible and that the tangibly visible opens the door to God himself. The Church, we said, is a communion, a communion of people who, through the action of the Holy Spirit, form the People of God which is at the same time the Body of Christ. Let us reflect a little on these two key words. The concept of "People of God" came into being and was developed in the Old Testament: to enter into the reality of human history, God chose a specific people, the People of Israel, to be his People. The intention of this particular choice is to reach, through a few, many people and through them to reach all. In other words the intention of God's specific choice is universality. Through this People, God enters into the reality of history. And this openness to universality is achieved in the Cross and in Christ's Resurrection. In the Cross, St Paul says, Christ broke down the wall of separation. In giving us his Body, he reunites us in this Body of his to make us one. In the communion of the "Body of Christ" we all become one people, the People of God, in which to cite St Paul again all are one and there are no longer distinctions or differences between Greek and Jew, the circumcized and the uncircumcized, the barbarian, the Scythian, the slave, the Jew, but Christ is all in all. He has broken down the wall of distinction between peoples, races and cultures: we are all united in Christ. Thus we see that the two concepts "People of God" and "Body of Christ" complete each other and together form the New Testament concept of Church. And whereas "People of God" expresses the continuity of the Church's history, "Body of Christ" expresses the universality inaugurated in the Cross and in the Lord's Resurrection. For us Christians, therefore, "Body of Christ" is not only an image, but a true concept, because Christ makes us the gift of his real Body, not only an image of it. Risen, Christ unites us all in the Sacrament to make us one Body. Thus the concept "People of God" and "Body of Christ" complete one another: in Christ we really become the People of God. "People of God" therefore means "all", from the Pope to the most recently baptized child. The First Eucharistic

Prayer, the so-called "Roman Canon" written in the fourth century, distinguishes between servants "we, your servants" and "*plebs tua sancta*"; therefore should one wish to make a distinction, one should speak of servants and *plebs sancta*, while the term "People of God" expresses the Church all together in their common being.

Subsequent to the [Council](#) this ecclesiological doctrine met with acceptance on a vast scale and thanks be to God an abundance of good fruit developed in the Christian community. However we must also remember that the integration of this doctrine in procedures and its consequent assimilation in the fabric of ecclesial awareness did not happen always and everywhere without difficulty and in accordance with a correct interpretation. As I was able to explain in my [Discourse to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2005](#), an interpretative current, claiming to refer to a presumed "spirit of the Council", sought to establish a discontinuity and even to distinguish between the Church before and the Church after the [Council](#), at times even crossing the very boundaries that exist objectively between the hierarchical ministry and the responsibilities of the lay faithful in the Church. The notion of "People of God", in particular was interpreted by some, in accordance with a purely sociological vision, with an almost exclusively horizontal bias that excluded the vertical reference to God. This position was in direct contrast with the word and spirit of the [Council](#) which did not desire a rupture, another Church, but rather a true and deep renewal in the continuity of the one subject Church which grows in time and develops but always remains identical, the one subject of the People of God on pilgrimage.

Secondly, it should be recognized that the reawakening of spiritual and pastoral energies that has been happening in recent years has not always produced the desired growth and development. In fact it must be noted that in certain ecclesial communities, the period of fervour and initiative has given way to a time of weakening commitment, a situation of weariness, at times almost a stalemate, and even resistance and contradiction between the conciliar doctrine and various concepts formulated in the name of the [Council](#), but in fact opposed to its spirit and guidelines. For this reason too, the Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops in 1987 was dedicated to the theme of the vocation and mission of lay people in the Church and in the world. This fact tells us that the luminous pages which the [Council](#) dedicated to the laity were not yet sufficiently adapted to or impressed on the minds of Catholics or in pastoral procedures. On the one hand there is still a tendency to identify the Church unilaterally with the hierarchy, forgetting the common responsibility, the common mission of the People of God, which, in Christ we all share. On the other, the tendency still persists to identify the People of God unilaterally, as I have already said, in accordance with a merely sociological or political concept, forgetting the newness and specificity of that people, which becomes a people solely through communion with Christ.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is now time to ask ourselves what point our Diocese of Rome has reached. To what extent is the pastoral co-responsibility of all, and particularly of the laity, recognized and encouraged? In past centuries, thanks to the generous witness of all the baptized who spent their life educating the new generations in the faith, healing the sick and going to the

aid of the poor, the Christian community proclaimed the Gospel to the inhabitants of Rome. The self-same mission is entrusted to us today, in different situations, in a city in which many of the baptized have strayed from the path of the Church and those who are Christian are unacquainted with beauty of our faith. The Diocesan Synod, convoked by my beloved Predecessor [John Paul II](#), was an effective *receptio* of the conciliar doctrine and the *Book of the Synod* involved the Diocese in becoming more and more a living and active Church in the heart of the City, through the coordinated and responsible action of all its inhabitants. The *City Mission* that followed in preparation for the [Great Jubilee of the Year 2000](#) enabled our ecclesial community to become aware that the mandate to evangelize does not only concern a few but rather all of the baptized. It was a salutary experience that helped to develop in the parishes, religious communities, associations and movements a consciousness of belonging to the one People of God which, as the Apostle Peter said, God made his own: "that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him" (1 Pt 2: 9). And let us give thanks for that this evening.

There is still a long way to go. Too many of the baptized do not feel part of the ecclesial community and live on its margins, only coming to parishes in certain circumstances to receive religious services. Compared to the number of inhabitants in each parish, the lay people who are ready to work in the various apostolic fields, although they profess to be Catholic, are still few and far between. Of course, social and cultural difficulties abound but faithful to the Lord's mandate, we cannot resign ourselves to preserving what exists. Trusting in the grace of the Spirit which the Risen Christ guaranteed to us, we must continue on our way with renewed energy. What paths can we take? In the first place we must renew our efforts for a formation which is more attentive and focused on the vision of the Church, of which I spoke and this should be both on the part of priests as well as of religious and lay people to understand ever better what this Church is, this People of God in the Body of Christ. At the same time, it is necessary to improve pastoral structures in such a way that the co-responsibility of all the members of the People of God in their entirety is gradually promoted, with respect for vocations and for the respective roles of the consecrated and of lay people. This demands a change in mindset, particularly concerning lay people. They must no longer be viewed as "collaborators" of the clergy but truly recognized as "co-responsible", for the Church's being and action, thereby fostering the consolidation of a mature and committed laity. This common awareness of being Church of all the baptized in no way diminishes the responsibility of parish priests. It is precisely your task, dear parish priests, to nurture the spiritual and apostolic growth of those who are already committed to working hard in the parishes. They form the core of the community that will act as a leaven for the others. Although these communities are sometimes small, to prevent them from losing their identity and vigour they must be taught to listen prayerfully to the word of God through the practice of *lectio divina*, as the recent Synod of Bishops ardently hoped. Let us truly draw nourishment from listening, from meditating on the word of God. Our communities must not lack the knowledge that they are "Church", because Christ, the eternal Word of the Father, convokes them and makes them his People. Indeed, on the one hand faith is a profoundly personal relationship with God but on the other it possesses an essential community component and the two dimensions are inseparable.

Thus young people, who are more exposed to the growing individualism of contemporary culture, the consequences of which inevitably involves the weakening of interpersonal bonds and the enfeeblement of the sense of belonging, will also taste the beauty and joy of being and feeling Church. Through faith in God we are united in the Body of Christ and all become united in the same Body. Thus, precisely by profoundly believing we may achieve communion among ourselves and emerge from the loneliness of individualism.

If it is the Word that gathers the community, it is the Eucharist that makes it one body: "because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10: 17). The Church, therefore, is not the result of an aggregation of individuals but of unity among those who are nourished by the one Word of God and the one Bread of Life. Communion and the unity of the Church that are born of the Eucharist, are a reality of which we must be ever more aware, also in receiving Holy Communion, ever more aware that we are entering into unity with Christ and thus become one among ourselves. We must learn ever anew to preserve and defend this unity from the rivalry, disputes, and jealousies that can be kindled in and among ecclesial communities. In particular, I would like to ask the movements and communities that came into being after the [Second Vatican Council](#) and that in our Diocese too are a precious gift for which we must always thank the Lord, I would like to ask these movements, which I repeat are a gift, always to ensure that their formation processes lead their members to develop a true sense of belonging to the parish community. The Eucharist, as I have said, is the centre of parish life, and particularly of the Sunday celebration. Since the unity of the Church is born from the encounter with the Lord, the great care given to adoration and celebration of the Eucharist, enabling those who participate in it to experience the beauty of Christ's mystery is no secondary matter. Given that the beauty of the liturgy "is no mere aestheticism, but the concrete way in which the truth of God's love in Christ encounters us, attracts us and delights us" ([Sacramentum Caritatis](#), n. 35), it is important that the Eucharistic celebration manifest and communicate, through the sacramental signs, the divine life and reveal the true face of the Church to the men and women of this City.

The spiritual and apostolic growth of the community then leads to its extension through a convinced missionary action. Strive, therefore, in every parish as at the time of the City Mission, to restore life to the small groups or counselling centres for the faithful who proclaim Christ and his word, places where it is possible to experience faith, to put charity into practice and to organize hope. This structuring of the large urban parishes by the multiplication of small communities allows the mission a larger breathing space, which takes into account the density of the population and its social and cultural features which are often very different. If this pastoral method is also to be applied effectively in workplaces, it would be important to evangelize them with a well thought-out and adapted pastoral ministry since, because of the high social mobility, it is here that people spend a large part of their day.

Lastly, the witness of charity that unites hearts and opens them to ecclesial belonging should not be forgotten. Historians answer the question as to how the success of Christianity in the first

centuries can be explained, the ascent of a presumed Jewish sect to the religion of the Empire, by saying that it was the experience of Christian charity in particular that convinced the world. Living charity is the primary form of missionary outreach. The word proclaimed and lived becomes credible if it is incarnate in behaviour that demonstrates solidarity and sharing, in deeds that show the Face of Christ as man's true Friend. May the silent, daily witness of charity, promoted by parishes thanks to the commitment of numerous lay faithful continue to spread increasingly, so that those who live in suffering feel the Church's closeness and experience the love of the Father rich in mercy. Therefore be "Good Samaritans", ready to treat the material and spiritual wounds of your brethren. Deacons, conformed by ordination to Christ the Servant, will be able to carry out a useful service in promoting fresh attention to the old and new forms of poverty. I am also thinking of the young people: dear friends, I invite you to put your enthusiasm and creativity at the service of Christ and the Gospel, making yourselves apostles of your peers, ready to respond generously to the Lord if he calls you to follow him more closely, in the priesthood or in consecrated life.

Dear brothers and sisters, the future of Christianity and of the Church in Rome also depends on the commitment and witness of each one of us. I invoke for this the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary, venerated for centuries in the Basilica of St Mary Major as *Salus populi romani*. As she did with the Apostles in the Upper Room while awaiting Pentecost, may she also accompany us and encourage us to look with trust to the future. With these sentiments, while I thank you for your daily work, I warmly impart to you all a special Apostolic Blessing.

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