



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS AND THE CLERGY OF ROME

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Thursday, 14 February 2013*

[Video]

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,*

For me it is a particular gift of Providence that, before leaving the Petrine ministry, I can once more see my clergy, the clergy of Rome. It is always a great joy to see the living Church, to see how the Church in Rome is alive; there are shepherds here who guide the Lord's flock in the spirit of the supreme Shepherd. It is a body of clergy that is truly Catholic, universal, in accordance with the essence of the Church of Rome: to bear within itself the universality, the catholicity of all nations, all races, all cultures. At the same time, I am very grateful to the Cardinal Vicar who helps to reawaken, to rediscover vocations in Rome itself, because if Rome, on the one hand, has to be the city of universality, it must also be a city with a strong and robust faith of its own, from which vocations are also born. And I am convinced that, with the Lord's help, we can find the vocations that he himself gives us, we can guide them, help them to mature, so as to be of service for work in the Lord's vineyard.

Today you have professed the Creed before the tomb of Saint Peter: in the Year of Faith, this seems to me to be a most appropriate act, a necessary one, perhaps, that the clergy of Rome should gather around the tomb of the Apostle to whom the Lord said: "To you I entrust my Church. Upon you I will build my Church" (cf. *Mt 16:18-19*). Before the Lord, together with Peter, you have professed: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (*Mt 16:16*). Thus the Church grows: together with Peter, professing Christ, following Christ. And we do this always. I am very grateful for your prayers, which I have sensed, as I said on Wednesday – almost palpably. And although I am about to withdraw, I remain close to all of you in prayer, and I am sure that you too will be

close to me, even if I am hidden from the world.

For today, given the conditions brought on by my age, I have not been able to prepare an extended discourse, as might have been expected; but rather what I have in mind are a few thoughts on the [Second Vatican Council](#), as I saw it. I shall begin with an anecdote: in 1959 I was appointed a professor at the University of Bonn, where the students included the seminarians of the diocese of Cologne and the other dioceses in the area. Thus I came into contact with the Cardinal Archbishop of Cologne, Cardinal Frings. Cardinal Siri of Genoa, in 1961 if I remember rightly, had organized a series of talks on the Council given by various European Cardinals, and he had invited the Archbishop of Cologne to give one of them, entitled: the Council and the world of modern thought.

The Cardinal asked me – the youngest of the professors – to write a draft for him. He liked the draft, and to the people in Genoa he delivered the text just as I had written it. Soon afterwards, Pope John invited him to come and see him, and the Cardinal was anxious that he might have said something incorrect, something false, and that he was being summoned for a rebuke, perhaps even to be deprived of the cardinalate. Indeed, when his secretary vested him for the audience, the Cardinal said: "Perhaps I am now wearing these robes for the last time". Then he went in, Pope John came to meet him, embraced him, and said: "Thank you, Your Eminence, you said the very things I wanted to say myself, but I could not find the words". So the Cardinal knew that he was on the right track and he invited me to go with him to the Council, firstly as his personal advisor; and then, during the first session – I think it was in November 1962 – I was also named an official *peritus* of the Council.

So off we went to the Council not just with joy but with enthusiasm. There was an incredible sense of expectation. We were hoping that all would be renewed, that there would truly be a new Pentecost, a new era of the Church, because the Church was still fairly robust at that time – Sunday Mass attendance was still good, vocations to the priesthood and to religious life were already slightly reduced, but still sufficient. However, there was a feeling that the Church was not moving forward, that it was declining, that it seemed more a thing of the past and not the herald of the future. And at that moment, we were hoping that this relation would be renewed, that it would change; that the Church might once again be a force for tomorrow and a force for today. And we knew that the relationship between the Church and the modern period, right from the outset, had been slightly fraught, beginning with the Church's error in the case of Galileo Galilei; we were looking to correct this mistaken start and to rediscover the union between the Church and the best forces of the world, so as to open up humanity's future, to open up true progress. Thus we were full of hope, full of enthusiasm, and also eager to play our own part in this process. I remember that the Roman Synod was thought of as a negative model. It was said – I don't know whether this was true – that they had read out prepared texts in the Basilica of Saint John, and that the members of the Synod had acclaimed, approved with applause, and that the Synod had been conducted thus. The bishops said: no, let's not do that. We are bishops, we ourselves are the

subject of the Synod; we do not simply want to approve what has already been done, but we ourselves want to be the subject, the protagonists of the Council. So too Cardinal Frings, who was famous for his absolute fidelity – almost to the point of scrupulosity – to the Holy Father, said in this case: we are here in a different role. The Pope has called us together to be like Fathers, to be an Ecumenical Council, a subject that renews the Church. So we want to assume this new role of ours.

The first occasion when this attitude was demonstrated was on the very first day. On the programme for this first day were the elections of the Commissions, and lists of names had been prepared, in what was intended to be an impartial manner, and these lists were put to the vote. But straight away the Fathers said: No, we do not simply want to vote for pre-prepared lists. We are the subject. Then, it was necessary to postpone the elections, because the Fathers themselves wanted to begin to get to know each other, they wanted to prepare the lists themselves. And so it was. Cardinal Liénart of Lille and Cardinal Frings of Cologne had said publicly: no, not this way. We want to make our own lists and elect our own candidates. It was not a revolutionary act, but an act of conscience, an act of responsibility on the part of the Council Fathers.

And so began an intense period of actively getting to know our counterparts, something which did not happen by chance. At the *Collegio dell'Anima*, where I was staying, we had many visits: the Cardinal was very well known, and we saw cardinals from all over the world. I well remember the tall slim figure of Monsignor Etchegaray, the Secretary of the French Episcopal Conference, I remember meetings with Cardinals, and so on. And this continued throughout the Council: small-scale meetings with peers from other countries. Thus I came to know great figures like Father de Lubac, Daniélou, Congar, and so on. We came to know various bishops; I remember particularly Bishop Elchinger of Strasbourg, and so on. And this was already an experience of the universality of the Church and of the concrete reality of the Church, which does not simply receive instructions from on high, but grows together and moves forward, always under the guidance – naturally – of the Successor of Peter.

Everyone, as I said, came with great expectations; there had never been a Council on such a scale, but not everyone knew what to do. The most prepared, let us say, those with the clearest ideas, were the French, German, Belgian and Dutch episcopates, the so-called "Rhine alliance". And in the first part of the Council it was they who pointed out the path; then the activity rapidly broadened, and everyone took part more and more in the creativity of the Council. The French and the Germans had various interests in common, albeit with quite different nuances. The first, initial, simple – or apparently simple – intention was the reform of the liturgy, which had begun with Pius XII, who had already reformed the Holy Week liturgy; the second was ecclesiology; the third was the word of God, revelation; and finally ecumenism. The French, much more than the Germans, were also keen to explore the question of the relationship between the Church and the world.

Let us begin with the first theme. After the First World War, Central and Western Europe had seen

the growth of the liturgical movement, a rediscovery of the richness and depth of the liturgy, which until then had remained, as it were, locked within the priest's Roman Missal, while the people prayed with their own prayer books, prepared in accordance with the heart of the people, seeking to translate the lofty content, the elevated language of classical liturgy into more emotional words, closer to the hearts of the people. But it was as if there were two parallel liturgies: the priest with the altar-servers, who celebrated Mass according to the Missal, and the laity, who prayed during Mass using their own prayer books, at the same time, while knowing substantially what was happening on the altar. But now there was a rediscovery of the beauty, the profundity, the historical, human, and spiritual riches of the Missal and it became clear that it should not be merely a representative of the people, a young altar-server, saying "*Et cum spiritu tuo*", and so on, but that there should truly be a dialogue between priest and people: truly the liturgy of the altar and the liturgy of the people should form one single liturgy, an active participation, such that the riches reach the people. And in this way, the liturgy was rediscovered and renewed.

I find now, looking back, that it was a very good idea to begin with the liturgy, because in this way the primacy of God could appear, the primacy of adoration. "*Operi Dei nihil praeponatur*": this phrase from the Rule of Saint Benedict (cf. 43:3) thus emerges as the supreme rule of the Council. Some have made the criticism that the Council spoke of many things, but not of God. It did speak of God! And this was the first thing that it did, that substantial speaking of God and opening up all the people, the whole of God's holy people, to the adoration of God, in the common celebration of the liturgy of the Body and Blood of Christ. In this sense, over and above the practical factors that advised against beginning straight away with controversial topics, it was, let us say, truly an act of Providence that at the beginning of the Council was the liturgy, God, adoration. Here and now I do not intend to go into the details of the discussion, but it is worth while to keep going back, over and above the practical outcomes, to the Council itself, to its profundity and to its essential ideas.

I would say that there were several of these: above all, the Paschal Mystery as the centre of what it is to be Christian – and therefore of the Christian life, the Christian year, the Christian seasons, expressed in Eastertide and on Sunday which is always the day of the Resurrection. Again and again we begin our time with the Resurrection, our encounter with the Risen one, and from that encounter with the Risen one we go out into the world. In this sense, it is a pity that these days Sunday has been transformed into the weekend, although it is actually the first day, it is the beginning; we must remind ourselves of this: it is the beginning, the beginning of Creation and the beginning of re-Creation in the Church, it is an encounter with the Creator and with the Risen Christ. This dual content of Sunday is important: it is the first day, that is, the feast of Creation, we are standing on the foundation of Creation, we believe in God the Creator; and it is an encounter with the Risen One who renews Creation; his true purpose is to create a world that is a response to the love of God.

Then there were the principles: intelligibility, instead of being locked up in an unknown language that is no longer spoken, and also active participation. Unfortunately, these principles have also

been misunderstood. Intelligibility does not mean banality, because the great texts of the liturgy – even when, thanks be to God, they are spoken in our mother tongue – are not easily intelligible, they demand ongoing formation on the part of the Christian if he is to grow and enter ever more deeply into the mystery and so arrive at understanding. And also the word of God – when I think of the daily sequence of Old Testament readings, and of the Pauline Epistles, the Gospels: who could say that he understands immediately, simply because the language is his own? Only ongoing formation of hearts and minds can truly create intelligibility and participation that is something more than external activity, but rather the entry of the person, of my being, into the communion of the Church and thus into communion with Christ.

And now the second topic: the Church. We know that the First Vatican Council was interrupted because of the Franco-Prussian War, and so it remained somewhat one-sided, incomplete, because the doctrine on the primacy – defined, thanks be to God, in that historical moment for the Church, and very necessary for the period that followed – was just a single element in a broader ecclesiology, already envisaged and prepared. So we were left with a fragment. And one might say: as long as it remains a fragment, we tend towards a one-sided vision where the Church would be just the primacy. So all along, the intention was to complete the ecclesiology of Vatican I, at a date to be determined, for the sake of a complete ecclesiology. Here too the time seemed ripe because, after the First World War, the sense of the Church was reborn in a new way. As Romano Guardini said: "The Church is starting to reawaken in people's souls", and a Protestant bishop spoke of the "era of the Church". Above all, there was a rediscovery of the concept that Vatican I had also envisaged, namely that of the Mystical Body of Christ. People were beginning to realize that the Church is not simply an organization, something structured, juridical, institutional – it is that too – but rather an organism, a living reality that penetrates my soul, in such a way that I myself, with my own believing soul, am a building block of the Church as such. In this sense, Pius XII wrote the Encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* as a step towards completing the ecclesiology of Vatican I.

I would say that theological discussion in the 1930's and 1940's, even in the 1920's, was entirely conducted under the heading *Mystici Corporis*. It was a discovery that brought so much joy at that time, and within this context emerged the formula: We are the Church, the Church is not a structure; we Christians, all together, we are all the living body of the Church. And naturally, this obtains in the sense that we, the true "we" of believers, together with the "I" of Christ, are the Church; every single one of us, not a particular "we", a single group that calls itself Church. No: this "we are Church" requires me to take my place within the great "we" of believers of all times and places. Therefore, the primary idea was to complete ecclesiology in a theological way, but also in a structural way, that is to say: besides the succession of Peter, and his unique function, to define more clearly also the function of the bishops, the corpus of bishops. And in order to do this, the word "collegiality" was adopted, a word that has been much discussed, sometimes acrimoniously, I would say, and also in somewhat exaggerated terms. But this word – maybe another could have been found, but this one worked – expressed the fact that the bishops

collectively are the continuation of the Twelve, of the corpus of Apostles. We said: only one bishop, the Bishop of Rome, is the successor of a particular Apostle, namely Peter. All the others become successors of the Apostles by entering into the corpus that continues the corpus of the Apostles. Hence it is the corpus of bishops, the college, that is the continuation of the corpus of the Twelve, and thus it has its intrinsic necessity, its function, its rights and duties. To many this seemed like a power struggle, and maybe some were thinking of their power, but substantially it was not about power, but about the complementarity of the different elements and about the completeness of the corpus of the Church with the bishops, the successors of the Apostles, as structural elements; and each of them is a structural element of the Church within this great corpus.

These, let us say, were the two basic elements – and in the meantime, in the quest for a complete theological vision of ecclesiology, a certain amount of criticism arose after the 1940's, in the 1950's, concerning the concept of the Body of Christ: the word "mystical" was thought to be too spiritual, too exclusive; the concept "People of God" then began to come into play. The Council rightly accepted this element, which in the Fathers is regarded as an expression of the continuity between the Old and the New Testaments. In the text of the New Testament, the phrase *Laos tou Theou*, corresponding to the Old Testament texts, means – with only two exceptions, I believe – the ancient People of God, the Jews, who among the world's peoples, *goim*, are "the" People of God. The others, we pagans, are not *per se* God's People: we become sons of Abraham and thus the People of God by entering into communion with Christ, the one seed of Abraham. By entering into communion with him, by being one with him, we too become God's People. In a word: the concept of "the People of God" implies the continuity of the Testaments, continuity in God's history with the world, with mankind, but it also implies the Christological element. Only through Christology do we become the People of God, and thus the two concepts are combined. The Council chose to elaborate a Trinitarian ecclesiology: People of God the Father, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit.

Yet only after the Council did an element come to light – which can also be found, albeit in a hidden way, in the Council itself – namely this: the link between People of God and Body of Christ is precisely communion with Christ in Eucharistic fellowship. This is where we become the Body of Christ: the relationship between People of God and Body of Christ creates a new reality – communion. After the Council it became clear, I would say, that the Council really discovered and pointed to this concept: communion as the central concept. I would say that, philologically, it is not yet fully developed in the Council, yet it is as a result of the Council that the concept of communion came more and more to be the expression of the Church's essence, communion in its different dimensions: communion with the Trinitarian God – who is himself communion between Father, Son and Holy Spirit – sacramental communion, and concrete communion in the episcopate and in the life of the Church.

Even more hotly debated was the problem of Revelation. At stake here was the relationship

between Scripture and Tradition, and it was the exegetes above all who were anxious for greater freedom; they felt themselves somewhat – shall we say – in a position of inferiority with regard to the Protestants, who were making the great discoveries, whereas Catholics felt somewhat "handicapped" by the need to submit to the Magisterium. So a very concrete struggle was in play here: what sort of freedom do exegetes have? How does one properly read Scripture? What is the meaning of Tradition? It was a multifaceted struggle which I cannot go into now, but the important thing, for sure, is that Scripture is the word of God and that the Church is under Scripture, the Church obeys God's word and does not stand above Scripture. Yet at the same time Scripture is Scripture only because there is the living Church, its living subject; without the living subject of the Church, Scripture is only a book, open to different interpretations and lacking ultimate clarity.

Here the battle – as I said – was difficult, and an intervention of Pope [Paul VI](#) proved decisive. This intervention shows all the delicacy of a father, his responsibility for the progress of the Council, but also his great respect for the Council. The idea had arisen that Scripture is complete; everything is found there; consequently there is no need for Tradition, and so the Magisterium has nothing to say. At that point the Pope transmitted to the Council, I believe, fourteen formulae for a phrase to be inserted into the text on Revelation and he gave us, the Council Fathers, the freedom to choose one of the fourteen formulae, but he said that one of them needed to be chosen in order to complete the text. I remember more or less the formula "*non omnis certitudo de veritatibus fidei potest sumi ex Sacra Scriptura*", in other words, the Church's certainty about her faith is not born only of an isolated book, but has need of the Church herself as a subject enlightened and guided by the Holy Spirit. Only then does the Scripture speak with all its authority. This phrase, which we selected in the Doctrinal Commission from the fourteen formulae, is decisive, I would say, for showing the Church's absolute necessity, and thus understanding the meaning of Tradition, the living body in which this word draws life from the outset and from which it receives its light, in which it is born. The fact of the canon of Scripture is already an ecclesial fact: that these writings are Scripture is the result of an illumination of the Church, who discovered in herself this canon of Scripture; she discovered it, she did not create it; and always and only in this communion of the living Church can one really understand and read the Scripture as the word of God, as a word which guides us in life and in death.

As I have said, this was a rather difficult debate, but thanks to the Pope and thanks, we may say, to the light of the Holy Spirit who was present in the Council, there emerged a document which is one of the finest and most innovative of the entire Council, and still needs to be studied more deeply. Because today too, exegesis tends to read Scripture apart from the Church, apart from faith, only in the so-called spirit of the historical-critical method, a method which is important, but never to the extent of being able to offer solutions with ultimate certitude. Only if we believe that these are not human words, but God's words, and only if there is that living subject to which God spoke and speaks, can we interpret sacred Scripture properly. And here – as I said in the foreword of my book on Jesus (cf. Part One) – much remains to be done in order to arrive at an interpretation that is truly in the spirit of the Council. Here the application of the Council is not yet

complete, more needs to be done.

Finally, ecumenism. I do not want to enter now into these problems, but it was obvious – especially after the "passions" suffered by Christians in the Nazi era – that Christians could find unity, or at least seek unity, yet it was also clear that God alone can bestow unity. And we are still following this path. Now, with these themes, the "Rhine alliance" – so to speak – had completed its work.

The second part of the Council was much more extensive. There appeared with great urgency the issue of today's world, the modern age, and the Church; and with it, the issues of responsibility for the building up of this world, of society, responsibility for the future of this world and eschatological hope, the ethical responsibility of Christians and where we look for guidance; and then religious freedom, progress, and relations with other religions. At this moment, all the parties of the Council really entered into the discussion, not just America, the United States, with its powerful interest in religious freedom. In the third session the Americans told the Pope: we cannot go home without bringing a declaration on religious freedom voted by the Council. The Pope, however, had the firmness and the decision, the patience, to take the text to the fourth session, for the sake of greater discernment and the fuller consent of the Council Fathers. I mean: it was not only the Americans who intervened forcefully in the unfolding of the Council, but also Latin America, well aware of the extreme poverty of its people, on a Catholic continent, and the responsibility of the faith for the situation of these people. Likewise, Africa and Asia saw the need for interreligious dialogue; problems arose which we Germans – I have to admit – had not foreseen. I cannot describe all of this now. The great document *Gaudium et Spes* analyzed very well the issue of Christian eschatology and worldly progress, and that of responsibility for the society of the future and the responsibility of Christians before eternity, and in this way it also renewed a Christian ethics, the foundations of ethics. But – let us say unexpectedly – alongside this great document there arose another document which responded in a more synthetic and more concrete way to the challenges of the times, and this was the Declaration *Nostra Aetate*. From the beginning our Jewish friends were present, and they said, primarily to us Germans, but not to us alone, that after the tragic events of the Nazi period, the Nazi decade, the Catholic Church had to say something about the Old Testament, about the Jewish people. They said: even if it is clear that the Catholic Church is not responsible for the *Shoah*, it was Christians for the most part who committed those crimes; we need to deepen and renew Christian awareness of this, even though we know full well that true believers have always resisted these things. Thus it was clear that our relationship with the world of the ancient People of God needed to be an object of reflection. Understandably, too, the Arab countries – the bishops of the Arab countries – were unhappy about this: they feared somewhat a glorification of the State of Israel, which naturally they did not want. They said: fine, a truly theological statement about the Jewish people is good, it is necessary, but if you speak about that, speak of Islam too; only then will there be a balance; Islam too is a great challenge and the Church also needs to clarify her relationship with Islam. This was something that, at the time, we did not much understand: a little, but not much. Today we know how necessary it was.

When we began to work also on Islam, we were told that there were also other world religions: the whole of Asia! Think of Buddhism, Hinduism.... And so, instead of a declaration as initially conceived, concerning only the People of God in the Old Testament, a text was created on interreligious dialogue, anticipating what only 30 years later would be demonstrated in all its intensity and importance. I cannot enter now into this theme, but if one reads the text, one sees that it is very dense and prepared truly by people who were familiar with the realities, and it indicates briefly, in a few words, what is essential. Likewise it indicates the foundation of dialogue, in difference, in diversity, in faith, on the unicity of Christ, who is one, and it is not possible for a believer to think that religions are all variations on a single theme. No, there is one reality of the living God, who has spoken, and there is *one* God, *one* incarnate God, thus *one* word of God, that is truly God's word. But there is religious experience, with a certain human light from creation, and therefore it is necessary and possible to enter into dialogue, and thus to become open to one another and to open everyone to the peace of God, the peace of all his sons and daughters, the peace of his entire family.

Therefore, these two documents, on religious freedom and *Nostra Aetate*, linked to *Gaudium et Spes*, make a very important trilogy whose importance has been demonstrated only after decades, and we are still working to understand better the interlinked realities of the unicity of God's revelation, the unicity of the one God incarnate in Christ, and the multiplicity of religions, by which we seek peace and also hearts that are open to the light of the Holy Spirit, who illumines and leads to Christ.

I would now like to add yet a third point: there was the Council of the Fathers – the real Council – but there was also the Council of the media. It was almost a Council apart, and the world perceived the Council through the latter, through the media. Thus, the Council that reached the people with immediate effect was that of the media, not that of the Fathers. And while the Council of the Fathers was conducted within the faith – it was a Council of faith seeking *intellectus*, seeking to understand itself and seeking to understand the signs of God at that time, seeking to respond to the challenge of God at that time and to find in the word of God a word for today and tomorrow – while all the Council, as I said, moved within the faith, as *fides quaerens intellectum*, the Council of the journalists, naturally, was not conducted within the faith, but within the categories of today's media, namely apart from faith, with a different hermeneutic. It was a political hermeneutic: for the media, the Council was a political struggle, a power struggle between different trends in the Church. It was obvious that the media would take the side of those who seemed to them more closely allied with their world. There were those who sought the decentralization of the Church, power for the bishops and then, through the expression "People of God", power for the people, the laity. There was this threefold question: the power of the Pope, which was then transferred to the power of the bishops and the power of all – popular sovereignty. Naturally, for them, this was the part to be approved, to be promulgated, to be favoured. So too with the liturgy: there was no interest in liturgy as an act of faith, but as something where comprehensible things are done, a matter of community activity, something profane. And we know that there was a tendency, not

without a certain historical basis, to say: sacrality is a pagan thing, perhaps also a thing of the Old Testament. In the New Testament it matters only that Christ died *outside*: that is, outside the gates, in the profane world. Sacrality must therefore be abolished, and profanity now spreads to worship: worship is no longer worship, but a community act, with communal participation: participation understood as activity. These translations, trivializations of the idea of the Council, were virulent in the process of putting the liturgical reform into practice; they were born from a vision of the Council detached from its proper key, that of faith. And the same applies to the question of Scripture: Scripture is a book, it is historical, to be treated historically and only historically, and so on.

We know that this Council of the media was accessible to everyone. Therefore, this was the dominant one, the more effective one, and it created so many disasters, so many problems, so much suffering: seminaries closed, convents closed, banal liturgy ... and the real Council had difficulty establishing itself and taking shape; the virtual Council was stronger than the real Council. But the real force of the Council was present and, slowly but surely, established itself more and more and became the true force which is also the true reform, the true renewal of the Church. It seems to me that, 50 years after the Council, we see that this virtual Council is broken, is lost, and there now appears the true Council with all its spiritual force. And it is our task, especially in this *Year of Faith*, on the basis of this *Year of Faith*, to work so that the true Council, with its power of the Holy Spirit, be accomplished and the Church be truly renewed. Let us hope that that the Lord will assist us. I myself, secluded in prayer, will always be with you and together let us go forward with the Lord in the certainty that the Lord will conquer. Thank you!