



The Holy See

MASS OF POSSESSION OF THE CHAIR OF THE BISHOP OF ROME

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of St John Lateran

Saturday, 7 May 2005

Dear Father Cardinals,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, when I can sit for the first time on the Chair of the Bishop of Rome as Successor of Peter, is the day on which the Church in Italy celebrates the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord. At the centre of this day we find Christ. And it is also only thanks to him, thanks to the mystery of his Ascension, that we can understand the significance of the Chair, which in turn is the symbol of the Bishop's power and responsibility.

So what does the Feast of the Ascension of the Lord mean for us? It does not mean that the Lord has departed to some place far from people and from the world. Christ's Ascension is not a journey into space toward the most remote stars; for basically, the planets, like the earth, are also made of physical elements.

Christ's Ascension means that he no longer belongs to the world of corruption and death that conditions our life. It means that he belongs entirely to God. He, the Eternal Son, led our human existence into God's presence, taking with him flesh and blood in a transfigured form.

The human being finds room in God; through Christ, the human being was introduced into the very life of God. And since God embraces and sustains the entire cosmos, the Ascension of the Lord means that Christ has not departed from us, but that he is now, thanks to his being with the

Father, close to each one of us for ever. Each one of us can be on intimate terms with him; each can call upon him. The Lord is always within hearing. We can inwardly draw away from him. We can live turning our backs on him. But he always waits for us and is always close to us.

From the readings of today's liturgy we also learn something more about the concrete way the Lord makes himself close to us. The Lord promises the disciples his Holy Spirit. The first reading that we heard tells us that the Holy Spirit will give "power" to the disciples; the Gospel adds that he will guide them to the whole truth. As the living Word of God, Jesus told his disciples everything, and God can give no more than himself. In Jesus, God gave us his whole self, that is, he gave us everything. As well as or together with this, there can be no other revelation which can communicate more or in some way complete the Revelation of Christ. In him, in the Son, all has been said to us, all has been given.

But our understanding is limited: thus, the Spirit's mission is to introduce the Church, in an ever new way from generation to generation, into the greatness of Christ's mystery. The Spirit places nothing different or new beside Christ; no pneumatic revelation comes with the revelation of Christ - as some say -, no second level of Revelation.

No: "He will have received from me...", Christ says in the Gospel (Jn 16: 14). And as Christ says only what he hears and receives from the Father, thus the Holy Spirit is the interpreter of Christ. "He will have received from me". He does not lead us to other places, far from Christ, but takes us further and further into Christ's light. Consequently, Christian Revelation is both ever old and new. Thus, all things are and always have been given to us. At the same time, every generation, in the inexhaustible encounter with the Lord - an encounter mediated by the Holy Spirit - always learns something new.

The Holy Spirit, therefore, is the power through which Christ causes us to experience his closeness. But the first reading also has something else to say: you will be my witnesses. The Risen Christ needs witnesses who have met him, people who have known him intimately through the power of the Holy Spirit; those who have, so to speak, actually touched him, can witness to him.

It is in this way that the Church, the family of Christ, "beginning at Jerusa-lem"..., as the Reading says, spread to the very ends of the earth. It is through witnesses that the Church was built - starting with Peter and Paul and the Twelve, to the point of including all who, filled with Christ, have rekindled down the centuries and will rekindle the flame of faith in a way that is ever new. All Christians in their own way can and must be witnesses of the Risen Lord.

When we read the saints' names we can see how often they have been - and continue to be - first and foremost simple people from whom shone - and shines - a radiant light that can lead others to Christ.

But this chorus of witnesses is also endowed with a clearly defined structure: the successors of the Apostles, the Bishops, who are publicly responsible for ensuring that the network of these witnesses survives. The power and grace required for this service are conferred upon Bishops through the sacrament of Episcopal Ordination. In this network of witnesses, the Successor of Peter has a special task. It was Peter who, on the Apostles' behalf, made the first profession of faith: "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16: 16).

This is the task of all Peter's Successors: to be the guide in the profession of faith in Christ, Son of the living God. The Chair of Rome is above all the Seat of this belief. From high up on this Chair the Bishop of Rome is constantly bound to repeat: *Dominus Iesus* - "Jesus is Lord", as Paul wrote in his Letters to the Romans (10: 9) and to the Corinthians (I Cor 12: 3). To the Corinthians he stressed: "Even though there are so-called gods in the heavens and on the earth... for us there is one God, the Father... and one Lord Jesus Christ, through whom everything was made and through whom we live" (I Cor 8: 5).

The Chair of Peter obliges all who hold it to say, as Peter said during a crisis time among the disciples when so many wanted to leave him: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe; we are convinced that you are God's holy one" (Jn 6: 68 ff.). The One who sits on the Chair of Peter must remember the Lord's words to Simon Peter at the Last Supper: "...You in turn must strengthen your brothers" (Lk 22: 32). The one who holds the office of the Petrine ministry must be aware that he is a frail and weak human being - just as his own powers are frail and weak - and is constantly in need of purification and conversion.

But he can also be aware that the power to strengthen his brethren in the faith and keep them united in the confession of the Crucified and Risen Christ comes from the Lord. In St Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, we find the oldest account we have of the Resurrection. Paul faithfully received it from the witnesses. This account first speaks of Christ's death for our sins, of his burial and of his Resurrection which took place the third day, and then says: "[Christ] was seen by Cephas, then by the Twelve..." (I Cor 15: 4). Thus, the importance of the mandate conferred upon Peter to the end of time is summed up: being a witness of the Risen Christ.

The Bishop of Rome sits upon the Chair to bear witness to Christ. Thus, the Chair is the symbol of the *potestas docendi*, the power to teach that is an essential part of the mandate of binding and loosing which the Lord conferred on Peter, and after him, on the Twelve. In the Church, Sacred Scripture, the understanding of which increases under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and the ministry of its authentic interpretation that was conferred upon the Apostles, are indissolubly bound. Whenever Sacred Scripture is separated from the living voice of the Church, it falls prey to disputes among experts.

Of course, all they have to tell us is important and invaluable; the work of scholars is a considerable help in understanding the living process in which the Scriptures developed, hence,

also in grasping their historical richness.

Yet science alone cannot provide us with a definitive and binding interpretation; it is unable to offer us, in its interpretation, that certainty with which we can live and for which we can even die. A greater mandate is necessary for this, which cannot derive from human abilities alone. The voice of the living Church is essential for this, of the Church entrusted until the end of time to Peter and to the College of the Apostles.

This power of teaching frightens many people in and outside the Church. They wonder whether freedom of conscience is threatened or whether it is a presumption opposed to freedom of thought. It is not like this. The power that Christ conferred upon Peter and his Successors is, in an absolute sense, a mandate to serve. The power of teaching in the Church involves a commitment to the service of obedience to the faith. The Pope is not an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law. On the contrary: the Pope's ministry is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and to his Word. He must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the Church to obedience to God's Word, in the face of every attempt to adapt it or water it down, and every form of opportunism.

Pope John Paul II did this when, in front of all attempts, apparently benevolent to the human person, and in the face of erroneous interpretations of freedom, he unequivocally stressed the inviolability of the human being and of human life from the moment of conception until natural death. The freedom to kill is not true freedom, but a tyranny that reduces the human being to slavery.

The Pope knows that in his important decisions, he is bound to the great community of faith of all times, to the binding interpretations that have developed throughout the Church's pilgrimage. Thus, his power is not being above, but at the service of, the Word of God. It is incumbent upon him to ensure that this Word continues to be present in its greatness and to resound in its purity, so that it is not torn to pieces by continuous changes in usage.

The Chair is - let us say it again - a symbol of the power of teaching, which is a power of obedience and service, so that the Word of God- the truth! - may shine out among us and show us the way of life.

But in speaking of the Chair of the Bishop of Rome, how can we forget St Ignatius of Antioch's words addressed to the Romans? Peter came from Antioch, his first See, to Rome, his permanent See. His martyrdom decreed that he stay here definitively and bound his succession to Rome for ever.

Ignatius, for his part, while remaining Bishop of Antioch, was also heading for the martyrdom that he was to suffer in Rome. In his Letter to the Romans, he refers to the Church of Rome as "She

who presides in love", a deeply meaningful phrase. We do not know with any certainty what Ignatius may have had in mind when he used these words. But for the ancient Church, the word love, *agape*, referred to the mystery of the Eucharist. In this mystery, Christ's love becomes permanently tangible among us. Here, again and again he gives himself. Here, again and again his heart is pierced; here he keeps his promise, the promise which, from the Cross, was to attract all things to himself.

In the Eucharist, we ourselves learn Christ's love. It was thanks to this centre and heart, thanks to the Eucharist, that the saints lived, bringing to the world God's love in ever new ways and forms. Thanks to the Eucharist, the Church is reborn ever anew! The Church is none other than that network - the Eucharistic community! - within which all of us, receiving the same Lord, become one body and embrace all the world.

Presiding in doctrine and presiding in love must in the end be one and the same: the whole of the Church's teaching leads ultimately to love. And the Eucharist, as the love of Jesus Christ present, is the criterion for all teaching. On love the whole law is based, and the prophets as well, the Lord says (cf. Mt 22: 40). Love is the fulfilment of the law, St Paul wrote to the Romans (cf. 13: 10).

Dear Romans, I am now your Bishop. Thank you for your generosity, thank you for your sympathy, thank you for your patience with me! As Catholics, in some way we are also all Romans.

With the words of Psalm 87, a hymn of praise to Zion, mother of all the peoples, Israel sang and the Church sings: "Of Zion they shall say: "One and all were born in her..." (v. 5). We too can likewise say: as Catholics, in a certain way, we are all born in Rome.

Thus, I want to try with all my heart to be your Bishop, the Bishop of Rome. And let us all seek to be more and more Catholic - more and more brothers and sisters in the great family of God, that family where no one is a stranger.

Lastly, I would like to warmly thank dear Cardinal Camillo Ruini, Vicar for the Diocese of Rome, the Auxiliary Bishops and all their collaborators. I warmly thank the parish priests, the clergy of Rome and all who, as the faithful, make their contribution to building here the living house of God. Amen.