



The Holy See

HOLY MASS CELEBRATED FOR THE 500th ANNIVERSARY OF
THE FOUNDING OF THE PONTIFICAL SWISS GUARD CORPS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Vatican Basilica
Saturday, 6 May 2006*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

This year we are commemorating several significant events that occurred in 1506, exactly 500 years ago.

The rediscovery of the sculptural group of the Laocoon that led to the establishment of the Vatican Museums; the laying of the foundation stone of this building, St Peter's Basilica, rebuilt on the site of Constantine's Basilica; and the birth of the Pontifical Swiss Guard.

Today, it is especially the latter event that we wish to recall.

Indeed, on 22 January, 500 years ago, the first 150 Swiss Guards arrived in Rome at the express request of Pope Julius II and entered his service in the Apostolic Palace. That chosen corps was very soon required to show its faithfulness to the Pontiff: in 1527, Rome was invaded and sacked, and on 6 May, 147 Swiss Guards were killed because they were defending Pope Clement VII, while the remaining 42 escorted him safely to Castel Sant'Angelo.

Why should we commemorate today these events that happened so long ago, in a Rome and a Europe so different from the situation today?

First of all, to pay honour to the Swiss Guard Corps, whose role ever since has always been reconfirmed, even in 1970 when the Servant of God Paul VI disbanded all the other military corps of the Vatican.

However, at the same time and above all, let us call to mind these historic events so as to draw a lesson from them in the light of God's Word.

To this end, the biblical Readings of today's liturgy are helpful, and the Risen Christ, whom we celebrate with special joy during this Easter Season, opens our minds to understanding the Scriptures (cf. Lk 24: 45), so that we may recognize God's plan and do his will.

The First Reading is taken from the Book of Wisdom, traditionally attributed to the great King Solomon. This entire Book is a hymn of praise to Divine Wisdom, presented as the most valuable treasure that man can desire and discover, the greatest good on which all other goods depend. For Wisdom, it is worth giving up every other thing; for Wisdom alone gives life its full meaning, a meaning that overcomes death itself because it puts people in authentic communion with God. Wisdom, the text says, "makes them friends of God" (Wis 7: 27).

On the one hand, it highlights the "formative" aspect, in other words, the fact that Wisdom forms people, making them grow from within towards the full stature of their maturity; and it contextually affirms that this fullness of life consists in friendship with God, in an intimate harmony with his being and his will.

The interior place in which Divine Wisdom operates is what the Bible calls "the heart", the person's spiritual centre. Thus, the Response of the Responsorial Psalm had us pray: "Give us, O God, wisdom of heart".

Psalms 90[89] then recalls that this Wisdom is granted to those who learn how to "number [their] days" (cf. v. 12), that is, to recognize that all the rest of life is fleeting, short-lived and transient; and that sinful human beings cannot and must not hide from God, but must recognize themselves for what they are: creatures in need of mercy and grace.

Those who accept this truth and are prepared to accept Wisdom, receive it as a gift.

For Wisdom, then, it is worth giving up all other things. This theme, to "leave" in order to "find", is the centre of the Gospel passage we have just heard, taken from chapter 19 of St Matthew.

After the episode of the "rich young man" who did not have the courage to detach himself from his "many riches" in order to follow Jesus (cf. Mt 19: 22), the Apostle Peter asked the Lord what instead would be the reward of those disciples of his who left everything in order to follow him (cf. Mt 19: 27).

Christ's answer reveals the immense greatness of his Heart: he promised the Twelve that they would share in his authority over the new Israel; then he assured them all that "everyone who has left" their earthly goods for his sake would "receive a hundredfold, and inherit eternal life" (Mt 19: 29).

The person who chooses Jesus finds the greatest treasure, the pearl of great value (cf. Mt 13: 44-46) that gives value to all the rest, for Jesus is Divine Wisdom incarnate (cf. Jn 1: 14), who came into the world so that humanity might have life in abundance (cf. Jn 10: 10). And the person who accepts Christ's superior goodness and beauty and truth, in which the whole fullness of God dwells (cf. Col 2: 9), enters with him into his Kingdom where the value judgments of this world decay and indeed, are overturned.

We find one of the most beautiful definitions of the Kingdom of God in the Second Reading. It is a text that belongs to the exhortational part of the Letter to the Romans. The Apostle Paul, after urging Christians always to allow themselves to be guided by love and not to be objects of scandal for those who are weak in faith, recalls that the Kingdom of God is "righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Rom 14: 17).

And he adds: "He who thus serves Christ is acceptable to God and approved by men. Let us then pursue what makes for peace and for mutual upbuilding" (Rom 14: 18-19). "What makes for peace" is a concise and complete expression of biblical Wisdom in the light of the revelation of Christ and his mystery of salvation.

The person who has recognized Christ as Wisdom Incarnate and for his sake has left everything else becomes a "peacemaker", both in the Christian community and in the world. In other words, he becomes a seed of the Kingdom of God that is already present and growing towards its full manifestation.

Therefore, in the perspective of the two words, "Wisdom-Christ", the Word of God offers us a complete vision of man in history: fascinated by Wisdom, he seeks it and finds it in Christ, leaving everything for him and receiving in exchange the priceless gift of the Kingdom of God; and clothed in temperance, prudence, justice and strength - the "cardinal" virtues - he lives the witness of charity in the Church.

One might wonder whether this perception of the human being can also constitute an ideal of life for the people of our time, especially for the young. That this is possible is shown by countless personal and community testimonies of Christian life which still constitute the wealth of the People of God, pilgrims through history.

Among the many expressions of the lay presence in the Catholic Church, there is also the very special one of the Pontifical Swiss Guards. These young men, motivated by love for Christ and for the Church, put themselves at the service of the Successor of Peter. For some of them, membership in this Guard Corps is limited to a brief period; for others, it extends until it becomes the choice of their entire life.

For some of them, and I say so with deep satisfaction, service at the Vatican has led to the

development of the response to a priestly or religious vocation.

However, for them all, being a Swiss Guard means adhering to Christ and the Church without reserve, and being prepared to die for them.

A Swiss Guard's active service may come to an end, but inside he always remains a Swiss Guard. This is what 80 former Swiss Guards desired to testify. From 7 April to 4 May they accomplished an extraordinary feat, marching from Switzerland to Rome, following the route of the Via Francigena as closely as possible.

I would like to renew my greeting to each one of them and to all the Swiss Guards. I also remember the Authorities who have come from Switzerland for the occasion, and the other civil and military Authorities, the Chaplains who enliven the Guards' daily service with the Gospel and the Eucharist, as well as their many relatives and friends.

Dear friends, I offer this Eucharist, the highest spiritual point of your celebration, especially for you and for the deceased members of your Corps.

Nourish yourselves on the Eucharistic Bread and be first and foremost men of prayer, so that Divine Wisdom may make you genuine friends of God and servants of his Kingdom of love and peace. The service offered by your long ranks winding through these 500 years acquires fullness of meaning and value in the Sacrifice of Christ.

As I make myself in spirit the interpreter of the Pontiffs whom your Corps has served faithfully down the centuries, I express well-deserved and heartfelt gratitude, while looking to the future, I invite you to march on, *acriter and fideliter*, with courage and fidelity.

May the Virgin Mary and your Patrons St Martin, St Sebastian and St Nicholas of Flüe, help you to carry out your daily tasks with generous dedication, ever enlivened by a spirit of faith and love for the Church.

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