



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO BRAZIL ON THE OCCASION OF THE FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE
OF THE BISHOPS OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

HOLY MASS FOR THE INAUGURATION
OF THE FIFTH GENERAL CONFERENCE OF THE BISHOPS
OF LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Square in front of the Shrine of Aparecida
Sixth Sunday of Easter, 13 May 2007*

Dear Brother Bishops,

Dear priests, and all of you, brothers and sisters in the Lord!

There are no words to express my joy in being here with you to celebrate this solemn Eucharist on the occasion of the opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean. I greet each of you most warmly, particularly Archbishop Raymundo Damasceno Assis, whom I thank for the words he addressed to me in the name of the entire assembly, and the Cardinal Presidents of this General Conference. My respectful greeting goes to the civil and military Authorities who have honoured us with their presence. From this Shrine my thoughts reach out, full of affection and prayer, to all those who are spiritually united with us, especially the communities of consecrated life, the young people belonging to various associations and movements, the families, and also the sick and the elderly. To all I say: "Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Cor 1:3).

I see it as a special gift of Providence that this Holy Mass is being celebrated *at this time and in this place*. The *time* is the liturgical season of Easter; on this Sixth Sunday of Easter, as Pentecost rapidly approaches, the Church is called to intensify her prayer for the coming of the Holy Spirit. The *place* is the National Shrine of Our Lady of Aparecida, the Marian heart of Brazil: Mary

welcomes us to this *Upper Room* and, as our Mother and Teacher, helps us to pray trustingly to God with one voice. This liturgical celebration lays a most solid foundation for the Fifth Conference, setting it on the firm basis of prayer and the Eucharist, *Sacramentum Caritatis*. Only *the love of Christ*, poured out by the Holy Spirit, can make this meeting an authentic ecclesial event, a moment of grace for this Continent and for the whole world. This afternoon I will be able to discuss more fully the implications of the theme of your Conference. But now, let us leave space for the word of God which we have the joy of receiving with open and docile hearts, like Mary, Our Lady of the Immaculate Conception, so that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, Christ may once again take flesh in the “today” of our history.

The first reading, taken from the *Acts of the Apostles*, refers to the so-called “Council of Jerusalem”, which dealt with the question as to whether the observance of the Mosaic Law was to be imposed on those pagans who had become Christians. The reading leaves out the discussion between “the apostles and the elders” (vv. 4-21) and reports the final decision, which was then written down in the form of a letter and entrusted to two delegates for delivery to the community in Antioch (vv. 22-29). This passage from *Acts* is highly appropriate for us, since we too are assembled here for an ecclesial meeting. It reminds us of the importance of community discernment with regard to the great problems and issues encountered by the Church along her way. These are clarified by the “apostles” and “elders” in the light of the Holy Spirit, who, as today’s Gospel says, calls to mind the teaching of Jesus Christ (cf. *Jn* 14:26) and thus helps the Christian community to advance in charity towards the fullness of truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13). The Church’s leaders discuss and argue, but in a constant attitude of religious openness to Christ’s word in the Holy Spirit. Consequently, at the end they can say: “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (*Acts* 15:28).

This is the “method” by which we operate in the Church, whether in small gatherings or in great ones. It is not only question of procedure: it is a reflection of the Church’s very nature as a mystery of communion with Christ in the Holy Spirit. In the case of the General Conferences of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, the first, held in 1955 in Rio de Janeiro, merited a special Letter from Pope Pius XII, of venerable memory; in later Conferences, including the present one, the Bishop of Rome has travelled to the site of the continental gathering in order to preside over its initial phase. With gratitude and devotion let us remember the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II, who brought to the Conferences of Medellín, Puebla and Santo Domingo the witness of the closeness of the universal Church to the Churches in Latin America, which constitute, proportionally, the majority of the Catholic community.

“*To the Holy Spirit and to us*”. This is the Church: *we*, the community of believers, the People of God, with its Pastors who are called to lead the way; together with the *Holy Spirit*, the Spirit of the Father, sent in the name of his Son Jesus, the Spirit of the one who is “greater” than all, given to us through Christ, who became “small” for our sake. The Paraclete Spirit, our *Ad-vocatus*, Defender and Consoler, makes us live in God’s presence, as hearers of his word, freed from all

anxiety and fear, bearing in our hearts the peace which Jesus left us, the peace that the world cannot give (cf. *Jn 14:26-27*). The Spirit accompanies the Church on her long pilgrimage between Christ's first and second coming. "I go away, and I will come to you" (*Jn 14:28*), Jesus tells his Apostles. Between Christ's "going away" and his "return" is the time of the Church, his Body. Two thousand years have passed so far, including these five centuries and more in which the Church has made her pilgrim way on the American Continent, filling believers with Christ's life through the sacraments and sowing in these lands the good seed of the Gospel, which has yielded thirty, sixty and a hundredfold. *The time of the Church, the time of the Spirit*: the Spirit is the Teacher who trains *disciples*: he teaches them to love Jesus; he trains them to hear his word and to contemplate his countenance; he conforms them to Christ's sacred humanity, a humanity which is poor in spirit, afflicted, meek, hungry for justice, merciful, pure in heart, peacemaking, persecuted for justice's sake (cf. *Mt 5:3-10*). *By the working of the Holy Spirit, Jesus becomes the "Way" along which the disciple walks*. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word", Jesus says at the beginning of today's Gospel. "The word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (*Jn 14:23-24*). Just as Jesus makes known the words of the Father, so the Spirit reminds the Church of Christ's own words (cf. *Jn 14:26*). And just as love of the Father led Jesus to feed on his will, so our love for Jesus is shown by our obedience to his words. Jesus' fidelity to the Father's will can be communicated to his disciples through the Holy Spirit, who pours the love of God into their hearts (cf. *Rom 5:5*).

The New Testament presents *Christ as the missionary of the Father*. Especially in the Gospel of John, Jesus often speaks of himself in relation to the Father who sent him into the world. And so in today's Gospel he says: "the word which you hear is not mine but the Father's who sent me" (*Jn 14:24*). At this moment, dear friends, we are invited to turn our gaze to him, for the Church's mission exists only as a prolongation of Christ's mission: "As the Father has sent me, even so I send you" (*Jn 20:21*). The evangelist stresses, in striking language, that the passing on of this commission takes place in the Holy Spirit: "he breathed on them and said to them: 'Receive the Holy Spirit'" (*Jn 20:22*). *Christ's mission is accomplished in love*. He has kindled in the world the fire of God's love (cf. *Lk 12:49*). *It is Love that gives life*: and so the Church has been sent forth to spread Christ's Love throughout the world, so that individuals and peoples "may have life, and have it abundantly" (*Jn 10:10*). To you, who represent the Church in Latin America, today I symbolically entrust my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, in which I sought to point out to everyone the essence of the Christian message. The Church considers herself the *disciple and missionary of this Love*: missionary only insofar as she is a disciple, capable of being attracted constantly and with renewed wonder by the God who has loved us and who loves us first (cf. *1 Jn 4:10*). The Church does not engage in proselytism. Instead, she grows by "*attraction*": just as Christ "draws all to himself" by the power of his love, culminating in the sacrifice of the Cross, so the Church fulfils her mission to the extent that, in union with Christ, she accomplishes every one of her works in spiritual and practical imitation of the love of her Lord.

Dear brothers and sisters! This is the priceless treasure that is so abundant in Latin America, this

is her most precious inheritance: *faith in the God who is Love*, who has shown us his face in Jesus Christ. You believe in the God who is Love: this is your strength, which overcomes the world, the joy that nothing and no one can ever take from you, the peace that Christ won for you by his Cross! *This is the faith that has made America the "Continent of Hope."* Not a political ideology, not a social movement, not an economic system: faith in the God who is Love—who took flesh, died and rose in Jesus Christ—is the authentic basis for this hope which has brought forth such a magnificent harvest from the time of the first evangelization until today, as attested by the ranks of Saints and *Beati* whom the Spirit has raised up throughout the Continent. Pope John Paul II called you to a *new evangelization*, and you accepted his commission with your customary generosity and commitment. I now confirm it with you, and in the words of this Fifth Conference I say to you: *be faithful disciples, so as to be courageous and effective missionaries.*

The second reading sets before us the magnificent vision of the *heavenly Jerusalem*. It is an image of awesome beauty, where nothing is superfluous, but everything contributes to the perfect harmony of the holy City. In his vision John sees the city "coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God" (*Rev 21:10*). And since the glory of God is Love, the heavenly Jerusalem is the icon of the Church, utterly holy and glorious, without spot or wrinkle (cf. *Eph 5:27*), permeated at her heart and in every part of her by the presence of the God who is Love. She is called a "bride", "the bride of the Lamb" (*Rev 20:9*), because in her is fulfilled the nuptial figure which pervades biblical revelation from beginning to end. The City and Bride is the locus of God's full communion with humanity; she has no need of a temple or of any external source of light, because the indwelling presence of God and of the Lamb illuminates her from within.

This magnificent icon has an *eschatological* value: it expresses the mystery of the beauty that is *already* the essential form of the Church, even if it has *not yet* arrived at its fullness. It is the goal of our pilgrimage, the homeland which awaits us and for which we long. Seeing that beauty with the eyes of faith, contemplating it and yearning for it, must not serve as an excuse for avoiding the historical reality in which the Church lives as she shares the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted (cf. Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 1). If the beauty of the heavenly Jerusalem is the glory of God—his love in other words—then it is in charity, and in charity alone, that we can approach it and to a certain degree dwell within it even now. Whoever loves the Lord Jesus and keeps his word, already experiences in this world the mysterious presence of the Triune God. We heard this in the Gospel: "we will come to him and make our home with him" (*Jn 14:23*). Every Christian is therefore called to become a living stone of this splendid "dwelling place of God with men". What a magnificent vocation!

A Church totally enlivened and impelled by the love of Christ, the Lamb slain for love, is the image within history of the heavenly Jerusalem, prefiguring the holy city that is radiant with the glory of God. It releases an *irresistible missionary power* which is *the power of holiness*. Through the prayers of the Virgin Mary, may the Church in Latin America and the Caribbean be abundantly

clothed with power from on high (cf. *Lk 24:49*), in order to spread throughout this Continent and the whole world the holiness of Christ. To him be glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen.

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