



The Holy See

PAPAL MASS ON THE
SOLEMNITY OF THE HOLY APOSTLES PETER AND PAUL

FIRST VESPERS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls

Sunday, 28 June 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With the celebration of First Vespers we enter the Solemnity of Sts Peter and Paul. We have the grace to do so gathered in prayer by the tomb of the Apostle to the Gentiles, in the Papal Basilica named after him. For this reason I wish to focus my brief reflection on the perspective of the Church's missionary vocation. The third Antiphon of the Psalter which we have prayed in addition to the biblical Reading is oriented in this direction. The first two Antiphons are dedicated to St Peter and the third to St Paul, and it says: "You are the chosen instrument of God, St Paul, Apostle, the preacher of truth in all the world". And in the brief Reading, taken from the opening address of the Letter to the Romans, Paul introduces himself as "apostle by God's call, set apart for the service of the Gospel" (cf. Rom 1:1). The figure of Paul his person and his ministry, the whole of his life and his hard work for the Kingdom of God is entirely dedicated to the service of the Gospel. In these texts one notices a sense of movement where the protagonist is not man, but God, the breath of the Holy Spirit, that impels the Apostle on the highways of the world to bring the Good News to everyone: the promises of the Prophets are fulfilled in Jesus, the Christ, the Son of God, who died for our sins and was raised for our justification. Saul is no longer, instead there is Paul, indeed there is Christ who lives in him (cf. Gal 2:20) and wants to reach out to all people. Although the Feast of the Holy Patrons of Rome thus calls to mind the twofold aspiration to unity and to universality that is characteristic of this Church, the context in which we are gathered this evening calls us to give priority to the latter, letting ourselves, so to speak, be "drawn" by St Paul

and his extraordinary vocation.

When, during the Second Vatican Council, the Servant of God Giovanni Battista Montini was elected Successor of Peter he chose to take the name of the Apostle to the Gentiles. Paul VI included in his programme for the implementation of the Council the convocation, in 1974, of the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the theme of evangelization in the modern world. About a year later, he published the Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi, which begins with these words: "There is no doubt that the effort to proclaim the Gospel to the people of today, who are buoyed up by hope but at the same time often oppressed by fear and distress, is a service rendered to the Christian community and also to the whole of humanity" (n. 1). The timeliness of these words is striking. Paul VI's special missionary sensitivity can be perceived in them and, through his voice, the Council's deep yearning for the evangelization of the contemporary world. This yearning culminates in the Decree Ad Gentes but runs through all the documents of the Second Vatican Council and, even earlier, inspired the thoughts and work of the Council Fathers, convoked to represent, in an unprecedented, tangible way, the dissemination throughout the world achieved by the Church.

Words are useless to explain how Venerable John Paul II, in his long Pontificate, developed this missionary outreach that it should always be remembered corresponded with the very nature of the Church which, with St Paul, can and must always repeat: "If I preach the Gospel, that gives me no ground for boasting. For necessity is laid upon me. Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (1 Cor 9:16). Pope John Paul II represented the Church's missionary nature "in the flesh" with his Apostolic Journeys and with the insistence of his Magisterium on the urgent need for a "new evangelization": "new" not in its content but in its inner thrust, open to the grace of the Holy Spirit which constitutes the force of the new law of the Gospel that always renews the Church; "new" in ways that correspond with the power of the Holy Spirit and which are suited to the times and situations; "new" because of being necessary even in countries that have already received the proclamation of the Gospel. It is evident to all that my Predecessor gave the Church's mission an extraordinary impetus, not only I repeat because of the distances he covered but above all because of the genuine missionary spirit that motivated him and that he left as a legacy at the dawn of the third millennium.

In receiving this legacy, I was able to state, at the beginning of my Petrine ministry, that the Church is young and open to the future. And I repeat this today, close to the tomb of St Paul. The Church is an immense force for renewal in the world. This is not, of course, because of her own strength but because of the power of the Gospel in which the Holy Spirit of God breathes, God Creator and Redeemer of the world. The challenges of the present time, the historical and social and, especially, the spiritual challenges, are certainly beyond the human capacity. It sometimes seems to us Pastors of the Church that we are reliving the experience of the Apostles when thousands of needy people followed Jesus and he asked them: what can we do for all these people? They were then aware of their powerlessness. Yet Jesus himself had shown them that

with faith in God nothing is impossible and that a few loaves and fish, blessed and shared, could satisfy the hunger of all. However, there was not and there is not hunger solely for material food: there is a deeper hunger that only God can satisfy. Human beings of the third millennium want an authentic, full life; they need truth, profound freedom, love freely given. Even in the deserts of the secularized world, man's soul thirsts for God, for the living God. It was for this reason that John Paul II wrote: "The mission of Christ the Redeemer, which is entrusted to the Church, is still very far from completion", and he added: "an overall view of the human race shows that this mission is still only beginning and that we must commit ourselves wholeheartedly to its service" (Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 1). There are regions of the world that are still awaiting a first evangelization; others that have received it, but need a deeper intervention; yet others in which the Gospel put down roots a long time ago, giving rise to a true Christian tradition but in which, in recent centuries with complex dynamics the secularization process has produced a serious crisis of the meaning of the Christian faith and of belonging to the Church.

From this perspective, I have decided to create a new body, in the form of a "Pontifical Council", whose principal task will be to promote a renewed evangelization in the countries where the first proclamation of the faith has already resonated and where Churches with an ancient foundation exist but are experiencing the progressive secularization of society and a sort of "eclipse of the sense of God", which pose a challenge to finding appropriate to propose anew the perennial truth of Christ's Gospel.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the challenge of the new evangelization calls into question the universal Church and asks us to continue with commitment our search for full Christian unity. An eloquent sign of hope in this regard is the custom of reciprocal visits between the Church of Rome and that of Constantinople for the Feast day of their respective Holy Patrons. Today, therefore, we welcome with renewed joy and gratitude the Delegation sent by Patriarch Bartholomaios I, to whom we address our most cordial greeting. May the intercession of Sts Peter and Paul obtain for the entire Church ardent faith and apostolic courage, to proclaim to the world the truth we all need, the truth that is God, the beginning and end of the universe and of history, the merciful and faithful Father, hope of eternal life. Amen.