



The Holy See

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GENERAL AUDIENCE

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The Baptism of Blood of the Church of Rome

1. Last week, the Roman Church experienced holy and elevated moments, which deserve special mention before God and men.

Before God—to be able to express gratitude to him and to renew trust. Before men—to satisfy the need of hearts, which at such moments unite and open to one another.

For the first time it happened to me, who am not a native of this city or of this land, to venerate the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul in this very place, from which the Lord called them to himself, on the day dedicated to the annual memory of their glorious martyrdom. I had already done so for many years in my native land, thus manifesting unity with Peter who unites the People of God in the Catholic Church. But here, *at the very centre of the Church*, the mystery of that unusual vocation, which led Peter from the lake of Gennesaret to Rome, and then brought also Paul of Tarsus here in his footsteps, speaks to us, with all the force of historical reality. With what deep emotion in the late evening of 28 June we recited the first vespers of the feast of the two Patron Saints. And then after *the blessing of the Pallia*, which are a symbol of the unity of the universal Church with St Peter's See, we went down to the place where there are the *sacred relics* of the Apostle, once buried here, and in our times examined again by scientists... How great is the eloquence of the altar in the centre of the Basilica, on which the Successor of St Peter celebrates the Eucharist with the thought that, *in a place close to this altar*, he himself, the crucified Peter, made the sacrifice of his life in union with the sacrifice of Christ crucified on Calvary—and risen again...

On the same day, according to a tradition, the Lord received also St Paul's sacrifice.

And not only those two. The liturgy of 30 June commemorates all the *martyrs of the Church* who then, in Nero's time, suffered bloody persecution here in Rome. This is testified to by ancient historians such as Tacitus (*Annales* XV, 45) and Apostolic Fathers such as Clement of Rome (*Ad Cor.* 5-6). This, however, far from being the last persecution, was rather the first one. After it came others until the times of Diocletian, at the beginning of the fourth century, and then until the time of Julian the Apostate, after the middle of the same century. The Church of Rome was deeply implanted in this multiple testimony. This see of the ancient world was baptized not only with the baptism of water, but also with the baptism of the *blood of the martyrs*, "that speaks more graciously than the blood of Abel" (Heb 12:24).

All of us, who live in the haste of modern civilization, in the restlessness of present-day life, must stop here and reflect how this Church was born, the Church to which it was granted by the will of the Lord to become the centre and the capital of such a great mission: the church to which there come on pilgrimage so many Churches, which find in it the foundation of their unity.

2. The memory of these events at the beginning of the Church of Rome, which God founded here on Peter (whose name means "Rock") was united with other important events in the experience of the other days of last week. These events reflect the *further historical development* of that Holy See, which must always serve the unity of Christians in a Church that is catholic and at the same time apostolic.

We have had the fortune to introduce solemnly into the *College of Cardinals* of the Roman Church fifteen men. Of these, one remains "in pectore", while waiting for the decisions of Divine Providence if one day it will allow us to reveal his name; the others are already commonly known to everyone.

In this sublime rite there was *renewed the millenary tradition of the Roman Church*, which has a great significance not only for the further stability of the Church, but also for adequate understanding of her character which is a double one: *local and universal at the same time*.

Our "local" Roman Church is linked with this City just as once, over nineteen centuries ago, the Apostle Peter linked it with this City. After Peter, this Roman Church elected its bishops successively, so that they might exercise pastoral service in it, and it did so in a way adapted to the possibilities and needs of the various eras.

The institution of the College of Cardinals in its origins goes back to this tradition, according to which the Bishop of Rome was elected by representatives of the Roman clergy. It was precisely these Roman electors, constituting already at that time of important College in the life of the Church, who began the institution which for nearly a thousand years has *ensured succession to St Peter's See*.

Succession to this episcopal see has a significance not only for the "local" Church, which is here in Rome. It has a significance for the universal Church, that is, for each of the local Churches, which in this way become part of a universal community. This is really a "key" significance, since Christ gave precisely to Peter "the power of the keys".

In recent times and especially during Paul VI's pontificate, the College of Cardinals has been increased and internationalized.

At present the Sacred College has 70 European Cardinals, 40 Cardinals from America (North, Centre and South), 12 Cardinals from Africa, 10 Cardinals from Asia and 3 Cardinals from Australia and Oceania. They fill particularly responsible offices such as *Pastors* of important local Churches (or dioceses) or as *Superiors* of the principal Departments of the Roman Curia, and they are at the same time the heirs of those ancient "electors" who came from the Roman clergy and chose the Bishop of Rome. Therefore together with the call to the College of Cardinals, they are given the title of one of the suburban dioceses or of one of the Roman churches. In this way the College of Cardinals unites in itself—and manifests in itself—both the constituent dimensions of the Church: the "local" dimension and the "universal" one. The Church built on Peter is "Roman" in these two dimensions.

3. In this way, therefore, the days of the past week enabled us to enter into a particularly deep familiarity with the reality of the Church, with her mystery and at the same time with her history, which, before our eyes, has been prolonged, in a certain sense, with a new stage.

If we return today to these important events, we do so to manifest how deeply we experienced these facts. Following the example of the Mother of Christ, it is necessary to "keep in our hearts" (cf. Lk 2:51) such eloquent events, and at the right moment "manifest them outside", so that their interior importance will be consolidated in these manifestations.

My thought goes once more to the Members of the College of Cardinals, and their new reinforcements. I commend each of them to the prayers of all of you gathered here, to the prayers of the whole Church.

To Jesus Christ "the King of ages" (1 Tim 1:17), I commend the Church built "upon the foundations of the apostles and prophets" (Eph 2:20), the Roman Church founded on Peter and linked since the beginning with the memory of the Apostle of the Gentiles.

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