



The Holy See

MASS OF CHRISTIAN BURIAL FOR CARDINAL EDUARDO FRANCISCO PIRONIO

HOMILY OF JOHN PAUL II

Saturday, 7 February 1998

1. "This is the will of my Father, that every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life; and I will raise him up at the last day" (*Jn 6:40*).

Christ's promise, which we have just heard in the Gospel, opens our heart to hope: he, who is the Lord of life, came so that "nothing of all the Father had given him would be lost". As he faces death, the human being has precisely this fear of being lost. His heart trembles, every certainty becomes precarious and the darkness of the unknown throws him into dismay.

The word of Christ then becomes the only key to unlocking the enigma of death. It is the light that illumines the way of life and gives value to its every moment, even to pain, suffering and extreme detachment. "Every one who sees the Son and believes in him should have eternal life", Jesus says. To believe in him is to trust in his words, relying solely on the power of his merciful love.

These considerations, dear brothers and sisters, rise spontaneously from our hearts as we find ourselves gathered in prayer by the mortal remains of our Brother, dear Cardinal Eduardo Francisco Pironio, whom we accompany today to his final dwelling-place. He witnessed to that courageous faith which can entrust itself to God even when, in the mysterious plans of his Providence, he allows a trial.

2. Yes, this Venerable Brother of ours believed with unshakeable faith in the Redeemer's promises. With these words he begins his Spiritual Testament: "I was baptized in the name of the Blessed Trinity; I firmly believed in it, by God's mercy; and I experienced its loving presence in the littleness of my soul.... I now enter into the 'joy of my master', into direct 'face to face' contemplation of the Trinity. Until now 'from afar I have wandered towards the Lord'; now 'I will see him as he is'. I am happy. *Magnificat!*".

His was a faith learned at his mother's knee. A woman of solid yet simple Christian background, she was able to impress the genuine Gospel meaning of life on her children's hearts. "In the history of my family", the late Cardinal said one day, "there is something miraculous. When she gave birth to her first son, my mother was barely 18 years old and fell seriously ill. After her recovery the doctors told her that she would not be able to have any more children without risking her own life. So she went to consult the Auxiliary Bishop of La Plata, who told her: 'Doctors can be mistaken: put yourself in God's hands and do your duty as a wife'. My mother then gave birth to 21 more. I am the last, and she lived until she was 82. But the story does not end here, for in later years I was appointed Auxiliary Bishop of La Plata, replacing the very Bishop who had blessed my mother. On the day of my episcopal ordination", Cardinal Pironio continued, "the Archbishop gave me that Bishop's pectoral cross without knowing the story behind it. When I told him that I owed my life to the cross's owner, he wept".

I wanted to mention this episode recounted by the Cardinal himself, because it highlights the reasons which sustained his journey of faith. His life was a hymn of faith to the God of life. He says so again in his Spiritual Testament: "How beautiful it is to live! You have made us, O Lord, for life. I love it, I offer it, I await it. You are my Life, as you have always been my Truth and my Way".

3. We have just heard the words of St Peter's Letter: "In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith ... may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (1 Pt 1:6-7). They describe Cardinal Pironio's priestly ministry. He witnessed to his faith with joy: the joy of being a priest and the constant desire to "communicate it to the young people of today, as my best testament and legacy", as he himself has left it to us in writing. The joy of serving the Gospel, in the various burdensome tasks entrusted to him.

He was born on 3 December 1920 and was ordained a priest in the Basilica of Our Lady of Luján on 5 December 1943. In the first years of his ministry he carried out intense educational and didactic activities in the seminary of Buenos Aires. During the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council he was asked to take part in the work as a conciliar *peritus*. In 1964 Paul VI made him Auxiliary to the Archbishop of La Plata. He was then appointed Apostolic Administrator of Avellaneda and General Secretary of CELAM, of which he also became President. He was later promoted to the see of Mar del Plata. Paul VI wanted him to be close at hand, and entrusted him with the then Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and in 1976 raised him to the dignity of Cardinal. On 8 April 1984 I myself called him to direct the Pontifical Council for the Laity, where he served until 20 August 1996, working throughout with youthful enthusiasm and total competence.

4. Thus his service to the Church gradually took on an ever vaster and more universal dimension: first a Diocese in Argentina, then the Latin American continent and later, after being called to the Roman Curia, the whole Catholic community. Here in Rome he continued the pastoral style he had always had, showing outstanding love for consecrated life and the laity, and particularly for young people. In his Spiritual Testament he wrote: "How I love men and women religious and all the consecrated lay people in the world! How I pray to Mary most holy for them! How joyfully I offer my life today, that they may be faithful.... I love them intensely, I embrace them and I bless them". And he added: "I give thanks to God for having been able to spend my poor energies and talents in dedication to the beloved lay people, whose friendship and witness enriched me spiritually".

How could his great contribution to the celebration of the World Youth Days be forgotten? Here I would like to make public my heartfelt gratitude to this Brother who was a great help to me in the exercise of the Petrine ministry.

5. His constant co-operation became even more apostolic in his last years marked by illness. The Apostle Peter spoke to us just now of the “genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold” and reminded us that we should not be surprised if we are subjected to trial since that metal, “though perishable, is tested by fire” (1 Pt 1:7). Cardinal Pironio’s faith was sorely tried in the crucible of suffering. Physically weakened by a serious illness, he was able to accept the heavy trial demanded of him with resignation and patience. Of this arduous experience he has written: “I thank the Lord for the privilege of the Cross. I am very happy to have suffered so much. I am only sorry for not having endured it better and for not always having relished my cross in silence. Now at least I would like my cross to begin to shine and bear fruit”.

And in the twilight of his life, he could further draw from his faith that optimism and hope which characterized his whole life. “All things ... are yours, O Lord who loves the living” (Wis 11:26), he liked to repeat, and his Cardinal’s motto was in a way its seal: “Christ in you, the hope of glory”.

6. In entrusting this beloved Brother’s chosen soul to the Lord’s mercy, let us make our own the words of the Book of Wisdom which we have heard: You, O Lord, “overlook men’s sins, that they may repent” (11:23).

Cardinal Pironio had a keen sense of human weakness: in his Spiritual Testament, which has guided our reflections, he repeatedly asks forgiveness. He asks for it with humility and faith. Before God’s holiness, every human creature can only beat his breast and confess: “You are merciful to all, for you can do all things” (Wis 11:23).

Now that he is entering the Father’s house, we accompany him with our prayer. We entrust him to Mary, Mother of hope and joy, to whom he had a deep devotion. At the end of his days, when it was already time to set sail for his last journey, he wrote in his Testament: “I embrace everyone with my whole heart, in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. I place them all in the heart of Mary, the poor, contemplative and faithful Virgin. Hail Mary! I ask her: ‘After this our exile, show unto us the blessed fruit of your womb, Jesus!’”.

May the Mother of God welcome him into her arms and bring him into the eternal dwelling-place which the Lord prepares for his faithful servants.

And you, dear Brother, rest in peace! Amen.

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