



The Holy See

MASS WITH THE BISHOPS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER PAUL VI

Sunday, 22 September 1974

Greetings to you, our Brethren!

We repeat the greeting with which this extraordinary celebration began: "The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (2 Cor. 13, 13).

Greetings to you, who have come to Rome to find strength, in faith and hope and love, as Pastors of the Church of God in a great and modern land. You give to us, and certainly to yourselves as well, a moment of wonderful and truly Catholic experience. This experience is one of evangelical love.

Through this love-as our Head and Teacher taught us at the Last Supper and it is the memory and mysterious reality of this Last Supper which we are now celebrating and renewing-we give evidence of being disciples of the Lord, as he proclaimed with solemn simplicity: "This is how all will know you for my disciples: your love for one another" (Jo. 13, 35; cfr. Jo. 15, 12).

And as we now seek to fulfill in ourselves this word of the Lord, we cannot escape the impression that we are giving witness, in a concrete, evident and persuasive manner, to an aspect of the Church which, yesterday and still today, is much challenged by many Christians who are unfortunately separated from us. We are speaking of the *visible nature* of the Church, her human and social reality, her body made up of real and living persons, living in this world and its actual history. And then there is another aspect of the Church that is affirmed by the celebration of this

Mass, which itself is an identical and authentic re-enactment of the Lord's Supper.

This aspect is the *institutional* one, the organizational and hierarchical aspect of the Church. Here it is placed in a light that defends it from the tendencies of other brethren who challenge it, and who are opposed to the recognition of an institutional Church-as though it were possible to imagine a Church of charity, freed from her organic and ministerial structures.

The real Church, the living Church, our Church and the Church of all her followers - those who are called Catholics, that is, universalists - is now being celebrated in this rite. It is a rite to which we are accustomed but yet one that is new and original in this Mass, which moreover is rendered more radiant, more full and eloquent in significance, by your presence, my brothers, by our magnificent ecclesial communion.

These are things both sublime and simple. But are they not perhaps worthy of being recalled here and now, as though to imbue our hearts with the study of theology and spirituality that you, pilgrims to this Apostolic See, are engaged upon? And is there not perhaps exalted, at the same time, the mystical and supernatural element of the Church precisely at this moment in which we, the humble heirs of the Apostles, are affirming her unequivocal physical, visible and hierarchical existence? The Church, as we well know, is the mystical Body of Christ (Cfr. *Col. 1, 24; Eph. 1, 22*). In her unbreakable and harmonious unity, she demands a complex system of complementary functions - a system which indeed concerns us directly, because of that "work of service" (*Eph. 4, 12*) that has been specifically assigned to us as Bishops of the Church of God.

What is this ministry that has been assigned to us? We know it well: it is the ministry of authority, of *exousia*, of power that the New Testament so often speaks to us about, not only with regard to Christ but also with regard to the Apostles, in relation, that is, to the mission on which they have been sent and to the work of instruction, sanctification and leadership to which they have been destined.

We shall give the greatest amount of attention to this word "power", which means the capacity to act and to require the ecclesial-that is, loving-obedience of those to whom this word is directed. For this word expresses a divine thought, a precise concept in ecclesiology, which must recognize the two parts that make it up-pastors and flock. These are the two aspects that constitute it and define it: the hierarchical society and the community of grace. And we shall admire in this reality, which divinely reflects the countenance of the Church in order, vitality, beauty and love. And for this we shall bless the Lord, with the resolution to recognize with fidelity and courage the consequences that flow from the divine plan of the Church.

Yes, with fidelity and courage. For we know that in human language, and also in historical reality, this expression *exousia*, "power", is seen to be ambivalent in its twofold possible translation as "domination" or "service". And we know that our Lord has given a very clear solution to the

possible misunderstanding, as regards the disciples invested with authority: “Let the greater among you be as the junior, the leader as the servant” (*Luc. 22, 26*). Thus we have just heard his voice in the reading of the Gospel. Our power is not a power of domination, it is a power of service; it is a “*diakonia*”, it is a function destined to the ministry of the community.

Saint Augustine’s motto referring to ecclesial power is well known : “Let pleasure be taken not in commanding but in being of service” (*PL 38, 1484*). This motto becomes, with Saint Benedict and Saint Gregory, a norm that often recurs in ecclesiastical speech-and it is reaffirmed by our venerable Predecessor Pius XII, in regard to this Apostolic See (Cfr. *AAS 1951, p. 641*; and cfr. *CONGAR, L’Episcopat; Summa Theologise, III, 80, 10 ad 5*; etc.).

Confronted with the evangelical and ecclesial interpretation of our authority in the community of the faithful, our hearts could remain fearful and paralyzed: how shall we be able to exercise our function if its proper meaning is apparently turned upside down? Is the Church going to be governed by the faithful, to the service of whom the Bishops are bound? No, we know it well: the Bishops are constituted by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the Church of God. To shepherd, *poimainein*-this is a decisive word, a word that with the depth of its meaning links in a marvellous way the juridical charism of authority with the sovereign charism of love.

It gives the Pastor his true Gospel figure, that of goodness-a goodness that is provident and strong-and that of the disciple of Christ, set up to exercise the “care of souls” which demands a complete gift of self, an inexhaustible spirit of sacrifice.

This is love in its highest and fullest expression: the love of truth (Cfr. *2 Thess. 2, 10*), exercised through the “Teach all nations” (*Matth. 28, 19*), and by vigilance over the “deposit” of the faith to be preserved (Cfr. *1 Tim. 4, 6; 6, 20; 2 Tim. 1, 14*). It is the love that dispenses the mysteries of God (Cfr. *1 Cor. 4, 1-2; Eph. 3, 8*); the charity that pours out the supreme love owed to Christ in the wise and untiring leadership of his flock (Cfr. *Io. 21, 15 ss.*).

There is nothing new to you, venerable Brothers, in our drawing your attention to these teachings; but it is never a useless thing to recall them, especially if it is done in circumstances like these present ones, when you are seeking to rekindle in your souls the light of the Holy Spirit, which you received at the moment of your episcopal ordination (Cfr. *2 Tim. 1, 6*), and when you are comparing your pastoral mission with your beloved local Churches and with the immense and trembling world of our day.

Thus may Jesus Christ, the Pastor of Pastors, assist and bless us all!

And on our part we take this joyful occasion likewise to extend our greetings in the Lord to all your beloved people. Through you we send our Apostolic Blessing to your local Churches. We thank your clergy, your religious and your laity for their diligent ecclesial communion with you and with

ourselves, and for the shared solicitude they show for their brothers and sisters in the other local Churches throughout the world. As Successor of Peter and in fulfillment of our own role of service we would confirm you all in faith in the Lord Jesus.