



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 3 May 2006*

## The Apostolic Tradition of the Church

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In these Catecheses we wish to understand a little more what the Church is. The last time we meditated on the theme of Apostolic Tradition. We saw that it is not a collection of things or words, like a box of dead things. Tradition is the river of new life that flows from the origins, from Christ down to us, and makes us participate in God's history with humanity.

This topic of Tradition is so important that I would like to reflect upon it again today: indeed, it is of great importance for the life of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council pointed out in this regard that Tradition is primarily *apostolic* in its origins: "God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations.

Therefore, Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the Most High God is summed up (cf. II Cor 1: 20; and 3: 16-4, 6), commanded the Apostles to preach the Gospel... and communicate the gifts of God to all men. This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, n. 7).

The Council noted further that this was faithfully done "by the Apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received - whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his

works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*).

The Council adds that there were "other men associated with the Apostles, who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing" (*ibid.*).

As heads of the eschatological Israel, and likewise as Twelve, the number of the tribes of the Chosen People, the Apostles continued the "gathering" begun by the Lord and did so first and foremost by transmitting faithfully the gift received, the Good News of the Kingdom that came to people in Jesus Christ.

Their number not only expresses continuity with the holy root, the Israel of the 12 tribes, but also the universal destination of their ministry, which brought salvation to the very ends of the earth. This can be understood from the symbolic value that the numbers have in the Semitic world: *twelve* results from the multiplication of three, a perfect number, and *four*, a number that refers to the four cardinal points, hence, to the whole world.

The community, born from the proclamation of the Gospel, recognizes that it was called by the words of those who were the first to experience the Lord and were sent out by him. It knows that it can count on the guidance of the Twelve, as well as that of those who were gradually associated with them as their successors in the ministry of the Word and in the service of communion. Consequently, the community feels committed to transmit to others the "Good News" of the actual presence of the Lord and of his Paschal Mystery, brought about in the Spirit.

This is clearly highlighted and visible in certain passages of the Pauline Letters: "I delivered to you... what I also received" (I Cor 15: 3). And this is important. St Paul, it is well-known, originally called by Christ with a personal vocation, was a real Apostle, yet for him too, fidelity to what he received was fundamentally important. He did not want "to invent" a new, so-to-speak, "Pauline" Christianity. Therefore, he insisted, "I have passed on to you what I too received". He passed on the initial gift that comes from the Lord and the truth that saves.

Then, towards the end of his life, he wrote to Timothy: "Guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us (II Tm 1: 14).

It is also effectively demonstrated by this ancient testimony of the Christian faith written by Tertullian in about the year 200: "(The Apostles) after first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea and founding Churches (there), they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded Churches in every city, from which all the other Churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become Churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic Churches" (Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 20: PL 2,

32).

The Second Vatican Council comments: "What was handed on by the Apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase their faith. In this way the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes" (*Dei Verbum*, n. 8).

The Church transmits all that she is and believes, she hands it down through worship, life and doctrine.

So it is that Tradition is the living Gospel, proclaimed by the Apostles in its integrity on the basis of the fullness of their unique and unrepeatable experience: through their activity the faith is communicated to others, even down to us, until the end of the world. Tradition, therefore, is the history of the Spirit who acts in the Church's history through the mediation of the Apostles and their successors, in faithful continuity with the experience of the origins.

This is what St Clement of Rome said towards the end of the first century:

"The Apostles", he wrote, "have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent by God. Christ, therefore, was sent forth by God, and the Apostles by Christ.

"Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God.... Our Apostles also knew, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the episcopal office.

"For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry" (*Ad Corinthios*, 42, 44: *PG* 1, 292, 296).

This chain of service has continued until today; it will continue to the end of the world. Indeed, the mandate that Jesus conferred upon the Apostles was passed on by them to their successors. Going beyond the experience of personal contact with Christ, unique and unrepeatable, the Apostles passed on to their successors the solemn mandate that they had received from the Master to go out into the world. "Apostle" comes precisely from the Greek term, "*apostéllein*", which means "to send forth".

The apostolic mandate - as the text of Matthew shows (Mt 28: 19ff.) - implies a service that is pastoral ("Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..."), liturgical ("baptizing them"), and prophetic ("teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"), guaranteed by the Lord's closeness, until the end of time ("and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age").

Thus, but differently from the Apostles, we too have a true, personal experience of the presence of

the Risen Lord.

Therefore, through the apostolic ministry it is Christ himself who reaches those who are called to the faith. The distance of the centuries is overcome and the Risen One offers himself alive and active for our sake, in the Church and in the world today.

This is our great joy. In the living river of Tradition, Christ is not 2,000 years away but is really present among us and gives us the Truth, he gives us the light that makes us live and find the way towards the future.

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### **To special groups**

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including groups from Britain and Ireland, from Asia and from the United States of America. In this month of May I entrust you to the maternal protection of our Blessed Lady, Queen of Peace. Upon all of you I invoke the abundant Blessings of our Risen Saviour.

I would now like to address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. We have just begun the month of May, dedicated especially to the Virgin Mary, and I urge you, dear *young people*, to study every day at her school, to learn from her to do God's will. Contemplating the Mother of the Crucified Christ, dear *sick people*, may you be able to accept the saving value of every cross, even those that are the heaviest. Lastly, I entrust you, dear *newly-weds*, to the motherly protection of the Blessed Virgin, so that you may create in your families the atmosphere of prayer and love of the House of Nazareth.

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