



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 10 May 2006

Having a "vision from on high"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the last two Audiences we meditated on what Tradition in the Church is and we saw that it is the permanent presence of the word and life of Jesus among his people. But in order to be present, the word needs a person, a witness.

And so it is that this reciprocity comes about: on the one hand, the word needs the person, but on the other, the person, the witness, is bound to the word, entrusted to him and not invented by him. This reciprocity between the content - the Word of God, life of the Lord - and the person who carries on the work is characteristic of the Church's structure. Let us meditate today on this personal aspect of the Church.

The Lord founded the Church, as we have seen, by calling together the Twelve, who were to represent the future People of God. Faithful to the Lord's mandate, after his Ascension, the Twelve first made up their number by appointing Matthias in Judas' place (cf. Acts 1: 15-26), thereby continuing to involve others in the duties entrusted to them so that they might continue their ministry.

The Risen Lord himself called Paul (cf. Gal 1: 1), but Paul, although he was called by the Lord to be an Apostle, compared his Gospel with the Gospel of the Twelve (cf. *ibid.*, 1: 18), and was concerned to transmit what he had received (cf. I Cor 11: 23; 15: 3-4). In the distribution of missionary tasks, he was associated with the Apostles together with others, for example,

Barnabas (cf. Gal 2: 9).

Just as becoming an Apostle begins with being called and sent out by the Risen One, so the subsequent call and sending out to others was to be brought about, through the power of the Spirit, by those who are already ordained in the apostolic ministry. And this is the way in which this ministry, known from the second generation as the episcopal ministry, *episcopate*, was to be continued.

Perhaps it would be useful to explain briefly what "Bishop" means. It is the Italian form of the Greek term, "*episcopos*". This word means one who has a vision from on high, who looks with the heart. This is what St Peter himself calls Jesus in his First Letter: bishop, "Shepherd and Guardian of your souls" (I Pt 2: 25).

And according to this new model of the Lord, who was the first Bishop, Guardian and Pastor of souls, the successors of the Apostles were later called Bishops, "*episcopoi*". The role of "episcopate" was entrusted to them. This specific role of the Bishop was gradually to evolve, in comparison with the origins, until it took the form - already clearly attested to by Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century (cf. *Ad Magnesios*, 6, 1: PG 5, 668) - of the threefold office of Bishop, Priest and Deacon.

This development was guided by God's Spirit who helps the Church in the discernment of the authentic forms of Apostolic Succession, ever more clearly defined among the plurality of experiences and charismatic and ministerial forms present in the earliest communities.

In this way, succession in the role of Bishop is presented as the continuity of the Apostolic ministry, a guarantee of the permanence of the Apostolic Tradition, word and life, entrusted to us by the Lord. The link between the College of Bishops and the original community of the Apostles is understood above all in the line of historical continuity.

As we have seen, first Matthias, then Paul, then Barnabas joined the Twelve, then others, until, in the second and third generations, the Bishop's ministry took shape.

Continuity, therefore, is expressed in this historical chain. And in the continuity of the succession lies the guarantee of the permanence, in the Ecclesial Community, of the Apostolic College that Christ had gathered around him.

This continuity, however, that we see first in the historical continuity of ministries, should also be understood in a spiritual sense, because Apostolic Succession in the ministry is considered a privileged place for the action and transmission of the Holy Spirit.

We find these convictions clearly echoed in the following text, for example, by Irenaeus of Lyons

(second half of the second century): "It is within the power of all... in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the Apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to count those who were by the Apostles instituted Bishops in the Churches and... the succession of these men to our own times.... [The Apostles] were desirous that these men, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, should be very perfect and blameless in all things, delivering up their own place of government to these men; which men, if they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon, but if they should fall away, the direst calamity" (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 1: PG 7, 848).

Pointing to this network of Apostolic Succession as a guarantee of the permanence of the Lord's word, Irenaeus then concentrated on that Church, "the very great, the very ancient and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul", highlighting the Tradition of faith that in her comes down to us from the Apostles through the succession of the Bishops.

In this way, for Irenaeus and for the universal Church, the Episcopal Succession of the Church of Rome becomes the sign, criterion and guarantee of the unbroken transmission of apostolic faith: "For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of her pre-eminent authority (*propter potioem principalem*) - that is, the faithful everywhere - inasmuch as the Apostolic Tradition has been preserved continuously..." (*ibid.*, III, 3, 2: PG 7, 848).

Apostolic Succession, verified on the basis of communion with that of the Church of Rome, is therefore the criterion of the permanence of the particular Churches in the Tradition of the common apostolic faith, which from the origins has come down to us through this channel: "In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical Tradition from the Apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. And this is a most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the Apostles until now, and handed down in truth" (*ibid.*, III, 3, 3: PG 7, 851).

According to this testimony of the ancient Church, the apostolicity of ecclesial communion consists in fidelity to the teaching and praxis of the Apostles, through whom the historical and spiritual bond of the Church with Christ is assured. The Apostolic Succession of the episcopal ministry is a means of guaranteeing the faithful transmission of the Apostolic witness.

What the Apostles represent in the relationship between the Lord Jesus and the Church of the origins is similarly represented by the ministerial succession in the relationship between the primitive Church and the Church of today. It is not merely a material sequence; rather, it is a historical instrument that the Spirit uses to make the Lord Jesus, Head of his people, present through those who are ordained for the ministry through the imposition of hands and the Bishops' prayer.

Consequently, through Apostolic Succession it is Christ who reaches us: in the words of the Apostles and of their successors, it is he who speaks to us; through their hands it is he who acts in the sacraments; in their gaze it is his gaze that embraces us and makes us feel loved and welcomed into the Heart of God. And still today, as at the outset, Christ himself is the true Shepherd and Guardian of our souls whom we follow with deep trust, gratitude and joy.

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To special groups

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, particularly those from England, Canada and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke the Blessings of the Risen Christ and wish you a most pleasant time in Rome.

I now greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly-weds*. In this month dedicated especially to Our Lady, I invite you, dear *young people*, especially you children of Catholic Action from the Diocese of Acerra, to follow Mary's example, always trusting in her motherly intercession so that she will help you to bring serenity wherever there is anxiety and loneliness. I hope that you, dear *sick people*, will live your condition trustingly, abandoning yourselves to the hands of the Lord and sustained by the One who on Calvary stayed faithful beneath the Cross of Christ. May the Blessed Virgin accompany you in family life, dear *newly-weds*, so that you can taste the joy that flows from reciprocal fidelity and always be witnesses of divine love.

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