



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*St. Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 15 October 2008*

### ***Saint Paul (8)***

#### ***Paul's Ecclesiological Dimension.***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In last [Wednesday's Catechesis](#) I spoke of Paul's relationship with the pre-Paschal Jesus in his earthly life. The question was: "What did Paul know about Jesus' life, his words, his Passion?". Today I would like to speak about St Paul's teaching on the Church. We must start by noting that this word "*Chiesa*" in Italian as in French "*Église*" and in Spanish "*Iglesia*" comes from the Greek "*ekklesia*". It comes from the Old Testament and means the assembly of the People of Israel, convoked by God. It particularly means the exemplary assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai. This word now means the new community of believers in Christ who feel that they are God's assembly, the new convocation of all the peoples by God and before him. The term *ekklesia* comes for the first time from the pen of Paul, the first author of a Christian text. It makes its first appearance in the *incipit* of his First Letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul textually addresses "the Church of the Thessalonians" (cf. also "the Church of the Laodiceans" in Col 4: 16). In other Letters he speaks of the Church of God which is at Corinth (1 Cor 1: 2; 2 Cor 1: 1) and of the Churches of Galatia (Gal 1: 2, etc.) particular Churches therefore but he also says he persecuted "*the Church of God*": not a specific local community, but "the Church of God". Thus we see that this word, "Church", has a multi-dimensional meaning: it indicates a part of God's assembly in a specific place (a city, a country, a house) but it also means the Church as a whole. And thus we see that "the Church of God" is not only a collection of various local Churches but that these various local

Churches in turn make up one Church of God. All together they are "the Church of God" which precedes the individual local Churches and is expressed or brought into being in them.

It is important to observe that the word "Church" almost always appears with the additional qualification "of God": she is not a human association, born from ideas or common interests, but a convocation of God. He has convoked her, thus, in all her manifestations she is one. The oneness of God creates the oneness of the Church in all the places in which she is found. Later, in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul richly elaborated the concept of the Church's oneness, in continuity with the concept of the People of God, Israel, considered by the prophets as "God's bride" called to live in a spousal relationship with him. Paul presents the one Church of God as "Christ's bride" in love, one body and one spirit with Christ himself. It is well known that as a young man Paul was a fierce adversary of the new movement constituted by the Church of Christ. He was opposed to this new movement because he saw it as a threat to fidelity to the tradition of the People of God, inspired by faith in the one God. This fidelity was expressed above all in circumcision, in the observance of the rules of religious purity, abstention from certain foods and respect for the Sabbath. The Israelites had paid for this fidelity with the blood of martyrs in the period of the Maccabees, when the Hellenistic regime wanted to force all peoples to conform to the one Hellenistic culture. Many Israelites spilled their blood to defend the proper vocation of Israel. The martyrs paid with their lives for the identity of their people who expressed themselves through these elements. After his encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul understood that Christians were not traitors; on the contrary, in the new situation the God of Israel, through Christ, had extended his call to all the peoples, becoming the God of all peoples. In this way fidelity to the one God was achieved. Distinctive signs constituted by special rules and observances were no longer necessary since all were called, in their variety, to belong to the one People of God in the "Church of God" in Christ.

One thing was immediately clear to Paul in his new situation: the fundamental, foundational value of Christ and of the "word" that he was proclaiming. Paul knew not only that one does not become Christian by coercion but also that in the internal configuration of the new community the institutional element was inevitably linked to the living "word", to the proclamation of the living Christ through whom God opens himself to all peoples and unites them in one People of God. It is symptomatic that in the Acts of the Apostles Luke twice uses, also with regard to Paul, the phrase "to speak the word" (cf. Acts 4: 29, 31; 8: 25; 11: 19; 13: 46; 14: 25; 16: 6, 32) evidently with the intention of giving the maximum emphasis to the crucial importance of the "word" of proclamation. In practice this word is constituted by the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ in which the Scriptures found fulfilment. The Paschal Mystery, which brought the Apostle to the turning point in his life on the road to Damascus, obviously lies at the heart of his preaching (1 Cor 2: 2; 15: 14). This Mystery, proclaimed in the Word, is brought about in the Sacraments of Baptism and of the Eucharist and then becomes reality in Christian love. Paul's only goal in his work of evangelization is to establish the community of believers in Christ. This idea is inherent in the actual etymology of the term *ekklesia*, which Paul, and with him all Christendom, preferred to the term "synagogue":

not only because the former is originally more "secular" (deriving from the Greek practice of the political assembly which was not exactly religious), but also because it directly involves the more theological idea of a call *ab extra*, and is not, therefore, a mere gathering; believers are called by God, who gathers them in a community, his Church.

Along these lines we can also understand the original concept of the Church exclusively Pauline as the "Body of Christ". In this regard it is necessary to bear in mind the two dimensions of this concept. One is sociological in character, according to which the body is made up of its elements and would not exist without them. This interpretation appears in the Letter to the Romans and in the First Letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul uses an image that already existed in Roman sociology: he says that a people is like a body with its different parts, each of which has its own function but all together, even its smallest and seemingly most insignificant parts are necessary if this body is to be able to live and carry out its functions. The Apostle appropriately observes that in the Church there are many vocations: prophets, apostles, teachers, simple people, all are called to practise charity every day, all are necessary in order to build the living unity of this spiritual organism. The other interpretation refers to the actual Body of Christ. Paul holds that the Church is not only an organism but really becomes the Body of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, where we all receive his Body and really become his Body. Thus is brought about the spousal mystery that all become one body and one spirit in Christ. So it is that the reality goes far beyond any sociological image, expressing its real, profound essence, that is, the oneness of all the baptized in Christ, considered by the Apostle "one" in Christ, conformed to the Sacrament of his Body.

In saying this, Paul shows that he knows well and makes us all understand that the Church is not his and is not ours: the Church is the Body of Christ, it is a "Church of God", "God's field, God's building... God's temple" (1 Cor 3: 9, 16). This latter designation is particularly interesting because it attributes to a fabric of interpersonal relations a term that commonly served to mean a physical place, considered sacred. The relationship between church and temple therefore comes to assume two complementary dimensions: on the one hand the characteristic of separateness and purity that the sacred building deserved is applied to the ecclesial community, but on the other, the concept of a material space is also overcome, to transfer this quality to the reality of a living community of faith. If previously temples had been considered places of God's presence, it was now known and seen that God does not dwell in buildings made of stone but that the place of God's presence in the world is the living community of believers.

The description "People of God" would deserve a separate commentary. In Paul it is applied mainly to the People of the Old Testament and then to the Gentiles who were "the non-people" but also became People of God thanks to their insertion in Christ through the word and sacrament. And finally, one last nuance. In his Letter to Timothy Paul describes the Church as the "household of God" (1 Tm 3: 15); and this is a truly original definition because it refers to the Church as a community structure in which warm, family-type interpersonal relations are lived. The Apostle

helps us to understand ever more deeply the mystery of the Church in her different dimensions as an assembly of God in the world. This is the greatness of the Church and the greatness of our call; we are a temple of God in the world, a place in which God truly dwells, and at the same time we are a community, a family of God who is love. As a family and home of God, we must practise God's love in the world and thus, with the power that comes from faith, be a place and a sign of his presence. Let us pray the Lord to grant us to be increasingly his Church, his Body, the place where his love is present in this world of ours and in our history.

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### To special groups

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience including the members of the English and Welsh Bishops' Committee for Christian Unity and the representation of Government Officials from the Philippines. I also greet the Mill Hill Missionaries and school groups present from England and Scotland. May your visit to Rome strengthen your commitment to share God's word with others. Upon all of you, I invoke the Lord's Blessings of peace and joy.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, today we are celebrating the Feast of St Teresa of Avila. To you, dear *young people*, this great Saint witnesses that true love cannot be separated from the truth; she shows you, dear *sick people*, that the Cross of Christ is a mystery of redeeming love; for you, dear *newlyweds*, she is a model of faithfulness to God, who entrusts a special mission to each one.

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