



## The Holy See

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HOLY MASS OF SUFFRAGE FOR CARDINAL BERNARDIN GANTIN

***HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI***

*Altar of the Chair, St Peter's Basilica*

*Friday, 23 May 2008*

*Your Eminences,*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

"Prophecy, and say to them, "Thus says the Lord God: Behold, I will open your graves and raise you from your graves" (Ez 37: 12). These words from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel ring out full of hope. The liturgy has presented them anew for our meditation while we gather around the altar of the Lord to offer the Eucharist in suffrage for dear Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, who reached the end of his earthly pilgrimage on Tuesday, 13 May. The Lord proclaimed the restoration of Israel to his oppressed and discouraged People, exhausted by the suffering of exile. The grandiose scene evoked by the Prophet foretells the saving intervention of God in human history, an intervention that goes beyond what is humanly possible. When we feel weary, powerless and disheartened before the impending reality, when we are tempted to yield to disappointment and even desperation, when man is reduced to a heap of "dry bones" then is the moment of hope "against hope" (cf. Rom 4: 18). The Word of God strongly recalls the truth that nothing and no one, not even death, can resist the omnipotence of his faithful and merciful love. This is our faith, founded on the Resurrection of Christ; this is the comforting assurance that the Lord repeats to us even today: "And you shall know that I am the Lord, when I open your graves, and raise you from your graves.... And I will put my spirit within you and you shall live" (Ez 37: 13-14).

It is in this perspective of faith and hope in the Resurrection that we commemorate venerable Cardinal Bernardin Gantin, a faithful and devout servant of the Church for many years. It is difficult to summarize concisely the offices, tasks and pastoral responsibilities that in rapid succession marked the stages of his earthly life which ended at the age of 86, in Georges Pompidou Hospital,

Paris. Until the very end he desired to dedicate himself with loving willingness to the service of God and his brethren, abiding by the motto he had chosen on the occasion of his Episcopal Ordination: "In tuo sancto servitio" . His human and priestly personality was a marvellous synthesis of the characteristics of the African soul with those proper to the Christian spirit, of the African culture and identity and the Gospel values. He was the first African ecclesiastic to have eminently responsible roles in the Roman Curia and he always carried them out with his typical simple and humble style, whose secret is probably to be found in the wise words his mother chose to address to him when he became a Cardinal on 27 June 1977: "Never forget the little faraway village from which we come".

Many personal memories bind me to this Brother of ours, starting precisely from the moment when we received the Cardinal's hat from the hands of the Venerable Servant of God Paul VI, 31 years ago now. We worked together here in the Roman Curia and frequently came into contact, which enabled me to appreciate increasingly his prudent wisdom, as well as his solid faith and sincere attachment to Christ and to the Pope, his Vicar on earth. Fifty-seven years as a priest, 51 as a Bishop and 31 as a Cardinal: this sums up a life spent for the Church.

He was only 34 years old when he was ordained a Bishop in the Chapel of the College of Propaganda Fide. Three years later he became Archbishop of Cotonou, the Capital of his Country, Benin. He was the first African Metropolitan in the whole of Africa. He governed the Diocese with human and ascetic gifts which made him an authoritative Pastor, dedicated above all to the care of priests and the formation of catechists until, in 1971, Paul VI wanted Archbishop Gantin in Rome as Adjunct Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Two years later, the Pope appointed him Secretary of the same Dicastery and, at the end of 1975, chose him to be Vice-President of the Pontifical Commission for Justice and Peace; he subsequently became its President and in 1976 also took on the office of President of the Pontifical Council "*Cor Unum*". On 8 April 1984, the Servant of God John Paul II appointed him Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and President of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, which office he held until 25 June 10 years ago, when he retired for reasons of age.

Even a rapid glance at the biography of Cardinal Gantin who, in addition to the offices already mentioned, also made a contribution to various other Offices and Dicasteries of the Curia, reminds us of St Paul's assertion that we heard in the Second Reading: "For me to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Phil 1: 21). The Apostle interprets his life in the light of Christ's message, for Christ has made him totally "his own" (cf. Phil 3: 12). We can say that this friend and brother, to whom today we are paying our grateful homage, was also imbued with love for Christ; love that made him loving and ready to listen to and engage in dialogue with all, love that impelled him always to look, as he was in the habit of repeating, at the essential of the life that endures, without losing himself in the incidental which instead is fleeting; a love that made him perceive his role in the various Curial Offices as a service free from human ambition. It was this spirit which on 30 November 2002, when he reached the venerable age of 80, prompted him to submit his resignation as Dean of the College of Cardinals in order to return to his people in Benin where he resumed the

evangelizing activity he had begun on the day of his priestly ordination in Ouidah, on that long ago, 14 January 1951.

Dear brothers and sisters, yesterday we celebrated the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*. The Eucharistic theme returns in the Gospel passage proclaimed at this liturgical assembly. St John recalls that it is only in eating "the flesh" and drinking "the blood" of Christ that we can dwell in him and he in us. A constant love for the Eucharist, a source of personal holiness and sound ecclesial communion which finds its visible foundation in the Successor of Peter, came to the fore in Cardinal Gantin. And it was in this very same Basilica that in celebrating his last Holy Mass before leaving Rome he stressed the unity that the Eucharist creates in the Church. In his homily he cited the famous sentence of St Cyprian of Carthage, the African Bishop, which is engraved in the dome of St Peter's: "From here a single faith shines throughout the world; from here is born the unity of the priesthood". This could be the message we inherit from venerable Cardinal Gantin as his spiritual testament. May our prayers to the Virgin Mary, Queen of Africa, for whom he had a tender devotion, accompany him in the last stage of his earthly journey - he died on an important Marian day, 13 May, the Memorial of Our Lady of Fatima. May Our Lady deliver him into the merciful hands of the Heavenly Father and introduce him joyfully into the "House of the Lord", for which all of us are bound. In the encounter with Christ, may this Brother of ours implore the gift of peace for us and especially for his beloved Africa. So may it be!

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