



# The Holy See

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JOHN PAUL II

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Wednesday, 1 August 1979*

During the General Audience on 30 May last, speaking of how, in the course of history, to the various languages of the Upper Room on the day of Pentecost the individual Slav languages were added, I did not mention the Serbian language.

I intend to make up for this shortcoming today. As is known, the certain origin of Christianity in Serbia goes back to the ninth century, in concomitance with the evangelizing activity and the religious culture of St Cyril and St Methodius. However, it must be said that there were attempts to evangelize the Serbs as early as the sixth century. In a document of 1020 of the Emperor of Constantinople, Basilios II, the Serbian diocese of Ras is mentioned. Stefan Njemanja, founder of the mediaeval Serbian state, was baptized according to the Latin rite, and his son Stefan Prvovencani received the royal crown from Pope Honorius III in 1218. Since then, with ups and downs, the Serbian people has grown and developed, always firmly rooted in the Christian faith.

I thank the Lord heartily that, also in the Serbian language, as in all other Slav languages and in every language of the great human family, the Gospel can be proclaimed with the power of the same Holy Spirit, as was manifested at the beginning, on the day of the first Pentecost.

1. It is drawing near *the first anniversary* of the death of Pope *Paul VI*. God called him to Himself on 6 August of last year, the day on which recurs, every year, the solemnity of the *Transfiguration of the Lord*. This solemnity, a beautiful one, rich in content, was Pope Paul VI's last day on earth, the day of his death, the day of his passing from life here below to eternity. "Life is not taken away, but transformed"; thus we pray in the Preface of the Mass for the Dead. In fact, the very day of that great Pope's death, the day of the Transfiguration, became an eloquent sign of this truth.

We can reflect *on the meaning of the day* that God chose to conclude such a laborious life, so full

of dedication and sacrifice for the cause of Christ, the Gospel, and the Church. Was not Paul VI's pontificate perhaps a time of deep change promoted by the Holy Spirit throughout the whole activity of the Council convened by his predecessor? Did not Paul VI, who had inherited the work of the Council from John XXIII immediately after the first session in 1963, *find himself at the very centre of this change*, first as the Pope of *Vatican II* and then as the Pope of the implementation of Vatican II, in the most difficult period, immediately after the closing of the Council?

If we may reflect on the meaning of the day that God chose as the close of his pontifical ministry, various interpretations accumulate in one's mind. Recalling the feast of the Transfiguration that God willed as the concluding day of his faith on earth (cf. 2 Tim 4:7), it could be said that this day manifested, in a way, *the particular charism* and also *the particular labour* of his life. The charism of "transformation" and the labour of "transformation". It could be said, developing this thought, that the Lord, having called Pope Paul to Himself, on the solemnity of his Transfiguration, permitted him and us to know that *in the whole work of "transformation"*, of renewal of the Church in the spirit of Vatican II, *He is present* as He was in that marvellous event which took place on Mount Tabor and which prepared the Apostles for Christ's departure from this earth, first through the cross and then through the resurrection.

2. *The Pope of Vatican III!* The Pope of that deep change which was nothing but a revelation of the face of the Church, awaited by the man and the world of today! There is also here an analogy with the mystery of the Transfiguration of the Lord. In fact that same Christ whom the Apostles saw on Mount Tabor, was no other than the one they got to know every day, the one whose words they listened to and whose actions they saw. On Mount Tabor *the same Lord* was revealed to them, *but "transfigured"*. In this Transfiguration there was manifested and realized an image of their Master, which was unknown to them in all preceding circumstances, which was veiled before them.

John XXIII and, after him, Paul VI received from the Holy Spirit the charism of transformation, thanks to which *the figure of the Church*, known to everyone, showed itself to be the *same* and at the same time *different*. This "difference" does not mean breaking away from its own essence but, rather, deeper penetration of this essence. It is the revelation of that figure of the Church which was concealed in the preceding one. It was necessary that, through the "signs of the times", recognized by the Council, it should become manifested and visible, that it should become a principle of life and action in the times in which we live and in those to come.

The Pope, who left us last year on the solemnity of the Transfiguration of the Lord, received from the Holy Spirit the charism of his time. If, in fact, *the transformation of the Church must serve her renewal*, he who undertakes it must have a particularly strong awareness of the identity of the Church. Paul VI manifested the expression of this awareness particularly in his first encyclical "Ecclesiam Suam" and then, continually, by proclaiming the Creed of the People of God and issuing a series of executive norms concerning the deliberations of Vatican II, by inaugurating the activity of the Synod of Bishops, by taking pioneering steps in the direction of the union of Christians, by reforming the Roman Curia, by internationalizing the College of Cardinals, and so on.

In all this there was always revealed the same awareness of the Church, which *confirms* more deeply her own *identity in the capacity of renewal*, of meeting the transformations that spring from her vitality and at the same time from the authenticity of Tradition.

3. Allow me to recall in this context *at least some sentences of the so many declarations of the Pope who died a year ago*. In his first Encyclical, *Ecclesiam Suam*, which bears precisely the date of 6 August 1964, he expressed himself as follows: "On the one hand Christian life, such as the Church defends and promotes, must protect itself continually and strenuously from everything that can deceive it, profane it, suffocate it, as if it were trying to immunize itself from the contagion of error and evil. On the other hand Christian life must not only adapt itself to the forms of thought and customs that the temporal environment offers it and imposes on it, when they are compatible with the essential requirements of its religious and moral programme but it must also try to approach them, purify them, ennoble them, vivify them and sanctify them... The word, now so famous, of our venerated Predecessor John XXIII of happy memory, the word "aggiornamento" will always be kept in mind by us as a programmatic policy. We have confirmed it as the guiding criterion of the Ecumenical Council and we will recall it as a stimulus, as it were, for the ever renascent vitality of the Church, for her ever watchful capacity of studying the signs of the times, and for her ever youthful agility in testing everything and adopting what is good (cf. I Thess 5:21), always and everywhere" (n. 44 and 52).

And some years afterwards, he said in an Address: "Anyone who has understood something of Christian life cannot disregard its constant aspiration to renewal. Those who attribute to Christian life a stable, faithful and static character, see correctly, but they do not see everything. Certainly Christian life is anchored to facts and commitments which do not admit of change; such as baptismal regeneration, faith, membership of the Church, the animation of charity. It is by nature a permanent acquisition which must never be compromised, but it is, as we say, a life, and therefore a principle, a seed, which must develop, which demands growth, improvement and, in view of our natural frailty and certain incurable consequences of original sin, it demands atonement, reconstruction, renewal" (*ibid.*, *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, vol. IX, page 318).

4. *Pope Paul was a generous sower of God's word*. He taught through the solemn *documents* of his pontificate. He taught through the homilies he delivered on various occasions. He taught, finally, through his *catechesis* on Wednesdays which, from the time of his pontificate, has become part of the usual programme of the whole year. Thanks to this, he was constantly able "to proclaim the Gospel" (cf. *Evangelii Nuntiandi*). He considered the proclamation of the Gospel, following the example of the apostle Paul, his first duty and his greatest joy. These papal catechetical lessons became substantial nourishment for the whole Church, in a period that particularly needed it

Before the restlessness of the post-conciliar period, that extraordinary "charism of Transfiguration" proved to be a *blessing and gift for the Church*. Thus Paul VI became Teacher and Pastor of human intellects and consciences in questions that demanded the decision of his supreme authority. He served Christ and the Church with that admirable firmness and humility which

enabled him to look, with the eye of faith and hope, at *the future* of the work he was carrying out.

At the approach of the first anniversary of his death, we again commend his soul to the Christ of the Mount of Transfiguration, so that He may receive him in the glory of eternal Tabor.

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