



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 29 March 2006

The gift of "communion"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Through her apostolic ministry the Church, a community gathered by the Son of God who came in the flesh, will live on through the passing times, building up and nourishing the communion in Christ and in the Holy Spirit to which all are called and in which they can experience the salvation given by the Father.

The Twelve - as Pope Clement, the third Successor of Peter, said at the end of the first century - took pains, in fact, to prepare successors (*cf. I Clem 42: 4*), so that the mission entrusted to them would be continued after their death. The Church, organically structured under the guidance of her legitimate Pastors, has thus continued down the ages to live in the world as a mystery of communion in which, to a certain extent, the Trinitarian Communion itself is mirrored.

The Apostle Paul was already referring to this supreme Trinitarian source when he wished his Christians: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all" (II Cor 13: 14).

These words, probably echoed in the worship of the newborn Church, emphasize how the free gift of the Father in Jesus Christ is realized and expressed in the communion brought about by the Holy Spirit.

This interpretation, based on the close parallelism between the three genitives that the text establishes: ("the grace *of the* Lord Jesus Christ... the love *of* God... and the fellowship *of the* Holy Spirit), presents "fellowship" as a specific gift of the Spirit, the fruit of the love given by God the

Father and the grace offered by the Lord Jesus.

Moreover, the immediate context, marked by the insistence on fraternal communion, guides us to perceiving the "*koinonía*" of the Holy Spirit not only as "participation" in the divine life more or less singularly, each one individually, but also, logically, as the "communion" among believers that the Spirit himself kindles as his builder and principal agent (cf. Phil 2: 1).

One might say that grace, love and communion, referring respectively to Christ, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, are different aspects of the one divine action for our salvation. This action creates the Church and makes the Church - as St Cyprian said in the third century - "a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit" (*De Orat. Dom. 23; PL 4, 553, cit. in Lumen Gentium, n. 4*).

The idea of communion as participation in Trinitarian life is illuminated with special intensity in John's Gospel.

Here, the communion of love that binds the Son to the Father and to men and women is at the same time the model and source of the fraternal communion that must unite disciples with one another: "Love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15: 12; cf. 13: 34); "that they may all be one... even as we are one" (Jn 17: 21-22). Hence, it is communion of men and women with the Trinitarian God and communion of men and women with one another.

During the time of his earthly pilgrimage, the disciple can already share through communion with the Son in his divine life and that of the Father: "our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ" (I Jn 1: 3).

This life of fellowship with God and with one another is the proper goal of Gospel proclamation, the goal of conversion to Christianity: "That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us" (I Jn 1: 2).

Thus, this twofold communion with God and with one another is inseparable. Wherever communion with God, which is communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another is destroyed. And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Trinitarian God is not alive and true either, as we have heard.

Let us now go a step further. Communion, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, is nourished by the Eucharistic Bread (cf. I Cor 10: 16-17) and is expressed in fraternal relations in a sort of anticipation of the future world.

In the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes us, he unites us with himself, with his Father, with the Holy Spirit

and with one another. This network of unity that embraces the world is an anticipation of the future world in our time.

Precisely in this way, since it is an anticipation of the future world, communion is also a gift with very real consequences. It lifts us from our loneliness, from being closed in on ourselves, and makes us sharers in the love that unites us to God and to one another.

It is easy to understand how great this gift is if we only think of the fragmentation and conflicts that afflict relations between individuals, groups and entire peoples. And if the gift of unity in the Holy Spirit does not exist, the fragmentation of humanity is inevitable.

"Communion" is truly the Good News, the remedy given to us by the Lord to fight the loneliness that threatens everyone today, the precious gift that makes us feel welcomed and beloved by God, in the unity of his People gathered in the name of the Trinity; it is the light that makes the Church shine forth like a beacon raised among the peoples.

"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another" (1 Jn 1: 6ff.).

Thus, the Church, despite all the human frailties that mark her historical profile, is revealed as a marvellous creation of love, brought into being to bring Christ close to every man and every woman who truly desire to meet him, until the end of time. And in the Church, the Lord always remains our contemporary. Scripture is not something of the past. The Lord does not speak in the past but speaks in the present, he speaks to us today, he enlightens us, he shows us the way through life, he gives us communion and thus he prepares us and opens us to peace.

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To special groups

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, particularly those from Japan and the United States of America. I also extend a special welcome to the priests from the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College and to the members of the National Conference of Vicars for Religious. Upon all of you I invoke the Lord's Blessings of peace and joy.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *sick*, the *newly-weds* and the *young people*, especially the students of the "Andrea Bafile" High School in Collesapone dell'Aquila, as well as the young people of the Diocese of Caserta who are gathered here with their Pastor, Bishop Raffaele Nogaro. May the

Lenten Season, with its repeated invitations to conversion, lead you, dear *young people*, to a love for Christ and his Church that is ever more aware; may it increase in you, dear *sick people*, the awareness that the Crucified Lord sustains us in trial; may it help you, dear *newly-weds*, to make your family life a place of constant growth in faithful and generous love.

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