

VOTIVE MASS FOR THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*St Patrick's Cathedral, New York
Saturday, 19 April 2008*

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

With great affection in the Lord, I greet all of you, who represent the Bishops, priests and deacons, the men and women in consecrated life, and the seminarians of the United States. I thank Cardinal Egan for his warm welcome and the good wishes which he has expressed in your name as I begin the fourth year of my papal ministry. I am happy to celebrate this Mass with you, who have been chosen by the Lord, who have answered his call, and who devote your lives to the pursuit of holiness, the spread of the Gospel and the building up of the Church in faith, hope and love.

Gathered as we are in this historic cathedral, how can we not think of the countless men and women who have gone before us, who labored for the growth of the Church in the United States, and left us a lasting legacy of faith and good works? In today's first reading we saw how, in the power of the Holy Spirit, the Apostles went forth from the Upper Room to proclaim God's mighty works to people of every nation and tongue. In this country, the Church's mission has always involved drawing people "from every nation under heaven" (cf. *Acts* 2:5) into spiritual unity, and enriching the Body of Christ by the variety of their gifts. As we give thanks for these precious past blessings, and look to the challenges of the future, let us implore from God the grace of a new Pentecost for the Church in America. May tongues of fire, combining burning love of God and neighbor with zeal for the spread of Christ's Kingdom, descend on all present!

In this morning's second reading, Saint Paul reminds us that spiritual unity – the unity which reconciles and enriches diversity – has its origin and supreme model in the life of the triune God. As a communion of pure love and infinite freedom, the Blessed Trinity constantly brings forth new life in the work of creation and redemption. The Church, as "a people made one by the unity of the Father, the Son and the Spirit" (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4), is called to proclaim the gift of life, to serve life, and to promote a culture of life. Here in this cathedral, our thoughts turn naturally to the heroic witness to the Gospel of life borne by the late Cardinals Cooke and O'Connor. The proclamation of life, life in abundance, must be the heart of the new evangelization. For true life – our salvation – can only be found in the reconciliation, freedom and love which are God's gracious gift.

This is the message of hope we are called to proclaim and embody in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence, and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people's hearts. Saint Irenaeus, with great insight, understood that the command which Moses enjoined upon the people of Israel: "Choose life!" (*Dt* 30:19) was the

ultimate reason for our obedience to all God's commandments (cf. *Adv. Haer.* IV, 16, 2-5). Perhaps we have lost sight of this: in a society where the Church seems legalistic and "institutional" to many people, our most urgent challenge is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God's love.

I am particularly happy that we have gathered in Saint Patrick's Cathedral. Perhaps more than any other church in the United States, this place is known and loved as "a house of prayer for all peoples" (cf. *Is* 56:7; *Mk* 11:17). Each day thousands of men, women and children enter its doors and find peace within its walls. Archbishop John Hughes, who – as Cardinal Egan has reminded us – was responsible for building this venerable edifice, wished it to rise in pure Gothic style. He wanted this cathedral to remind the young Church in America of the great spiritual tradition to which it was heir, and to inspire it to bring the best of that heritage to the building up of Christ's body in this land. I would like to draw your attention to a few aspects of this beautiful structure which I think can serve as a starting point for a reflection on our particular vocations within the unity of the Mystical Body.

The first has to do with the stained glass windows, which flood the interior with mystic light. From the outside, those windows are dark, heavy, even dreary. But once one enters the church, they suddenly come alive; reflecting the light passing through them, they reveal all their splendor. Many writers – here in America we can think of Nathaniel Hawthorne – have used the image of stained glass to illustrate the mystery of the Church herself. It is only from the inside, from the experience of faith and ecclesial life, that we see the Church as she truly is: flooded with grace, resplendent in beauty, adorned by the manifold gifts of the Spirit. It follows that we, who live the life of grace within the Church's communion, are called to draw all people into this mystery of light.

This is no easy task in a world which can tend to look at the Church, like those stained glass windows, "from the outside": a world which deeply senses a need for spirituality, yet finds it difficult to "enter into" the mystery of the Church. Even for those of us within, the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the Church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members. It can be dimmed too, by the obstacles encountered in a society which sometimes seems to have forgotten God and to resent even the most elementary demands of Christian morality. You, who have devoted your lives to bearing witness to the love of Christ and the building up of his Body, know from your daily contact with the world around us how tempting it is at times to give way to frustration, disappointment and even pessimism about the future. In a word, it is not always easy to see the light of the Spirit all about us, the splendor of the Risen Lord illuminating our lives and instilling renewed hope in his victory over the world (cf. *Jn* 16:33).

Yet the word of God reminds us that, in faith, we see the heavens opened, and the grace of the Holy Spirit lighting up the Church and bringing sure hope to our world. "O Lord, my God," the Psalmist sings, "when you send forth your spirit, they are created, and you renew the face of the earth" (*Ps* 104:30). These words evoke the first creation, when the Spirit of God hovered over the deep (cf. *Gen* 1:2). And they look forward to the new

creation, at Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descended upon the Apostles and established the Church as the first fruits of a redeemed humanity (cf. *Jn* 20:22-23). These words summon us to ever deeper faith in God's infinite power to transform every human situation, to create life from death, and to light up even the darkest night. And they make us think of another magnificent phrase of Saint Irenaeus: "where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and all grace" (*Adv. Haer.* III, 24, 1).

This leads me to a further reflection about the architecture of this church. Like all Gothic cathedrals, it is a highly complex structure, whose exact and harmonious proportions symbolize the unity of God's creation. Medieval artists often portrayed Christ, the creative Word of God, as a heavenly "geometer", compass in hand, who orders the cosmos with infinite wisdom and purpose. Does this not bring to mind our need to see all things with the eyes of faith, and thus to grasp them in their truest perspective, in the unity of God's eternal plan? This requires, as we know, constant conversion, and a commitment to acquiring "a fresh, spiritual way of thinking" (cf. *Eph* 4:23). It also calls for the cultivation of those virtues which enable each of us to grow in holiness and to bear spiritual fruit within our particular state of life. Is not this ongoing "intellectual" conversion as necessary as "moral" conversion for our own growth in faith, our discernment of the signs of the times, and our personal contribution to the Church's life and mission?

For all of us, I think, one of the great disappointments which followed the Second Vatican Council, with its call for a greater engagement in the Church's mission to the world, has been the experience of division between different groups, different generations, different members of the same religious family. We can only move forward if we turn our gaze together to Christ! In the light of faith, we will then discover the wisdom and strength needed to open ourselves to points of view which may not necessarily conform to our own ideas or assumptions. Thus we can value the perspectives of others, be they younger or older than ourselves, and ultimately hear "what the Spirit is saying" to us and to the Church (cf. *Rev* 2:7). In this way, we will move together towards that true spiritual renewal desired by the Council, a renewal which can only strengthen the Church in that holiness and unity indispensable for the effective proclamation of the Gospel in today's world.

Was not this unity of vision and purpose – rooted in faith and a spirit of constant conversion and self-sacrifice – the secret of the impressive growth of the Church in this country? We need but think of the remarkable accomplishment of that exemplary American priest, the Venerable Michael McGivney, whose vision and zeal led to the establishment of the Knights of Columbus, or of the legacy of the generations of religious and priests who quietly devoted their lives to serving the People of God in countless schools, hospitals and parishes.

Here, within the context of our need for the perspective given by faith, and for unity and cooperation in the work of building up the Church, I would like say a word about the sexual abuse that has caused so much suffering. I have already had occasion to speak of

this, and of the resulting damage to the community of the faithful. Here I simply wish to assure you, dear priests and religious, of my spiritual closeness as you strive to respond with Christian hope to the continuing challenges that this situation presents. I join you in praying that this will be a time of purification for each and every particular Church and religious community, and a time for healing. And I also encourage you to cooperate with your Bishops who continue to work effectively to resolve this issue. May our Lord Jesus Christ grant the Church in America a renewed sense of unity and purpose, as all – Bishops, clergy, religious and laity – move forward in hope, in love for the truth and for one another.

Dear friends, these considerations lead me to a final observation about this great cathedral in which we find ourselves. The unity of a Gothic cathedral, we know, is not the static unity of a classical temple, but a unity born of the dynamic tension of diverse forces which impel the architecture upward, pointing it to heaven. Here too, we can see a symbol of the Church's unity, which is the unity – as Saint Paul has told us – of a living body composed of many different members, each with its own role and purpose. Here too we see our need to acknowledge and reverence the gifts of each and every member of the body as “manifestations of the Spirit given for the good of all” (*1 Cor* 12:7). Certainly within the Church's divinely-willed structure there is a distinction to be made between hierarchical and charismatic gifts (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 4). Yet the very variety and richness of the graces bestowed by the Spirit invite us constantly to discern how these gifts are to be rightly ordered in the service of the Church's mission. You, dear priests, by sacramental ordination have been configured to Christ, the Head of the Body. You, dear deacons, have been ordained for the service of that Body. You, dear men and women religious, both contemplative and apostolic, have devoted your lives to following the divine Master in generous love and complete devotion to his Gospel. All of you, who fill this cathedral today, as well as your retired, elderly and infirm brothers and sisters, who unite their prayers and sacrifices to your labors, are called to be forces of unity within Christ's Body. By your personal witness, and your fidelity to the ministry or apostolate entrusted to you, you prepare a path for the Spirit. For the Spirit never ceases to pour out his abundant gifts, to awaken new vocations and missions, and to guide the Church, as our Lord promised in this morning's Gospel, into the fullness of truth (cf. *Jn* 16:13).

So let us lift our gaze upward! And with great humility and confidence, let us ask the Spirit to enable us each day to grow in the holiness that will make us living stones in the temple which he is even now raising up in the midst of our world. If we are to be true forces of unity, let us be the first to seek inner reconciliation through penance. Let us forgive the wrongs we have suffered and put aside all anger and contention. Let us be the first to demonstrate the humility and purity of heart which are required to approach the splendor of God's truth. In fidelity to the deposit of faith entrusted to the Apostles (cf. *1 Tim* 6:20), let us be joyful witnesses of the transforming power of the Gospel!

Dear brothers and sisters, in the finest traditions of the Church in this country, may you also be the first friend of the poor, the homeless, the stranger, the sick and all who suffer. Act as beacons of hope, casting the light of Christ upon the world, and encouraging

young people to discover the beauty of a life given completely to the Lord and his Church. I make this plea in a particular way to the many seminarians and young religious present. All of you have a special place in my heart. Never forget that you are called to carry on, with all the enthusiasm and joy that the Spirit has given you, a work that others have begun, a legacy that one day you too will have to pass on to a new generation. Work generously and joyfully, for he whom you serve is the Lord!

The spires of Saint Patrick's Cathedral are dwarfed by the skyscrapers of the Manhattan skyline, yet in the heart of this busy metropolis, they are a vivid reminder of the constant yearning of the human spirit to rise to God. As we celebrate this Eucharist, let us thank the Lord for allowing us to know him in the communion of the Church, to cooperate in building up his Mystical Body, and in bringing his saving word as good news to the men and women of our time. And when we leave this great church, let us go forth as heralds of hope in the midst of this city, and all those places where God's grace has placed us. In this way, the Church in America will know a new springtime in the Spirit, and point the way to that other, greater city, the new Jerusalem, whose light is the Lamb (*Rev 21:23*). For there God is even now preparing for all people a banquet of unending joy and life. Amen.

Words spoken spontaneously by the Holy Father at the conclusion of the Holy Mass:

At this moment I can only thank you for your love of the Church and Our Lord, and for the love which you show to the poor Successor of Saint Peter. I will try to do all that is possible to be a worthy successor of the great Apostle, who also was a man with faults and sins, but remained in the end the rock for the Church. And so I too, with all my spiritual poverty, can be for this time, in virtue of the Lord's grace, the Successor of Peter.

It is also your prayers and your love which give me the certainty that the Lord will help me in this my ministry. I am therefore deeply grateful for your love and for your prayers. My response now for all that you have given to me during this visit is my blessing, which I impart to you at the conclusion of this beautiful Celebration.