

**The Address of the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI,
to the Roman Curia
on the occasion of their Christmas Greetings**

Sala Clementina, Vatican City, Monday 22nd December 2008



Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and Presbyterate,
Dear brothers and sisters!

The birthday of the Lord is at hand. Every family feels the desire to be reunited, to savour the unique and unrepeatable atmosphere which this feast is capable of creating. Even the family of the Roman Curia also finds itself here, this morning, in accordance with an appealing custom, thanks to which we have the joy of meeting and exchanging greetings in this particular spiritual season. I offer my sincere greetings to each one of you, full of recognition for the valuable collaboration offered to the ministry of the Successor of Peter. I thank most sincerely the Cardinal Dean, Angelo Sodano, who offered the good wishes of everyone present, and also of all who work in the different offices, including the Papal Representations.

Earlier I referred to the special atmosphere of Christmas. I like to think that this is, as it were, an extension of that mysterious joy, of that intimate elation, which surround the Holy Family, the Angels and the shepherds of Bethlehem on the night Jesus was born.

I would describe that as “the atmosphere of grace”, having in mind the words of St. Paul in the letter to Titus: “*The grace of God our Saviour has appeared to all mankind.*” (Ti 2:11). The Apostle declares that the grace of God has appeared to the “whole of humanity”: I would add that in these words the mission of the Church is disclosed, and in particular that of the Successor of Peter and his collaborators, to make their contribution so that the grace of God, of the Redeemer, might become ever more visible to all, and that everyone might attain salvation.



The year just concluding has been rich by way of retrospective glances on important moments in the recent history of the Church, but also rich in events which carry within them pointers to direct our journey towards the future. Fifty years ago Pope Pius XII died, fifty years ago John XXIII was elected Pope, Forty years have passed since the publication of the Encyclical

Humanae Vitae, and thirty years since the death of its author, Pope Paul VI. The message from such events has been recorded and reflected upon in many ways in the course of the year, and I do not intend to delay again at this time. This backward glance through memory, however, takes us even further back, beyond the events of the last century, and precisely in this way has pointed us towards the future: on the evening of the 28th June, in the presence of the ecumenical Patriarch, Bartholomew I of Constantinople, and of the representatives of many other Churches and ecclesial Communities, we were able to inaugurate in the Basilica of St. Paul's outside the Walls the Year of St. Paul, recalling the birth of the Apostle of the gentiles two thousand years ago. For us, Paul is not a figure of the past. By means of his letters he continues to speak to us until the present day. And whoever enters into dialogue with him, find himself impelled towards Christ crucified and risen. The Pauline Year is a year of pilgrimage, not only in the sense of an external journey towards places associated with St. Paul, but also, and above all, in the sense of a pilgrimage of the heart, together with Paul towards Jesus Christ. In a word, Paul teaches us that the Church is the Body of Christ, that the Head and the Body are inseparable and that there can be no love for Christ without love for his Church and her living community.



Three specific events, during this year now coming to a close, come particularly to mind.

First, there was the World Youth Day in Australia, a great celebration of faith, which united more than 200,000 young people from every part of the world, and brought them close not only exteriorly – in the geographical sense – but, thanks to the shared joy of being Christians, it also brought them closer in an interior fashion.

Apart from this, there were journeys, one to the United States, the other to France, in which the Church made herself visible before the world and for the world as a spiritual force which points the pathways to life and, by the witness

of faith, brings light to the world. Those indeed were days which radiated brightness; they radiated confidence in the value of life and in the commitment to good.

Lastly, there is the memory of the Synod of Bishops: Pastors from all over the world were gathered around the Word of God, which was raised up in their midst; around the Word of God, whose supreme manifestation is found in Sacred Scripture. That which in our daily living we have paid attention to, we have cultivated anew in all its sublimity: the fact that God speaks and answers our questions. The fact that he, albeit in human language, speaks in person and we are able to hear him, and through hearing, come to know and understand him. The fact that he enters into our lives and we can go out of our lives and enter into the vastness of his mercy. So we have been newly made aware that God in his Word addresses himself to each one of us, speaks to the heart of each one of us: if our heart is disposed and our interior hearing open, then each individual can discover the word addressed appropriately to him. But precisely if we hear God speaking in such a personal manner to each one of us, we understand also that his Word is present so that we can draw closer to each other; so that we can discover the path out of what is solely personal. This Word has constructed a common history and wishes continually to do so. Thus we are freshly made aware that – precisely because the Word is so personal – we can understand it in correct and total fashion only in the “we” of the community established by God: always full conscious that we can never completely exhaust it, that it has something new to say to every generation. We understood for sure that the biblical writings were composed at determined periods and therefore constitute in this sense something of a book from a past age. But we have seen that their message does not stay in the past nor can it be confined in it: God, in truth, always speaks to the present, and we have heard the Bible in a manner that is full only when we have discovered this “present” of God, which we call now.

Finally, it was important to experience that there is a Pentecost in the Church today, i.e. that it speaks in many tongues and this not only in an exterior fashion in the sense of there being represented in it all the major languages of the world, but it a still much more profound sense: in the Church are found all the different experiences of God and of the world, the richness of cultures, and only thus there appears the vastness of human existence and, departing from it, the vastness of the Word of God. Yet we have also learned that Pentecost is still “in via”, on the way, and so far incomplete: still to be found are a multitude of languages which yet await the Word of God found in the Bible. Also moving were the numerous witnesses of faithful lay people from every part of the world, who not only live the Word of God, but also suffer because of it. One precious contribution was the address of the Rabbi on the Sacred Scriptures of Israel, which in fact are our Scriptures as well. A significant moment for the Synod, rather for the journey of the Church as a whole, took place with when the Patriarch Bartholomew, in the light of the orthodox tradition, opened up for us a way to the Word of God with a penetrating analysis. Let us now hope that the experiences and attainments of the Synod will have an effective influence on the life of the Church, on a personal relationship with the Sacred Scriptures, on their interpretation in the Liturgy and catechesis, as also in scientific research, lest the Bible remain a Word of

the past, but that its vitality and actuality may be read and revealed in all its vast and significant dimensions.

The themes of the actuality of the Word of God, of God himself in this very hour of history, also figured in the pastoral journeys this year: their true meaning can only be to serve this actuality. On such occasions when the Church is perceived publicly, alongside the faith arises at least the question about God. This public manifestation of the faith brings along all those who seek to understand the present time and the forces operative in it. In particular, the phenomenon of the World Youth Days is always the subject of analysis, in which there the attempt is made to understand this kind of event, so to speak, of youth culture. Australia had never seen before so many people from every continent as during the World Youth Day, not even at the time of the Olympics. And if beforehand the fear existed that the presence of such a mass of young people could bring with it some risk to public order, paralysis of traffic, upset to daily routine, provocation to violence and the occasion for drugs, all of this was shown to be without foundation. It was a feast of joy – a joy which finally embraced the reluctant: in the final analysis, no one felt threatened. The days became a celebration for everyone, rather only then did we take full account of what a feast was – an occasion in which everyone is, as it were, outside of themselves, beyond their very selves, and in truth with themselves and with the others. What and wherefore was the nature of this success of the World Youth Day? What were the forces which drove it? Popular analyses tend to look on these days as a variant of modern youth culture, like a kind of rock festival, modified in church wise, with the Pope like a star. With or without faith, this festival is at root always the same thing, and so the question of God can be sidelined. There are also Catholic voices which move in this direction, seeing it all as a great spectacle, even beautiful, with having little significance for the question of faith and the presence of the gospel in our time. They could be moments of festive ecstasy, which however when all is said and done leave things as they were, having no bearing in any depth on life itself.

With this, however, the peculiar nature of such days and the particular character of their joy, their creative force for communion, find no explanation. Above all, it is important to take account of the fact that the World Youth Days do not consist of one single week in which they become public and visible to the world. There is both a long external and internal journey leading to them. The Cross, accompanied by the image of the Mother of the Lord, goes on pilgrimage in different lands. Faith, in its own way, feels the need to see and to touch. The encounter with the cross, which is touched and carried, becomes an interior encounter with Him who died on the cross for us. The encounter with the Cross arouses in the depths of youth the memory of that God who willed to become man and suffer with us. And we see the woman whom He has given us as Mother. The solemn Youth Days are only the culmination of a long journey, along which they meet one another and together they go to Christ. In Australia, not fortuitously, the long Way of the Cross through the city became the culminating event of those days. It recapitulated once more all that had taken place in the preceding years and pointed to the One who unites us all together: the God who loves us to the extent of the Cross. And so even the Pope is not the star around which everything happens. He is simply and

solely Vicar. He defers to Another who stands in our midst. Finally, the solemn liturgy is the centre of everything, because there takes place in it what we are unable to accomplish and of which, however, we are always in expectation. He is present. He enters into our midst. Heaven is rent, and this makes the earth glow. It is this which makes life joyful and open and unites one to another in a joy which cannot be compared to the joy of a rock festival. Friedrich Nietzsche said on one occasion: "The ability is not to be found in organising a festival, but in finding people who can enjoy it." According to Scripture, joy is the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Gal 5:22): this fruit was abundantly visible during those days in Sydney. Just as a long journey preceded the World Day of Youth, so successive journeys flowed from it. Friendships were forged which encouraged a single, diverse style of life and supported it from within. The great Days have, not as their ultimate reason, the intention to create such friendships and in this way they bring about areas of life in faith, which are simultaneously arenas of hope and of a charity experienced.

Joy as the fruit of the Holy Spirit – with this we come to the central theme of Sydney which, precisely, was the Holy Spirit. In this retrospective glance I would like to refer, by way of synthesis, to the orientation implicit in such a theme. Keeping before our eyes the witness of Scripture and of Tradition, four dimensions of the theme "Holy Spirit" are easily recognised.

1. The first is the affirmation which we find at the beginning of the account of creation: there we hear of the Creator Spirit which hovers over the waters, creates the world and constantly renews it. Faith in the Creator Spirit is an essential part of the Christian *Credo*. The fact that matter carries within itself a mathematical structure, is full of spirit, and forms the foundation on which the modern natural sciences rest. Only because it is structured in an intelligent fashion is our spirit competent to interpret it and to actively refashion it. Because this intelligent structure proceeds from the same Spirit Creator which has given us the spirit to us, it brings with it a task and a responsibility. The ultimate foundation for our responsibility towards the earth rests on our beliefs about creation. The earth is not simply our possession which we can plunder according to our interests and desires. It is rather a gift of the Creator who has designed its intrinsic laws and with this has given us the basic directions for us to adhere as stewards of his creation. The fact that the earth, the cosmos, mirror the Creator Spirit, clearly means that their rational structures which, transcending the mathematical order, become almost palpable in our experience, bear within themselves an ethical orientation. The Spirit which has formed them, is more than mathematics, he is the Good in person, using the language of creation, and points us to the way of right living.

Since faith in the Creator is an essential part of the Christian *Credo*, the Church cannot and should not confine itself to passing on the message of salvation alone. It has a responsibility for the created order and ought to make this responsibility prevail, even in public. And in so doing, it ought to safeguard not only the earth, water, and air as gifts of creation, belonging to everyone. It ought also to protect man against the destruction of himself. What is necessary is a kind of ecology of man, understood in the correct sense.

When the Church speaks of the nature of the human being as man and woman and asks that this order of creation be respected, it is not the result of an outdated metaphysic. It is a question here of faith in the Creator and of listening to the language of creation, the devaluation of which leads to the self-destruction of man and therefore to the destruction of the same work of God. That which is often expressed and understood by the term “*gender*”, results finally in the self-emancipation of man from creation and from the Creator. Man wishes to act alone and to dispose ever and exclusively of that alone which concerns him. But in this way he is living contrary to the truth, he is living contrary to the Spirit Creator. The tropical forests are deserving, yes, of our protection, but man merits no less than the creature, in which there is written a message which does not mean a contradiction of our liberty, but its condition. The great Scholastic theologians have characterised matrimony, the life-long bond between man and woman, as a sacrament of creation, instituted by the Creator himself and which Christ – without modifying the message of creation – has incorporated into the history of his covenant with mankind. This forms part of the message that the Church must recover the witness in favour of the Spirit Creator present in nature in its entirety and in a particular way in the nature of man, created in the image of God. Beginning from this perspective, it would be beneficial to read again the Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*: the intention of Pope Paul VI was to defend love against sexuality as a consumer entity, the future as opposed to the exclusive pretext of the present, and the nature of man against its manipulation.

2. Finally, I add a few more remarks on other aspects of pneumatology. If the creator Spirit is manifest above all in the silent grandeur of the universe, in its intelligent structure, faith, beyond this, tells us something unexpected, that this Spirit speaks, as it were, also in human language, has entered into history and, as a force which shapes history, is also a Spirit who speaks, rather he is the Word which comes to meet us in the writings of the Old and New Testament. What this might mean for us, Saint Ambrose has marvellously expressed in one of his letters: “Even now, when I read the divine Scriptures, God walks in paradise” (Ep.49:3). By reading the Scriptures we also today can, so to speak, wander in the garden of Paradise and meet the God who walks there: between the theme of the World Youth Day in Australia and the theme for the Synod of Bishops exists a deep interior bond. The two themes “Holy Spirit” and “Word of God” go together. Reading Scripture we learn moreover that Christ and the Holy Spirit are inseparable from one another. If Paul, in an arresting synthesis, states: “The Lord is the Spirit” (2 Cor3:17), not only does there appear in essence, the Trinitarian unity between the Son and the Holy Spirit, but also their unity where the story of salvation is concerned: in the passion and resurrection of Christ the veils of the merely literal sense are torn and the presence of God who is speaking becomes visible. By reading the Scripture together with Christ, we come to sense in human words the voice of the Holy Spirit and we discover the unity of the Bible.

3. With this we have arrived at the third dimension of pneumatology which consists, precisely, in the inseparability of Christ and the Holy Spirit. In rather beautiful fashion this is shown in Saint John’s account of the first appearance of the risen Lord to his disciples: the Lord breathes on his disciples and in this way gives them the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit is the

breath of Christ. And just as the breath of God in the morning of creation transformed the dust of the earth into a living being, likewise the breath of Christ gathers us into ontological communion with the Son, makes us a new creation. For this reason it is the Holy Spirit who makes us say with the Son: “Abba, Father” (Jn20:22; Rom8:15).

4. As the fourth dimension, there arises spontaneously the connection between Spirit and Church. Paul, in *1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12*, explains the Church as the Body of Christ and in this way as an organism of the Holy Spirit, in which the gifts of the Holy Spirit mould individual members into a single living entity. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Body of Christ. By belonging to this body we find our role, we live as one for another in dependence on one another, living in the depths of Him who lived and suffered for us all, and by means of the Holy Spirit draws us to himself in the unity of all the sons of God. “Do you also wish to live from the Spirit of Christ? Then be in the body of Christ.”, says Augustine in this regard. (Tr, in Jo.26:13)

And so with the theme “Holy Spirit” which guided the days in Australia and, in a more hidden fashion, also the week of the Synod, the whole extent of the Christian faith becomes clear, a breadth which from the responsibility for the created order and for the existence of man in harmony with creation leads, through the themes of Scripture and the history of salvation, to Christ and beyond to the living community of the Church, in its ordinances and responsibilities and also in its vastness and freedom, which finds expression both in the multiplicity of charisms and in the Pentecostal image of the multitude of languages and cultures.

Joy is an integral part of the feast. A feast can be organised, joy no. It can only be offered as a gift; and, in fact, has been given to us in abundance: it is by this that we are known. Just as Paul described joy as the fruit of the Holy Spirit, so likewise has John in his gospel connected closely the Spirit and joy. The Holy Spirit gives us joy. And he is joy. Joy is the gift in which all the other gifts are included. It is the expression of happiness, of being in harmony with ourselves, that which can only come from being in harmony with God and with his creation. It belongs to the nature of joy to be radiant, it must communicate itself. The missionary spirit of the Church is none other than the impulse to communicate the joy which has been given. May it always be alive in us and so be radiated on the world in the midst of its tribulations: such is my wish at the close of this year. Along with a lively thanks for all your labours and endeavours, I wish you all this joy which comes from God and may it also be given to us abundantly in the New Year.

I commend these wishes to the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of Divine Grace, requesting that we can live the Christmas festival in joy and in the peace of the Lord. With these sentiments I sincerely impart to you and the great family of the Roman Curia the Apostolic Blessing.



**This translation has been provided by
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(An official English translation is not yet available.)**