

First Message of Pope Benedict XVI
at the end of the Eucharistic Concelebration
with the Cardinal electors in the Sistine Chapel (April 20, 2005)



"Grace and peace in abundance to all of you! In my soul there are two contrasting sentiments in these hours. On the one hand, a sense of inadequacy and human turmoil for the responsibility entrusted to me yesterday as the Successor of the Apostle Peter in this See of Rome, with regard to the Universal Church. On the other hand I sense within me profound gratitude to God Who — as the liturgy makes us sing — does not abandon His flock, but leads

it throughout time, under the guidance of those whom He has chosen as vicars of His Son, and made pastors.

"Dear Ones, this intimate recognition for a gift of divine mercy prevails in my heart in spite of everything. I consider this a grace obtained for me by my venerated predecessor, John Paul II. It seems I can feel his strong hand squeezing mine; I seem to see his smiling eyes and listen to his words, addressed to me especially at this moment: 'Do not be afraid!'

"The death of the Holy Father John Paul II, and the days which followed, were for the Church and for the entire world an extraordinary time of grace. The great pain for his death and the void that it left in all of us were tempered by the action of the Risen Christ, which showed itself during long days in the choral wave of faith, love and spiritual solidarity, culminating in his solemn funeral.

"We can say it: the funeral of John Paul II was a truly extraordinary experience in which was perceived in some way the power of God Who, through His Church, wishes to form a great family of all peoples, through the unifying force of Truth and Love. In the hour of death, conformed to his Master and Lord, John Paul II crowned his long and fruitful pontificate, confirming the Christian people in faith, gathering them around him and making the entire human family feel more united.

"How can one not feel sustained by this witness? How can one not feel the encouragement that comes from this event of grace?

"Surprising every prevision I had, Divine Providence, through the will of the venerable Cardinal Fathers, called me to succeed this great Pope. I have been thinking in these hours about what happened in the region of Caesarea of Philippi two thousand years ago: I seem to hear the words of Peter: 'You are Christ, the Son of the living God,' and the solemn affirmation of the Lord: 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church ... I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven'.

"You are Christ! You are Peter! It seems I am reliving this very Gospel scene; I, the Successor of Peter, repeat with trepidation the anxious words of the fisherman from

Galilee and I listen again with intimate emotion to the reassuring promise of the divine Master. If the weight of the responsibility that now lies on my poor shoulders is enormous, the divine power on which I can count is surely immeasurable: 'You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church'. Electing me as the Bishop of Rome, the Lord wanted me as his Vicar, he wished me to be the 'rock' upon which everyone may rest with confidence. I ask him to make up for the poverty of my strength, that I may be a courageous and faithful pastor of His flock, always docile to the inspirations of His Spirit.

"I undertake this special ministry, the 'Petrine' ministry at the service of the Universal Church, with humble abandon to the hands of the Providence of God. And it is to Christ in the first place that I renew my total and trustworthy adhesion: 'In Te, Domine, speravi; non confundar in aeternum!'

"To you, Lord Cardinals, with a grateful soul for the trust shown me, I ask you to sustain me with prayer and with constant, active and wise collaboration. I also ask my brothers in the episcopacy to be close to me in prayer and counsel so that I may truly be the 'Servus servorum Dei' (Servant of the servants of God). As Peter and the other Apostles were, through the will of the Lord, one apostolic college, in the same way the Successor of Peter and the Bishops, successors of the Apostles - and the Council forcefully repeated this - must be closely united among themselves. This collegial communion, even in the diversity of roles and functions of the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops, is at the service of the Church and the unity of faith, from which depend in a notable measure the effectiveness of the evangelizing action of the contemporary world. Thus, this path, upon which my venerated predecessors went forward, I too intend to follow, concerned solely with proclaiming to the world the living presence of Christ.

"Before my eyes is, in particular, the witness of Pope John Paul II. He leaves us a Church that is more courageous, freer, younger. A Church that, according to his teaching and example, looks with serenity to the past and is not afraid of the future. With the Great Jubilee the Church was introduced into the new millennium carrying in her hands the Gospel, applied to the world through the authoritative re-reading of Vatican Council II. Pope John Paul II justly indicated the Council as a 'compass' with which to orient ourselves in the vast ocean of the third millennium. Also in his spiritual testament he noted: ' I am convinced that for a very long time the new generations will draw upon the riches that this council of the 20th century gave us'.

"I too, as I start in the service that is proper to the Successor of Peter, wish to affirm with force my decided will to pursue the commitment to enact Vatican Council II, in the wake of my predecessors and in faithful continuity with the millennia-old tradition of the Church. Precisely this year is the 40th anniversary of the conclusion of this conciliar assembly (December 8, 1965). With the passing of time, the conciliar documents have not lost their timeliness; their teachings have shown themselves to be especially pertinent to the new exigencies of the Church and the present globalized society.

"In a very significant way, my pontificate starts as the Church is living the special year dedicated to the Eucharist. How can I not see in this providential coincidence an element that must mark the ministry to which I have been called? The Eucharist, the heart of Christian life and the source of the evangelizing mission of the Church, cannot but be the permanent center and the source of the petrine service entrusted to me.

"The Eucharist makes the Risen Christ constantly present, Christ Who continues to give Himself to us, calling us to participate in the banquet of His Body and His Blood. From this full communion with Him comes every other element of the life of the Church, in the first place the communion among the faithful, the commitment to proclaim and give witness to the Gospel, the ardor of charity towards all, especially towards the poor and the smallest.

"In this year, therefore, the Solemnity of Corpus Christ must be celebrated in a particularly special way. The Eucharist will be at the center, in August, of World Youth Day in Cologne and, in October, of the ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops which will take place on the theme 'The Eucharist, Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church.' I ask everyone to intensify in coming months love and devotion to the Eucharistic Jesus and to express in a courageous and clear way the real presence of the Lord, above all through the solemnity and the correctness of the celebrations.

"I ask this in a special way of priests, about whom I am thinking in this moment with great affection. The priestly ministry was born in the Cenacle, together with the Eucharist, as my venerated predecessor John Paul II underlined so many times. 'The priestly life must have in a special way a 'Eucharistic form', he wrote in his last Letter for Holy Thursday. The devout daily celebration of Holy Mass, the center of the life and mission of every priest, contributes to this end.

"Nourished and sustained by the Eucharist, Catholics cannot but feel stimulated to tend towards that full unity for which Christ hoped in the Cenacle. Peter's Successor knows that he must take on this supreme desire of the Divine Master in a particularly special way. To him, indeed, has been entrusted the duty of strengthening his brethren.

"Thus, in full awareness and at the beginning of his ministry in the Church of Rome that Peter bathed with his blood, the current Successor assumes as his primary commitment that of working tirelessly towards the reconstitution of the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers. This is his ambition, this is his compelling duty. He is aware that to do so, expressions of good feelings are not enough. Concrete gestures are required to penetrate souls and move consciences, encouraging everyone to that interior conversion which is the basis for all progress on the road of ecumenism.

"Theological dialogue is necessary. A profound examination of the historical reasons behind past choices is also indispensable. But even more urgent is that 'purification of memory,' which was so often evoked by John Paul II, and which alone can dispose souls to welcome the full truth of Christ. It is before Him, supreme Judge of all living things, that each of us must stand, in the awareness that one day we must explain to Him what we did and what we did not do for the great good that is the full and visible unity of all His disciples.

"The current Successor of Peter feels himself to be personally implicated in this question and is disposed to do all in his power to promote the fundamental cause of ecumenism. In the wake of his predecessors, he is fully determined to cultivate any initiative that may seem appropriate to promote contact and agreement with representatives from the various Churches and ecclesial communities. Indeed, on this occasion too, he sends them his most cordial greetings in Christ, the one Lord of all.

"In this moment, I go back in my memory to the unforgettable experience we all underwent with the death and the funeral of the lamented John Paul II. Around his mortal remains, lying on the bare earth, leaders of nations gathered, with people from all social classes and especially the young, in an unforgettable embrace of affection and admiration. The entire world looked to him with trust. To many it seemed as if that intense participation, amplified to the confines of the planet by the social communications media, was like a choral request for help addressed to the Pope by modern humanity which, wracked by fear and uncertainty, questions itself about the future.

"The Church today must revive within herself an awareness of the task to present the world again with the voice of the One Who said: 'I am the light of the world; he who follows me will not walk in darkness but will have the light of life.' In undertaking his ministry, the new Pope knows that his task is to bring the light of Christ to shine before the men and women of today: not his own light but that of Christ.

"With this awareness, I address myself to everyone, even to those who follow other religions or who are simply seeking an answer to the fundamental questions of life and have not yet found it. I address everyone with simplicity and affection, to assure them that the Church wants to continue to build an open and sincere dialogue with them, in a search for the true good of mankind and of society.

"From God I invoke unity and peace for the human family and declare the willingness of all Catholics to cooperate for true social development, one that respects the dignity of all human beings.

"I will make every effort and dedicate myself to pursuing the promising dialogue that my predecessors began with various civilizations, because it is mutual understanding that gives rise to conditions for a better future for everyone.

"I am particularly thinking of young people. To them, the privileged interlocutors of John Paul II, I send an affectionate embrace in the hope, God willing, of meeting them at Cologne on the occasion of the next World Youth Day. With you, dear young people, I will continue to maintain a dialogue, listening to your expectations in an attempt to help you meet ever more profoundly the living, ever young, Christ.

"*'Mane nobiscum, Domine!'* Stay with us Lord! This invocation, which forms the dominant theme of John Paul II's Apostolic Letter for the Year of the Eucharist, is the prayer that comes spontaneously from my heart as I turn to begin the ministry to which Christ has called me. Like Peter, I too renew to Him my unconditional promise of faithfulness. He alone I intend to serve as I dedicate myself totally to the service of His Church.

"In support of this promise, I invoke the maternal intercession of Mary Most Holy, in whose hands I place the present and the future of my person and of the Church. May the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, and all the saints, also intercede.

"With these sentiments I impart to you venerated brother cardinals, to those participating in this ritual, and to all those following to us by television and radio, a special and affectionate blessing."