

**Mass of Thanksgiving**  
**for the Papal Ministry of Benedict XVI**

Holy Rosary Cathedral

1 March 2013

Dear brother priests, dear consecrated men and women, seminarians, and dear parishioners, visitors and friends:

***Introduction***

Yesterday, the last day of the nearly eight-year papal ministry of Benedict XVI, we were privileged to witness greatness of character and nobility of soul as the Holy Father, at precisely 8 pm in Rome, when his resignation took effect, ceased to be the Vicar of Christ. While it was undoubtedly a sad moment for many, and I include myself in that number, his was an act not only of profound humility and courage but also of great spiritual freedom. Rare indeed is the person who can, and will, relinquish such immense power voluntarily. But Joseph Ratzinger, our Pope Benedict, did it. Once again, in the simplicity of an eloquent gesture formed in the school of humility, he taught us the truth.

**Legacy**

It is still too early to talk about what politicians call “legacy”, and Benedict is a pastor not a politician, but I would like to mention just several of the things that he has left us which, I believe, have influenced the Church permanently for the better, and which we should keep in mind.

And these different things all revolve around one word: truth. First

as a theologian and scholar and later as a bishop and pope, Joseph Ratzinger was convinced that the perilous “dictatorship of relativism” which he saw engulfing the elites of the Western world, could only be overcome by insisting on the beauty of the truth to those who claimed that it was impossible to know, let alone to love the truth. These claims are regarded with suspicion. “Today,” he said, “the idea of truth and that of intolerance are almost completely fused, and so we no longer dare to believe in the truth or to speak of the truth. It seems to be far away, it seems something better not to refer to.”<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to say that no one “has” the truth; rather, the truth possesses us. For the truth is Jesus Christ, who is “the way, and the truth and the life”(cf. Jn 14:10).

As his witness, indeed as his vicar, Benedict was a truth teller. He told us the truth in a direct, intelligible and very often beautiful way. Let me briefly mention some of those truths.

### ***1. The Office and Not the Officeholder***

First of all, by resigning from the papal ministry, Pope Benedict has told us about what it means to be Pope. The office of Pope and the man who holds it are separate and separable. The ministry of Peter or the papacy is a mission; it is conferred by Christ on the man who is chosen and freely accepts to be Bishop of Rome.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Mariapoli Centre, Castel Gandolfo (2 September 2012).

But it is a mission that requires a certain strength. As he himself said when giving the reason for his resignation, “in today’s world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfill the ministry entrusted to me.”<sup>2</sup> Understanding the current demands of that heavy ministry, Benedict judged before God and his conscience that he could no longer fulfill it as the Church needs at this moment in her history. And, as he said last Sunday at the Angelus, regarding his resignation, “if God is asking me to do this it is so that I can continue to serve the Church with the same dedication and the same love with which I have done thus far, but in a way that is better suited to my age and my strength.”<sup>3</sup>

This step of resignation was something truly radical, a reform that, in the future, will make it easier for future popes to follow suit, should they, too, believe that is the best course to follow.

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<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI, Declaration (110 February 2013).

<sup>3</sup> Benedict XVI, Angelus (24 February 2013).

And without any sentimentality or posturing, Benedict handed the office back to the One who founded it, to the Lord Jesus himself, who is holding it in trust for his next Vicar. Benedict knows that he fulfilled the ministry of Peter for a time only by God's will. He was, as he said in his first address to the crowd in the Piazza San Pietro on the evening of his election, only the Lord's instrument: "after the great Pope John Paul II, the Cardinals have elected me, a simple, humble labourer in the vineyard of the Lord. The fact that the Lord knows how to work and to act even with insufficient instruments comforts me."<sup>4</sup> Benedict was so aware that he was a servant, a servant of the Lord and of his Church. This past Wednesday, at his last general audience, he said: "I always knew that the Lord is in the barque, that the barque of the Church is not mine, not ours, but his – and he shall not let her sink. It is he, who steers her."<sup>5</sup>

## ***2. Focus on the Foundational***

As pastor of the universal Church, Benedict used virtually every medium at his disposal – books and Twitter, sermons and encyclicals – to teach the truth: to catechize the faithful on the foundational beliefs and practices of Christianity. He constantly advocated fundamental Christian values to counter the increased secularization of many Western

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<sup>4</sup> Benedict XVI, *Urbi et Orbi* Address after Election (19 April 2005).

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI, General Audience (27 February 2013).

countries. He viewed relativism's denial of objective truth, and the denial of moral truths in particular, as the central problem of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. With his habitual clarity, he reaffirmed the Church's moral teaching on issues such as the dignity of human life from conception to its natural end, the nature of marriage and sexuality. But his message to society at large focussed less on these single issues and more on the risk of losing the basic relationship between the human being and the Creator: on belief in God. Indeed, it was forgetfulness of God that he most warned us against.

In the homily at the Mass where he was invested with the pallium as the Bishop of Rome, this is what he said, for it affirms what he saw as the central message of the Gospel, focussed on Jesus and salvation:

For the Fathers of the Church, the parable of the lost sheep, which the shepherd seeks in the desert, was an image of the mystery of Christ and the Church. The human race – every one of us – is the sheep lost in the desert which no longer knows the way. The Son of God will not let this happen; he cannot abandon humanity in so wretched a condition. He leaps to his feet and abandons the glory of heaven, in order to go in search of the sheep and pursue it, all the way to the Cross. He takes it upon his shoulders and carries our humanity; he carries us all – he is the good shepherd who lays

down his life for the sheep.<sup>6</sup>

He consistently warned the West that unless its secularized society rediscovered religious values, it would lose its bearings altogether.

### ***3. New Evangelization and Friendship with Jesus***

Building upon the foundation laid by his predecessor, Benedict thrust open the door to the Church of the New Evangelization – his third great legacy. Not only did he define it as the re-proposing of the Gospel to the people of our time and culture, but he told us it consists of the ordinary ongoing formation of every believer, as well as the outreach to those who have never heard of Christ, and the special effort to reach those who have been baptized and have fallen away from the practice of the faith – an initiative we have undertaken in the Archdiocese with our “Catholics Come Home” program.

At the heart of the New Evangelization is learning afresh the vital importance of personal friendship with Jesus Christ. Again and again Benedict returned to this theme. Jesus calls us to be his friends.

The Lord wishes to make each one of us a disciple who lives in personal friendship with him. To achieve this, it is not enough to follow him and to listen to him outwardly: it is also necessary to live with him and like him. This is what happens between friends; for this reason

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<sup>6</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Inauguration of his Pontificate (24 April 2005).

Jesus said at the Last Supper: “No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:15).

Again, listen to his words from one of Benedict’s homilies, and let them echo in your heart:

If we let Christ into our lives, we lose nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing of what makes life free, beautiful and great. No! Only in this friendship are the doors of life opened wide. Only in this friendship is the great potential of human existence truly revealed. Only in this friendship do we experience beauty and liberation.<sup>7</sup>

#### ***4. Lucidity of Teaching***

The last point I wish to make, although I could go on, is that Pope Benedict will long be remembered for the lucidity and richness of his teaching. Some have compared his homilies to those of Pope St. Leo the Great or Gregory the Great. They are remarkable not only for the depth of their theological content, their resonance with the word of God and the beauty of their style, but also for the way they touch the heart as well as the mind of the listener. And I think his homilies, together with his

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<sup>7</sup> Benedict XVI, Homily, Mass of the Inauguration of his Pontificate (24 April 2005).

other writings and books, will be pored over for years to come. Certainly I shall do so.

While concentrating on the essentials of faith – and this is why he called the Year of Faith we are now celebrating – over and over again Pope Benedict led us to understand that Christians in today’s world need to be able to explain the reasons for their faith with gentleness (cf. 1 Pt 3:15-16), by possessing a knowledge of the content of the faith so that it is not mere impressions they pass on but the very faith of the Church.

As might be expected from a former theology professor, Benedict was insistent on the harmonious relationship between faith and reason. For him, a passionate faith, untempered by critical reasoning, is just as dangerous as a technocratic rationality which ignores the human person’s transcendent nature. The Catholic faith is strengthened, not threatened, by the proper use of reason, he told us again and again

### ***Conclusion***

Today, then, our hearts are filled with thanksgiving for the gift to the Church that was the ministry of Benedict XVI. He taught us the truth with clarity and simplicity– about his own ministry, about the fundamentals of our faith, about personal friendship with Jesus and about the beauty of sharing our faith with others.

While he has left the Petrine office, Benedict XVI will never leave our hearts which are filled with respect, admiration and love for him.

So, this evening, we express our thanks to the Lord that he has once more kept his promise of building up his Church on the faith of Peter's Successor. We thank him Pope Benedict: for gracing us with a good and gentle shepherd who nurtured us with the truth of the Catholic faith.

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