

Pope Benedict's Homily

Holy Mass, Westminster Cathedral

LONDON - 18.09.2010



Dear friends in Christ,

I greet all of you with the joy in the Lord and I thank you for your warm reception. I am grateful to Archbishop Nichols for his words of welcome on your behalf. Truly, in this meeting of the Successor of Peter and the faithful of Britain, "heart speaks unto heart" as we rejoice in the love of Christ and in our common profession of the Catholic faith which comes to us from the Apostles. I am especially happy that our meeting takes place in this Cathedral dedicated to the Most Precious Blood, which is the sign of God's redemptive mercy poured out upon the world through the passion, death and resurrection of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In a particular way I greet the Archbishop of Canterbury, who honours us by his presence.

The visitor to this Cathedral cannot fail to be struck by the great crucifix dominating the nave, which portrays Christ's body, crushed by suffering, overwhelmed by sorrow, the innocent victim whose death has reconciled us with the Father and given us a share in the very life of God. The Lord's outstretched arms seem to embrace this entire church, lifting up to the Father all the ranks of the faithful who gather around the altar of the Eucharistic sacrifice and share in its fruits. The crucified Lord stands above and before us as the source of our life and salvation, "the high priest of the good things to come", as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews calls him in today's first reading (Heb 9:11).

It is in the shadow, so to speak, of this striking image, that I would like to consider the word of God which has been proclaimed in our midst and reflect on the mystery of the Precious Blood. For that mystery leads us to see the unity between Christ's sacrifice on the Cross, the Eucharistic sacrifice which he has given to his Church, and his eternal priesthood, whereby, seated at the right hand of the Father, he makes unceasing intercession for us, the members of his mystical body.

Let us begin with the sacrifice of the Cross. The outpouring of Christ's blood is the source of the Church's life. St John, as we know, sees in the water and blood which flowed from our Lord's body the wellspring of that divine life to the Hebrews draws out, we might say, the liturgical implications of this mystery. Jesus, by his suffering and death, his self-oblation in the eternal Spirit, has become our high priest and "the mediator of a new covenant" (Heb 9:15). These words echo our Lord's own words at the Last Supper, when he instituted the Eucharist as the sacrament of his body, given up for us, and his blood, the blood of the new and everlasting covenant shed for the forgiveness of sins (cf Mk 14:24; Mt 26:28; Lk 22:20).

Faithful to Christ's command to "do this in memory of me" (Lk 22:19), the Church in every time and place celebrates the Eucharist until the Lord returns in glory, rejoicing in his sacramental presence and drawing upon the power of his saving sacrifice for the redemption of the world.

The reality of the Eucharistic sacrifice has always been at the heart of Catholic faith; called into question in the 16th century, it was solemnly reaffirmed at the Council of Trent against the backdrop of our justification in Christ. Here in England, as we know, there were many who staunchly defended the Mass, often at great cost, giving rise to that devotion to the Most Holy Eucharist which has been the hallmark of Catholicism in these lands.

The Eucharistic sacrifice of the Body and Blood of Christ embraces in turn the mystery of our Lord's continuing passion in the members of his Mystical Body, the Church in every age. Here the great crucifix which towers above us serves as a reminder that Christ, our eternal high priest, daily unites our own sacrifices, our own sufferings, our own needs, hopes and aspirations, to the infinite merits of his sacrifice. Through him, with him, and in him, we lift up our own bodies as a sacrifice holy and acceptable to God (cf Rom 12:1). In this sense we are caught up in his eternal oblation, completing, as St Paul says, in our flesh what is lacking in Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, the Church (cf Col 1:24). In the life of the Church, in her trials and tribulations, Christ continues, in the stark phrase of Pascal, to be in agony until the end of the world (Pensees, 553, ed. Brunschvicg).

We see this aspect of the mystery of Christ's precious blood represented, most eloquently, by the martyrs of every age, who drank from the cup which Christ himself drank, and whose own blood, shed in union with his sacrifice, gives new life to the

Church. It is also reflected in our brothers and sisters throughout the world who even now are suffering discrimination and persecution for their Christian faith. Yet it is also present, often hidden in the suffering of all those individual Christians who daily unite their sacrifices to those of the Lord for the sanctification of the Church and the redemption of the world. My thoughts go in a special way to all those who are spiritually united with this Eucharistic celebration, and in particular the sick, the elderly, the handicapped and those who suffer mentally and spiritually.

Here, too, I think of the immense suffering caused by the abuse of children, especially within the Church and by her ministers. Above all, I express my deep sorrow to the innocent victims of these unspeakable crimes, along with my hope that the power of Christ's grace, his sacrifice of reconciliation, will bring deep healing and peace to their lives. I also acknowledge with you the shame and humiliation which all of us have suffered because of these sins; and I invite you to offer it to the Lord with trust that this chastisement will contribute to the healing of victims, the purification of the Church and the renewal of her age-old commitment to the education and care of young people. I express my gratitude for the efforts being made to address this problem responsibly, and I ask all of you to show your concern for the victims and solidarity with your priests.

Dear friends, let us return to the contemplation of the great crucifix which rises above us. Our Lord's hands, extended on the Cross, also invite us to contemplate our participation in his eternal priesthood and thus our responsibility, as members of his body, to bring the reconciling power of his sacrifice to the world in which we live. The Second Vatican Council spoke eloquently of the indispensable role of the laity in carrying forward the Church's mission through their efforts to serve as a leaven of the Gospel in society and to work for the advancement of God's kingdom in the world. The Council's appeal to the lay faithful to take up their baptismal sharing in Christ's mission echoed the insights and teachings of John Henry Newman. May the profound ideas of this great Englishman continue to inspire all Christ's followers in this land to conform their ever thought, word and action to Christ, and to work strenuously to defend those unchanging moral truths which, taken up, illuminated and confirmed by the Gospel, stand at the foundation of a truly humane, just and free society.

How much contemporary society needs this witness! How much we need, in the Church and in society, witnesses of the beauty of holiness, witnesses of the splendour of truth, witnesses of the joy and freedom born of a living relationship with Christ! One of the greatest challenges facing us today is how to speak convincingly of the wisdom and

liberating power of God's word to a world which all too often sees the Gospel as a constriction of human freedom, instead of the truth which liberates our minds and enlightens our efforts to live wisely and well, both as individuals and as members of society.

Let us pray, then, that the Catholics of this land will become ever more conscious of their dignity as a priestly people, called to consecrate the world to God through lives of faith and holiness. And may this increase of apostolic zeal be accompanied by an outpouring of prayer for vocations to the ordained priesthood. For the more the lay apostolate grows, the more urgently the need for priests is felt; and the more the laity's own sense of vocation is deepened, the more what is proper to the priest stands out. May many young men in this land find the strength to answer the Master's call to the ministerial priesthood, devoting their lives, their energy and their talents to God, thus building up his people in unity and fidelity to the Gospel, especially through the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Dear friends, in this Cathedral of the Most Precious Blood, I invite you once more to look to Christ, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection (cf Heb 12:2). I ask you to unite yourselves ever more fully to the Lord, sharing in his sacrifice on the Cross and offering him that "spiritual worship" (Rom 12:1) which embraces every aspect of our lives and finds expression in our efforts to contribute to the coming of his Kingdom. I pray that, in doing so, you may join the ranks of faithful believers throughout the long Christian history of this land in building a society truly worthy of man, worthy of your nation's highest traditions.