

Faith, Obedience and Theology

Archbishop Ranjith's address in the Netherlands: Tuesday, October 16, 2007

Challenges to the Mission of the Church today



Your Excellency, the Apostolic Nuncio Mons. François Bacquè

Your Lordship,

Dear Rev. Fathers,

President and Members of the Dutch Association for Latin Liturgy,

Distinguished Ladies and Gentlemen,

I am overjoyed to have had the opportunity to celebrate the Holy Mass and address this distinguished gathering on the occasion of the Annual General Meeting of your Association. I thank you for the kind invitation extended to me.

The Holy Father in his post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation [*Sacramentum Caritatis*] called for the more frequent use of Latin as well as Gregorian Chant in the Liturgy recommending that even the lay faithful be helped to recite common prayers and sing parts of the Liturgy in Latin [no. 62]. It is in this happy situation for those of you who love this language and its use in the Liturgy that I have come to spend this day with you encouraging you in your efforts. And making use of this opportunity I thought of speaking to you today about a matter of great importance for the life of the Church — Faith and Obedience in the study of Theology and in the sense of discipline which should accompany the mission of the Church.

It is not a surprise that the writers of the Holy Scriptures and, precisely, the traditions behind the Genesis story of Creation and Fall visualize the fall of man in terms of an act of pride and disobedience. It leads man to become a slave of his own instincts seeking for himself power and domination and moves him not only to jealousy and murder [Gen 4: 1 - 16] but also for equality with God. He becomes his own god and wishes to build a tower “with its top reaching heaven” [Gen 11: 4]. The first 11 chapters of the book of Genesis then, is the story of disobedience and estrangement from God. But it does not end there. God in his great mercy does not abandon man to his destiny of self destruction which he had set for himself. He calls and establishes in the faith of Abraham the beginnings of the history of salvation. Abraham responds by deep faith and obedience and thus becomes the father of the people of Israel, God’s chosen instrument for the salvation of the world [Deut. 7: 7-8]. And as the letter to the Hebrews states — “it was by faith that Abraham obeyed the call to set out for a country that was the inheritance given to him and his descendants and that he set out without knowing where he was going” [Heb. 11: 8]. The author of the letter then sets out into a journey of discovery of the faith and obedience to God of all His servants through Abraham to Moses and Jesus ending up with the exhortation: “let us keep

our eyes fixed on Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection; for the sake of the joy which laid ahead of Him, He endured the Cross, disregarding the shame of it and has taken His seat at the right of God's throne" [Hebrews 12: 2]. Salvation history, then, is a story of faith and obedience.

The covenant ratified on mount Sinai [Ex. 24: 3-16] establishes once again that relationship between God and humanity through the obedience of Israel. It is sealed by the book of laws that God gives his people — the Torah.

Living out the laws of that covenant then marks the entire history of the People of Israel, blessings being the result of obedience and sufferings the result of the opposite attitude. Obedience is demanded both at the level of the individual and of the people and blessings or disaster is shown to flow out naturally on the basis of their response, individually or collectively. In truth, obedience becomes the expression of a response of love towards God by the people of Israel. It is not so much a covenant of a "give and take" form as was prevalent at that time in the treaties of the Hittites with their suzerain states but a treaty of an intimate union of love between God and Israel visualized as one between a Father [mother] and his [her] Son [Ex. 4: 22; Is. 49: 14-15; Jer. 3: 19; 31: 9, 20; Hos. 11: 1-11] or Husband and wife [Is. 54: 5-8; Jer. 2: 2; 3: 20; Hos. 2: 4-25]. The formula which signifies the covenant is modeled on the formula which seals a marriage — "I will be your God, you will be My people" [Song of Songs 7: 11]. The demands placed on the people and on God reflect essentially not just a spirit of obedience and service but much deeper virtues of love and fidelity [Ps. 117: 1-2]. Besides, it is God who makes the first move. He loved humanity first [Deus Caritas Est 1]. Infidelity in the forms of idolatry and moral disobedience lead the people not only to suffering and death but also to slavery and exile in foreign lands. Besides, the right to land is a consequence of Israel's faithfulness to the covenant. And so invasion and exile are the fruits of disobedience. The entire deuteronomic reform and the emergence of prophecy are consequences of the constant allurements and attractions Israel felt to idolatry, infidelity and insincerity driving the people away from God.

Jesus and the new Torah

As Pope Benedict explains in “Jesus of Nazareth”, Jesus completed the formation of the people of God by both lifting the veil that excluded the gentiles from entering into communion with God and introducing the new Torah of love, which is the law of the more perfect and eternal covenant with words of authority — “but I say to you...” [Mt. 5: 22 et al]. The people of this more perfect covenant superseded all boundaries, a universal communion — Jews and gentiles together — bonded in and through Him in the free and conscious living out of the law of love which He gave them and ratified with His own blood — “this cup is the new covenant in My blood poured out for you” [Lc. 22: 20]. States the Pope “this restructuring of the social order finds its basis and its justification in Jesus’ claim that He, with His community of disciples, forms the origin and center of the new Israel”, [Jesus of Nazareth, Doubleday, New York 2007, p. 114] and that “He teaches not as the rabbis do, but as one who has authority” [Mt. 7: 28 et al] [ibid p. 102]. And this authority came to Him by the fact that He indeed was the Messiah, the anointed one of God.

Thus faithfulness to Jesus and the living out of the new Torah which He gave His disciples becomes the essential condition for belonging to the community of the new covenant — the sole gateway to the Kingdom of God. States the Pope — “in Jesus’ case it is not the universally binding adherence to the Torah that forms the new family. Rather it is adherence to Jesus Himself, to His Torah” [ibid p. 115].

And Jesus wants His disciples to personally follow His own example in not only accepting Him but above all in living out the way He lived, following Him on the Cross. “If anyone wants to be a follower of Mine, let him renounce himself and take up his cross and follow Me” [Mc. 8: 34]. In the case of the old alliance it was faithfulness to the Torah that assured the individual or the community its sense of belonging to the Lord and being under his loving care. But in the case of the new alliance it is not so much a matter of adherence to a law as much as to a person: Jesus. Loving Him, following Him and imitating Him was the essential condition. In fact, Jesus’ commandment of love — “love one another as I have loved you” [Jn. 13: 34] is a commandment that urges all to follow His own example of love. Love is not what we feel it is, but the way He lived it out. And Jesus did live out His love for humanity so profoundly and selflessly that He laid down his life for them — “no one can have a greater love than to lay down his life for his friends” [Jn. 15: 13] or “I lay down My life for My sheep” [Jn. 10: 11]. It is not a life taken by others as much as is laid down by Jesus Himself.

St. Paul quoting an ancient Confessional Hymn of the Church portrays the entire life of Christ as a living out of the twin moments of the loving and voluntary self emptying by Jesus and His glorification at the hands of God which signifies His baptism. For Him, Jesus, the Christ, “although He was in the form of God, thought not robbery to be equal with God: but made Himself of no reputation and took upon Himself the form of a servant and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, He humbled Himself becoming obedient unto death, even death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted Him and given Him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things on earth and things under the earth. And that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of the Father” [Phil. 2: 5 -11]. The key phrase in the hymn consists of the words “obedient unto death” [vs. 8]. The Greek verb “hupekoos” used here is to be understood as the opposite of that act of disobedience of Adam. St. Paul himself states so — “for as by one man’s disobedience [Parakohe] many were made sinners, so by the obedience [hupakohe] of one, shall many be made righteous” [Rom. 5: 19].

The theological dictionary of the new testament by Gerhard Kittel states that “hupakohe” in general “is measured by the attitude of obedience to God” [p. 224 vol. 1]. St. Paul places it in opposition to “hamartia” — sin. States St. Paul “you can be the slaves either of sin [hamartia] which leads to death or of obedience [hupakohe] which leads to righteousness” [Rom. 6: 16].

The idea is clear. Jesus’ whole life which is the fulfillment of the history of salvation is one of sheer obedience to the Father as seen and understood in the background of the disobedience of Adam. Says the letter to the Galatians, the Lord Jesus “gave Himself for our sins to liberate us from this present wicked world, in accordance with the will of our God and Father, to whom be glory for ever and ever” [Gal. 1: 4]. Indeed Jesus did state so — “I have come from heaven not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” [Jn. 6: 38] or “I seek to do not My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me” [Jn. 5: 30]. He understands His mission on earth as the realization of the type of obedience required by God so that His divine kingship may be realized on earth. In and through Jesus and the Church, then, God enters human history in the fullest sense and His Kingdom is thus established definitively. This Church or the community of “the called” is the mystical presence of Jesus in history and the manifestation of God’s Kingdom on earth. And as *Lumen Gentium* states it “subsists in the Catholic Church, which is governed by the successor of Peter and by the bishops in union with that successor” [LG 8]. And again, “Although many elements of sanctification and of truth can be found outside of her visible structure,

these elements, however, as gifts properly belonging to the Church of Christ, possess an inner dynamism toward Catholic unity” [ibid].

The Church thus exists in order to expand the process of sanctification and liberation which Jesus brought to fulfillment through His obedience to the Father. Its mission is precisely that of imitating Jesus in His great act of obedience to the Father, so that God may re-enter human reality and ennoble all of it in the creation of the “new heaven and the new earth” [II Pet. 3: 13] — that the Kingdom of God may be established definitely and fully in the world. The Church becomes thus the locus of humanity’s profound sense of obedience to God. It is in this way that God continues to re-enter human reality and transform and ennoble it. Obedience in the imitation of Jesus should not be seen merely as a burden or the acceptance and the faithful implementation of a law or norm but rather as the way to sanctification and to the rendering sacred of all human and cosmic reality.

This mission is indeed something sacred and liturgical. The famous exhortation of St. Paul on turning our lives into a sacrifice [logiké latreia] acceptable to God states: “I urge you, then, brothers, remembering the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, dedicated and acceptable to God; that is the kind of worship for you, as sensible people. Do not model your behaviour on the contemporary world, but let the renewing of your minds transform you, so that you may discern for yourselves what is the will of God — what is good and acceptable and mature” [Rom. 12: 1-2].

It is this same sense of obedience and discipline in the life of a Christian whatever his or her role in the Church be, that gives effective credibility to what Jesus represents: a life of total and self negating subjection to the will of the Father. In a world dominated by egoism and its resultant corollaries of individualism, subjectivism and relativism, where in the name of liberty any vestige of authority is rejected as a burden and an obstacle to human freedom, the Church has to manifest itself as the community of God, consisting of those in whose life the acceptance and submission to the will of God and a noble sense of unity ought to shine out. If the world visualizes freedom as “freedom from”, the Church has to firmly reflect freedom as “freedom for”.

If the world wishes to become a place where confusing and contradictory philosophies, values and a cacophony of noisy and disorderly political orientations make human life neurotic, the Church has to be the sign of truth, good and beauty which in their most supreme form reflect God’s own essence. If the world has become the market place of greed and the reduction of human kind to an object of consumism, then the Church has to become the community that extols God’s own providence and

reflects a sense of detachment and respect especially for those who become the victims of such greed; If the world becomes the arena of moral laxism, hedonism and the subjugation of mankind to transient and empty allures, then the Church has to be the sign of the purity and holiness of God.

In other words the Church cannot be the arena of confusion, philosophical or moral relativism, sophistry and casuistic dilution of the revealed truth which is the foundation of its Credo, the Word of God as revealed in the Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church and interpreted by the official magisterium of the Church and open dissent or public debate even in the name of the freedom of theological research. My mind goes back to the story of the construction or shall we say the attempted construction of the Tower of Babel. Its constructors felt confident that they could scale the heavens with their own resources and strength without God. Hasn't that same spirit re-appeared perhaps in a more sophisticated form in the world and the Church today? There are some people who even claim that they make the Church as if the Church is a creation of us humans.

But the Church is not what we make. It is what Jesus established and continues to nourish and sustain. Says *Lumen Gentium* "Christ, the one mediator, established and ceaselessly sustains here on earth His Holy Church, the community of faith, hope and charity, as a visible structure. Through her He communicates truth and grace to all" [LG 8]. It is thus, even in its visible manifestation, a divine institution which is called to live and make real in the world God's own holiness, truth and beauty as well as the harmony and peace that comes from Him alone. For, as St. Paul stated, "God is not the author of confusion but of peace, as in all Churches of the Saints" [1 Cor. 14: 33].

The Church is not an association or federation or a democracy made up of the faithful. It is the mystical body of Christ with its own inner life that comes from Christ, who is its supreme and invisible head. It has its visible structure which is not to be separated from the mystical. The Council states "but the society furnished with hierarchical agencies and the mystical body of Christ are not to be considered two realities, nor are the visible assembly and the spiritual community, nor the earthly Church and the Church enriched with heavenly things. Rather they form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and a human element" [LG 8]. The Council then goes on to compare this mystical divine — human interlocking with the mystery of the incarnation itself [cfr LG 8]. It is, as the Council further confirms, the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church referring thus to its uniqueness, its singular vocation, its universal nature and its missionary dimension.

The hierarchical nature of the Church as the same document confirms does not come from a bottom to top orientation but the other way around. Christ is the supreme shepherd and spouse of the Church. He established it on the foundation of the apostles and, as *Lumen Gentium* further clarifies, “after the resurrection our Saviour handed her over to Peter to be shepherded [Jn. 21: 17], commissioning him and the other apostles to propagate and govern her [cf Mt. 28: 18 ff]. Her He erected for all ages as “the pillar and mainstay of the truth” [1 Tim. 3: 11]” [LG 8]. And as the Church teaches, through apostolic succession and the power to bind and loose, the College of Apostles with Peter as its head is succeeded by the College of Bishops who with the Pope who “is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful” [LG 23] becomes the hierarchical leadership of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 22 states further “the Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ, and as pastor of the entire Church has full, supreme and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered” and further “the College of Bishops, has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter’s successor, as its head” [LG 22]. Naturally as Jesus often expressed all authority in the Church has to be exercised in a pastoral sense — in that loving and caring as well as gently guiding way of the good shepherd and not of those who seek to lord it over [cfr 22: 25-26].

Provided that authority in the Church is understood and exercised as a service, rather than a means of domination in an egoistic sense, it is essential that unity not only in its communitarian form but also in its direction be preserved and the effective fulfillment of its mission be facilitated. Disagreement is possible but it should not be allowed to deteriorate and become a cause of division, hostility and a sign of mundane frivolity. As we see in that singular reflection of the early Christian Community at the first Council of Jerusalem [Acts 15: 6-29] even if the issue at stake, the question of the uncircumcised, was seen differently by them, they all agreed to settle for a united position after prayer and listening to the different views of Paul, Barnabas, James and Simon Peter. The voice of Peter was decisive here and James agreed with him. The cause of unity was served best that way. It was a debate among brothers and not in the fora of the roman civil or religious courts or in the *aeropagus* of Athens. The Council of Jerusalem was an experience of communion in which the voice of the apostles, especially of Peter set the pace for whatever was decided.

Disagreement and even debate are part of the search for an understanding of one’s faith given the limitedness of the human mind. Since theology itself is “*fides querens intellectum*” and is based on the centrality of faith, “*credo ut intelligam*”, sin can cause the search for that understanding to become ruffled and muddy. For faith cannot

co-exist with sin and intellectual arrogance. It requires listening, silence, and most of all prayer which prepares the heart and mind to receive God's word. Where such an attitude does not prevail, disagreement can lead the seeker to be a prisoner of his own thoughts, feel stimulated by considerations of self aggrandizement, pride and lead to open dissent which would be harmful to the faith. It will cause just the opposite effect and can lead one on to the path of disobedience and falling prey to the machinations of the evil one. The example of the Council of Jerusalem is important here — once Simon Peter set the pace, the debate took a decisive turn towards identifying an acceptable solution which is in the best interests of the mission of the Church. The Acts of the Apostles states that “and when there had been much disputing, Peter rose up and said unto them...” [Acts 15: 7] and surprisingly the Acts states that at the end of Peter's discourse — “all the multitude kept silence” [Acts 15: 12] and James seconded what Peter said ending the debate with a decision which was good for all.

Besides, since the Church is a spiritual communion enriched by the life of Grace that flows from Christ especially in the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, what should be of foremost concern for all its members is to reflect and live that intimate communion with the Lord, and in Him with all the brothers and sisters, as fruitfully and as truly as possible. Every effort then ought to be made not to demean the inner dynamism of the Church through our selfishness and sinfulness especially through intellectual pride and arrogance. Rendering glory to God and edifying the Church, the Mystical Body of Christ, in order to make her carry on her mission effectively should be more important.

It is here that a deep spirit of self denial, sense of humility before the mystery of God's ways and an awareness that the life of Christ is somehow present and active in the Church and in the person of the Vicar of Christ ought to animate all of us, especially the bishops, priests, the religious, the theologians and experts in the various ecclesial disciplines. We ought to always remember the words of Isaiah — “who was it who measured the water of the sea in the hollow of His hands and calculated the heavens to the nearest inch; gauged the dust of the earth to the nearest bushel, weighed the mountains on scales, the hills in a balance? Who directed Yahweh, what counselor could have instructed Him? Whom has He consulted to enlighten Him, to instruct on the path of judgment, to teach Him knowledge and show Him how to understand?” [Is. 40: 12 - 14]. Speaking of wisdom, Job exclaims — “God alone understands her path and knows where she is to be found Then He said to human beings, wisdom? — that is the fear of the Lord; intelligence? — avoidance of evil” [Job 28: 23-28].

It is most unfortunate to note, that often enough we tend to forget that there is a far superior mission in our hands than that of engaging in hair splitting theological debate. Even theology is at the service of faith, it is not its master. Faith comes first and then only theology. For, if there is no faith in theology, it would only be a matter of words and empty noise which would not be effectively contributive towards the mission of the Church.

A so called dissident theologian from Asia recently wrote as follows: “many Christians in Asia are increasingly unable to think of salvation exclusively in terms of the Church or as only mediated by Jesus Christ. We have come to realize that such a view would imply that the vast majority of the people of Asia were not saved. The point has slowly dawned on us that this is not acceptable.... The more I studied the issue of salvation the more I was impressed with the serious inadequacy of the Church’s doctrinal teaching” [Tissa Balasuriya, *From Inquisition to Freedom*, Continuum 2001, pg.90]. And again – “In Asia where Christianity is a minority religion, we cannot accept that the whole of humanity is in original sin in the sense that they are alienated from God. We cannot accept that all our fore bearers are in hell. Regarding redemption, I have maintained my view that Jesus did not have to pray a price to God to save us, although this interpretation has so impregnated our prayers, hymns and attitudes.... The mission of the Church is not so much to convert to Christianity as to convert all to humanity” [ibid. pg. 105].

What I see here is an approach to theology bereft of that sense of faith and transcendence and geared rather towards the humanization of the society, than its divinization. The mission of Jesus who wished to usher in the era of the reign of God in human life was certainly not limited to making man merely more human. That kind of understanding is very reductive of the great mission of Jesus. Besides, it is rather subjective without any consideration given to the objective sources of divine revelation — the Sacred Scriptures and the Tradition of the Church, of which the latter is rather quickly dismissed as a creation of what is called “Orthodoxy”. The same writer rejects what he calls arbitrary authority and the states, “there comes a point when we must say that eternal destiny is not determined by particular persons or what is called orthodoxy but by one’s conscience and by our relationship to the divine” [ibid. pg. 108]. Both these latter principles are as we can see, of a subjective order.

The rejection of objective revelation places such theologizing outside the realms of the faith and once it becomes an object of debate leads to attitudes incompatible with the noble spiritual mission of theology which is that of “edifying the Church” [cfr 1 Cor. 14: 4]. It is good to note here that St. Paul warned Timothy to beware of “anyone

who teaches anything different and does not keep to the sound teaching which is that of our Lord Jesus Christ, the doctrine which is in accordance with true religion, is proud and has no understanding, but rather a weakness for questioning everything and arguing about words” [1 Tim. 6: 3 - 4]. This type of attitude can influence all if care is not exercised in always keeping before us an attitude of humility in the face of the great mysteries of God.

Today more than ever the Church needs men and women who portray in their lives that sense of humility and self negation as well as obedience to God’s will, which is manifested in a special way through the Church and its visible head, the Roman Pontiff. Discussion and debate in a fraternal way, yes, but if it does not in the end lead to a spirit of obedience in the service of unity then it divides and can only be interpreted as a manifestation of the intent of the evil one to disturb and retard the noble mission of Christ. Even those wearing ecclesiastical purple or red are not exempt from the tempter’s enchantments.

We see this happening unfortunately quite often nowadays. It is not a rare feature to see the emergence of ecclesiastics in responsible positions who are instrumentalised by the media and forces inimical to the Church, to make statements critical of the directions from the Roman Pontiff or from the dicasteries that carry out his decisions. Others take the attitude of ignoring or disregarding such directions and so great harm is procured for the mission of the Church – especially through the sense of loss and confusion brought about by such attitudes on the faithful.

St. Paul tells us how he changed when he met Jesus on the way to Damascus — no longer was he the proud and zealous Jew who persecuted the Church — he states “what things were gain for me, those I counted loss for Christ, yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord for whom I have suffered the loss of all things and so count them but dung, that I may win Christ” [Phil. 3: 7-8]. And again — “I am crucified with Christ; nevertheless I live, yet not I but Christ lives in me” [Gal. 2: 20]. What counts for him is not so much who he is or what he thinks but what he has become — for Christ owns him, and lives in him. It is this new life that made him, Christ’s apostle, who in turn is being called to, like St. John the Baptist, let his personality recede to the background allowing Christ to shine out in his life.

This I feel should be our own attitude especially in these troubled days — “He must increase, I must decrease” [Jn. 3: 30]. We should pray the Lord to keep us all to be like Him who though He was in the form of God assumed the form of a slave and became obedient to the Father accepting to undergo death and death on a Cross.

May He bless and protect the Church!

Thank you.

+Archbishop Malcolm Ranjith

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