



GRAND MAGISTERIUM – VATICAN
EQUESTRIAN ORDER OF
THE HOLY SEPULCHRE OF JERUSALEM

At the service of the living stones in the Holy Land

Church: Who are you?

A meditation for the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul



Pentecost is traditionally considered the liturgical feast in which the mission of the Church began. Nobody denies this. But you, Church, who are you, what do you say about yourself? It is not a provocative question, because identity is the basis of every mission. John the baptizer was also questioned by those who had been sent to him from Jerusalem: Why are you baptizing? Who are you? I am "voice", he said, I am not the Christ. You will have to wait for the Christ; it is he who will be consecrated by the Holy Spirit (cf. Jn 1:19-33).

Jesus will also be questioned by the Sanhedrin: Are you the Christ? Tell us. Are you the Son of God? Answer. Jesus answered, and was declared blasphemous, guilty of death! (cf. Mt 26:59-66). Then Pilate will also ask him: Are you the king of the Jews? It was not true, but he was condemned anyway (cf. Jn. 19, 1-16).

Finally, the Apostles will also be asked: With what power and in whose name do you preach and do this? (cf. Acts 4:7) In the midst of preaching and persecution, the apostolic Church began its mission.

On the occasion of the Second Session of the Second Vatican Council, Paul VI asked the question in the Council Chamber: Church, what do you say about yourself? Who are you? The dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* was born, in which the Council Fathers wrote: "*Since the Church is in Christ like a sacrament or as a sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race.*" (LG 1). The close bond with the person of Jesus was reiterated, as if to underline even more clearly the indissoluble nature and union with Christ. It is what some tendencies today would surreptitiously like to review, affecting its sacramentality and indissoluble union and reducing everything to a human organization oriented by opinions, ideologies, consents, presumable majorities, according to the most current forms of socio-political organization.

The sacramentality of the Church is situated, in truth, in its most intimate and profound nature, that is, in its self-awareness, infused by Christ; this is why the Church can never be reduced to a simple human organization, much less a 'right' or 'left', for the preserve of 'conservatives' or 'progressives'. The Church, like Eve, is taken from the pierced side of Christ crucified. Existentially and ontologically, therefore, it draws its nature from the very nature of the incarnate Son of God: divine and human at the same time. The Church, therefore, the new Eve, is loved and 'adored' by her Bridegroom. Hosea glimpsed its beauty and sang this relationship in almost carnal terms.

Borrowing a happy expression from Benedict XVI (Jesus of Nazareth - from entering Jerusalem to the resurrection), we can also say that the Church is presence: gift and task. It is a "gift" as it is given to us, but we do not possess it; it is a "task" for the mission entrusted to it by Jesus. On the eve of the Council, John XXIII had indicated it *Mater et Magistra* (Mother and Teacher). As a 'bride', she is inextricably linked to him: she preserves her Bridegroom in faith and in her heart as a 'Eucharist', synthesis and summit of sanctifying relationship and eternal presence.

A fruitful motherhood involves a task: it is the generator of children in the grace of Baptism, it is regenerating in remission and forgiveness, it is consoling in illness, it is the dispenser of every blessing in marriage and in the priesthood.

John XXIII also wanted to indicate her as 'Teacher': not only, therefore, generating for 'Grace', but also for the 'Truth', which she is obliged to bring to all peoples and to the whole human race, according to the aforementioned expression of the Council. In this task, it becomes an instrument of peace and union, without ideological, political or military calculations, but in the humblest service of man in times of unrest, social changes and imbalances that violate dignity, freedom and the human person. Benedict XVI comments that it is precisely under the cross, that is, in the highest and most sublime moment of donation and love, the Church of the "pagans" began, going beyond the Jewish dimension; he added that, "*beginning with the cross, the Lord gathers men for the new community of the universal Church. By virtue of the suffering Son they recognize the true God*" (ib.).

If we repeat the question now: Church, who are you? Perhaps the answer may appear more evident: "I am gift and mission, mother and teacher". Any other say would be reductive and sometimes misleading.

Thinking of the sinner forgiven by Jesus in the house of Simon the Pharisee who scattered perfumed ointments and tears on the feet of the beloved Master, or of Mary of Bethany who thanked him with a similar gesture for her brother Lazarus brought back to life, or of Joseph of Arimathea who paid no attention to expenses to perfume, with conspicuous ointments, the Body of the Lord removed from the cross and ready to be entombed, we must in truth recognize that we actually need, and more than ever, to take care of this "Body", this "Bride" of Christ, of this "Mother" of ours, the Church, wounded by abject apathy, by incalculable violence, by mortifying criticisms, by attempts at manipulation, more or less hidden, and by weighty sorrows, especially when they occur at the hands of those who belonged to her.

However, one must be careful not to accept the twisted and moralistic reasoning of those who would always like to blame it for all the human miseries of their children; Jesus himself had dismissed the hypocritical reasoning of Judas, who lamented the waste of money in the purchase of ointments by those who - like Mary of Bethany - loved him. The Church must be loved! Of course, it is easier and more profitable to reprimand or criticize it!

It is essential for every child to love their mother, listen to her as a good teacher, welcome her as an incomparable gift (indeed it is only when she is lost, that her true value is appreciated!) and support her in the task entrusted to her to give Jesus and to bring to Jesus. To Peter, as to John for Mary, the

Lord entrusted the custody of the Church on her earthly pilgrimage. Peter is her "son" and "guardian" at the same time, on this pilgrimage.

In his spiritual Testament, Paul VI wrote to the Church: "*May you be aware of your nature and your mission; may you have a sense of humanity's true and profound needs; and walk in poverty, in other words free, strong and in love with Christ*". These words still apply!

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(June 2020)