



27 FEBRUARY 2013



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

**SAINT PETER'S SQUARE
WEDNESDAY, 27 FEBRUARY 2013**

[VIDEO]

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Presbyterate!

Distinguished Authorities!

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

I thank all of you for having come in such great numbers to this last General Audience.

Heartfelt thanks! I am truly moved and I see the Church alive! And I think we should also say thanks to the Creator for the fine weather which he gives us even on this winter day.

Like the Apostle Paul in the biblical text which we have heard, I too feel a deep need first and foremost to thank God, who gives guidance and growth to the Church, who sows his word and thus nourishes faith in his people. At this moment my heart expands and embraces the whole Church throughout the world; and I thank God for all that I have "heard" in these years of the Petrine ministry about the faith in the Lord Jesus Christ and

the love which truly circulates in the Body of the Church and makes it live in love, and about the hope which opens and directs us towards the fullness of life, towards our heavenly homeland.

I feel that I bear everyone in prayer, in a present, God's present, in which I gather together every one of my meetings, journeys and pastoral visits. In prayer I gather each and all, in order to entrust them to the Lord: that we might be filled with the knowledge of his will, with all spiritual wisdom and understanding, and that we might lead a life worthy of him and of his love, bearing fruit in every good work (cf. Col 1:9-10).

At this moment I feel great confidence, because I know, we all know, that the Gospel word of truth is the Church's strength, it is her life. The Gospel purifies and renews, it bears fruit, wherever the community of believers hears it and receives God's grace in truth and charity. This is my confidence, this is my joy.

When on 19 April nearly eight years ago I accepted the Petrine ministry, I had the firm certainty that has always accompanied me: this certainty of the life of the Church which comes from the word of God. At that moment, as I have often said, the words which echoed in my heart were: Lord, why are you asking this of me, and what is it that you are asking of me? It is a heavy burden which you are laying on my shoulders, but if you ask it of me, at your word I will cast the net, sure that you will lead me even with all my weaknesses. And eight years later I can say that the Lord has truly led me, he has been close to me, I have been able to perceive his presence daily. It has been a portion of the Church's journey which has had its moments of joy and light, but also moments which were not easy; I have felt like Saint Peter with the Apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee: the Lord has given us so many days of sun and of light winds, days when the catch was abundant; there were also moments when the waters were rough and the winds against us, as throughout the Church's history, and the Lord seemed to be sleeping. But I have always known that the Lord is in that boat, and I have always known that the barque of the Church is not mine but his. Nor does the Lord let it sink; it is he who guides it, surely also through those whom he has chosen, because he so wished. This has been, and is, a certainty which nothing can shake. For this reason my heart today overflows with gratitude to God, for he has never let his Church, or me personally, lack his consolation, his light, his love.

We are in the *Year of Faith* which I desired precisely to reaffirm our faith in God in a context which seems to push him more and more into the background. I should like to invite all of us to renew our firm confidence in the Lord, to entrust ourselves like children in God's arms, certain that those arms always hold us, enabling us to press forward each day, even when the going is rough. I want everyone to feel loved by that God who gave his Son for us and who has shown us his infinite love. I want everyone to feel the joy of being a Christian. In one beautiful morning prayer, it says: "I adore you, my God, and I love you with all my heart. I thank you for having created me and made me a Christian...". Yes, we are happy for the gift of faith; it is our most precious possession, which no one can take from us! Let us thank the Lord for this daily, in prayer and by a consistent Christian life. God loves us, but he also expects us to love him!

But it is not only God whom I want to thank at this moment. The Pope is not alone in guiding the barque of Peter, even if it is his first responsibility. I have never felt alone in bearing the joy and the burden of the Petrine ministry; the Lord has set beside me so many people who, with generosity and love for God and the Church, have helped me and been close to me. Above all you, dear brother Cardinals: your wisdom, your counsel and your friendship have been invaluable to me; my co-workers, beginning with my Secretary of State who has faithfully accompanied me in these years; the Secretariat of State and the whole Roman Curia, as well as all those who in various sectors offer their service to the Holy See: many, many unseen faces which remain in the background, but precisely through their silent, daily dedication in a spirit of faith and humility they have been a sure and trustworthy support to me. I also think in a special way of the Church of Rome, my Diocese! I cannot forget my Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Presbyterate, the consecrated persons and the entire People of God: in my pastoral visits, meetings, audiences and journeys I have always felt

great kindness and deep affection; yet I too have felt affection for each and all without distinction, with that pastoral charity which is the heart of every Pastor, and especially of the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of the Apostle Peter. Every day I have borne each of you in prayer, with the heart of a father.

I would like my greeting and my thanksgiving to extend to everyone: the heart of the Pope reaches out to the whole world. And I wish to express my gratitude to the Diplomatic Corps accredited to the Holy See which represents the great family of the nations. Here I think too of all those who work for good communications and I thank them for their important service.

At this point, I would also like to thank most heartily all those people throughout the world who in these recent weeks have sent me moving expressions of concern, friendship and prayer. Yes, the Pope is never alone; now I once again experience this so overwhelmingly that my heart is touched. The Pope belongs to everyone and so many persons feel very close to him. It is true that I receive letters from world leaders – from heads of state, from religious leaders, from representatives of the world of culture, and so on. But I also receive many many letters from ordinary people who write to me simply and from the heart, and who show me their affection, an affection born of our being together with Christ Jesus, in the Church. These people do not write to me in the way one writes, for example, to a prince or some important person whom they do not know. They write to me as brothers and sisters, as sons and daughters, with a sense of a very affectionate family bond. Here one can sense palpably what the Church is – not an organization, an association for religious or humanitarian ends, but a living body, a communion of brothers and sisters in the Body of Christ, which makes us all one. To experience the Church in this way and to be able as it were to put one's finger on the strength of her truth and her love, is a cause for joy at a time when so many people are speaking of her decline. But we see how the Church is alive today!

In these last months I have felt my energies declining, and I have asked God insistently in prayer to grant me his light and to help me make the right decision, not for my own good, but for the good of the Church. I have taken this step with full awareness of its gravity and even its novelty, but with profound interior serenity. Loving the Church means also having the courage to make difficult, painful decisions, always looking to the good of the Church and not of oneself.

Here, allow me to go back once again to 19 April 2005. The real gravity of the decision was also due to the fact that from that moment on I was engaged always and forever by the Lord. Always – anyone who accepts the Petrine ministry no longer has any privacy. He belongs always and completely to everyone, to the whole Church. In a manner of speaking, the private dimension of his life is completely eliminated. I was able to experience, and I experience it even now, that one receives one's life precisely when one gives it away. Earlier I said that many people who love the Lord also love the Successor of Saint Peter and feel great affection for him; that the Pope truly has brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, throughout the world, and that he feels secure in the embrace of your communion; because he no longer belongs to himself, he belongs to all and all belong to him.

The "always" is also a "for ever" – there can no longer be a return to the private sphere. My decision to resign the active exercise of the ministry does not revoke this. I do not return to private life, to a life of travel, meetings, receptions, conferences, and so on. I am not abandoning the cross, but remaining in a new way at the side of the crucified Lord. I no longer bear the power of office for the governance of the Church, but in the service of prayer I remain, so to speak, in the enclosure of Saint Peter. Saint Benedict, whose name I bear as Pope, will be a great example for me in this. He showed us the way for a life which, whether active or passive, is completely given over to the work of God.

I also thank each and every one of you for the respect and understanding with which you have accepted this important decision. I will continue to accompany the Church's journey with prayer and reflection, with that devotion to the Lord and his Bride which I have hitherto sought to practise daily and which I would like to practise always. I ask you to remember me in prayer before God, and above all to pray for the Cardinals, who are called to so weighty a task, and for the new Successor of the Apostle Peter: may the Lord accompany him with the light and strength of his Spirit.

Let us call upon the maternal intercession of the Virgin Mary, Mother of God and Mother of the Church, that she may accompany each of us and the whole ecclesial community; to her let us commend ourselves with deep confidence.

Dear friends! God guides his Church, he sustains it always, especially at times of difficulty. Let us never lose this vision of faith, which is the one true way of looking at the journey of the Church and of the world. In our hearts, in the heart of each of you, may there always abide the joyful certainty that the Lord is at our side: he does not abandon us, he remains close to us and he surrounds us with his love. Thank you!

To special groups:

I offer a warm and affectionate greeting to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors who have joined me for this, my last General Audience. Like Saint Paul, whose words we heard earlier, my heart is filled with thanksgiving to God who ever watches over his Church and her growth in faith and love, and I embrace all of you with joy and gratitude.

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