



Allocutio



Presentata Curia 27th November 2008

Allocutio: Hope

Dark days are upon us in the order of nature. Energy is taken from us and we have to supplement it with fires and lights. Depression in various forms can threaten us. Nor in the life of the Church is it any different. It can appear that the dark forces of evil are prevailing and that good cannot triumph, that the Church cannot survive. Against this the office of Peter stands as a bulwark: You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church and the forces of the underworld will not prevail against it (Mt 16:18).

The Bishop of Rome stands for the impossibility of the dark forces of the devil to have victory. The Pope stands for Christ who has conquered these dark realities.

To help illustrate this I'd like to share with you some words of two Popes. The first is Pope John XXIII when he officially convoked the Second Vatican Council. This is the Pope by the way who had seen two world wars in his life. He had been an army chaplain in World War 1 and now it is a mere sixteen years since the end of World War 2 and the bombs at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

After enumerating a number of concerns and threats that he sees, the Pope said "Distrustful souls see only darkness burdening the face of the earth. We, instead, like to reaffirm all our confidence in our Saviour who has not left the world which he redeemed." Please note in those words an attitude completely opposite to the so-called "God forsaken world"! The Pope is not siding with those who see nothing but darkness all over the place, those who see negativity and threat. He sees light shining in the darkness.

"We make ours the recommendation of Jesus that one should know how to distinguish the 'signs of the times' (Mt 16:4) and we seem to see now, in the midst of so much darkness, a few indications which augur well for the fate of the Church and humanity". And he comments that all the dark moments of the twentieth century that have been suffered so far have actually got a silver lining in them. It actually bonded people together, caused a deep desire for peace to grow, and has led to a greater closeness in the human family. So people have actually been brought closer to the Gospel and see its values. And he sees the Church as having been purified and made ready for further trials. Indeed he now calls the Council because he sees that God has prepared the right circumstances for it to take place. He is positive, he is full of faith and hope in the face of a world in which many would despair. And we could add to that the fact that communism and the fear of nuclear war were eventually overcome. Communism was undermined by John Paul II and the agreement that effectively overcame the nuclear proliferation was signed on December 8th.

Sometimes, friends, I hear certain people in the Church complain that things are terrible, that the end must be near, that God must be very angry with the world, that the Church is riddled with agents of Satan. That is the wrong mentality, we need to be more positive. We must not exaggerate evil nor its power nor should we fear that evil will win out. That will never happen because the powers of hell cannot prevail. We need to be more positive, more full of hope and faith, because God is more in charge than we can imagine and Jesus has given us the guarantee that good is triumphing.

I come now to my second illustration. Pope Benedict in his recent encyclical on Christian hope makes a very interesting comment about that great day of final judgement which we heard about in Last Sunday's Gospel. Because he noticed something I had noticed too. I remember once visiting Padua, St. Anthony's town in Italy. There is a church there in which somebody (maybe Giotto) painted a Last Judgement scene and it would nearly scare you to death. The imagery of devils driving souls into hell is very vivid. The Pope says that that is the wrong way to read the day of final judgement. We must see it rather as the day that all who have suffered so much injustice and inhumanity receive finally their just recompense.



Allocutio



In that letter the Pope referred to a small number of recent philosophers who have pondered the question of evil. They wonder about all who have suffered from mankind's inhumanity. The only way these philosophers can see this deep cry for justice in us ever being achievable is that there has to be a resurrection from the dead. So Christ's return in glory is the only way, the only hope that the world has that all the innocent of history can be vindicated. And so the Pope says, "The image of the last Judgement is not primarily an image of terror, but an image of hope." Here again we see how a Pope looks on things: positively, not negatively.

And that is precisely the message of Christ's Resurrection. He was vindicated and glorified after his cruel and utterly unfair execution. He unlike others did not turn to anger or hate of others in this outrage. He kept to his own conviction about love. And that is the real message given us by his own example: Go the road of love, go the road of great love and you will come to Resurrection.

A Christian must always be upbeat about life and the future. Yes, there will always be challenges and trials. But the spirit we live with is that the trials are just temporary pains as we grow.

Can I make this final point however! While all this is true a plain fact is that anyone can live in a situation which causes complete darkness to overcome them. We who may have to work at times in grim circumstances need to take care of ourselves. I recall when I first worked in the Marriage Tribunal I began to get a bit down because all I was hearing was pain and suffering. I spoke to someone about it and as a result I was put in touch with a group in the Christian Family Movement who provided for me good examples of married life and it gave me a better view of married life. Likewise I was put into a parish and there met so many people of ordinary circumstances that helped restore a more balanced vision of life.

People who care for other people have to mind their own mental outlook. I appreciate here that we are all unique. But if you find yourself seeing only darkness in your work for Christ then something is wrong. Our Popes have shown us that our outlook must always be bright.

Amen.

Fr Paul Churchill