

Homily for a Mass in Thanksgiving for the Pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI and Seeking the Holy Spirit's Guidance for the College of Cardinals in the Election of a Successor to the Chair of Peter

Thursday, February 28, 2013
Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament - Altoona

A famous actor was once the guest of honor at a social gathering where he received many requests to recite favorite excerpts from Shakespeare or verses from some of the great poets.

On that occasion, one lady asked if he would recite the 23rd Psalm. This famous actor agreed on the condition that when he was finished, the audience would allow one other person to recite the 23rd Psalm as well.

So this actor with perfect pronunciation and projection of his booming voice began to say the words, "The Lord is my shepherd, there is nothing I shall want." His recitation was dramatic and done without any flaw.

The audience stood to applaud. This famous actor finally got the group to quiet down, and invited to the front an elderly priest. He was the retired pastor of the local parish.

The priest began to speak in a soft voice which was obviously weak with age. His pronunciation was not perfect because English was not his first language. He was born and raised in a small village in Europe and he still had a fairly strong accent.

When he finished, he quietly returned to his seat. There was no applause, but it was obvious that the audience was deeply moved by his recitation of the 23rd Psalm. The famous actor who had proposed that this elderly priest be heard had a tear in his eyes.

Someone asked the famous actor why did everyone applaud his recitation and cry when the priest spoke. The actor, who considered the elderly priest to be his spiritual father said, "The difference is, I know the words of the Psalm, but he knows the Shepherd."

The opening words of the 23rd Psalm contain a simple profession of faith and an act of faith. The profession of faith is found in the acclamation, “The Lord is my shepherd.”

Did you even notice that whenever we pray this 23rd Psalm, we pray it with a simple, but deep conviction that the Lord God is real? And there is a simple, but deep conviction that with the Lord God we want nothing because God is everything and means everything to us.

Yesterday, in his final public address to all of us in the Church, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on his simple, but deep conviction that with the Lord God as our Shepherd, we want nothing because God is everything and means everything to us.

And Pope Benedict reflected on this simple, but deep conviction with great joy and thanksgiving. This is what he said:

At this time, I have within myself a great trust in God, because I know – all of us know – that the Gospel’s word of truth is the strength of the Church: it is her life.

The Gospel purifies and renews. It bears fruit wherever the community of believers hears and welcomes the grace of God in truth and lives in charity. This is my faith, this is my joy.

Then, Pope Benedict expressed even more that he not only knows the Psalm but he knows the Shepherd and he wants us to know that we should know the Shepherd as well. He said,

We are in the Year of Faith, which I desired in order to strengthen our own faith in God in a context that seems to push faith more and more toward the margins of life. I would like to invite everyone to renew firm trust in the Lord.

I would like that we all entrust ourselves as children to the arms of God, and rest assured that those arms support us and us to walk every day, even in times of struggle. I would like everyone to feel loved by the God who gave His Son for us and showed us His boundless love. I want everyone to feel the joy of being Christian.

And finally he says,

In a beautiful prayer to be recited daily in the morning it says, “I adore you, my God, I love you with all my heart. I thank you for having created me, for having made me a Christian.”

Yes, we are happy for the gift of faith: it is the most precious good that no one can take from us! Let us thank God for this every day, with prayer and with a coherent Christian life. God loves us, but He also expects that we love Him!

This desire of Pope Benedict that we “feel loved by the God who gave His Son for us and showed us His boundless love,” is the message that Jesus, the Good Shepherd shares with us in today’s Gospel reading; that we should remain in his love. And he reminds us that if we remain in his love, our joy will be complete.

This is the message of Pope Benedict in his first encyclical letter, *Deus caritas est* (God is love), that he published on Christmas day, December 25, 2005; the first year of his pontificate. In that letter he wrote:

Faith, hope and love go together. Faith tells us that God has given his Son for our sakes and gives us the victorious certainty that it is really true: God is love! It transforms our impatience and our doubts into the sure hope that God holds the world in his hands.

Faith, which sees the love of God revealed in the pierced heart of Jesus on the Cross, gives rise to love. Love is the light—and in the end, the only light—that can always illuminate a world grown dim and give us the courage needed to keep living and working. Love is possible, and we are able to practice it because we are created in the image of God.

Pope Benedict knows the Shepherd as described by the Prophet Ezekiel who says in the first reading today, “Shepherds, hear the word of the Lord God,” who says, “I rescue the sheep from every place where it was cloudy and dark.”

In his farewell address yesterday, Pope Benedict stated that he is full of gratitude for all those who pray for him as we do here today. He says:

“I would like to offer heartfelt thanks to all the many people throughout the whole world, who, in recent weeks have sent me moving tokens of concern, friendship and prayer. Yes, the Pope is never alone: now I experience this [truth] again in a way so great as to touch my very heart. The Pope belongs to everyone, and so many people feel very close to him.

“I receive many letters from ordinary people who write to me simply from their heart and let me feel their affection, which is born of our being together in Christ Jesus, in the Church. These people write to me as brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, with the sense of very affectionate family ties.

“Here, one can touch what the Church is – not an organization, not an association for religious or humanitarian purposes, but a living body, a community of brothers and sisters in the Body of Jesus Christ, who unites us all. To experience the Church in this way and almost be able to touch with one’s hands the power of His truth and His love, is a source of joy, in a time in which many speak of its decline.”

As an expression of gratitude, concern, affection and friendship, many of you, especially our young people, have written down thoughts and prayers for Pope Benedict. What a powerful witness and expression of the living body which is the Church in the Diocese of Altoona-Johnstown as those written messages were brought forward in procession.

I hope you realize that as much as you and I appreciate Pope Benedict who has served faithfully as a Shepherd for the whole Church, he sees in your thoughts and prayers an opportunity for him to be able to touch the power of Christ’s truth and love. You are a source of joy for Pope Benedict!

In his farewell message, Pope Benedict asks nothing more for himself, but instead he asks prayers for the Church and for whoever will succeed him as the next Pope. He asks our prayers for the Cardinals of the Church who will elect the successor to the chair of Peter.

The written thoughts and prayers for these intentions remain here, but I have written to Apostolic Nuncio in Washington, and asked him to convey our gratitude and prayerful best wishes to Pope Benedict.

But we should not forget that it is in this celebration of the Holy Eucharist that we offer praise and thanks to God for the gift of Benedict XVI who knows the words of the 23rd Psalm. But more important, he knows the Shepherd and Pope Benedict XVI has shown us the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ, through his ministry these past eight years.

Today's Gospel reading comes from the final conversation that Jesus had with his disciples at the Last Supper. Jesus spoke of the difficult times that he was about to face in his passion and death, but he also spoke words of encouragement.

Jesus said, "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I call you friends because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."

So, let's close with what will be remembered as the last conversation Pope Benedict has with all us at the end of his ministry as the Shepherd of our Church. There is no sense of discouragement or sound of distress or regret as our Holy Father says to us:

"Finally, Dear friends! God guides His Church, maintains her always, and especially in difficult times. Let us never lose this vision of faith, which is the only true vision of the way of the Church and the world.

In our heart, in the heart of each of you, let there be always the joyous certainty that the Lord is near, that He does not abandon us, that He is near to us and that He surrounds us with His love. Thank you!"

The famous actor received applause as he recited the words, "The Lord is my Shepherd. There is nothing I shall want." But the people were more deeply moved by the elderly priest. The difference? The actor knew the Psalm, but the priest knew the Shepherd.

- Thanks be to God for the gift of Jesus the Good Shepherd.
- Thanks be to God for the gift of the Church which Jesus founded upon Peter and the Apostles.
- Thanks be to God for Benedict XVI who has served as successor to Peter;
- Thanks be to God for Benedict XVI who loves the Church.

- Thanks be to God for Benedict XVI who knows the Shepherd, the Lord Jesus and has taught us how to know him, love him, and serve him, because our Shepherd knows, and loves, and serves us!