

Pastoral Letter on Freedom of Conscience and Religion
Permanent Council of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops
April 2012

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

In his General Audience of 18 April 2012, Pope Benedict XVI gave a catechetical reflection on what he called the “Little Pentecost” in the life of the early Church (Acts of the Apostles, chapter 4), and the lessons the early Christian community learned when “confronted by dangers, difficulties and threats”. The full text of the Holy Father’s catechesis is on the Vatican website at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/audiences/2012/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20120418_en.html. A summary of the catechesis was published by the Vatican Information Service and is attached to these questions.

- 1. How have our religious liberties in Canada been threatened or jeopardized over the past few years? In what way has this touched my person life? In what way has this affected the Church in Canada? My diocese? My parish?**
- 2. What has been our response to these challenges and threats to our religious liberty?**
- 3. What prevents us from giving a bold, Christian witness today in Canada?**
- 4. What have been the historical events that influenced, hindered and impeded our proclamation and our way of being Church?**
- 5. How have certain events helped us to refine and rethink our proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ?**
- 6. What is the Spirit saying to the Church? What new forms of public Gospel witness is the Spirit requiring of us today?**
- 7. What major fruits have been produced in our Churches through the transmission of the faith?**
- 8. How much are individual Christian communities prepared to acknowledge these fruits, to sustain them and to nourish them?**
- 9. What fruits are greatly lacking?**
- 10. Is there a real sense of urgency and boldness present in our parish communities today?**

THE CHURCH MUST NOT FEAR PERSECUTIONS BUT TRUST IN THE PRESENCE OF GOD

Vatican City, 18 April 2012 (VIS) - Returning to a recent series of catecheses on the theme of prayer, Benedict XVI dedicated his general audience this morning to what has been called the "Little Pentecost", an event which coincided with a difficult moment in the life of the nascent Church.

The Acts of the Apostles tell us how Peter and John were released from prison following their arrest for preaching the Gospel. They returned to their companions who, listening to their account of what had happened, did not reflect on how to react or defend themselves, or on what measures to adopt; rather, "in that moment of trial they all raised their voices together to God", Who replied by sending the Holy Spirit.

"This was the unanimous and united prayer of the whole community, which was facing persecution because of Jesus", the Pope explained. It involved the community "because the experiences of the two Apostles did not concern only them, but the entire Church. In suffering persecution for Jesus' sake, the community not only did not give way to fear and division, but was profoundly united in prayer".

When believers suffer for the faith, "unity is consolidated rather than undermined, because it is supported by unshakeable prayer. The Church must not fear the persecutions she is forced to suffer in her history, but must trust always, as Jesus did in Gethsemane, in the presence, help and strength of God, invoked in prayer".

Before trying to understand what had happened the first community sought to interpret events through the faith, using the Word of God. In the Acts of the Apostles St. Luke notes how the community of Jerusalem began by invoking God's greatness and immensity. Then, using the Psalms, those early Christians recalled how God had acted in history alongside His people, "showing Himself to be a God Who is concerned for human beings, Who does not abandon them", Benedict XVI said. Subsequently the events were read "in the light of Christ, Who is the key to understanding all things, even persecution. The opposition to Jesus, His passion and death were reread ... as the accomplishment of the plan of God the Father for the salvation of the world. ... In prayer, meditating on Sacred Scripture in the light of the mystery of Christ helps us to interpret current reality as part of the history of salvation which God enacts in the world".

Thus the plea the first Christian community of Jerusalem made to God in prayer was not "to be defended, to be spared from trials or to enjoy success, but only to be able to proclaim ... the Word of God frankly, freely and courageously". The community also asked that "their proclamation be accompanied by the hand of God so that healing, signs and wonders could be accomplished. In other words, they wanted to become a force for the transformation of reality, changing the hearts, minds and lives of men and bringing the radical novelty of the Gospel".

"We too", the Holy Father concluded his catechesis, "must bring the events of our daily lives into our prayer, in order to seek their most profound significance. And we too, like the first Christian community, allowing ourselves to be illuminated by the Word of God and meditating on Sacred Scripture, may learn to see that God is present in our lives, even at moments of difficulty, and that everything ... is part of a plan of love in which the final victory over evil, sin and death is truly is that of goodness, grace, life and God".