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The Sixth Sunday of Easter (A)

What was it that Philip proclaimed to the crowds of Samaria that made them all pay "attention to what was said" (Acts 8:6)? He proclaimed Christ our hope to them, just as Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed to us last week and people all across the world listened to his message. Were you among them?

Already here in the Acts of the Apostles we see the differentiation of the three-fold ministry of bishop, priest and deacon established by Christ Jesus.

This Philip who preaches to Samaria is not the Apostle, but one of the "seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom" (Acts 6:3). This Philip, together with the other six men, were "set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid hands upon them," entrusting to them the ministry of preaching and of service to the poor (Acts 6:6).

The apostles sent Peter and John to the new believers in Samaria precisely because Philip was a deacon; he was not entrusted with the sacred power to call down the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation. Philip could baptize, but he could not confirm. Peter and John "laid hands upon them and they received the Holy Spirit" (Acts 8:17). In just a few weeks' time, His Excellency Bishop Lucas will come, as the

successor of the Apostles, to call the Holy Spirit down upon some of our young people as he administers the Sacrament of Confirmation.

What, then, is the Sacrament of Confirmation? It is more than a mere rite of passage and far more than an individual confirming his or her own faith. In the Sacrament, it is not the one receiving it who does the confirming, but the Bishop, the Successor of the Apostles. He confirms that the faith entrusted to a person in Baptism is the faith of the Apostles living and true and in this way the Sacrament builds up and strengthens the Body of Christ, the Church.

Jesus tells us that after we receive the Holy Spirit "you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). For this reason the Second Vatican Council teaches that through the Sacrament of Confirmation the faithful "are more perfectly bound to the Church and are endowed with the special strength of the Holy Spirit. Hence they are, as true witnesses of Christ, more strictly obliged to spread the faith by word and deed."¹

Here, then, we come to the command of Saint Peter, the first Pope: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope" (I Peter 3:15). Peter's successor invoked these words on at least three

¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 11.

occasions during his visit to us, thereby showing their great importance.

When Pope Benedict XVI came to us a few days ago, he came as an apostle, "sent by Jesus Christ," and "as a friend, a preacher of the Gospel."² He came bringing to us the message of Christian hope and the exhortation to share our hope, our faith, with everyone we meet.

He came not only to "strengthen further the bonds of communion that unite us," but also to spur us on to a deeper faith in Jesus Christ, to live more faithfully as his disciples so that our lives might bear greater witness to Christ our hope.

He pointedly asked us:

Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs? Is it consistent for practicing Catholics to ignore or exploit the poor and the marginalized, to promote sexual behavior contrary to Catholic moral teaching, or to adopt positions that contradict the right to life of every human being from conception to natural death? Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.³

The Holy Father has challenged us to live our lives in conformity with the truth of the Gospel. Does your faith shape every aspect of your life?

² Pope Benedict XVI, Video Message to Catholics and People of the United States of America on the Occasion of the Upcoming Apostolic Journey (8 April 2008) and Address at the Welcome Ceremony (16 April 2008).

³ *Ibid.*, Meeting with the Bishops of the United States of America, 16 April 2008.

How, then, are we to make the changes necessary to live more faithfully as followers of Jesus Christ?

We must first of all call upon the Holy Spirit, who will "be with you always, the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot accept, because it neither sees nor knows him" (John 14:16-17). Secondly, we must heed the words of Saint Peter to always be ready to give a reason for our faith. We do so first of all within the family.

During his Apostolic Visit, Pope Benedict XVI spoke often of the role of the family, noting, "the family is the primary place for evangelization, for passing on the faith, for helping young people to appreciate the importance of religious practice and Sunday observance."⁴

And so parents, grandparents and godparents, I ask you: when was the last time you spoke to your children, grandchildren or godchildren about your faith, about the hope that is in you? When was the last time you sincerely sought to understand your faith more clearly in order to explain it more fully and convincingly?

This task is given to each and every one of us. Each of us has a solemn duty to grow in the knowledge of the faith, in the knowledge of the truth, and to share this hope with everyone we meet. This is why the Lord has given us the Holy Spirit.

⁴ *Ibid.*

At the same time that we seek to grow in faith and in the knowledge of faith, handing it on to each generation, we must also seek to conform our lives ever more closely to this truth, to this faith, to live lives of integrity. In this way we will keep the commands of the Lord and will know his love.

His commands are not given as a set of prohibitions to limit our freedom. Rather, they open us up and show us and guide us along the path of true freedom, along the path of life!

What do you seek in life? Do you seek happiness? Contentment? Peace? Of course you do. Have you found it yet? I tell you, you will never find it apart from Jesus Christ!

He says to us today, "Whoever has my commandments and observes them is the one who loves me. And whoever loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and reveal myself to him" (John 14:21).

Today, my friends, call upon the Holy Spirit to help you follow the command of Christ to love God and neighbor. By faithfully following him you will find life, joy and peace and in this way you will be filled with hope, the hope that makes all things new in Christ. Amen!