



The Holy See

GENERAL AUDIENCE OF JOHN PAUL II

Castelgandolfo

Wednesday, 6 August 2003

Pope Pius X: "total fidelity to Christ and passionate love for his Church"

Pope Paul VI: "lofty stature as a teacher and defender of the faith"

1. My Predecessor St Pius X was elected 100 years ago on 4 August 1903. Giuseppe Sarto was born in Riese, a small town in the Pre-Alps Veneto region which had remained deeply Christian, and he spent all his life in the Veneto until his election as Pope. I greet with affection the large group of pilgrims from Treviso who, accompanied by their Bishop, have come to pay homage to their illustrious fellow countryman.

Your presence, dear brothers and sisters, gives me the opportunity to speak about the important role of this Successor of Peter in the history of the Church and of humanity at the beginning of the 20th century. In raising him to the honours of the altar on 29 May 1954, a Marian Year, Pius XII described him as an "invincible champion of the Church and a providential Saint of our times", whose work "looked like the struggle of a giant defending a priceless treasure, the inner unity of the Church in the deepest of her foundations: the faith" (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* XLVI [1954], 308). May this holy Pontiff, who left us an example of total fidelity to Christ and passionate love for his Church, continue to watch over this Church.

2. I would also like to commemorate another great Pope. Indeed, today is the 25th anniversary of 6 August 1978, on which *the Servant of God Pope Paul VI* passed away in this same Castel Gandolfo residence. It was the evening of the day on which the Church celebrates that mystery of light, the Transfiguration of Christ, "the Sun that never sets" (*Liturgical hymn*). It was a Sunday, the weekly Easter, the Day of the Lord and of the gift of the Spirit (cf. Apostolic Letter *Dies Domini*, n. 19).

I have already had the opportunity to reflect on the stature of Paul VI at a recent General Audience on the occasion of the 40th anniversary of his election as Bishop of Rome. Today, in the very place where he ended his life on earth, I would like in spirit to listen once again, together with you, dear brothers and sisters, to *his spiritual testament*, that last supreme word which was, precisely, *his death*.

At his last General Audience, four days before his death on Wednesday, 2 August, he spoke to the pilgrims about faith as the strength and light of the Church (cf. *Homily*, 2 August 1978; *ORE*, 10 August 1978, p. 4). Furthermore, in the text he had prepared for the Angelus of 6 August, which he was unable to deliver, turning his gaze to the transfigured Christ, he wrote: "That light, which bathes [him], is and also will be our share of inheritance and of splendour. We are called to share such great glory because we are "partakers of the divine nature' (II Pt 1: 4)" (*Angelus*, 6 August 1978; *ORE*, 17 August 1978, p. 1).

3. Paul VI was aware of the importance of adapting the acts and decisions of each day to the "great departure" for which he had been gradually preparing himself. This is borne out by what he wrote, for example, in *Pensiero alla Morte* (a thought on death). In it, we read one phrase among others that reminds us precisely of today's feast, the Transfiguration: "So", he wrote, "I would like, in ending, to be in the light.... In my last glance I realize that this fascinating and mysterious scene [of the world] is a reverberation, a reflection of the one and only Light... an invitation to view the invisible Sun, *quem nemo vidit umquam* (cf. Jn 1: 18): *unigenitus Filius, qui est in sinu Patris, Ipse enarravit* (whom no one has ever seen: the only Son who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known). So be it, Amen" (*Pensiero alla Morte*, pp. 24-25).

For believers, *death is like the final "amen"* of their earthly existence. So it certainly was for the Servant of God Paul VI, who in the "great departure" made manifest his most exalted profession of faith. He, who at the closure of the Year of the Faith had solemnly proclaimed: "*I believe in the People of God*", sealed it with his last, utterly personal "amen", as the *crowning of a commitment to Christ*, which had given his whole life meaning.

4. "The light of the faith never fades". So we sing in a liturgical hymn. Let us thank God today because these words came true in my beloved Predecessor. Twenty-five years after his passing, his lofty stature as a *teacher and defender of the faith* appear ever more resplendent to us at this dramatic time in the history of the Church and of the world. Thinking back to what he wrote with regard to our time, that is, that people of our time listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers (cf. Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n. 41), let us remember him with devout gratitude as an authentic *witness of Christ Our Lord*, in love with the Church and ever perceptive in interpreting the signs of the times in contemporary culture.

May every member of the People of God - and I mean every man and every woman of good will - honour his venerable memory with the commitment to a sincere and constant search *for the truth*.

That truth which *shines in its fullness on the face of Christ*, and which the Virgin Mary, as Paul VI liked to recall, helps us to understand and to live better, through her tender, motherly intercession.

To the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors

To the English-speaking pilgrims present at this Audience, especially those from England, Ireland and Malta, I offer special greetings. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the grace and peace of Jesus Christ.

To young people, the sick and newly-weds

Lastly, I greet you, dear *young people, sick people and newly-weds*, and I hope that the light of Christ transfigured which we contemplate today may brighten your lives and fill your hearts with the joy that is based on Christian hope.