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Benedict XVI, Vicar of Christ

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Bishop Javier Echevarría

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In the afternoon of last April 19, when the fumata bianca announced that the new Pope had already been elected, the people – who were crowding into St Peter's Square – broke out into a mighty applause and a similar thing happened in very many other towns and countries. No one knew who he was. The choral manifestations of jubilation were not

for this or that person. They were for the Successor of St. Peter and the Vicar of Christ on earth. Once more was verified what St. Ambrose wrote very many centuries ago: “Ubi Petrus, ibi Ecclesia” (Where Peter is, there is the Church.) Already from that moment the Church and all her children were very happy with the new Roman Pontiff. Less than an hour later we met Benedict XVI and we received his apostolic blessing. We felt then the emotion of proving once more that the Successor of Peter is with the whole Church and the Church exults with his presence.

When the hours have gone by, you begin to reflect on what you have lived with such great joy. The brevity of the Conclave – barely 24 hours – has been the object of quite a few commentaries. Within the unique mother Church there exist legitimate differences of language, mentalities, experiences. But the Holy Spirit

makes them converge when one is looking for who can best lead the Church, to face the challenges presented by our epoch, continuing in a dynamic and creative way the work of the most beloved and unforgettable John Paul II.

The last homily pronounced before his election to the chair of Peter, and the first message of Benedict XVI, on the morning of 20 April, allow one to draw up an overall picture of the challenges that have to be faced and those to which the Pope will not fail to give a response. Faith in Christ, our Lord and Redeemer, is the centre on which the challenges of our time converge and from where also the adequate response is born. From this awareness comes the petition that the Lord “may give us a new shepherd according to his heart, a shepherd who will guide us to the knowledge of Christ, to his love, to

true happiness”, a petition of the Liturgy that Heaven has heard.

Attaining “the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4,13) is the task that each new Christian generation has to carry out. In our days many are the ideological currents and intellectual fashions that shake the one who makes up his mind to go along the path of faith. With faith we open our heart to the saving mercy of God. The mercy of God is a joyful affirmation, a positive reality that does not harm anyone and fills everyone with peace and hope. But divine mercy puts a limit to evil, as John Paul II used to say. And the “father of lies” (Jn 8,44) feels wounded and continually seeks new forms of resistance, to take us away with subtle deceits from faith in the Creed of the Church, making us think that, to keep up to the level

of the present times, one has to let oneself be led by any wind of doctrine (cf. Eph 4, 14). Only the person who were to read certain features of our culture and quite a few events of our era superficially could think that this is an exaggeration.

Fortunately this is only a part, that makes noise and causes sadness, but it is only a part. Benedict XVI reminds us of a fact that is seen by everyone: “the funeral of John Paul II has been a truly extraordinary experience, in which in some way the power of God has been seen, who, through the Church, wants to make of all the peoples a great family, through the unifying force of Truth and Love.” All those who flocked spontaneously to Rome, also non-Catholics and unbelievers, facing great delays and uncomfortable conditions with good grace, to give a last and moving

greeting to the one who for almost three decades guided us in the path of the faith, were the fruit that the generous earth gives back to the one who on its ground worked with all his strength, giving himself in the sight of everyone up to his last breath. Clear is the example of holiness, which calls us to give our life generously in order to take Christ to every corner of the world. “We ought to be animated – we heard the then Cardinal Ratzinger in the homily of April 18 – with a holy anxiety to take to all the gift of faith, of friendship with Christ. Truly, love; friendship with God has been given to us so that it may also reach the rest. We have received the faith to give it to others,” and with the faith we also have to offer our availability to cooperate, with an attitude of open dialogue, in the construction of a true social development, in justice, freedom and peace.

Benedict XVI has traced out the great lines of the programme of his pontificate. The Church must continue on its way, during this third millennium, illuminating human life with the light of the Gospel, which with the help of the Holy Spirit Vatican Council II applied to our time, whose action it should carry on. Particularly during this year, the Eucharist, heart of the life of the Church and source of its evangelising mission, will be the permanent centre of the petrine ministry to which the new Roman Pontiff has been called. With the strength of the Eucharist one has to seek, with effective effort and in the unique truth, full unity among all those who believe in Christ, give an impulse to the theological dialogue and take the specific steps that move hearts towards unity. Above all what is necessary is interior conversion, a necessary premise for true progress on the path of ecumenism. Efforts

will not be spared in the promotion of the dialogue among cultures and of peace, so that from the mutual understanding may be born the conditions of a better future for everyone. Benedict XVI will continue the solicitous attention of John Paul II to young people, because they are the future and the hope of the Church and of humanity. And, above all, the Holy Father declares that his task consists in making the light of Christ shine forth before the men and women of today, and with this awareness he directs himself openly to each one, also to those who follow other religions and those who simply look for a response to the fundamental problems of human existence.

Benedict XVI is ready to undertake these tasks, trusting in the help of God, in our prayers and in our fidelity to Christ. He puts entirely at the service of his high mission the

many gifts that God has granted him. His profound theological intelligence and his equally deep piety, the experience acquired from very many years of service to the Church as a close collaborator of John Paul II, his realistic vision of the drama of secularisation and relativism, the refinement and sensitivity well-known by those who have been close to him – far removed from the cliché spread by some unfriendly person –, his capacity to listen and to appreciate the opinion of the others, his wide horizons, which have moved some of the most important European intellectuals of our time to want to have a public dialogue with him.

In these first days of his pontificate more than once he has referred to himself making allusion to the fragility of the insufficient instruments that the Lord deigns to employ. Men feel themselves

insufficient when God approaches to entrust a mission to them. We, children of God and of the Church, know that it is the hour of unity, of which the Successor of Peter is the principle and visible foundation. Already from now he deserves the affectionate adhesion and gratitude of all for his concern in the exercise of the universal ministry that he now commences. Personally I repeat many times, and I also advise others to do the same, a brief prayer that I listened to very many times from the lips of St. Josemaría Escrivá: Omnes cum Petro ad Iesum per Mariam (Everyone with Peter to Jesus through Mary).
