CHRISM MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saint Peter's Basilica
Holy Thursday, 5 April 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Leo Tolstoi, the Russian writer, tells in a short story of a harsh sovereign who asked his priests and sages to show him God so that he might see him. The wise men were unable to satisfy his desire.
Then a shepherd, who was just coming in from the fields, volunteered to take on the task of the priests and sages. From him the king learned that his eyes were not good enough to see God. Then, however, he wanted to know at least what God does. "To be able to answer your question", the shepherd said to the king, "we must exchange our clothes".

Somewhat hesitant but impelled by curiosity about the information he was expecting, the king consented; he gave the shepherd his royal robes and had himself dressed in the simple clothes of the poor man.

Then came the answer: "This is what God does". Indeed, the Son of God, true God from true God, shed his divine splendour: "he emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men; and being found in human form he humbled himself..., even unto death on a cross" (cf. *Phil* 2: 6ff.).

God, as the Fathers say, worked the sacrum commercium, the sacred exchange: he took on what was ours, so that we might receive what was his and become similar to God.

With regard to what happens in Baptism, St Paul explicitly uses the image of clothing: "For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ" (*Gal* 3: 27). This is what is fulfilled in Baptism: we put on Christ, he gives us his garments and these are not something external. It means that we enter into an existential communion with him, that his being and our being merge, penetrate one another.

"It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me", is how Paul himself describes the event of his Baptism in his *Letter to the Galatians* (2: 20). Christ has put on our clothes: the pain and joy of being a man, hunger, thirst, weariness, our hopes and disappointments, our fear of death, all our apprehensions until death. And he has given to us his "garments".

What in the Letter to the Galatians Paul describes as a simple "fact" of Baptism - the gift of new being - he presents to us in the *Letter to the Ephesians* as an ongoing task: "Put off your old nature which belongs to your former manner of life... and [you must] put on the new nature, created after the likeness of God in true righteousness and holiness. Therefore, putting away falsehood, let everyone speak the truth with his neighbour, for we are members of one another. Be angry but do not sin..." (*Eph* 4: 22-26).

This theology of Baptism returns in a new way and with a new insistence in priestly Ordination. Just as in Baptism an "exchange of clothing" is given, an exchanged destination, a new existential communion with Christ, so also in priesthood there is an exchange: in the administration of the sacraments, the priest now acts and speaks *"in persona Christi".* In the sacred mysteries, he does not represent himself and does not speak expressing himself, but speaks for the Other, for Christ.

Thus, in the Sacraments, he dramatically renders visible what being a priest means in general; what we have expressed with our *"Adsum* - I am ready", during our consecration to the priesthood: I am here so that you may make use of me. We put ourselves at the disposal of the One who "died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves..." (II *Cor* 5: 15). Putting ourselves at Christ's disposal means that we allow ourselves to be attracted within his "for all": in being with him we can truly be "for all".

In persona Christi: at the moment of priestly Ordination, the Church has also made this reality of "new clothes" visible and comprehensible to us externally through being clothed in liturgical vestments.

In this external gesture she wants to make the interior event visible to us, as well as our task which stems from it: putting on Christ; giving ourselves to him as he gave himself to us.

This event, the "putting on of Christ", is demonstrated again and again at every Holy Mass by the putting on of liturgical vestments. Vesting ourselves in them must be more than an external event: it means entering ever anew into the "yes" of our office - into that "no longer I" of Baptism which Ordination to the priesthood gives to us in a new way and at the same time asks of us.

The fact that we are standing at the altar clad in liturgical vestments must make it clearly visible to those present that we are there "in the person of an Other". Just as in the course of time priestly vestments developed, they are a profound symbolic expression of what the priesthood means.
I would therefore like to explain to you, dear Confreres, on this Holy Thursday, the essence of the priestly ministry, interpreting the liturgical vestments themselves, which are precisely intended to illustrate what "putting on Christ", what speaking and acting *in persona Christi*, mean.

Putting on priestly vestments was once accompanied by prayers that helped us understand better each single element of the priestly ministry.

Let us start with the *amice.* In the past - and in monastic orders still today - it was first placed on the head as a sort of hood, thus becoming a symbol of the discipline of the senses and of thought necessary for a proper celebration of Holy Mass. My thoughts must not wander here and there due to the anxieties and expectations of my daily life; my senses must not be attracted by what there, inside the church, might accidentally captivate the eyes and ears. My heart must open itself docilely to the Word of God and be recollected in the prayer of the Church, so that my thoughts may receive their orientation from the words of the proclamation and of prayer. And the gaze of my heart must be turned toward the Lord who is in our midst: this is what the *ars celebrandi* means: the proper way of celebrating.

If I am with the Lord, then, with my listening, speaking and acting, I will also draw people into communion with him.

The texts of the prayer expressed by the *alb* and the *stole* both move in the same direction.

They call to mind the festive robes which the father gave to the prodigal son who had come home dirty, in rags.

When we approach the liturgy to act in the person of Christ, we all realize how distant we are from him; how much dirt there is in our lives. He alone can give us festive robes, can make us worthy to preside at his table, to be at his service.

Thus, the prayers also recall the words of Revelation, which say that it was not due to their own merit that the robes of the 144,000 elect were worthy of God. The *Book of Revelation* says that they had washed their robes in the Blood of the Lamb and thus made them white and shining like light (cf.
Rv
7: 14).

When I was little, I used to ask myself about this: when one washes something in blood, it certainly does not become white! The answer is: the "Blood of the Lamb" is the love of the Crucified Christ. It is this love that makes our dirty clothes white, that makes our clouded spirit true and bright; that transforms us, despite all our shadows, into "light in the Lord".

By putting on the alb we must remind ourselves: he suffered for me, too. And it is only because his love is greater than all my sins that I can represent him and witness to his light.

But with the garment of light which the Lord gave us in Baptism and in a new way in priestly Ordination, we can also think of the wedding apparel which he tells us about in the parable of God's banquet.

In the homilies of Gregory the Great, I found in this regard a noteworthy reflection. Gregory distinguishes between Luke's version of the parable and Matthew's. He is convinced that the Lucan parable speaks of the eschatological marriage feast, whereas - in his opinion - the version handed down by Matthew anticipates this nuptial banquet in the liturgy and life of the Church. In Matthew, in fact, and only in Matthew, the king comes into the crowded room to see his guests. And here in this multitude he also finds a guest who was not wearing wedding clothes, who is then thrown outside into the darkness.

Then Gregory asks himself: "But what kind of clothes ought he to have been wearing? All those who are gathered in the Church have received the new garment of baptism and the faith; otherwise, they would not be in the Church. So what was it that was still lacking? What wedding clothes must there be in addition?"

The Pope responds: "the clothes of love". And unfortunately, among his guests to whom he had given new clothes, the white clothes of rebirth, the king found some who were not wearing the purple clothes of twofold love, for God and for neighbour.

"In what condition do we want to come to the feast in Heaven, if we are not wearing wedding clothes - that is, love, which alone can make us beautiful?", the Pope asks. A person without love is dark within. External shadows, of which the Gospel speaks, are only the reflection of the internal blindness of the heart (cf. *Hom.* 38, 8-13).

Now that we are preparing for the celebration of Holy Mass, we must ask ourselves whether we are wearing these clothes of love. Let us ask the Lord to keep all hostility away from our hearts, to remove from us every feeling of self-sufficiency and truly to clothe ourselves with the vestment of love, so that we may be luminous persons and not belong to darkness.

Lastly, one additional brief word on the *chasuble.* The traditional prayer when one puts on the *chasuble*
sees it as representing the yoke of the Lord which is imposed upon us as priests. And it recalls the words of Jesus, who invites us to take his yoke upon us and to learn from him who is "gentle and lowly in heart" (
Mt
11: 29).

Taking the Lord's yoke upon us means first of all: learning from him. It means always being ready to go to his school. From him we must learn gentleness and meekness: the humility of God who shows himself in his being a man.

St Gregory of Nazianzus once asked himself why God wanted to become a man. The most

important and for me the most moving part of his answer is: "God wanted to realize what obedience means to us and he wanted to measure everything on the basis of his own suffering, on the invention of his love for us. In this way, he himself can directly know what it is that we feel - what is asked of us, what indulgence we deserve - calculating our weakness on the basis of his suffering" (*Orationes* 30; *Theological Talk* IV, 6).

At times we would like to say to Jesus: Lord, your yoke is far from light. Indeed, it is tremendously heavy in this world. But then looking at the One who bore everything - who tried out on himself obedience, weakness, suffering, all the darkness -, then these complaints of ours fade. His yoke is that of loving with him. And the more we love him and with him become loving people, the lighter becomes his seemingly burdensome yoke.

Let us pray to him to help us become with him people who are loving, thereby to increasingly experience how beautiful it is to take up his yoke. Amen.