READING SCRIPTURE AS THE WORD OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

VATICAN CITY, 28 JAN 2009 (VIS) - In today's general audience, held in the Paul VI Hall, the Pope turned his attention to the theological content of St. Paul's final Letters, known as the pastoral letters because they are addressed to his close collaborators Timothy and Titus.

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These Letters, said the Holy Father, refer to a situation in which "certain erroneous and false doctrines had arisen, such as the attempt to present marriage as something bad. This concern remains current today because Scripture is sometimes read as a historical curiosity and not as the Word of the Holy Spirit, in which we can hear the voice of the Lord Himself and perceive His presence in history".

Against such doctrines, St. Paul affirmed the need to read Sacred Scripture "as 'inspired by' and proceeding from the Holy Spirit". He also speaks of the "good 'deposit', by which he means 'the tradition of apostolic faith which must be safeguarded with the help of the Holy Spirit Who dwells within us, ... and is the criterion of faithfulness to the announcement of the Gospel".

Benedict XVI highlighted how the "sense of universality" of salvation - "God wishes all mankind to be saved and to know the truth" - is "strong and decisive" in these Pauline Letters.

The Letters also contain "a reflection upon the ministerial structure of the Church. They present for the first time the triple division of bishops, priests and deacons".

"Thus", he went on, "we have the essential elements of Catholic structure. Scripture and Tradition, Scripture and announcement form a single whole. But to this structure - so to say, a doctrinal structure - must be added a personal structure, the successors of the Apostles as witnesses of the apostolic announcement".

Speaking of the episcopate, the Pope recalled how in the Letter to Timothy, for example, the bishop "is considered as the father of the Christian community. The idea of the Church as the 'house of God' has its roots in the Old Testament and is again formulated in the Letter to the Hebrews, while in the Letter to the Ephesians we read that Christians are no longer strangers and aliens, but citizens and saints, members of the house of God".

"Let us ask the Lord and St. Paul that we too, as Christians, may always be characterised - with respect to the society in which we live - as members of the 'family of God'. We also pray that the pastors of the Church may increasingly acquire parental sentiments, tender and strong at one and the same time, for the formation of the house of God, the community, the Church".