

# Mass of Thanksgiving

## **I. Introduction**

Allow me to thank you for your presence this evening – members of the Cathedral parishes, those from parishes around the Archdiocese, and those representing many organizations & groups that strengthen this local church. This Cathedral Church is the spiritual home of all Catholics in our Archdiocese and nothing gives me greater joy than to gather with you here in this magnificent edifice that speaks to us of the glory of God dwelling in our midst.

We are gathered here this evening by the Eucharistic Lord so that we might give him thanks for the life and ministry of Pope Benedict XVI. Next Thursday, February 28th, His Holiness will conclude his service as Bishop of Rome & Vicar of Christ, as shepherd of the Church throughout the world, because of the diminished strength he is experiencing in his advancing years. In this holy Mass, we are invited to pray for the Holy Father and his intentions as he embarks on a life of solitude and prayer, praying for the Church and his successor and praying for all of us that we might be transfigured into living images of God's glory by prayer, participation in the Eucharist and the sacraments, and by a life of charity.

## **II. The Transfiguration**

Moments ago we heard the account of the Transfiguration from St. Luke's Gospel. Let us be guided in our reflection on this Gospel passage by Pope Benedict XVI through whom the voice of God's Word, Scripture and Tradition, resounds so clearly.

As he did so many times before, Jesus ascended a mountain, in this case, Mt. Tabor, and there was absorbed in prayer before his Heavenly Father. He was accompanied by Peter, James, and John, his three closest followers, who witnessed what Blessed John Henry Newman called a glimpse of heaven: the glory which the Son of God eternally shared with his Father shone on Jesus' face; his clothes became a brilliant white as one day the robes of the martyrs would be. Jesus, the Word made flesh, converses with Moses and Elijah, representing the law the prophets. Pope Benedict calls our attention to the fact that in Luke's Gospel Jesus was speaking with Moses and Elijah about the Cross, about his passion and death which he would undergo to free us from the filth of sin so that with pure minds, hearts, and bodies we might

share in the glory of God for which we were created.

Grasping for words at this sight, Peter suggests that three tents be erected on that site one each for Jesus, Moses, and Elijah, representing the New and the Old Testaments, really the whole of God's Word, which speaks to us with One Voice of his plan for the creation and redemption of the world. Pope Benedict teaches us that Peter's suggestion of erecting three booths is related to the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles which had just concluded, a feast which celebrates the presence of God who pitched his tent among his people. Having glimpsed heaven, Peter wanted to extend the vision indefinitely. Yet this vision was but the foretaste of what the Lord would do in dying and rising. As St. Paul teaches in his letter to the Philippians, our second reading, Jesus was about to die for our sins and rise from the dead – so that our earthly tent, our bodies, might be conformed to his glorified body; in a word, so that ever fiber of our being might reflect the glory of the risen Christ. It is for this that we pray, go to confession, fast, and engage in charity during Lent.

Pope Benedict, reflecting on this Gospel scene, reminds us that the event of the Transfiguration took place eight days after Peter, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, confessed Jesus to be “the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Now with Christ atop Mt. Tabor, Peter and the other apostles are enveloped in a cloud, overshadowed again by the Holy Spirit of God's Presence, and in that moment they hear a voice: “This is my chosen Son; listen to him.” It is the voice of the Heavenly Father confirming Peter's confession of faith.

### **III. The Transfiguration and Pope Benedict XVI**

The foregoing is but a sampling of Pope Benedict's ability to explain profoundly the deep meaning and the hidden riches of any and texts from the bible, as well as from ancient Christian writers and masters of the spiritual life. Let us now turn again the Gospel account of the Transfiguration to see what it tells us about Pope Benedict & his long and loving service to the Church.

In this Year of Faith, Pope Benedict has turned the gaze of the whole Church to Jesus. Again & again he reminds us that faith means standing with Jesus so as to live in him. He reminds us that our faith is not about abstract principles or ethical ideals; no, at the center of our faith is the unique Person of Jesus Christ, the Son of God

made man, whose true glory and identity were revealed at Tabor and whose life and love and glory were poured out for us upon the Cross as a great stream of life and love which reaches us in the Mass and the Sacraments. As few others have done, Pope Benedict calls our attention to the truth that Christ is the only Savior of the world, only name in which we find salvation, and it is only in him that we find that endless life and glorious joy for which we long. Whatever else may happen the future, Pope Benedict has set the Church firmly on the course of the New Evangelization, challenging us to open our hearts and minds to Christ, challenging us to know and love our faith, and then to share it with fresh confidence and ardor to those around us, especially those who no longer practice their faith or who are searching for truth.

Throughout his ministry as a teacher of the faith and certainly as our Holy Father, Pope Benedict has taught us to see the Scripture not merely as a collection of writings from various centuries in differing styles; but indeed to perceive essential unity of Scripture – to see the unity between Christ, Moses, and Elijah – to see Christ as the One Word conveyed throughout the Bible from beginning to end. He has taught us to love the Scriptures, to read them with reverence, and to listen to the voice of the Master speaking to us in every passage, even those passages that are often difficult to understand.

Pope Benedict teaches us to hope, not in ourselves and in our possessions but in God. The Transfiguration was but a glimpse of heaven the route to which travels along the way of the Cross. Pope Benedict wrote profoundly on the virtue of hope speaking to the fears and insecurities that plague the people of our times, offering them reasons why they should put their hope in Christ. Travelling far more than was predicted at the beginning of his Pontificate, Pope Benedict brought this message of hope and joy to many parts of the world, never more effectively than when he was speaking to young people, especially at World Youth Days, where millions greeted him not as a rock star but more as a beloved grandfather who loved them and cared about their future.

And surely the Holy Father is not only a man of faith and hope but also of deep prayer. How he has reminded all of us – whatever our vocation or station in life may be – of the utter necessity of prayer, both private and liturgical. Like Peter & the

Apostles who were overcome with awe at the sight of Christ in glory, so Pope Benedict has taught us once again the gift of wonder and awe as we kneel down before the Christ in adoration and joy. He has taught us the purifying power of prayer which admits even to the hidden corners of the soul the light of God's glory and changes us from within. He has taught us not to value worldly glory which is merely external but rather to value glory of God which shines from within the soul made holy. And he has show how those who have transformed by Word and Sacrament, those who have set their sights on heaven where Christ Crucifies lives and reigns, are also those who dedicate themselves to building an earthly city that is marked by the works of charity, justice, freedom, and peace. Almost no one on the world stage today has spoken as clearly and forcefully for human rights and religious freedom than Pope Benedict XVI.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Last December, I had the privilege of accompanying Carl Anderson, the Supreme Knight of the Knights of Columbus, on a visit to Pope Benedict. There we sat before the Pontiff who was bone-tired yet gracious, genial & engaged. It was a face transfigured by prayer and suffering, especially during the last year. We could not know that he would soon resign the papal office but we surely did know that Pope Benedict had given everything to the Church.

In these days many people speak about the challenges that the Church is facing and about the need for ongoing structural reform in the Church, such as a restructuring and modernizing of the Roman Curia. Some of these commentators suggest that Pope Benedict has not been able to bring about these reforms during his papacy and that these challenges await not only a new Pope but the whole Church. The need for a constant reform firmly rooted in the Church's teaching is undeniable but let me suggest that Pope Benedict points to the one necessary thing: not ecclesiastical politics or administrative prowess but holiness, being overtaken from within by the glory of God shining on the face of Christ. In his teaching as in his travails, Pope Benedict has planted that seed. May it germinate and produce abundant fruit in the years ahead to the glory of God and for our salvation!