

**Homily for WOC Mass on the Occasion of the Visit of Pope Benedict XVI  
To Washington, DC  
April 14, 2008**

**Andrea M. Johnson**

***Scriptures for the Day:* Acts 11: 1-18; Psalm 42: 2-3 & 43: 3-4; John 10: 11-18**

***The Church We Want***

It is wonderful to be gathered here for liturgy with so many *committed* and *courageous* Catholic women and men, and people committed to justice for women. We are here in the midst of the Easter season, continuing to praise our God for the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, God's Anointed One, and to celebrate the visit to Washington of Pope Benedict XVI, successor to the apostle Peter as the one responsible for our church's unity and its fidelity to the vision and mission of Christ. We welcome Pope Benedict's presence and his willingness to hear the voices of his brothers and sisters. We wish to give Pope Benedict the *gift of women* in the leadership of the church!

Today, I'd like for us to think a bit about what kind of church we have inherited from the apostles, and what kind of church *we must be* as we move into the future. It might be helpful to state at first what the church IS NOT. I am reminded that Blessed Pope John XXIII, at the opening of the Second Vatican Council, told us that the church is NOT a museum! It is much less about the preservation of the past than it is about moving forward – about Jesus' dream – about building the Reign of God – which is God's plan for a just and peaceful world. It is NOT in essence a bureaucracy, but rather a pastoral and welcoming community, a powerful instrument of the Spirit of the Living Christ. It is fitting that today's readings include a marvelous story of the apostle Peter as he struggles to fulfill his leadership role in the earliest times. Peter is, in fact, a very interesting

character. Matthew's gospel tells us that he is named by Jesus as the rock on which the community will be built. But the gospels also tell us that Peter's own faith journey is itself a bit rocky, to say the least! Peter makes a lot of faux pas, but somehow, by grace, he is always able to recover, to admit his mistakes, to take a step back, to discern God's voice, to learn and to change. What is so loveable about Peter is his openness, his transparency (no excuses), and his awareness of his own limitations or fallibility!

In today's reading from the Acts of the Apostles, we hear that Peter is severely criticized by the young church's leaders in Jerusalem. These leaders thought every follower of Jesus should be circumcised, and so, they chastise Peter for *eating with the uncircumcised* in Caesarea where he has gone to preach the gospel and to baptize. Peter has a lot of explaining to do to the elders in Jerusalem because he broke their tradition. He tells his story from the beginning, stating his good intentions not to eat meat from so-called "*unclean animals*." However, in a dream, he is corrected by God who says: "Do not call anything impure that God has made clean!" Now that's what's so wonderful about Peter. He is able to learn – to be taught by God. Why do you suppose that was? I think it was because, after a few false starts, the Peter we see after Jesus' resurrection was a changed man. He became totally focused on the vision of Jesus for his church- a vision of God's reign in the *here and now*- and this made it possible for Peter to make adjustments to the "*old ways*" of "*doing religion*" or being in relationship with God and others. Peter began to dream the dream of Jesus – of an inclusive and empowering way of understanding his mission among the People of God. We call this a *basileia* vision – a community of justice and peace where all are included. This *basileia* vision of Jesus

represents a radical transformation of human beings and human institutions to a form that expresses the very character and nature of God who is All-Compassionate.

This leads me to the heart of the matter – not what the church is not, but rather what the church IS – the church IS the *herald of the Basileia or the Reign of God*. The question is how we, the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, can best express and act upon this vision of Jesus for God's people? It is Jesus' *basileia* vision and *his* acting on it that *provides the concrete image of transformation of our world*. How can we be faithful witnesses of that vision in today's world? We have received the tradition handed down from the apostles. What is God telling us *now, in light of our own experience*, about the *future* of the church?

Let's just imagine a church that is shaped *not like a pyramid*, but *rather like a circle*; Jesus, God's Anointed One, is not out of reach at the top of a pyramid, but rather, is at the center of the circle, just as he was when he preached and healed in Galilee and Judea. All are invited to be with him at the center of things. No one is excluded because of age or gender, sexual orientation or economic status, or for any other reason. It is an inclusive community – one that listens to all voices. *Because there is mutual listening*, this is a church in which people are empowering of one another, and are respectful of differences among the members. It is a community of love that embraces equality and justice for every member. *Because there is mutual listening*, it is also a church that recognizes that it is continually in need of reform – indeed, of transformation. This *ongoing transformation* is not only about personal conversion, but is also put at the service of the whole community. This can happen by transforming structures which have, in the past, excluded whole categories of people from decision-making. Imagine a

church that practices the principle of *subsidiarity*, empowering communities to make decisions locally, and allowing for the discernment and recognition of the gifts of all! In this way, the ministry of the church would reflect Jesus' ministry and that of the early apostolic church. The heart of it would be to BE *the herald of the Reign of God now*. In this *basileia* model of church, the ministerial priesthood would be acknowledged as grounded in baptism. Open to all the baptized; it would be exercised in prophetic obedience to the Holy Spirit. The teaching authority of the church would base itself on scripture, tradition and *also in reading the signs of the times* (in other words, God's revelation to us in our own time and experience). Most importantly, this would be a church that practices justice *within its own house*, and therefore, a *credible* witness; *this church would be authentically engaged* with the real life of the world, in all its complexities, recognizing and *prophetically challenging* the multiple and interlocking oppressions which afflict people in our world. This church would then be perceived as truly committed to bringing all those on the political and economic margin to the center, and indeed to the empowerment and spiritual nourishment of everyone. Its proclamation of the equality of all as image of God would be strong and true – both in the world and in the church! Only when we are faithful to the Spirit of Jesus by having all participate each according to her/his gifts, can we claim to be faithful witnesses to God's plan for a just and peaceful world.

The church's mission is *to* and *for* and *with* all people. As Elisabeth Schuessler Fiorenza has said, "*We must deconstruct the politics of "otherness,"* a kind of cultural or institutional self-definition which tends to categorize people as black or white, male or female, rich or poor, gay or straight, chosen or not chosen. From time immemorial,

women as a category, have served as the universal icon for “otherness” because they exist in every culture. But the *otherness* of women has also served as a means of disenfranchising all sorts of *others* who don’t fit into the dominant group. We must *replace the politics of “otherness” with the “discipleship of equals,”* in which all are called to wholeness and selfhood, all are chosen, all are heard, all can act - another way of characterizing the *Reign of God*. Our vision must be that of Jesus, a *basileia or circle* of God that models true community in a discipleship of equals – of women and men, of all races, sexual orientations, abilities, and ages. *All* must be eligible to be called forth to leadership in this community of God’s people on earth. It is a matter of justice and faithfulness to the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Going back to our story of the apostle Peter in Acts, we note that Peter’s report to the elders in Jerusalem included the following description of the household of the uncircumcised Roman official, Cornelius:

I had hardly begun to speak when the Holy Spirit came down on *them* in the *same* way she came on *us* in the beginning, and I remembered what Christ had said: ‘John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit’ I realized then that God was giving *them* the *same gift* that had been given to *us* when we came to believe in our Savior Jesus Christ. And *who am I to stand in God’s way?*

For all his faults, Peter truly was a man of remarkable openness and discernment. These wonderful qualities allowed him to witness credibly to the Reign of God and to be the leader that the church needed then. Our prayer for Peter’s successor, Pope Benedict, *must be* that he too will *choose* to be *such* a leader *now*, listening for God’s voice in the experience of his brothers and sisters, being *willing* to step back and to *trust* the Spirit, and *committing* himself to a leadership of inclusion, widening the circle to *include all*.