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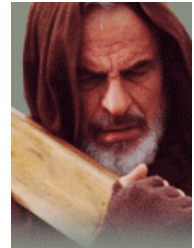
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BENEDICT XVI HIGHLIGHTS 1ST CENTURY PAPAL PRIMACY

Begins Audience Series on Apostolic Fathers

VATICAN CITY, MARCH 8, 2007 ([Zenit.org](#)).- Already in the first century, popes exercised their primacy over the other Churches, Benedict XVI says.

The Holy Father explained this on Wednesday at the general audience, which he dedicated to Pope St. Clement of Rome, the third successor of Peter.

Speaking to some 16,000 people gathered both in Paul VI Hall and St. Peter's Basilica, the Pontiff began a new series of catecheses on the Apostolic Fathers.

Benedict XVI mentioned that Clement's Letter to the Corinthians was given "[a]n almost canonical characteristic."

The letter noted that the Church of Corinth was experiencing severe divisions. "The priests of the community, in fact, had been deposed by some young upstarts," the Holy Father said.

And quoting St. Irenaeus, he explained the context of Clement's letter: "[t]he Church of Rome sent the Corinthians a very important letter to reconcile them in peace to renew their faith and to announce the tradition, a tradition they had so newly received from the apostles."

Benedict XVI continued: "Therefore we could say that [Clement's letter] is a first exercise of a Primate of Rome after the death of St. Peter."

He added that the letter "opened to the Bishop of Rome the possibility for vast intervention on the identity of the Church and its mission."

Organic connection

St. Clement's letter clarifies the distinction between hierarchy and laity.

"The clear distinction between the 'lay people' and the hierarchy does not mean, in any way, a contraposition but only the organic connection of a body, of an organism with different functions," Benedict XVI explained. "In fact, the Church is not a place for confusion and anarchy, where someone can do whatever he wants at any time; each one in this organism with an articulated structure practices his ministry according to the vocation received.

"As pertains to the heads of the communities, Clement specifies clearly the doctrine of apostolic succession."

Benedict XVI added: "The laws that regulate this derive from God himself in an ultimate analysis. The Father sent Jesus Christ, who in turn sent the apostles. These then sent out the first heads of the communities, and established that they would be followed by worthy men."

"The Church is above all a gift of God and not a creature of ours," the Pope contended, "and therefore this sacramental structure not only guarantees the common order but also the precedence of the gift of God that we all need."

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