THEOLOGY OF THE LETTERS TO THE COLOSSIANS AND EPHESIANS

VATICAN CITY, 14 JAN 2009 (VIS) - At this morning's general audience, Benedict XVI continued his series of catecheses on St. Paul, today focusing on certain theological aspects of the Apostle's Letters to the Colossians and the Ephesians.

"Only in these two Letters", he said, "is Jesus attributed the title of 'head'. ... Initially Christ is referred to as the head of the Church. This has two meanings. Firstly, that He is the governor ... Who guides and is responsible for the Christian community as its leader and its Lord. ... The Church is subject to Him, both to follow His superior guidance and to receive all the vitality that emanates from Him. ... Secondly, ... Christ is considered as head of the heavenly powers and of the entire cosmos".

Thus "these two letters give us a highly positive and fruitful message: that Christ fears no rivals because He is superior to any possible form of power that may seek to humiliate mankind. ... Hence, if we remain united to Christ we need fear no enemy or adversity. ... Even the entire cosmos is subject to Him". In this context, the Holy Father referred to the depiction of Christ as "Pantocrator", sometimes shown enthroned over the world, sometimes on a rainbow. This, he said, "indicates His equality with God at Whose right hand He sits, and hence also His unrivalled function as the guide of human destinies.

"Such a vision", he added, "can only be conceived by the Church, not in the sense that she wishes unduly to appropriate that which is not hers, but in another, dual, sense: both in that the Church recognises that in any case Christ is greater than herself, because His lordship extends beyond her confines, and in that only the Church, and not the cosmos, is defined as the Body of Christ. This means we must give positive consideration to worldly things, because Christ recapitulates them in Himself, and at the same time we must fully live our specific ecclesial identity, which is the closest to the identity of Christ Himself".

Another characteristic of these two Letters is "the concept of mystery", which means "the

inscrutable divine plan for the destiny of mankind, of peoples and of the world, ... which finds fulfilment in Christ ... in which the 'mystery' was incarnated and became tangible".

Finally, the Pope referred to another recurring theme of the Letters: "the Church as the bride of Christ ... Who is concerned for her beauty; not just the beauty acquired through Baptism, but also the beauty that must grow every day through a life of irreproachable moral behaviour, without spot or blemish.

"From here to the shared experience of Christian marriage is but a short step", he explained, "and in fact it is not clear what the initial point of reference was for the author of the Letter: whether the Christ-Church relationship provided a light in which to consider the union of man and woman; or whether experience of conjugal union was the light in which to examine the relations between Christ and the Church".

"These two Letters are a great catechesis", he concluded. "From them we can learn how to be good Christians. ... If we begin to understand that the cosmos is the mark of Christ, we understand what our relationship with the cosmos is, what problems are involved in its conservation. We learn to see it using reason, but a reason moved by love, ... respect and humility. ... If we remember that the Church is the Body of Christ, that Christ gave Himself for her, then we learn to live with Christ in mutual love, a love that unites us to God and brings us to see the image of Christ in others".