THE CHURCH, AN ASSEMBLY CALLED BY GOD IN THE WORLD

VATICAN CITY, 15 OCT 2008 (VIS) - In his general audience this Wednesday celebrated in St. Peter's Square, the Pope continued his catechesis on St. Paul, speaking today about the Apostle and the Church.

The Holy Father recalled that "the word 'ekklesia' in Greek comes from the Old Testament and means the assembly of the People of Israel called by God". The word Church appears for the first time in the Letter of St. Paul to the Thessalonians, and in other Letters he speaks of the Church of God that is in Corinth and Galatia, etc., "but he also speaks of the fact that 'I have persecuted the Church of God', not a particular local community, but the Church of God".

"The Church possesses a pluridimensional meaning: on one hand it means assemblies of God in specific places - a city, a country - but it also means the entire Church as a whole. In this way we see that the Church of God is not an association of local churches, but that these are the realisation of the one Church of God".

Benedict XVI emphasised that "the word Church is almost always accompanied by the words 'of God'; it is not a human association of ideas and common interests but a call made by God. He has called it and therefore it is one in all its manifestations. God's unity creates the Church's unity wherever it is".

In the Letter to the Ephesians, he continued, St. Paul "develops the concept of the unity of the Church in parallel with the concept of the People of God, Israel. . Paul presents the one Church of God as the 'bride of Christ', ... one body and one Spirit with Christ Himself".

"Paul knew one thing clearly: the fundamental and foundational value of Christ and of the 'word' that announces Him. Paul knew that not only do we not become Christians by force but also that, in the internal configuration of the new community, the institutional component was inevitably tied to the living 'word', the announcement of the living Christ".

The Holy Father called attention to the fact that "the purpose of Paul's evangelical work was to establish a community of believers in Christ. We find this idea in the very etymology of the word 'ekklesia', . which implies a call 'ab extra', not just the idea of joining together but of being called by God; believers are called by God Who unites them in a community, His Church".

He spoke of the Pauline concept of Church as "Body of Christ". "Regarding this term it is worthwhile to remember the two dimensions of the concept: a sociological concept according to which the body is made up of its members, without which it could not exist. . St. Paul also says that the Church is not just an organism but is truly the Body of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist in which all receive His Body, becoming truly one body . and one spirit in Christ".

"Paul knows and makes us understand that the Church is neither his nor ours; it is the 'Body of Christ', the 'Church of God', 'God's field', 'God's building'". This latter definition . attributed a term commonly used to indicate a physical place seen as sacred to a web of interpersonal relations. The relationship between the Church and the temple assumes two complementary dimensions: on one hand the characteristics of purity and separation proper to the sacred building are attributed to the ecclesial community and, at the same time, the concept of a material space of divine presence is surpassed, and applied to the reality of a living faith community".

The Pope continued, commenting that "the concept of the 'People of God', "which in St. Paul mainly applies to the people of the Old Testament, subsequently referred to pagans . who also become the People of God thanks to their unification with Christ through the Word and the Sacraments".

In the Letter to Timothy, the Holy Father said, "the Church is considered as the 'household of God', referring to the Church as the communal structure of interpersonal family relationships".

"The Apostle helps us to ever deeper understanding of the mystery of the Church in its

different dimensions as assembly of God in the world", he concluded. "This is the greatness of the Church and the greatness of our call".