

# Pope Benedict XVI General Audiences

*Most of the General Audiences, following in the traditions of earlier Popes, are centred around certain themes, including continuing the catechesis on the Psalms and Canticles of Evening Prayer, begun by Pope John Paul II. There are other audiences that fall outside of these themes and are included here. General audiences are usually delivered on a Wednesday.*

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# Reflection on the name chosen: Benedict XVI

27 April 2005

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to welcome you and I address a cordial greeting to all of you present here, as well as to those who are following us via radio and television. As I already expressed in the Sistine Chapel at my first Meeting with the Cardinals last mixed feelings fill my heart during these days when I am beginning my Petrine Ministry: amazement and gratitude to God who first of all surprised me by calling me to succeed the Apostle Peter; inner apprehension at the immensity of the task and the responsibility which have been entrusted to me. However, the certainty of the help of God, of his Most Holy Mother, the Virgin Mary, and of the Patron Saints, gives me serenity and joy. I also find support in the spiritual closeness of the entire People of God who, as I had an opportunity to say last Sunday, I continue to ask to accompany me with their persistent prayers.

After the holy death of my Venerable Predecessor John Paul II, the traditional Wednesday General Audiences are resuming today. Thus, we are returning to normality. At this first Meeting, I would like to begin by reflecting on the name that I chose on becoming Bishop of Rome and universal Pastor of the Church. I wanted to be called Benedict XVI in order to create a spiritual bond with Benedict XV, who steered the Church through the period of turmoil caused by the First World War. He was a courageous and authentic prophet of peace and strove with brave courage first of all to avert the tragedy of the war and then to limit its harmful consequences. Treading in his footsteps, I would like to place my ministry at the service of reconciliation and harmony between persons and peoples, since I am profoundly convinced that the great good of peace is first and foremost a gift of God, a precious but unfortunately fragile gift to pray for, safeguard and build up, day after day, with the help of all.

The name “Benedict” also calls to mind the extraordinary figure of the great “Patriarch of Western Monasticism”, St Benedict of Norcia, Co-Patron of Europe together with Sts Cyril and Methodius, and the women Saints, Bridget of Sweden, Catherine of Siena and Edith Stein. The gradual expansion of the Benedictine Order that he founded had an enormous influence on the spread of Christianity across the Continent. St Benedict is therefore deeply venerated, also in Germany and particularly in Bavaria, my birthplace; he is a fundamental reference point for European unity and a powerful reminder of the indispensable Christian roots of his culture and civilization.

We are familiar with the recommendation that this Father of Western Monasticism left to his monks in his Rule: “Prefer nothing to the love of Christ” (Rule 72:11; cf. 4:21). At the

beginning of my service as Successor of Peter, I ask St Benedict to help us keep Christ firmly at the heart of our lives. May Christ always have pride of place in our thoughts and in all our activities!

I think back with affection to my Venerable Predecessor John Paul II, to whom we are indebted for his extraordinary spiritual heritage. “Our Christian communities”, he wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, “must become genuine “schools’ of prayer, where the meeting with Christ is expressed not just in imploring help but also in thanksgiving, praise, adoration, contemplation, listening and ardent devotion, until the heart truly “falls in love” (n. 33). This is what Pope John Paul II did. He sought to put these instructions into practice himself, commenting on the Psalms of Lauds and Vespers at the most recent of his Wednesday Catecheses. Just as at the beginning of his Pontificate John Paul II wanted to continue the reflections on the Christian virtues that his Predecessor had begun (cf. *L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, General Audience of 25 October 1978, p. 5), I also intend to continue in the coming months the reflections that he had prepared on the second part of the Psalms and Canticles which comprise Vespers. Next therefore, I will take up his Catecheses where he left off, after his General Audience last 26 January.

Dear Friends, thank you again for your visit, and thank you for the affection with which you surround me. I cordially reciprocate these sentiments with a special Blessing, which I impart to all of you here, to your relatives and to all your loved ones.



# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity

## Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2006

18 January 2006

“If two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven” (Mt 18:19). This solemn assurance of Jesus to his disciples also sustains our prayer.

The “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity”, by now a tradition, begins today. It is an important event for reflecting on the tragedy of the division of the Christian community and to ask with Jesus himself “that they may all be one... so that the world may believe” (Jn 17:21). We also do so here today, in harmony with a great multitude throughout the world.

Indeed, prayer “for the union of all” involves Catholics, Orthodox and Protestants, brought together in different forms, times and ways by the same faith in Jesus Christ, the one Lord and Saviour.

Prayer for unity is part of the central nucleus which the Second Vatican Council calls “the soul of the whole ecumenical movement” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8), a nucleus that includes public and private prayers, conversion of heart and holiness of life. This vision takes us back to the heart of the ecumenical problem, which is obedience to the Gospel in order to do God’s will with his necessary and effective help.

The Council explicitly pointed this out to the faithful, declaring: “The closer their union with the Father, the Word, and the Spirit, the more deeply and easily will they be able to grow in mutual brotherly love” (ibid., n. 7).

The elements that, despite the persistent division, still unite Christians, make it possible to raise a common prayer to God. This communion in Christ sustains the entire ecumenical movement and indicates the very purpose of the search for unity of all Christians in God’s Church. It is what distinguishes the ecumenical movement from any other initiative of dialogue and relations with other religions and ideologies.

In this too, the teaching of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Ecumenism is precise: "Taking part in this movement, which is called ecumenical, are those who invoke the Triune God and confess Jesus as Lord and Saviour" (ibid., n. 1).

The common prayers that are prayed throughout the world, particularly in this period or around Pentecost, also express the desire for a common commitment to re-establish communion among all Christians. These prayers in common "are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity" (ibid., n. 8).

With this affirmation, the Second Vatican Council basically interprets what Jesus said to his disciples when he assured them that if two of them were to agree on earth about anything for which they were to ask the Father who is in Heaven, he would grant it, "because" where two or three are gathered in his name he is in their midst.

After the Resurrection he assured them further that he would be with them "always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20). It is Jesus' presence in the community of disciples and in our prayer itself which guarantees its effectiveness, to the point that he promised: "whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven" (Mt 18:18).

However, let us not limit ourselves to imploring. We can also thank the Lord for the new situation that, with effort, has been created in ecumenical relations among Christians in brotherhood rediscovered through the establishment of strong ties of solidarity, the growth of communion and the forms of convergence achieved - certainly, in an unequal manner - between the various dialogues.

There are many reasons to give thanks. And if there is still so much to hope for and to do, let us not forget that God has given us a great deal on our way towards unity. Let us therefore be grateful to him for these gifts.

The future lies before us. The Holy Father John Paul II of happy memory - who did and suffered so much for the ecumenical cause - has opportunely taught us that "an appreciation of how much God has already given is the condition which disposes us to receive those gifts still indispensable for bringing to completion the ecumenical work of unity" (Ut Unum Sint, n. 41).

Therefore, brothers and sisters, let us continue to pray, because we know that the holy cause of the restoration of Christian unity exceeds our poor human efforts and that unity, finally, is a gift of God.

In this regard and with these sentiments, I will be following in John Paul II's footsteps next 25 January, the Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle to the Gentiles, in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls to pray with our Orthodox and Protestant brethren: to pray

to thank the Lord for what he has granted us; to pray that the Lord will guide us in the footprints of unity.

In addition, my first Encyclical will finally be published that same day, 25 January; its title is already known: “Deus Caritas Est”, “God is love”. The theme is not directly ecumenical, but the context and background are ecumenical because God and our love are the condition for Christian unity. They are the condition for peace in the world.

In this Encyclical I desire to show the concept of love in its various dimensions. Today, in the terminology with which we are familiar, “love” often appears very far from what a Christian thinks when he speaks of charity.

For my part, I would like to show that this is a single impulse with various dimensions. The “eros”, this gift of love between a man and a woman, comes from the same source, the Creator’s goodness, as the possibility of a love that gives itself for the sake of the other. The “eros” becomes “agape” to the extent that the two truly love each other and no longer seek themselves, their own joy and their own pleasure, but seek above all the good of the other.

Thus, this love which is “eros” is transformed into charity in a process of purification and deepening. From its own family it is opened to the greater family of society, the family of the Church, the family of the world.

I also endeavour to show that the very personal act that comes to us from God is a unique act of love. It must also be expressed as an ecclesial and organizational act.

If it is true that the Church is an expression of God’s love, of that love God feels for his human creature, it must also be true that the fundamental act of faith, which creates and unites the Church and gives us the hope of eternal life and of God’s presence in the world, gives rise to an ecclesial act. In practice, the Church must also love as a Church, as a community, institutionally.

And this so-called “Caritas” is not a mere organization like other philanthropic organizations, but a necessary expression of the deepest act of personal love with which God has created us, awakening in our hearts the impulse to love, a reflection of the God-Love who makes us in his image.

It took time to prepare and translate the text. It now seems to me a gift of Providence, the fact that the text should be published on the very day on which we will pray for Christian unity. I hope that it will be able to illuminate and help our Christian life.

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (2007-1)

17 January 2007

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins tomorrow. I myself will conclude it in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls this 25 January with the celebration of Vespers, to which representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities of Rome are also invited.

The days from 18 to 25 January, and in other parts of the world the week around Pentecost, are a strong time of commitment and prayer on the part of all Christians, who can avail themselves of the booklets produced jointly by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches.

I have been able to sense how sincere the desire for unity is at the meetings I have had with various representatives of Churches and Ecclesial Communities in these years, and in a most moving way, during my recent Visit to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I in Istanbul, Turkey.

On these and on other experiences that opened my heart to hope, I will reflect at greater length next Wednesday. The way to unity remains long and laborious; yet, it is necessary not to be discouraged and to journey on, in the first place relying on the unfailing support of the One who, before ascending into Heaven, promised his followers: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20).

Unity is a gift of God and the fruit of his Spirit's action. Consequently, it is important to pray. The closer we draw to Christ, converting to his love, the closer we also draw to one another.

In some countries, including Italy, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is preceded by the Day of Christian-Jewish reflection, which is celebrated precisely today, 17 January.

For almost 20 years now the Italian Bishops' Conference has dedicated this Judaism Day to furthering knowledge and esteem for it and for developing the relationship of reciprocal friendship between the Christian and Jewish communities, a relationship that has developed positively since the Second Vatican Council and the historic visit of the Servant of God John Paul II to the Major Synagogue of Rome.

To grow and be fruitful, the Jewish-Christian friendship must also be based on prayer. Therefore, today I invite you all to address an ardent prayer to the Lord that Jews and

Christians may respect and esteem one another and collaborate for justice and peace in the world.

This year the biblical theme proposed for common reflection and prayer during this “Week” is: “He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak” (Mk 7:31-37). These words are taken from Mark’s Gospel and refer to the healing of a deaf-mute by Jesus. In this short passage, the Evangelist recounts that the Lord, after putting his fingers into his ears and touching his tongue with saliva, worked the miracle by saying: “Ephphatha”, which means “be opened”. Having regained his hearing and the gift of speech, the man roused the admiration of others by telling what had happened to him.

Every Christian, spiritually deaf and mute because of original sin, receives with Baptism the gift of the Lord who places his fingers on his face and thus, through the grace of Baptism, becomes able to hear the Word of God and to proclaim it to his brethren. Indeed, from that very moment it is his task to mature in knowledge and love for Christ so as to be able to proclaim and witness effectively to the Gospel.

This topic, shedding light on two aspects of the mission of every Christian community - the proclamation of the Gospel and the witness of charity -, also underlines how important it is to translate Christ’s message into concrete initiatives of solidarity. This encourages the journey to unity because it can be said that any relief to the suffering of their neighbour which Christians offer together, however little, also helps to make more visible their communion and fidelity to the Lord’s command.

Prayer for Christian unity cannot, however, be limited to one week a year. The unanimous plea to the Lord that in times and ways known only to him he may bring about the full unity of all his disciples must extend to every day of the year.

Furthermore, the harmony of intentions in the service to alleviate human suffering, the search for the truth of Christ’s message, conversion and penance are obligatory steps through which every Christian worthy of the name must join his brother or sister to implore the gift of unity and communion.

I exhort you, therefore, to spend these days in an atmosphere of prayerful listening to the Spirit of God, so that important steps may be made on the path to full and perfect communion among all Christ’s disciples. May the Virgin Mary obtain this for us; may she, whom we invoke as Mother of the Church and help of all Christians, sustain our way towards Christ.

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity (2007-2)

24 January 2007

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Tomorrow, the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity comes to a close. This year its theme has been the words in Mark's Gospel: "He even makes the deaf hear and the mute speak" (cf. Mk 7:31-37). We too will be able to repeat these words that express the people's admiration at the healing of a deaf-mute worked by Jesus when we see the wondrous flowering of the commitment to restoring Christian unity.

Reviewing the ground we have covered in the past 40 years, it is surprising to see how the Lord has awakened us from the torpor of self-sufficiency and indifference: how he makes us ever more able to "listen to each other" and not just "to hear each other"; how he has loosened our tongues so that the prayers we raise to him may have a greater force of conviction for the world.

Yes, it is true, the Lord has granted us many graces and the light of his Spirit has illumined many witnesses. They have shown that everything may be obtained by prayer when we can obey with trust and humility the divine commandment of love and adhere to Christ's longing for the unity of all his disciples.

"The concern for restoring unity", the Second Vatican Council affirms, "involves the whole Church, faithful and clergy alike. It extends to everyone, according to the talent of each, whether it be exercised in daily Christian living or in theological and historical studies" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 5).

Our first common task is to pray. In praying, and praying together, Christians become more aware of their kinship, even if they are still divided; moreover, in praying we learn to listen to the Lord better because only by listening to the Lord and following his voice can we find the way to unity.

Ecumenism is, of course, a slow process, sometimes even discouraging when people yield to the temptation to "hear" rather than to "listen", to speak half-heartedly instead of speaking out courageously. It is not easy to give up a "convenient deafness", as though the unchanging Gospel were unable to flourish anew and reassert itself as a providential leaven of conversion and spiritual renewal for each one of us.

Ecumenism, as I said, is a slow process, it is a slow and uphill journey like every penitential process. However, it is a journey which, after the initial difficulties and even in their midst, also offers broad spaces of joy, refreshing stops, and from time to time allows one to breathe deeply the purest air of full communion.

The experience of the recent decades after the Second Vatican Council demonstrates that the search for Christian unity takes place at various levels and in innumerable circumstances: in parishes, in hospitals, in contacts between people, through the collaboration of local communities in every part of the world and especially in those regions where to make a gesture of good will for one's brother or sister demands a great effort and also a purification of memory.

The meetings and events that constantly mark my ministry, the ministry of the Bishop of Rome, Pastor of the universal Church, also fit into this context of hope, punctuated by practical steps towards the full communion of Christians.

I would like here to review the most significant events that took place in 2006 and were a cause for joy and gratitude to the Lord.

The year began with the official visit of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches. The International Commission of the Catholic Churches and the Reformed Churches entrusted to their respective authorities for consideration, a document that marks the end of a dialogue process that began in 1970, hence, it has continued for more than 36 years. The document is entitled: "The Church as a Community of Common Witness to the Kingdom of God".

On 25 January 2006 - consequently, one year ago - the delegates for European ecumenism took part in the solemn conclusion of the "Week of Prayer for Christian Unity" in the Basilica of St Paul Outside-the-Walls. They had been convoked jointly by the Council of European Episcopal Conferences and by the Conference of European Churches for the first stage in the upcoming third European Ecumenical Assembly that will be held in Sibiu, on Orthodox territory, in September 2007.

I was able at the Wednesday Audiences to receive the delegation of the World Baptist Alliance and the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America that remains faithful to its regular visits to Rome.

I was also able to meet with the Hierarchs of the Orthodox Church of Georgia, which I follow with affection, nurturing the bond of friendship that bound His Holiness Ilia II to my venerable Predecessor, the Servant of God Pope John Paul II.

In continuing this resume of last year's ecumenical encounters, I come to the "Summit of Religious Leaders" held in Moscow in July 2006; with a special message, Alexei II, Patriarch of Moscow and All the Russias, requested communion with the Holy See.

The visit of Metropolitan Kirill from the Patriarchate of Moscow was also useful. It brought to the fore the intention to achieve a more explicit normalization of our bilateral relations.

Equally satisfying was the visit of priests and students from the Diakonia Apostolica College of the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Greece. I am also pleased to recall that at its General Assembly in Porto Alegre the World Council of Churches gave Catholic participation ample room.

On that occasion, I sent a special Message. I also wished to send a Message to the General Assembly of the World Methodist Council in Seoul. Likewise, I recall with pleasure the cordial visit of the Secretaries of the Christian World Communions, organizations for reciprocal information and contact between the various denominations.

And as we review the events of the year 2006, we come to the official visit last November of the Archbishop of Canterbury and Primate of the Anglican Communion. In the Redemptoris Mater Chapel in the Apostolic Palace I shared with him and his entourage a meaningful moment of prayer.

Then, regarding the unforgettable Apostolic Visit to Turkey and the meeting with His Holiness Bartholomew I, I would like to recall the many gestures that were even more eloquent than words. I take this opportunity to greet His Holiness Bartholomew I once again and I thank him for the letter he wrote to me upon my return to Rome; I assure him of my prayers and my commitment to take steps to ensure that that embrace of peace we exchanged during the Divine Liturgy in St George's Church at the Phanar may bring results.

The year ended with the official visit to Rome of H.B. Christodoulos, Archbishop of Athens and All Greece, and we exchanged exigent gifts: the icons of the Panaghia, the "All Holy", and of Sts Peter and Paul embracing.

Are these not moments of lofty spiritual value, moments of joy in which to draw a breath on the slow ascent to unity, of which I spoke? These moments cast light on the commitment - often silent, but strong - that brings us together in the quest for unity. They encourage us to make every effort to continue on this slow but important climb.

Let us entrust ourselves to the constant intercession of the Mother of God and of our Patron Saints, so that they may sustain us and help us not to withdraw from our good resolutions; so that they may encourage us to redouble all our efforts, praying and working with trust in the certainty that the Holy Spirit will do the rest. He will grant us full unity when and as he pleases. And strengthened by trust in this, let us go forward on the path of faith, hope and charity. The Lord will guide us.

## **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2009**

*21 January 2009*



*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*The “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” began last Sunday. It will end next Sunday, the Feast of the Conversion of the Apostle St Paul. The Week of Prayer is a particularly precious spiritual initiative that is becoming ever more widespread among Christians, in harmony with and, we might say, in response to the heartfelt entreaty that Jesus addressed to the Father in the Upper Room before his Passion: “That they may all be one ... so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21). In this priestly prayer, the Lord asks at least four times that his disciples may be “one”, in accordance with the image of the unity between the Father and the Son. This is a unity that can only grow by following the example of the Son’s gift of himself to the Father, that is, by coming out of oneself and uniting oneself with Christ. Moreover in this prayer Jesus twice adds as the purpose of this unity: so that the world may believe. Thus, full unity concerns the Church’s life and mission in the world. She must live a unity that can only derive from her unity with Christ, with his transcendence, as a sign that Christ is the truth. This is our responsibility: that the gift of unity by virtue of which our faith is made credible may be visible in the world. For this reason it is important that every Christian community become aware of the urgent need to work in every possible way to achieve this great objective. However, knowing that unity is first and foremost a “gift” of the Lord, it is necessary at the same time to implore it with tireless and trusting prayer. Only by coming out of ourselves and going towards Christ, only in our relationship with him, can we become truly united with one another. This is the invitation that this “Week” addresses to believers in Christ of every Church and Ecclesial Community; let us respond to it, Dear Brothers and Sisters, with prompt generosity.*

This year the “Week of Prayer for Unity” presents to us for our meditation and prayers these words from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel: “*That they may become one in your hand*” (37:17). The theme was chosen by an ecumenical group from Korea and was then re-examined for international circulation by the *Joint Committee for Prayer*, comprised of representatives of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. The process of preparation itself was a fruitful and stimulating exercise of true ecumenism.

In the passage from the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel, from which the theme has been taken, the Lord orders the Prophet to take two sticks, one representing Judah and his tribes and the other Joseph and all the house of Israel associated with him, and asks him “to join them together” into one stick, that they may become “one” in his hand. The parable of unity is transparent. To “[his] people” who ask for an explanation, Ezekiel, enlightened from on High, was to say that

the Lord himself takes the two sticks and joins them together in such a way that the two kingdoms with their respective tribes, divided from one another, may become “one in his hand”. The hand of the Prophet who brings the two sticks together is considered as the very hand of God who gathers together and unites his people and, in the end, the whole of humanity. We may apply the Prophet’s words to Christians in the sense of an exhortation to pray and work, doing their utmost to bring about the unity of all Christ’s disciples, to work so that our hand may become an instrument of the unifying hand of God. This exhortation becomes particularly moving and heartrending in Jesus’ words after the Last Supper. The Lord desires the whole of his people to journey on and in this sees the Church of the future, of the centuries to come with patience and perseverance towards the goal of full unity. This is a commitment that entails humble adherence and docile obedience to the commandment of the Lord, who blesses it and makes it fruitful. The Prophet Ezekiel assures us that it will be he himself, our one Lord, the one God, who gathers us into “his hand”.

In the second part of the biblical reading the significance and conditions of unity of the various tribes into a single kingdom are more deeply examined. In their dispersion among the Gentiles, the Israelites had become acquainted with erroneous forms of worship, they had developed mistaken concepts of life and had assumed customs alien to the divine law. The Lord now declares that they shall no longer defile themselves with the idols of pagan peoples, with their abominations and with all their transgressions (Ez 37:23). He recalls their need to free themselves from sin, to purify their hearts. “I will deliver them from all their sins and will cleanse them”, he says. And so “they shall be my people, and I will be their God” (*ibid.*). In this condition of inner renewal they “shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes”. And the prophetic text concludes with the definitive and fully salvific promise: “I will make a covenant of peace with them ... and will set my sanctuary in the midst of them” (Ez 37:26).

Ezekiel’s vision becomes particularly eloquent for the entire ecumenical movement because it sheds light on the indispensable need for authentic inner renewal in all the members of the people of God which only the Lord can bring about. We too must be open to this renewal because we too, dispersed among the world’s peoples, have learned customs that are very far from the Word of God. Since “every renewal of the Church essentially consists in an increase of fidelity

to her own calling”, as we read in the Decree on Ecumenism of the Second Vatican Council, “undoubtedly this explains the dynamism of the movement toward unity” (*Unitatis redintegratio*, n. 6), namely, the greatest fidelity to the vocation of God. The Decree then stresses the interior dimension of conversion of the heart. “There can be no ecumenism worthy of the name”, it adds, “without interior conversion. For it is from newness of attitudes of mind, from self-denial and unstinting love, that desires of unity take their rise and develop in a mature way” (*ibid.*, n. 7). Thus for all of us the “Week of Prayer for Unity” becomes an incentive for sincere conversion, for listening ever more docilely to God’s word and for increasingly deeper faith.

The “Week” is also a favourable opportunity to thank the Lord for what, with his help, has been done up to now to bring divided Christian and Ecclesial Communities closer to one another. This spirit has enlivened the Catholic Church which, in the year that has just ended, continued with firm conviction and well-founded hope to engage in respectful brotherly relations with all the Churches and Ecclesial Communities of the East and West. Within a variety of situations, at times more positive and at times with greater difficulty, we endeavoured never to fall short of our commitment to make every possible effort for the recomposition of full unity. Relations between the Churches and theological dialogues have continued to show encouraging signs of spiritual convergence. I myself have had the joy, both here at the Vatican and during my Apostolic Visits, of meeting Christians from all parts. I have received the Ecumenical Patriarch His Holiness Bartholomew I three times with deep joy and, during what was an extraordinary event at the recent Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, we heard him speak with fraternal ecclesial warmth and convinced trust in the future. I had the pleasure of receiving the two *Catholicoi* of the Armenian Apostolic Church: His Holiness Karekin II of Etchmiadzin and His Holiness Aram I of Antelias. And, lastly, I shared in the sorrow of the Patriarchate of Moscow at the departure of our Beloved Brother in Christ, His Holiness Patriarch Alexei II, and I continue to remain in communion through prayer with these brothers of ours who are preparing to elect the new Patriarch of their venerable and great Orthodox Church. Likewise I have been granted to meet representatives of the various Christian communions of the West, with whom exchanges are continuing, on the important witness that Christians must bear today in a harmonious manner, in a world that is ever more divided and

placed before so many cultural, social, economical and ethical challenges. Let us joyfully give thanks to the Lord together for these and many other meetings, dialogues and gestures of brotherhood that the Lord has granted us to accomplish.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us take the opportunity that the “Week of Prayer for Christian Unity” offers us to ask the Lord for the commitment and the ecumenical dialogue to continue and, if possible, to be intensified. In the context of the Pauline Year commemorating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of St Paul, we cannot fail to also refer to what the Apostle Paul has bequeathed to us in writing concerning the Church’s unity. Every Wednesday I continue to devote my reflection to his Letters and to his invaluable teaching. Here I simply resume what he wrote when addressing the community of Ephesus: “There is one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:4–5). Let us make our own the yearning of St Paul who spent his whole life for the one Lord and for the unity of his Mystical Body, the Church, and with his martyrdom bearing a supreme witness of faithfulness and love for Christ.*

By following his example and counting on his intercession, may every community grow in the commitment to unity, thanks to the various spiritual and pastoral initiatives and common prayer assemblies that usually become more numerous and intense in this “Week”. These give us a foretaste, in a certain way, of the day of full unity. Let us pray that the dialogue of truth among the Churches and Ecclesial Communities and the dialogue of charity, which conditions the theological dialogue itself and helps us live together in order to bear a common witness, will continue. They are indispensable in order to settle differences. The desire that dwells in our hearts is to hasten the day of full communion, when all the disciples of our one Lord will at last be able to celebrate the Eucharist together, the divine sacrifice for the life and salvation of the world. Let us invoke the motherly intercession of Mary so that she may help all Christians to cultivate a more attentive listening to the word of God and more intense prayers for unity.

## **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2010**

20 January 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are in the middle of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, an ecumenical initiative which has now been making progress for more than a century. Every year it focuses attention on the theme of the visible unity of Christians, which involves the consciences

and stimulates the commitment of all who believe in Christ. And it does so first of all with the invitation to pray, in imitation of Jesus who asks the Father on his disciples' behalf: "That they may all be one ... so that the world may believe" (Jn 17:21). The persistent call to prayer for full communion between the followers of the Lord expresses the most genuine and profound approach of the whole ecumenical search because, in the first place, unity is a gift of God. Indeed, as the Second Vatican Council states: "this holy objective the reconciliation of all Christians in the unity of the one and only Church of Christ transcends human powers" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 24). Hence, confident and harmonious prayer to the Lord is necessary, in addition to our effort to develop brotherly relations and to promote dialogue to clarify and to solve the divergences that separate the Churches and Ecclesial Communities.

This year's theme is taken from Luke's Gospel, from the last words of the Risen One to his disciples: "You are witnesses of these things" (Lk 24:48). The Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, in agreement with the *Faith and Constitution Commission* of the *World Council of Churches* asked a Scottish ecumenical group to propose the theme. A century ago the World Missionary Conference: *To Consider Missionary Problems in Relation to the Non-Christian World*, was held in Edinburgh, Scotland, from 13 to 24 June 1910. Among the problems discussed then was that of the practical difficulty of proposing in a credible way to the non-Christian world the Gospel proclamation by Christians who were divided among themselves. If Christians present themselves divided, or indeed often at odds, to a world that does not know Christ, that has distanced itself from him or that has shown itself to be indifferent to the Gospel, will the proclamation of Christ as the one Saviour of the world and our peace be credible? From that time the relationship between unity and mission has represented an essential dimension of all ecumenical action, as well as its starting point. And it is because of this specific contribution that the Edinburgh Conference remains a reference point for modern ecumenism. At the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church took up and vigorously reaffirmed this aim, asserting that the division among Jesus' disciples not only "openly contradicts the will of Christ, but scandalizes the world, and damages that most holy cause, the preaching of the Gospel to every creature" (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 1).

The theme proposed in this Week for meditation and prayer fits into this theological and spiritual context: the need for a common testimony to Christ. The brief text proposed as a theme, "You are witnesses of these things", must be interpreted in the context of the whole of chapter 24 of the Gospel according to Luke. Let us briefly recall the content of this chapter. First the women go to the tomb, they see the signs of Jesus' Resurrection and tell the Apostles and the other disciples what they have seen (v. 8); then the Risen One himself appears to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, he appears to Simon Peter and subsequently to the "Eleven gathered together and those who were with them" (v. 33). He

opens their minds to understand the Scriptures about his redeeming death and his Resurrection, saying that “repentance and forgiveness of sins should be preached in his name to all nations” (v. 47). To the disciples who were “gathered” together and who were witnesses of his mission, the Risen Lord promised the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. v. 49), so that together they might bear witness to him to all the peoples. For us, from this imperative, “of all these things”, of which you are witnesses (cf. Lk 24:48) the theme of this Week for Christian Unity two questions arise. The first is: what are “all these things”? The second: how can we be witnesses of “all these things”?

If we look at the context of the chapter “all these things”, means first and foremost the Cross and the Resurrection: the disciples have seen the Lord’s crucifixion, they see the Risen One and thus begin to understand all the Scriptures that speak of the mystery of the Passion and the gift of the Resurrection. “All these things”, therefore, refers to the mystery of Christ, to the Son of God made man, who died for us and rose, who lives for ever and thus guarantees our eternal life. However, by knowing Christ this is the essential point we know the Face of God. Christ is above all the revelation of God. In all epochs human beings have perceived the existence of God, one God, but a God who is distant and does not show himself. In Christ this God shows himself, the distant God becomes close. “All these things”, therefore, especially with the mystery of Christ, God made himself close to us. This implies another dimension: Christ is never alone; he came among us, he died alone but was raised to draw us all to him. Christ, as Scripture says, created a body for himself, he gathered all humanity in his reality of immortal life. Thus, in Christ who reunites humanity, we know humanity’s future: eternal life.

All this, therefore, is very simple, in the last instance: we know God by knowing Christ, his Body, the Mystery of the Church and the promise of eternal life. We now come to the second question. How can we be witnesses of “all these things”? We can only be witnesses by knowing Christ, and in knowing Christ, also knowing God. However, knowing Christ implies, of course, an intellectual dimension learning what we know of Christ but it is always much more than an intellectual process: it is an existential process, a process of the opening of my ego, of my transformation by the presence and power of Christ. Thus it is also a process of openness to all the others who must be the Body of Christ. In this way, it is obvious that knowing Christ, as an intellectual and, especially, an existential process, is a process that makes us witnesses. In other words, we can only be witnesses if we know Christ personally and not solely through others from our own lives and from our own personal encounter with Christ. In truly meeting him in our life of faith we become witnesses and thus can contribute to the newness of the world, to eternal life. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also gives us a clue to the content of “all these things”. The Church has gathered together and summed up the essential of all that the Lord gave us in the Revelation in the “*Niceno-Constantinopolitan or Nicene Creed*”, which

“draws its great authority from the fact that it stems from the first two ecumenical Councils (in 325 and 381)” (n. 195). The Catechism explains that this Creed “remains common to all the great Churches of both East and West to this day” (*ibid.*). Consequently in this Creed the truths of faith are found that Christians can profess and witness to together, so that the world may believe, expressing, with their desire and commitment to overcome the existing divergences, the will to walk together towards full communion, the unity of the Body of Christ.

The celebration of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity brings us to consider other important aspects for ecumenism and first of all the great progress achieved in the relations between Churches and Ecclesial Communities since the Edinburgh Conference more than a century ago. The modern ecumenical movement has developed so significantly that over the past century it has become an important element in the life of the Church, recalling the problem of unity among all Christians and sustaining the growth of communion between them. Not only does it encourage fraternal relations between the Churches and Ecclesial Communities in response to the commandment of love, but it also encourages theological research. In addition, it involves the practical life of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities with topics that touch on pastoral and sacramental life, such as, for example, the mutual recognition of Baptism, questions concerning mixed marriages, the partial cases of *communicatio in sacris* in specific, well-defined situations. Following the trajectory of this ecumenical spirit, contacts have continued to broaden so as to include Pentecostal, Evangelical and Charismatic movements for greater reciprocal knowledge, despite the many serious problems in this sector.

Since the Second Vatican Council and thereafter the Catholic Church has entered into fraternal relations with all the Churches of the East and with the Ecclesial Communities of the West, in particular by organizing bilateral theological dialogues with most of them. These have led to finding convergences or even consensus on various points, thereby deepening the bonds of communion. In the year that has just ended the groups in dialogue have recorded some positive steps. At the 11th Plenary Session that was held in Paphos, Cyprus, in October 2009, the Joint International Commission for Theological Dialogue with the Orthodox Churches embarked on the examination of a crucial topic in the Dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox: *The Role of the Bishop of Rome in the Communion of the Church in the First Millennium*, that is, during the time in which the Christians of East and West lived in full communion. This study will later be extended to the second millennium. I have several times asked Catholics to pray for this delicate and essential dialogue for the whole ecumenical movement. The same Joint Commission also met from 26 to 30 January last year with the Ancient Orthodox Churches of the East (Coptic, Ethiopian, Syrian, Armenian). These important initiatives testify that a

profound dialogue full of hope is continuing with all the Churches of the East which are not in full communion with Rome, in their own specificity.

In the course of the past year, the results achieved by the various dialogues that have taken place in the past 40 years with the Western Ecclesial Communities were examined. Special thought was given to those with the Anglican Communion, with the Lutheran World Federation, with the World Alliance of Reformed Churches and with the World Methodist Council. In this regard the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity made a survey to list the points of convergence which have been reached in the relative bilateral dialogues and at the same time to point out the problems that remain open on which it will be necessary to start a new phase of discussions.

Among the recent events I would like to mention the commemoration of the 10th anniversary of the *Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification*, celebrated by Catholics and Lutherans together on 31 October 2009 to encourage the pursuit of the dialogue, as well as the visit to Rome of Dr Rowan Williams, Archbishop of Canterbury, who also had meetings about the specific situation of the Anglican Communion at the present time. The common commitment to continue relations and dialogue are a positive sign that show the strong desire for unity despite all the problems that stand in its way. Thus we see that a dimension of our responsibility exists in doing everything possible to attain real unity, but there is the other dimension, that of divine action, because God alone can give unity to the Church. A “self-made” unity would be human but we want the Church of God, made by God, who will create unity when he wishes and when we are ready. We must also bear in mind how much real progress has been achieved in collaboration and brotherhood in all these years, in the past 50 years. At the same we must realize that ecumenical work is not a linear process. Indeed, old problems that arose in the context of another epoch lose their relevance while in today’s context new problems and new difficulties arise. We must therefore always be open to a process of purification, in which the Lord will make us capable of being united.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I ask everyone to pray for the complex ecumenical reality, for the promotion of dialogue, as well as in order that the Christians of our time may give a new common witness of faithfulness to Christ in the eyes of this world of ours, May the Lord hear our invocation and that of all Christians which we are raising to him with special intensity during this Week.*

## **Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2011**

19 January 2011



*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are celebrating the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity in which all believers in Christ are asked to unite in prayer in order to witness to the deep bond that exists between them and to invoke the gift of full communion.

It is providential that in the process of building unity prayer is made central. This reminds us once again that unity cannot be a mere product of human endeavour; it is first and foremost a gift of God which entails growth in communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The Second Vatican Council says: “Such prayers in common are certainly a very effective means of petitioning for the grace of unity, and they are a genuine expression of the ties which still bond Catholics to their separated brethren. ‘For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them’ (Mt 18:20)” (Decree on Ecumenism, *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8).

The path that leads to the visible unity of all Christians lies in prayer, because, fundamentally, it is not we who “build” unity but God who “builds” it, it comes from him, from the Trinitarian Mystery, from the unity of the Father with the Son in the dialogue of love, which is the Holy Spirit; and our ecumenical commitment must be open to divine action, it must become a daily invocation for God’s help. The Church is his and not ours.

The theme chosen for this Year’s Week of Prayer refers to the experience of the first Christian Community in Jerusalem, as it is described in the Acts of the Apostles; we have listened to the text: “They devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42).

We must consider that in the past, at the very moment of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended upon people of different languages and cultures. This means that from the very first the Church has embraced people from different backgrounds and yet, it is that the Spirit creates one body precisely from these differences.

Pentecost, as the beginning of the Church, marks the expansion of God’s Covenant to all creatures, all peoples and all epochs, so that the whole of creation may walk towards its true goal: to be a place of unity and love.

In the passage cited from the Acts of the Apostles, four characteristics define the first Christian community of Jerusalem as a place of unity and love. St Luke, moreover, does not only want to describe something from the past. He presents this community to us as

a model, as a norm for the Church today, since these four characteristics must always constitute the Church's life.

The first characteristic is its unity, its devotion to listening to the Apostles' teaching, then to fellowship, to the breaking of the bread and the prayers. As I have said, still today these four elements are the pillars that support the life of every Christian community and constitute the one solid foundation on which to progress in the search for the visible unity of the Church.

We first have devotion to the teaching of the Apostles, that is, listening to their testimony to the mission, to the life, and to the death and Resurrection of the Lord. This is what Paul calls simply the "Gospel". The first Christians received the Gospel from the lips of the Apostles, they were united by listening to it and by its proclamation because, as St Paul says, "the Gospel ... is the power of God for salvation to every one who has faith" (Rom 1:16).

Still today the community of believers recognizes the reference to the Apostles' teaching as the norm of its own faith. Hence every effort to build unity among all Christians passes through the deepening of our faithfulness to the *depositum fidei* passed on to us by the Apostles. A steadfast faith is the foundation of our communion, it is the foundation of Christian unity.

The second element is fraternal communion. At the time of the first Christian community, as it is in our day too, this is the most tangible expression especially for the external world, of unity among the Lord's disciples. We read in the Acts of the Apostles that the early Christians had all things in common and those with possessions and goods sold them to share the proceeds with the needy (cf. Acts 2:44–45).

This sharing of goods has found ever new forms of expression in the history of the Church. Distinctive among these are the brotherly relations and friendships established between Christians of different denominations.

The history of the ecumenical movement is marked by difficulties and uncertainties but it is also a history of brotherhood, of cooperation and of human and spiritual sharing, which has significantly changed relations between believers in the Lord Jesus: we are all working hard to continue on this path.

Thus the second element is thus communion. This is primarily communion with God through faith; but communion with God creates communion among ourselves and is necessarily expressed in that concrete communion of which the Acts of the Apostles speak, in other words sharing.

No one in the Christian community must be hungry or poor: this is a fundamental obligation. Communion with God, expressed as brotherly communion, is lived out in practice in social commitment, in Christian charity and in justice.

The third element: essential in the life of the first community of Jerusalem was the moment of the breaking of the bread in which the Lord makes himself present, with the unique sacrifice of the Cross, in his unreserved gift of self for the life of his friends: “this is my body which will be given up for you ... this is the cup of my blood.... It will be shed for you”. “The Church draws her life from the Eucharist. This truth does not simply express a daily experience of faith, but recapitulates *the heart of the mystery of the Church*” (John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, n. 1). Communion in Christ’s sacrifice is the crowning point of our union with God and thus also represents the fullness of the unity of Christ’s disciples, full communion.

In this Week of Prayer for Unity our regret about the impossibility of sharing the same Eucharistic banquet—a sign that we are still far from achieving that unity for which Christ prayed—is particularly acute. This sorrowful experience, which also gives our prayers a penitential dimension, must become the reason for an even more generous dedication on the part of all so that, once the obstacles that stand in the way of full communion have been removed, the day will come when we can gather round the table of the Lord to break the Eucharistic bread together and to drink from the same cup.

Lastly, prayer—or as St Luke says prayers—is the fourth characteristic of the early Church of Jerusalem described in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles. Prayer has always been a constant attitude of disciples of Christ, something that accompanies their daily life in obedience to God’s will, as the Apostle Paul’s words in his First Letter to the Thessalonians also attest: “Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you (1 Thes 5:16–18; cf. Eph 6:18).

Christian prayer, participation in Jesus’ prayer, is a filial experience par excellence as the words of the “Our Father” testify—the “we” of God’s children, brothers and sisters—a family prayer that addresses our common Father. Therefore, adopting an attitude of prayer also means opening ourselves to brotherhood.

Only in the “we” can we say “Our Father”; so let us open ourselves to brotherhood which comes from being children of the one heavenly Father and from being disposed to forgiveness and reconciliation.

Dear brothers and sisters, as disciples of the Lord we have a common responsibility to the world. We must undertake a common service; like the first Christian community of

Jerusalem, starting with what we already share, we must bear a powerful witness supported by reason and spiritually founded on the one God who revealed himself and speaks to us in Christ, in order to be heralds of a message that guides and illumines people today, who all too often lack clear and effective reference points.

It is therefore important to increase day by day in reciprocal love, striving to surmount those barriers between Christians that still exist; to feel that real inner unity exists among all those who follow the Lord; to collaborate as closely as possible, working together on the issues that are still unresolved; and above all, to be aware that on this journey we need the Lord's assistance, he will have to give us even more help for, on our own, unless we "abide in him", we can do nothing (cf. Jn 15:5).

Dear friends, we are once again gathered in prayer—particularly during this Week—together with all those who profess faith in Jesus Christ, Son of God: let us persevere in prayer, let us be a people of prayer, entreating God to grant us the gift of unity so that his plan of salvation and reconciliation may be brought about for the whole world. Many thanks.

## **Prayer in preparation of the Meeting in Assisi** ***Pilgrims of Truth, Pilgrims of Peace***

26 October 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today the usual appointment of the General Audience assumes a special character, because we are on the eve of the *Day of Reflection, Dialogue and Prayer for Peace and Justice in the World*, which will take place tomorrow in Assisi, 25 years after the first historic meeting Blessed John Paul II convened. I chose to give this Day the name of "Pilgrims of truth, pilgrims of peace", to stress the commitment that we desire to solemnly renew, together with the members of different religions, and also with men and women, non-believers who sincerely search for the truth, in promoting the authentic good of humanity and in building peace. As I have already mentioned, "Whoever is on the path to God cannot but transmit peace, whoever builds peace cannot but come closer to God".

As Christians, we believe that the most precious contribution we can make to the cause of peace is that of prayer. That is why we are here today, as the Church of Rome, together with the pilgrims who have come to the City, to listen to the word of God, to invoke with

faith the gift of peace. The Lord can enlighten our minds and hearts and guide us to be builders of justice and reconciliation in our daily lives and in the world.

In the passage from the Prophet Zechariah that we just listened to, a proclamation full of hope and light resounds (cf. 9:10). God promises salvation, he invites us to “rejoice greatly” because this salvation is coming true. He speaks of a King: “Lo, your king comes to you; triumphant and victorious is he” (v. 9), but the one who is announced is not a king invested with human power, the force of arms; he is not a king who dominates by political or military might; he is a gentle king, who reigns with humility and meekness before God and men, a king different from the great sovereigns of the world: “riding on an ass, on a colt the foal of an ass”, says the Prophet (*ibid.*). He appears mounted on the animal of the common man, of the poor, as opposed to the war chariots of the hosts of the earth’s powerful. Indeed, he is a king who will cut off these chariots of war, break the bow of battle, command peace to the nations (cf. v. 10).

But who is this king of whom the Prophet Zechariah speaks? Let us go for a moment to Bethlehem and listen again to what the Angel says to the shepherds who keep watch in the night guarding their flock. The Angel announces to them a great joy which will come to all the people, tied to a humble sign: a babe wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a manger (cf. Lk 2:8–12). And a multitude of the heavenly host sings “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (v. 14), to people of good will. The birth of that babe, who is Jesus, brings a proclamation of peace for the whole world. But let us now go to the final moments of Christ’s life, when he enters Jerusalem greeted by a cheering crowd. The Prophet Zechariah’s message of the coming of a humble and meek king comes back to mind of Jesus’ disciples in a special way after the events of the passion, death and resurrection, of the Paschal Mystery, when they look with the eyes of faith to that joyful entry of their Master into the Holy City. He rides a borrowed ass (cf. Mt 21:2–7): he is not in a rich carriage, not on a horse like the great ones. He does not enter Jerusalem accompanied by a powerful host of chariots and horsemen. He is a poor king, the king of those who are the poor people of God. In the Greek text the word *praeis* appears, meaning the meek, the mild; Jesus is the king of the *anawim*, of those whose hearts are free from the longing for power and material riches, the desire and quest for domination over others. Jesus is the king of those who have that interior freedom that makes one capable of overcoming greed, the selfishness that is in the world, and know that God alone is their wealth.

Jesus is the poor king among the poor, meek among those who desire to be meek. In this way he is the king of peace, thanks to the power of God, who is the power of goodness, the power of love. He is a king who cuts off the chariots and war horses, who breaks the bows of war; a king who realizes peace on the Cross, joining earth and heaven and

building a bridge of brotherly love among all people. The Cross is the new *bow of peace*, the sign and the instrument of reconciliation, of forgiveness, of understanding, the sign that love is stronger than any violence and oppression, stronger than death: evil is conquered by good, by love.

This is the new kingdom of peace of which Christ is king; and it is a kingdom that encompasses the whole earth. The Prophet Zechariah announces that this meek king, a peaceful one, shall rule “from sea to sea, and from the River to the ends of the earth” (Zech 9:10). The kingdom that Christ inaugurates has universal dimensions. The horizon of this poor meek king, is not that of a territory, of a State, but the ends of the world; beyond every barrier of race, language, culture, he creates a communion. He creates unity. And where do we see this message being realized today? In the great network of Eucharistic communities that covers the whole of the earth, Zechariah’s shining prophecy surfaces anew. It is a vast mosaic of communities in which this gentle and peaceful king’s sacrifice of love is made present; it is a vast mosaic which constitutes the “Kingdom of peace” of Jesus from sea to sea to the ends of the earth; it is a multitude of “islands of peace”, radiating peace. Everywhere, in every situation, in every culture, from big cities with their sky-scrapers to little villages with their humble dwellings, from massive cathedrals to small chapels, he comes, he makes himself present; and by entering into communion with him men too are united among themselves in one single body, overcoming division, rivalry, grudges. The Lord comes in the Eucharist to take us out of our individualism, away from our particularities that exclude others, in order to form us into one single body, one single kingdom of peace in a divided world.

But how can we build this kingdom of peace in which Christ is king? The commandment which he leaves his Apostles and, through them, each of us is: “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19). Like Jesus, the messengers of peace of his kingdom must set out, they must respond to his invitation. They must go, but not with the might of war or the force of power. In the Gospel passage that we listened to Jesus sends 70 disciples out into the great harvest, which is the world, inviting them to pray the Lord of the harvest that there may be no lack of labourers in his harvest (cf. Lk 10:1–3); but he does not send them with powerful means, but “as lambs in the midst of wolves” (v. 3), without purse, bag, or sandals (cf. v. 4). St John Chrysostom, in one of his homilies, comments: “For so long as we are sheep, we conquer: though ten thousand wolves prowl around, we overcome and prevail. But if we become wolves, we are worsted, for the help of our Shepherd departs from us” (*Homily 33*, 1: PG 57, 389). Christians must never yield to the temptation to become wolves among wolves; it is not with might, with force, with violence that Christ’s kingdom of peace grows, but with the gift of self, with love carried to the extreme, even towards

enemies. Jesus does not conquer the world with the force of arms, but with the force of the Cross, which is the true guarantee of victory. The consequence of this for those who want to be disciples of the Lord, his envoys, is to be prepared for the passion and martyrdom, to lose their own life for him, so that in the world goodness, love and peace may triumph. This is the prerequisite needed to say, upon entering into every situation: “Peace be to this house” (Lk 10:5).

In front of St Peter’s Basilica, these are two large statues of Sts Peter and Paul, easily identifiable: St Peter holds in his hand the keys, St Paul holds in his hands a sword. Those unfamiliar with the history of the latter might think that this was a great leader who led powerful armies and subdued peoples and nations by the sword, obtaining fame and wealth for himself by the blood of others. Instead it is exactly the opposite: the sword held between his hands is the instrument by which Paul was put to death, with which he was martyred and that shed his blood. His battle was not one of violence, of war, but that of martyrdom for Christ. His only weapon was the message: “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (1 Cor 2:2). And his preaching was not based on “plausible words of wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and power” (v. 4). He dedicated his life to spreading the Gospel message of reconciliation and peace, spending all of his energy to make it vibrant to the ends of the earth. And this was his strength: he did not seek a tranquil, comfortable life, free from hardships, from opposition, but was consumed by the Gospel, he gave himself unreservedly, and so became the great messenger of Christ’s peace and reconciliation. The sword that St Paul holds in his hands is a reminder, too, of the power of truth, that can often wound, it can hurt; the Apostle remained faithful to this truth to the end. He served it, suffered for it, he gave up his life for it. This same logic holds true also for us, if we want to be bearers of the kingdom of peace proclaimed by the Prophet Zechariah and fulfilled by Christ: we must be willing to pay in person, to suffer misunderstanding, rejection, persecution in the first person. It is not the sword of the conqueror that builds peace, but the sword of the suffering, of whoever gives up his/her own life.

Dear brothers and sisters, as Christians let us ask God for the gift of peace, let us pray to him that he may make us instruments of his peace in a world still torn by hatred, by divisions, by selfishness, by war. Let us ask him that the meeting tomorrow in Assisi may encourage dialogue between people of different religious confessions and bring a ray of light capable of illuminating the minds and hearts of all men, so that bitterness may give way to forgiveness, division to reconciliation, hatred to love, violence to gentleness, and that peace may reign in the world. Amen.

# Week of Prayer for Christian Unity 2012

18 January 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins today. For more than a century it has been celebrated every year by Christians of all Churches and ecclesial communities in order to invoke the extraordinary gift for which the Lord Jesus himself prayed at the Last Supper, before his Passion: “that they may all be one; even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).

The practice of the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity was introduced in 1908 by Fr Paul Wattson, the founder of an Anglican religious community who later entered the Catholic Church. The initiative received the blessing of Pope St Pius X and was later promoted by Pope Benedict XV, who encouraged its celebration throughout the Catholic Church with the Brief *Romanorum Pontificum* of 25 February 1916.

The Octave of Prayer was developed and perfected in the 1930s by Abbé Paul Couturier of Lyons, who supported the prayer “for the unity of the Church as Christ wants her and in conformity with the instruments that he desires”. His last writings show that Abbé Couturier saw this Week as a means which enables Christ’s universal prayer “to enter and penetrate the entire Body of Christians”; it must grow until it becomes “an immense, unanimous cry of the entire People of God”, asking God for this great gift. Moreover the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity is in itself one of the most effective expressions of the impetus the Second Vatican Council gave to the search for full communion among all Christ’s disciples.

May this spiritual event that unites Christians of all traditions increase our awareness that the true unity for which we strive cannot be solely the result of our own efforts but, rather, will be a gift from on high, to be ceaselessly prayed for.

Every year the booklets for the Week of Prayer are compiled by an ecumenical group from a different region of the world. I would like to reflect here on this



point. This year the texts have been proposed by a joint group of representatives of the Catholic Church and of the Polish Ecumenical Council, comprised of various Churches and ecclesial communities of the country. The documentation was then revised by a committee made up of members of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity and of the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches. This work done in two phases, is a further sign of the desire for unity that motivates Christians and of the awareness that prayer is the main way to attain full communion since if we are united in our orientation to the Lord we are on our way to unity.

The theme of this year's Week—as we have heard—was taken from the First Letter to the Corinthians: “We shall all be changed ... by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 15:51–58), his victory will transform us. This theme was suggested by the large Polish ecumenical group, as I mentioned, which, reflecting on its experience as a nation, chose to emphasize how strong the support of the Christian faith is in trials and upheavals, such as those that have marked the history of Poland. After much discussion, a theme was chosen which focuses on the transforming power of faith in Christ and in particular in the light of its importance to our prayers for the visible unity of the Church, the Body of Christ.

The inspiration for this reflection was drawn from St Paul's words to the Church in Corinth. He speaks of the transitory nature of what belongs to our life in the present, marked too by the experience of the “defeat” of sin and death, in comparison with what Christ's “victory” over sin and death in his Paschal Mystery brings to us.

The particular history of the Polish nation which experienced periods of democratic coexistence and religious freedom, as in the 16th century, was marked in the last centuries by invasions and defeats, the constant struggle against oppression and the thirst for freedom. It was all this that led the ecumenical group to reflect more deeply on the true meaning of “victory”—what victory is—and of “defeat”. Concerning “victory” understood in triumphalistic terms, Christ suggests to us a very different road that does not pass through dominance and power. Indeed, he says: “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all” (Mk 9:35).

Christ speaks of a victory through suffering love, reciprocal service, help, new hope and practical comfort given to the lowliest, to the forgotten, to the outcast. For all Christians the loftiest expression of this humble service is Jesus Christ himself, the total gift that he makes of himself, the victory of his love over death, on the cross, that shines in the light of Easter morning.

Only if we let ourselves be transformed by God, only if we undertake to convert our life and if the transformation is brought about in the form of conversion can we share in this transforming “victory”. This is the reason why the Polish ecumenical group considered St Paul’s words: “We shall all be changed by the victory of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. 1 Cor 15:51–58) particularly appropriate for the theme of its meditation.

The full and visible Christian unity that we long for demands that we let ourselves be transformed and that we conform ever more perfectly to the image of Christ. The unity we pray for requires an inner conversion that is both common and personal. It is not merely a matter of cordiality or cooperation, it is necessary above all to strengthen our faith in God, in the God of Jesus Christ, who spoke to us and made himself one of us. It is necessary to enter into new life in Christ, who is our true and definitive victory; it is necessary to open ourselves to one another, understanding all the elements of unity that God keeps for us and gives us ever anew; it is necessary to be aware of the urgent need to bear witness among the people of our time to the living God, who made himself known in Christ.

The Second Vatican Council made the ecumenical search the centre of the Church’s life and activity: “The Sacred Council exhorts all the Catholic faithful to recognize the signs of the times and to take an active and intelligent part in the work of ecumenism” (*Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 4). Blessed John Paul II underlined the essential nature of this task, saying, “This unity, which the Lord has bestowed on his Church and in which he wishes to embrace all people, is not something added on, but stands at the very heart of Christ’s mission. Nor is it some secondary attribute of the community of his disciples. Rather, it belongs to the very essence of this community” (Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint*, n. 9).

Hence the ecumenical task is a responsibility of the entire Church and of all the baptized, who must develop the partial communion that already exists among

Christians and make it grow into full communion in truth and in charity. The prayer for unity is consequently not restricted to this Week of Prayer but must become an integral part of our prayers, of the life of prayer of all Christians, in every place and in every time, especially when people of different traditions meet and work together for the victory, in Christ, over all that is sin, evil, injustice and the violation of human dignity.

Since the birth of the modern ecumenical movement, more than a century ago, there has always been a clear awareness that the lack of unity among Christians is an obstacle to a more effective proclamation of the Gospel, because it endangers our credibility. How can we give a convincing witness if we are divided?

Of course, the fundamental truths of the faith unite us far more than they divide us. Yet the divisions remain, and also concern various practical and ethical issues, giving rise to confusion and diffidence, undermining our ability to transmit the saving word of Christ. In this sense, we should remember the words of Bl. John Paul II who spoke in his Encyclical *Ut Unum Sint* of the damage to Christian witness and to the proclamation of the Gospel that is caused by the lack of unity (cf. nn. 98, 99). This presents an important challenge to the New Evangelization, which will be all the more fruitful when all Christians proclaim together the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and give a common response to the spiritual thirst of our time.

The Church's journey, like that of the peoples, is in the hands of the Risen Christ, victorious over death and over the injustice that he suffered in the name of all. He makes us share in his victory. He alone can transform us and change us from weak and hesitant people into strong and courageous in doing good. He alone can save us from the negative consequences of our divisions. Dear brothers and sisters, I invite everyone to join together more intensely in prayer during this Week for Unity, so that the common witness, solidarity and collaboration among Christians may increase, in the expectation of the glorious day on which we shall profess together the faith handed down by the Apostles and celebrate together the sacraments of our transformation in Christ. Many thanks.

# Lent & Easter

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## Ash Wednesday

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are beginning the Lenten Journey, a journey that takes 40 days and brings us to the joy of the Lord's Pasch. On this spiritual journey we are not alone because the Church accompanies and supports us from the outset with the word of God, which contains a programme of spiritual life and penitential commitment, and with the grace of the sacraments.

The Apostle Paul's words give us a precise order "We entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain.... Behold, now is the acceptable time; behold, now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:1-2).

Indeed in the Christian vision of life every moment must be favourable and every day must be a day of salvation but the Church's Liturgy speaks of this in a very special way in the Season of Lent. And we can understand that the 40 days in preparation for Easter are a favourable time and a time of grace precisely from the appeal that the austere rite of the imposition of ashes addresses to us and which is expressed in the Liturgy in two

formulas: “Turn away from sin and be faithful to the Gospel”; “Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return”.

The first appeal is for conversion, a word to be understood with its extraordinary gravity, grasping the surprising newness it releases. The appeal to conversion, in fact, lays bare and denounces the facile superficiality that all too often marks our lives. To repent [or convert] is to change direction in the journey of life: not, however, by means of a small adjustment, but with a true and proper about turn. Conversion means swimming against the tide, where the “tide” is the superficial lifestyle, inconsistent and deceptive, that often sweeps us long, overwhelms us and makes us slaves to evil or at any rate prisoners of moral mediocrity. With conversion, on the other hand, we are aiming for the high standard of Christian living, we entrust ourselves to the living and personal Gospel which is Jesus Christ. He is our final goal and the profound meaning of conversion, he is the path on which all are called to walk through life, letting themselves be illumined by his light and sustained by his power which moves our steps. In this way conversion expresses his most splendid and fascinating Face: it is not a mere moral decision that rectifies our conduct in life, but rather a choice of faith that wholly involves us in close communion with Jesus as a real and living Person. To repent and believe in the Gospel are not two different things or in some way only juxtaposed, but express the same reality. Repentance is the total “yes” of those who consign their whole life to the Gospel responding freely to Christ who first offers himself to humankind as the Way, the Truth and the Life, as the only One who sets us free and saves us. This is the precise meaning of the first words with which, according to the Evangelist Mark, Jesus begins preaching the “Gospel of God”: “The time is fulfilled, and the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent, and believe in the Gospel” (Mk 1:15).

The “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” is not only at the beginning of Christian life but accompanies it throughout, endures, is renewed and spreads, branching out into all its expressions. Every day is a favourable moment of grace because every day presses us to give ourselves to Jesus, to trust in him, to abide in him, to share his lifestyle, to learn true love from him, to follow him in the daily fulfilment of the Father’s will, the one great law of life. Every day, even when it is fraught with difficulties and toil, weariness and setbacks, even when we are tempted to leave the path of the following of Christ and withdraw into ourselves, into our selfishness, without realizing our need to open ourselves to the love of God in Christ, to live the same logic of justice and love. In my recent Message for Lent I wanted to recall that “humility is required to accept that I need Another to free me from ‘what is mine’, to give me gratuitously ‘what is His’. This happens especially in the sacraments of Reconciliation and the Eucharist. Thanks to Christ’s action, we may enter into the ‘greatest’ justice, which is that of love (cf. Rom 13:8–10), the justice that recognizes itself in every case more a debtor than a creditor,

because it has received more than could ever have been expected” (*Message*, 30 October 2009).

The favourable moment of grace in Lent also reveals its spiritual significance to us in the ancient formula: “Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return” which the priest says as he places a little ash on our foreheads. Thus we are referred back to the dawn of human history when the Lord told Adam, after the original sin: “In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return” (Gen 3:19). Here, the word of God reminds us of our frailty, indeed of our death, which is the extreme form. Before the innate fear of the end and even sooner in the context of a culture which in so many ways tends to censure the reality and the human experience of death, the Lenten Liturgy, on the one hand, reminds us of death, inviting us to realism and wisdom; but, on the other, it impels us above all to understand and live the unexpected newness that the Christian faith releases from the reality of death itself.

Man is dust and to dust he shall return, but dust is precious in God’s eyes because God created man, destining him to immortality. Hence the Liturgical formula, “Remember, man, you are dust and to dust you will return”, finds the fullness of its meaning in reference to the new Adam, Christ. The Lord Jesus also chose freely to share with every human being the destiny of weakness, in particular through his death on the Cross; but this very death, the culmination of his love for the Father and for humanity, was the way to the glorious Resurrection, through which Christ became a source of grace, given to all who believe in him, who are made to share in divine life itself. This life that will have no end has already begun in the earthly phase of our existence but it will be brought to completion after “the resurrection of the flesh”. The little action of the imposition of ashes reveals to us the unique riches of its meaning. It is an invitation to spend the Lenten Season as a more conscious and intense immersion in Christ’s Paschal Mystery in his death and Resurrection, through participation in the Eucharist and in the life of charity, which is born from the Eucharist in which it also finds its fulfilment. With the imposition of ashes we renew our commitment to following Jesus, to letting ourselves be transformed by his Paschal Mystery, to overcoming evil and to doing good, in order to make our former self, linked to sin die and to give birth to our “new nature”, transformed by God’s grace.

Dear friends, while we prepare to set out on the austere Lenten journey, let us invoke with special trust the protection and help of the Virgin Mary. May it be her, the first believer in Christ, to accompany us in these 40 days of intense prayer and sincere penitence so that we may arrive purified and completely renewed in mind and in spirit at the great Mystery of the Pasch of his Son.

I wish you all a good Lent!

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland and the United States. My special greeting goes to the members of the Movement *Pro Sanctitate* from Lithuania, led by Bishop Antons Justs. I also greet the many school and university students, including those from Bishop Hendrickson High School in Rhode Island, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

In a special way I greet with affection the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people* I urge you to live Lent with an authentic penitential spirit, as a return to the Father who awaits all with open arms. Dear *sick people*, I encourage you to offer up your suffering together with Christ for the conversion of all who are still far from God; and I hope that you, dear *newlyweds*, may build your family courageously and generously on the firm rock of divine love.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*3 March*

## **Lent - On the road!**

*Ash Wednesday, 1 March 2006*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, with the Ash Wednesday Liturgy, the Lenten journey of 40 days begins that will lead us to the Easter Triduum, the memorial of the passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord, heart of the mystery of our salvation. It is a favourable time when the Church invites Christians to have a keener awareness of the redeeming work of Christ and to live their Baptism in greater depth.

Indeed, in this liturgical season, the People of God from the earliest times have drawn abundant nourishment from the Word of God to strengthen their faith, reviewing the entire history of creation and redemption.

With its 40-day duration, Lent has an indisputably evocative power. Indeed, it intends to recall some of the events that marked the life and history of ancient Israel, presenting its paradigmatic value anew also to us.

We think, for example, of the 40 days of the great flood that led to God's Covenant with Noah, and hence, with humanity, and of the 40 days that Moses spent on Mount Sinai, after which he was given the Tables of the Law.

The Lenten period is meant to serve as an invitation to relive with Jesus the 40 days he spent in the desert, praying and fasting, in preparation for his public mission.

Today, we too, together with all the world's Christians, are spiritually setting out towards Calvary on a journey of reflection and prayer, meditating on the central mysteries of the faith. We will thus prepare ourselves to experience, after the mystery of the Cross, the joy of Easter.

Today, an austere and symbolic gesture is being made in all parish communities: the imposition of ashes, and this rite is accompanied by two formulas, full of meaning, that are a pressing appeal to recognize that we are sinners and to return to God.

The first formula says: "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you will return" (cf. Gn 3:19). These words of the Book of Genesis call to mind the human condition placed under the sign of transience and limitation, and are meant to spur us once again to place our every hope in God alone.

The second formula refers to the words that Jesus spoke at the beginning of his itinerant ministry: "Repent, and believe in the Gospel" (Mk 1:15). This is an invitation to base our personal and community renewal on a firm and trusting attachment to the Gospel.

The Christian's life is a life of faith, founded on the Word of God and nourished by it. In the trials of life and in every temptation, the secret of victory lies in listening to the Word of truth and rejecting with determination falsehood and evil.

This is the true and central programme of the Lenten Season: to listen to the word of truth, to live, speak and do what is true, to refuse falsehood that poisons humanity and is the vehicle of all evils.

It is therefore urgently necessary in these 40 days to listen anew to the Gospel, the Word of the Lord, the word of truth, so that in every Christian, in every one of us, the understanding of the truth given to him, given to us, may be strengthened, so that we may live it and witness to it.

Lent encourages us to let the Word of God penetrate our life and thus to know the fundamental truth: who we are, where we come from, where we must go, what road to take in life. And thus, the Season of Lent offers us an ascetic and liturgical route which, while helping us to open our eyes to our weakness, opens our hearts to the merciful love of Christ.



The Lenten journey, by bringing us close to God, enables us to look upon our brethren and their needs with new eyes. Those who begin to recognize God, to look at the face of Christ, also see their brother with other eyes, discover their brother, what is good for him, what is bad for him, his needs.

Lent, therefore, as a time of listening to the truth, is a favourable moment to convert to love, because the deep truth, the truth of God, is at the same time love.

By converting to the truth of God, we must necessarily be converted to love; a love that knows how to make its own the Lord's attitude of compassion and mercy, as I wanted to recall in the Message for Lent, whose theme consists of the Gospel words: "Jesus, at the sight of the crowds, was moved with pity" (Mt 9:36).

Aware of her mission in the world, the Church never ceases to proclaim the merciful love of Christ, who continues to turn his compassionate gaze upon the people and peoples of every time. "In the face of the terrible challenge of poverty afflicting so much of the world's population", I wrote in the above-mentioned Message for Lent, "indifference and self-centred isolation stand in stark contrast to the "gaze" of Christ. Fasting and almsgiving, which, together with prayer, the Church proposes in a special way during the Lenten Season, are suitable means for us to become conformed to this "gaze" (L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 8 February 2006, p. 7), to the gaze of Christ, and to see ourselves, humanity, others, with his gaze.

In this spirit, let us enter the austere and prayerful atmosphere of Lent, which is truly an atmosphere of love for our brethren.

May these be days of reflection and of intense prayer, in which we let ourselves be guided by the Word of God, which the liturgy offers to us in abundance. May Lent also be a time of fasting, penance and watchfulness of ourselves, and may we be convinced that the fight against sin is never-ending, because temptation is a daily reality and we all experience fragility and delusion.

Lastly, through almsgiving and doing good to others, may Lent be an opportunity for sincere sharing with our brethren of the gifts that we have received, and of attention to the needs of the poorest and most abandoned people.

On this penitential journey, may we be accompanied by Mary, Mother of the Redeemer, who is a teacher of listening and of faithful adherence to God. May the Virgin Most Holy help us to arrive purified and renewed in mind and in spirit, to celebrate the great mystery of Christ's Pasch. With these sentiments, I wish you all a good and productive Lent.

# Holy Triduum of Easter

8 April 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Holy Week, which for Christians is the most important week of the year, gives us the opportunity to immerse ourselves in the central events of the Redemption, to relive the Paschal Mystery, the great Mystery of faith. As of tomorrow afternoon, with the Mass *in Coena Domini*, the solemn liturgical rites will help us to meditate more vividly on the Passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord in the days of the Holy Triduum of Easter, the cornerstone of the entire liturgical year. May divine grace open our hearts to an understanding of the invaluable gift of salvation, obtained for us by Christ's sacrifice. We find this immense gift wonderfully described in a famous hymn contained in the Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2:6–11), upon which we have meditated several times during Lent. The Apostle concisely and effectively retraces the mystery of the history of salvation, mentioning the arrogance of Adam who, although he was not God, wanted to be like God. And he compares the arrogance of the first man, which we all tend to feel in our being, with the humility of the true Son of God who, in becoming man does not hesitate to take upon himself all human weaknesses, save sin, and going even as far as the depths of death. This descent to the ultimate depths of the Passion and death is followed by his exaltation, the true glory, the glory of love which went to the very end.

And it is therefore right as St Paul says that “at Jesus' name every knee must bend in the heavens, on the earth and under the earth, and every tongue profess that Jesus Christ is Lord” (*ibid.*, 2:10–11). With these words, St Paul refers to a prophecy of Isaiah in which God says: I am God ... to me every knee shall bend in Heaven and on earth (cf. Is 45:23). This, Paul says, applies to Jesus Christ. He truly is, in his humility, in the true greatness of his love, the Lord of the world and before him every knee bends.

How marvellous and at the same time surprising this mystery is! We can never sufficiently meditate on this reality. In spite of being God, Jesus does not want to make his divine prerogative an exclusive possession; he does not want to use his being as God, his glorious dignity and his power, as an instrument of triumph

and a sign of remoteness from us. On the contrary, “he empties himself”, taking on the wretched and weak human condition. In this regard Paul uses a rather evocative Greek verb to indicate the *kénosis*, this humbling of Jesus’. In Christ the divine form (*morphé*) was hidden beneath the human form, that is, beneath our reality marked by suffering, by poverty, by our human limitations and by death. His radical, true sharing in our nature, a sharing in all things save sin, led him to that boundary which is the sign of our finiteness, death. However, all this was not the fruit of an obscure mechanism or blind fatality: rather, it was his own free choice, through generous adherence to the Father’s saving plan. And the death he went to meet, Paul adds, was that of crucifixion, the most humiliating and degrading death imaginable. The Lord of the universe did all this out of love for us: out of love he chose “to empty himself” and make himself our brother; out of love he shared our condition, that of every man and every woman. Theodoret of Cyrus, a great witness of the Oriental tradition, wrote on this subject: “being God and God by nature and having equality with God he did not consider this something great, as do those who have received some honour greater than that which they deserve but, concealing his merits, he chose the most profound humility and took the form of a human being” (*Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians*, 2:6–7).

The prelude to the Easter Triduum which will begin tomorrow as I said with the evocative afternoon rites of Holy Thursday, is the solemn *Chrism Mass*, which the Bishop celebrates with his priests in the morning, and during which the priestly promises pronounced on the day of Ordination are renewed. This is a gesture of great value, an especially favourable opportunity in which priests reaffirm their personal fidelity to Christ who has chosen them as his ministers. This priestly encounter acquires, in addition, a special importance because it is, as it were, a preparation for the Year for Priests, which I established on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the death of the Holy Curé d’Ars and which will begin next 19 June. Again, during the *Chrism Mass* the oil of the sick and that of the catechumens will be blessed and the Chrism consecrated. These are rites that symbolically signify the fullness of Christ’s Priesthood and the ecclesial communion that must inspire the Christian people gathered for the Eucharistic sacrifice and enlivened in unity by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

In the afternoon Mass, called *in Coena Domini*, the Church commemorates the institution of the Eucharist, the ministerial priesthood and the new Commandment of love that Jesus entrusted to his disciples. St Paul offers one of the oldest accounts of what happened in the Upper Room, on the vigil of the Lord's Passion. "The Lord Jesus", he writes at the beginning of the 50s, on the basis of a text he received from the Lord's own environment, "on the night in which he was betrayed took bread, and after he had given thanks, broke it and said, 'This is my body, which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. In the same way, after the supper, he took the cup, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:23–25). These words, laden with mystery, clearly show Christ's will: under the species of the Bread and the Wine, he makes himself present with his body given and his Blood poured out. This is the sacrifice of the new and everlasting covenant offered to all, without distinction of race or culture. It is from this sacramental rite, which he presents to the Church as the supreme evidence of his love, that Jesus makes ministers of his disciples and all those who will continue the ministry through the centuries. Thus, Holy Thursday constitutes a renewed invitation to give thanks to God for the supreme gift of the Eucharist, to receive with devotion and to adore with living faith. For this reason the Church encourages the faithful to keep vigil in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament after the celebration of Holy Mass, recalling the sorrowful hour that Jesus spent in solitude and prayer at Gethsemane, before being arrested and then sentenced to death.

And so we come to Good Friday, the day of the Passion and the Crucifixion of the Lord. Every year, standing in silence before Jesus hanging on the wood of the Cross, we feel how full of love the words were that he spoke on the previous evening during the Last Supper. "This is my blood, of the covenant, which is poured out for many" (Mk 14:24). Jesus wanted to offer his life in sacrifice for the remission of humanity's sins. As it does before the Eucharist, as well as before the Passion and death of Jesus on the Cross, the mystery eludes reason. We are placed before something which, humanly, may appear senseless: a God who is not only made Man, with all the needs of man, who not only suffers to save man, taking upon himself the whole tragedy of humanity, but also dies for man.

Christ's death recalls the accumulated sorrow and evils that weigh upon humanity of every age: the crushing weight of our death, the hatred and violence that still today stain the earth with blood. The Passion of the Lord continues in the suffering of human beings. As Blaise Pascal has rightly written: "Jesus will be in agony even to the end of the world. We must not sleep during that time" (*Pensées*, 553). If Good Friday is a day full of sorrow, it is therefore at the same time a particularly propitious day to reawaken our faith, to consolidate our hope and courage so that each one of us may carry our cross with humility, trust and abandonment in God, certain of his support and his victory. The liturgy of this day sings: *O Crux, ave, spes unica* Hail, O Cross, our only hope!

This hope is nourished in the great silence of Holy Saturday, in expectation of the Resurrection of Jesus. On this day the Churches are unadorned and no particular liturgical rites are scheduled. The Church keeps vigil in prayer like Mary and with Mary, sharing her same sentiments of sorrow and of trust in God. It is rightly recommended that a prayerful atmosphere be preserved throughout the day, favourable for meditation and reconciliation; the faithful are encouraged to receive the sacrament of Penance, to be able to take part in the Easter festivities truly renewed.

The recollection and silence of Holy Saturday will usher us into the night of the solemn *Easter Vigil*, "mother of all vigils", when the hymn of joy in Christ's Resurrection will burst forth in all the churches and communities. Once again the victory of light over darkness, of life over death will be proclaimed and the Church will rejoice in the encounter with her Lord. Thus we shall enter into the atmosphere of Easter.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us prepare to live the Holy Triduum intensely, in order to share ever more deeply in the Mystery of Christ. We are accompanied in this itinerary by the Blessed Virgin who silently followed her Son Jesus to Calvary, taking part with deep sorrow in his sacrifice and thus cooperating in the mystery of the Redemption and becoming Mother of all believers (cf. Jn 19:25–27). Together with her we shall enter the Upper Room, we shall remain at the foot of the Cross, we shall watch in spirit beside the dead Christ, waiting with hope for the dawn of the radiant day of the*

*Resurrection. In view of this, I express to you all from this moment my most cordial good wishes for a happy and holy Easter, together with your families, parishes and communities.*

## Octave of Easter 2009

15 April 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today the usual Wednesday General Audience is imbued with spiritual joy, that joy which no suffering or sorrow can erase because it is a joy that springs from the certainty that Christ, with his death and Resurrection, has triumphed over evil and death once and for all. “*Christ is risen! Alleluia!*”, the Church sings, rejoicing. And this festive atmosphere, these characteristic sentiments of Easter are not only prolonged during this week the Octave of Easter but extend over the 50 days until Pentecost. Indeed, we can say: the Paschal Mystery embraces our whole life-span.

The biblical references and incentives to meditation offered to us in this liturgical season so that we may acquire a deeper knowledge of the meaning and value of Easter are truly numerous. The “*Via Crucis*” [Way of the Cross] to Calvary that we walked with Jesus in the Sacred Triduum has become the comforting “*Via lucis*” [way of light]. Seen from the Resurrection we can say that this way of suffering is a path of light and spiritual renewal, of inner peace and firm hope. After the weeping, after the bewilderment of Good Friday, followed by the silence laden with expectation of Holy Saturday, at dawn on the “first day after the Sabbath” the proclamation of Life that triumphed over death resounded: “*Dux vitae mortuus/regnat vivus* the Lord of life was dead; but he is now alive and triumphant!”. The overwhelming newness of the Resurrection is so important that the Church never ceases to proclaim it, prolonging its commemoration especially every Sunday: every Sunday, in fact, is the “Lord’s Day” and the weekly Easter of the People of God. As if to highlight this mystery of salvation that invests our daily life, our Eastern brothers and sisters call Sunday, in Russian, “the day of the Resurrection” (*voskresénje*).

Consequently, it is fundamental for our faith and for our Christian witness to proclaim the Resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth as a real, historical event, attested by many authoritative witnesses. We assert this forcefully because, in our day too, there are plenty of people who seek to deny its historicity, reducing the Gospel narrative to a myth, to a “vision” of the Apostles, taking up and presenting old and already worn-out theories as new and scientific. For Jesus, of course, the Resurrection was not a simple return to his former life. Should this have been the case, in fact, it would have been something of the past: 2,000 years ago someone, such as, for example, Lazarus, was raised and returned to his former life. The Resurrection is placed in another dimension: it is the passage to a

profoundly new dimension of life that also concerns us, that involves the entire human family, history and the universe. This event that introduced a new dimension of life, an opening of this world of ours to eternal life, changed the lives of the eye-witnesses as the Gospel accounts and the other New Testament writings demonstrate; it is a proclamation that entire generations of men and women down the centuries have accepted with faith and to which they have borne witness, often at the price of their blood, knowing that in this very way they were entering into this new dimension of life. This year too, at Easter this Good News rings out unchanged and ever new in every corner of the earth: Jesus who died on the Cross is risen, he lives in glory because he has defeated the power of death, he has brought the human being to a new communion of life with God and in God. This is the victory of Easter, our salvation! And therefore we can sing with St Augustine: “Christ’s Resurrection is our hope!”, because it introduces us into a new future.

It is true: our firm hope is founded on the Resurrection of Jesus that brightens the whole of our earthly pilgrimage, including the human enigma of pain and death. Faith in the Crucified and Risen Christ is the heart of the entire Gospel message, the central core of our “Creed”. We may find an authoritative expression of this essential “Creed” in a well-known Pauline passage contained in the First Letter to the Corinthians (15:3–8), in which, to respond to some of the communities of Corinth which were paradoxically proclaiming Jesus’ Resurrection but denying the resurrection of the dead our hope the Apostle faithfully hands on what he Paul had received from the first apostolic community concerning the Lord’s death and Resurrection.

He begins with an almost peremptory affirmation: “Brothers, I want to remind you of the Gospel I preached to you, which you received and in which you stand firm. You are being saved by it at this very moment if you hold fast to it as I preached it to you. Otherwise you have believed in vain” (vv. 1–2). He immediately adds that he has transmitted to them what he himself had received. This is followed by the passage we heard at the beginning of our meeting. St Paul first of all presents Jesus’ death and in this pithy text makes two additions to the information: “Christ died”. The first addition is: died “for our sins”; the second is: “in accordance with the Scriptures” (v. 3). The words: “in accordance with the Scriptures” place the event of the Lord’s Resurrection in relation to the Old Testament history of God’s Covenant with his People, and make us understand that the death of the Son of God belongs to the fabric of salvation history and indeed makes us understand that this history receives from it both its logic and its true meaning. Until that moment Christ’s death had remained as it were an enigma, whose outcome was still uncertain. In the Paschal Mystery the words of Scripture are fulfilled, that is, this death which comes about “in accordance with the Scriptures” is an event that bears within it a *logos*, a logic: the death of Christ testifies that the Word of God was made “flesh”, was made human “history”, through and through. How and why this should have happened can be

understood from St Paul's other addition: Christ died "for our sins". With these words the Pauline text seems to take up Isaiah's prophecy contained in the *Fourth Song of the Servant of God* (cf. Is 53:12). The Servant of God the *Song* says "surrendered himself to death"; he bore "the guilt of many" and, by interceding for the "wicked", was able to bring the gift of the reconciliation of men and women with one another and of men and women with God. Thus, his is a death that puts an end to death; the Way of the Cross leads to Resurrection.

In the verses that follow, the Apostle then reflects on the Lord's Resurrection. He says that Christ "was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures". Once again, "in accordance with the Scriptures"! Many exegetes see the words: "he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures" as an important reference to what we read in Psalm 16[15] in which the Psalmist proclaims: "Because you will not abandon my soul to the nether world, nor will you suffer your faithful one to undergo corruption" (*ibid.*, v. 10). This is one of the texts of the Old Testament, cited frequently in early Christianity to prove Jesus' messianic character. Since according to the Jewish interpretation corruption began after the third day, the words of Scripture are fulfilled in Jesus who rose on the third day, that is, before corruption began. St Paul, faithfully passing on the teaching of the Apostles, emphasizes that Christ's victory over death happens through the creative power of the Word of God. This divine power brings hope and joy: this is ultimately the liberating content of the Paschal revelation. At Easter God reveals himself and the power of Trinitarian love that annihilates the destructive forces of evil and death.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us allow ourselves to be illumined by the splendour of the Risen Lord. Let us welcome him with faith and adhere generously to his Gospel, as did the privileged witnesses of his Resurrection; and as, some years later, did St Paul who encountered the divine Teacher in an extraordinary manner on the Road to Damascus. We cannot keep for ourselves alone the proclamation of this Truth that changes the life of all. And with humble trust let us pray: "Jesus, who in rising from the dead anticipated our Resurrection, we believe in You!". I would like to end with an exclamation that Sylvan of Mount Athos used to like to repeat: "Rejoice my soul. It is always Easter, for the Risen Christ is our Resurrection!". May the Virgin Mary help to cultivate within us and around us this climate of Easter joy, so that we may be witnesses of divine Love in every situation of our existence. Once again, Happy Easter to you all!*

## **Easter Triduum 2010**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are living the holy days that invite us to meditate on the central events of our Redemption, the essential core of our faith. Tomorrow the Easter Triduum begins, the



fulcrum of the whole Liturgical Year in which we are called to silence and prayer in order to contemplate the mystery of the Passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord.

In their Homilies the Fathers often referred to these days which, as St Athanasius observed in one of his *Easter Letters*, bring “us to a new beginning, even the announcement of the blessed Passover, in which the Lord was sacrificed” (*Letter 5, 1–2: PG 26, 1379*).

I therefore urge you to live these days intensely, so that they may decisively direct the life of each one to generous and convinced adherence to Christ, who died and rose for us.

Tomorrow morning, the Holy Chrism Mass, a morning prelude to Holy Thursday, will see priests gathered with their own Bishop. During an important Eucharistic celebration which usually takes place in the diocesan cathedrals, the oil of the sick and of the catechumens and chrism will be blessed. In addition, the Bishop and Priests will renew the priestly promises that they spoke on the day of their Ordination. This year, this action acquires a very special prominence because it is taking place in the context of the Year for Priests, which I established to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of the holy Curé d’Ars. To all priests I would like to repeat the hope I expressed at the end of my Letter for its inauguration: “In the footsteps of the holy Curé of Ars, let yourselves be enthralled by him. In this way you too will be, for the world in our time, heralds of hope, reconciliation and peace!”.

Tomorrow afternoon we shall celebrate the institution of the Eucharist. Writing to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul strengthened the early Christians in the truth of the Eucharistic Mystery, conveying to them what he himself had learned. “The Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, ‘This is my Body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me’. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, ‘This cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me’ ” (1 Cor 11:23–25).

These words clearly express Christ’s intention: under the species of the bread and the wine, he makes himself really present with his Body given and his Blood poured out as a sacrifice of the New Covenant. At the same time, he constitutes the Apostles and their successors ministers of this Sacrament, which he entrusts to his Church as a supreme proof of his love.

We also commemorate with an evocative rite the gesture of Jesus who washes the Apostles’ feet (Jn 13:1–25). For the Evangelist this act comes to portray the whole of Jesus’ life and reveals his love to the end, an infinite love that is capable of preparing man for communion with God and of setting him free. At the end of the Holy Thursday Liturgy the Church puts the Blessed Sacrament in a specially prepared place that represents

Jesus' loneliness and mortal anguish in Gethsemane. Before the Eucharist, the faithful contemplate Jesus in the hour of his solitude and pray that all the loneliness in the world may cease. This liturgical itinerary is likewise an invitation to seek the intimate encounter with the Lord in prayer, to recognize Jesus among those who are lonely, to watch with him and to proclaim him with the light of one's own life.

On Good Friday we shall commemorate the Passion and death of the Lord. Jesus wanted to give his life as a sacrifice for the forgiveness of humanity's sins, choosing to this end the most brutal and humiliating death: crucifixion. There is an inseparable connection between the Last Supper and Jesus' death. At the Last Supper Jesus gives his Body and his Blood, that is, his earthly existence, himself, anticipating his death and transforming it into an act of love. Thus he makes death which by its nature is the end, the destruction of every relationship an act of the communication of himself, a means of salvation and of the proclamation of the victory of love. In this way, Jesus becomes the key to understanding the Last Supper, which is an anticipation of the transformation of violent death into a voluntary sacrifice; into an act of love that redeems and saves the world.

Holy Saturday is marked by a profound silence. The Churches are bare and no special Liturgies are planned. In this time of waiting and hope, believers are invited to prayer, reflection and conversion, also by means of the sacrament of Reconciliation, in order to take part, intimately renewed, in the celebration of Easter.

In the night of Holy Saturday, during the solemn Easter Vigil, "mother of all vigils", this silence will be broken by the singing of the *Alleluia* which announces Christ's Resurrection and proclaims the victory of light over darkness, of life over death. The Church will rejoice in the encounter with her Lord, entering Easter Day which the Lord will inaugurate by rising from the dead.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us prepare to live intensely this Sacred Triduum, now at hand, so as to be ever more deeply inserted into the Mystery of Christ, who died and rose for us. May the Most Holy Virgin accompany us on this spiritual journey. May she, who followed Jesus in his Passion and who stood beneath the Cross, lead us into the Paschal Mystery so that we may experience the joy and peace of the Risen One.*

With these sentiments, from this moment I offer you all my most cordial good wishes for a holy Easter, extending them to your Communities and to all your loved ones.

### **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Japan, Canada and the United States. I also greet the

various student groups present, including those taking part in the annual “Univ Congress”. Upon all of you I invoke God’s Blessings of joy and peace!

In addressing the Italian-speaking pilgrims, I greet the university students from various countries who are taking part in the international Congress sponsored by the Prelature of Opus Dei. Dear friends, you have come to Rome for Holy Week for an experience of faith, friendship and spiritual enrichment. I ask you to reflect on the importance of university studies in forming that “Catholic or universal mentality” that St Josémaría described as: “a breadth of vision and a vigorous endeavour to study more deeply the things that are permanently alive and unchanged in Catholic orthodoxy”. May the desire to encounter Jesus Christ personally increase in each and every one, to witness to him in every context.

Lastly, I address my cordial thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newlyweds*. May contemplation of the Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus, dear *young people*, make you ever stronger in your Christian witness. And may you, dear *sick people*, draw from the Cross of Christ daily support to get the better of moments of trial and discouragement. May you, dear *newlyweds*, receive from the Paschal Mystery which we contemplate in these days, an encouragement to make your family a place of faithful and fruitful love.

*Saint Peter’s Square*

*7 April 2010*

## **Ash Wednesday 2011**

*9 March 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

On this day, marked by the austere symbol of ashes, we enter the Season of Lent, beginning a spiritual journey that prepares us for celebrating worthily the Easter Mysteries. The blessed ashes imposed upon our forehead are a sign that reminds us of our condition as creatures, that invites us to repent, and to intensify our commitment to convert, to follow the Lord ever more closely.

Lent is a journey, it means accompanying Jesus who goes up to Jerusalem, the place of the fulfilment of his mystery of Passion, death and Resurrection; it reminds us that Christian life is a “way” to take, not so much consistent with a law to observe as with the very Person of Christ, to encounter, to welcome, to follow.

Indeed, Jesus says to us: “If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me” (Lk 9:23). In other words he tells us that in order to attain, with him, the light and joy of the Resurrection, the victory of life, of love and of goodness, we too must take up our daily cross, as a beautiful passage from the *Imitation of Christ* urges us: “Take up your cross, therefore, and follow Jesus, and you shall enter eternal life. He himself opened the way before you in carrying his Cross (Jn 19:17), and upon it he died for you, that you too, might take up your cross and long to die upon it. If you die with him, you shall also live with him, and if you share his suffering, you shall also share his glory” (Book 2, chapter 12, n. 2).

In Holy Mass of the First Sunday of Lent we shall pray: “Father, through our observance of Lent, sign of the sacrament of our conversion, help us to understand the meaning of your Son’s death and Resurrection, and teach us to reflect it in our lives” (*Opening Prayer*).

This is an invocation that we address to God because we know that he alone can convert our hearts. And it is above all in the Liturgy, by participating in the holy mysteries, that we are led to make this journey with the Lord; it means learning at the school of Jesus, reviewing the events that brought salvation to us but not as a mere commemoration, a remembrance of past events. In the liturgical actions Christ makes himself present through the power of the Holy Spirit and these saving events become real.

There is a keyword that recurs frequently in the Liturgy to indicate this: the word “today”; and it should be understood in its original and practical, rather than metaphorical, sense. *Today* God reveals his law and we are granted to choose *today* between good and evil, between life and death (cf. Dt 30:19). *Today* “the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the Gospel!” (Mk 1:15). *Today* Christ died on Calvary and rose from the dead; he ascended into Heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father; *today* the Holy Spirit is given to us; *today* is a favourable time.

Taking part in the Liturgy thus means immersing our life in the mystery of Christ, in his enduring presence so as to follow a path on which we enter his death and Resurrection in order to have life. The Sundays of Lent, in this liturgical year of Cycle A in a quite particular way, introduce us to the experience of a baptismal journey, almost as if we were retracing the path of the catechumens, of those who are preparing to receive Baptism, in order to rekindle this gift within us and to ensure that our life may recover a sense of the demands and commitments of this sacrament which is at the root of our Christian life.

In the Message for this Lent I wished to recall the particular connection that binds Baptism to the Season of Lent. The Church has always associated the Easter Vigil with

the celebration of Baptism, step by step. In it is brought about that great mystery through which man, dead to sin, is enabled to share in new life in the Risen Christ and receives the Spirit of God who raised Jesus from the dead (cf. Rom 8:11).

The Readings we shall listen to on the coming Sundays and to which I ask you to pay special attention are taken up precisely by the ancient tradition which accompanied catechumens in the discovery of Baptism. These Readings are the great proclamation of what God brings about in this sacrament, a wonderful baptismal catechesis addressed to each one of us.

The First Sunday of Lent, known as the “Sunday of the Temptation” because it presents Jesus’ temptations in the wilderness, invites us to renew our definitive adherence to God and, in order to remain faithful to him, to face courageously the struggle that awaits us.

Over and over again we need determination, resistance to evil, we need to follow Jesus. On this Sunday, after hearing the testimony of the godparents and catechists, the Church celebrates the election of those who are admitted to the Easter sacraments.

The Second Sunday is called “of Abraham and of the Transfiguration”. Baptism is the sacrament of faith and of divine sonship; like Abraham, Father of believers, we too are asked to set out, to depart from our land, to give up the security we have created for ourselves in order to place our trust in God; the destination is glimpsed in the Transfiguration of Christ, the beloved Son, in whom we too become “sons of God”.

On the following Sundays, Baptism is presented in images of water, light and life. The Third Sunday makes us meet the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:5–42). Like Israel in the Exodus, in Baptism we too have received the water that saves; Jesus, as the Samaritan woman says, has living water that quenches all thirst; and this water is the Spirit himself. On this Sunday the Church celebrates the First Scrutiny of the catechumens and during the week presents to them the Creed: the profession of faith.

The Fourth Sunday makes us reflect on the experience of the “man blind from birth” (cf. Jn 9:1–41). In Baptism, we are set free from the shadow of evil and receive Christ’s light in order to live as children of light. We too must learn to see in Christ’s Face God’s presence, hence light. The Second Scrutiny on the catechumen’s journey is celebrated.

Lastly, the Fifth Sunday presents to us the raising of Lazarus (cf. Jn 11:1–45). In Baptism we passed from death to life and were enabled to please God, to make the former person die so as to live by the Spirit of the Risen One. The Third Scrutiny for the catechumens is celebrated and during the week the *Lord’s Prayer* is presented to them.

In the Church's tradition, this journey we are asked to take in Lent is marked by certain practices: fasting, almsgiving and prayer. Fasting means abstinence from food but includes other forms of privation for a more modest life. However, all this is not yet the full reality of fasting: it is an outer sign of an inner reality, of our commitment, with God's help, to abstain from evil and to live by the Gospel. Those who are unable to nourish themselves with the word of God do not fast properly.

In the Christian tradition fasting is closely linked to almsgiving. St Leo the Great taught in one of his Discourses on Lent: "All that each Christian is bound to do in every season he must now do with greater solicitude and devotion in order to fulfil the apostolic prescription of Lenten fasting consistently, not only in abstinence from food but also and above all from sin. Furthermore, with this holy fasting which is only right, no work may be more fruitfully associated than almsgiving which, under the one name of 'mercy', embraces many good works. The field of works of mercy is immense. It is not only the rich and the well-off who can benefit others with almsgiving, but also those of modest means and even the poor. Thus, although their futures differ, all may be the same in the soul's sentiments of piety" (*Sermon VI on Lent*, 2: PL 54, 286).

St Gregory the Great recalled in his *Pastoral Rule* that fasting is sanctified by the virtues that go with it, especially by charity, by every act of generosity, giving to the poor and needy the equivalent of something we ourselves have given up (cf. 19, 10–11). Lent, moreover, is a privileged period for prayer. St Augustine said that fasting and almsgiving are "the two wings of prayer" which enable it to gain momentum and more easily reach even to God.

He said: "In this way our prayers, made in humility and charity, in fasting and almsgiving, in temperance and in the forgiveness of offences, giving good things and not returning those that are bad, keeping away from evil and doing good, seek peace and achieve it. On the wings of these virtues our prayers fly safely and are more easily carried to Heaven, where Christ our Peace has preceded us" (*Sermon 206, 3 on Lent*: PL 38, 1042).

The Church knows that because of our weakness it is difficult to create silence in order to come before God and to acquire an awareness of our condition as creatures who depend on him, as sinners in need of his love. It is for this reason that in Lent she asks us to pray more faithfully, more intensely, and to prolong our meditation on the word of God.

St John Chrysostom urged: "Embellish your house with modesty and humility with the practice of prayer. Make your dwelling place shine with the light of justice; adorn its walls with good works, like a lustre of pure gold, and replace walls and precious stones

with faith and supernatural magnanimity, putting prayer above all other things, high up in the gables, to give the whole complex decorum.

“You will thus prepare a worthy dwelling place for the Lord, you will welcome him in a splendid palace. He will grant you to transform your soul into a temple of his presence” (*Homily 6 on Prayer*: PG 64, 466).

Dear friends, on this Lenten journey let us be careful to accept Christ’s invitation to follow him more decisively and consistently, renewing the grace and commitments of our Baptism, to cast off the former person within us and put on Christ, in order to arrive at Easter renewed and able to say, with St Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). I wish you all a good Lenten journey! Thank you!

## Octave of Easter 2011

*27 April 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In these first days of the Easter Season—which lasts until Pentecost—we are still filled with the freshness and new joy that the liturgical celebrations have brought to our hearts. I would therefore like to reflect briefly with you on Easter, the heart of the Christian mystery. Everything, in fact, starts here: our faith is founded on Christ risen from the dead.

The whole liturgy of the Church radiates from Easter, as if from a luminous, incandescent centre, drawing from it content and significance. The liturgical celebration of the death and Resurrection of Christ is not a simple commemoration of this event but is its actualization in the mystery, for the life of every Christian and of every ecclesial community, for our life. In fact, faith in the Risen Christ transforms life, bringing about within us a continuous resurrection, as St Paul wrote to the first believers: “For once you were darkness, but now you are light in the Lord; walk as children of light (for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true)” (Eph 5:8–9).

So how can we make Easter become “life”? How can the whole of our interior and exterior existence take on a paschal “form”? We must start from an authentic understanding of Jesus’ Resurrection: this event is not merely a return to previous life, as it was for Lazarus, for the daughter of Jairus and for the young man of Nain; rather it is something entirely new and different.

Christ's Resurrection is a landing place on the way to a life no longer subjected to the transience of time, a life steeped in God's eternity. In the Resurrection of Jesus a new condition of being human begins, which illumines and transforms our daily routine and opens a qualitatively different and new future to humanity as a whole.

For this reason not only does St Paul interpret the resurrection of Christians in a manner inseparable from that of Jesus (cf. 1 Cor 15:16, 20), but he also points out how we should live the Paschal Mystery in our everyday lives.

In the Letter to the Colossians, he says: "If then you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (3:1-2). At first sight, on reading this text it might seem that the Apostle intends to encourage contempt of earthly realities, in other words inviting us to forget this world of suffering, injustice and sin, in order to live in anticipation in a heavenly paradise. The thought of "Heaven" would in this case be a sort of alienation. Yet, to grasp the true meaning of these Pauline affirmations, it is sufficient not to separate them from the context. The Apostle explains very clearly what he means by "things that are above" which the Christian must seek and the "things that are on earth", that the Christian should avoid.

Now, first of all what are the "things of the earth" that must be avoided? "Put to death therefore", St Paul writes, "what is earthly in you: immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and covetousness, which is idolatry" (3:5-6). Putting to death within us the insatiable desire for material goods, selfishness, the root of all sin. Therefore, when the Apostle invites Christians to detach themselves firmly from the "things of the earth", he clearly wishes to make them understand that they belong to the "old nature", from which the Christian must divest himself, in order to put on Christ.

Just as he was unambivalent in spelling out the things which we should not set our hearts on, he was equally clear in pointing out to us the "things that are above", which on the contrary Christians must seek and savour. They concern what belongs to the "new nature", which has put on Christ once and for all in Baptism, but always needs to be renewed "after the image of its Creator" (Col 3:10). This is how the Apostle to the Gentiles describes these "things that are above": "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other.... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony" (Col 3:12-24).

St Paul, therefore is very far from inviting Christians, each one of us, to escape from the world in which God has placed us. It is true that we are citizens of another "city", where



our true homeland is found; but we must journey on towards this destination every day, here on earth. Taking part from this moment in the life of the Risen Christ, we must live in this world, in the heart of the earthly city, as new men and women.

And this is not only the way to transform ourselves, but also to transform the world, to give the earthly city a new face that will encourage the development of humanity and of society, in accordance with the logic of solidarity, of goodness, in profound respect for the dignity proper to each one. The Apostle reminds us of the virtues that must accompany Christian life; at the top of the list is charity, to which all the others are related, as to the source and the matrix. Christian life sums up or summarizes the “things that are in Heaven”: charity, which, with faith and hope, represents the great rule of life of the Christian and defines its profound nature.

Easter, therefore, brings the newness of a profound and total passage from a life subjected to the slavery of sin to a life of freedom, enlivened by love, a force that pulls down every barrier and builds a new harmony in one’s own heart and in the relationship with others and with things. Every Christian just as every community, if he lives the experience of this passage of resurrection, cannot but be a new leaven in the world, giving himself without reserve for the most urgent and just causes, as the testimonies of the saints in every epoch and in every place show.

The expectations of our time are so numerous: we Christians, firmly believing that Christ’s Resurrection has renewed man without taking him from the world in which he builds his history, we must be luminous witnesses of this new life that Easter has brought.

Easter is therefore a gift to be accepted ever more deeply in the faith, to be able to operate in every situation with the grace of Christ, according to the logic of God, the logic of love. The light of Christ’s Resurrection must penetrate this world of ours; as a message of truth and life it must reach all human beings through our daily witness.

Dear friends, Yes, Christ is truly risen! We cannot keep for ourselves the life and joy that he has given us in his Passover, but rather we must give it to all who approach us. It is our duty and our mission: to kindle in the heart of our neighbour hope where there is despair, joy where there is sorrow, life where there is death.

Witnessing every day to the joy of the Risen Lord means always living in “a paschal mode” and causing to ring out the Good News that Christ is neither an idea nor a memory of the past, but a Person who lives with us, for us and in us, and with him, for him and in him we can make all things new (cf. Rev 21:5).

# Easter Triduum 2011

20 April 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We have now arrived at the heart of Holy Week, the culmination of the Lenten journey. Tomorrow we shall enter the Easter Triduum, the three holy days in which the Church commemorates the mystery of the Passion, death and Resurrection of Jesus.

The Son of God, who, after becoming man in obedience to the Father, similar to us in all things save sin (cf. Heb 4:15), accepted to do the Father's will to the very end. He accepted the Passion and the Cross out of love for us, to enable us to share in his Resurrection so that, in him and for him, we might live for ever in consolation and in peace.

I therefore urge you to accept this mystery of salvation and to participate intensely in the Easter Triduum, the fulcrum of the entire Liturgical Year and a time of special grace for every Christian. I invite you in these days to seek recollection and prayer, so as to draw more deeply from this source of grace. In this regard, with a view to the forthcoming celebrations every Christian is asked to celebrate the sacrament of Reconciliation, a moment of special adherence to the death and Resurrection of Christ, to be able to participate more fruitfully in Holy Easter.

Holy Thursday is the day on which the Institution of the Eucharist and of the Ministerial Priesthood is commemorated. In the morning each diocesan community, gathered round its bishop in the cathedral church, celebrates the Chrism Mass in which the sacred Chrism, the Oil of the Catechumens and the Oil of the Sick are blessed. Starting with the Easter Triduum and throughout the liturgical year these oils will be used for the sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation, priestly and episcopal Ordination and the Anointing of the Sick.

This emphasizes that salvation, transmitted by the sacramental signs, flows from the very heart of the Paschal Mystery of Christ. Indeed, we are redeemed by his death and Resurrection and, through the sacraments, we draw on that same salvific source.

The priestly promises will also be renewed at the Chrism Mass tomorrow. Throughout the world, every priest renews the commitment he made on the day of his Ordination to be totally consecrated to Christ in exercising his sacred ministry at the service of his brethren. Let us accompany our priests with our prayers.

In the afternoon of Holy Thursday, the Triduum effectively begins with the commemoration of the Last Supper, at which Jesus instituted the Memorial of his Passover, complying with the Jewish Easter rite. In accordance with the tradition, every Jewish family, gathered at table on the feast of the Passover, eats roast lamb, commemorating the liberation of the Israelites from the slavery of Egypt; thus in the Upper Room, knowing of his imminent death, Jesus, the true Paschal Lamb, offered himself for our salvation (cf. 1 Cor 5:7).

In pronouncing the blessing over the bread and the wine, he anticipated the sacrifice of the Cross and expressed the intention of perpetuating his presence among the disciples. Under the species of the bread and the wine, he made himself present in a real way with his Body given and his Blood poured out.

At the Last Supper, the Apostles were constituted ministers of this Sacrament of salvation; Jesus washed their feet (cf. Jn 13:1–25), inviting them to love one another as he had loved them, giving his life for them. In repeating this gesture in the Liturgy, we too are called to witness effectively to the love of our Redeemer.

Lastly, Holy Thursday ends with Eucharistic Adoration, in memory of the Lord's agony in the Garden of Gethsemane. Having left the Upper Room he withdrew to pray, alone before the Father. At that moment of deep communion the Gospels recount that Jesus experienced great anguish, such acute suffering that it made him sweat blood (cf. Mt 26:38).

In the knowledge of his imminent death on the Cross, he felt immense anguish at the closeness of death. In this situation an element appeared that was of great importance to the whole Church. Jesus said to his followers: stay here and keep watch; and this appeal for vigilance concerns precisely this moment of anguish, of threats, in which the traitor was to arrive, but it concerns the whole history of the Church. It is a permanent message for every era because the disciples' drowsiness was not just a problem at that moment but is a problem for the whole of history.

The question is: in what does this apathy consist? What would the watchfulness to which the Lord invites us consist of? I would say that the disciples' somnolence in the course of history is a certain insensitiveness of the soul with regard to the power of evil, an insensibility to all the evil in the world. We do not wish to be unduly disturbed by these things, we prefer to forget them. We think that perhaps, after all, it will not be so serious and we forget.

Moreover, it is not only insensibility to evil, when we should be watchful in order to do good, to fight for the force of goodness. Rather it is an insensibility to God: this is our

true sleepiness, this insensibility to God's presence that also makes us insensible to evil. We are not aware of God—he would disturb us—hence we are naturally not aware of the force of evil and continue on the path of our own convenience.

Nocturnal adoration of Holy Thursday, watching with the Lord, must be the very moment to make us reflect on the somnolence of the disciples, of the defenders of Jesus, of the Apostles, of us who do not see, who do not wish to see the whole force of evil nor do we wish to enter his passion for goodness, for the presence of God in the world, for the love of our neighbour and of God.

Then the Lord began to pray. The three Apostles—Peter, James and John—were asleep but they awoke intermittently and heard the refrain of this prayer of the Lord: “not *my* will, but *your* will be done”. What is this will of *mine*, what is this will of *yours* of which the Lord speaks?

*My* will is “that he should not die”, that he be spared this cup of suffering: it is the human will, human nature, and Christ felt, with the whole awareness of his being, life, the abyss of death, the terror of nothingness, the threat of suffering. Moreover, he was even more acutely aware of the abyss of evil than are we who have a natural aversion to death, a natural fear of death.

Together with death, he felt the whole of humanity's suffering. He felt that this was the cup he was obliged to drink, that he himself had to drink in order to accept the evil of the world, all that is terrible, the aversion to God, the whole weight of sin. And we can understand that before this reality, the cruelty of which he fully perceived, Jesus, with his human soul, was terrified: *my* will would be not to drink the cup, but *my* will is subordinate to *your* will, to the will of God, to the will of the Father, which is also the true will of the Son. And thus in this prayer Jesus transformed his natural repugnance, his aversion to the cup and to his mission to die for us; he transformed his own natural will into God's will, into a “yes” to God's will.

Man of himself is tempted to oppose God's will, to seek to do his own will, to feel free only if he is autonomous; he sets his own autonomy against the heteronomy of obeying God's will. This is the whole drama of humanity. But in truth, this autonomy is mistaken and entry into God's will is not opposition to the self, it is not a form of slavery that violates *my* will but rather means entering into truth and love, into goodness.

And Jesus draws our will—which opposes God's will, which seeks autonomy—upwards, towards God's will. This is the drama of our redemption, that Jesus should uplift our will, our total aversion to God's will and our aversion to death and sin and unite it with the Father's will: “Not *my* will but *yours*”. In this transformation of “no” into “yes”, in this

insertion of the creatural will into the will of the Father, he transforms humanity and redeems us. And he invites us to be part of his movement: to emerge from our “no” and to enter into the “yes” of the Son. My will exists, but the will of the Father is crucial because it is truth and love.

Another element of this prayer seems to me to be important. The three witnesses preserved—as appears in Sacred Scripture—the Hebrew or Aramaic word with which the Lord spoke to the Father, he called him: “Abba”, Father. But this term “Abba” is a familiar form of the term “father”, a form used only in the family that was never applied to God. Here we have a glimpse of Jesus’ intimate life, of the way he spoke in the family, the way he truly spoke as the Son with the Father. We see the Trinitarian mystery: the Son speaks to the Father and redeems humanity.

A further observation: the Letter to the Hebrews gave us a profound interpretation of this prayer of the Lord, of this drama of Gethsemane. It says: Jesus’ tears, his prayer, his cry, his anguish, all this is not merely a concession to the weakness of the flesh as might be said. It is in this very way that Jesus fulfilled his office as High Priest, because the High Priest must uplift the human being, with all his problems and suffering, to God’s heights. And the Letter to the Hebrews says: with all these cries, tears, prayers and supplications, the Lord has brought our reality to God (cf. Heb 5:7ff). And it uses this Greek word “*prosferein*”, which is the technical term for what the High Priest must do to offer, with raised hands.

It was in this drama of Gethsemane, where God’s power no longer seemed to be present, that Jesus fulfilled his role as High Priest. And it also says that in this act of obedience, that is, of the conformation of the natural human will to God’s will, he was perfected as a priest. Furthermore, it once again uses the technical word for ordaining a priest. In this way he truly became the High Priest of humanity and thus opened Heaven and the door to the resurrection.

If we reflect on this drama of Gethsemane we can also see the strong contrast between Jesus with his anguish, with his suffering, in comparison with the great philosopher Socrates, who stayed calm, without anxiety, in the face of death. And this seems the ideal. We can admire this philosopher but Jesus’ mission was different. His mission was not this total indifference and freedom; his mission was to bear in himself the whole burden of our suffering, the whole of the human drama. This humiliation of Gethsemane, therefore, is essential to the mission of the God-Man. He carries in himself our suffering, our poverty, and transforms it in accordance with God’s will. And thus he opens the doors of Heaven. He opens Heaven: this curtain of the Most Holy One, which until now Man has kept closed against God, is opened through his suffering and

obedience. These are a few observations for Holy Thursday, for our celebration on Holy Thursday evening.

On Good Friday we will commemorate the Passion and death of the Lord; we will worship the Crucified Christ, we will share in his suffering with penance and fasting. Looking “on him whom they have pierced” (cf. Jn 19:37), we shall be able to draw from his pierced heart, from which blood and water flowed as from a source; from that heart from which the love of God for every human being flows, we receive his Spirit. Therefore, on Good Friday, let us too accompany Jesus on his ascent to Calvary, allowing him to guide us right to the Cross and to receive the offering of his immolated Body.

Lastly, on the night of Holy Saturday we shall celebrate the solemn Easter Vigil during which Christ’s Resurrection is proclaimed, his definitive victory over death which calls us to be new men and women in him. In participating in this holy Vigil, the central Night of the entire Liturgical Year, we shall commemorate our Baptism, in which we too were buried with Christ, to be able to rise with him and take part in the banquet of Heaven (cf. Rev 19:7–9).

Dear friends, we have endeavoured to understand Jesus’ state of mind at the moment when he experienced the extreme trial in order to grasp what directed his action. The criterion that throughout his life guided every decision Jesus made was his firm determination to love the Father, to be one with the Father and to be faithful to him; this decision to respond to his love impelled him to embrace the Father’s plan in every single circumstance, to make his own the plan of love entrusted to him in order to recapitulate all things in God, to lead all things to him.

In reliving the Sacred Triduum, let us also prepare ourselves to welcome God’s will in our life, knowing that our own true good, the way to life, is found in God’s will even if it appears harsh, in contrast with our intentions. May the Virgin Mother guide us on this itinerary and obtain from her divine Son the grace to be able to spend our life for love of Jesus, in the service of our brethren. Thank you.

## **Season of Lent 2012**

*22 February 2012*

### ***Ash Wednesday***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this Catechesis, I would like to reflect briefly upon the season of Lent which begins today with the Ash Wednesday Liturgy. It is a 40-day journey that will bring us to the Easter Triduum—the memorial of the Lord’s Passion, death and Resurrection, the heart of the mystery of our salvation. In the first centuries of the Church’s life this was the time when those who had heard and received the proclamation of Christ set out, step by step, on their journey of faith and conversion in order to receive the sacrament of Baptism. For the catechumens—namely, those who wished to become Christian and to be incorporated into Christ and into the Church—it was a matter of drawing closer to the living God and an initiation to faith which was to take place gradually, through inner transformation.

Subsequently, penitents and then all the faithful were also asked to make this journey of spiritual renewal and increasingly to conform their lives to Christ’s. The participation of the whole community in the various stages of the Lenten journey emphasizes an important dimension of Christian spirituality: Christ’s death and Resurrection does not bring the redemption of a few but of all. For this reason everyone, both those who were making a journey of faith as catechumens to receive Baptism and those who had drifted away from God and from the community of faith and were seeking reconciliation, as well as those who were living their faith in full communion with the Church, knew that the season which precedes Easter is a time of *metanoia*; that is, of a change of heart, of repentance; it is the season that identifies our human life and the whole of history as a process of conversion that starts now, to encounter the Lord at the end of time.

Using an expression that has become characteristic in the liturgy, the Church calls the season we have entered today “*Quadragesima*”, namely, a 40-day period and, with a clear reference to Sacred Scripture, in this way introduces us into a precise spiritual context. In fact, 40 is the symbolic number with which both the Old and the New Testaments represent the salient moments in the experience of faith of the People of God.

It is a number that stands for the time of waiting, of purification, of the return to the Lord, of the knowledge that God keeps his promises. This number does not represent an exact chronological period, marked by the sum of its days. Rather, it suggests patient perseverance, a long trial, a sufficient length of time in which

to perceive God's works, a time within which one must resolve to assume one's responsibilities with no further postponement. It is the time for mature decisions.

The number 40 first appears in the story of Noah. Because of the flood this righteous man spends 40 days and 40 nights in the Ark, with his family and with the animals that God had told him to take with him. And he waits another 40 days, after the flood, before touching dry land, saved from destruction (cf. Gen 7:4, 12; 8:6).

Then, the next stage: Moses remains in the Lord's presence on Mount Sinai for 40 days and 40 nights to receive the Law. He fasts throughout this period (cf. Ex 24:18). The journey of the Jewish people from Egypt to the Promised Land lasts for 40 years, an appropriate span of time to experience God's faithfulness.

"You shall remember all the way which the Lord your God has led you these forty years in the wilderness ... your clothing did not wear out upon you, and your foot did not swell, these forty years", Moses says in Deuteronomy at the end of the 40 years' migration (8:2, 4). The years of peace that Israel enjoys under the Judges are 40 (cf. 3:11, 30); but once this time has passed, forgetfulness of God's gifts and the return to sin creep in.

The Prophet Elijah takes 40 days to reach Mount Horeb, the mountain where he encounters God (cf. 1 Kings 19:8). For 40 days the inhabitants of Ninevah do penance in order to obtain God's forgiveness (cf. Jon 3:4). Forty is also the number of years of the reigns of Saul (cf. Acts 13:21), of David (cf. 2 Sam 5:4-5) and of Solomon (cf. 1 Kings 11:42), the first three kings of Israel.

The Psalms also reflect on the biblical significance of the 40 years; for example, Psalm 95[94], a passage of which we have just heard: "O that today you would hearken to his voice! Harden not your hearts, as at Meribah, as on the day at Massah in the wilderness, when your fathers tested me, and put me to the proof, though they had seen my work. For forty years I loathed that generation and said, 'They are a people who err in heart, and they do not regard my ways'" (vv. 7c-10).



In the New Testament, before beginning his public ministry, Jesus withdraws into the wilderness for 40 days, neither eating nor drinking (cf. Mt 4:2); his nourishment is the Word of God, which he uses as a weapon to triumph over the devil. Jesus' temptations recall those that the Jewish people faced in the desert, but which they were unable to overcome. It is for 40 days that the Risen Jesus instructs his disciples before ascending into Heaven and sending the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 1:3).

This recurring number of 40 describes a spiritual context which is still timely and applicable, and the Church, precisely by means of the days of the Lenten season, wishes to preserve their enduring value and show us their effectiveness. The purpose of the Christian liturgy of Lent is to encourage a journey of spiritual renewal in the light of this long biblical experience and, especially, to learn to imitate Jesus, who by spending 40 days in the wilderness taught how to overcome temptation with the word of God.

The 40 years that Israel spent wandering through the wilderness reveal ambivalent attitudes and situations. On the one hand they are the season of the first love with God and between God and his people, when he speaks to their hearts, continuously pointing out to them the path to follow. God had, as it were, made his dwelling place in Israel's midst, he went before his people in a cloud or in a pillar of fire; he provided food for them every day by bringing down manna from heaven and making water flow from the rock. The years that Israel spent in the wilderness can thus be seen as the time of God's predilection, the time when the People adhered to him: a time of first love.

On the other hand, the Bible also shows another image of Israel's wanderings in the wilderness: the time of the greatest temptations and dangers too, when Israel mutters against its God and, feeling the need to worship a God who is closer and more tangible, would like to return to paganism and build its own idols. It is also the time of rebellion against the great and invisible God.

In Jesus' earthly pilgrimage we are surprised to discover this ambivalence, a time of special closeness to God—a time of first love—and a time of temptation—the temptation to return to paganism, but of course without any compromise with sin. After his Baptism of penance in the Jordan, when he takes upon himself the destiny of the Servant of God who renounces himself, lives for others and puts

himself among sinners to take the sin of the world upon himself, Jesus goes into the wilderness and remains there for 40 days in profound union with the Father, thereby repeating Israel's history, with all those cadences of 40 days or years which I have mentioned. This dynamic is a constant in the earthly life of Jesus, who always seeks moments of solitude in order to pray to his Father and to remain in intimate communion, in intimate solitude with him, in an exclusive communion with him, and then to return to the people. However in this period of "wilderness" and of his special encounter with the Father, Jesus is exposed to danger and is assaulted by the temptation and seduction of the Evil One, who proposes a different messianic path to him, far from God's plan because it passes through power, success and domination rather than the total gift of himself on the Cross. This is the alternative: a messianism of power, of success, or a messianism of love, of the gift of self.

This situation of ambivalence also describes the condition of the Church journeying through the "wilderness" of the world and of history. In this "desert" we believers certainly have the opportunity for a profound experience of God who strengthens the spirit, confirms faith, nourishes hope and awakens charity; an experience that enables us to share in Christ's victory over sin and death through his sacrifice of love on the Cross. However the "wilderness" is also a negative aspect of the reality that surrounds us: aridity, the poverty of words of life and of values, secularism and cultural materialism, which shut people into the worldly horizons of existence, removing them from all reference to transcendence.

This is also the environment in which the sky above us is dark, because it is covered with the clouds of selfishness, misunderstanding and deceit. In spite of this, for the Church today the time spent in the wilderness may be turned into a time of grace, for we have the certainty that God can make the living water that quenches thirst and brings refreshment gush from even the hardest rock.

Dear brothers and sisters, in these 40 days that will bring us to the Resurrection at Easter, we can find fresh courage for accepting with patience and faith every situation of difficulty, affliction and trial in the knowledge that from the darkness the Lord will cause a new day to dawn. And if we are faithful to Jesus, following him on the Way of the Cross, the clear world of God, the world of light,

truth and joy will be, as it were, restored to us. It will be the new dawn, created by God himself. A good Lenten journey to you all!

## **Easter Octave 2012**

*11 April 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After the solemn celebrations of Easter, our meeting today is imbued with spiritual joy, although the sky is grey we carry in our hearts the joy of Easter, the certainty of the Resurrection of Christ who triumphed over death once and for all. In the first place I renew to each one of you a cordial Easter greeting: may the joyful announcement of Christ's Resurrection ring out in all homes and in all hearts so that hope may be reborn.

In this Catechesis I would like to demonstrate the transformation that the Pasch of Jesus worked in his disciples. Let us start with the evening of the day of the Resurrection. The disciples had locked the door to the house for fear of the Jews (cf. Jn 20:19). Fear caused their hearts to miss a beat, and prevented them from reaching out to others and to life. The Teacher was no longer. The memory of his Passion gave rise to uncertainty. Yet Jesus had his followers at heart and was about to fulfil the promise he had made during the Last Supper: "I will not leave you desolate; I will come to you" (Jn 14:18) and he also says this to us, even in overcast weather: "I will not leave you desolate".

With Jesus' arrival the disciple's situation of anguish changes radically. He enters through closed doors, he stands in their midst and gives them the peace that reassures: "Peace to you" (Jn 20:19b). It is a common greeting but it now acquires new significance because it brings about an inner change; it is the Easter greeting that enables the disciples to overcome all fear. The peace that Jesus brings is the gift of salvation that he had promised in his farewell discourses: "peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your hearts be troubled, neither let them be afraid" (Jn 14:27).

On this day of the Resurrection he gives it in fullness and for the community it becomes a source of joy, the certainty of victory, and security in relying on God. “Let not your hearts be troubled”, (Jn 14:1), do not be afraid, he also says to us.

After this greeting, Jesus shows the disciples the wounds in his hands and in his side (cf. Jn 20:20), signs of what has occurred and will never be cancelled: his glorious humanity remains “wounded”. The purpose of this act is to confirm the new reality of the Resurrection: Christ, now among his own, is a real person, the same Jesus who three days earlier was nailed to the cross. And it is in this way that in the dazzling light of Easter, in the encounter with the Risen One, the disciples perceive the salvific meaning of his passion and his death. Then sorrow and fear turn into full joy. The sorrow and the wounds themselves become a source of joy.

The joy that is born in their hearts derives from “[having seen] the Lord” (Jn 20:20). He repeats to them: “Peace be with you” (v. 21). By then it was obvious that it was not only a greeting. It was a gift, *the* gift that the Risen One wants to offer his friends, but at the same time it is a consignment. This peace, which Christ purchased with his blood, is for them but also for all, the disciples must pass on to the whole world. Indeed, he adds: “as the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (*ibid.*). The Risen Jesus returned to his disciples to send them out. He had completed his work in the world, it was then up to them to sow faith in hearts so that the Father, known and loved, might gather all his children from the dispersion.

But Jesus knows that his followers are still fearful, even now. Thus he carries out the gesture of blowing upon them and regenerates them in his Spirit (cf. Jn 20:22); this action is the sign of the new creation. In fact, with the gift of the Holy Spirit that comes from the Risen Christ, a new world begins. The sending of the disciples on mission is the beginning of the journey in the world of the people of the New Covenant, a people who believe in him and in his work of salvation, a people who witness to the truth of the Resurrection. This newness of life that does not die, brought by Easter, must be spread everywhere so that the thorns of sin, which wound the human heart, leave room for the new shoots of Grace, of God’s presence and of his love that triumph over sin and death.

Dear friends, today too the Risen One enters our homes and our hearts, even when, at times, the doors are closed. He enters giving joy and peace, life and hope, gifts we need for our human and spiritual rebirth. Only he can roll away those stones from the tombs in which all too often people seal themselves off from their own feelings, their own relationships, their own behaviour; stones that sanction death: division, enmity, resentment, envy, diffidence, indifference. Only he, the Living One, can give meaning to existence and enable those who are weary and sad, downhearted and drained of hope, to continue on their journey. This was the experience of the two disciples who were on their way from Jerusalem to Emmaus on Easter Day (cf. Lk 24:13–35). They were talking about Jesus but their sad looks (cf. v. 17), expressed their disappointed hopes, uncertainty and melancholy. They had left their homeland to follow Jesus with his friends and had discovered a new reality in which forgiveness and love were no longer only words but had a tangible effect on life. Jesus of Nazareth had made all things new, he had transformed their life. But now he was dead and it all seemed to be over.

Suddenly, however, they are no longer two, but three people, who are walking. Jesus joins the two disciples and walks with them, but they are unable to recognize him. They have of course heard the rumours about his resurrection, indeed they even tell him: “Some women of our company amazed us. They were at the tomb early in the morning and did not find his body; and they came back saying that they had even seen a vision of angels who said that he was alive” (vv. 22–23). Yet all this did not suffice to convince them, because “him they did not see” (v. 24). So Jesus, “beginning with Moses and all the prophets”, patiently “interpreted to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning himself” (v. 27).

The Risen One explains Sacred Scripture to the disciples, giving the fundamental key to reading it, namely, he himself and his Paschal Mystery: it is to him that the Scriptures bear witness (cf. Jn 5:39–47). The meaning of all things, of the Law, of the Prophets and of the Psalms, suddenly dawns on them and becomes clear to their eyes. Jesus had opened their minds to the understanding of the Scriptures (cf. Lk 24:45).

In the meantime, they had reached the village, probably the home of one of the two. The unknown wayfarer “appeared to be going further” (v. 28), but then he

stayed with them because they asked him to so insistently: “Stay with us” (v. 29). We too must say insistently to the Lord, over and over again, “Stay with us”.

“When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them” (v. 30). The reference to Jesus’ gestures at the Last Supper, is evident. “And their eyes were opened and they recognized him” (v. 31). The presence of Jesus, first with words and then with the act of breaking the bread, enabled the disciples to recognize him and they could feel in a new way what they had felt while they were walking beside him: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (v. 32). This episode points out to us two special “places” where we can encounter the Risen One who transforms our life: in listening to his word, in communion with Christ, and in the breaking of the bread; two “places” profoundly united with each other because “Word and Eucharist are so deeply bound together that we cannot understand one without the other: the Word of God sacramentally takes flesh in the event of the Eucharist” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini*, nn. 54–55).

After this encounter, the two disciples “rose that same hour and returned to Jerusalem; and they found the eleven gathered together and those who were with them, who said, ‘The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!’” (v. 33–34).

In Jerusalem they hear the news of Jesus’ Resurrection and, in turn, they recount their own experience, on fire with love for the Risen One who has opened their hearts to an uncontainable joy. As St Peter says, they were “born anew to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead” (cf. 1 Pet 1:3). Indeed, the enthusiasm of faith, love for the community, the need to communicate the Good News was reborn within them. The Teacher is risen and with him all life is reborn; witnessing to this event becomes an irrepressible need for them.

Dear friends, may the Easter season be for us all a favourable opportunity to rediscover the sources of faith, the presence of the Risen One among us, with joy and enthusiasm. It is a question of making the same journey that Jesus enabled the two disciples of Emmaus to make, by rediscovering the word of God and the Eucharist, that is, by walking with the Lord and letting our eyes be opened to the

true meaning of Scripture and to his presence in the breaking of bread. The culmination of this journey, then as today, is Eucharistic Communion: in Communion Jesus nourishes us with his Body and his Blood, to be present in our life, to renew us, and to enliven us with the power of the Holy Spirit.

To conclude, the experience of the disciples invites us to think about the meaning of Easter for us. Let us allow ourselves to encounter the Risen Jesus! He, alive and true, is ever present in our midst; he walks with us to guide our life, to open our eyes. Let us trust in the Risen One who has the power to give life, to make us be born anew as children of God, capable of believing and of loving. Faith in him transforms our life: frees it from fear, gives it firm hope, enlivens it with God's love which gives full meaning to existence. Many thanks.

# Octave of Easter

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today the customary Wednesday General Audience is bathed in the luminous joy of Easter. In these days, in fact, the Church celebrates the mystery of the Resurrection and experiences the great joy that comes to her from the Good News of Christ's victory over evil and over death.

This joy is not only prolonged in the Octave of Easter but is extended for 50 days until Pentecost. After the weeping and distress of Good Friday and after the silence, laden with expectation, of Holy Saturday, here is the wonderful announcement: "The Lord has risen indeed, and has appeared to Simon!" (Lk 24:34). This is the "Good News" par excellence in the entire history of the world, it is the "Gospel" proclaimed and passed on down the centuries, from generation to generation.

Christ's Pasch is the supreme and unequalled act of God's power. It is an absolutely extraordinary event, the most beautiful, ripe fruit of the "Mystery of God". It is so extraordinary that it is ineffable in its dimensions that escape our human capacity for knowing and investigating. Yet, it is also a "historical" event, witnessed to and documented. It is the event on which the whole of our faith is founded. It is the central content in which we believe and the main reason why we believe.

The New Testament does not describe how the Resurrection of Jesus took place. It only mentions the testimonies of those whom Jesus met personally after he had risen. The three Synoptic Gospels tell us that this announcement: "He has risen!", was first proclaimed by Angels. It is therefore a proclamation that originates in God; but God immediately entrusts it to his "messengers", so that they may pass it on to all. Hence it is these same Angels who tell the women, who had gone at daybreak to the tomb, "go quickly and tell his disciples that he has risen from the dead, and behold, he is going before you to Galilee; there you will see him" (Mt 28:7). In this way, through the women of the Gospel, this divine mandate reaches each and every one so that each in turn may transmit this same news to others with faithfulness and courage the glad tidings, that are joyful and convey delight.

Yes, dear friends, our whole faith is founded on the constant and faithful transmission of this "Good News", and today we want to tell God of our deep gratitude for the innumerable hosts of believers in Christ who have gone before us in the course of the centuries, because they never failed in their fundamental mandate to proclaim the Gospel which they had received. The Good News of Easter, therefore, requires the action of enthusiastic and courageous witnesses. Each disciple of Christ, and also each one of



us, is called to be a witness. This is the precise, demanding and exalting mandate of the Risen Lord. The “news” of new life in Christ must shine out in the life of Christians, it must be alive and active in those who bring it, really capable of changing hearts and the whole of life. It is alive first of all because Christ himself is its living and life-giving soul. St Mark reminds us, at the end of his Gospel, where he writes that the Apostles “went forth and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by the signs that attended it” (Mk 16:20).

The Apostles’ experience is also our own and that of every believer, of every disciple who makes himself a “herald”. In fact, we too are sure that the Lord works with his witnesses today, as he did in the past. This is a fact we can recognize every time we see the seeds of true and lasting peace sprouting and wherever the work and example of Christians and of people of good will is enlivened by respect for justice, patient dialogue, convinced esteem for others, impartiality and personal and communitarian renunciation. Unfortunately, we also see in the world so much suffering, so much violence, so much misunderstanding. The celebration of the Paschal Mystery, the joyous contemplation of Christ’s Resurrection that triumphs over sin and death with the power of God’s Love, is a favourable opportunity for rediscovering and professing with greater conviction and trust in the Risen Lord, who accompanies the witnesses of his word, working miracles together with them. We shall be truly and with our whole selves witnesses of the Risen Jesus when we let the wonder of his love shine through us: when in our words, and especially, in our actions, the voice and hand of Jesus himself may be recognized as fully consistent with the Gospel.

Therefore the Lord sends us everywhere as his witnesses. But we can only be such on the basis of and with continuous reference to the Paschal experience, the experience which Mary Magdalene expresses when she announces to the other disciples: “I have seen the Lord” (Jn 20:18). This personal encounter with the Risen One is the steadfast foundation and central content of our faith, the fresh and inexhaustible source of our hope, the ardent dynamism of our charity. Thus our Christian life itself will fully coincide with the announcement: “Christ the Lord has risen, indeed”. Let us, therefore, allow ourselves to be won over by the fascination of Christ’s Resurrection. May the Virgin Mary support us with her protection and help us to savour the Easter joy to the full so that in turn we may bring it to all our brothers and sisters.

Once again, a Happy Easter to you all!

### **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the newly ordained deacons from the Pontifical Irish College, together with their families and friends. Dear young deacons: may the grace of your ordination conform you ever more fully to the Lord in humble obedience and faithful service to the building up of the Church in your beloved homeland. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Sweden, Malta, Croatia, Australia, Japan and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Christ!

I also address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims, in particular the deacons and seminarians of the Archdiocese of Catania, as well as the deacons of the Society of Jesus who are gathered here with their superiors and relatives. Together with them I greet the *young people* present, especially the teenagers from the Diocese of Cremona, the numerous groups of boys and girls who are making their "profession of faith" this year. They come from various Deaconries, Parishes and Prayer and Recreation Centres of the Archdiocese of Milan. Dear friends, may you always be faithful to your Baptism: live to the full your baptismal consecration and be witnesses of Christ who died and rose for us.

I address an affectionate thought also to you, dear *sick people*: may the light of Easter illuminate you and support you in your suffering. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, draw from the Paschal Mystery the courage to be protagonists in the Church and in society, contributing with your faithful and fertile love to building the civilization of love.

*Greeting to the Russian faithful:*

I am glad to be able, by courtesy of the Itar-Tass Press Agency, to send a cordial greeting and good wishes to all Russians, both those who live in their homeland and those who dwell in various parts of the world. May the Solemnity of Holy Easter, which this year we had the joy of celebrating together with the Catholics and the Orthodox, be an opportunity for renewed brotherhood and a more and more intense collaboration in truth and in charity.

# Christmas

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## The meaning of Christmas

20 December 2006

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

“The Lord is close: come, let us adore him”. With this invocation, the liturgy invites us in these last days of Advent to approach as it were on tip-toe the Bethlehem Grotto where the extraordinary event that changed the course of history took place: the birth of the Redeemer.

On Christmas Night we will pause, once again, before the crib and contemplate with wonder the “Word made flesh”. Sentiments of joy and gratitude will be renewed in our hearts, as they are every year, while we listen to the Christmas melodies that sing of the extraordinary event in so many languages.

It was out of love that the Creator of the universe came to dwell among us. In his Letter to the Philippians, St Paul says that Christ, “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men” (2:6). He appeared in human form, adds the Apostle, humbling himself. At holy Christmas we will relive the fulfilment of this sublime mystery of grace and mercy.

St Paul says further, “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might

receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4-5). In truth, the Chosen People had been waiting for the Messiah for many centuries but they imagined him as a powerful and victorious army leader who would free his followers from foreign oppression.

The Saviour, on the contrary, was born in silence and in absolute poverty. He came as “the light that enlightens every man”, St John notes, yet “his own people received him not” (Jn 1:9, 11). “But”, the Apostle added, “to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God” (ibid., 1:12). The light promised was to illumine the hearts of those who had persevered in vigilant and active expectation.

The Advent liturgy also exhorts us to be sober and watchful in order not to let ourselves be burdened by sin and excessively worldly concerns. Indeed, it is by watching and praying that we will be able to recognize and accept the splendour of Christ’s birth. St Maximus of Turin, a Bishop of the fourth and fifth centuries, said in one of his homilies: “The time warns us that the Birth of Christ the Lord is at hand. The world with its own apprehensions speaks of something imminent that will renew it, and desires with impatient expectation that the splendour of a brighter sun may illumine its darkness.... This expectation of creation also persuades us to wait for Christ, the new Sun, to rise” (cf. Hom. 61a, 1-3). Creation itself, therefore, leads us to discover and recognize the One who must come.

But the question is: is the humanity of our time still waiting for a Saviour? One has the feeling that many consider God as foreign to their own interests. Apparently, they do not need him. They live as though he did not exist and, worse still, as though he were an “obstacle” to remove in order to fulfil themselves. Even among believers - we are sure of it - some let themselves be attracted by enticing dreams and distracted by misleading doctrines that suggest deceptive shortcuts to happiness.

Yet, despite its contradictions, worries and tragedies, and perhaps precisely because of them, humanity today seeks a path of renewal, of salvation, it seeks a Saviour and awaits, sometimes unconsciously, the coming of the Saviour who renews the world and our life, the coming of Christ, the one true Redeemer of man and of the whole of man.

Of course, false prophets continue to propose a salvation “at a cheap price”, that always ends by producing searing disappointments.

The history of the past 50 years itself demonstrates this search for a Saviour “at a cheap price” and highlights all the disappointments that have derived from it. It is the task of us Christians, with the witness of our life, to spread the truth of Christmas which Christ brings to every man and woman of good will.

Born in the poverty of the manger, Jesus comes to offer to all that joy and that peace which alone can fulfil the expectations of the human soul.

But how should we prepare ourselves to open our hearts to the Lord who comes? The spiritual attitude of watchful and prayerful expectation remains the fundamental characteristic of the Christian in this Advent Season. It is this attitude that distinguishes the protagonists of that time: Zechariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the Magi, the humble, simple people, above all Mary and Joseph's expectation! The latter, more than any of the others, felt in the first person the anxiety and trepidation for the Child who would be born.

It is not difficult to imagine how they spent the last days, waiting to hold the newborn Infant in their arms. May their attitude be our own, dear brothers and sisters! In this regard, let us listen to the exhortation of St Maximus, Bishop of Turin, cited above: "While we are waiting to welcome the Nativity of the Lord, let us clothe ourselves in clean garments, without a stain. I am speaking of clothing the soul, not the body. Let us not be clad in silk raiments but in holy works! Sumptuous clothing may cover the limbs but does not adorn the conscience" (ibid.).

In being born among us, may the Child Jesus not find us distracted or merely busy, beautifying our houses with decorative lights. Rather, let us deck our soul and make our families a worthy dwelling place where he feels welcomed with faith and love. May the Blessed Virgin and St Joseph help us to live the Mystery of Christmas with renewed wonder and peaceful serenity.

With these sentiments, I would like to offer my most fervent good wishes for a holy and happy Christmas to all of you present here and to your relatives, with a special remembrance for those who may be in difficulty or who are suffering in body and spirit. Happy Christmas to you all!

## Why did God do it?

27 December 2006

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today's meeting takes place in the Christmas atmosphere pervaded with an intimate joy for the birth of the Saviour. We have just celebrated, the day before yesterday, this mystery, whose echo expands in the liturgy of all these days.

It is a mystery of light that men and women of every age can relive in faith.

The words of John the Evangelist, whose feast we celebrate today, resound in our hearts: "Et Verbum caro factum est - the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn 1:14).

At Christmas, therefore, God comes to dwell among us; he comes for us, to remain with us. A question passes through these 2,000 years of Christian history: “But why did he do it, why did God become man?”.

The song that the angels intone over the grotto of Bethlehem helps us to respond to this question: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased” (Lk 2::14).

The canticle of Christmas night, found in the Gloria, is already part of the liturgy like the other three canticles of the New Testament which refer to the birth and the infancy of Jesus: the Benedictus, the Magnificat and the Nunc dimittis.

While these latter are inserted respectively in the morning Lauds, in the evening prayer of Vespers and in the night prayer of Compline, the Gloria has found its own place in the Holy Mass.

From the second century some acclamations were added to the angels words: “We praise you, we bless you, we adore you, we glorify you, we give you thanks for your immense glory”; and later, other invocations: “Lord God, Lamb of God, Son of the Father, who takes away the sin of the world...”, to formulate an arioso hymn of praise that is sung for the first time in the Mass of Christmas and thereafter, on all feast days.

Inserted at the beginning of the Eucharistic celebration, the Gloria emphasizes the continuity that exists between the birth and the death of Christ, between Christmas and Easter, inseparable aspects of the one and the same mystery of salvation.

The Gospel narrates that the angelic multitude sang: “Glory to God in the highest of heavens and peace on earth to those whom he loves”. The angels announce to the shepherds that the birth of Jesus “is” glory for God in the highest of heavens; and “is” peace on earth to those whom he loves. It is thus opportune to place these angelic words over the grotto to explain the mystery of the birth that takes place in the crib.

The term “glory” (doxa) indicates the splendour of God that sparks the thankful praise of creatures. St Paul will say: it is “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Cor 4::6).

“Peace” (eirene) summarizes the fullness of the messianic gifts, the salvation that, as the Apostle notes, identifies with Christ himself: “For he is our peace” (Eph 2::14).

Lastly, there is the reference to men “of good will”. “Good will” (eudokia), in common language, makes one think of the “good will” of men; but here, it means the “good will” of God toward men, which knows no limits. And here then is the Christmas message: with the birth of Jesus, God has manifested his good will toward all.

Let us return to the question: “Why did God make himself man?”. St Irenaeus writes: “The Word made himself dispenser of the Father’s glory for the benefit of men.... The glory of God is the living man - vivens homo - and the life of man consists in the vision of God” (Adv. Haer. 20:5, 7).

The glory of God is manifest, therefore, in the salvation of man, whom God so loved as “to give”, as the Evangelist John affirms, “his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16).

Hence, love is the ultimate reason for the Incarnation of Christ.

In this regard the reflection of the theologian H.U. von Balthasar is eloquent, in which he wrote: God “is not, in the first place, absolute power, but absolute love, whose sovereignty is not manifest in keeping for himself what belongs to him, but in his abandonment” (Mysterium Paschale I, 4). The God we contemplate in the crib is God-Love.

At this point the message of the angels resounds for us as an invitation: glory “be” to God in the highest of heavens, peace “be” on earth to those whom he loves. The only way to glorify God and to build peace in the world consists in the humble and trusting welcoming of the gift of Christmas: love.

The song of the angles can then become a prayer to repeat often, not only in this Christmas season. It is a hymn of praise to God in the highest of heavens and a fervent invocation of peace on earth, which translates into a concrete commitment to build it with our life. This is the duty that Christmas entrusts to us.

## **The joyful event of Christ’s birth**

*3 January 2007*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Thank you for your affection. I wish you all a happy New Year! This first General Audience of the new year still takes place in the atmosphere of Christmas, which invites us to rejoice in the Redeemer’s birth. On coming into the world, Jesus lavished his gifts of goodness, mercy and love upon men and women. As if interpreting the sentiments of the people of every epoch, the Apostle John observes: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God” (I Jn 3:1).

Anyone who stops to meditate before the Son of God lying helpless in the crib can only feel surprised at this humanly incredible event; one cannot but share the wonder and

humble abandonment of the Virgin Mary, whom God chose to be Mother of the Redeemer precisely because of her humility.

In the Child of Bethlehem, every person discovers he is freely loved by God; in the light of Christmas God's infinite goodness is revealed to each one of us. In Jesus, the Heavenly Father inaugurated a new relationship with us; he made us "sons in the Son himself". During these days, it is precisely on this reality that St John invites us to meditate with the richness and depth of his words, of which we have heard a passage.

The beloved Apostle of the Lord stresses that we are really sons: "and so we are" (I Jn 3:1). We are not only creatures, but we are sons; in this way God is close to us; in this way he draws us to himself at the moment of his Incarnation, in his becoming one of us. Therefore, we truly belong to the family whose Father is God, because Jesus, the Only-Begotten Son, came to pitch his tent among us, the tent of his flesh, to gather all the nations together into a single family, the family of God, belonging to the divine Being united in one people, one family.

He came to reveal to us the true Face of the Father and if we now use the word "God", it is no longer a reality known only from afar. We know the Face of God: it is that of the Son, who came to bring the heavenly realities closer to us and to the earth.

St John notes: "In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us" (I Jn 4:10). At Christmas, the simple and overwhelming announcement resounds throughout the world: "God loves us". "We love", St John says, "because he first loved us" (I Jn 4:19). This mystery is henceforth entrusted to our hands so that through our experience of divine love we may live aspiring to the realities of Heaven. And this, let us say, is also our practice in these days: to live truly reaching for God, seeking first of all the Kingdom and its righteousness, certain that the rest, all the rest, will be given to us as well (cf. Mt 6:33). The spiritual atmosphere of the Christmas Season helps us to grow in our knowledge of this.

The joy of Christmas, however, does not make us forget the mystery of evil (*mysterium iniquitatis*), the power of darkness that attempts to dim the splendour of the divine light. And unfortunately, we experience this power of darkness everyday.

In the Prologue to his Gospel, proclaimed several times in the past few days, John the Evangelist writes: "The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness did not receive it" (cf. 1:5).

As in the past, the tragedy of the rejection of Christ unfortunately manifests and expresses itself also today in so many different ways. Perhaps even the most subtle and dangerous are the forms of the rejection of God in the contemporary era: from a clear refusal to indifference, from scientific atheism to the presentation of a so-called



modernized or better, post-modernized Jesus. A man Jesus, reduced in a different way to a mere man of his time, deprived of his divinity; or a Jesus so highly idealized that he seems at times like the character of a fable.

Yet Jesus, the true Jesus of history, is true God and true man and never tires of proposing his Gospel to all, aware that he is a “sign of contradiction that thoughts out of many hearts may be revealed”, as the elderly Simeon would prophesy (cf. Lk 2:32-35).

Actually, it is only the Child lying in the manger who possesses the true secret of life. For this reason he asks us to welcome him, to make room for him within us, in our hearts, in our homes, in our cities and in our societies. The words of John’s Prologue echo in our minds and hearts: “To all who received him... he gave power to become children of God” (1:12). Let us endeavour to be among those who welcome him. Before him one cannot remain indifferent. We too, dear friends, must continuously take sides. What will our response be? With what attitude will we welcome him? The simplicity of the shepherds and the seeking of the Magi who scrutinized the signs of God by means of the star come to our help. The docility of Mary and the wise prudence of Joseph serve as an example to us.

The more than 2,000 years of Christian history are filled with examples of men and women, youth and adults, children and elderly people who believed in the mystery of Christmas, who opened their arms to the Emmanuel and with their lives became beacons of light and hope.

*The love that Jesus, born in Bethlehem, brought into the world binds to himself in a lasting relationship of friendship and brotherhood all who welcome him. St John of the Cross says: “In giving us all, that is, his Son, in him God has now said all. Fix your eyes on him alone... and you will find in addition more than you ask and desire” (Ascent of Mount Carmel, Book I, Ep. 22, 4-5).*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, at the beginning of this new year let us revive within us the commitment to open our minds and hearts to Christ, sincerely showing him our desire to live as his true friends.*

Thus, we will become collaborators of his plan of salvation and witnesses of that joy which he gives to us so that we may spread it around us in abundance.

May Mary help us open our hearts to the Emmanuel who took on our poor, weak flesh in order to share with us the arduous journey of earthly life. In the company of Jesus, however, this tiring journey becomes a joyful journey. Let us proceed together with Jesus, let us walk with him and thus the new year will be a happy and good year.

## **Spiritual meaning of Christmas**

17 December 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

On this very day, the days of Advent that directly prepare us for the Nativity of the Lord begin: we are in the *Christmas Novena* which in many Christian communities is celebrated with liturgies rich in biblical texts, all oriented to fostering the expectation of the Saviour's Birth. Indeed, the whole Church focuses her gaze of faith on this Feast that is now at hand, preparing herself, as she does every year, to join in the joyful singing of the Angels who will announce to the shepherds in the heart of the night the extraordinary event of the Birth of the Redeemer, inviting them to go to the Grotto in Bethlehem. It is there that the Emmanuel lies, the Creator who made himself a creature, wrapped in swaddling clothes and lying in a poor manger (cf. Lk 2:13–16).

Because of the atmosphere that distinguishes it, Christmas is a universal celebration. In fact, even those who do not profess themselves to be believers can perceive in this annual Christian event something extraordinary and transcendent, something intimate that speaks to the heart. It is a Feast that praises the gift of life. The birth of a child must always be an event that brings joy; the embrace of a newborn baby usually inspires feelings of kindness and care, of emotion and tenderness. Christmas is the encounter with a newborn baby lying in a humble grotto. In contemplating him in the manger, how can we fail to think of all those children who continue to be born today in great poverty in many regions of the world? How can we fail to think of those newborn infants who are not welcomed, who are rejected, who do not manage to survive because of the lack of care and attention? How can we fail to think also of the families who long for the joy of a child and do not see their hope fulfilled? Unfortunately, under the influence of hedonist consumerism Christmas risks losing its spiritual meaning and being reduced to a mere commercial opportunity for purchases and the exchange of gifts! However, it is true that the difficulties, the uncertainties and the financial crisis itself that numerous families have had to come to terms with in recent months and which is affecting all humanity could be an incentive to rediscover the warmth of simplicity, friendship and solidarity: typical values of Christmas. Stripped of its consumerist and materialistic encrustations, Christmas can thus become an opportunity for welcoming, as a personal gift, the message of hope that emanates from the mystery of Christ's Birth.

However, none of this enables us to fully grasp the ineffable value of the Feast for which we are preparing. We know that it celebrates the central event of history: the Incarnation of the divine Word for the redemption of humanity. In one of his many Christmas Homilies, St Leo the Great exclaims: “Let us be glad in the Lord, dearly-beloved, and rejoice with spiritual joy that there has dawned for us the day of ever-new redemption, of ancient preparation, of eternal bliss. For as the year rolls round, there recurs for us the commemoration of our salvation, which promised from the beginning, accomplished in the fullness of time will endure for ever” (*Homily XXII*). St Paul returns several times in his Letters to this fundamental truth. For example, he writes to the Galatians: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law ... so that we might receive adoption as sons” (4:4). In the Letter to the Romans he highlights the logic and the demanding consequences of this salvific event: “If we are children of God ... then [we are] heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, provided we suffer with him in order that we may also be glorified with him” (8:17). However, in the Prologue to the fourth Gospel, it is above all St John who meditates profoundly on the mystery of the Incarnation. And it is for this reason that the Prologue has been part of the Christmas liturgy since the very earliest times. Indeed, in it are found the most authentic expression and the most profound synthesis of this Feast and of the basis of its joy. St John writes: “*Et Verbum caro factum est et habitavit in nobis* and the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14).

At Christmas, therefore, we do not limit ourselves to commemorating the birth of a great figure: we do not simply and abstractly celebrate the birth of the man or in general the mystery of life; even less do we celebrate only the beginning of the new season. At Christmas we commemorate something very tangible and important for mankind, something essential for the Christian faith, a truth that St John sums up in these few words: “*The Word became flesh*”. This was a historical event that the Evangelist Luke was concerned to situate in a well-defined context: in the days when the decree was issued for the first census of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was Governor of Syria (cf. Lk 2:1–7). Therefore, it was on a historically dated night that the event of salvation occurred for which Israel had been waiting for centuries. In the darkness of the night of Bethlehem a great light really was lit: the Creator of the universe became flesh, uniting himself indissolubly with human nature so as truly to be “God from God, Light from

Light” yet at the same time a man, true man. What John calls in Greek “*ho logos*” translated into Latin as “*Verbum*” and Italian as “*il Verbo*” also means “the Meaning”. Thus we can understand John’s words as: the “eternal Meaning” of the world made himself tangible to our senses and our minds: we may now touch him and contemplate him (cf. 1 Jn 1:1). The “Meaning” that became flesh is not merely a general idea inherent in the world; it is a “Word” addressed to us. The *Logos* knows us, calls us, guides us. The Word is not a universal law within which we play some role, but rather a Person who is concerned with every individual person: he is the Son of the living God who became man in Bethlehem.

To many people, and in a certain way to all of us, this seems too beautiful to be true. In fact, here it is reaffirmed to us: yes, a meaning exists, and the meaning is not a powerless protest against the absurd. The meaning has power: it is God. A good God who must not be confused with any sublime and remote being, whom it would never be possible to reach, but a God who made himself our neighbour and who is very close to us, who has time for each one of us and who came to stay with us. It then comes naturally to ask ourselves: “However could such a thing be possible? Is it dignified for God to make himself a child?”. If we are to seek to open our hearts to this truth that illuminates the whole of human existence we must bend our minds and recognize the limitations of our intelligence. In the Grotto of Bethlehem God shows himself to us as a humble “infant” to defeat our arrogance. Perhaps we would have submitted more easily to power and wisdom, but he does not want us to submit; rather, he appeals to our hearts and to our free decision to accept his love. He made himself tiny to set us free from that human claim to grandeur that results from pride. He became flesh freely in order to set us truly free, free to love him.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Christmas is a privileged opportunity to meditate on the meaning and value of our existence. The approach of this Solemnity helps us on the one hand to reflect on the drama of history in which people, injured by sin, are perennially in search of happiness and of a fulfilling sense of life and death; and on the other, it urges us to meditate on the merciful kindness of God who came to man to communicate to him directly the Truth that saves, and to enable him to partake in his friendship and his life. Therefore let us prepare ourselves for Christmas with humility and simplicity, making ourselves ready to receive as a gift the light, joy and peace that shine from this mystery. Let us welcome the Nativity of Christ as an event that can renew our lives today. The encounter with the Child Jesus makes us people who do not think only of themselves but open themselves to the expectations and needs of their brothers and sisters. In this way we too will become*

*witnesses of the radiance of Christmas that shines on the humanity of the third millennium. Let us ask Mary Most Holy, Tabernacle of the Incarnate Word, and St Joseph, the silent witness of the events of salvation, to communicate to us what they felt while they were waiting for the Birth of Jesus, so that we may prepare ourselves to celebrate with holiness the approaching Christmas, in the joy of faith and inspired by the commitment to sincere conversion.*

Happy Christmas to you all!

## **Christmas 2010**

*22 December 2010*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

With this last Audience before the Christmas celebrations, we approach with trepidation and wonder the “place” where for us and for our salvation everything began, everything found fulfilment, where the expectations of the world and of the human heart converged with God’s presence.

We can already have a foretaste of joy now, brought by that small light which is glimpsed, which begins to shine out on the world from the Bethlehem grotto. During the Advent journey the Liturgy has invited us to live, we have been shown how to welcome with readiness and gratitude the great event of the Saviour’s birth and to contemplate full of wonder his entry into the world.

Joyful expectation, characteristic of the days that lead up to Holy Christmas, is certainly the fundamental attitude of the Christian who wishes to live fruitfully the renewed encounter with the One who comes to dwell among us: Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man. Let us rediscover and make our own the disposition of heart of those who were the first to welcome the coming of the Messiah: Zachariah and Elizabeth, the shepherds, the simple people and, especially, Mary and Joseph, who felt trepidation personally, but above all rejoiced in the mystery of this birth.

The whole of the Old Testament constitutes one great promise that was to be fulfilled with the coming of a powerful Saviour. The Book of the Prophet Isaiah in particular—testifies to the anguish of history and of the whole of creation oriented to a redemption destined to bring fresh energy and give a new orientation to the entire world.

Hence down the centuries, alongside the expectation of the figures of Sacred Scripture our expectation, which we are experiencing in these days and which keeps us alert throughout our life journey, also finds room and meaning.

Indeed, the whole of human life is enlivened by this profound sentiment, by the desire that what is the truest, the most beautiful and the greatest, which we have perceived and intuited with mind and heart, may come to meet us in order that it become real before our eyes and uplift us anew.

“Soon the Lord God will come, and you will call him Emmanuel, God-with-us” (*Entrance Antiphon*, Holy Mass of 21 December). We frequently repeat these words in these days. In Liturgical time, which reactualizes the Mystery, the One who comes to save us from sin and death is already at the door, the One who, after the disobedience of Adam and Eve, embraces us once again and opens wide to us the way to true life.

St Irenaeus explains it in his treatise *Adversus Haereses* [Against Heresies], when he says: “The Son of God himself descended ‘in the likeness of sinful flesh’ (Rom 8:3) to condemn sin and, having condemned it, to cast it out completely from the human race. He called man to likeness with himself, he made him imitator of God, he set him on the path indicated by the Father so that he might see God, and he gave him as a gift the Father himself” (III, 20, 2–3).

Some of St Irenaeus’ favourite ideas are presented to us, for example, that God with the Child Jesus calls us to likeness with himself. We see how God is. And thus St Irenaeus reminds us that we should be like God and must imitate him. God gave himself. God gave himself into our hands. We must imitate God. And lastly, is the thought that in this way we can see God. One central idea of St Irenaeus is that man does not see God, he cannot see him and so he is in the dark concerning the truth about himself. However man, who cannot see God, can see Jesus and so he sees God, so he begins to see the truth and so he begins to live.

The Saviour, therefore, comes to reduce to powerlessness the work of evil and all that can still keep us distant from God in order to restore to us the ancient splendour and primitive fatherhood. With his coming among us, God points out and assigns to us a task: precisely that of being like him and of striving for true life, to attain the vision of God in the Face of Christ. St. Irenaeus states further: “The Word of God dwelt in man and became the Son of man in order to accustom man to perceive God and to accustom God to dwell in man, according to the Father’s pleasure. For this reason God gave us as a ‘sign’ of our salvation the One who, born of the Virgin, is the Emmanuel” (*ibid.*).

Here too there is a very beautiful central idea of St Irenaeus: We must get used to perceiving God. God is generally remote from our lives, from our ideas, from our actions. He has come to us and we must accustom ourselves to being with God. And Irenaeus dares boldly to say that God must also accustom himself to being with us and within us. And that God should perhaps accompany us at Christmas, should accustom us

to God, just as God should accustom himself to us, to our poverty and frailty. Hence the coming of the Lord can have no other purpose than to teach us to see and love events, the world, and all that surrounds us with God's own eyes. The Word-become-a-Child helps us to understand God's way of acting so that we will be able to let ourselves be transformed increasingly by his goodness and his infinite mercy.

In the night of the world let us still be surprised and illumined by this act of God which is totally unexpected: God makes himself a Child. We must let ourselves be overcome with wonder, illumined by the Star that flooded the universe with joy. May the Child Jesus, in coming to us, not find us unprepared, dedicated only to making exterior reality more beautiful. May the care we give to making our roads and homes more splendid be an even greater incentive to predispose our soul to encounter the One who will come to visit us, who is the true beauty and the true light. Let us therefore purify our consciences and our lives of what is contrary to this coming: thoughts, words, attitudes and deeds—impelling ourselves to do good and to contribute to achieving in our world peace and justice for every person, and thus to walk towards our encounter with the Lord.

A characteristic sign of this Christmas Season is the Nativity scene. In St. Peter's Square too, in keeping with the tradition, it is almost ready and looks out in spirit over Rome and over the whole world, representing the beauty of the Mystery of God who was made man and pitched his tent among us (cf. John 1:14).

The crib is an expression of our expectation that God is coming close to us, that Jesus comes close to us, but it is also an expression of thanksgiving for the One who decided to share in our human condition, in poverty and simplicity.

I am glad because the tradition of preparing the crib in homes, in workplaces, in meeting places, is still alive and is even being rediscovered. Today too, may this genuine witness of Christian faith also be able to offer all men and women of good will an eloquent icon of the Father's infinite love for us all. May the hearts of children and adults still be able to feel wonder before him.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the Virgin Mary and St Joseph help us to live the Mystery of Christmas with renewed gratitude to the Lord. In the midst of the frenetic activity of our day, may this Season give us some calm and joy and enable us to feel tangibly the goodness of our God, who became a Child to save us and to give new encouragement and light on our journey. This is my wish for a holy and happy Christmas: I address it with affection to all of you present here, to your families, in particular to the sick and the suffering, as well as to your communities and your loved ones.*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience. To all of you, and especially the children, I offer my heartfelt good wishes for a serene and joy-filled Christmas!

# Light in the Christmas Season

5 January 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to welcome you at this first General Audience of the New Year and I cordially offer you and your families my fervent good wishes. May the Lord of time and history guide our steps on the path of goodness and grant to each one an abundance of grace and prosperity.

Still surrounded by the light of Holy Christmas that invites us to rejoice at the coming of the Saviour, today on the eve of the Epiphany, we celebrate the manifestation of the Lord to all peoples. The Feast of Christmas fascinates us today—just as it once did—more than the Church’s other great feastdays. It fascinates us because everyone in some way feels that the Birth of Jesus has to do with the deepest aspirations and hopes of man. Consumerism can distance us from this inner longing, but if in our hearts there is the desire to welcome that Child who brings God’s newness, who came to give us life in its fullness, the lights of the Christmas decorations can indeed become a reflection of the Light that came into being with the Incarnation of God.

In the liturgical celebrations of these holy days we have lived in a mysterious but real way the entry into the world of the Son of God and we have been illumined once again by the light of his radiance. Every celebration is an actual presence of Christ’s mystery and in it the history of salvation is prolonged.

Pope St Leo the Great said of Christmas: “Even if the succession of bodily actions has now passed, as was preordained in the eternal plan ... nevertheless we continuously adore the Virgin’s giving birth that brings about our salvation (*Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord* 29, 2). And St Leo explains: “because that day has not passed away in such a way that the power of the work, which was then revealed, has passed away with it” (*Sermon on the Epiphany*, 36, 1).

Celebrating the events of the Incarnation of the Son of God is not merely remembering past events, but it is making present those mysteries that bring salvation. Today in the Liturgy, in the celebration of the sacraments, those mysteries become present and effective for us.

St Leo the Great said further: “All therefore that the Son of God did and taught for the world’s reconciliation, we not only know as a matter of past history, but appreciate in the power of their present effect” (*Sermon* 52, 1).



In the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy the Second Vatican Council emphasized that the work of salvation brought about by Christ continues in the Church through the celebration of the holy mysteries, thanks to the action of the Holy Spirit. We already have in the Old Testament, in the journey towards the fullness of faith, testimonies of how God's presence and action were mediated through signs, for example, that of fire (cf. Ex 3:2ff; 19:18).

However, from the Incarnation something overwhelming happens: the regime of salvific contact with God is radically transformed and flesh becomes the instrument of salvation: "*Verbum caro factum est*", "the Word was made flesh", the Evangelist John writes, and Tertullian, a third-century Christian author affirms: "*Caro salutis est cardo*", "the flesh is the pivot of salvation" (*De resurrectione carnis*, 8, 3: PL 2, 806).

Christmas is already the first fruit of the "*sacramentum-mysterium paschale*", that is, it is the beginning of the central mystery of salvation that culminates in the Passion, death and Resurrection, because Jesus begins the offering of himself through love from the very first moment of his human existence in the Virgin Mary's womb. Christmas Night is thus deeply linked to the great nocturnal vigil of Easter, when the redemption is brought about in the glorious sacrifice of the dead and Risen Lord. The crib itself, as an image of the Incarnation of the Word, in the light of the Gospel narrative already alludes to Easter; and it is interesting to see, as in certain icons of the Nativity in the Eastern tradition, that the Child Jesus is portrayed wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger in the form of a tomb, an allusion to the moment when he will be deposed from the Cross, wrapped in a winding-sheet and laid in a tomb hollowed out in the rock (cf. Lk 2:7, 23:53).

The Incarnation and Easter are not one beside other but they are the two inseparable key points of the one faith in Jesus Christ, the Son of God Incarnate and Redeemer. The Cross and the Resurrection presuppose the Incarnation. Only because the Son and, in him, God himself truly "came down", and "was made flesh", are the death and Resurrection of Jesus events that prove to be contemporary to us and concern us, they snatch us from death and open to us a future in which this "flesh", the earthly and transitory existence will enter God's eternity. In this unitive perspective of the Mystery of Christ, the visit to the crib orients us to the visit to the Eucharist, where we encounter present in a real way the Crucified and Risen Christ, the living Christ.

The liturgical celebration of Christmas, then, is not only a memory but is above all a mystery; it is not only commemoration but also presence. In order to grasp the meaning of these two inseparable aspects it is necessary to live intensely the whole of the Christmas Season as the Church presents it. If we consider it in a broad sense, it lasts for 40 days, from 25 December to 2 February, from the celebration of Christmas Night to

Mary, Mother of God, to the Epiphany, to the Baptism of Jesus, to the Wedding at Cana, to the Presentation in the Temple, which forms a unit of 50 days, until Pentecost. The manifestation of God in the flesh is the event that revealed the Truth in history. In fact, the date of 25 December, linked to the idea of the solar manifestation—God who appears as a light that never sets on the horizon of history—reminds us that it is not only an idea, that God is the fullness of light, but a reality for us men and women that has already been brought about and is ever timely: today, as then, God reveals himself in the flesh, that is, in the “living body” of the Church, a pilgrim in time, and in the sacraments that give us salvation today.

The symbols of the Christmas celebrations, recalled by the Readings and by the prayers, give to the Liturgy of this Season a profound sense of the “epiphany” of God in his Christ-Word Incarnate, namely his “manifestation”, which also possesses an eschatological meaning, in other words which orients us to the last times.

Already in Advent the two comings, the historical coming and the coming at the end of history were directly connected, but it is in particular in the Epiphany and in the Baptism of Jesus that the messianic manifestation is celebrated in the perspective of the eschatological expectations: the messianic consecration of Jesus, the Incarnate Word, through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in a visible form, leads to the fulfilment of the time of the promises and ushers in the last times.

It is necessary to recover the meaning of this Christmas Season, divesting it of excessive moralistic sentimentality. What the celebration of Christmas proposes to us, besides examples to imitate, such as the Lord’s humility and poverty or his benevolence and love for human beings, is to let ourselves be totally transformed by the One who took on our flesh.

St Leo the Great exclaimed: “the Son of God ... so united himself with us and us with him that the descent of God to man’s estate became the exaltation of man to God’s” (*Sermon on the Nativity of the Lord*, 27, 2).

The manifestation of God aims at our participation in the divine life, in the realization within us of the mystery of his Incarnation. This mystery is the fulfilment of the human vocation. St Leo the Great explains further the practical and ever timely importance of the mystery of Christmas for Christian life: “The words of the Gospel and of the Prophets ... inflame our spirit and teach us to understand the Lord’s Nativity, this mystery of the Word made flesh, not so much as the memory of a past event, as rather an event that takes place before our eyes ... as though the words: ‘I bring you good news of a great joy which will come to all the people; for to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour,

who is Christ the Lord'” (*ibid.* 29, 1), were still being proclaimed to us at today’s Solemnity.

And, St Leo added: “Christian, acknowledge your dignity, and becoming a partner in the Divine nature, refuse to return to the old baseness by degenerate conduct” (*Sermon 1 on the Nativity of the Lord*, 3).

Dear friends, let us live this Christmas Season deeply: after having adored the Son of God made man and laid in the manger, we are called to move on to the altar of the Sacrifice, where Christ, the living Bread come down from Heaven, offers himself to us as true nourishment for eternal life. And let us proclaim joyfully to the world, what we have seen with our own eyes at the table of the Word and of the Bread of Life, what we have contemplated, in other words what our hands have touched, namely, the Word made flesh, and witness to him generously with our whole life.

I warmly renew to all of you and to your loved ones my warmest good wishes for the New Year and I wish you a good celebration of Epiphany.

## **Holy Christmas 2011**

*21 December 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to welcome you at the General Audience a few days before the celebration of the Lord’s Birth. The greeting on everyone’s lips in these days is “Happy Christmas! Best wishes for the Christmas festivities!”. Let us ensure that in today’s society too the exchange of good wishes does not lose its profound religious value and that the feast is not emptied by the exterior aspects which pluck at our heartstrings. The external signs are of course beautiful and important, as long as they do not distract us but rather help us to live Christmas in its truest sense, as sacred and Christian, so that our joy too may not be superficial but profound.

With the Christmas liturgy the Church ushers us into the great Mystery of the Incarnation. Christmas, in fact, is not merely an anniversary of Jesus’ Birth; it is also this, but it is more, it is celebrating a mystery that has marked and continues to mark human history. God himself came to dwell among us (cf. Jn 1:14), he made himself one of us. It is a mystery that concerns our faith and our life; a mystery that we actually experience in the liturgical celebrations, and, in particular, in Holy Mass. Some people might ask themselves: how is it possible for me to experience this event today that happened so long

ago? How can I participate fruitfully in the Birth of the Son of God that occurred more than 2,000 years ago?

In Holy Mass on Christmas Night we shall repeat these words in the refrain of the Responsorial Psalm: “Today is born our Saviour, Christ the Lord”. This adverb of time, “today”, recurs several times throughout the Christmas celebrations and is applied to the event of the Birth of Jesus and to the salvation that the Incarnation of the Son of God comes to bring us. In the liturgy this event goes beyond the limits of time and space and becomes real, becomes present; its effect endures, even with the passing of days, years and centuries. In pointing out that Jesus is born “today”, the liturgy is not using a meaningless sentence but stresses that this Birth invests and permeates the whole of history and that today too it remains a reality we can attain in the liturgy itself.

For us believers the celebration of Christmas renews our certainty that God is really present with us, still “flesh” and not far away: although he is with the Father he is close to us. In the Child born in Bethlehem God came close to man: we can still encounter him now, in a “today” on which the sun never sets.

I would like to insist on this point because people of today, people of the “tangible”, of what can be experienced empirically, are finding it ever harder to open their horizons and enter the world of God. Of course, humanity’s redemption happened at a precise and identifiable moment in history: in the manifestation of Jesus of Nazareth; but Jesus is the Son of God, he is God himself, who not only has spoken to man, showed him miraculous signs and guided him throughout the history of salvation, but also became man and remains man.

The Eternal One entered the limits of time and space to make the encounter with him possible “today”. The liturgical texts of Christmas help us to understand that the events of salvation brought about by Christ are always up to date and concern every person and all people. When in the liturgical celebrations we hear or proclaim: “today is born our Saviour”, we are not using an empty, conventional expression. Rather, we mean that God is offering to us “today”, now, to me, to each one of us, the possibility of recognizing and welcoming him, as did the shepherds in Bethlehem, so that he may also be born in our lives and renew, illuminate and transform them by his Grace and by his Presence.

Therefore, while Christmas commemorates the Birth of Jesus in the flesh from the Virgin Mary—and many liturgical texts bring one episode or another to life before our eyes—it is an effective event for us. Pope St Leo the Great, in presenting the profound meaning of the Feast of Christmas invited his faithful with these words: “Let us be glad in the Lord, dearly-beloved, and rejoice with spiritual joy that there has dawned for us the day of

ever-new redemption, of ancient preparation, of eternal bliss. For as the year rolls round, there recurs for us the commemoration of our salvation, which promised from the beginning, accomplished in the fullness of time will endure for ever” (*Sermo 22, In Nativitate Domini, 2, 1: PL 54, 193*).

And, St Leo the Great also said in another of his Christmas sermons: “Today the Maker of the world was born of a Virgin’s womb, and he, who made all natures, became Son of her, whom he created. Today the Word of God appeared clothed in flesh, and that which had never been visible to human eyes began to be tangible to our hands as well. Today the shepherds learned from angels’ voices that the Saviour was born in the substance of our flesh and soul” (*Sermo 26, In Nativitate Domini, 6, 1: PL 54, 213*).

There is a second aspect that I would like to mention briefly: the event of Bethlehem must be considered in the light of the Paschal Mystery; they are both part of Christ’s one work of redemption. Jesus’ Incarnation and Birth are already an invitation to us to direct our gaze to his death and his Resurrection. Christmas and Easter are both feasts of redemption. Easter celebrates it as a victory over sin and death; it marks the final moment when the glory of the Man-God shines out like the light of day. Christmas celebrates it as God’s entry into history, his becoming man in order to restore mankind to God. It marks, so to speak, the initial moment when we see the first gleam of dawn.

However just as daybreak precedes and heralds the light of the day, so Christmas already proclaims the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection. And the two seasons of the year in which the two great feasts are placed, at least in some parts of the world, can help us understand this aspect. Indeed, whereas Easter comes at the beginning of Spring, when the sun dispels the thick, cold fog and renews the face of the earth, Christmas falls at the very beginning of Winter, when the sun’s light and warmth do not succeed in reawakening nature, enveloped in the cold beneath whose pall life is nevertheless pulsating and the victory of the sun and its warmth begins again.

The Church Fathers always interpreted Christ’s Birth in the light of the whole redemptive work which culminates in the Paschal Mystery. The Incarnation of the Son of God not only appears as the beginning and condition for salvation, but as the very presence of the Mystery of our salvation: God is made man, he is born an infant, like us, he takes our flesh to conquer death and sin.

Two important texts of St Basil illustrate this clearly. St Basil said to the faithful: “God takes flesh precisely in order to destroy death that is concealed in it. Just as antidotes to poison neutralize its effects as soon as they are ingested and as the shadows in a house are dispelled by sunlight, so death that held sway over human nature was destroyed by

God's presence. But just as ice in water remains solid as long as night lasts and darkness prevails, it quickly melts in the heat of the sun, so death, that reigned until Christ's coming, as soon as God the Saviour's grace appeared and the sun of justice awoke, unable to coexist with life, 'is swallowed up in victory' (1 Cor 15:54)" (*Homily on the Birth of Christ*, 2: PG 31, 1461).

In another text St Basil again formulates this invitation: "Let us celebrate the salvation of the world, the birth of the human race. Today, Adam's sin has been pardoned. Now we can no longer say "you are dust, and to dust you shall return" (Gen 3:19) but: united to him who came from heaven, you will be admitted to heaven (*Homily on the Birth of Christ*, 6: PG 31, 1473).

In Christmas we find the tenderness and love of God who stoops to our limitations, to our weaknesses, to our sins, and who bends down even to us. St Paul declares that Jesus Christ, "who, though he was in the form of God ... emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men" (Phil 2:6-7).

Let us look at the Bethlehem Grotto: God humbled himself to the point of being laid in a manger, already a prelude to the humbling of himself in the hour of his passion. The culmination of the love story between God and man passes through the manger in Bethlehem and the tomb in Jerusalem.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us experience Christmas that is now at hand with joy. Let us experience this wondrous event: the Son of God is born again "today", God is truly close to each one of us and wants to meet us, he wants to bring us to him. He is the true light that dispels and dissolves the shadows that envelop our life and humanity. Let us experience the Nativity of the Lord contemplating the path of the immense love of God who lifts us up to him through the Mystery of the Incarnation, passion death and resurrection of his Son; for, as St Augustine said, "In [Christ] the divinity of the Only Begotten One was made to share in our mortality, that we might share in his immortality" (*Epistola* 187, 6. 20: PL 33, 839-840).

Above all let us contemplate and live this Mystery in the celebration of the Eucharist, the heart of Holy Christmas; in it Jesus becomes present in a real way, the true Bread come down from heaven, the true Lamb immolated for our salvation.

I wish all of you and your families a truly Christian celebration of Christmas so that the exchange of greetings on that day may also be an expression of the joy of knowing that God is close to us and wants to accompany us on our journey through life. Many thanks.

# Nativity of the Lord: Mystery of Joy and Light

4 January 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to welcome you at this first General Audience of the New Year and I cordially offer all of you and your families my affectionate greetings. May God, who with the birth of Christ his Son imbued the whole world with joy, provide for deeds and days in his peace. We are in the liturgical Time of Christmas, which begins on the evening of 24 December with the Vigil Mass and ends with the celebration of the Baptism of the Lord. The span of days is short but full of celebrations and mysteries and it all takes place around the two great Solemnities of the Lord: Christmas and Epiphany. The very names of these two feasts indicate their respective traits.

Christmas celebrates the historical event of Jesus' Birth in Bethlehem. Epiphany, which came into being as a feast in the East, indicates an event but above all one aspect of the Mystery: God reveals himself in the human nature of Christ and this is the meaning of the Greek verb *epiphaino*, to make oneself visible. In this perspective, Epiphany calls to mind a whole series of events focused on the manifestation of the Lord: in a special way the adoration of the Magi, who recognize Jesus as the Messiah awaited, but also the Baptism in the River Jordan with its theophany—the voice of God from on high—and the miracle of the Wedding at Cana, as the first “sign” worked by Christ.

A very beautiful Antiphon of the Liturgy of the Hours unifies these three events around the theme of the wedding of Christ with his Church: “Today the Bridegroom claims his bride, the Church, since Christ has washed her sins away in Jordan’s waters; the Magi hasten with their gifts to the royal wedding; and the wedding guests rejoice, for Christ has changed water into wine (*Antiphon of Lauds*). We can say, as it were, that on the Feast of Christmas God’s hiddenness is emphasized in the humility of the human condition, in the Child of Bethlehem, whereas in the Epiphany his manifestation is highlighted, the appearance of God through this same humanity.

In this Catechesis I would like to recall briefly several themes proper to the celebration of the Nativity of the Lord so that each one of us may quench our thirst at the inexhaustible source of this Mystery and bear fruits of life.

First of all, let us ask ourselves: what is the first reaction to this extraordinary action of God who makes himself a child, who makes himself man? I think that the first reaction can only be one of joy. “Let us all rejoice in the Lord, for our Saviour is born to the world”. The Mass on Christmas Eve begins with these words and we have just heard what the Angel said to the Shepherds: “Behold, I bring you good news of a great joy” (Lk 2:10). This is the theme with which the Gospel begins and also with which it concludes, since the Risen Jesus was to reprimand the Apostles precisely for being sad (cf. Lk 24:17)—incompatible with the fact that he remains Man for eternity. However, let us take another step; what gives rise to this joy? I would say that it is born from the heart’s wonder at seeing that God is close to us, that God thinks of us, that God acts in history; it is therefore a joy born from contemplating the face of that humble Child because we know that he is the Face of God present for ever in humanity, for us and with us. Christmas is joy because at last we see and are certain that God is the goodness, life, and truth of human beings and that he stoops down to them to lift them up to him.

God becomes so close that it is possible to see and touch him. The Church contemplates this ineffable mystery and the liturgical texts of this Season are steeped in wonder and joy; all Christmas carols express this joy. Christmas is the point at which Heaven and earth converge and the various expressions we hear in these days stress the greatness of what has come about: the remote—God who seems very remote—has become close, “The inaccessible wanted to be accessible, he who exists before time began to be in time, the Lord of the universe, veiling the greatness of his majesty, took the nature of a servant” St Leo the Great exclaimed (*Sermon 2 on the Nativity of the Lord*, 2.1). In that Child who needed everything as all children do, what God is—eternity, strength, holiness, life and joy—is united with what we are: weakness, sin, suffering and death.

The theology and spirituality of Christmas use a phrase to describe this event, they speak of an *admirabile commercium*, that is, a wondrous exchange between divinity and humanity. St Athanasius of Alexandria says: “The Son of God



became man so that we might become God” (*De Incarnatione*, 54, 3: PG 25, 192), but it is above all with St Leo the Great and his famous sermons on Christmas that this reality became the object of profound meditation.

Indeed, the Holy Pontiff says: “so that we may have recourse to that unutterable condescension of the Divine Mercy, whereby the Creator of men deigned to become man, and be found ourselves in his nature whom we worship in ours” (*Sermon 8 on the Nativity*: CCL 138, 139). The first act of this wondrous exchange is brought about in Christ’s humanity itself. The Word took on our humanity and in exchange human nature was raised to the divine dignity. The second act of the exchange consists in our real and intimate participation in the divine nature of the Word. St Paul says: “When the time had fully come, God sent forth his Son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5). Christmas, therefore, is the feast on which God made himself so close to man as to share in his own act of being born, to reveal to him his deepest dignity: that of being a son of God. Thus the dream of humanity beginning in Paradise—we would like to be like God—is brought about in an unexpected manner not because of the greatness of man who cannot make himself God but because of the humility of God who comes down and thus enters us in his humility and raises us to the true greatness of his being. The Second Vatican Council said in this regard: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22); otherwise it remains an enigma: what does this creature man mean?

It is only by seeing that God is with us that we can see light for our being, that we can be content to be human beings and live with trust and joy. And where does this wondrous exchange become truly present, so that it may work in our life and make it an existence of true children of God? It becomes tangible in the Eucharist. When we participate in Holy Mass we present what is ours to God: the bread and the wine, fruit of the earth, so that he will accept them and transform them, giving us himself and making himself our food, in order that in receiving his Body and his Blood we may participate in his divine life.

I would like to reflect, lastly, on another aspect of Christmas. When the Angel of the Lord appeared to the Shepherds on the night of Jesus’ Birth, Luke the

Evangelist notes that “the glory of the Lord shone around them” (Lk 2:9); and the Prologue of John’s Gospel speaks of the Word made flesh as of the true light coming into the world, the light that can enlighten every man (cf. Jn 1:9). The Christmas liturgy is bathed in light.

Christ’s coming dispels the shadows of the world, fills the Holy Night with a heavenly brightness and reflects the splendour of God the Father on human faces. Today too. Enveloped in Christ’s light, we are insistently invited by the Christmas Liturgy to let our minds and hearts be illuminated by God who has shown the radiance of his Face. The First Preface of Christmas proclaims: “In the wonder of the incarnation your eternal Word has brought to the eyes of faith a new and radiant vision of your glory. In him we see our God made visible and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see”. In the Mystery of the Incarnation God, having spoken and intervened in history through messengers and with signs, “appeared”, emerged from his inaccessible light to illuminate the world.

On the Solemnity of the Epiphany, 6 January, which we shall be celebrating in a few days, the Church presents a very important passage from the Prophet Isaiah: “Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you. For behold, darkness shall cover the earth, and thick darkness the peoples; but the Lord will arise upon you, and his glory will be seen upon you. And nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising” (Is 60:1–3)

It is an invitation addressed to the Church, the community of Christ, but also to each one of us, to acquire an ever livelier awareness of the mission and of the responsibility to the world in witnessing to and bringing the new light of the Gospel. At the beginning of the Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, we find the following words: “Christ is the light of humanity; and it is, accordingly, the heartfelt desire of this sacred Council, being gathered together in the Holy Spirit, that, by proclaiming his Gospel to every creature, it may bring to all men that light of Christ which shines out visibly from the Church” (n. 1). The Gospel is not a light to hide but to set upon a stand. The Church is not light but receives the light of Christ, receives it to be illuminated by it and to radiate it in its full splendour. And this must also happen in our personal life. Once again, I cite St Leo the Great who said on Holy Night:

“Recognize, O Christian, your dignity and, enabled to share in the divine nature, do not wish to relapse into your former base condition with unworthy conduct. Remember who is your Head and to which Body you belong. Remember that you were snatched from the power of darkness and transferred into the light and into the Kingdom of God” (*Sermon 1 on the Nativity*, 3, 2: CCL 138, 88).

Dear brothers and sisters, Christmas means pausing to contemplate that Child, the Mystery of God who became man in humility and poverty, but above all it means welcoming within us once again that Child who is Christ the Lord, to live of his own life, to ensure that his sentiments, his thoughts and his actions are our sentiments, our thoughts and our actions. Celebrating Christmas is therefore showing the joy, the newness and the light that this Birth brought to the whole of our life, so that we too may be heralds of joy, of true newness, of the light of God to others. Once again I wish you all a Christmas Season blessed by God’s presence!

# Mary

## **Meditation on the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary**

*16 August 2006*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, our customary weekly Wednesday appointment is again taking place in the atmosphere of the Solemnity of the Blessed Virgin Mary's Assumption. I would therefore like to ask you to turn your gaze once again to our heavenly Mother, whom yesterday's liturgy helped us to contemplate triumphant with Christ in Heaven.

Since the first centuries of Christianity, the Christian people has always found this feast deeply stirring; as is well known, it celebrates the glorification, also in body, of that creature whom God chose as Mother and whom Jesus on the Cross gave as Mother to the whole of humanity.

The Assumption evokes a mystery that concerns each one of us because, as the Second Vatican Council affirms, Mary "shines forth on earth... a sign of certain hope and comfort to the pilgrim People of God" (Lumen Gentium, n. 68).

However, taken up by the events of each day, one can sometimes forget this comforting spiritual reality that constitutes an important truth of faith; so how can it be ensured that this luminous sign of hope is ever more clearly perceived by all of us and by contemporary society?

Some people today live as if they never had to die or as if, with death, everything were over; others, who hold that man is the one and only author of his own destiny, behave as though God did not exist, and at times they even reach the point of denying that there is room for him in our world.

Yet, the great breakthroughs of technology and science that have considerably improved humanity's condition leave unresolved the deepest searchings of the human soul.

Only openness to the mystery of God, who is Love, can quench the thirst for truth and happiness in our hearts; only the prospect of eternity can give authentic value to historical events and especially to the mystery of human frailty, suffering and death.

By contemplating Mary in heavenly glory, we understand that the earth is not the definitive homeland for us either, and that if we live with our gaze fixed on eternal goods we will one day share in this same glory and the earth will become more beautiful.

Consequently, we must not lose our serenity and peace even amid the thousands of daily difficulties. The luminous sign of Our Lady taken up into Heaven shines out even more brightly when sad shadows of suffering and violence seem to loom on the horizon.

We may be sure of it: from on high, Mary follows our footsteps with gentle concern, dispels the gloom in moments of darkness and distress, reassures us with her motherly hand.

Supported by awareness of this, let us continue confidently on our path of Christian commitment wherever Providence may lead us. Let us forge ahead in our lives under Mary's guidance. Thank you.

## The Blessed Virgin Mary as Queen

22 August 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today is the liturgical Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, invoked by the title: "Queen". It is a recently instituted feast, although its origins and the devotion to her are ancient. It was in fact established in 1954, at the end of the Marian Year, by Venerable Pius XII who fixed the date as 31 May (cf. Encyclical Letter *Ad Caeli Reginam*, 11 October 1954: AAS 46 [1954], 625–640). On this occasion the Pope said that Mary was Queen more than any other creature because of the sublime dignity of her soul and the excellence of the gifts she received. She never ceases to bestow upon humanity all the treasures of her love and tender care (cf. *Discourse in honour of Mary Queen*, 1 November 1954). Now, after the post-conciliar reform of the liturgical calendar, this feast is set eight days after the Solemnity of the Assumption to emphasize the close link between Mary's royal nature and her glorification in body and soul beside her Son. In the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Church we read: Mary "was taken up body and soul into heavenly glory ... and exalted by the Lord as Queen over all things, that she might be the more fully conformed to her Son" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 59).

This is the origin of today's feast: Mary is Queen because she is uniquely conformed to her Son, both on the earthly journey and in heavenly glory. Ephrem

the Syrian, Syria's great saint, said of Mary's queenship that it derives from her motherhood: she is Mother of the Lord, of the King of kings (cf. Is 9:1–6) and she points Jesus out to us as our life, our salvation and our hope. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Marialis Cultus* the Servant of God Paul VI recalled: "In the Virgin Mary everything is relative to Christ and dependent upon him. It was with a view to Christ that God the Father, from all eternity, chose her to be the all-holy Mother and adorned her with gifts of the Spirit granted to no one else" (n. 25).

Now however, let us ask ourselves: what does "Mary Queen" mean? Is it solely a title, together with others, a crown, an ornament like others? What does it mean? What is this queenship? As mentioned above, it is a consequence of her being united to the Son, of her being in heaven, that is, in communion with God; she shares in God's responsibility for the world and in God's love for the world. There is a worldly or common idea of a king or queen: a person with great power and wealth. But this is not the kind of royalty of Jesus and Mary. Let us think of the Lord; the royalty and kingship of Christ is interwoven with humility, service and love. It is above all serving, helping and loving. Let us remember that Jesus on the Cross was proclaimed king with this inscription written by Pilate: "The King of the Jews" (cf. Mk 15:26). On the Cross, at that moment, he is shown to be King; and how is he King? By suffering with us and for us, by loving to the end, and in this way governing and creating truth, love and justice. Let us also think of another moment: at the Last Supper he bows down to wash the feet of his followers.

Consequently Jesus' kingship has nothing to do with that of the powerful of this earth. He is a King who serves his servants; he demonstrated this throughout his life; and the same is true of Mary. She is Queen in her service to God for humanity, she is a Queen of love who lives the gift of herself to God so as to enter into the plan of man's salvation. She answered the Angel: "Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord" (cf. Lk 1:38) and in the *Magnificat* she sings: God has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden (cf. Lk 1:48). She helps us. She is Queen precisely by loving us, by helping us in our every need; she is our sister, a humble handmaid.

And so we have already reached this point: how does Mary exercise this queenship of service and love? By watching over us, her children: the children

who turn to her in prayer, to thank her or to ask her for her motherly protection and her heavenly help, perhaps after having lost our way, or when we are oppressed by suffering or anguish because of the sorrowful and harrowing vicissitudes of life. In serenity or in life's darkness let us address Mary, entrusting ourselves to her continuous intercession so that she may obtain for us from the Son every grace and mercy we need for our pilgrimage on the highways of the world.

Through the Virgin Mary let us turn with trust to the One who rules the world and holds in his hand the future of the universe. For centuries she has been invoked as the celestial Queen of Heaven; in the Litany of Loreto after the prayer of the holy Rosary, she is implored eight times: as Queen of Angels, of Patriarchs, of Prophets, of Apostles, of Martyrs, of Confessors, of Virgins, of all the Saints and of Families. The rhythm of these ancient invocations and daily prayers, such as the *Salve Regina*, help us to understand that the Blessed Virgin, as our Mother beside her Son Jesus in the glory of heaven, is always with us in the daily events of our life.

The title "Queen" is thus a title of trust, joy and love. And we know that the One who holds a part of the world's destinies in her hand is good, that she loves us and helps us in our difficulties.

Dear friends, the devotion to Our Lady is an important element of spiritual life. In our prayers let us not fail to address her with trust. Mary will not fail to intercede for us with her Son. Looking at her, let us imitate her faith, her full availability to God's plan of love, her generous acceptance of Jesus. Let us learn how to live from Mary. Mary is the Queen of Heaven who is close to God but she is also the Mother who is close to each one of us, who loves us and listens to our voice. Thank you for your attention.

# Apostolic Journeys

## World Youth Day in Cologne

*24 August 2005*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Just as beloved John Paul II used to do after every Apostolic Pilgrimage, today I too would like to run through with you the days I spent in Cologne for World Youth Day.

Divine Providence determined that the destination of my first Apostolic Journey outside Italy be in my native Country and that it take place on the occasion of the great meeting of the world's young people, 20 years after the establishment of World Youth Day, desired with prophetic insight by my unforgettable Predecessor. After my return, I thank God from the bottom of my heart for the gift of this pilgrimage, of which I shall cherish beloved memories.

We all felt that it was a gift of God. Of course, many people worked together, but in the end the grace of this event was a gift from on high, from the Lord.

At the same time, I address my thanks to all those who prepared and organized every phase of the meeting with loving commitment: in the first place, Cardinal Joachim Meisner, Archbishop of Cologne; Cardinal Karl Lehmann, President of the Bishops' Conference; and the Bishops of Germany, to whom I spoke at the very end of my Visit.

I would then like once again to thank the Authorities, organizers and volunteers who made their contribution. I am also grateful to the people and communities in every part of the world who supported it with their prayers, and to the sick, who offered up their sufferings for the spiritual success of this important appointment.

My spiritual embrace of the young participants of World Youth Day began with my arrival at the Cologne/Bonn Airport and continued, ever more filled with emotion, as we sailed down the Rhine from the Rodenkirchenerbrücke Wharf to Cologne, escorted by five other boats representing the five continents.

Then there was an evocative pause at the Poller Rheinwiesen Wharf where thousands and thousands of young people were already waiting. With them I had my first official Meeting, appropriately called the "Welcome Celebration" and whose motto was the Magi's question: "Where is the newborn King of the Jews?" (Mt 2:2). The Magi themselves



were the “guides” of those young pilgrims bound for Christ, adorers of the mystery of his presence in the Eucharist.

How significant it is that all this has occurred while we are on our way towards the conclusion of the Year of the Eucharist, desired by John Paul II! “We have come to worship him”: the theme of the Meeting invited everyone to follow the Wise Men in spirit and with them to make an inner journey of conversion to Emmanuel, God-with-us, in order to know him, encounter him and worship him, and after meeting and adoring him, to set out anew, bearing his light and his joy in our hearts, in our innermost depths.

In Cologne, the young people had several opportunities to examine these important spiritual topics deeply; they felt impelled by the Holy Spirit to be enthusiastic and consistent witnesses of Christ, who promised to remain truly present among us in the Eucharist until the end of the world.

I am thinking back to the various moments that I had the joy of spending with them, especially the Saturday Vigil and the Concluding Celebration on Sunday. Millions of other young people from every corner of the earth joined us in these vivid expressions of faith, thanks to the providential radio and television link-ups.

However, I would like here to recall a special Meeting, my encounter with the seminarians, young men called to a more radical and personal following of Christ, Teacher and Pastor. I wanted a specific moment to be devoted to them, also to highlight the vocational dimension typical of World Youth Days. In the past 20 years, many vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life have been born precisely during the World Youth Days, privileged occasions when the Holy Spirit makes his call forcefully heard.

The Ecumenical Meeting with representatives of the other Churches and Ecclesial Communities fitted in very well with the context of the Cologne Day, rich in hope. Germany’s role in ecumenical dialogue is important, both because of the sad history of divisions and because of its important role in the journey of reconciliation.

I hope that dialogue, as a reciprocal exchange of gifts and not only of words, will also help increase and develop that orderly and harmonious “symphony” which is Catholic unity. In this perspective, the World Youth Days are an effective ecumenical “workshop”.

And how can we fail to relive with emotion the visit to the Synagogue of Cologne, the home of the oldest Jewish Community in Germany? With my Jewish brothers and sisters I commemorated the Shoah and the 60th anniversary of the liberation of the Nazi concentration camps.

*This year is also the 40th anniversary of the conciliar Declaration *Nostra Aetate*, which has ushered in a new season of dialogue and spiritual solidarity between Jews and Christians, as well as esteem for the other great religious traditions. Islam occupies a special place among them. Its followers worship the same God and willingly refer to the Patriarch Abraham. That is why I wanted to meet the representatives of some Muslim Communities, to whom I expressed the hopes and worries of the rough time in history that we are living through, in the hope that fanaticism and violence will be uprooted and that we will always be able to work together to defend human dignity and protect the fundamental rights of men and women.*

*Dear brothers and sisters from the heart of the “old” Europe, which unfortunately experienced in the past century horrendous conflicts and inhuman regimes, the young people have relaunched for the humanity of our time the message of hope that does not disappoint, for it is based on the Word of God made flesh in Jesus Christ, who died and rose for our salvation.*

In Cologne, the young people encountered and adored Emmanuel, God-with-us, in the mystery of the Eucharist, and they came to understand better that the Church is the great family through which God creates a space of communion and unity between every continent, culture and race, a family vaster than the world that knows limits and boundaries; a “great band of pilgrims”, so to speak, who walk together with Christ, guided by him, the bright star that illumines history.

Jesus makes himself our travelling companion in the Eucharist, and the Eucharist - as I said in my Homily at the concluding celebration, borrowing from physics a well-known image - induces “nuclear fission” into the very heart of being (Homily, Holy Mass, Marienfeld Esplanade, Cologne, 21 August 2005; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 24 August 2005, p. 11). Only this innermost explosion of good that overcomes evil can give life to other transformations that are necessary to change the world.

May Jesus, the face of the merciful Lord for every person, continue to light our way, like the star that guided the Magi, and fill us with his joy.

Let us pray, therefore, that the young people of Cologne will take home with them, within them, the light of Christ, which is truth and love, and spread it everywhere. I am confident that through the power of the Holy Spirit and the motherly assistance of the Virgin Mary, we will see a great springtime of hope in Germany, in Europe and throughout the world.

## **Apostolic Journey to Poland**

31 May 2006

*“Stand firm in your faith!”*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, I would like to review with you the stages of the Apostolic Journey that I was able to make to Poland in the past few days.

I thank the Polish Bishops and particularly the Metropolitan Archbishops of Warsaw and Krakow for their enthusiasm and care in preparing for this Visit. I renew the expression of my gratitude to the President of the Republic and to the different Authorities of the Country, as well as to all those who worked together for the success of this event.

Above all, I want to say a big “thank you” to the Catholics and to the entire Polish People; I felt them clustered round me in an embrace full of human and spiritual warmth.

And many of you saw me on television. It was a true expression of catholicity, of the Church’s love expressed in love for the Successor of Peter.

After my arrival at Warsaw Airport, the Cathedral of this important metropolis was the venue of my first Meeting, reserved for priests, on the very day of the 50th anniversary of the ordination to the priesthood of Cardinal Józef Glemp, the Pastor of that Archdiocese. Thus, my pilgrimage began under the banner of the priesthood.

It continued with a testimony of ecumenical concern in the Lutheran Church of the Most Holy Trinity. On this occasion, united with representatives of the different Churches and Ecclesial Communities living in Poland, I reasserted my firm determination to consider as a priority of my ministry the commitment to the reconstitution of full and visible unity among Christians.

Next came the Solemn Eucharist in Pi<sup>3</sup>sudski Square in the centre of Warsaw that was filled to overflowing. This place, where we solemnly and joyfully celebrated the Eucharist, has already acquired symbolic value as the site of historical events such as the Holy Masses celebrated by John Paul II, the funeral of the Cardinal Primate Stefan Wyszyński and, following my venerable Predecessor’s death, it was packed at the celebrations of prayers for the repose of his soul.

A visit to the shrines that marked the life of the priest and Bishop Karol Wojty<sup>3</sup>a could not have been omitted from my itinerary: Czestochowa, Kalwaria Zebrzydowska and Divine Mercy.

I will not be able to forget my stop at the famous Marian Shrine of Jasna Góra. On that “Bright Mount”, the heart of the Polish Nation, as in a spiritual Upper Room, vast numbers of the faithful, especially men and women religious, seminarians and

representatives of the Ecclesial Movements, gathered round the Successor of Peter to listen, together with me, to Mary.

Drawing inspiration from the marvellous Marian meditation that John Paul II presented to the Church in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Mater*, I wanted to repropose faith as a fundamental attitude of the spirit, not merely something intellectual or sentimental; true faith involves the entire person: thoughts, affections, intentions, relations, bodiliness, activity and daily work.

Then, visiting the wonderful Shrine of Kalwaria Zebrzydowska, not far from Krakow, I asked the Sorrowful Virgin to sustain the faith of the Ecclesial Community in times of hardship and trial.

My next stop, at the Shrine of Divine Mercy in Łagiewniki, gave me the opportunity to stress that Divine Mercy alone illumines the mystery of man. It was here at the neighbouring convent that Sr Faustina Kowalska, contemplating the shining wounds of the Risen Christ, received a message of trust for humanity which John Paul II echoed and interpreted and which really is a central message precisely for our time: Mercy as God's power, as a divine barrier against the evil of the world.

I wanted to visit other symbolic "shrines": I am referring to Wadowice, a place that became famous because it was here that Karol Wojty<sup>3</sup>a was born and baptized. Visiting it gave me an opportunity to thank the Lord for the gift of this unflagging servant of the Gospel. The roots of his vigorous faith, his humanity, so sensitive and open, his love for beauty and truth, his devotion to Our Lady, his love for the Church and especially his vocation to holiness are found in this small town where he received his first education and formation.

In Krakow, Wawel Cathedral is another place that was dear to John Paul II. It is a symbolic place for the Polish Nation: it was here in the cathedral crypt that Karol Wojty<sup>3</sup>a celebrated his First Mass.

Another beautiful experience was my Meeting with young people that took place in Krakow's large B<sup>3</sup>onie Park. I symbolically consigned the "Flame of Mercy" to the crowds of young people who had come, so that they might be heralds of Love and Divine Mercy in the world. With them, I meditated on the Gospel parable of the house built upon rock (cf. Mt 7:24-27) that was also read today at the beginning of this Audience.

I also paused to reflect on the Word of God on Sunday morning, the Solemnity of the Ascension, during the Celebration to conclude my Visit. It was a liturgical meeting enlivened by an extraordinary participation of the faithful in the same Park where the youth meeting had taken place the previous evening. I made the most of the occasion to renew among the Polish People the wonderful proclamation of the Christian truth about

man, created and redeemed in Christ; that truth which John Paul II proclaimed vigorously so many times, to spur everyone to be strong in faith, hope and love.

Stand firm in your faith! This was the message I left with the children of beloved Poland, encouraging them to persevere in faithfulness to Christ and to the Church, so that Europe and the world will not lack the contribution of their Gospel witness.

Preventing another “Auschwitz”

All Christians must feel committed to bearing this witness in order to prevent humanity of the third millennium from once again experiencing horrors similar to those tragically called to mind by the extermination camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau. It was precisely in that place, sadly famous throughout the world, that I chose to stop before returning to Rome.

Hitler had more than 6 million Jews exterminated in the camp of Auschwitz-Birkenau and in other similar camps. About 150,000 Poles and tens of thousands of men and women of other nationalities died at Auschwitz-Birkenau. In the face of the horror of Auschwitz there is no other response than the Cross of Christ: Love descended to the very depths of the abyss of evil to save man in his core, where human freedom can rebel against God.

May contemporary humanity never forget Auschwitz or the other “death factories” where the Nazi regime attempted to eliminate God in order to replace him! May it not succumb to the temptation of racial hatred which is at the root of the worst forms of anti-Semitism! May people recognize once again that God is the Father of all and calls us all, in Christ, to build a world of justice, truth and peace together!

Let us ask this of the Lord through the intercession of Mary, whom today, as we end the month of May, we contemplate in her zealous and loving visit to Elizabeth, her elderly relative.

2 August 2006

*Special catechesis for the European Pilgrimage of Altar Servers*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*Thank you for your welcome! I greet you all with great affection. After an interval, due to my stay in the Aosta Valley, today I am resuming the General Audiences. And I am starting with a truly special Audience, because I have the joy of welcoming the large European Pilgrimage of Altar Servers. Dear*

*boys and girls and young people, welcome! Since most of the Altar Servers who have gathered in this Square today are German-speaking, I will first address them in my mother-tongue.*

*Dear Altar Servers,*

I am pleased that my first Audience after my holiday in the Alps is with you Altar Servers, and I greet each one of you with affection. I thank your Pastor, Auxiliary Bishop Martin Gächter of Basle, for the words with which, as President of Coetus Internationalis Ministrantium, he introduced the Audience, and I am grateful for the scarf, thanks to which I am once again an altar boy. In 1935, more than 70 years ago, I began as an altar boy; consequently, it has been a long journey on this path.

I cordially greet Cardinal Christoph Schönborn who celebrated Holy Mass for you yesterday, and the many Bishops and priests who have come from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Hungary.

I would like to offer you, dear Altar Servers - briefly, since it is hot - a message that can accompany you throughout your life and your service in the Church.

I would therefore like to resume the subject I have been addressing at the Catecheses in recent months. Perhaps some of you know that at the Wednesday General Audiences I am presenting the figures of the Apostles. First came Simon, whom the Lord called Peter, his brother Andrew, then another pair of brothers, St James known as “the Greater”, the first martyr among the Apostles, and John the theologian and Evangelist, then James called “the Lesser”.

I am planning to continue my presentation of the individual Apostles at the next Audiences, in which the Church, so to speak, becomes personal.

Today, however, we are reflecting on a common subject: on what kind of people the Apostles were.

In short, we might say that they were “friends” of Jesus. This is what he himself called them at the Last Supper, saying to them: “no longer do I call you servants... but... friends” (Jn 15:15).

They were, and were able to be, apostles and witnesses of Christ because they were close to him. They were united to him by a bond of love, brought to life by the Holy Spirit.

In this perspective, we can understand the theme of your pilgrimage: “Spiritus vivificat”. It is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who gives life. It is he who gives life to your relationship with Jesus, in such a way that it becomes not only exterior: “we know that he existed and that he is present in the Sacrament”, but he makes it become an intimate, profound and truly personal friendship which can give meaning to each one of your lives. And since you

know him and know him in friendship, you will be able to witness to him and take him to others.

Today, seeing you here before me in St Peter's Square, I think of the Apostles and I hear Jesus' voice saying to you: I do not call you servants but friends; abide in my love and you will bear an abundance of fruit (cf. Jn 15:9, 16).

I ask you to listen to this voice! Christ did not only say this 2,000 years ago; he is alive and saying it to you now. Listen to his voice with great openness; he has something to say to each one. Perhaps he is saying to some of you: "I want you to serve me in a special way as a priest, thus becoming my witness, being my friend and introducing others into this friendship".

Listen faithfully, therefore, to Jesus' voice. Each person's vocation is different, but Christ wants to make friends with everyone, just as he did with Simon, whom he called Peter, with Andrew, James, John and the other Apostles.

*He has given you his word and continues to give it to you, so that you may know the truth, know how things truly are for human beings, and thus, so that you know how one ought to live in the right way, how one ought to face life so that it may become true. Thus, each of you, in your own way, will be able to be his disciples and apostles.*

*Dear Altar Servers, you are, in fact, already apostles of Jesus! When you take part in the Liturgy by carrying out your altar service, you offer a witness to all. Your absorption, the devotion that wells up from your heart and is expressed in gestures, in song, in the responses: if you do it correctly and not absent-mindedly, then in a certain way your witness is one that moves people.*

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the bond of friendship with Jesus. You are very close to Jesus in the Eucharist, and this is the most important sign of his friendship for each one of us. Do not forget it.

This is why I am asking you not to take this gift for granted so that it does not become a sort of habit, knowing how it works and doing it automatically; rather, discover every day anew that something important happens, that the living God is among us and that you can be close to him and help him so that his mystery is celebrated and reaches people.

If you do not give into habit, if you put your innermost self into carrying out your service, then you will truly be his apostles and bear fruits of goodness and service in every context of your life: in the family, at school, in your free time.

Take to one and all that love which you receive in the Liturgy, especially to places where you realize that they lack love, where they do not receive goodness, where they suffer and are lonely.

With the power of the Holy Spirit, try to take Jesus to those very people who are outcast, who are not very popular or have problems. With the power of the Holy Spirit, it is precisely there that you must take Jesus.

In this way, the Bread you see broken upon the altar will be shared and multiplied even more, and you, like the Twelve Apostles, will help Jesus distribute it to the people of today in their different walks of life.

So it is, dear Altar Servers, that my last words to you are: May you always be friends and apostles of Jesus Christ!

## **Apostolic Journey to Munich, Altötting and Regensburg**

*20 September 2006*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, I would like to think back to the various moments of the Pastoral Visit that the Lord granted me to make last week to Bavaria.

In sharing with you my emotions and sentiments on seeing the places dear to me, I feel first of all the need to thank God for having made possible my second Visit to Germany and my first to Bavaria, my native Land.

I am also deeply grateful to all those - Pastors, priests, pastoral workers, public Authorities, organizers, police forces and volunteers - who worked with dedication and patience to ensure that every event would take place as smoothly as possible. As I said on arriving at Munich Airport on Saturday, 9 September, the purpose of my Journey, in memory of those who helped to form my personality, was to reaffirm and strengthen, as Successor of the Apostle Peter, the close bonds that unite the See of Rome with the Church in Germany.

Thus, the Journey was not simply a “return” to the past but also a providential opportunity to look with hope to the future. “Those who believe are never alone”: the motto of my Visit was intended as an invitation to reflect on the membership of every baptized person in the one Church of Christ, within which one is never alone but in constant communion with God and with all the brethren.

My first stop was the City of Munich, known as “the Metropolis with a heart” (Weltstadt mit Herz). In its historical centre is the Marienplatz, Mary’s Square, in which the “Mariensäule”, the Column of Our Lady, stands with a gilded bronze statue of the Virgin Mary on its summit.



I wanted to begin my stay in Bavaria with a tribute to the Patroness of Bavaria, which, for me, assumes a highly significant value: there, in that square and before that image of Mary, about 30 years ago I was welcomed as Archbishop, and it was there that I began my episcopal mission with a prayer to Mary; there I returned at the end of my mandate before leaving for Rome. This time, I wanted to pause again at the foot of the Mariensäule to implore the intercession and blessing of the Mother of God, not only for the City of Munich and Bavaria, but for the entire Church and the whole world.

The next day, Sunday, I celebrated the Eucharist on Neue Messe (the New Tradefair) Esplanade in Munich, with the numerous faithful who had come from various places. Prompted by the Gospel of the day, I reminded everyone that when it comes to God, a “hardness of hearing” exists from which we are suffering especially today.

It is our task, as Christians in a secularized world, to proclaim and to witness to all the message of hope that faith offers us: in the Crucified Jesus, God, the merciful Father, calls us to be his children and to overcome every form of hatred and violence, to contribute to the definitive triumph of love.

God is near

“Make us strong in faith” was the theme of the Sunday afternoon Meeting with the First Holy Communion children and their young families, with the catechists, with the other pastoral workers and with all those who cooperate in the evangelization of the Diocese of Munich.

We celebrated Vespers together in the historical Cathedral, known as the “Cathedral of Our Lady” where the relics of St Benno, Patron of the City, are kept and where in 1977 I was ordained a Bishop.

I reminded the young people and the adults that God is not far from us, in some unreachable place of the universe; on the contrary, in Jesus he made himself close to us to establish with every one a relationship of friendship. Every Christian community, and the parish in particular, is called through the commitment of all its members to become one great family that can move ahead united on the path of true life.

Monday, 11 September, was largely occupied by the Visit to Altötting in the Diocese of Passau. This little town is known as “Herz Bayerns” (the heart of Bavaria), and there the “Black Madonna” is preserved, venerated in the Gnadenkapelle (Chapel of Graces), the destination of many pilgrims from Germany and the nations of Central Europe.

Close by is the Capuchin Friary of St Anne, the home where St Konrad Birndorfer lived, canonized by my venerable Predecessor, Pope Pius XI, in 1934.

With the multitude of the faithful taking part in Holy Mass celebrated in the square outside the Shrine, we reflected together on Mary's role in the work of salvation, to learn from her helpful kindness, humility and generous acceptance of the divine will.

Mary leads us to Jesus: this truth was made even more visible at the end of the divine Sacrifice by the devout procession in which, carrying the statue of Our Lady of Grace, we made our way to the new Chapel of Eucharistic Adoration (Anbetungskapelle), inaugurated for the occasion. The day ended with solemn Marian Vespers in the Basilica of St Anne, Altötting, attended by the Religious and seminarians of Bavaria as well as the Members of the Society for Spiritual Vocations.

The next day, Tuesday, in Regensburg, a Diocese established by St Boniface in 739 and whose Patron is Bishop St Wolfgang, there were three important appointments.

In the morning Holy Mass was celebrated on Islinger Feld Esplanade, during which, taking up the theme of the Pastoral Visit: "Those who believe are never alone", we reflected on the content of the Creed. God, who is Father, wants through Jesus Christ to gather all humanity into a single family, the Church. For this reason the believer is never alone; those who believe must never be afraid of ending up in a blind alley.

Then in the afternoon I went to Regensburg Cathedral, also famous for its choir of treble voices, the "Domspatzen" (cathedral sparrows), which boasts 1,000 years of activity and for 30 years was conducted by my brother Georg. It was there that the ecumenical celebration of Vespers was held in which many representatives of various Churches and Ecclesial Communities in Bavaria took part, together with members of the Ecumenical Commission of the German Bishops' Conference.

This was a providential opportunity to pray together, to hasten full unity among all Christ's disciples and to reaffirm the duty to proclaim our faith in Jesus Christ, without attenuations, but in a clear and integral way and especially in our behaviour of sincere love.

On that day it was a particularly beautiful experience for me to deliver a conference to a large audience of teachers and students at the University of Regensburg, where I taught as professor for many years.

With joy, I was able to meet once again the university world that was my spiritual homeland for a long period of my life. As a theme I had chosen the issue of the relationship between faith and reason.

To introduce my audience to the drama and timeliness of the topic, I cited some words from a 14th-century Christian-Islamic dialogue, with which the Christian interlocutor, the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Paleologus - in an incomprehensibly brusque way for

us - presented to his Islamic interlocutor the problem of relations between religion and violence.

This citation, unfortunately, lent itself to misinterpretation. For the attentive reader of my text, however, it is clear that in no way did I want to make my own the negative words spoken by the Medieval Emperor in this dialogue, and that their polemical content does not express my personal conviction. My intention was quite different: starting with what Manuel II subsequently said in a positive manner, with very beautiful words, about rationality that must guide us in the transmission of faith, I wanted to explain that it is not religion and violence but rather religion and reason that go together.

The topic of my lecture - responding to the mission of the University - was therefore the relationship between faith and reason: I wished to invite [people] to the dialogue of the Christian faith with the modern world and to the dialogue of all the cultures and religions.

I hope that in the various circumstances during my Visit - for example, when in Munich I emphasized how important it is to respect what is sacred to others - that my deep respect for the great religions, and especially for Muslims, who “worship God, who is one” and with whom we are engaged in preserving and promoting together, for the benefit of all men, “peace, liberty, social justice and moral values” (Nostra Aetate, n. 3), appeared quite clear.

Therefore, I trust that after the immediate reactions, my words at the University of Regensburg will serve as an incentive and an encouragement for a positive, even self-critical dialogue, both between religions and between modern reason and the Christian faith.

The following morning, 13 September, in the “Alte Kapelle” (Old Chapel) of Regensburg, in which a miraculous image of Mary is preserved, painted, according to local tradition, by the Evangelist Luke, I presided at a short Liturgy for the Blessing of the new organ.

Inspired by the structure of this musical instrument that consists of many pipes of various sizes but that all harmonize well with one another, I reminded those present of the need for the various ministries, gifts and charisms active in the Ecclesial Community to converge under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to form one harmony in the praise of God and in fraternal love.

On Thursday, 14 September, my last stop was the City of Freising. I feel a special bond with it because I was ordained a priest precisely in its Cathedral, dedicated to Mary Most Holy and to St Corbinian, the evangelizer of Bavaria.

And the last Meeting planned, with priests and with permanent deacons, took place in the Cathedral itself. Reliving the emotion of my priestly Ordination, I reminded those present of the duty to collaborate with the Lord in inspiring new vocations at the service of the “harvest” which is “plentiful” even today, and I urged them to cultivate the interior life as a pastoral priority in order not to lose contact with Christ, the source of joy in the daily fatigue of the ministry.

At the Farewell Ceremony, once again thanking all those who contributed to the realization of the Visit, I stressed once more its main purpose: to present anew to my fellow citizens the eternal truth of the Gospel, and to strengthen believers in their adherence to Christ, the Incarnate Son of God who died and rose for us.

May Mary, Mother of the Church, help us to open our hearts and minds to the One who is “the Way, and the Truth and the Life” (Jn 14:6).

*I prayed for this and for this I invite all of you, Dear Brothers and Sisters, to continue to pray, as I warmly thank you for the affection with which you have accompanied me in my daily pastoral ministry.*

My thanks to you all.

## **Apostolic Journey to Turkey**

6 December 2006

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At this General Audience, with what is now the custom after every Apostolic Journey, I would like to retrace the various stages of the Pilgrimage I made in Turkey from Tuesday to Friday last week. As you know, many aspects of this Visit were not easy, but God accompanied it from the outset and so it was a success.

Therefore, just as I asked you to prepare for it and accompany it with your prayers, I now ask you to join me in thanking the Lord for the way it went and for its conclusion.

I entrust to him the fruits that I hope it will yield, both as regards relations with our Orthodox brethren and our dialogue with the Muslims.

I feel it is my duty, first of all, to renew the cordial expression of my gratitude to the President of the Republic, to the Prime Minister and to the other Authorities, who welcomed me so courteously and assured me of the necessary conditions for everything to take place in the best possible way.

I then offer my brotherly thanks to the Bishops of the Catholic Church in Turkey, with their collaborators, for all that they did. I extend my special thanks to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, who received me at his home, to the Armenian Patriarch Mesrob II, to the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan Mor Filüksinos and to the other Religious Authorities.

I felt spiritually supported throughout the Visit by my venerable Predecessors, the Servants of God Paul VI and John Paul II, both of whom made a memorable Visit to Turkey, and especially by Bl. John XXIII, who was Papal Representative in that noble Country from 1935 to 1944 and left there memories full of affection and devotion.

With reference to the vision of the Church that the Second Vatican Council presented (cf. Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 14-16), I would say that the Pope's Pastoral Journeys help him to carry out his mission that unfolds "in concentric circles". In the innermost circle, the Successor of Peter strengthens Catholics in the faith; in the intermediate circle he meets other Christians; and in the outer one he addresses non-Christians and the whole of humanity.

The first day of my Visit to Turkey was spent within the area of this third "circle", the widest one; I met the Prime Minister, the President of the Republic and the President for Religious Affairs, to whom I addressed my first Speech; I paid homage at his Mausoleum to the "Father of the Homeland", Mustafa Kemal Atatürk; I then had the opportunity to speak to the Diplomatic Corps at the Apostolic Nunciature in Ankara.

This intense sequence of meetings formed an important part of my Visit, especially given that Turkey is a Country with a vast Muslim majority, even if it is governed by a Constitution that asserts the secularity of the State.

It is therefore a Country emblematic of the great challenge at stake today across the globe: on the one hand, we must rediscover the reality of God and the public importance of religious faith; and on the other, we must ensure that people can freely express this faith, that it is not debased by forms of fundamentalism and that they are able to firmly reject every form of violence.

I thus had a favourable opportunity to renew my sentiments of esteem for the Muslims and for the Islamic civilizations. At the same time, I was able to insist on the importance of Christians and Muslims working together for humankind, for life and for peace and justice, reasserting that the distinction between the civil and religious spheres is a value and that the State must assure citizens and religious communities effective freedom of worship.

In the area of interreligious dialogue, divine Providence granted me, almost at the end of my Journey, an unscheduled Visit which proved rather important: my Visit to Istanbul's

famous Blue Mosque. Pausing for a few minutes of recollection in that place of prayer, I addressed the one Lord of Heaven and earth, the Merciful Father of all humanity. May all believers recognize that they are his creatures and witness to true brotherhood!

The second day took me to Ephesus, and I therefore quickly found myself in the innermost “circle” of the Journey, in direct contact with the Catholic Community. In fact, the Shrine of Mary’s House stands in a pleasant place called the “Hill of the Nightingale” which overlooks the Aegean Sea. This is a small and ancient chapel, built to contain a cottage which, according to a very old tradition, the Apostle John had built for the Virgin Mary after taking her with him to Ephesus.

It was Jesus himself who entrusted them to each other before he died on the Cross, when he said to Mary, “Woman, behold, your son!” and to John, “Behold, your mother!” (Jn 19:26-27).

Archaeological research has shown that from time immemorial the site has been a place of Marian worship which is also dear to Muslims, who go there regularly to venerate the One they call “Meryem Ana”, Mother Mary.

In the garden in front of the Shrine, I celebrated Holy Mass for a group of the faithful who came from the neighbouring city of Izmir, from other parts of Turkey and from abroad. At “Mary’s House” we truly felt “at home”, and in that atmosphere of peace we prayed for peace in the Holy Land and throughout the world. There, I remembered Fr Andrea Santoro, a Roman priest who witnessed to the Gospel with his blood on Turkish soil.

The intermediate “circle”, that of ecumenical relations, occupied the central part of this Visit and took place on the Feast of St Andrew, 30 November. This event provided an ideal context for the consolidation of fraternal relations between the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter, and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, a Church which Tradition claims was founded by the Apostle St Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.

In the footsteps of Paul VI, who met Patriarch Athenagoras, and John Paul II, who was welcomed by Dimitrios I, Successor of Athenagoras, I renewed this gesture of great symbolic value with His Holiness Bartholomew I, to confirm our reciprocal commitment to persevere on the way towards the re-establishment of full communion between Catholics and Orthodox.

To sanction this firm resolution, I signed a Common Declaration with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I, which constitutes a further milestone on our journey. It was particularly significant that this act took place at the end of the solemn Liturgy for the Feast of St Andrew in which I took part; it ended with the double Blessing imparted by the Bishop of Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople, Successors respectively of the

Apostles Peter and Andrew. In this way, we showed that at the root of every ecumenical endeavour there is always prayer and the persevering invocation of the Holy Spirit.

Likewise in this context, I had the joy of visiting His Beatitude Mesrob II, Patriarch of the Armenian Apostolic Church, and of meeting the Syrian Orthodox Metropolitan. In this context, I am also glad to mention my conversation with the Grand Rabbi of Turkey.

My Visit ended, just before departing for Rome, with my return to the innermost “circle”, in other words, my meeting with the Catholic Community, all of whose members were present in the Latin Cathedral of the Holy Spirit in Istanbul.

The Ecumenical Patriarch, the Armenian Patriarch, the Syrian-Orthodox Metropolitan and Representatives of the Protestant Churches were also taking part in this Holy Mass.

*In short, all Christians, in the diversity of their traditions, rites and languages, were gathered together in prayer. Comforted by the words of Christ, who promised believers “rivers of living water” (Jn 7:38), and by the image of the many members united in one body (cf. I Cor 12:12-13), we lived the experience of a renewed Pentecost.*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I returned here to the Vatican, my heart brimming with gratitude to God and sentiments of sincere affection and esteem for the inhabitants of the beloved Turkish Nation, by which I felt welcomed and understood. The appreciation and warmth that surrounded me, despite the inevitable difficulties that my Visit created for the normal functioning of their daily activities, live on as a vivid memory that inspires me to pray. May the Almighty and Merciful God help the Turkish People, their Government Leaders and the Representatives of the different religions to build together a future of peace, so that Turkey may be a “bridge” of friendship and fraternal collaboration between West and East.*

Let us also pray that through the intercession of Mary Most Holy, the Holy Spirit will make this Apostolic Visit fruitful, and throughout the world enliven the mission of the Church, established by Christ to proclaim the Gospel of truth, peace and love to all Peoples.

## **Apostolic Journey to France**

*17 September 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today’s meeting gives me the pleasant opportunity of reviewing the various events of the Pastoral Visit to France which I made a few days ago; a Visit that culminated, as you know, with the pilgrimage to Lourdes on the occasion of the

150th anniversary of the Apparitions of Our Lady to St Bernadette. As I offer fervent thanks to the Lord who granted me such a providential opportunity, I once again express my deep gratitude to the Archbishop of Paris, to the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, to their respective collaborators and to all who contributed in various ways to the success of my pilgrimage. I also cordially thank the President of the Republic and the other Authorities who welcomed me so courteously.

The Visit began in Paris, where I met in spirit the entire French people, thereby paying homage to a beloved nation in which, since the second century, the Church has played a fundamental civilizing role. It is interesting that precisely in this context the need developed for a healthy distinction between the political and religious spheres in accordance with Jesus' famous words: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12:17). However, if the image of Caesar was stamped on Roman coins which for this reason were to be rendered to him, the human heart bears the imprint of the Creator, the one Lord of our life. Genuine secularism does not mean, therefore, leaving the spiritual dimension out of consideration but rather recognizing that it is precisely this that radically guarantees our freedom and autonomy from earthly realities, thanks to the dictates of creative Wisdom which the human conscience is capable of accepting and actuating.

The broad reflection on the theme I addressed at the meeting with the world of culture, "The origins of Western theology and the roots of European culture" fits into this perspective. The venue was chosen for its symbolic importance: the Collège des Bernardins, which the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger wished to develop as a centre of cultural dialogue. It is a 12th century building, built for the Cistercians, where young monks studied. Thus the monastic theology which also gave birth to our Western culture is also really present there. The starting point of my Discourse was a reflection on monasticism, whose goal was the search for God, *quaerere Deum*. At the time of the profound crisis of the ancient civilization, the monks, guided by the light of faith, chose the right pathway: the pathway of listening to the Word of God. Thus they were great scholars of the Sacred Scriptures and monasteries became schools of wisdom and "*dominici servitii*" school, "in the Lord's service", as St Benedict called them. So it was that the search for God, by its nature, brought the monks to a culture of the word.



*Quaerere Deum*, in searching for God, they sought him by following his Word and must therefore have acquired an ever deeper knowledge of this Word. It is necessary to penetrate the secret of the language in order to understand its structure. In the search for God revealed to us in the Sacred Scriptures, the profane sciences, oriented to attaining a deeper knowledge of the secrets of languages, thus became important. Consequently, it was *eruditio* that developed in the monasteries which permitted the formation of culture. Today, for this very reason, *quaerere Deum*—seeking God, journeying towards God, is still, as it was in the past, the main path and foundation of every true culture.

Architecture too is an artistic expression of the search for God and there is no doubt that the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris constitutes an example of universal value. Inside this magnificent church where I had the joy of presiding at the celebration of Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I urged the priests, deacons, men and women religious and seminarians who had come from every part of France, to give priority to the religious listening to the Divine Word, looking to the Virgin Mary as a sublime model. In front of Notre-Dame I then greeted the young people who had arrived in enthusiastic throngs. As they were about to start a long prayer vigil, I consigned to them two treasures of the Christian faith: the Holy Spirit and the Cross. The Spirit opens to human intelligence horizons which transcend it and enable it to perceive the beauty and truth of God's love revealed on the Cross itself. This is a love from which nothing will ever be able to separate us and which is experienced by giving one's own life after the example of Christ. I then made a brief stop at the *Institut de France*, the headquarters of five national Academies: since I myself am a member of one of them, I was overjoyed to meet my colleagues here. My Visit culminated in the Eucharistic celebration on the *Esplanade des Invalides*. Re-echoing St Paul's words to the Corinthians, I invited the faithful of Paris and of all France to seek the living God who showed us his true Face in Jesus, present in the Eucharist, and urged us to love our brethren as he loved us.

I then went to Lourdes. Here I was immediately able to join thousands of the faithful on the "Jubilee Way", which retraces the places of St Bernadette's life: the parish church with the baptismal font in which she was baptized; the "*Cachot*", where she lived as a child in great poverty; the Grotto of *Massabielle*, where the Blessed Virgin appeared to her 18 times. In the evening I took part in the

traditional torchlight procession, a wonderful manifestation of faith in God and of devotion to his and our Mother. Lourdes is truly a place of light, prayer, hope and conversion, founded on the rock of the love of God whose culminating revelation was in the glorious Cross of Christ.

By a happy coincidence, last Sunday the liturgy commemorated the Exaltation of the Cross, a sign of hope par excellence since it is the greatest possible witness of love. In Lourdes, at the school of Mary, the first and perfect disciple of the Crucified One, pilgrims learn to view the crosses of their own life in the very light of the glorious Cross of Christ. In fact, on appearing to Bernadette in the Grotto of *Massabielle*, the first gesture Mary made was the Sign of the Cross, in silence, without speaking. And Bernadette imitated her, making the Sign of the Cross in turn, although with a trembling hand. And so Our Lady began her initiation into the essence of Christianity: the Sign of the Cross is the epitome of our faith and by making it with an attentive heart, we enter into the full mystery of our salvation. That gesture of Our Lady contains the whole message of Lourdes! God so loved us that he gave himself for us: this is the message of the Cross, “a mystery of death and glory”. The Cross reminds us that there is no true love without suffering, there is no gift of life without pain. Many people learn this truth in Lourdes, which is a school of faith and hope, because it is also a school of charity and service to our brethren. It is in this context of faith and prayer that the important meeting with the French Bishops took place; it was a moment of intense spiritual communion in which together we entrusted our common pastoral expectations and concerns to the Blessed Virgin.

The next stage was the Eucharistic procession with thousands of the faithful, including, as always, numerous sick people. Before the Blessed Sacrament, our spiritual communion with Mary became even more intense and profound, because she gives us eyes and a heart that can contemplate her Divine Son in the Holy Eucharist. The silence of those thousands of people before the Lord was moving. It was not an empty silence but filled with prayer and with an awareness of the presence of the Lord who loved us to the point of being lifted up on the Cross for our sake. Lastly, Monday, 15 September, the liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, was devoted in a special way to the sick. After a brief Visit to the Hospital Chapel where Bernadette received her First Communion, I presided at the celebration of Holy Mass in front of the Basilica of the Rosary, during which I

administered the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. With the sick people and their care givers, I chose to meditate on the tears that Mary shed beneath the Cross and on her smile that illuminates Easter morning.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, together let us thank the Lord for this Apostolic Visit rich in so many spiritual gifts. In particular, let us praise him because Mary, in appearing to St Bernadette, opened a privileged space in the world in which to encounter the divine love that heals and saves. In Lourdes, the Blessed Virgin asks everyone to consider the earth as the place of our pilgrimage toward the definitive Homeland, which is Heaven. Actually, we are all pilgrims and are in need of the Mother who guides us; and in Lourdes her smile invites us to continue with great trust, in the knowledge that God is good, God is love.*

I happily greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including pilgrims from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Australia, Burma, Japan, and the United States of America. God bless you all!

## **Pilgrimage to the Holy Land**

20 May 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I shall talk about the Apostolic Journey that I made from 8 to 15 May to the Holy Land, for which I do not cease to thank the Lord because it turned out to be a great gift for the Successor of Peter and for the whole Church. I would like once again to express a heartfelt "thank you" to H.B. Patriarch Fouad Twal, to the Bishops of the various rites, to the Priests and to the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land. I thank the King and Queen of Jordan, the President of Israel and the President of the National Palestinian Authority, together with their respective Governments, all the Authorities and all those who in various ways collaborated in the preparation and success of my Visit. It was first and foremost a pilgrimage, indeed, a pilgrimage par excellence to the sources of our faith; and at the same time a Pastoral Visit to the Church which lives in the Holy Land: a community of unique importance because it is a living presence in the place where it was born.

The first stage, from 8 to 11 May, was in Jordan, in whose territory are located two of the most important holy places: Mount Nebo, from which Moses contemplated the Promised Land and where he died without entering it; then Bethany "on the other side of the Jordan", where, according to the fourth Gospel, St John began to baptize. The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo is a site with a strong symbolic value: it speaks of our condition as pilgrims between an "already" and a "not yet", between a promise so important and

beautiful as to hearten us on the way, and fulfilment that surpasses us and also surpasses this world. The Church lives this “eschatological” and “pilgrim disposition” in herself: she is already united with Christ her Bridegroom but for the time being the wedding feast is only anticipated, in expectation of his glorious return at the end of time (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 48–50). In Bethany I had the joy of blessing the foundation stones of two churches that will be built on the site where St John baptized the people. This event was a sign of the openness and respect for religious freedom and for the Christian tradition which prevail in the Hashemite Kingdom and deserves deep appreciation. I was able to show this just recognition, united with profound respect for the Muslim community, the Religious Leaders, the Diplomatic Corps and the university Rectors who met at the Al-Hussein Bin Talal Mosque, that King Abdallah II commissioned in memory of his father, the famous King Hussein, who welcomed Pope Paul VI on his historic pilgrimage in 1964. How important it is that Christians and Muslims live side by side peacefully and in mutual respect! Thanks be to God and to the commitment of the government leaders this is happening in Jordan. I prayed that it would be like this also elsewhere, thinking especially of the Christians who instead experience difficult situations in neighbouring Iraq.

A large Christian community lives in Jordan, increased by Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. It is a significant presence appreciated in society, also because of its institutions for education and social assistance, attentive to the human person independently of his or her race or religion. A beautiful example is the “Regina Pacis” Rehabilitation Centre in Amman, which takes in numerous people afflicted by disabilities. In visiting it, I was able to bring a word of hope, but in turn I also received one, as a testimony strengthened by suffering and by human sharing; as a sign of the Church’s commitment in the field of culture, I also blessed the foundation stone of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem’s University of Madaba. I rejoiced in giving a start to this new scientific and cultural institution so that it may tangibly express that the Church encourages the quest for truth and for the common good and may offer a space for higher learning open to all who want to commit themselves to this search, an indispensable premise for a true and fruitful dialogue among civilizations. Likewise in Amman two solemn liturgical celebrations took place: Vespers in the Greek-Melkite Cathedral of St George and Holy Mass in the International Stadium which enabled us to savour together the beauty of meeting one another as God’s pilgrim People, rich in their different traditions and united in the one faith.

After leaving Jordan, in the late morning of Monday, 11 May, I landed in Israel where, from my arrival, I introduced myself as a pilgrim of faith in the Land where Jesus was born, lived, died and rose, and at the same time, as a pilgrim of peace to implore from

God that in the place where he chose to make himself man all men and women may live as his children, that is, as brothers and sisters. This second aspect of my journey naturally emerged in my meetings with the civil authorities: in my visit to the Israeli President and to the President of the Palestinian Authority. In that Land blessed by God, it sometimes seems impossible to extricate oneself from the spiral of violence. But nothing is impossible to God and to those who trust in him! For this reason faith in the one just and merciful God, which is the most precious resource of those peoples, must be able to release its full charge of respect, reconciliation and collaboration. I desired to express this wish in paying a visit both to the Grand Mufti and the leaders of the Islamic community of Jerusalem and to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, as well as at the meeting with the organizations involved in inter-religious dialogue and then, at the encounter with the religious leaders of Galilee.

Jerusalem is the cross-roads of the three great monotheistic religions, and its very name “City of Peace” expresses God’s plan for humanity: to make it one great family. This design, announced to Abraham, was completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whom St Paul calls “our peace”, because through his Sacrifice he forcefully broke down the dividing wall of hostility (cf. Eph 2:14). Thus all believers must leave behind them their prejudices and desire to dominate and must in harmony obey the fundamental Commandment: in other words to love God with all one’s might and to love one’s neighbour as oneself. It is to this that Jews, Christians and Muslims are called to bear witness, in order to honour with acts that God to whom they pray with their lips. And it is exactly this that I carried in my heart, in my prayers, as I visited in Jerusalem the Western or Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock, symbolic places respectively of Judaism and of Islam. The Visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial, built in Jerusalem in honour of the victims of the *Shoah*, was also a moment of intense recollection. In silence we paused there, praying and meditating on the mystery of the “name”: every human person is sacred, and his name is written in the heart of the eternal God. The horrendous tragedy of the *Shoah* must never be forgotten! On the contrary, we must always remember that universal recommendation of sacred respect for human life, which always possesses an infinite value.

As I have already mentioned, the priority of my Journey was the Visit to the Catholic Communities of the Holy Land and this also took place in various stages at Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. In the Upper Room, my mind fixed on Christ who washed the Apostles’ feet and instituted the Eucharist, as well as on the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church on the Day of Pentecost, I was able to meet, among others, the Custos of the Holy Land and to meditate with him on our vocation to be one, to form one body and one mind, to transform the world with the gentle force of love. Of course, this call encounters particular difficulty in the Holy Land, therefore, with the heart of Christ I repeated to my brother Bishops his very words: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure

to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32). I then briefly greeted the women and men religious of contemplative life, thanking them for the service that with their prayers they offer to the Church and to the cause of peace.

Above all the supreme moments of communion with the Catholic faithful were the Eucharistic celebrations. In Josaphat Valley, in Jerusalem, we meditated on the Resurrection of Christ as a force of hope and peace for that City and for the whole world. In Bethlehem, in the Palestinian Territories, Holy Mass was celebrated in front of the Basilica of the Nativity with the participation of the faithful from Gaza, whom I had the joy to comfort personally, assuring them of my special closeness. Bethlehem, the place in which the celestial hymn of peace for all men rang out, is a symbol of the distance that still separates us from the fulfilment of that proclamation. Precariousness, isolation, uncertainty, poverty: all this has led so many Christians to leave for distant places. Yet the Church continues on her way, supported by the power of faith and witnessing to love with concrete works of service to the brethren such as, for example, the Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem, supported by the Dioceses of Germany and Switzerland, and humanitarian action in the refugee camps. In the camp that I visited I wished to assure the families that are housed there of the closeness and encouragement of the universal Church and I invited everyone to seek peace with non violent methods, after the example of St Francis of Assisi. I celebrated the third and last Mass with the people last Thursday, in Nazareth, the town of the Holy Family. We prayed for all the families that they might rediscover the beauty of marriage and family life, the value of domestic spirituality and of education, attention to children who are entitled to grow up in peace and serenity. In addition, in the Basilica of the Annunciation, together with all the Pastors, consecrated people, ecclesial movements and lay people involved in Galilee, we sang our faith in the creative and transforming power of God. There, where the Word was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, flows an inexhaustible source of hope and joy that does not cease to bring life to the heart of the Church, a pilgrim through history.

My pilgrimage ended last Friday with the stop at the Holy Sepulchre and with two important ecumenical meetings in Jerusalem: at the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate, where the representatives of all the Churches in the Holy Land had gathered, and lastly, at the Armenian Apostolic Patriarchal Church. I am pleased to sum up the whole of the itinerary that I was granted to follow precisely in the sign of Christ’s Resurrection: despite the vicissitudes that have scarred the Holy Places down the centuries, despite the wars, destruction and unfortunately also conflicts between Christians, the Church has continued her mission, impelled by the Spirit of the Risen Lord. She is on her way towards full unity, so that the world may believe in the love of God and experience the joy of his peace. On my knees on Calvary and at the Holy Sepulchre I invoked the power of love that flows from the Paschal Mystery, the only force that can renew men and women

and direct history and the cosmos to its destiny. I also ask you to pray for this intention, as we prepare for the Feast of the Ascension which we shall be celebrating in the Vatican tomorrow. Thank you for your attention.

## **Apostolic Journey to Cameroon and Angola**

*1st April 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As I announced last Sunday at the Angelus, today I am pausing to speak of my recent Apostolic Journey to Africa, the first in my Pontificate to that continent. It was limited to Cameroon and Angola, but with my Visit I intended to embrace in spirit all the African peoples and to bless them in the Lord's name. I experienced the traditional warm African welcome which I met with everywhere, and I willingly take this opportunity to express once again my deep gratitude to the Bishops of the two countries, to the Heads of State, to all the Authorities and to all those who in their various capacities did their utmost to ensure the success of my Pastoral Visit.

My stay in Africa began on 17 March in Yaoundé, the capital of Cameroon, where I immediately found myself in the heart of Africa, and not only geographically. In fact, this country sums up many features of that vast continent and first and foremost its profoundly religious spirit which all the very numerous ethnic groups that populate it have in common. In Cameroon more than a quarter of the inhabitants are Catholic and live peacefully with the other religious communities. For this reason, in 1995 my beloved Predecessor John Paul II chose the capital of this very nation to promulgate the Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, after the first Synodal Assembly dedicated, precisely, to the African continent. This time, the Pope went there to present the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Synodal Assembly for Africa, scheduled to be held in Rome next October and whose theme will be: "The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace: 'You are the salt of the earth.... You are the light of the world' (Mt 5:13-14)".

At the meetings I had with the Bishops two days apart respectively of Cameroon and of Angola and São Tomé e Príncipe, I wished, especially in this Pauline Year, to recall the urgent need for evangelization which is primarily

incumbent on the Bishops themselves and stressed the collegial dimension, based on sacramental communion. I urged them always to be an example to their priests and to all the faithful, and to take an interest in the formation of the seminarians who, thanks be to God, are numerous and of the catechists who are becoming more and more necessary to the life of the Church in Africa. I encouraged the Bishops to promote the pastoral care of marriage and the family, the liturgy and culture, so as to enable lay people to withstand the attack of sects and esoteric groups. My affectionate wish was to strengthen them in the practice of charity and in the defence of the rights of the poor.

Then I am thinking back to the solemn celebration of Vespers in Yaoundé in the Basilica of “Marie Reine des Apôtres”, Patronness of Cameroon. It is a large, modern church that stands on the site where the first evangelizers of Cameroon worked, the Missionaries of the Holy Spirit. On the eve of the Solemnity of St Joseph to whose attentive custody God entrusted his most precious treasures, Mary and Jesus, we glorified the one Father who is in Heaven, together with the representatives of other Churches and ecclesial Communities. In contemplating the spiritual figure of St Joseph, who dedicated his life to Christ and to the Virgin Mary, I asked the priests, the consecrated people and the members of ecclesial movements to respond ever more faithfully to their calling, living in God’s presence and in joyful obedience to his word.

At the Apostolic Nunciature in Yaoundé I had the opportunity also to meet with the representatives of the Muslim community in Cameroon. Reaffirming the importance of interreligious dialogue and collaboration between Christians and Muslims to help the world to open itself to God. It really was a very pleasant meeting.

One of the crowning events of the Journey was without a doubt the promulgation of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Second Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, on 19 March, the day of St Joseph and my name day in the Stadium of Yaoundé at the end of the solemn Eucharistic Celebration in honour of St Joseph. It took place in a harmonious atmosphere among the People of God, “with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival” according to the Psalm (Ps 42[41]:4) of which we had a real experience. The Synodal Assembly will be celebrated in Rome, but in a certain sense it has already begun in the heart of



the African continent, in the heart of the Christian family that lives, suffers and hopes there. For this reason the fact that the publication of the “Working Document” coincided with the Feast of St Joseph, a model of faith and hope like the first Patriarch, Abraham, seemed to me to be fortuitous. Faith in the “God who is close”, who revealed his loving Face in Jesus, is the guarantee of a trustworthy hope for Africa and for the whole world, a guarantee of a future of reconciliation, justice and peace.

After the solemn liturgical assembly and the festive presentation of the Working Document, at the Apostolic Nunciature in Yaoundé, I was able to meet with the Members of the Special Council for Africa of the Synod of Bishops and to live with them a moment of intense communion: we reflected together on Africa’s history in a theological and pastoral perspective. It was almost like a first meeting of the Synod itself, in a brotherly discussion between the different episcopates and the Pope concerning the prospects of the Synod of reconciliation and peace in Africa. Christianity, in fact and this was evident has put down deep roots in African soil from the outset, as is attested by the numerous martyrs and saints, pastors, teachers and catechists who flourished, first in the north and later, in subsequent epochs, in the rest of the continent: let us think of Cyprian, of Augustine, of his mother, Monica, and of Athanasius; and then of the Martyrs of Uganda, of Josephine Bakhita and of the many others. In this season, which sees Africa working to consolidate her political independence and the construction of the national identities in a now globalized context, the Church accompanies Africans, recalling the important message of the Second Vatican Council, applied through the first and now, the Second Assembly of the Synod for Africa. In the midst of the unfortunately numerous and tragic conflicts which still afflict various regions of that continent the Church knows she must be a sign and an instrument of unity and reconciliation so that the whole of Africa may build together a future of justice, solidarity and peace, putting into practice the teachings of the Gospel.

A powerful sign of the humanizing action of Christ’s message is certainly the Cardinal Léger Centre in Yaoundé, destined for the rehabilitation of disabled people. Its founder was the Canadian Cardinal Paul-Émile Léger, who chose to retire after the Council of 1968, to work among the poor. At that Centre, which he later handed over to the State, I met numerous brothers and sisters in situations

of suffering, and shared with them but also drew from them the hope that comes from faith even in situations of suffering.

The second stage and the second part of my Journey was Angola, certain aspects of which make it another emblematic country. In fact, Angola has emerged from a long civil war and is now involved in the work of national reconciliation and reconstruction. But how could this reconciliation and this reconstruction be authentic if they were achieved at the expense of the poorest people who have a right, like everyone, to have a share of the resources of their land? This is why, with this Visit of mine whose first purpose was obviously to strengthen the Church in the faith, I also intended to encourage the social process that is under way. In Angola what my venerable Predecessors repeated more than once is really tangible: all is lost with war, all can be reborn with peace. However, in order to rebuild a nation great moral energy is required. And here, once again, the role of the Church is important; she is called to carry out an educational role, working in depth to renew and form consciences.

St Paul is the Patron of the city of Luanda, the capital of Angola. This is why I chose to celebrate the Eucharist with the priests, seminarians, religious, catechists and other pastoral workers on Saturday 21 March, in the church dedicated to the Apostle. Once again St Paul's personal experience spoke to us of the encounter with the Risen Christ, capable of transforming people and society. Historical contexts change and it is necessary to be mindful of this but Christ remains the true force of radical renewal of man and of the human community. Therefore to return to God, to be converted to Christ means going ahead toward the fullness of life.

In Luanda, to express the Church's closeness to the efforts for the reconstruction of Angola and of so many African regions, I wanted to dedicate two special encounters respectively to youth and to women. With the young people, in the stadium, it was a celebration of joy and hope, unfortunately saddened by the death of two girls who were crushed by the crowd at the entrance. Africa is a very young continent but too many of its sons and daughters, children and adolescents, have already suffered serious wounds that only Jesus Christ, the Risen Crucified One can heal by imbuing in them, with his Spirit, the strength to love and to work for justice and peace. I then paid homage to the women for the

service that so many of them offer to faith, to human dignity, to life, to the family. I reaffirmed their full right to be involved in public life, but not to the detriment of their role in the family, a fundamental mission to be carried out in responsible sharing with all the other members of society, especially with the husbands and fathers. So this was the message that I left to the new generations and to the world of women, extending it later to all at the great Eucharistic assembly on Sunday, 22 March, concelebrated with the Bishops of the countries of southern Africa, with the participation of a million of the faithful. If the African peoples I told them like ancient Israel, base their hope on the Word of God, rich in their religious and cultural heritage, they will truly be able to build a future of reconciliation and stable peace for all.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, how many other considerations I have in my heart and how many memories come to mind as I think of this journey! I ask you to thank the Lord for the marvels he has worked and continues to work in Africa thanks to the generous action of the missionaries, men and women religious, volunteers, priests and catechists, and in young communities full of enthusiasm and faith. I also ask you to pray for the African peoples, very dear to me, so that they may be able to face courageously the great social, financial and spiritual challenges of the present time. We entrust everything and everyone to the maternal intercession of Mary Most Holy, Queen of Africa, and of the African Saints and Blesseds.*

8 April 2009

## **Apostolic Journey to Croatia**

8 June 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak to you about my Pastoral Visit to Croatia, which I made last Saturday and Sunday. It was a short Apostolic Journey that took place entirely in the capital, Zagreb, yet it was full of meetings and especially of an intense spirit of faith, since the Croats are a deeply Catholic people.

I renew my most heartfelt thanks to Cardinal Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb, to Archbishop Srakić, President of the Bishops' Conference and to the other Bishops of Croatia, as well as to the President of the Republic, for the warm welcome they offered me. I extend my gratitude to all the civil authorities and to all who collaborated in various ways in this event, especially to people who offered prayers and sacrifices for this intention.

*“Together in Christ”*: this was the motto of my visit. It expresses first of all the experience of everyone meeting in the name of Christ, the experience of being Church, demonstrated by the People of God gathering round the Successor of Peter. However, *“Together in Christ”* in this case had a special reference to the family: indeed, the main purpose of my visit was the First National Day of Croatian Catholic Families, which culminated in the Eucharistic concelebration on Sunday morning, which saw the participation, in the Hippodrome of Zagreb, at which a great multitude of the faithful participated. It was very important to me to strengthen in the faith especially families, which the Second Vatican Council called *“of the domestic Church”* (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11). Bl. John Paul II, who visited Croatia three times gave great prominence to the role of the family in the Church; so, with this journey, I wanted to give continuity to this aspect of his Magisterium. In Europe today, the nations with a solid Christian tradition have a special responsibility in defending and promoting the value of the family founded on marriage, which in any case remains crucial in both the educational and social spheres. This message therefore had special importance for Croatia which, with its rich spiritual, ethical and cultural patrimony, is preparing to enter the European Union.

The Holy Mass was celebrated in the spiritual atmosphere peculiar to the Novena of Pentecost. As in a great *“Upper Room”*, open to the sky, the Croatian families gathered in prayer, invoking together the gift of the Holy Spirit. This enabled me to underline the gift of, and commitment to, communion in the Church, as well as to encourage married couples in their mission. In our day, while unfortunately the increase in separation and divorce can be seen, the fidelity of spouses has become in itself an important witness to Christ’s love that makes it possible to experience Marriage for what it is, namely, the union of a man and a woman who, with Christ’s grace, love each other and help each other throughout their lives, in joy and in suffering, in health and in sickness. The first education in faith consists precisely in witnessing this fidelity to the conjugal pact; from it, children learn without words that God is faithful, patient, respectful and generous love.

Faith in God who is Love, is transmitted primarily with the witness of a fidelity to conjugal love which is naturally expressed in love for the children, the fruit of this union. But this fidelity is impossible without the grace of God, without the support of faith and of the Holy Spirit. This is why the Virgin Mary never ceases to intercede with her Son so that—as the wedding at Cana—he may continually replenish the gift to the married couple of *“good wine”*, that is of his grace which enables them to live as *“one flesh”* in the different stages and situations of life.

The Vigil with the young people fitted very well into this context of great attention to the family. It was held on Saturday evening in Jelačić Square, the heart of the city of Zagreb.

There I was able to meet the new generation of Croats and I perceived the full force of their youthful faith, enlivened by a great impetus towards life and its meaning, towards good, towards freedom, in other words towards God. It was beautiful and moving to hear these young people singing with joy and enthusiasm, and then, in the moments of listening and praying, to see them meditating in profound silence! I repeated to them the question that Jesus asked his first disciples: “What do you seek?” (Jn 1:38), but I told them that God looks for them first and even before they themselves seek him. This is the joy of faith: discovering that God loves us first! It is a discovery which always keeps us as disciples, and therefore ever young in spirit! This mystery, during the Vigil, was experienced in the prayer of Eucharistic adoration: in silence, our being “together in Christ” found its fullness. Thus my invitation to follow Jesus was an echo of the Word that he himself addresses to the hearts of the young.

Another moment we might say, of the “Upper Room” was the celebration of Vespers in the Cathedral with the bishops, priests, religious and young people studying in the Seminaries and in the Novitiates. Here too, in a particular way, we experienced our being “family” as an ecclesial community. The monumental tomb of Bl. Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, Bishop and Martyr, is located in the Cathedral of Zagreb. In Christ’s name he courageously opposed first the abuses of Nazism and Fascism and later, those of the Communist regime. He was imprisoned and confined to the village of his birth. Created a Cardinal by Pope Pius XII, he died in 1960 from an illness he contracted in prison. In the light of his witness, I encouraged the bishops and priests in their ministry, urging them to communion and to apostolic dynamism. I proposed anew to the consecrated men and women the beauty and radicalism of their form of life. I invited the seminarians and novices to follow joyfully Christ who has called them by name. This moment of prayer, enriched by the presence of so many brothers and sisters who have dedicated their life to the Lord, was a great comfort to me, and I pray that Croatian families may always be fertile ground for the birth of numerous holy vocations at the service of the Kingdom of God.

Another significant meeting was with the representatives of civil society, of the political, academic, cultural and business worlds, with the diplomatic corps and with the religious leaders, gathered in the National Theatre of Zagreb. In that context I had the joy of paying homage to the great Croatian cultural tradition, inseparable from its history of faith and from the living presence of the Church, which down the centuries promoted many institutions, and above all formed distinguished seekers of the truth and of the common good.

Among them I recalled in particular the Jesuit, Fr Ruder Bošković, a great scientist, the third centenary of whose birth falls this year. Once again the deepest vocation of Europe

appeared clearly to all of us: to safeguard and to renew a humanism which has Christian roots and can be described as “catholic”, that is, universal and integral. A humanism which puts at the centre the conscience of the human being, his openness to the transcendent and at the same time his historical reality, capable of inspiring political projects that are different but converge in the construction of a real democracy, founded on the ethical values rooted in human nature itself.

In looking at Europe from the viewpoint of a nation with an ancient and solid Christian tradition—which is an integral part of the European civilization—while it is preparing to enter the political Union, we felt anew the urgency of the challenge that today faces all the people of this continent: in other words, not to be afraid of God, of the God of Jesus Christ, who is Love and Truth and who takes nothing from freedom but restores it to the continent and gives it a horizon of trustworthy hope.

Dear friends, every time the Successor of Peter makes an Apostolic Journey the whole ecclesial body participates in a certain way in the dynamism of communion and mission proper to his ministry. I thank all those who have accompanied and sustained me with prayers, ensuring the success of my Pastoral Visit. Now, as we thank the Lord for this great gift, let us ask him, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Croats, that all I have been able to sow may bear abundant fruit, for Croatian families, for the entire nation and for the whole of Europe.

## **Apostolic Journey to Madrid**

*24 August 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to return my thoughts and my heart to the extraordinary days I spent in Madrid for the 26th World Youth Day. As you know it was a stirring ecclesial event; about two million young people from all the continents lived with joy an overwhelming experience of brotherhood, of encounter with the Lord, of sharing and of growth in faith: a true cascade of light. I thank God for this precious gift, which promises hope for the Church's future: young people with a strong and sincere desire to root their life in Christ, to keep firm in faith, to walk together in the Church. My thanks to all who worked generously for this Day: the Cardinal Archbishop of Madrid, his Auxiliaries, the other Bishops of Spain and of other parts of the world, the Pontifical Council for the Laity, the priests, men and women religious and lay people.

I renew my gratitude to the Spanish authorities, to the institutions and associations, to the volunteers and to all who offered the support of their prayers. I cannot forget the warm welcome I received from Their Majesties the King and Queen of Spain, as well as from the entire country.

I cannot of course describe in a few words the most intense moments that we experienced. I am thinking of the unrestrained enthusiasm with which the young people received me on the first day in the Plaza de Cibeles, of their words of expectation, their strong desire to turn to the deepest truth and to be rooted in it, that truth which God has granted us to know in Christ.

At the imposing Monastery of El Escorial, rich in history, spirituality and culture, I met the young women religious and young university professors. I reminded the former, the young women religious, of the beauty of their vocation lived with fidelity and of the importance of their apostolic service and their prophetic witness. Moreover, the impression of their enthusiasm, of their young faith, full of courage for the future and of the readiness to serve humanity in this way lives on within me.

I reminded the professors that they should be true formators of the new generations, guiding them in their search for truth not only with words but also with their life, knowing that the Truth is Christ himself. In finding Christ we find the truth. In the evening, during the celebration of the Way of the Cross, a variegated multitude of young people relived the scenes of Christ's passion and death with intense involvement: the Cross of Christ gives far more than it demands; it gives everything because it leads us to God.

The following day there was Holy Mass with the seminarians in the Cathedral of de la Almudena in Madrid, young men who want to be rooted in Christ in order some day to make him present as his ministers. I hope that vocations to the priesthood will increase! Among those present, more than a few had heard the Lord's call precisely during previous Youth Days; I am sure that in Madrid too the Lord knocked at the door of the heart of many young men so that they might follow him generously in the priestly ministry or in the religious life.

The visit to a Centre for differently abled young people permitted me to see the great respect and love that is felt for every person and it gave me the opportunity to thank the thousands of volunteers who silently bear witness to the Gospel of charity and life. The Prayer Vigil in the evening and the great concluding Eucharistic celebration the following day were two very intense moments: in the evening a multitude of young people celebrating, not in the least discouraged by the wind and rain, knelt in silent adoration of

Christ present in the Eucharist, to praise him, to thank him, to ask him for help and enlightenment; and then, on Sunday, the young people expressed their exuberance and joy in celebrating the Lord in the word and in the Eucharist, to insert themselves increasingly in him and to strengthen their faith and their life as Christians. I met the volunteers at the end in an atmosphere of enthusiasm and thanked them for their generosity and, with the Farewell Ceremony, I left the country bearing these days in my heart as a great gift.

Dear friends, the Madrid Meeting was a wonderful expression of faith for Spain and for the world first of all. For the multitude of youth, who came from every corner of the earth it was a special opportunity to reflect, to take part in dialogue, to exchange positive experiences with each other and above all, to pray together and renew the commitment to root their own life in Christ, a faithful Friend.

I am sure that they are returning home firmly resolved to be the leaven in the mass, bringing the hope that is born from faith. For my part, I continue to accompany them with my prayers, so that they will be faithful to the commitments they have taken on. I entrust the fruits of this Day to the motherly intercession of Mary.

And I would now like to announce the themes of the upcoming World Youth Days. The theme for the Day next year, which will be celebrated in the individual dioceses will be: “Rejoice in the Lord always”, from the Letter to the Philippians (4:4); whereas for the World Youth Day 2013 in Rio de Janeiro, the theme will be Jesus’ mandate: “Go and make disciples of all nations!” (cf. Mt 28:19). From this moment I entrust the preparation for these very important events to the prayers of all. Many thanks.

## **Apostolic Journey to Germany**

*28 September 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As you know, from Thursday to Sunday last I made a Pastoral Visit to Germany; I am therefore glad, as usual, to take the opportunity of today’s Audience to review with you the marvellous full days I spent in my homeland. I travelled through Germany from north to south, from east to west: from the capital Berlin to Erfurt and Eichsfeld and, lastly, to the city of Freiburg, not far from the boundaries with France and Switzerland.

I thank the Lord first of all for giving me the possibility to meet with the people and to speak about God, to pray together and to strengthen my brothers and sisters in the faith, complying with the special mandate that the Lord entrusted to Peter and to his



Successors. This Visit, which took place under the motto: “Where God is, there is a future”, was truly a great celebration of faith in the various meetings and conversations, in the ceremonies, especially in the solemn Masses with the People of God. These moments were a precious gift which enabled us to perceive anew that it is God who gives our life the most profound meaning, true fullness, and indeed that he alone gives a future to us, one and all.

With profound gratitude I recall the warm and enthusiastic welcome as well as the attention and affection I was shown in the various places I visited. I cordially thank the German Bishops, especially those of the dioceses which offered me hospitality, for their invitation and for all they did, together with so many collaborators, to prepare this Journey. My heartfelt thanks go likewise to the Federal President and to all the political and civil authorities, at the federal and regional levels. I am deeply grateful to all who contributed in various ways to the success of the Visit, and especially to the many volunteers. Thus it was a great gift for me and for all of us and awakened joy, hope, and a new impulse of faith and commitment for the future.

In Berlin, the capital, the Federal President welcomed me at his residence and greeted me in his name and in the name of my compatriot, expressing the esteem and affection for a Pope from Germany. I outlined a brief thought on the reciprocal relationship between religion and freedom, remembering a sentence of the great bishop and social reformer: Wilhelm von Ketteler: “Just as religion has need of freedom, so also freedom has need of religion”.

I very willingly accepted the invitation to go to the *Bundestag*, which was certainly one of the most important events on my itinerary. For the first time ever a Pope addressed members of the German Parliament. On this occasion I wanted to explain the foundations of law and of the free state of law, that is, the measure of every law inscribed by the Creator in the very being of his creation. Hence it is necessary to broaden our conception of nature, understanding it not only as a collection of functions but beyond this as the language of the Creator to help us to distinguish between good and evil. I then had a meeting with some representatives of Germany’s Jewish community. Recalling our common roots in faith in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, we highlighted the results obtained so far in the dialogue between the Catholic Church and Judaism in Germany. I was likewise able to meet several members of the Muslim community, and to agree with them on the importance of religious freedom for humanity’s peaceful development.

Holy Mass in the Olympic Stadium in Berlin at the end of the first day of my Visit was one of the important liturgical celebrations that enabled me to pray together with the

faithful and to encourage them in their faith. I was glad to see the participation of so many people! At that festive and impressive moment we meditated on the Gospel image of the vine and the branches, namely on the importance—for our personal life as believers and for our being Church, his mystical Body—of being united to Christ.

The second stop on my Visit was Thuringia. Germany, and Thuringia in particular, is the land of the Protestant Reformation. From the very outset, therefore, I ardently desired to give special importance to ecumenism in the framework of this Journey; I firmly hoped for an ecumenical experience in Erfurt, for it was in this very city that Martin Luther entered the Augustinian community and was ordained a priest. I was therefore deeply cheered by the meeting with the members of the Council of the Evangelical Church in Germany and by the ecumenical event in the former Augustinian Convent. It was a cordial meeting which, in dialogue and prayer, brought us more deeply to Christ. We saw once again how important our common witness to faith in Jesus Christ is in today's world, which all too often takes no notice of God or is not interested in him. Our common effort on the way towards full unity is essential, but let us always be well aware that we ourselves can “make” neither faith nor the unity we so deeply long for. A faith created by ourselves has no value, and true unity is indeed a gift of the Lord, who always prayed and still prays for the unity of his disciples. Christ alone can bestow this unity upon us and we will be ever more united to the extent that we turn to him and let ourselves be transformed by him.

A particularly emotional moment for me was the celebration of Marian Vespers outside the Shrine of Etzelsbach, where I was welcomed by a multitude of pilgrims. As a young man I had heard about the Eichsfeld region—a strip of land that had always remained Catholic throughout the various ups and downs of history—and of its inhabitants who courageously withstood the dictatorships of Nazism and Communism. So I was very pleased to be visiting Eichsfeld and its people on a pilgrimage to the miraculous image of Our Lady of Sorrows of Etzelsbach, where for centuries the faithful have entrusted to Mary their petitions, preoccupations and sufferings, receiving comfort, graces and blessings. Equally moving was the Mass celebrated in Erfurt's magnificent cathedral square.

In recalling the Patron Saints of Thuringia—St Elizabeth, St Boniface and St Kilian—and the luminous example of the faithful who witnessed to the Gospel during the totalitarian regimes, I invited the faithful to be the saints of today, credible witnesses of Christ, and to contribute to building our society. In fact it has always been the Saints and people permeated by love for Christ to have truly transformed the world. My brief meeting with Mons. Hermann Scheipers, the last living German priest to have survived the concentration camp of Dachau, was deeply moving. In Erfurt, in addition, I had the

opportunity to meet several victims of sex abuse perpetrated by religious. I wanted to assure these victims of my regret and of my closeness in their suffering.

The last stage of the Journey took me to south-west Germany, to the Archdiocese of Freiburg. The inhabitants of this beautiful city, the archdiocesan faithful and the many pilgrims from neighbouring Switzerland and France and from other countries gave me an especially festive welcome. I also felt this at the prayer vigil with thousands of young people. I was glad to see that faith in my German homeland has a youthful face, that it is vibrant and has a future. In the evocative Rite of Light I passed on to the young people the flame of the Paschal candle, a symbol of the light which is Christ, urging them: "You are the light of the world". I repeated to them that the Pope trusts in the active collaboration of the young; with Christ's grace, they are able to bring the flame of God's love to the world.

Then the meeting with the seminarians at the Seminary of Freiburg was unique. In a certain sense as a response to the touching letter they had sent me a few weeks earlier, I wanted to show these young men the beauty and greatness of their call from the Lord and to offer them some help so that they might continue on the path of the "sequela" with joy and in deep communion with Christ. Again at the seminary I was also able to meet in a brotherly atmosphere several representatives of the Orthodox and Oriental Orthodox Churches, to whom we Catholics feel very close. And the common duty to be a leaven for the renewal of our society stems from this broad communion itself. A friendly meeting with representatives of the German Catholic laity concluded the series of events at the seminary.

The great celebration of the Sunday Eucharist at the tourist Airport of Freiburg was another highpoint of my Pastoral Visit and the opportunity to thank all those who are working hard in the various spheres of ecclesial life, especially the numerous volunteers and those who collaborate in charitable projects. It is they who make possible the many forms of assistance that the German Church offers to the universal Church, especially in mission lands. I also mentioned that their invaluable service will always be fruitful when it derives from an authentic and living faith, in union with the Bishops and the Pope, in union with the Church. Lastly, before returning, I spoke to about 1,000 Catholics committed to the Church and to society, suggesting some ideas for the Church's action in a secularized society, urging them to be free from material and political commitments in order to be more transparent to God.

Dear brothers and sisters, this Apostolic Journey in Germany gave me a favourable opportunity to meet the faithful of my homeland, Germany, to strengthen them in faith, hope and love, and to share with them the joy of being Catholic. Yet my Message was

addressed to the entire German nation, to invite them all to look with trust to the future. It is true, “Where God is, there is a future”. I thank once again all those who made this Visit possible and all who have accompanied me with their prayers. May the Lord bless the People of God in Germany, and may he bless you all. Many thanks.

## **Apostolic Journey to Benin**

*23 November 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I still retain vivid impressions of my recent Apostolic Journey to Benin, on which I would like to reflect today. Thanksgiving to the Lord spontaneously wells up in my mind: in his Providence he wanted me to return to Africa, for the second time as successor of Peter, on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the beginning of the evangelization of Benin and to sign and officially consign the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus* to the African ecclesial communities.

In this important document, after reflecting on the analyses and proposals that resulted from the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops that was held in the Vatican in October 2009, I wanted to offer some guidelines for pastoral action on the great continent of Africa. At the same time I wished to pay homage and to pray at the tomb of an illustrious son of Benin and of Africa who was also a great man of the Church, the unforgettable Cardinal Bernardin Gantin. His venerable memory is more alive than ever in his own country, which considers him a Father of the homeland and throughout the continent.

Today I would like to express once again my most heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed to organizing this pilgrimage. First of all I am deeply grateful to the President of the Republic who, with great courtesy, offered me his cordial greeting and that of the entire country; to the Archbishop of Cotonou and to my other venerable Brothers in the Episcopate who welcomed me with affection. I also thank the priests, men and women religious, deacons, catechists and innumerable brothers and sisters who accompanied me with such great faith and warmth during these days of grace. Together we lived a moving experience of faith and a renewed encounter with the living Jesus Christ, in the context of the 150th anniversary of the evangelization of Benin.

I laid the fruit of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops at the feet of the Blessed Virgin, venerated in particular at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception in Ouidah. Following Mary's example, the Church in Africa accepted the

Good News of the Gospel and brought forth many people in the faith. Henceforth the Christian communities of Africa—as both the theme of the Synod and the motto of my Apostolic Journey emphasized—are called to renew themselves in faith to be increasingly at the service of reconciliation, justice and peace. They are invited to be reconciled with their inner selves, to become joyful instruments of divine mercy, each one contributing his own spiritual and material riches to the common commitment.

This spirit of reconciliation is also indispensable, of course, at the civic level and requires openness to hope, which in addition must inspire the socio-political and economic life of the continent, as I had the opportunity to say at the meeting with the political institutions, the Diplomatic Corps and the representatives of the religions. On this occasion I wished to put the accent precisely on hope, since hope must motivate life to the continent's journey, pointing out the ardent desire for freedom and justice, which, especially in recent months, brings life to the hearts of numerous African peoples. Then I stressed the need to build a society in which relations between different religions and ethnic groups are characterized by dialogue and harmony. I invited everyone to be true sowers of hope in every situation and in every walk of life.

Christians by nature are people of hope who cannot neglect their own brothers and sisters. I also recalled this truth to the immense crowd gathered for the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist in Friendship Stadium, Cotonou. This Sunday Mass was an extraordinary moment of prayer and festivity in which thousands of the faithful of Benin and from other African countries took part, from the most elderly to the youngest: a marvellous testimony of how faith succeeds in bringing generations together and can respond to the challenges of every season of life.

During this moving and solemn celebration, I consigned to the Presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of Africa the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Africae Munus*—which I had signed the day before in Ouidah—destined for the bishops, priests, men and women religious, catechists and lay people of the entire African continent. In entrusting to them the fruit of the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, I asked them to meditate upon it attentively and to live it to the full in order to respond effectively to the demanding evangelizing mission of the Church, a pilgrim in Africa in the third millennium. In this important text every member of the faithful will find fundamental guidelines that will direct and encourage on her journey the Church in Africa which is called to be, increasingly, the “salt of the earth” and the “light of the world” (Mt 5:13–14).

I addressed an appeal to everyone to be tireless builders of communion, peace and solidarity, in order to cooperate in bringing about God's plan of salvation for humanity. The Africans have responded enthusiastically to the Pope's invitation and, on their faces,

in their ardent faith, in their convinced adherence to the Gospel of life, I once again recognized comforting signs of hope for the great continent of Africa.

I also felt these signs tangibly at the meeting with children and with the world of suffering. In the parish Church of St Rita I truly sampled the joy of life, the cheerfulness and enthusiasm of the new generations who constitute Africa's future. I pointed out to the festive throngs of children—one of the continent's many resources and riches, St Kizito—a Ugandan boy killed because he wanted to live in accordance with the Gospel, and I urged each one to witness to Jesus among his peers.

The Visit to the Foyer “Paix et Joie”, run by Mother Teresa's Missionaries of Charity, enabled me to experience a deeply moving moment in meeting abandoned and sick children and permitted me to see in practice that love and solidarity can make the strength and affection of the risen Christ present in weakness.

The joy and apostolic fervour I found among the priests, religious, seminarians and lay people, gathered in large numbers, is a sign of sure hope for the future of the Church in Benin. I urged all to have an authentic, lively faith and a Christian life characterized by the practice of the virtues and I encouraged each one to live his or her respective mission in the Church with fidelity to the teachings of the Magisterium, in communion with each other and with the pastors, pointing out the way of holiness especially to priests, in the knowledge that the ministry is not merely a social function but brings God to man and man to God.

The meeting with the Episcopate of Benin was a moment of intense communion in order to reflect in particular on the origin of the Gospel proclamation in their country undertaken by missionaries who generously gave their lives—sometimes heroically—so that God's love may be proclaimed to all.

I invited the bishops to put into practice pastoral initiatives to inspire in families, in parishes, in the communities and in ecclesial movements a constant rediscovery of Sacred Scripture as a source of spiritual renewal and an opportunity for deepening their faith.

From this renewed approach to the word of God and from the rediscovery of their own baptism, the lay faithful will find the strength to witness to their faith in Christ and in his Gospel in their daily life. In this crucial phase for the whole continent the Church in Africa, with her commitment to serving the Gospel and with the courageous witness of effective solidarity can play the lead in a new season of hope.

In Africa I saw spontaneity in the *yes* to life, a freshness of the religious sense and of hope, a perception of reality in its totality with God and not reduced to positivism which, in the end, extinguishes hope. All this shows that in this continent there is a reserve of life and vitality for the future, on which we can count, on which the Church can count.

My journey has also been an important appeal to Africa to direct its every effort to announcing the Gospel to those who do not yet know it. It is a renewed commitment to evangelization to which every baptized person is called, promoting reconciliation, justice and peace.

To Mary, Mother of the Church and Our Lady of Africa, I entrust those whom I have had the opportunity to meet on my unforgettable Apostolic Journey. I commend the Church in Africa to her. May the motherly intercession of Mary “whose heart is always inclined to God’s will, sustain every effort at conversion; may she consolidate every initiative of reconciliation and strengthen every endeavour for peace in a world which hungers and thirsts for justice” (*Africae Munus*, n. 175). Many thanks.

## **Apostolic Journey to Mexico and to the Republic of Cuba (Easter Triduum 2012)**

*4 April 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I still feel the strong emotion my recent Apostolic Visit to Mexico and Cuba aroused in me, which I would like to recall today. Gratitude to the Lord rises spontaneously from my soul: in his Providence, he allowed me to travel for the first time as Successor of Peter to these two countries, which preserve an indelible memory of Bl. John Paul II’s visits. The bicentennial of the Independence of Mexico and of other Latin American countries, the 20th anniversary of diplomatic relations between Mexico and the Holy See and the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre in the Republic of Cuba were the occasion for my pilgrimage. With it in spirit, I wished to embrace the entire continent, inviting everyone to live together in hope and the concrete engagement to walk united towards a better future. I am grateful to the Presidents of Mexico and Cuba, who courteously welcomed me, as well as to the other Authorities. I wholeheartedly thank the Archbishops of León, Santiago de Cuba and Havana and the other venerable

Brothers in the Episcopate, who welcomed me with great affection, as well as their collaborators and everyone who worked so generously for my Pastoral Visit. They were unforgettable days of joy and hope, which will remain impressed in my heart!

The first stop was León, in the State of Guanajuato, the geographical centre of Mexico. There, a large, festive crowd offered me an extraordinary and lively reception, as a sign of the warm embrace of an entire people. Starting from the welcome ceremony, I was able to recognize the faith and the warmth of the priests, the consecrated people and the lay faithful. In the presence of the leaders of various institutions, of numerous Bishops and of the representatives of society, I recalled the necessity of recognizing and protecting the fundamental rights of the human person—among which religious freedom stands out—assuring my closeness to everyone suffering because of social wounds, old and new conflicts, corruption and violence. I recall with profound gratitude the countless people lining the streets, who accompanied me with enthusiasm. In those hands extended in a sign of greeting and affection, in those happy faces, in those cries of joy I saw the tenacious hope of Mexican Christians, a hope which has remained alight in their hearts despite the difficult moments of violence, which I did not fail to deplore and to whose victims I turned a heart-felt thought, being able to comfort some in person. On that same day I encountered a great number of children and adolescents, who are the future of the nation and of the Church. Their inexhaustible exuberance expressed in resounding song and music, as well as their looks and gestures, were evidence of the strong desire of all the children of Mexico, Latin America and the Caribbean to be able to live in peace, in serenity and harmony, in a more just and reconciled society.

The disciples of the Lord should strive to increase the joy of being Christian and the joy of belonging to the Church. The energy to serve Christ in situations that are difficult and painful is born from this joy. I recalled this truth to the enormous crowd assembled for the Sunday Eucharistic celebration in the Bicentennial Park in León. I exhorted all to trust in the goodness of Almighty God who can change unbearable and dark situations from within, from the heart. The Mexicans responded with their ardent faith and with their convinced adherence to the Gospel I recognized yet again comforting signs of hope for the continent. The last event of my Visit in Mexico, still in León, was the celebration



of Vespers in the Cathedral of Our Lady of Light, with the Mexican Bishops and the representatives of the Episcopates of America. I expressed my closeness to their commitment in the face of various challenges and difficulties, and my gratitude to those who spread the Gospel in complex situations, often not without restrictions. I encouraged them to be zealous Pastors and reliable guides, inspiring everywhere sincere communion and cordial adherence to the Church's teaching. I then left the beloved country of Mexico where I experienced a special devotion and affection for the Vicar of Christ. Before leaving, I urged the Mexican people to remain faithful to the Lord and to his Church, firmly anchored to their own Christian roots.

On the following day, the second part of my Apostolic Visit began with my arrival in Cuba, where I went above all in order to support the mission of the Catholic Church, engaged in proclaiming the Gospel with joy, despite the lack of means and the difficulties yet to be overcome, so that religion may carry out its proper spiritual and educational service in the public sector of society. I wished to underline this by going to Santiago de Cuba, the second city of the Island, without failing to highlight the good relations which exist between the State and the Holy See, with the aim of serving the lively and constructive presence of the local Church. I also assured them that the Pope carries in his heart the preoccupations and the aspirations of all Cubans, especially those who suffer through the restriction of freedom.

The first Holy Mass which I had the joy of celebrating on Cuban soil took place in the context of the 400th anniversary of the discovery of the image of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, Patroness of Cuba. It was an intensely strong spiritual moment, with the attentive and prayerful participation of thousands of people, the sign of a Church which is emerging from situations which were not easy, but with a lively witness to charity and to an active presence in the life of the people. I invited the Cuban Catholics, together with the entire population, who hope for a better future, to give new vigour to their faith and to contribute with the courage of forgiveness and understanding to the construction of an open and renewed society, where there is ever more space for God, because, when God is left out, the world turns into an inhospitable place for man. Before leaving Santiago de Cuba I went to the Shrine of Our Lady of Charity of El Cobre, so dear to the Cuban people. The pilgrimage of the image of Our Lady of Charity excited great

spiritual enthusiasm in the families of the Island, making it a significant event of new evangelization and an opportunity for rediscovering the faith. To the Holy Virgin I commended, above all, young Cubans and those who are suffering.

The second stop in Cuba was Havana, capital of the Island. Young people, in particular, were the principal protagonists of the exuberant welcome on my way to the Nunciature, where I had the opportunity to converse with the Bishops of the Country to discuss the challenges which the Cuban Church is called to face, in the awareness that the people are looking to her with growing trust. The following day I presided at Holy Mass in the principal square of Havana, packed with people. I reminded everyone that Cuba and the world need change, but change will only come if each person opens to the entire truth about man, an indispensable presupposition for reaching freedom, and is ready to sow reconciliation and brotherhood around him/herself, basing his or her own life on Jesus Christ. He alone can disperse the shadows of error, helping us to defeat evil and everything which oppresses us. I wished also to repeat that the Church does not ask for privileges, but for the right to proclaim and celebrate the faith also in public, carrying the Gospel message of hope and peace to every area of society. In expressing my appreciation for the steps already completed in this direction by the Cuban Authorities, I underlined that it is necessary to continue along this path to reach full religious freedom.

Upon leaving Cuba, tens of thousands of Cubans lined the street to wish me goodbye, despite the heavy rain. At the departure ceremony I recalled that at the present time the various members of Cuban society are called to make a sincere effort to cooperate and dialogue patient for the good of the country. In this perspective, my presence on the Island, as a witness of Jesus Christ, intended to encourage people to open the gates of their heart to him, who is the source of hope and strength, to increase goodness. For this reason I said goodbye to the Cubans, exhorting them to rekindle the faith of their fathers and to build a better future.

This Visit to Mexico and to Cuba has had, thanks be to God, the desired pastoral success. May the Mexican and Cuban peoples draw from it abundant fruits to build a future of peace and of fraternity in ecclesial communion and evangelical courage.

Dear friends, tomorrow afternoon, with the Holy Mass in *Coena Domini*, we will enter the Easter Triduum, summit of the entire Liturgical Year, to celebrate the central Mystery of the faith: the Passion, Death and Resurrection of Christ. In the Gospel of St John, this culminating moment of Jesus' mission is called his "hour", which begins with the Last Supper. The Evangelist introduces it in this way: "Before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour had come to depart out from this world to the Father, having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end" (Jn 13:1). Jesus' whole life had been directed to this hour, characterized by two aspects which illuminate one another: it is the hour of the "passage" (*metabasis*) and it is the hour of the "love (*agape*) to the end". In fact, it is precisely the divine love, the Spirit with which Jesus is overflowing, which makes Jesus too "pass" through the abyss of evil and death and makes him emerge into the new "space" of the resurrection. It is *agape*, love, which effects this transformation, so that Jesus passes beyond the limits of the human condition marked by sin and surpasses the barrier which keeps man prisoner, separated from God and from eternal life. Participating with faith in the liturgical celebrations of the Paschal Triduum, we are invited to live this transformation realized by *agape*. Each of us has been loved by Jesus "to the end", that is, to the complete gift of himself on the Cross, when he cried: "It is finished!" (Jn 19:30). Let us allow ourselves to be touched by this love, let us allow ourselves to be transformed, so that the resurrection may truly take place in us. I invite you, therefore, to live the Paschal Triduum intensely and I wish you all a Holy Easter! Thank you.

## **Apostolic Journey to the United Kingdom**

*22 September 2010*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to say more about my Apostolic Journey to the United Kingdom which God granted me to make a few days ago. It was an official Visit and at the same time a Pilgrimage to the heart of the past and of the present of a people rich in culture and faith, as is the British people. It was an historic event that marked a new and important phase in the long and complex relations between those peoples and the Holy See. The main purpose of the Visit was to proclaim blessed Cardinal John Henry Newman, one of the greatest Englishmen in recent times, an outstanding theologian and man of the Church. In fact, the beatification ceremony was the culmination of the Apostolic Journey, whose

theme was inspired by the motto Blessed Newman chose on being created a Cardinal: “Heart speaks unto heart”. And in the four busy and very beautiful days I spent in this noble land I had the great joy of speaking to the hearts of the inhabitants of the United Kingdom and they spoke to mine, especially with their presence and with the testimony of their faith. Indeed I could see how strong the Christian heritage still is and how active it still is in social life at every level. British hearts and British lives are open to the reality of God and there are numerous expressions of religious feeling that my Visit has made even more visible.

From the very first day of my stay in the United Kingdom and throughout my Visit I met with a warm welcome from the Authorities, from the representatives of the various social realities and of the different religious confessions and, especially, from the common people. I am thinking in particular of the faithful of the Catholic Community and their Pastors who, in spite of being a minority in the country, are widely appreciated, esteemed and committed to the joyous proclamation of Jesus Christ, making the Lord shine out and making themselves his voice, especially among the lowliest. To all I renew the expression of my deep gratitude for the enthusiasm shown and for the praiseworthy diligence with which they strove for the success of my Visit, whose memory I shall always cherish in my heart.

The first Meeting was in Edinburgh with Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II, who, together with her Consort, the Duke of Edinburgh, welcomed me with great courtesy on behalf of the entire British people. It was a very cordial meeting, characterized by the sharing of several profound concerns for the well-being of the world’s peoples and for the role of the Christian values in society. In Scotland’s historic capital I was able to admire the beauties of art, the testimony of a rich tradition with profound Christian roots. I referred to this in my Discourse to Her Majesty and to the Authorities present, recalling that the Christian message has become an integral part of the language, thought and culture of the peoples of those Islands. I also spoke of the role that Great Britain has had and has on the international scene, mentioning the importance of the steps taken for a just and lasting peace in Northern Ireland.

The joyful, festive atmosphere created by the young people and children gladdened the visit to Edinburgh. Then, having gone on to Glasgow, a city embellished with enchanting parks, I presided at the first Holy Mass of the Journey in Bellahouston Park. It was an immensely spiritual moment, very important for the Catholics of the country, given also that the Feast of St Ninian, the first evangelizer of Scotland, was celebrated on that day. At this liturgical assembly, gathered in attentive and participatory prayer, whose solemnity was deepened by the traditional melodies and involving hymns, I mentioned the importance of the evangelization of culture, especially in our epoch in which a

pervasive relativism threatens to cloud the unchangeable truth about the nature of the human being.

On the second day, I began my Visit in London. Here I met first the world of Catholic education which plays an important role in the country's educational system. In an authentic family atmosphere I spoke to the teachers, recalling the importance of faith in the formation of mature and responsible citizens. To the numerous adolescents and young people, who greeted me with pleasure and enthusiasm, I proposed that they should not follow limited objectives contenting themselves with accomodating decisions but to aim for something higher, in other words the quest for true happiness which is found only in God. At the next Meeting this time with the leaders of other religions most widely represented in the United Kingdom, I recalled the inevitable need for sincere dialogue which, if it is to be totally fruitful, requires respect for the principle of reciprocity. At the same time, I highlighted the search for the sacred as the ground common to all religions on which to consolidate friendship, trust and collaboration.

The fraternal Visit to the Archbishop of Canterbury afforded the opportunity to reaffirm the common commitment to bear witness to the Christian message that unites Catholics and Anglicans. One of the most significant moments of the Apostolic Journey followed the meeting in the Great Hall of the British Parliament with institutional, political, diplomatic, academic and religious figures, and exponents of the worlds of culture and business. In that most prestigious place, I emphasized that legislators, must never consider religion be a problem to be solved, but on the contrary a factor that makes a vital contribution to the progress of history and to the public debate of the nation, in particular by recalling the essential importance of an ethical foundation for taking decisions in the various social milieus.

In that same solemn atmosphere, I then went to Westminster Abbey. It was the first time that a Successor of Peter has entered that place of worship which symbolizes the very ancient Christian roots of the country. The recitation of Evening Prayer, together with the different Christian communities of the United Kingdom, was an important moment in relations between the Catholic Community and the Anglican Communion. When we venerated St Edward the Confessor together at his tomb, while the choir sang "*Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*", we all praised God who is leading us on the path to full unity.

On Saturday morning, my Appointment with the Prime Minister introduced the series of my Meetings with the most important spokespeople of the British political world. It was followed by the Eucharistic celebration in Westminster Cathedral, dedicated to the Most Precious Blood of Our Lord. This was an extraordinary moment of faith and prayer that also highlighted the rich and precious tradition of "Roman" and "English" liturgical

music in which the various ecclesial dignitaries took part, spiritually united to the multitude of believers in the course of the long Christian history of this land. I felt great joy in meeting a large number of young people who were taking part in Holy Mass outside the Cathedral. Their presence charged with enthusiasm and attentive expectation, showed at once their desire to be the protagonists of a new season of courageous witness, effective solidarity and generous commitment to the service of the Gospel.

At the Apostolic Nunciature I met with several of the victims of abuse by members of the clergy and by religious. It was an intensely emotional and also prayerful moment. Shortly afterwards, I also met with a group of professionals and volunteers who are responsible for the protection of children and young people in ecclesial contexts, a particularly important aspect that is part of the Church's pastoral commitment. I thanked them and encouraged them to continue their work that fits into the Church's long tradition of attention to respect, education and the formation of the new generations. Still in London, I then visited the home for the elderly run by the Little Sisters of the Poor with the invaluable contribution of many nurses and volunteers. This structure that takes in elderly people is a sign of the great esteem the Church has always had for the elderly, as well as an expression of British Catholics' commitment to respect any life without any reservation on account of age or condition.

As I was saying, the crowning point of my Visit to the United Kingdom was the Beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, an outstanding son of England. It was preceded and prepared for by a special Prayer Vigil that took place on Saturday evening in Hyde Park, London, in an atmosphere of profound recollection. To the multitudes of the faithful, especially young people, I chose to present anew the luminous figure of Cardinal Newman, an intellectual and a believer, whose basic spiritual message testifies that the path to knowledge is not withdrawal into "self", but openness, conversion and obedience to the One who is the Way, the Truth and the Life. The rite of Beatification took place in Birmingham at the solemn Eucharistic celebration on Sunday, in the presence of a great throng from the whole of Great Britain and Ireland and from many other countries. This moving event brought even more into the limelight a scholar of great stature, an outstanding writer and poet, a wise man of God, whose thought illumined many consciences and still today exerts an extraordinary fascination. May believers and ecclesial communities in the United Kingdom in particular draw inspiration from him so that, in our day too, this noble land may continue to produce abundant fruits of gospel life.

The Meetings with the Bishops' Conference of England and Wales and with that of Scotland ended a day of great festivity and intense communion of hearts for the Catholic community in Great Britain.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, on this Visit to the United Kingdom, as always, I wanted first and foremost to support the Catholic Community, encouraging it to work strenuously to defend the immutable moral truths which, taken up, illuminated and strengthened by the Gospel are at the root of a truly human, just and free society. I also wished to speak to the hearts of all the inhabitants of the United Kingdom, excluding no one, of the true reality of man, of his deepest needs, of his ultimate destiny. In addressing the citizens of that country, a crossroads of culture and of the world economy, I kept in mind the entire West, conversing with the intellect of this civilization and communicating the unfading newness of the Gospel in which it is steeped. This Apostolic Journey strengthened a deep conviction within me: the ancient nations of Europe have a Christian soul, which is one with the "genius" and history of the respective peoples, and the Church never stops working to keep this spiritual and cultural tradition ceaselessly alive.*

Blessed John Henry Newman, whose figure and writings still preserve a remarkable timeliness, deserves to be known by all. He supports the resolutions and efforts of Christians to spread everywhere they go the fragrance of Christ, so that their whole life and being may be only his radiance, as he wrote wisely in his booklet *Radiating Christ*.

## **Apostolic Visit to the Czech Republic**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In accordance with the custom after international Apostolic Journeys, I take the opportunity of today's General Audience to speak of the pilgrimage I made a few days ago to the Czech Republic. I do so first of all as an act of thanksgiving to God who granted me to make this Visit and abundantly blessed it. It was a real pilgrimage and, at the same time, a mission to the heart of Europe: a pilgrimage, because for more than a millennium Bohemia and Moravia have been lands of faith and holiness; and a mission, because Europe needs to rediscover in God and in his love its firm foundation of hope. It is not by chance that the holy evangelizers of those peoples, Cyril and Methodius, are Patrons of Europe together with St Benedict. "The love of Christ is our strength": this was the motto of the Journey, an affirmation which re-echoes the faith of so many heroic witnesses of the remote and recent past I am thinking in particular of the last century but which, above all, aims to interpret the certainty of Christians today. Yes, our strength is the love of Christ! It is a strength that inspires and gives life to true revolutions, peaceful and liberating, and that sustains us in moments of crisis, permitting us to straighten up when freedom, recovered with great effort, risks losing itself, its own truth.

I met with a warm welcome. The President of the Republic, to whom I renew the expression of my gratitude, wanted to be present at various events and received me, together with my collaborators, with great cordiality at his residence, the capital's historic Castle. The entire Bishops' Conference, and in particular the Cardinal Archbishop of Prague and the Bishop of Brno, made me feel with great warmth the deep bond that binds the Czech Catholic community to the Successor of St Peter. I thank them too for having carefully prepared the liturgical celebrations. I am also grateful to all the civil and military Authorities and to all those who in various ways contributed to the success of my Visit.

The love of Christ first revealed itself in the face of a Child. In fact, on my arrival in Prague I made my first stop at the Church of Our Lady of Victory where the Infant Jesus, known precisely as the "Infant of Prague", is venerated. This image refers to the mystery of God made man, to the "close God", the foundation of our hope. Before the "Infant of Prague", I prayed for all children, for parents and for the future of the family. The true "victory" for which we ask Mary today is the victory of love and life in the family and in society!

Prague Castle, extraordinary from the historical and architectural viewpoints, suggests a further, more general reflection: its vast layout includes many monuments, scenes and institutions, almost as if it represented a *polis* in which the Cathedral and Palace, square and park, harmoniously coexist. Thus, in this same context, my Visit touched on the civil and the religious environments that are not in opposition but in harmony, while retaining their distinctiveness. Thus, addressing the Political and Civil Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps I chose to recall the indissoluble bond that must always exist between freedom and truth. One must not fear truth, because it is a friend of man and of his freedom; indeed, only in the sincere search for the true, the good and the beautiful is it really possible to offer a future to today's youth and to the generations to come. Moreover, what is it that attracts so many people to Prague if not its beauty, a beauty that is not only aesthetic but also historical and religious in the broadest human sense? Those who exercise responsibility in the political and educational fields must be able to find light in that truth which is a reflection of the Creator's eternal Wisdom; and they are personally called to bear witness to it with their lives. Only a serious commitment of intellectual and moral rectitude is worthy of the sacrifice of all those who paid the price of freedom so dearly!

A symbol of this synthesis between truth and beauty is Prague's splendid Cathedral, called after Sts Vitus, Wenceslaus and Adalbert, where the celebration of Vespers was held with the priests, religious, seminarians and lay representatives of the associations and ecclesial movements.



For the Central and Eastern European communities it is a difficult period: in addition to the consequences of the long winter of atheistic totalitarianism are the harmful effects of a certain Western secularism and consumerism. I therefore encouraged all to draw ever new energy from the Risen Lord, to be able to be a Gospel leaven in society and to involve themselves, as is already happening, in charitable activities and, especially, in the educational and scholastic fields.

I extended this message of hope founded on faith in Christ to the entire People of God during two great Eucharistic Celebrations that took place respectively in Brno, the capital of Moravia, and in Stará Boleslav, the place where St Wenceslaus, the nation's principal Patron, was martyred. Moravia immediately calls to mind Sts Cyril and Methodius, the evangelizers of the Slav peoples, and hence the inexorable power of the Gospel, flowing through history and the continents, carrying life everywhere, like a river of healing waters. Christ's words: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28) are engraved above the portal of the Cathedral of Brno. These very words rang out last Sunday in the liturgy, re-echoing the perennial voice of the Saviour, hope of the peoples, yesterday, today and forever. An eloquent sign of Christ's lordship and of his mercy is the existence of the holy Patrons of the different Christian nations, such as, precisely, Wenceslaus, a young king of Bohemia in the 10th century who was distinguished for his exemplary Christian witness and was assassinated by his brother. Wenceslaus put the Kingdom of Heaven before the fascination of earthly power and has lived on for ever in the heart of the Czech people as an example and protector in the alternating vicissitudes of history. To the numerous young people present at the Mass for St Wenceslaus, who also came from neighbouring countries, I extended the invitation to recognize Christ as the truest friend who satisfies the deepest aspirations of the human heart.

Lastly, among others, I must mention two meetings: the ecumenical gathering and the encounter with the academic community. The former, held in the Archbishop's Residence in Prague, gathered the representatives of the various Christian communities in the Czech Republic and the leader of the Jewish Community. In thinking of the history of this country, which unfortunately experienced harsh conflicts among Christians, it was a cause of deep gratitude to God to be meeting together as disciples of the one Lord to share the joy of faith and historical responsibility in the face of today's challenges. The effort to progress towards an ever fuller and more visible unity amongst us, believers in Christ, makes our common commitment to rediscovering the Christian roots of Europe stronger and more effective. The latter aspect, which my beloved Predecessor John Paul II had very much at heart, also emerged at the Meeting with university rectors and representatives of the teaching body and of the students, as well as with other important figures of the cultural world. In this context I wanted to insist upon the role of the

university institution, one of the fundamental structures of Europe, of which Prague Athenaeum is one of the oldest and most prestigious on the continent: Charles University, called after the Emperor Charles IV who founded it, together with Pope Clement VI. The university is a vital environment for society, a guarantee of freedom and development, as is shown by the fact that the so-called “Velvet Revolution” came into being precisely in university circles. Twenty years after that historic event, I proposed the idea anew of an integral human formation rooted in truth, to oppose a new dictatorship, that of relativism combined with the domination of technology. The humanistic and scientific cultures cannot be separated; on the contrary, they are the two sides of the same coin: we are once again reminded of this by the Czech Republic, the homeland of great writers such as Kafka and of the Abbot Mendel, a pioneer of modern genetics.

Dear friends, I thank the Lord because with this Visit he has granted me to meet a people and a Church with profoundly historical and religious roots and which this year is commemorating various events of lofty spiritual and social value. I renew a message of hope to my brothers and sisters in the Czech Republic and an invitation to have the courage of goodness in order to build the present and future of Europe. I entrust the fruits of my Pastoral Visit to the intercession of Mary Most Holy and of all the Saints of Bohemia and Moravia. Thank you.

## **Apostolic Journey to Santiago de Compostela and Barcelona**

*10 November 2010*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like, with you, to think back to the Apostolic Journey to Santiago de Compostela and Barcelona which I had the joy to make last Saturday and Sunday. I went there to strengthen my brethren in the faith (cf. Lk 22:32); I did so as a witness of the Risen Christ, as a sower of the hope that does not disappoint or deceive because it stems from God’s infinite love for all humanity.

My first stopover was Santiago. From the Welcome Ceremony I could feel the affection of the people of Spain for the Successor of Peter. I was truly welcomed with great enthusiasm and warmth. In this Compostelian Holy Year, I wanted to go as a pilgrim with all those who went in great numbers to that famous Shrine. I was able to visit the “House of the Apostle James the Greater”, who continues to repeat to those who come in need of grace that in Christ God came into the world to reconcile it to himself and not to blame men and women for their sins.

In the impressive Cathedral of Compostela, giving the traditional embrace to the Saint with emotion, I thought of how this gesture of welcome and friendship is also a way of expressing adherence to his word and participation in his mission. It is a strong sign of the desire to be conformed to the apostolic message. On the one hand this commits us to being faithful custodians of the Good News that the Apostles passed on, without giving in to the temptation to change it, diminish it or adapt it to suit other interests, and on the other, it transforms each one of us into tireless heralds of faith in Christ, with words and the witness of our lives in all sectors of society.

In seeing the number of pilgrims present at the solemn Holy Mass at which I had the joy of presiding in Santiago, I thought about what it is that impels so many people to leave their daily occupations to set out on the penitential journey to Compostela, a way at times long and arduous. It is the desire to reach Christ's light which they yearn for in the depths of their heart, although they are often not very good at expressing it in words.

At moments of confusion, of seeking, of difficulty, as well as the aspiration to strengthen their faith and live in a manner more consistent with it, pilgrims to Compostela embark on a profound process of conversion to Christ who took upon himself the weakness, the sin of humanity, the wretchedness of the world, taking them to where evil has no more power, where the light of goodness illuminates all things.

It is a people of silent walkers from every part of the world, who rediscover the ancient medieval and Christian tradition of the pilgrimage as they pass through small towns and cities steeped in Catholicism.

In that solemn Eucharist, experienced by so many of the faithful, present with intense participation and devotion, I asked fervently that all who go on pilgrimage to Santiago may receive the gift of becoming true witnesses of Christ, whom they have rediscovered at the crossroads of the evocative routes that lead to Compostela.

I also prayed that the pilgrims, following in the footsteps of many Saints down the ages who walked the "Way of Santiago", may continue to keep alive its genuine religious, spiritual and penitential significance, without giving in to banality, distractions or trends. This way, a grid of routes that run across vast regions forming a network throughout the Iberian Peninsular and Europe, was and continues to be a place of encounter for men and women of the most varied provenance, united in the search for faith and truth about themselves that inspires profound experiences of sharing, brotherhood and solidarity.

It is precisely faith in Christ that gives meaning to Compostela, a spiritually extraordinary place that continues to be a reference point for contemporary Europe in its new configurations and prospects.

To preserve and reinforce openness to the transcendent and likewise fruitful dialogue between faith and reason, between politics and religion, between economy and ethics, will make it possible to build a Europe which, faithful to its indispensable Christian roots, will fully respond to its own vocation and mission in the world; therefore, certain of the immense possibilities of the European Continent and confident of its future of hope, I asked Europe to be ever more open to God, thereby encouraging the prospects of an authentic and respectful encounter in solidarity the peoples and civilizations of other continents.

Then, on Sunday, in Barcelona I had the truly great joy of presiding at the Dedication of the Church of the Sagrada Família which I declared a Minor Basilica. In contemplating the grandeur and beauty of this building that invites one to lift one's gaze and one's mind to the Highest, to God, I mentioned the great religious buildings such as the cathedrals of the Middle Ages which profoundly marked the history and the traits of Europe's principal cities. That splendid work—full of religious symbols, delicate in the interlacing of its forms, fascinating in its play of light and colour—as it were an immense sculpture in stone, the result of profound faith, of the spiritual sensitivity and artistic talent of Antoni Gaudí, derives from the true sanctuary, the place of real worship, Heaven itself, which Christ entered to appear before God on our behalf (cf. Heb 9:24).

In that magnificent church the brilliant architect was able to portray marvelously the mystery of the Church, in which the faithful become incorporated by Baptism into living stones for the building of a spiritual edifice (cf. 1 Pt 2:5). Gaudí conceived of and projected the Church of the Holy Family as a profound catechesis on Jesus Christ.

In Barcelona I also visited the “Nen Déu” Home, a charitable work started over 100 years ago, very closely connected with the Archdiocese. Here, children and young people with certain developmental challenges are cared for in a professional way and with love. Their lives are precious in God's eyes and are a constant invitation to us to emerge from our selfishness. In that home I shared in the joy and the deep and unconditional love of the Franciscan Sisters of the Sacred Hearts, the generous work of doctors, educators and of so many other professionals and volunteers who work in this Institution with praiseworthy dedication. I also blessed the first stone of a new Residence that will be part of this same institution, where everything speaks of charity, of respect for the person and his or her dignity and of deep joy, because human beings are valuable for what they are and not only for what they do.

While I was in Barcelona, I prayed intensely for families, the vital cells and hope of society and of the Church. I also remembered those who are suffering, especially in these times of serious financial difficulty. At the same time, I kept in mind the young people—who accompanied me throughout my Visits to Santiago and Barcelona with their

enthusiasm and their joy—that they might discover the beauty, value and commitment of Marriage, in which a man and a woman form a family that is generously open to life and nurtures it from its conception until its natural end. Everything done to support marriage and the family, to help the neediest people, everything that increases the greatness of the human being and his inviolable dignity contributes to perfecting society. In this regard no effort is in vain.

Dear friends, I give thanks to God for the full days I spent in Santiago de Compostela and in Barcelona. I renew my thanks to the King and Queen of Spain, to the Prince and Princess of the Asturias and to all the Authorities.

I once again address my grateful and affectionate thoughts to my esteemed Brother Archbishops of those two Particular Churches and to their collaborators, as well as to all those who generously made every effort to ensure that my Visit to those two marvellous Cities was fruitful.

These were unforgettable days, which will remain impressed upon my heart! In particular, the two Eucharistic celebrations—carefully arranged and with the intense participation of all the faithful and with hymns taken both from the Church’s great musical tradition and from the genius of modern composers—were moments of real inner joy.

May God reward everyone as he alone can; may the Most Holy Mother of God and the Apostle St James continue to guide and protect them on their way. Next year, please God, I shall go to Spain once again, for the World Youth Day in Madrid. From this moment I entrust to your prayers this provident project, so that it may be an opportunity for growth in the faith for a great number of young people.

## **Pastoral Visit to the Archdiocese of Milan 7th World Meeting of Families**

*6 June 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

“*The Family: Work and Celebration*” was the theme of the Seventh World Meeting of Families which has taken place in Milan in the past few days. I still have in my eyes and in my heart the images and emotions of this unforgettable and marvellous event that transformed Milan into a city of families: families from all over the world, united by the joy of believing in Jesus Christ. I am profoundly

grateful to God who has granted me to live this event “with” families and “for” the family.

In all those who listened to me during these days I met with a sincere readiness to accept and to witness to the “Gospel of the family”. Yes, for without the family humanity has no future; young people in particular need to learn the values that give meaning to life, they need to be born into and grow up in that community of life and love which God himself desired for men and women.

The meeting with the many families from the different continents has given me the happy opportunity to visit the Archdiocese of Milan for the first time as Successor of Peter. Cardinal Angelo Scola, the priests and all the faithful, as well as the Mayor and the other authorities, welcomed me with great warmth—for which I am deeply grateful. I was thus able to experience from close at hand the faith of the people of Milan, rich in history, culture, humanity and active charity.

The first event of this busy three-day Pastoral Visit took place in the square outside the cathedral, the symbol and heart of the city. I cannot forget the warm embrace of the crowd of Milanese people and participants in the Seventh World Meeting of Families that accompanied me throughout my Visit, overflowing the streets.

An expanse of celebrating families that with sentiments of deep participation joined in particular with the affectionate thoughts and solidarity that I wanted to address straight away to all those in need of help and comfort, those who are troubled by various anxieties and, especially, the families worst hit by the economic crisis, as well as the beloved peoples struck by the earthquake.

At this first meeting with the City, I first wanted to speak to the hearts of the faithful of the Ambrosian City. I urged them to live out their faith in their experience as individuals and as a community, in private and in public, so as to foster an authentic “well-being”, starting with the family which must be rediscovered as humanity’s principal patrimony. From the top of the Cathedral, the statue of Our Lady, with her arms wide open, seemed to welcome with motherly tenderness all the families of Milan and of the whole world!

Then Milan reserved a unique and noble greeting for me in one of the most evocative and meaningful places in the city, La Scala, where important pages of the country's history have been written, under the impulse of great spiritual values and ideals.

In this temple of music, the notes of Ludwig van Beethoven's Ninth Symphony gave a voice to that example of universality and brotherhood which the Church repropose tirelessly by proclaiming the Gospel. And at the end of the concert—which I dedicated to our many brothers and sisters who have been sorely tried by the earthquake—I referred specifically to the contrast between this ideal and the dramas of history, and to the need for a God who is close and who shares in our suffering. I emphasized that in Jesus of Nazareth God makes himself close and shoulders our suffering with us.

At the end of that intense musical and spiritual moment I mentioned the family of the third millennium, recalling that it is in the family that we first feel that the human person is not created to live withdrawn into him- or herself but rather in relationships with others; and it is in the family that the light of peace is first kindled in hearts so that it may illuminate our world.

The next day, in the Cathedral thronged with priests and men and women religious and in the presence of numerous Cardinals and Bishops from various countries of the world, I celebrated Terce according to the Ambrosian Liturgy. On that occasion I wished to reaffirm the value of celibacy and consecrated virginity, so dear to the great St Ambrose. Celibacy and virginity in the Church are a luminous sign of love for God and for the brethren, which stems from an ever closer relationship with Christ in prayer and is expressed in the total gift of oneself.

Then the event in the Meazza Stadium was an encounter charged with enthusiasm. Here I experienced the embrace of a joyful multitude of young men and women who have received this year or who are about to receive the Sacrament of Confirmation. The careful preparation of the event, with meaningful texts and prayers, as well as choreography, made the meeting even more stimulating. To the youth of Milan I addressed the appeal to say a free and conscious "yes" to the Gospel of Jesus, accepting the gifts of the Holy Spirit which make it possible to be formed as Christians, to live the Gospel and to be active

members of the community. I encouraged them to be dedicated to their studies in particular and to generous service of their neighbour.

The meeting with the representatives of institutional authorities, of business people and of workers, of the worlds of culture and of education of the Milanese and Lombard society enabled me to highlight how important it is that legislation and the work of the State institutions be at the service and for the safeguard of the person in his many aspects, starting with the right to life—whose deliberate suppression can never be legitimate—and with recognition of the identity proper to the family founded on the marriage of a man and a woman.

After this appointment dedicated to the situation of the diocese and the city, I went to the vast Parco Nord in the territory of Bresso. Here I took part in the involving Feast of Testimonies entitled “*One world, family, love*”. Here I had the joy of meeting thousands of people, a rainbow of families from Italy and from across the world, who had already gathered in the early hours of the afternoon in a genuinely family atmosphere of festivity and warmth. Answering the questions of several families resulting from their life and experience, I wanted to give them a sign of the open dialogue that exists between families and the Church, between the world and the Church.

I was deeply impressed by the moving testimonies of married couples and children from different continents on highly topical themes of our times: the economic crisis, the difficulty in reconciling work time with time for the family, the spread of separations and divorces, and also existential questions that affect adults, young people and children. I would like here to recall what I said in defence of time for the family, threatened by a sort of “dictatorship” of work commitments: Sunday is the day of the Lord and of men and women, a day in which everyone must be able to be free, free for the family and free for God. In defending Sunday we defend human freedom!

The Holy Mass on Sunday, 3 June, for the conclusion of the Seventh World Meeting of Families was an immense and prayerful crowd that completely filled the area of Bresso Airport which seemed transformed into an open air cathedral, partly because of the reproductions of the magnificent polychrome stained-glass windows of the Cathedral that stood out on the dais.



To that multitude of the faithful from different nations, deeply immersed in the beautifully prepared liturgy, I launched an appeal to build ecclesial communities that would be increasingly families and would be able to reflect the beauty of the Blessed Trinity and to evangelize not only with words but by outreach, with the power of love lived, because love is the only power that can transform the world. I also stressed the importance of the “triad” of family, work and celebration. These are three gifts of God, three dimensions of our life that must find a harmonious balance in order to build societies with a human face.

I feel deeply grateful for these magnificent days in Milan. I thank Cardinal Ennio Antonelli and the Pontifical Council for the Family, all the Authorities, for their presence and collaboration in these event; my thanks also goes to the Prime Minister of the Italian Republic for having taken part in Holy Mass on Sunday. And I renew my cordial “thank you” to the various institutions which generously cooperated with the Holy See and with the Archdiocese of Milan in the organization of the Meeting; which had tremendous pastoral and ecclesial success, and vast echoes throughout the world. In fact it brought to Milan more than a million people, who peacefully invaded the streets for several days, witnessing to the beauty of the family, hope for humanity.

The World Meeting in Milan thus resulted from this most eloquent “epiphany” of the family, which was demonstrated in the variety of its expressions, but also in the oneness of its essential identity: that of a communion of love, founded on marriage and called to be the sanctuary of life, a miniature Church, the cell of society.

From Milan a message of hope was launched to the entire world. It was substantiated by the living experiences: it is possible and joyous, although demanding, to live faithful love open to life “forever”; it is possible to participate as families in the mission of the Church and in the construction of society. With the help of God and the special protection of Mary Most Holy, Queen of the Family, may the Milan experience bring abundant fruit to the Church’s journey; and may it be a harbinger of increased attention to the cause of the family, which coincides with that of man and of civilization. Many thanks.

# Apostolic Journey to Lebanon

19 September 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to return briefly in my thoughts and in my heart to those extraordinary days of the Apostolic Journey that I made to Lebanon. It was a Journey that I strongly desired, despite the difficult circumstances, considering how a father must always be beside his children when they come up against serious problems. I was moved by the fervent desire to proclaim the peace which the Risen Lord left to his disciples with the words: “My peace I give to you” (Jn 14:27). The main purpose of my Journey was the signing and the consigning of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* to representatives of the Catholic communities of the Middle East, as well as to the other Churches and Ecclesial communities and to Muslim leaders.

It was a moving ecclesial event and, at the same time, a providential occasion for dialogue in a country that is complex but also emblematic for the whole region because of its tradition of coexistence and fruitful collaboration among diverse religious and social components. In the face of the suffering and drama in which this part of the Middle East is steeped, I expressed my heartfelt closeness to the legitimate aspirations of this dear people, bringing them a message of encouragement and peace. I am thinking in particular of the terrible conflict that is tormenting Syria, causing, in addition to thousands of deaths, a stream of refugees pouring into the region in a desperate search for security and a future. And I have not forgotten the difficult situation in Iraq. During my Visit, the people of Lebanon and of the Middle East—Catholics, Representatives of other Churches and Ecclesial Communities and of the various Muslim Communities—experienced enthusiastically and in a calm and constructive atmosphere an important moment of mutual respect, comprehension and brotherhood. This is a strong sign of hope for all humanity. But above all it was an encounter with the Catholic faithful of Lebanon and of the Middle East, present in thousands, which inspired in my spirit a feeling of profound gratitude for the ardour of their faith and their witness.

I thank the Lord for this precious gift which promises hope for the future of the Church in those regions: young people, adults and families enlivened by the tenacious desire to root their lives in Christ, to stay anchored to the Gospel, to walk together in the Church. I also renew my gratitude to all those who worked tirelessly for my Visit: the Patriarchs and Bishops of Lebanon with their collaborators, the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, the consecrated people, the lay faithful, who are a valuable and significant reality in Lebanese society. I was able to see directly how the Catholic Lebanese community, through their 2,000-year-old presence and their commitment filled with hope, makes a significant and appreciated contribution to the daily lives of all the inhabitants of the country. I extend a respectful and grateful thought to the Lebanese Authorities, to the Institutions and Associations, to the volunteers and to those who offered their support in prayer. I cannot forget the cordial welcome that I received from the President of the Republic, Mr Michel Sleiman, as well as from the various components of the country and from the people: it was a warm welcome, befitting the fame of Lebanese hospitality. The Muslims welcomed me with great respect and sincere esteem; their constant participation enabled me to send a message of dialogue and collaboration between Christianity and Islam. It seems to me that the time has come to bear together an honest and decisive witness against division, against violence, against war. The Catholics, who also came from neighbouring countries, showed fervently their deep affection for the Successor of Peter.

After the beautiful ceremony for my arrival at the airport of Beirut, the first event was particularly solemn: the signing of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Medio Oriente* in the Greek-Melkite Basilica of St Paul in Harissa. On that occasion I invited Middle Eastern Catholics to fix their gaze on Christ Crucified to find the strength, even in difficult and painful situations, to celebrate the victory of love over hate, of forgiveness over revenge and of unity over division. I assured everyone that the universal Church is closer than ever, in affection and prayer, to the Churches in the Middle East: although they are a “small flock”, in the certainty that the Lord is always with them, they need not be afraid. The Pope does not forget them.

On the second day of my Apostolic Journey I met with representatives of the institutions of the Republic and of the cultural world, the Diplomatic Corps and

religious leaders. I pointed out to them, among other things, a way to take to encourage a future of peace and solidarity: it is a question of working to ensure that the cultural, social and religious differences, in sincere dialogue, achieve a new brotherhood in which what unites is the shared sense of the greatness and dignity of every person, whose life must always be protected and preserved. On that same day I had a meeting with the leaders of the Muslim religious community, which took place in a spirit of dialogue and reciprocal goodwill. I thank God for this meeting. Today's world needs clear and strong signs of dialogue and collaboration. Lebanon has been and must continue to be an example of this for the Arab countries and for the rest of the world.

In the afternoon, at the residence of the Maronite Patriarch I was welcomed with uncontainable enthusiasm by thousands of young people from Lebanon and from the neighbouring countries, who gave life to a festive and prayerful moment which will live on, unforgettable, in the hearts of many. I emphasized their good fortune in living in the part of the world which saw Jesus, who died and rose for our salvation, and the development of Christianity, as I urged them to fidelity and to love for their land in spite of the difficulties caused by the lack of stability and security. In addition, I encouraged them to be steadfast in faith, trusting in Christ the source of our joy, and deepening their personal relationship with him in prayer, as well as being open to the great ideals of life, of the family, of friendship and of solidarity. Seeing young Christians and Muslims celebrating in great harmony, I urged them to build together the future of Lebanon and of the Middle East, and to combat together violence and war. Harmony and reconciliation must be stronger than the impulsion of death.

The very intense moment of Holy Mass in which large numbers took part at the City Center Waterfront of Beirut was on Sunday morning. It was accompanied by evocative hymns, as were the other celebrations. In the presence of numerous Bishops and a huge crowd of the faithful from every part of the Middle East, I wanted to urge everyone to live their faith and to witness to it fearlessly, in the knowledge that the vocation of Christians and of the Church is to take the Gospel to everyone without distinction, following Jesus' example. In a context marked by bitter conflicts, I called attention to the need to serve peace and justice, becoming instruments of reconciliation and builders of communion. At the end of the Eucharistic celebration, I had the joy of consigning the Apostolic

Exhortation that contains the conclusions of the Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops dedicated to the Middle East. Through the Patriarchs and the Eastern—and Latin-rite Bishops, the priests, the consecrated and lay people, this Document intends to reach out to all the faithful of this beloved region, to sustain them in the faith and in communion and to spur them on the path of the longed for new evangelization. In the afternoon, at the headquarters of the Syrian-Catholic Patriarchate, I then had the joy of a fraternal ecumenical meeting with the Orthodox and Eastern Orthodox Patriarchs and the representatives of those Churches, as well as of the Ecclesial Communities.

Dear friends, the days I spent in Lebanon were a marvellous manifestation of faith, intense religious feeling and a prophetic sign of peace. The multitude of believers coming from the entire Middle East had the opportunity to reflect, to converse and especially, to pray together, renewing the commitment to root their life in Christ. I am sure that the Lebanese people, in its multiform but well amalgamated religious and social composition, will be able to witness with a new impetus to true peace that is born from trust in God. I hope that the various messages of peace and esteem which I sought to convey, may help the government leaders of the Region to take decisive steps toward peace and toward a better comprehension of relations between Christians and Muslims.

For my part I continue to accompany those beloved peoples with prayers, so that they may stay faithful to the commitments they have assumed. I entrust the fruits of this Pastoral Visit, as well as the good resolutions and the just aspirations of the whole of the Middle East to the motherly intercession of Mary, venerated in so many ancient Lebanese Shrines. Many thanks.

# Apostolic Journey to Portugal

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I wish to review with you the various stages of the Apostolic Trip that I took to Portugal in the past days, inspired mainly by a desire to honour the Virgin Mary, who at Fatima passed on to her seers and to pilgrims an intense love for the Successor of Peter. I thank God for having given me the opportunity to pay homage to that People, to its long and glorious history of faith and of Christian witness. Therefore, just as I asked you to accompany in prayer this Pastoral Visit, so I now invite you to join with me in giving thanks to the Lord for its happy outcome and its conclusion. I entrust to him the fruits that the Visit has brought about and will bring about for the community of the Portuguese Church and for the entire population. I renew my heartfelt gratitude to the President of the Republic, Mr Aníbal Cavaco Silva, along with the other State Authorities, who welcomed me so cordially and did their utmost to ensure that everything might progress in the best possible way. With intense affection I recall my Brother Bishops of the Portuguese dioceses, whom I had the joy of embracing in their own homeland. I thank them fraternally for the work they carried out in the spiritual and organizational preparation of my Visit, and also for the considerable effort involved in its realization. I extend a special thought to the Patriarch of Lisbon, Cardinal José da Cruz Policarpo, to the Bishops António Augusto dos Santos Marto of Leiria-Fatima and Manuel Macário do Nascimento Clemente of Oporto and to their respective collaborators, and likewise to the various bodies of the Bishops' Conference led by Bishop Jorge Ortiga.

Throughout the Visit, which coincided with the 10th anniversary of the Beatification of the shepherd children Jacinta and Francisco, I felt spiritually sustained by my beloved Predecessor, the Venerable John Paul II, who travelled to Fatima three times, in thanksgiving for that “invisible hand” which saved him from death in the attempt of 13 May, here in St Peter's Square. On the evening of my arrival I celebrated Holy Mass in Lisbon in the charming setting of *Terreiro do Paço*, facing the River Tagus. It was a festive liturgical gathering, full of hope and animated by the joyous participation of a great many faithful. At the Capital from where, over the course of centuries, many missionaries departed in order to take the Gospel to various continents I encouraged the several members of the local Church to pursue a vigorous evangelizing action within society's diverse milieux, in order to be sowers of hope in a world often marked by distrust. In particular, I appealed to believers to proclaim the death and Resurrection of Christ, the heart of Christianity, fulcrum and support of our faith and reason for our joy. I also expressed these sentiments during the meeting with representatives of the world of culture, which took place in the Cultural Centre of Belém. On that occasion, I highlighted the patrimony of values with which Christianity has enriched the culture, art

and heritage of the Portuguese People. In this noble Land it is possible as it is in every other country deeply influenced by Christianity to build a future of fraternal good will and collaboration with other cultural initiatives, by being open to sincere, reciprocal and respectful dialogue.

I then went to Fatima, a small city characterized by an atmosphere of real mysticism, in which one senses the almost palpable presence of Our Lady. There, in that admirable Shrine, the spiritual heart of Portugal and the destination of a multitude of people from greatly diverse places on earth, I became a pilgrim among pilgrims. After having paused in prayerful and moving contemplation in the Chapel of the Apparitions in the *Cova da Iria* where I entrusted to the Immaculate Heart of Mary the joys and expectations, as well as the problems and sufferings, of the entire world I had the joy of presiding at a Vespers Celebration of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the Church of the Most Holy Trinity. Inside this large modern temple, I expressed my deep appreciation to the priests, men and women religious, deacons, and to the seminarians who came from every part of Portugal, as I thanked them for their often silent and not always easy witness, and for their fidelity to the Gospel and to the Church. In this Year for Priests, which is nearing its end, I encouraged the priests to give priority to devout listening to the Word of God, to the intimate knowledge of Christ, to the intense celebration of the Eucharist, while emulating the luminous example of the Holy Curé d'Ars. I did not omit to entrust and consecrate the priests of all the world to the Immaculate Heart of Mary, true model of a disciple of the Lord.

In the evening, I participated in an evocative candlelit procession with the thousands of people who had chosen to join in the event in this huge square in front of the Shrine. It was a stupendous manifestation of faith in God and of devotion to his and our Mother, expressed in the recitation of the Holy Rosary. This prayer, so dear to the Christian people, has found in Fatima a central driving force for the whole Church and the world. The “*White Lady*”, in the Apparition of 13 June, told the three shepherd children: “*I want you to recite the Rosary every day*”. We could say that Fatima and the Rosary are practically synonymous.

My Visit to this truly special place reached its climax in the Eucharistic Celebration of 13 May, the anniversary of the first Apparition of the Virgin Mary to Francisco, Jacinta and Lúcia. In echoing the words of the Prophet Isaiah, I invited that immense prayerful gathering, united in such great love and devotion at the feet of the Virgin, to rejoice fully in the Lord (cf. Is 61:10), so that her merciful love, which accompanies us on our pilgrimage on this earth, may be the spring of our great hope. And hope is precisely what fills the demanding yet at the same time comforting Message that Our Lady left to us at Fatima. It is a Message centred on prayer, on penance and on conversion that reaches

beyond the threats, dangers and horrors of history to invite mankind to have faith in God's action: to cultivate the great Hope, to experience the Lord's grace and thus to fall in love with him, who is the source of love and peace.

In this perspective, my meeting with the social assistance and pastoral organizations was especially meaningful and engrossing. To these I emphasized the Good Samaritan's way of meeting the needs of our poorest brothers and sisters and of serving Christ, by promoting the common good. Indeed, it is at Fatima a school of faith and of hope, since it is also a school of charity and service to others that many young people learn the importance of selfless giving. In this context of faith and prayer, the important, fraternal meeting with the Portuguese Episcopate took place, at the conclusion of my Visit to Fatima. It was a moment of intense spiritual communion, in which together we thanked the Lord for the faithfulness of the Church that is alive in Portugal and also entrusted to the Virgin the community's hopes and our pastoral concerns. I also spoke of these hopes and pastoral prospects during the Holy Mass celebrated in the historic and symbolic city of Oporto, the "City of the Virgin", which was the last stage of my pilgrimage through the land of Lusitania. Addressing the large crowd of the faithful gathered in the *Avenida dos Aliados*, I recalled the commitment to witness to the Gospel in every context, offering the Risen Christ to the world so that every difficult, painful and frightening situation might be transformed through the Holy Spirit into an opportunity for growth and life.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, my pilgrimage to Portugal has been a moving experience, rich with many spiritual gifts. While the memory of this unforgettable Journey the warm, spontaneous welcome, the enthusiasm of the people remain fixed in my mind and heart, I give praise to the Lord for having opened to the world, through Mary's Apparitions to the three shepherd children, a privileged space in which to encounter the divine mercy that heals and saves. At Fatima, the Blessed Virgin invites everyone to consider the earth as the place where we make our pilgrimage towards the definitive homeland, which is Heaven. In reality we are all pilgrims, and we need our Mother to guide us. The theme of my Apostolic Journey to Portugal was, "With You We Walk in Hope: Wisdom and Mission". And at Fatima the Blessed Virgin Mary invites us to walk with great hope, letting ourselves be guided by the "wisdom from on high" manifest in Jesus, the wisdom of love so that we might carry Christ's light and joy to the world. I therefore invite you to join with me in prayer, asking the Lord to bless the efforts of those in that beloved Nation who dedicate themselves to the service of the Gospel and to the search for the true good of man, of every human being. Furthermore we pray that, through the intercession of Mary Most Holy, the Holy Spirit may make this Apostolic Trip fruitful, and may give life to the mission of the Church worldwide, instituted by Christ, to proclaim to all peoples the Gospel of truth, peace and love. To Special Groups Dear Brothers and Sisters, I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the groups from England, Malaysia and the United States of America. I extend a special greeting to the students who are here and to the American Patrons of the Vatican Museums.*



*Commending all of you to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima, I ask Almighty God to pour out his Blessings upon you.*

My Pastoral Visit to Portugal this past week enabled me to honour Our Lady of Fatima and to pay homage to the distinguished history of Christian faith and evangelizing zeal of the Portuguese people. The visit began with a Mass celebrated in the *Terreiro do Paço* in Lisbon, where I urged Portugal's Christians to carry on this great work of evangelization in our own day. The heart of my journey was my pilgrimage to Fatima for the tenth anniversary of the Beatification of the shepherd children Francisco and Jacinta. The evening recitation of the Rosary and the solemn Mass on the anniversary of the first apparition were centred on the message of Fatima. Our Lady's exhortation to prayer, penance and conversion is essentially a summons to hope in God's merciful love and trust in his saving plan, which triumphs over the threats and calamities of history. As I give thanks for the blessings of my pilgrimage, I ask you to join me in asking Our Lady of Fatima to continue, by her prayers, to guide us on our journey to heaven, to open the hearts of all to God's infinite mercy, and to confirm the Church in her perennial mission of proclaiming before the world the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ.

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the groups from England, Malaysia and the United States of America. I extend a special greeting to the students who are here and to the American Patrons of the Vatican Museums. Commending all of you to the intercession of Our Lady of Fatima, I ask Almighty God to pour out his blessings upon you.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*26 May 2010*

## **Apostolic Journey to Cyprus**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I wish to reflect on my Apostolic Journey to Cyprus which in many ways was in continuity with my previous Journeys to the Holy Land and to Malta. Thanks be to God this Pastoral Visit went very well, since it has felicitously achieved its object. Already in itself it was an historic event; in fact, never before had the Bishop of Rome visited that land blessed by the apostolic work of St Paul and St Barnabas and traditionally considered a part of the Holy Land. In the footsteps of the Apostle to the Gentiles I became a pilgrim of the Gospel, primarily to strengthen the faith of the Catholic communities that form a small but lively minority on the Island and to encourage them to continue on the path to full Christian unity, especially with our Orthodox brethren. At the same time I wanted to embrace in spirit all the Middle Eastern people and to bless

them in the Lord's Name, invoking from God the gift of peace. I was given a warm welcome everywhere I went and I gladly take this opportunity to express my deep gratitude once again in the first place to Archbishop Joseph Soueif of Cyprus for Maronites, and to H.B. Archbishop Fouad Twal, together with their collaborators, as I renew to each one my appreciation of their apostolic action. My heartfelt gratitude then goes to the Holy Synod of the Orthodox Church of Cyprus, and first of all to H.B. Chrysostomos II, Archbishop of Nea Justiniana and All Cyprus, whom I had the joy to embrace with brotherly affection, as well as the President of the Republic, all the Civil Authorities and all those who laudably did their utmost, in their various capacities, to ensure the success of my Pastoral Visit.

It began on 4 June in the ancient city of Paphos where I felt enveloped in an atmosphere that seemed, as it were, a perceptible synthesis of 2,000 years of Christian history. The archaeological remains here testify to an ancient and glorious spiritual heritage that still has a strong impact on the country's life today. A moving ecumenical celebration took place at the Church of Agia Kiriaki Chrysopolitissa an Orthodox place of worship also open to Catholics and Anglicans that is located within the archaeological site. Together with the Orthodox Archbishop Chrysostomos II and the representatives of the Armenian, Lutheran and Anglican communities, we fraternally renewed our reciprocal and irreversible ecumenical commitment. I later expressed these sentiments to H.B. Chrysostomos II during our cordial Meeting at his residence, at which I also noted that the Orthodox Church of Cyprus is bound to the destiny of this people, preserving devout and grateful memories of Archbishop Makarios III, commonly considered the father and benefactor of the nation. I too desired to pay homage to him, pausing briefly by the monument in his honour that portrays him. This attachment to tradition does not prevent the Orthodox Community from engaging in the ecumenical dialogue with the Catholic community with determination; both are motivated by the sincere wish to re-establish full and visible communion between the Churches of the East and of the West.

I began the second stage of my Journey on 5 June, in Nicosia, the capital of the Island, by calling on the President of the Republic who received me with great courtesy. In meeting the Civil Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps, I reaffirmed the importance of basing positive law upon the ethical principles of natural law in order to promote moral truth in public life. It was an appeal to reason, based on ethical principles and full of demanding implications for contemporary society that all too often no longer recognizes the cultural tradition on which it is founded.

The Liturgy of the Word, celebrated at St Maron's Elementary School, was one of the most evocative meetings with the Catholic community of Cyprus, with its Maronite and Latin-Rite members, and enabled me to become closely acquainted with the apostolic

fervour of Cypriot Catholics. It is also expressed through educational activities and social assistance. The dozens of structures that serve society as a whole are appreciated by the Government authorities as well as by the entire population. It was a festive, joyful moment enlivened by the enthusiasm of numerous children and young people. The dimension of remembrance was not lacking and made movingly perceptible the heart of the Maronite Church, which in this very year is celebrating the 1,600th anniversary of the death of its Founder, St Maron. Particularly important in this regard is the presence of some Maronite Catholics who came from the four villages of the Island where Christians are a people that suffers and hopes. I wanted to express to them my fatherly understanding of their aspirations and difficulties.

During that same celebration I was able to admire the apostolic commitment of the Latin community, guided by the solicitude of the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem and by the apostolic zeal of the Friars Minor of the Holy Land, who with persevering generosity make themselves available to serving the people. Latin-Rite Catholics, very active in the area of charity, pay special attention to the workers and to the neediest. To all, Latins and Maronites alike I assure my remembrance in prayer, encouraging them to witness to the Gospel also through a patient effort of reciprocal trust between Christians and non-Christians, in order to build a lasting peace and harmony among the peoples.

At Holy Mass celebrated in the Parish Church of Holy Cross in the presence of priests, consecrated people, deacons, catechists and representatives of the Island's lay associations and movements, I wished to repeat my invitation to trust and hope. Starting from a reflection on the mystery of the Cross, I then addressed a heartfelt appeal to all the Catholics of the Middle East so that, despite the great trials and well-known difficulties, they will not give in to the hardship and the temptation to emigrate, since their presence in the region is an indispensable sign of hope. I guaranteed to them, and especially to the priests and religious, the affectionate and intense solidarity of the Church as a whole, as well as constant prayers, so that the Lord may help them always to be an active and peaceful presence.

The culminating moment of the Apostolic Journey was certainly the consignment of the *Instrumentum Laboris* of the Special Assembly for the Middle East of the Synod of Bishops. This event took place on Sunday, 6 June, at the Sport Centre in Nicosia, at the end of the solemn celebration of the Eucharist in which the Patriarchs and Bishops of the various ecclesial communities of the Middle East took part. The participation of the People of God was unanimous: "with glad shouts and songs of thanksgiving, a multitude keeping festival", as the Psalm says (Ps 42[41]:4). We experienced it in practice, partly thanks to the presence of so many immigrants who form a significant group among the Island's Catholic population, into which they have integrated without difficulty. We prayed

together for the soul of the late Bishop Luigi Padovese, President of the Turkish Bishops' Conference, whose unexpected and tragic death has left us saddened and dismayed.

The theme of the Synodal Assembly for the Middle East that will be taking place in Rome next October, speaks of communion and the openness to hope: "The Catholic Church in the Middle East: Communion and Witness". In fact the important event is a gathering of the Catholic Christianity of that region, with its different rites, that at the same time seeks to renew dialogue and courage for the future. It will therefore be accompanied by the prayerful affection of the entire Church in whose heart the Middle East has a special place, since it is here that God made himself known to our fathers in the faith. However attention to other topics of our global society will not be lacking, particularly of the protagonists of public life, called to work with constant commitment to enable this region to surmount the situations of suffering and conflict that still afflict it and to rediscover peace in justice at last.

Before taking my leave of Cyprus, I wished to visit the Maronite Cathedral in Nicosia where Cardinal Nasrallah Pierre Sfeir, Patriarch of Antiochs for Maronites, was also present. I renewed my sincere closeness and fervent comprehension to every community of the ancient Maronite Church throughout the Island, on whose shores the Maronites arrived in various periods and were often hard put to stay faithful to their specific Christian heritage, the memories of whose art and history constitute a cultural patrimony for the whole of humanity.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I returned to the Vatican my heart brimming with gratitude to God and with sentiments of sincere affection and esteem for the inhabitants of Cyprus by whom I felt welcomed and understood. In the noble land of Cyprus I was able to see the apostolic work of the different traditions of the one Church of Christ and I could almost feel many hearts beating in unison just as the Journey's theme said: "One heart, one soul". The Catholic Cypriot community, in its Maronite, Armenian and Latin branches, strives ceaselessly to be of one heart and one soul, both within itself and in cordial and constructive relations with its Orthodox brethren and with the other Christian denominations. May the Cypriot people and the other nations of the Middle East, with their government leaders and the representatives of the different religions, build together a future of peace, friendship and fraternal collaboration. And let us also pray that through the intercession of Mary Most Holy the Holy Spirit may make this Apostolic Journey fruitful and enliven throughout the world the Church's mission, established by Christ to proclaim to all peoples the Gospel of truth, love and peace.*

### **To special groups**

I offer a warm welcome to the ecumenical study group from the School of Theology at Seton Hall University, and to the members of the International Leadership Programme

for LaSallian Universities. My cordial greetings also go to the scholars and experts taking part in the international conference sponsored by the International Insolvency Institute. I greet the many student groups present, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Ireland, the Philippines and the United States, I invoke Almighty God's blessings of joy and peace.

*Saint Peter's Square*

16 June 2010

## **To participants in the Pilgrimage of the Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am glad to receive you in this Basilica and to address my cordial welcome to each one of you. I greet the pilgrimage promoted by the *Don Carlo Gnocchi Foundation* after the recent beatification of this luminous figure of the Milanese clergy. Dear friends, I am well aware of the extraordinary activity you carry out in the vast area of health-care assistance for children in difficulty, for the disabled, for the elderly and for the terminally ill. Through your projects of solidarity you strive to perpetuate the praiseworthy work begun by Bl. Carlo Gnocchi, an apostle of modern times and a genius of Christian charity, who, in taking up the challenges of his time, devoted himself with every possible care to little ones who were mutilated, victims of war in whom he discerned the Face of God. A dynamic and enthusiastic priest and a perceptive teacher, he lived the Gospel integrally in the different milieus in which he worked with unflagging zeal and indefatigable apostolic fervour. In this Year for Priests the Church once again looks to him as a model to imitate. May his shining example sustain the work of all who are dedicated to the service of the weakest. May it also inspire in priests the keen desire to rediscover and reinvigorate awareness of the extraordinary gift of Grace that the ordained ministry represents for those who have received it, for the whole Church and for the world.

Let us conclude this short Meeting by singing the prayer of the *Pater Noster*.

# Other teachings

## Commemoration of All the Faithful Departed

2 November 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After celebrating the Solemnity of All Saints, today the Church invites us to commemorate all the faithful departed, to turn our eyes to the many faces who have gone before us and who have ended their earthly journey. So at today's Audience, I would like to offer a few simple thoughts on the reality of death, which for us Christians is illuminated by the Resurrection of Christ, and so as to renew our faith in eternal life.

As I already said at the Angelus yesterday, during these days we go to the cemetery to pray for the loved ones who have left us, as it were paying a visit to show them, once more, our love, to feel them still close, remembering also, an article of the *Creed*: in the communion of saints there is a close bond between us who are still walking here upon the earth and those many brothers and sisters who have already entered eternity.

Human beings have always cared for their dead and sought to give them a sort of second life through attention, care and affection. In a way, we want to preserve their experience of life; and, paradoxically, by looking at their graves, before which countless memories return, we discover how they lived, what they loved, what they feared, what they hoped for and what they hated. They are almost a mirror of their world.

Why is this so? Because, despite the fact that death is an almost forbidden subject in our society and that there is a continuous attempt to banish the thought of it from our minds, death touches each of us, it touches mankind of every age and every place. And before this mystery we all, even unconsciously, search for something to give us hope, a sign that might bring us consolation, open up some horizon, offer us a future once more. The road to death, in reality, is a way of hope and it passes through our cemeteries, just as can be read on the tombstones and fulfills a journey marked by the hope of eternity.

Yet, we wonder, why do we feel fear before death? Why has humanity, for the most part, never resigned itself to the belief that beyond life there is simply nothing? I would say that there are multiple answers: we are afraid of death because we are afraid of that

nothingness, of leaving this world for something we don't know, something unknown to us. And, then, there is a sense of rejection in us because we cannot accept that all that is beautiful and great, realized during a lifetime, should be suddenly erased, should fall into the abyss of nothingness. Above all, we feel that love calls and asks for eternity and it is impossible to accept that it is destroyed by death in an instant.

Furthermore, we fear in the face of death because, when we find ourselves approaching the end of our lives, there is a perception that our actions will be judged, the way in which we have lived our lives, above all, those moments of darkness which we often skillfully remove or try to remove from our conscience. I would say that precisely the question of judgment often underlies man of all time's concern for the dead, the attention paid to the people who were important to him and are no longer with him on the journey through earthly life. In a certain sense the gestures of affection and love which surround the deceased are a way to protect him in the conviction that they will have an effect on the judgment. This we can gather from the majority of cultures that characterize the history of man.

Today the world has become, at least in appearance, much more rational, or rather, there is a more widespread tendency to think that every reality ought to be tackled with the criteria of experimental science, and that the great questions about death ought to be answered not so much with faith as with empirical, provable knowledge. It is not sufficiently taken into account, however, that precisely in this way one is doomed to fall into forms of spiritism, in an attempt to have some kind of contact with the world beyond, almost imagining it to be a reality that, ultimately, is a copy of the present one.

Dear friends, the Solemnity of All Saints and the Commemoration of all the faithful departed tells us that only those who can recognize a great hope in death, can live a life based on hope. If we reduce man exclusively to his horizontal dimension, to that which can be perceived empirically, life itself loses its profound meaning. Man needs eternity for every other hope is too brief, too limited for him. Man can be explained only if there is a Love which overcomes every isolation, even that of death, in a totality which also transcends time and space. Man can be explained, he finds his deepest meaning, only if there is God. And we know that God left his distance for us and made himself close. He entered into our life and tells us: "I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die" (Jn 11:25–26).

Let us think for a moment of the scene on Calvary and listen again to Jesus' words from the height of the Cross, addressed to the criminal crucified on his right: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43). We think of the two disciples on

the road to Emmaus, when, after traveling a stretch of the way with the Risen Jesus, they recognize him and set out immediately for Jerusalem to proclaim the Resurrection of the Lord (cf. Lk 24:13–35). The Master’s words come back to our minds with renewed clarity: “Let not your hearts be troubled; believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father’s house are many rooms; if it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?” (Jn 14:1–2). God is truly demonstrated, he became accessible, for he so loved the world “that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16), and in the supreme act of love on the Cross, immersing himself in the abyss of death, he conquered it, and rose and opened the doors of eternity for us too. Christ sustains us through the night of death which he himself overcame; he is the Good Shepherd, on whose guidance one can rely without any fear, for he knows the way well, even through darkness.

Every Sunday in reciting the *Creed*, we reaffirm this truth. And in going to cemeteries to pray with affection and love for our departed, we are invited, once more, to renew with courage and with strength our faith in eternal life, indeed to live with this great hope and to bear witness to it in the world: behind the present there is not nothing. And faith in eternal life gives to Christians the courage to love our earth ever more intensely and to work in order to build a future for it, to give it a true and sure hope. Thank you.

## Safeguarding of Creation

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We have almost reached the end of August, which for many means the end of the summer holidays. As we pick up our usual routine, how could we not thank God for the precious gift of creation which we so enjoy, and not only during our holidays! The various phenomena of environmental degradation and natural disasters which, unfortunately, are often reported in the news remind us of the urgent need to respect nature as we should, recovering and appreciating a correct relationship with the environment in every day life. A new sensitivity to these topics that justly give rise to concern on the part of the Authorities and of public opinion is developing and is expressed in the increasing number of meetings, also at the international level.

The Earth is indeed a precious gift of the Creator who, in designing its intrinsic order, has given us bearings that guide us as stewards of his creation. Precisely from within this framework, the Church considers matters concerning the environment and its protection intimately linked to the theme of integral human development. In my recent Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, I referred more than once to such questions, recalling the “pressing moral need for renewed solidarity” (n. 49) not only between countries but also



between individuals, since the natural environment is given by God to everyone, and our use of it entails a personal responsibility towards humanity as a whole, and in particular towards the poor and towards future generations (cf. n. 48). Bearing in mind our common responsibility for creation (cf. n. 51), the Church is not only committed to promoting the protection of land, water and air as gifts of the Creator destined to everyone but above all she invites others and works herself to protect mankind from self-destruction. In fact, “when ‘human ecology’ is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits” (*ibid.*). Is it not true that an irresponsible use of creation begins precisely where God is marginalized or even denied? If the relationship between human creatures and the Creator is forgotten, matter is reduced to a selfish possession, man becomes the “last word”, and the purpose of human existence is reduced to a scramble for the maximum number of possessions possible.

The created world, structured in an intelligent way by God, is entrusted to our responsibility and though we are able to analyze it and transform it we cannot consider ourselves creation’s absolute master. We are called, rather, to exercise responsible stewardship of creation, in order to protect it, to enjoy its fruits, and to cultivate it, finding the resources necessary for every one to live with dignity. Through the help of nature itself and through hard work and creativity, humanity is indeed capable of carrying out its grave duty to hand on the earth to future generations so that they too, in turn, will be able to inhabit it worthily and continue to cultivate it (cf. n. 50). For this to happen, it is essential to develop “that covenant between human beings and the environment, which should mirror the creative love of God” (*Message for the 2008 World Day of Peace*, n. 7), recognizing that we all come from God and that we are all journeying towards him. How important it is then, that the international community and individual governments send the right signals to their citizens to succeed in countering harmful ways of treating the environment! The economic and social costs of using up shared environmental resources must be recognized with transparency and borne by those who incur them, and not by other peoples or future generations. The protection of the environment, and the safeguarding of resources and of the climate, oblige all international leaders to act jointly respecting the law and promoting solidarity with the weakest regions of the world (cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 50). Together we can build an integral human development beneficial for all peoples, present and future, a development inspired by the values of charity in truth. For this to happen it is essential that the current model of global development be transformed through a greater, and shared, acceptance of responsibility for creation: this is demanded not only by environmental factors, but also by the scandal of hunger and human misery.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us now give thanks to the Lord and make our own the words of St Francis found in “The Canticle of All Creatures”:*

Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,

All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.

To you alone, Most High, do they belong, ...

So says St Francis. We, too, wish to pray and live in the spirit of these words.

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## **Psalm 121**[120]

4 May 2005

### *Israel’s guard*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. As I announced last in our Catecheses I have decided to continue the commentary on the Psalms and Canticles of Vespers, using the texts prepared by my beloved Predecessor, Pope John Paul II.

Let us begin today with Psalm 121[120]. The Psalm is one of the “*songs of ascents*” that accompanied the pilgrimage to the encounter with the Lord in the Temple of Zion. It is a Psalm of trust, for the Hebrew verb *shamar*, “to safeguard, to protect”, is repeated in it six times. God, whose name is frequently invoked, emerges as the ever vigilant, attentive and concerned “guardian”, the “sentinel” who keeps watch over his people to protect them from every hazard and danger.

The song begins with the Psalmist raising his eyes “to the mountains”, that is, to the hills crowned by Jerusalem: from up there comes help, for there, in his temple, the Lord dwells (cf. vv. 1-2).

However, the word “mountains” can also conjure up images of idolatrous shrines in the so-called “high places”, which are frequently condemned in the Old Testament (cf. I Kgs 3:2; II Kgs 18:4). In this case, there would have been a contrast: while the pilgrim was advancing towards Zion, his eyes would have lit on pagan temples that were a great temptation to him. But his faith was steadfast and he was certain of one thing alone: “My help shall come from the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (Ps 121[120]:2).

There are also similar things in our pilgrimage through life. We see the high places that spread out before us as a promise of life: wealth, power, prestige, the easy life. These high places are temptations, for they truly seem like the promise of life. But with our faith we realize that this is not true and that these high places are not life. True life, true help, comes from the Lord. And we turn our gaze, therefore, to the true high places, to the true mountain: Christ.

2. This trust is illustrated in the Psalm through the image of the guardian and sentinel, who watch and protect. There is also an allusion to the foot that does not stumble (cf. v. 3) on the way through life, and perhaps to the shepherd who, stopping for the night, watches over his flock without falling asleep or dozing (cf. v. 4). The divine Pastor knows no rest in the task of caring for his people, for all of us.

Another symbol is then introduced into the Psalm: “shade”, which implies that the journey is resumed during the heat of the day (cf. v. 5). Let us remember the historic march through the desert of Sinai where the Lord preceded Israel “in the daytime by means of a column of cloud to show them the way” (Ex 13:21). Many prayers in the Psalter say: “Hide me in the shadow of your wings” (Ps 17[16]:8; cf. Ps 91[90]:1). Here too, there is an aspect that relates to our life. Our lives move beneath a merciless sun; the Lord is the shade that protects and helps us.

3. After the vigil and the shade there is the third symbol, that of the Lord who is “at [the] right side” of his faithful (cf. Ps 121[120]:5). This is the position of defence, both in military and court contexts: it is the certainty of never being abandoned in a time of trial, in an assault by evil or by persecution. At this point the Psalmist returns to the idea of a journey on a scorching hot day on which God protects us from the fierce heat of the sun.

But night follows day. In ancient times it was also thought that moonbeams were harmful and caused fever or blindness, or even madness; thus, the Lord also protects us at night time (cf. v. 6), in the nights of our lives.

The Psalm now draws to a close with a concise declaration of trust: God will protect us with love at every moment, guarding our lives from every evil (cf. v. 7). All our activities, summed up in two opposite verbs, “going” and “coming”, always take place under the vigilant gaze of the Lord, as do all our acts and all our time, “both now and for ever” (v. 8).

4. Let us now, in conclusion, comment on this final declaration of trust with a spiritual testimony of the ancient Christian tradition. In fact, in the *Epistolarium* of Barsanuphius of Gaza (who died in the mid-sixth century), a widely renowned aesthete sought out by monks, clerics and lay people for the wisdom of his discernment, we find several references to the verse of our Psalm: “The Lord will guard you from evil, he will guard your soul”. With this Psalm, with this verse, Barsanuphius wanted to comfort all those who came to him with their toils, life’s trials, dangers and misfortunes.

Once asked by a monk to pray for him and his companions, Barsanuphius responded as follows, including the citation of this verse in his greeting: “My beloved sons, I embrace you in the Lord, entreating him to *protect you from all evil*, and to support you as he did Job, to give you grace as he gave to Joseph, gentleness as to Moses and valour in battle as to Joshua, the son of Nun, mastery of thought as to the judges, victory over enemies as to King David and King Solomon, fertile land as to the Israelites.... May he grant you forgiveness of your sins with the healing of the body as he did to the paralytic. May he save you from the waters as he did Peter and snatch you from troubles as he did Paul and the other Apostles. *May he protect you from every evil*, as his true children, and grant you your heart’s desire, for the advantage of your soul and your body, in his name. Amen” (Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, *Epistolario* 194: *Collana di Testi Patristici*, XCIII, Rome, 1991, pp. 235-236).

## Canticle in the Book of Revelation (15:3-4)

11 May 2005

*“Just and true are your ways!”*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Brief and solemn, incisive and grandiose in tone: this is the Canticle we have now heard and thus made our own, raising it to the “Lord God the Almighty” (Rev 15:3) as a hymn of praise. It is one of the many prayerful texts with which the Book of Revelation is studded, the last book of Sacred Scripture, a book of judgment, salvation and above all, of hope.

History, in fact, is not in the hands of the powers of darkness, chance or human decisions alone. When evil energy that we see is unleashed, when Satan vehemently bursts in, when a multitude of scourges and ills surface, the Lord, the supreme arbiter of historical events, arises. He leads history wisely towards the dawn of the new heavens and the new earth of which, in the image of the new Jerusalem, the last part of the Book of Revelation sings (cf. 21-22).

It is the just of history, the victors over the Satanic Beast, who intone this Canticle on which we now intend to meditate. It is they who, through their apparent defeat in martyrdom, are in fact the true builders of the new world, with God, the supreme Architect.

2. They begin by exalting the “great and wonderful” “deeds” and “ways” of the Lord that are “just and true” (cf. v. 3). The language used in this Canticle is characteristic of the Exodus of Israel from the slavery in Egypt. The first Canticle of Moses, which he proclaimed after the Red Sea crossing, celebrates the Lord who is “terrible in renown, worker of wonders” (Ex 15:11). His second Canticle, cited in Deuteronomy towards the end of the great legislator’s life, reaffirms “how faultless are his deeds, how right all his ways” (Dt 32:4).

There is consequently a desire to reaffirm that God is not indifferent to human events but penetrates them, creating his own “ways” or, in other words, his effective plans and “deeds”.

3. According to our hymn, his divine intervention has a very precise purpose: to be a sign that invites all the peoples of the earth to conversion. The hymn thus invites all of us, ever anew, to conversion. The nations must learn to “read” God’s message in history. The adventure of humanity is not confused and meaningless, nor is it doomed never to be appealed against or to be abused by the overbearing and the perverse.

It is possible to discern the divine action that is concealed in history. The Second Vatican Council, in the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, also invites believers to examine the signs of the times in the light of the Gospel, in order to find in them a manifestation of God’s action (cf. nn. 4, 11). This attitude of faith leads men and women to recognize the power of God who works in history and thus to open themselves to feeling awe for the name of the Lord. In biblical language, in fact, this “fear” is not fright, it does not denote fear, for fear of God is something quite different. It is recognition of the mystery of divine transcendence. Thus, it is at the root of faith and is interwoven with love. Sacred Scripture says in Deuteronomy: “What does the Lord, your God, ask of you but to fear the Lord, your God, and... to love... the Lord, your God, with all your heart and all your soul”



(cf. Dt 10:12). As St Hilary of Poitiers, a fourth-century Bishop, said: “All our fear is in love”.

Along these lines, in our brief hymn taken from Revelation, fear and the glorification of God are combined. The hymn says: “Who shall not fear and glorify your name, O Lord?” (15:4). Thanks to fear of the Lord we are not afraid of the evil that rages in history and we vigorously resume our journey through life. It is precisely thanks to fear of God that we are not afraid of the world and of all these problems, that we are not afraid of people, for God is more powerful. Pope John XXIII once said, “Those who believe do not tremble because, fearing God who is good, they are not afraid of the world or of the future”. And this is what the Prophet Isaiah says: “Strengthen the hands that are feeble, make firm the knees that are weak. Say to those whose hearts are frightened: “Be strong, fear not!” (Is 35:3-4).

4. The hymn concludes by foretelling that a universal procession of peoples will come and worship the Lord of history, revealed through his “just and true judgments” (cf. Rev 15:4). They will prostrate themselves in adoration. And the one Lord and Saviour seems to repeat to them the words he spoke on the last evening of his earthly life when he said to his Apostles: “Take courage! I have overcome the world!” (Jn 16:33).

Let us conclude our brief reflection on the “song of the Lamb” (cf. Rev 15:3), sung by the just of Revelation, with an ancient hymn of the *Lucernarium*, that is, a prayer at Vespers that was formerly known to St Basil the Great of Cesarea. This hymn says: “Come sunset, when we see the evening twilight fall, let us praise the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit of God. You deserve to be praised at every moment by holy voices, Son of God, you who give life. For this the world glorifies you (S. Pricoco-M. Simonetti, *La preghiera dei cristiani*, Milan, 2000, p. 97).

Thank you!

## **Psalm 113[112]**

18 May 2005

*“Praise the name of the Lord!”*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Before entering into a brief interpretation of the Psalm just sung, I would like to remind you that today is the birthday of our beloved Pope John Paul II, who would have been 85 years old. We are certain that he sees us from heaven and is with us. On this occasion we

want to tell the Lord a heartfelt “thank you” for the gift of this Pope and to say “thank you” to the Pope himself for all that he did and suffered.

1. We have just heard, in its simplicity and beauty, Psalm 113[112], a true introduction into a small group of Psalms that go from 113[112] to 118[117], commonly known as the “Egyptian Hallel”. It is the Alleluia, or song of praise, that exalts the liberation from Pharaoh’s slavery and the joy of Israel to serve the Lord freely in the Promised Land (cf. Ps 114[113]).

The Jewish tradition intentionally connected this series of Psalms to the Paschal liturgy. The celebration of that event, according to its historical-social and, more especially, spiritual dimensions, was perceived as a sign of liberation from the multifaceted forms of evil.

Psalm 113[112] is a brief hymn that in its original Hebrew consists of only 60 or so words, all imbued with sentiments of trust, praise and joy.

2. The first strophe (cf. Ps 113[112]:1-3) praises “the name of the Lord” who, as is known, indicates in Biblical language the person of God himself, his presence, living and working in human history.

Three times, with impassioned insistence, the “name of the Lord” resounds at the centre of the prayer of adoration. All being and all time - “from the rising of the sun to its setting”, as the Psalmist says (v. 3) - are involved in a single action of grace. It is as if a ceaseless breath were rising from earth to heaven to praise the Lord, Creator of the universe and King of history.

3. Precisely by means of this ascending movement, the Psalm leads us to the divine mystery. Indeed, the second part (cf. vv. 4-6) celebrates the Lord’s transcendence, described with vertical images that go beyond the mere human horizon. It is proclaimed: the Lord is “sublime”, “enthroned on high”, and no one is equal; also, to look at the heavens he must “stoop”, since “above the heavens is his glory” (v. 4).

The divine gaze watches over all realities, over all beings, earthly and heavenly. However, his eyes are not arrogant and distant, like that of a cold emperor. The Lord, the Psalmist says, “stoops... to look” (v. 6).

4. In this way, we pass to the last part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 7-9), which moves the attention from the heights of the heavens to our earthly horizon. The Lord attentively stoops down towards our littleness and poverty, which drives us to withdraw in fear. He looks directly, with his loving gaze and his real concern, upon the world’s lowly and poor: “From the dust he lifts up the lowly, from his misery he raises the poor” (v. 7).

God bends down, therefore, to console the needy and those who suffer; this word finds its ultimate wealth, its ultimate meaning in the moment in which God bends over to the point of bending down, of becoming one of us, one of the world's poor. He bestows the greatest honour on the poor, that of sitting "in the company of princes, yes, with the princes of his people" (v. 8). To the abandoned and childless woman, humiliated by ancient society as if she were a worthless, dead branch, God gives the honour and the immense joy of many children (cf. v. 9). And so, the Psalmist praises a God who is very different from us in his grandeur, but at the same time very close to his suffering creatures.

It is easy to draw from these final verses of Psalm 113[112] the prefiguration of the words of Mary in the Magnificat, the Canticle of God's chosen one, who "looked with favour on his lowly servant". More radically than our Psalm, Mary proclaims that God "casts down the mighty from their thrones and lifts up the lowly" (cf. Lk 1:48, 52; Ps 113 [112]:6-8).

5. A very ancient "Hymn of Vespers", preserved in the so-called Apostolic Constitutions (VII, 48), takes up once more and develops the joyful introduction to our Psalm. We recall it here, at the end of our reflection, to highlight the customary "Christian" re-reading of the Psalms done by the early community: "Praise the Lord, O children, praise the name of the Lord. We worship you, we sing to you, we praise you for your immense glory. Lord King, Father of Christ, spotless Lamb who takes away the sin of the world. To you all praise, to you our song, to you the glory, to God the Father through the Son in the Spirit, for ever and ever. Amen" (S. Pricoco M. Simonetti, *La preghiera dei cristiani*, Milan, 2000, p. 97).

## Psalm 116[115]

25 May 2005

### *Prayer of thanksgiving to the Lord*

1. Psalm 116[115], which we have just prayed, has always been in use in the Christian tradition, beginning with St Paul who, citing the introduction of the Greek translation of the Septuagint, wrote to the Christians of Corinth: "Since we have the same spirit of faith as he had, who wrote, 'I believed, and so I spoke', we too believe, and so we speak" (II Cor 4:13).

The Apostle feels in spiritual harmony with the Psalmist, in serene trust and sincere witness, notwithstanding suffering and human weakness. Writing to the Romans, Paul takes up again verse two of the Psalm and highlights a difference between God who is

faithful and man who is inconsistent: “God must be proved true even though every man be proved a liar” (Rom 3:4).

The Christian tradition has read, prayed and interpreted the text in different contexts and thus all the wealth and depth of the Word of God appears, which opens new dimensions and new situations. Initially it was read above all as a text for martyrdom, but then in the peaceful Church it increasingly became a Eucharistic text because of the phrase “cup of salvation”. In reality, Christ is the first martyr. He gave up his life in a context of hate and falsehood, but he transformed this anguish - and thus also this context - into the Eucharist: into a festive thanksgiving. The Eucharist is thanksgiving: “I will lift up the cup of salvation”.

2. In the original Hebrew, Psalm 116[115] forms a single composition with Psalm 115[114], which it follows. Both are the same thanksgiving, directed to the Lord who frees from the nightmare of death, from contexts of hate and lies.

In our text the memory of a distressing past surfaces: the person praying has held high the torch of faith, even when on his lips played the bitterness of despair and unhappiness (cf. Ps 116[115]:10). Indeed, around him an icy curtain of hatred and deceit is being raised, as the neighbour shows himself to be false and unfaithful (cf. v. 11).

The supplication, however, is now transformed into gratitude because the Lord has remained faithful in this context of infidelity and has saved his faithful [servant] from the dark vortex of lies (cf. v. 11). So, this psalm is for us a text of hope, because even in difficult situations the Lord does not leave us, and therefore we must hold the torch of faith on high.

The person praying thus prepares to offer a sacrifice of thanksgiving, in which he will drink from the ritual chalice, the cup of sacred libation that is a sign of acknowledgement for having been freed (cf. v. 13), and find ultimate fulfilment in the Chalice of the Lord. Thus, the Liturgy is the privileged place to raise up acceptable praise to God the Saviour.

3. Indeed, explicit reference is made, other than to the sacrificial rite, also to the assembly of “all his people”, in front of which the person praying fulfils his vows and witnesses to his faith (cf. v. 14). It will be in this circumstance that he will make his gratitude public, knowing well that, even when death is imminent, the Lord bends lovingly over him. God is not indifferent to the drama of his creature, but breaks his chains (cf. v. 16).

The person praying, saved from death, feels himself to be a “servant” of the Lord, “son of your handmaid” (ibid.), a beautiful Eastern expression to indicate one who has been born in the master’s own household. The Psalmist humbly and joyfully professes his belonging to the house of God, to the family of creatures united to him in love and fidelity.

4. The Psalm finishes, always through the words of the person praying, by re-evoking the rite of thanksgiving that will be celebrated in the “courts of the temple” (cf. vv. 17-19). In this way, his prayer is situated in a community setting. His personal ups and downs are spoken of so that it will serve as an incentive for everyone to believe in and to love the Lord.

Therefore, we can perceive in the background the entire people of God as the person praying thanks the Lord of life, who does not abandon the righteous in the dark womb of suffering and death but leads them to hope and life.

5. We conclude our reflection by entrusting ourselves to the words of St Basil the Great who, in the Homily on Psalm 115, commented on the question and answer contained in the Psalm as follows: “‘How shall I make a return to the Lord for all the good he has done for me? The cup of salvation I will take up’. The Psalmist has understood the multitude of gifts he has received from God: from non-existence he has been led into being, he has been formed from the earth and given the ability to reason... he then perceived the economy of salvation to be to the benefit of the human race, acknowledging that the Lord gave himself up to redeem all of us; and he hesitates, searching among all of the goods that belong to him for a gift that might be worthy of the Lord. “How then, shall I make a return to the Lord? Not sacrifices nor holocausts... but my entire life itself. For this he says: “I will lift up the cup of salvation’, giving the name “cup’ to the suffering of spiritual combat, of resisting sin to the point of death; besides, that is what our Saviour taught us in the Gospel: “Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass me by’; and again to the Apostles: “Can you drink the cup I shall drink?’, clearly symbolizing the death that he welcomed for the salvation of the world” (PG XXX, 109), thus transforming the sinful world into a redeemed world, into a world of thanksgiving for the life the Lord gives us.

## **Canticle in Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11)**

1st June 2005

### *He humbled himself*

1. In every Sunday celebration of Vespers the liturgy proposes anew the Christological hymn of the Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2:6-11) which is short but laden with meaning. We are examining the first part of this hymn that has just resounded (vv. 6-8), in which the paradoxical “self-emptying” of the Divine Word is described as he divests himself of his glory and takes on the human condition.

Christ, incarnate and humiliated by the most shameful death of crucifixion, is held up as a vital model for Christians. Indeed, as is clear from the context, their “attitude must be

that of Christ” (v. 5), and their sentiments, humility and self-giving, detachment and generosity.

2. He certainly possesses the divine nature with all its prerogatives. But this transcendent reality is not interpreted or lived out under the banner of power, greatness and dominion. Christ does not use his equality with God, his glorious dignity or his power as an instrument of triumph, a sign of remoteness or an expression of incontestable supremacy (cf. v. 6). On the contrary, he strips or “empties himself”, immersing himself without reserve in our weak and wretched human condition. In Christ the divine “form” (morphe) is concealed beneath the human “form” (morphe), that is, beneath our reality marked by suffering, poverty, limitation and death (cf. v. 7).

Consequently, it was not a mere disguise or a change in appearance such as people believed the deities of the Greco-Roman culture could assume. The form Christ took was divine reality in an authentically human experience. God does not appear only as a man, but he makes himself man and truly becomes one of us, he truly becomes the “God-with-us” who is not satisfied with looking down kindly upon us from the throne of his glory, but plunges in person into human history, becoming “flesh” or, in other words, a fragile reality, conditioned by time and space (cf. Jn 1:14).

3. This radical and true sharing in the human condition, with the exception of sin (cf. Heb 4:15), leads Jesus to the boundary that is a sign of our finite condition and transience: death. However, it is not the product of an obscure mechanism or a blind fatalism. It stems from his free choice of obedience to the Father’s plan of salvation (cf. Phil 2:8).

The Apostle adds that the death Jesus encounters is death on a cross, actually the most disgraceful death; he thereby desires to be truly a brother to every man and every woman, also of those who are forced to suffer an atrocious or ignominious end.

But it was precisely in his passion and death that Christ witnessed to his free and conscious obedience to the Father’s will, as we read in the Letter to the Hebrews: “Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered” (Heb 5:8).

Let us conclude here our reflection on the first part of the Christological hymn that is centred on the Incarnation and the redeeming passion. We will have an opportunity later to examine the subsequent paschal development that leads from the Cross to glory.

The basic element of this first part of the Canticle seems to me to be the invitation to enter into Jesus’ sentiments. Entering into the sentiments of Jesus means not considering power, riches and prestige as the supreme values in our lives, for basically they do not respond to our most profound spiritual thirst, but rather, by opening our hearts to the Other, carrying with the Other our life’s burden and opening ourselves to Our Heavenly Father with a sense of obedience and trust, knowing that by such

obedience to the Father, we will be free. Entering into the sentiments of Jesus: this should be our daily practice of living as Christians.

4. Let us conclude our reflection with a great witness of the Eastern tradition, Theodoret, who was Bishop of Cyr, Syria, in the fifth century. “The Incarnation of Our Lord is the most exalted expression of divine concern for human beings. Indeed, neither heaven nor earth nor the sea nor the air nor the sun nor the moon nor the stars nor the whole visible and invisible universe, created by his one word, or rather, brought to light by his word in conformity with his will, show his immeasurable goodness as does the fact that the Only-begotten Son of God, the One who subsisted in the nature of God (cf. Phil 2:6), a reflection of his glory, bearing the stamp of his substance (cf. Heb 1:3), who was in the beginning, was with God and was God, through whom all things were made (cf. Jn 1:1-3), after having taken on the nature of a slave, appeared in the form of a man; because of his human figure he was considered a man, he was seen on earth, he had relationships with people, he burdened himself with our infirmities and took upon his own shoulders our sicknesses” (Discorsi sulla provvidenza divina, 10: Collana di testi patristici, LXXV, Rome, 1988, pp. 250-251).

Theodoret of Cyr continues his reflection by shedding light on the close connection, highlighted in the hymn of the Letter to the Philippians, between the Incarnation of Jesus and the redemption of humanity. “The Creator worked with wisdom and justice for our salvation. Since he did not wish to use his power alone to lavish upon us the gift of freedom, nor solely to arm mercy against the one who subjugated the human race, to ensure that they would not accuse mercy of injustice; rather, he conceived of a way full of love for human beings and at the same time adorned with justice. Indeed, having united in himself human nature, henceforth overcome, he leads it into battle and disposes that it shelter from defeat, to rout the one who had once wickedly been victorious, to free it from the tyranny of the one who had cruelly enslaved it and to recover its original freedom” (ibid., pp. 251-252).

## Psalm 111[110]

8 June 2005

### *To fear the Lord*

Evening Prayer - Sunday of Week Three

1. Today we feel a strong wind. The wind in Sacred Scripture is a symbol of the Holy Spirit. We hope that the Holy Spirit will illumine us now in our meditation on Psalm 111[110] that we have just heard.

In this Psalm we find a hymn of praise and thanksgiving for the many benefits that describe God in his attributes and his work of salvation: the Psalmist speaks of “compassion”, “love”, “justice”, “might”, “truth”, “uprightness”, “standing firm”, “covenant”, “works”, “wonders”, even “food” which God provides, and lastly his glorious “name”, that is, God himself.

Thus, prayer is contemplation of the mystery of God and the wonders that he works in the history of salvation.

2. The Psalm begins with the verb “to thank” that not only wells up from the heart of the person praying but also from the whole liturgical assembly (cf. v. 1). The subject of this prayer, which also includes the rite of thanksgiving, is expressed with the word “works” (cf. vv. 2, 3, 6, 7). “Works” indicate the saving interventions of the Lord, an expression of his “justice” (cf. v. 3), a word which, in biblical language, suggests in the very first place the love from which salvation is born.

Therefore, the heart of the Psalm becomes a hymn to the covenant (cf. vv. 4-9), that intimate bond which binds God to his people and entails a series of attitudes and gestures. Thus, the Psalmist speaks of “compassion and love” (cf. v. 4) in the wake of the great proclamation on Sinai: “The Lord, the Lord, a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity” (Ex 34:6).

“Compassion” is the divine grace that envelops and transfigures the faithful, while “love” is expressed in the original Hebrew with the use of a characteristic term that refers to the maternal “womb” of the Lord, even more merciful than that of a mother (cf. Is 49:15).

3. This bond of love includes the fundamental gift of food and therefore of life (cf. Ps 111[110]:5), which the Christian interpretation was to identify with the Eucharist, as St Jerome says: “As food he gave the Bread come down from Heaven: if we are worthy of it, let us eat it!” (Breviarium in Psalmos, 110: PL XXVI, 1238-1239).

Then, there is the gift of land, “the lands of the nations” (Ps 111[110]:6), which alludes to the great event of the Exodus when the Lord revealed himself as the God of liberation. The synthesis of the central body of this hymn is therefore to be sought in the theme of the special covenant between the Lord and his people, as stated in the lapidary declaration in v. 9: “He has... established his covenant for ever”.

4. The end of Psalm 111[110] is sealed by contemplation of the divine face, the Lord’s very person, symbolized by his holy and transcendent “name”. Next, quoting a sapiential saying (cf. Prov 1:7; 9:10, 15:33), the Psalmist invites every member of the faithful to cultivate “fear of the Lord” (Ps 111[110]:10), the beginning of true wisdom. It is not fear and terror that are suggested by this word, but serious and sincere respect which is the fruit of love, a genuine and active attachment to God the Liberator.



And if the very first word of the hymn is a word of thanksgiving, the last word is a word of praise: just as the Lord's saving justice "[stands] firm for ever" (v. 3), the gratitude of the praying person knows no bounds and re-echoes in his ceaseless prayer (cf. v. 10).

To sum up, the Psalm invites us, lastly, to discover the many good things that the Lord gives us every day. We more readily perceive the negative aspects of our lives. The Psalm invites us also to see the positive things, the many gifts we receive, and thus to discover gratitude, for only in a grateful heart can the great liturgy of gratitude be celebrated: the Eucharist.

5. At the end of our reflection, let us meditate with the ecclesial tradition of the early centuries of Christianity on the final verse with its celebrated declaration, which is reiterated elsewhere in the Bible (cf. Prov 1:7): "to fear the Lord is the first stage of wisdom" (Ps 111[110]:10).

The Christian writer Barsanuphius of Gaza (active in the first half of the sixth century) comments on this verse: "What is the first stage of wisdom if not the avoidance of all that is hateful to God? And how can one avoid it, other than by first asking for advice before acting, or by saying nothing that should not be said, and in addition, by considering oneself foolish, stupid, contemptible and of no worth whatsoever?" (Epistolario, 234: Collana di testi patristici, XCIII, Rome, 1991, pp. 265-266).

However, John Cassian (who lived between the fourth and fifth centuries) preferred to explain that "there is a great difference between love, which lacks nothing and is the treasure of wisdom and knowledge, and imperfect love, called 'the first stage of wisdom'. The latter, which in itself contains the idea of punishment, is excluded from the hearts of the perfect because they have reached the fullness of love" (Conferenze ai monaci, 2, 11, 13: Collana di testi patristici, CLVI, Rome, 2000, p. 29).

Thus, on the journey through life towards Christ, our initial servile fear is replaced by perfect awe which is love, a gift of the Holy Spirit.

## **Psalm 123[122]**

15 June 2005

## *“Have mercy on us!”*

*Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Three*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Unfortunately, you have suffered under the rain. Let us hope that the weather will now improve.

1. Jesus very vigorously affirms in the Gospel that the eyes are an expressive symbol of the innermost self, a mirror of the soul (cf. Mt 6:22-23). Well, Psalm 123[122], which has just been proclaimed, is the focal point of an exchange of glances: the faithful person lifts his eyes to the Lord, awaiting a divine reaction, ready to glimpse a gesture of love or a look of kindness. We too, as it were, raise our eyes and await a gesture of benevolence from the Lord.

The gaze of the Most High who “looks down on the sons of men to see if any are wise, if any seek God” (Ps 14[13]:2), is often mentioned in the Psalter. The Psalmist, as we have heard, uses an image, that of the servant and slave who look to their master, waiting for him to make a decision that will set them free.

Even if this scene is connected with the ancient world and its social structures, the idea is clear and full of meaning: the image taken from the world of the ancient East is intended to exalt the attachment of the poor, the hope of the oppressed and the availability of the just to the Lord.

2. The person of prayer is waiting for the divine hands to move because they will act justly and destroy evil. This is why, in the Psalter, the one praying raises his hope-filled eyes to the Lord. “My eyes are always on the Lord; for he rescues my feet from the snare” (Ps 25[24]:15), while “My eyes are wasted away from looking for my God” (Ps 69[68]:4).

Psalm 123[122] is an entreaty in which the voice of one of the faithful joins that of the whole community: indeed, the Psalm passes from the first person singular, “I lifted up my eyes”, to the first person plural, “our eyes” and “show us his mercy” (cf. vv. 1-3). The Psalmist expresses the hope that the Lord will open his hands to lavish his gifts of justice and freedom upon us. The just person waits for God’s gaze to reveal itself in all its tenderness and goodness, as one reads in the ancient priestly blessing from the Book of Numbers: “The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you: the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace!” (Nm 6:25-26).

3. The great importance of God’s loving gaze is revealed in the second part of the Psalm which features the invocation: “Have mercy on us, Lord, have mercy” (Ps 123[122]:3), that

comes in continuity with the finale of the first part in which trusting expectation is reaffirmed, “till [the Lord our God] show us his mercy” (cf. v. 2).

The faithful are in need of God’s intervention because they are in a painful plight, suffering the contempt and disdain of overbearing people. The image the Psalmist uses here is that of satiety: “We are filled with contempt. Indeed, all too full is our soul with the scorn of the rich, with the proud man’s disdain” (vv. 3-4).

The traditional biblical fullness of food and years, considered a sign of divine blessing, is now countered by an intolerable satiety composed of an excessive load of humiliations. And we know today that many nations, many individuals, are truly burdened with derision, with the contempt of the rich and the disdain of the proud. Let us pray for them and let us help these humiliated brethren of ours.

Thus, the righteous have entrusted their cause to the Lord; he is not indifferent to their beseeching eyes nor does he ignore their plea - and ours - or disappoint their hope.

4. To conclude, let us make room for the voice of St Ambrose, the great Archbishop of Milan who, in the Psalmist’s spirit, gives poetical rhythm to the work of God that reaches us through Jesus the Saviour: “Christ is everything for us. If you wish to cure a wound, he is doctor; if you burn with fever, he is fountain; if you are oppressed by iniquity, he is justice; if you are in need of help, he is strength; if you fear death, he is life; if you desire heaven, he is the way; if you flee from darkness, he is light; if you seek food, he is nourishment” (La verginità, 99: SAEMO, XIV/2, Milan-Rome, 1989, p. 81).

## Psalm 124[123]

22 June 2005

*“If the Lord had not been on our side”*

*Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Three*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. We have before us Psalm 124[123], a song of thanksgiving intoned by the whole community in prayer, raising praise to God for the gift of liberation. The Psalmist opens by proclaiming the invitation: “This is Israel’s song” (v. 1), thus encouraging all the people to raise lively and sincere thanks to God the Saviour. If the Lord had not taken the victims’ side, with their limited strength they would have been powerless to free themselves; their adversaries, like monsters, would have torn and shattered them.

Although this Psalm has been thought to refer to some specific historical event, such as the end of the Babylonian exile, it is more likely that it was intended as a heartfelt hymn to thank the Lord for being saved from peril and a plea for liberation from all evil. In this regard it is a Psalm that is ever timely.

2. After the initial reference to certain “men” who rose up against the faithful and would have “swallowed them alive” (cf. vv. 2-3), the song has two passages. In the first, the raging waters, a biblical symbol of devastating chaos, evil and death, predominate: “Then would the waters have engulfed us, the torrent gone over us; over our head would have swept the raging waters” (vv. 4-5). The person of prayer now has the feeling that he lies on a beach, miraculously saved from the pounding fury of the waves.

Human life is surrounded by the snares of evil lying in wait that not only attack the person’s life but also aim at destroying all human values. We see how these dangers exist even now. However, the Lord rises - and we can be sure of this also today - to preserve the just and save him, as the Psalmist sings in Psalm 18[17]: “From on high he reached down and seized me; he drew me forth from the mighty waters. He snatched me from my powerful foe, from my enemies... the Lord was my support. He brought me forth into freedom, he saved me because he loved me” (vv. 17-20).

3. The second part of our thanksgiving hymn shifts from the marine image to a hunting scene, typical of many Psalms of supplication (cf. Ps 124[123]:6-8). Here, in fact, the Psalm evokes a wild beast clenching its prey between its teeth or the snare of fowlers that captures a bird. But the blessing this Psalm expresses enables us to understand that the destiny of the faithful, that was a destiny of death, has been radically changed by a saving intervention: “Blessed be the Lord who did not give us a prey to their teeth! Our life, like a bird, has escaped from the snare of the fowler. Indeed the snare has been broken and we have escaped” (vv. 6-7).

Here, prayer becomes a sigh of relief that wells up from the depths of the soul: even when all human hopes are destroyed, the divine liberating power can appear. The Psalmist can thus conclude with a profession of faith, which has been part of the Christian liturgy for centuries, as an ideal premise for all our prayers: “Adiutorium nostrum in nomine Domini, qui fecit caelum et terram - Our help is in the name of the Lord, who made heaven and earth” (v. 8). In particular, the Almighty takes the side of the victims and the persecuted “who call out to him day and night” and he “will give them swift justice” (cf. Lk 18:7-8).

4. St Augustine comments clearly on this Psalm. He first observes that it is fittingly sung by the “members of Christ who have reached blessedness”. In particular, “it has been sung by the holy martyrs who, upon leaving this world are with Christ in joy, ready to

take up incorrupt again those same bodies that were previously corruptible. In life they suffered torments in the body, but in eternity these torments will be transformed into ornaments of justice”.

However, in a second instance the Bishop of Hippo tells us that we too, not only the blessed in Heaven, can sing this Psalm with hope. He declares: “We too are enlivened by unfailing hope and will sing in exaltation. Indeed, the singers of this Psalm are not strangers to us.... Therefore, let us all sing with one heart: both the saints who already possess the crown as well as ourselves, who with affection and hope unite ourselves to their crown. Together we desire the life that we do not have here below, but that we will never obtain if we have not first desired it”.

St Augustine then returns to his former perspective and explains: “The saints think back to the sufferings they encountered, and from that place of bliss and peace where they are now, look at the path they trod to arrive there; and since it would have been difficult to attain deliverance had the hand of the Liberator not intervened to rescue them, they joyfully exclaim: “If the Lord had not been on our side’. This is how their song begins. So great is their joy that they never even speak of that from which they have escaped” (Exposition on Psalm 123:3: Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, XXVIII, Rome 1977, p. 65).

## **Canticle in Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-14)**

6 July 2005

*“He chose us”*

*Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Three*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Today we have heard not a Psalm but a Hymn from the Letter to the Ephesians (cf. Eph 1:3-14), a hymn that recurs in the Liturgy of Vespers in each one of the four weeks. This hymn is a prayer of blessing addressed to God the Father. It develops and describes the various stages of the plan of salvation, fulfilled through the work of Christ.

At the centre of the blessing the Greek word *mysterion* rings out, a term usually associated with verbs of revelation (“to reveal”, “to know”, “to manifest”). In fact, this is the great and secret project which the Father had kept to himself since time immemorial (cf. v. 9) and which he decided to bring about and reveal in “the fullness of time” (cf. v. 10) through Jesus Christ, his Son.

The stages of this plan correspond in the hymn with the saving actions of God through Christ in the Spirit. The Father, first of all - this is his first act - chooses us from eternity so that we may be holy and blameless in love (cf. v. 4), then he predestines us to be his sons (cf. vv. 5-6), and in addition, he redeems us and forgives our sins (cf. vv. 7-8), fully reveals to us the mystery of salvation in Christ (cf. vv. 9-10) and finally, he offers the eternal inheritance to us (cf. vv. 11-12), already giving us a pledge of it now in the gift of the Holy Spirit, with a view to the final resurrection (cf. vv. 13-14).

2. There are, therefore, many saving events that follow one another as the hymn unfolds. They involve the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity: starting with the Father, who is the Initiator and supreme Creator of the plan of salvation: the focus is then centred on the Son, who brings about the plan in history; then comes the Holy Spirit, who impresses his “seal” upon the whole work of salvation. Let us now reflect briefly on the first two stages: holiness and sonship (vv. 4-6).

The first divine act, revealed and brought about in Christ, is the choosing of believers, the result of a free and gratuitous initiative of God. In the beginning, therefore, “before the foundation of the world” (v. 4), in the eternity of God, divine grace was ready to come into action. I am moved to meditate upon this truth: from eternity we have been in God’s sight, and he decided to save us. The content of this calling is our “holiness”, a great word. Holiness is participation in the purity of the divine Being. But we know that God is love.

Participating in divine purity, therefore, means participating in the “charity” of God, conforming ourselves to God who is “charity”. “God is love” (I Jn 4:8, 16): this is the comforting truth that also makes us understand that “holiness” is not a reality remote from our own lives, but we enter into the mystery of “holiness” to the extent that we can become people who love together with God. Thus, the agape becomes our daily reality. We are therefore transferred to the sacred and vital horizon of God himself.

3. We proceed along these lines towards the next stage that has also been contemplated in the divine plan since eternity: our “predestination” as children of God, who are not only human creatures, but truly belong to God as his children.

Paul has exalted elsewhere (cf. Gal 4:5; Rom 8:15, 23) the sublime condition of sonship that implies and results from brotherhood with Christ, the Son par excellence, the “first-born of many brothers” (Rom 8:29), as well as intimacy with the heavenly Father who can henceforth be invoked as Abba, whom we can address as “beloved Father” in the sense of a real familiarity with God, in a spontaneous and loving relationship.

We are therefore in the presence of an immense gift, made possible by the “purpose of [the divine] will” and by “grace”, a luminous expression of the love that saves.

4. Let us now listen to the great Bishop of Milan, St Ambrose, who in one of his letters comments on the words the Apostle Paul addressed to the Ephesians, reflecting on the rich content of our own Christological Hymn. He first emphasizes the superabundant grace with which God has made us his adoptive children in Jesus Christ. “Consequently, there is no need to doubt that the members are united to their Head, above all because we were predestined from the very start to be adopted as children of God through Jesus Christ” (Letter XVI ad Ireneo, 4: SAEMO, XIX, Milan-Rome, 1988, p. 161).

The holy Bishop of Milan continued his reflection, observing: “Who is rich other than God alone, Creator of all things?”. And he concludes: “But he is far richer in mercy for he has redeemed us all and - as the author of nature - has transformed us, who in accordance with the nature of flesh were children of anger and subject to punishment, so that we might be children of peace and love” (ibid., 7, p. 163).

## Psalm 125 [124]

3 August 2005

*“On Israel, peace!”*

Evening Prayer - Tuesday of Week Three

Brothers and Sisters,

1. After my holidays spent in the Aosta Valley, our journey in the Liturgy of Vespers continues at this meeting. Psalm 125[124] is now our focus; it is part of that intense and evocative collection known as the “Songs of Ascents”, an ideal little prayer book for the pilgrimage to Zion with a view to the encounter with the Lord in the temple (cf. Ps 120[119]-134[133]).

We shall now meditate briefly on a sapiential text that gives rise to trust in the Lord and contains a short prayer (cf. Ps 125[124]:4).

The first sentence proclaims the stability of “those who put their trust in the Lord”, comparing it to the safety and firmness of “Mount Zion”, that “cannot be shaken”. This is obviously due to the presence of God, “rock, fortress, saviour... refuge, shield, mighty help, stronghold”, as another Psalm says (cf. 18[17]:3).

Even when the believer feels lonely and is surrounded by risks and hostility, his faith must be serene because the Lord is always with us; his power surrounds us and protects us.

The Prophet Isaiah also testifies to hearing God speak these words, destined for the faithful: “See, I am laying a stone in Zion, a stone that has been tested, a precious cornerstone as a sure foundation; he who puts his faith in it shall not be shaken” (Is 28:16).

2. However, the Psalmist continues, the trust that is the atmosphere of faith of the faithful has a further support: the Lord is, as it were, encamped to defend his people, just as the mountains that surround Jerusalem make it a naturally fortified city (cf. Ps 125[124]:2). In a prophecy by Zechariah, God says of Jerusalem: “I will be for her an encircling wall of fire... and I will be the glory in her midst” (Zec 2:9).

In this atmosphere of deeply-rooted trust, which is the atmosphere of faith, the Psalmist reassures “the upright of heart”, the believers. Their situation in itself can be worrying because of the tyranny of the wicked, who wish to impose their domination.

There might also be a temptation for the just to make themselves accomplices of evil to avoid serious difficulties, but the Lord protects them from oppression: “For the sceptre of the wicked shall not rest over the land of the just” (Ps 125[124]:3); at the same time, he preserves them from the temptation to turn their hands to evil (cf. *ibid.*).

Thus, the Psalm instils deep trust in the soul. This is a powerful help in facing difficult situations when the external crisis of loneliness, irony and contempt of believers is associated with the interior crisis that consists of discouragement, mediocrity and weariness. We know this situation, but the Psalm tells us that if we have trust, we are stronger than these evils.

3. The finale of the Psalm contains the prayer addressed to the Lord for the “good” and the “upright of heart” (cf. v. 4), and an announcement of misfortune to “the crooked and those who do evil” (v. 5).

On the one hand, the Psalmist asks the Lord to manifest himself as a loving father to the just and the faithful who bear aloft the torch of a righteous life and a clear conscience.

On the other hand, the hope is expressed that he will prove to be a just judge to those who have taken the winding path of evil, which leads ultimately to death.

The Psalm is sealed by the traditional greeting, shalom, “On Israel, peace”, a greeting that by assonance rhymes with Jerushalajim, on Jerusalem (cf. v. 2), the city that is a symbol of peace and holiness.

This greeting becomes a wish of hope: We can explain it in St Paul’s words: “Peace and mercy on all who follow this rule of life, and on the Israel of God” (Gal 6:16).



4. In his commentary on this Psalm, St Augustine compares “the crooked and those who do evil” with “the upright of heart”, who never stray from God. If the former are to find themselves associated with the destiny of “those who do evil”, what will be the destiny of the “upright of heart”?

In the hope that together with his listeners he too will share in their happy destiny, the Bishop of Hippo wonders: “What will we possess? What will be our inheritance? What will be our homeland? What will it be called?”.

And he answers himself, pointing out its name. I make these words my own: “Peace. We greet you with the wish of peace; I proclaim peace to you; may the mountains receive peace, while justice spreads over the hills (cf. Ps 72[71]:3). Now, our peace is Christ: Indeed, “It is he who is our peace’ (Eph 2:14)” (Esposizioni sui Salmi, IV, Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, XXVIII, Rome, 1977, p. 105).

St Augustine concludes with an exhortation which at the same time is a wish: “We are the Israel of God and let us cling tightly to peace, for Jerusalem means a vision of peace and we are Israel: the Israel on which is peace” (ibid., p. 107), and peace is Christ.

## Psalm 131 [130]

10 August 2005

*“My heart is not proud”*

Evening Prayer - Tuesday of Week Three

1. We have listened to only a few words, about 30 in the original Hebrew, of Psalm 131[130]. Yet they are intense words that convey a topic dear to all religious literature: spiritual childhood. Our thoughts turn spontaneously to St Thérèse of Lisieux, to her “Little Way”, her “remaining little” in order to be held in Jesus’ arms (cf. Story of a Soul, Manuscript “C”, p. 208).

Indeed, the clear-cut image of a mother and child in the middle of the Psalm is a sign of God’s tender and maternal love, as the Prophet Hosea formerly expressed it: “When Israel was a child I loved him.... I drew [him] with human cords, with bands of love; I fostered [him] like one who raises an infant to his cheeks... I stooped to feed my child” (Hos 11:1, 4).

2. The Psalm begins by describing an attitude quite the opposite of infancy, which, well aware of its own frailty, trusts in the help of others. In the foreground of this Psalm, instead, are pride of heart, haughty eyes and “great things” that are “too sublime for me”

(cf. Ps 131[130]:1). This is an illustration of the proud person who is described by Hebrew words that suggest “pride” and “haughtiness”, the arrogant attitude of those who look down on others, considering them inferior.

The great temptation of the proud, who want to be like God, the arbiter of good and evil (cf. Gn 3:5), is decisively rejected by the person of prayer who chooses humble and spontaneous trust in the One Lord.

3. Thus, we move on to the unforgettable image of the mother and child. The original Hebrew text does not speak of a newborn child but of a child that has been “weaned” (Ps 131[130]:2). Now, it is known that in the ancient Near East a special celebration marked the official weaning of a child, usually at about the age of 3 (cf. Gn 21:8; I Sam 1:20-23; II Mc 7:27).

The child to which the Psalmist refers is now bound to the mother by a most personal and intimate bond, hence, not merely by physical contact and the need for food. It is a more conscious tie, although nonetheless immediate and spontaneous. This is the ideal Parable of the true “childhood” of the spirit that does not abandon itself to God blindly and automatically, but serenely and responsibly.

4. At this point, the praying person’s profession of trust is extended to the entire community: “O Israel, hope in the Lord both now and for ever” (Ps 131[130]:3). In the entire people which receives security, life and peace from God, hope now blossoms and extends from the present to the future, “now and for ever”.

It is easy to continue the prayer by making other voices in the Psalms ring out, inspired by this same trust in God: “To you I was committed at birth, from my mother’s womb you are my God” (Ps 22[21]:11). “Though my father and mother forsake me, yet will the Lord receive me” (Ps 27[26]:10). “For you are my hope, O Lord; my trust, O God, from my youth. On you I depend from birth; from my mother’s womb you are my strength” (Ps 71[70]:5-6).

5. Humble trust, as we have seen, is opposed by pride. John Cassian, a fourth-fifth century Christian writer, warned the faithful of the danger of this vice that “destroys all the virtues overall and does not only attack the tepid and the weak, but principally those who have forced their way to the top”.

He continues: “This is the reason why Blessed David preserved his heart with such great circumspection, to the point that he dared proclaim before the One whom none of the secrets of his conscience escaped: “Lord, may my heart not grow proud, nor my gaze be raised with haughtiness; let me not seek great things that are beyond my strength’.... Yet, knowing well how difficult such custody is even for those who are perfect, he does not presume to rely solely on his own abilities, but implores the Lord with prayers to help

him succeed in avoiding the darts of the enemy and in not being injured by them: “Let not the foot of the proud overtake me’ (Ps 36[35]:12)” (Le Istituzioni Cenobitiche, XII, 6, Abbey of Praglia, Bresseo di Teolo, Padua, 1989, p. 289).

Likewise, an anonymous elderly Desert Father has handed down to us this saying that echoes Psalm 131[130]: “I have never overstepped my rank to walk higher, nor have I ever been troubled in the case of humiliation, for I concentrated my every thought on this: praying the Lord to strip me of the old man” (I Padri del Deserto. Detti, Rome, 1980, p. 287).

## Psalm 126[125]

17 August 2005

*“Deliver us, O Lord”*

Evening Prayer - Wednesday of Week Three

1. Listening to the words of Psalm 126[125], one has the impression of seeing before one’s eyes the event of the “new Exodus” that is sung of in the second part of the Book of Isaiah: the return of Israel from the Babylonian Exile to the land of her fathers after the edict of the Persian King Cyrus in 538 B.C. It was thus a repetition of the joyful experience of the first Exodus, when the Jewish people were released from slavery in Egypt.

This Psalm acquired special significance when it was sung on the days when Israel felt threatened and afraid because she was once again being put to the test. Effectively, the Psalm contains a prayer for the return of the captives of that time (cf. v. 4). Thus, it became a prayer of the People of God in their historical wanderings, fraught with dangers and trials but ever open to trust in God the Saviour and Liberator, the support of the weak and the oppressed.

2. The Psalm introduces us into an atmosphere of exultation: people were laughing, celebrating their new-found freedom, and songs of joy were on their lips (cf. vv. 1-2).

There is a twofold reaction to the restored freedom.

On the one hand, the heathen nations recognized the greatness of the God of Israel: “What marvels the Lord worked for them!” (v. 2). The salvation of the Chosen People becomes a clear proof of the effective and powerful existence of God, present and active in history.

On the other hand, it is the People of God who profess their faith in the Lord who saves: “What marvels the Lord worked for us!” (v. 3).

3. Our thoughts then turn to the past, relived with a shudder of fear and affliction. Let us focus our attention on the agricultural image used by the Psalmist: “Those who are sowing in tears will sing when they reap” (v. 5). Under the burden of work, their faces are sometimes lined with tears: the sowing is laborious, perhaps doomed to uselessness and failure. But with the coming of the abundant, joyful harvest, they discover that their suffering has borne fruit.

The great lesson on the mystery of life’s fruitfulness that suffering can contain is condensed in this Psalm, just as Jesus said on the threshold of his passion and death: “Unless the grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat. But if it dies, it produces much fruit” (Jn 12:24).

4. Thus, the horizon of the Psalm opens to the festive harvest, a symbol of joy born from the freedom, peace and prosperity that are fruits of the divine blessing. This prayer, then, is a song of hope to turn back to when one is immersed in moments of trial, fear, threats and inner oppression.

But it can also become a more general appeal to live one’s days and make one’s decisions in an atmosphere of faithfulness. In the end, perseverance in good, even if it is misunderstood and opposed, always reaches a landing place of light, fruitfulness and peace.

This is what St Paul reminded the Galatians: “If [a man] sows in the field of the flesh, he will reap a harvest of corruption; but if his seed-ground is the spirit, he will reap everlasting life. Let us not grow weary of doing good; if we do not relax our efforts, in due time we shall reap our harvest” (Gal 6:8-9).

5. Let us end with a reflection on Psalm 126[125] by St Bede the Venerable (672/3-735), commenting on the words by which Jesus announced to his disciples the sorrow that lay in store for them, and at the same time the joy that would spring from their affliction (cf. Jn 16:20).

Bede recalls that “Those who loved Christ were weeping and mourning when they saw him captured by his enemies, bound, carried away for judgment, condemned, scourged, mocked and lastly crucified, pierced by the spear and buried. Instead, those who loved the world rejoiced... when they condemned to a most ignominious death the One of whom the sight alone they could not tolerate. The disciples were overcome by grief at the death of the Lord, but once they had learned of his Resurrection, their sorrow changed to joy; then when they had seen the miracle of the Ascension, they praised and blessed the Lord, filled with even greater joy, as the Evangelist Luke testified (cf. Lk 24:53).

“But the Lord’s words can be applied to all the faithful who, through the tears and afflictions of this world, seek to arrive at eternal jubilation and rightly weep and grieve

now, because they cannot yet see the One they love and because they know that while they are in the body they are far from the Homeland and the Kingdom, even if they are certain that they will reach it with their efforts and struggles. Their sorrow will change into joy when, after the struggle of this life, they receive the reward of eternal life, as the Psalm says: “Those who are sowing in tears will sing when they reap’ (Homily on the Gospel, 2, 13: Collana dei Testi Patristici, XC, Rome, 1990, pp. 379-380).

At the end of his Catechesis, the Holy Father expressed his deep sorrow at the death of Bro. Roger Schutz, founder of the Taizé Community, who was stabbed on Tuesday, 16 August, by a woman.

We have talked together of sorrow and joy. In fact, this morning I received some very sad, tragic news.

At Vespers yesterday evening [Tuesday, 16 August], beloved Bro. Roger Schutz, Founder of the Taizé Community, was stabbed and killed by a woman who was probably insane.

This news is an especially heavy blow because only yesterday I received a very touching and friendly letter from Bro. Roger. In it, he wrote that in the depths of his heart he was intending to tell me that “we are in communion with you and with those who have gathered in Cologne”. He then wrote that because of his health he would unfortunately be unable to come in person to Cologne, but would be present in spirit, with his brethren.

At the end of this letter he told me that he wanted to come as soon as possible to Rome to meet me and tell me that “our Community of Taizé wants to journey on in communion with the Holy Father”. And he then wrote in his own hand: “Holy Father, I assure you of my sentiments of deep communion. Bro. Roger of Taizé”.

At this moment of grief, we can only entrust to the Lord's goodness the soul of this faithful servant of his. We know that joy will be born from sorrow - as we have just heard in the Psalm: Bro. Roger Schutz is in the hands of eternal goodness, eternal love; he has arrived at eternal joy.

He recommends to us, he urges us always to be faithful workers in the Lord's vineyard, even in sorrowful situations, certain that the Lord accompanies us and will give us his joy.

## **Psalm 127[126]**

31 August 2005

## *“If the Lord does not build the house”*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of Week Three*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Psalm 127[126], just proclaimed, places a motion picture before our eyes: a house under construction, the city with its watchmen, family life, night watches, daily work, the little and great secrets of existence.

However, a crucial presence towers over everything, the presence of the Lord who watches over the works of man, as the incisive opening of the Psalm suggests: “If the Lord does not build the house, in vain do its builders labour” (v. 1).

Indeed, a sound society is born from the commitment of all its members, but it needs the blessing and support of that God who, unfortunately, is too often excluded or ignored.

The Book of Proverbs emphasizes the primacy of divine action for a community’s well-being and does so radically, asserting: “It is the Lord’s blessing that brings wealth, and no effort can substitute for it” (Prv 10:22).

2. This sapiential Psalm, fruit of meditation on the reality of everyday life, is built mainly on a contrast: without the Lord, in vain does one seek to construct a stable house, to build a secure city, to bring our own efforts to fruition (cf. Ps 127[126]:1-2).

With the Lord, instead, there is prosperity and fruitfulness, a peaceful family richly endowed with children, a well-fortified and protected city, free of constant worry and insecurity (cf. vv. 3-5).

The text opens with a reference to the Lord, portrayed as a builder of houses and a watchman on guard over the city (cf. Ps 121[120]:1-8). Man goes out in the morning to toil at a job to support the family and serve the development of society. It is work that consumes his energy, making his brow sweat all day long (cf. Ps 127[126]:2).

3. Well, the Psalmist, although he recognizes the importance of work, does not hesitate to say that all this work is useless if God is not beside the labourer. And he affirms that God even goes so far as to reward his friends’ sleep.

Thus, the Psalmist desires to exalt the primacy of divine grace that impresses substance and value on human action, although it is marked by limitations and transience.

In the serene and faithful abandonment of our freedom to the Lord, our work also becomes solid, capable of bearing lasting fruit. Thus, our “sleep” becomes rest blessed by God and destined to seal an activity that has meaning and coherence.

4. At this point we move on to the other scene outlined in our Psalm.

The Lord offers the gift of children, seen as a blessing and a grace, a sign of life that continues and of the history of salvation extending to new stages (cf. v. 3).

The Psalmist extols in particular “the sons of youth”: the father who has had sons in his youth will not only see them in their full vigour, but they will be his support in old age. He will be able, therefore, to face the future confidently, like a warrior, armed with a quiver of those victorious pointed “arrows” that are his sons (cf. vv. 4-5).

The purpose of this image, taken from the culture of the time, is to celebrate the safety, stability and strength found in a large family, such as is presented anew in the subsequent Psalm 128[127], in which the portrait of a happy family is sketched.

The last picture shows a father surrounded by his sons, who is welcomed with respect at the city gates, the seat of public life.

Begetting is thus a gift that brings life and well-being to society. We are aware of this in our days in the face of nations that are deprived, by the demographic loss, of the freshness and energy of a future embodied by children.

However, the blessing of God’s presence, the source of life and hope, towers over it all.

5. Spiritual authors have often made use of Psalm 127[126] to exalt this divine presence, crucial to advancing on the path of good and of the Kingdom of God.

Thus, the monk Isaiah (who died in Gaza in 491), recalling the example of the ancient patriarchs and prophets, taught in his *Asceticon* (Logos 4, 118): “They placed themselves under God’s protection, imploring his assistance, without putting their trust in some work they accomplished. And for them, God’s protection was a fortified city, because they knew that without God’s help they were powerless; and their humility made them say, with the Psalmist: “If the Lord does not watch over the city, in vain does the watchman keep vigil” (*Recueil Ascétique*, Abbey of Bellefontaine 1976, pp. 74-75).

Thus, it is also true today that only communion with the Lord can safeguard our houses and our cities.

## **Canticle in Letter to the Colossians (1:12-20)**

7 September 2005

*“Firstborn of all creation!”*

Evening Prayer - Wednesday of Week Three

1. We have already reflected earlier on the grandiose fresco of Christ, Lord of the universe and of history, that dominates the hymn St Paul placed at the beginning of the Letter to the Colossians. This canticle, in fact, punctuates all four of the weeks spanned by the Liturgy of Vespers.

The heart of the hymn consists of verses 15-20, into which Christ enters directly and solemnly as the “image” of “the invisible God” (v. 15).

The Greek term *ikon*, “icon”, is dear to the Apostle: in his Letters he uses it nine times, applying it both to Christ, the perfect icon of God (cf. II Cor 4:4), and to man, the image and glory of God (cf. I Cor 11:7).

However, by sin, men and women “exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images representing mortal man” (Rom 1:23), choosing to worship idols and become like them.

We must therefore continuously model our being and life on the image of that of the Son of God (cf. II Cor 3:18), so that we may be “delivered... from the dominion of darkness” and “transferred... to the Kingdom of his beloved Son” (Col 1:13).

This is a first imperative in this hymn: to model our life on the image of the Son of God, entering into his sentiments, his will and his thoughts.

2. Christ is then proclaimed the “firstborn” of “all creation” (v. 15). Christ is before all things (cf. v. 17) because he has been begotten since eternity, for “all things were created through him and for him” (v. 16). The ancient Jewish tradition also says that “the whole world was created in view of the Messiah” (Sanhedrin, 98b).

For the Apostle, Christ is the principle of coherence (“in him all things hold together”), the mediator (“through him”) and the final destination toward which the whole of creation converges. He is the “firstborn of many brothers” (Rom 8:29), that is, the Son par excellence in the great family of God’s children, into which we are incorporated by Baptism.

3. At this point, our gaze turns from the world of creation to that of history. Christ is “the Head of the Body, the Church” (Col 1:18); he already became this through his Incarnation.

Indeed, he entered the human community to support it and make it into a “body”, that is, in harmonious and fruitful unity. Christ is the root, the vital pivot and “the beginning” of the coherence and growth of humanity.

Precisely with this primacy Christ can become the principle of the resurrection of all, the “firstborn from the dead”, so that “in Christ all will come to life again”: first Christ, the first fruits; then, at his coming, all those who belong to Christ (cf. I Cor 15:22-23).



4. The Canticle draws to a close celebrating the “fullness”, in Greek *pleroma*, which Christ possesses in himself as a gift of love of the Father. It is the fullness of divinity that shines out, both in the universe and in humanity, becoming a source of peace, unity and perfect harmony (Col 1:19-20).

This “reconciliation” and “repacification” is brought about through “the blood of his Cross”, by which we are justified and made holy. By pouring out his Blood and giving himself, Christ has spread peace, which in biblical language is a synthesis of the Messianic goods and saving fullness extended to the whole of created reality.

The hymn ends, therefore, with a shining horizon of reconciliation, unity, harmony and peace, against which the figure of its architect solemnly rises: Christ, the “Beloved Son” of the Father.

5. Many historians of the ancient Christian tradition have reflected on this important passage. St Cyril of Jerusalem, in one of his dialogues, cites the Canticle of the Letter to the Colossians in response to an anonymous correspondent who had asked him: “So can we say that the Word begotten by God the Father suffered for us in his flesh?”.

The answer, echoing the Canticle, is in the affirmative. Indeed, Cyril says, “the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of every creature, visible and invisible, for whom and in whom all things exist, was given - Paul says - to be the Head of the Church: he is also the firstborn from the dead”, that is, the first in the series of the dead who are raised.

“He made his own”, Cyril continues, “all that is of the flesh of man and “endured the Cross, heedless of its shame’ (Heb 12:2). We do not say that a simple man, heaped with honours, I know not how because of his connection with him, was sacrificed for us, but that the Lord of glory himself was the One crucified” (Perché Cristo è uno: Collana di Testi Patristici, XXXVII, Rome, 1983, p. 101).

Before this Lord of glory, a sign of the supreme love of the Father, let us also raise our song of praise and bow down before him, in adoration and thanksgiving.

## Psalm 132[131]

14 September 2005

*“A place for the Lord”*

Evening Prayer - Thursday of Week Three

1. We have heard the first part of Psalm 132[131], a hymn that the Liturgy of Vespers offers us at two different times. Many scholars think that this song would have rung out during

the solemn celebration of the transportation of the Ark of the Lord, a sign of divine presence amid the people of Israel in Jerusalem, the new capital chosen by David.

In the narrative of this event, as told in the Bible, we read that King David “girt with a linen apron (efod), came dancing before the Lord with abandon, as he and all the Israelites were bringing up the ark of the Lord with shouts of joy and to the sound of the horn” (II Sm 6:14-15).

Other experts, instead, relate Psalm 132[131] to a commemorative celebration of that ancient event, after David himself had instituted the worship in the Sanctuary of Zion.

2. Our hymn seems to suggest a liturgical dimension: it was in all likelihood sung during a procession with the presence of priests and faithful and included a choir.

Following the Liturgy of Vespers, let us reflect on the first 10 verses of the Psalm that has just been proclaimed. At the heart of this section is the solemn oath pronounced by David. Indeed, it says that, having left behind him the bitter struggle with his predecessor, King Saul, David “swore to the Lord, his vow to the Strong One of Jacob” (Ps 132[131]:2). The content of this solemn commitment, expressed in verses 3-5, is clear: the sovereign will not set foot in the royal palace of Jerusalem, he will not go calmly to rest until he has found a dwelling place for the Ark of the Lord.

And this is a very important thing, because it shows that at the heart of the social life of a city, of a community, of a people there must be a presence that calls to mind the mystery of the transcendent God, a proper space for God, a dwelling for God. Man cannot walk well without God; he must walk together with God through history, and the task of the temple, of the dwelling of God, is to point out in a visible way this communion, this allowing God to guide.

3. Perhaps at this point, after David’s words, a liturgical choir’s words prepare the way for the memory of the past. In fact, it recalls the rediscovery of the Ark in the plains of Yearím in the Éphrata region (cf. v. 6): it had been left there for a long time after the Philistines had restored it to Israel, which had lost it during a battle (cf. I Sm 7:1; II Sm 6:2, 11).

Thus, it was taken from the province to the future Holy City; and our passage ends with a festive celebration which, on the one hand, shows the people worshipping (cf. Ps 132[131]:7, 9), that is, the liturgical assembly, and on the other, the Lord who returns to make himself present and active in the sign of the Ark set in place in Zion (cf. v. 8), that is, in the heart of his people.

The heart of the liturgy is found in this intersection between priests and faithful on one side, and the Lord with his power on the other.

4. A prayerful acclamation on behalf of the kings, the successors of David, seals the first part of Psalm 132[131]. “For the sake of David your servant do not reject your anointed” (v. 10).

One sees, then, the future successor of David, “your anointed”. It is easy to perceive a Messianic dimension in this supplication, initially destined to implore support for the Hebrew sovereign in his life’s trials.

The term “anointed”, in fact, expresses the Jewish term “Messiah”: the gaze of the praying person thus extends beyond the events in the Kingdom of Judah to the great expectation of the perfect “anointed One”, the Messiah who will always be pleasing to God, and loved and blessed by him, and will be not only for Israel, but the “anointed”, the king for all the world. He, God, is with us and awaits this “anointed”, come then in the person of Jesus Christ.

5. This Messianic interpretation of the future “anointed” will dominate the Christian reinterpretation and will extend to the whole Psalm.

For example, the analogy Hesychius of Jerusalem, a priest in the first half of the fifth century, was to make between verse 8 and the Incarnation of Jesus is significant. In his Second Homily on the Mother of God, he addresses the Virgin in these words:

“Upon you and upon the One born of you, David does not cease to sing to the zither: “Rise, O Lord, and come to the place of your rest, you and the ark of your sanctification” (cf. Ps 132[131]:8). What is “the ark of your sanctification?” Hesychius replies: “The Virgin Mother of God, of course. For if you are the pearl, she is rightly the ark; if you are the sun, the Virgin must necessarily be called the sky; and if you are the uncontaminated flower, then the Virgin will be the plant of incorruption, the paradise of immortality” (Testi mariani del primo millennio, I, Rome, 1988, pp. 532-533).

This double interpretation seems very important to me. The “anointed” is Christ. Christ, the Son of God, is made flesh. And the Ark of the Covenant, the true dwelling of God in the world, not made of wood but of flesh and blood, is the Mother who offers herself to the Lord as the Ark of the Covenant and invites us also to be living dwellings for God in the world.

## **Psalm 132[131]**

21 September 2005

## *“My crown shall shine”*

Evening Prayer - Thursday of Week Three

1. We have just heard the second part of Psalm 132[131], a hymn that recalls a major event in Israel’s history: the transfer of the Ark of the Lord to the city of Jerusalem.

David was responsible for this transfer, as the psalmist testifies in the first part of the Psalm we have already seen. Indeed, the king had sworn not to take up residence in the royal palace until he had found a permanent dwelling place for the Ark of God, a sign of the Lord’s presence with his people (cf. vv. 3-5).

In response to the sovereign’s oath, God in turn takes an oath: “The Lord swore an oath to David; he will not go back on his word” (v. 11). This solemn promise is essentially the same one that the Prophet Nathan swore in God’s name to David himself; it concerns the future of David’s descendants, destined to reign for ever (cf. II Sm 7:8-16).

2. The divine oath, however, involves a human commitment inasmuch as it is conditioned by an “if”: if your sons “keep my covenant” (Ps 132[131]:12).

Men and women must respond with faithful and active loyalty to God’s promise and gift, which have nothing magic about them, in a dialogue in which are interwoven two freedoms, the divine and the human.

At this point, the Psalm becomes a hymn that extols the marvellous effects of both the gift of the Lord and the fidelity of Israel.

In fact, Israel will experience God’s presence in the midst of his people (cf. vv. 13-14): he will be like an inhabitant among the inhabitants of Jerusalem, a citizen who lives the events of history with the other citizens, but who offers the power of his blessing.

3. God will bless the harvest and see to it that the poor can satisfy their hunger (cf. v. 15). He will clothe priests with his protective mantle, offering them his salvation; he will ensure that all the faithful live in joy and trust (cf. v. 16).

The greatest blessing is once again reserved for David and his descendants: “There David’s stock will flower: I will prepare a lamp for my anointed. I will cover his enemies with shame, but on him my crown shall shine” (vv. 17-18).

As happened in the first part of the Psalm (cf. v. 10), the figure of the “anointed” One, in Hebrew, “Messiah”, once again makes his entrance, thereby binding the house of David to messianism, which in the Christian interpretation reaches complete fulfilment in Christ.

Lively images are used: David is represented by a shoot that will flourish. God illumines David's descendants with a shining lamp, a symbol of vitality and glory; a splendid crown will indicate his triumph over his enemies, hence, victory over evil.

4. The twofold presence of the Lord, his presence in space and in history, is actuated in Jerusalem, in the temple that preserves the Ark, and in the Davidic dynasty. Psalm 132[131] therefore becomes a celebration of the God-Emmanuel who is with his creatures, who lives beside them and benefits them, as long as they stay united to him in truth and justice.

The spiritual centre of this hymn is already a prelude to the Joannine proclamation: "The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us" (Jn 1:14).

5. Let us end by remembering that the beginning of this second part of Psalm 132[131] was commonly used by the Fathers of the Church to describe the Incarnation of the Word in the Virgin Mary's womb.

St Irenaeus, referring to the prophecy of Isaiah about the Virgin in labour, had already explained:

"The words: "Listen, then, O house of David!" (Is 7:13), indicate that the eternal King, whom God had promised David would be "the fruit of [his] body' (132[131]:11), was the same One, born of the Virgin and descended from David.

"Thus, God promised him that a king would be born who was "the fruit of [his] body', a description that indicates a pregnant virgin. Scripture, therefore,... sets down and affirms the fruit of the womb to proclaim that the One to come would be begotten of the Virgin.

"Likewise, Elizabeth herself, filled with the Holy Spirit, testified, saying to Mary: "Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb' (Lk 1:42).

"In this way the Holy Spirit points out to those who want to hear him that in the Virgin's, that is, Mary's, giving birth is fulfilled God's promise to David that he would raise up a king born of his body" (Contro le Eresie, 3, 21, 5: "Già e Non Ancora", CCCXX, Milan, 1997, p. 285).

And thus, we see God's faithfulness in the great span of time that goes from the ancient Psalm to the Incarnation of the Lord. The mystery of a God who dwells among us, a God who becomes one with us in the Incarnation, already appears and transpires in the Psalm. And this faithfulness of God and our trust throughout the changes of history contribute to our joy.

# Psalm 135[134]:1-12

28 September 2005

## *Praise the Lord for the Lord is good*

Evening Prayer - Friday of Week Three

1. We now have before us the first part of Psalm 135[134], a hymn of a liturgical nature, interlaced with allusions, memories and references to other biblical texts. Indeed, the liturgy often constructs its text by drawing from the Bible's great patrimony with its rich repertory of subjects and prayers that sustain the journey of the faithful.

We follow the prayerful line of this first section (cf. Ps 135[134]:1-12), which opens with a broad and impassioned invitation to praise the Lord (cf. vv. 1-3). The appeal is made to the "servants of the Lord, who stand in the house of the Lord, in the courts of the house of our God" (vv. 1-2).

Therefore, we find ourselves in the living atmosphere of worship that unfolds in the temple, the preferred and communal place of prayer. Here, the presence of "our God", a "good" and "loving" God, the God of the chosen and of the covenant (cf. vv. 3-4), is experienced.

After the invitation to praise, a soloist voice proclaims the profession of faith that begins with the formula "I know" (v. 5). This Creed makes up the essence of the entire hymn, revealed in a proclamation of the Lord's greatness (ibid.), manifested in his marvellous works.

2. Divine omnipotence is continually manifested throughout the world, "in heaven, on earth, in the seas". It is he who produces clouds, lightning, rain and wind, imaginarily contained in "treasuries" or storehouses (cf. vv. 6-7).

Primarily, however, another aspect of divine activity is celebrated in this profession of faith; it is the marvellous intervention in history, where the Creator reveals his face as redeemer of his people and king of the world. Before the eyes of Israel, gathered in prayer, the great events of the Exodus unfold.

Here, in the first place, is the concise and essential commemoration of the "plagues" of Egypt, the scourges inflicted by the Lord to break down the oppressor (cf. vv. 8-9).

It is followed afterward with the evocation of the victories of Israel after the long march in the desert. They are attributed to the powerful intervention of God, who struck many "nations in their greatness" and slew many "kings in their splendour" (cf. v. 10).

Finally, there is the long-awaited and hoped-for destination, the promised land: “He let Israel inherit their land; on his people their land he bestowed” (v. 12).

Divine love becomes concrete and can almost be experienced in history with all of its bitter and glorious vicissitudes. The liturgy has the duty to make present and efficacious the divine gifts, especially in the great paschal celebration that is the root of every other solemnity and is the supreme symbol of freedom and salvation.

3. Let us experience the spirit of the Psalm and its praise to God through the voice of St Clement of Rome, as it resounds in the long closing prayer of his Letter to the Corinthians. He notes that, as in Psalm 135[134], the face of God the Redeemer appears; in this way, his protection, already granted to the ancient fathers, is now presented to us in Christ:

“O Lord, make your face shine upon us, for goodness in peace, to protect us with your mighty hand and to deliver us from all sin with your most high arm, saving us from those that hate us unjustly. Grant concord and peace to us and to all the inhabitants of the earth, as you gave it to our fathers when they devoutly called upon your name in faith and truth.... To you, who are the only one capable of doing these and other greater goods for us, we give you thanks through the great priest and protector of our souls, Jesus Christ, by whom you are glorified from generation to generation, for ever and ever” (cf. 60, 3-4; 61, 3; Collana di Testi Patristici, V, Rome, 1984, pp. 90-91).

Yes, in our times we too can recite this prayer of a first-century Pope as our prayer for today: “O Lord, make your face shine upon us, for goodness in peace. In these times, grant concord and peace to us and to all the inhabitants of the earth, through Jesus Christ who reigns from generation to generation and for ever and ever”. Amen.

## Psalm 135[134]

5 October 2005

*Sons of Israel, bless the Lord!*

Evening Prayer - Friday of Week Three

1. The liturgy of Vespers offers us two separate passages of Psalm 135[134]. The one we have just heard includes the second part (cf. vv. 13-21), sealed by the “Alleluia”, the exclamation of praise to the Lord that opened the Psalm.

After commemorating in the first part of the hymn the event of the Exodus, the core of Israel's Passover celebration, the Psalmist now deals incisively with two different visions of religion.

On the one hand rises the figure of the living, personal God who is the centre of authentic faith (cf. vv. 13-14). His is an effective and saving presence; the Lord is not an immobile, absent reality but a living person who "guides" his faithful, "takes pity" on them and sustains them with his power and love.

2. At this point, on the other hand, idolatry emerges (cf. vv. 15-18), an expression of a distorted and misleading religiosity. In fact, the idol is merely "a work of human hands", a product of human desires, hence, powerless to overcome the limitations of creatures.

Indeed, it has a human form with a mouth, eyes, ears and throat, but it is inert, lifeless, like an inanimate statue (cf. Ps 115[113B]:4-8).

Those who worship these dead realities are destined to resemble them, impotent, fragile and inert. This description of idolatry as false religion clearly conveys man's eternal temptation to seek salvation in the "work of his hands", placing hope in riches, power, in success and material things.

Unfortunately, what the Prophet Isaiah had already effectively described happens to the person who moves along these lines, who worships riches: "He feeds on ashes; a deluded mind has led him astray, and he cannot deliver himself or say, "Is there not a lie in my right hand?" (Is 44:20).

3. After this meditation on true and false religion, on genuine faith in the Lord of the universe and history and on idolatry, Psalm 135[134] concludes with a liturgical blessing (cf. vv. 19-21) that introduces a series of figures who feature in the cult practised in the temple of Zion (cf. Ps 115[113B]:9-13).

From the whole community gathered in the temple, a blessing rises in unison to God, Creator of the universe and Saviour of his people in history, expressed in their different voices and in the humility of faith.

The liturgy is the privileged place in which to hear the divine Word which makes present the Lord's saving acts; but it is also the context in which the community raises its prayer celebrating divine love.

God and man meet each other in an embrace of salvation that finds fulfilment precisely in the liturgical celebration. We might say that this is almost a definition of the liturgy: it brings about an embrace of salvation between God and man.



4. Commenting on the verses of this Psalm regarding idols and the resemblance with them that will be acquired by those who put their trust in them (cf. Ps 135[134]:15-18), St Augustine observes:

“In fact - believe it, brothers and sisters - a certain likeness with their idols is brought about within them: of course, not in their bodies but in their interior being. They have ears but do not hear when God cries to them: “Those who have ears to listen, let them hear!”. They have eyes but do not see: in other words, they have the eyes of the body but not the eye of faith”. They do not perceive God’s presence. They have eyes but they do not see.

And likewise, “they have nostrils but cannot smell. They are unable to detect the fragrance of which the Apostle says: “Everywhere... we are the aroma of Christ’ (cf. II Cor 2:15). What good does it do them to have nostrils if they cannot manage to breathe the sweet fragrance of Christ?”.

It is true, Augustine recognizes, that some people are still bound to idolatry; and this is also true in our time, with its materialism that is a form of idolatry. Augustine adds: even if there are still such people, even if this idolatry continues, “Every day, nonetheless, there are people convinced by the miracles of Christ the Lord who embrace the faith”, and thanks be to God this is still true today. “Every day, the eyes of the blind are opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, blocked nostrils begin to breathe and the tongues of the mute are loosened, the limbs of the paralyzed grow strong and the legs of the lame are straightened. From all these stones emerge sons and daughters of Abraham (cf. Mt 3:9).

“It should therefore be said to all of them: “House of Israel, bless the Lord’.... Bless the Lord, you peoples in general! This means “House of Israel’. Bless it, O you Prelates of the Church! This means “House of Aaron’. Bless it, Ministers! This means “House of Levi’. And what should be said of the other nations? “You who fear him, bless the Lord!” (Esposizione sul Salmo 134, 24-25: Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, XXVIII, Rome, 1977, pp. 375, 377).

Let us make this invitation our own and let us bless, praise and adore the Lord, the true, living God.

## **Psalm 122[121]**

12 October 2005

## *Peace upon you!*

Evening Prayer - Sunday of Week Fourth

1. We have just heard and enjoyed as a prayer one of the most beautiful and fervent songs of ascents. It is Psalm 122[121], a living, shared celebration of Jerusalem, the Holy City to which the pilgrims climb.

Indeed, in the opening line, two moments lived by the faithful are amalgamated: that of the day on which the pilgrim rejoiced when he accepted the invitation to “go to God’s house” (v. 1), and that of his joyful arrival at the “gates” of Jerusalem (cf. v. 2); now at last he is walking on that beloved Holy Land. A festive hymn is on his lips at that very moment in honour of Zion, whose deep spiritual significance he contemplates.

2. As a “strongly compact” city (v. 3), a symbol of security and stability, Jerusalem is the heart of the unity of the 12 tribes of Israel that converge towards it as the centre of their faith and worship. They go up there, in fact, “to praise the Lord’s name” (v. 4) in the place that “Israel’s law” (Dt 12:13-14; 16:16) has chosen as the only legitimate and perfect shrine.

There is another important reality in Jerusalem that is also a sign of God’s presence in Israel: “the thrones... of the House of David” (cf. v. 5); that is, the Davidic dynasty governs, an expression of the divine action in history that was to lead to the Messiah (II Sam 7:8-16).

3. The “thrones... of the House of David” are at the same time called “thrones of judgment” (v. 5), because the king was also the supreme judge. Thus, Jerusalem, a political capital, was also the highest tribunal where controversies were settled in the final instance: in this way, when Jewish pilgrims left Zion, they returned to their villages feeling more righteous and peaceful.

The Psalm thus traced an ideal portrait of the Holy City with her religious and social function, showing that biblical religion is neither abstract nor intimistic, but a leaven of justice and solidarity. Communion with God is necessarily followed by the communion of brothers and sisters with one another.

4. We now come to the final invocation (cf. v. 6-9). It is marked throughout by the Jewish word *shalom*, “peace”, traditionally considered to be the etymological root of *Jerushalajim*, the Holy City itself, interpreted as “city of peace”.

It is well known that *shalom* alludes to the messianic peace that in itself brings joy, prosperity, goodness and abundance. Indeed, in the pilgrim’s final farewell to the temple, to the “house of the Lord our God”, he adds “good” to “peace”: “I will ask for your good” (v. 9). This anticipates the Franciscan greeting: “Peace and good!”. We all have

something of a Franciscan soul. This greeting expresses the hope that blessings will be poured out upon the faithful who love the Holy City, upon the physical reality of its walls and buildings in which the life of a people pulsates, on all its brothers and sisters and friends. In this way, Jerusalem will become a hearth of harmony and peace.

5. Let us end our meditation on Psalm 122[121] with an idea for reflection suggested by the Fathers of the Church for whom the ancient Jerusalem was the sign of another Jerusalem, also “built as a city strongly compact”.

This city, St Gregory the Great says in his Homilies on Ezekiel, “has here a great construction in the customs of the saints. In a building, one stone supports the other, because each stone is set upon another, and the one that supports another is in turn supported by another. This is exactly how in our Holy Church each one is sustaining and sustained. The closest support one another, and so it is by using them that the building of charity is erected.

“This explains Paul’s exhortation: “Help carry one another’s burdens; in that way you will fulfil the law of Christ’ (Gal 6:2). Emphasizing the force of this law, he says: “Love is the fulfilment of the law’ (Rom 13:10).

“Indeed, if I do not make an effort to accept you as you are and you do not strive to accept me as I am, the building of love between us can no longer be erected, bound though we may be by reciprocal and patient love”.

And to complete the image, let us not forget that “there is one foundation that supports the full weight of the construction; and it is our Redeemer, who alone bears all together the customs of us all. The Apostle says of him: “No one can lay a foundation other than the one that has been laid, namely, Jesus Christ’ (I Cor 3:11). The foundation sustains the stones but the stones do not sustain the foundation: in other words, our Redeemer bore the burden of all our sins, but in him there was no sin to be borne” (2, 1, 5: *Opere di Gregorio Magno*, III/2, Rome, 1993, pp. 27, 29).

Thus, Pope St Gregory the Great tells us what the Psalm means for our lives in practice. He tells us that we must be a true Jerusalem in the Church today, that is, a place of peace, “supporting one another” as we are; “supporting one another together” in the joyful certainty that the Lord “supports us all”. In this way the Church will grow like a true Jerusalem, a place of peace. But let us also pray for the city of Jerusalem, that it may increasingly be a place for the encounter of religions and peoples; that it may truly be a place of peace.

# Psalm 130[129]

19 October 2005

*“Lord, hear my voice!”*

Evening Prayer - Sunday of Week Fourth

1. One of the Psalms best-known and best-loved in Christian tradition has just been proclaimed: the *De profundis*, as it was called from its beginning in the Latin version. With the *Miserere*, it has become one of the favourite penitential Psalms of popular devotion.

Over and above its use at funerals, the text is first and foremost a hymn to divine mercy and to the reconciliation between the sinner and the Lord, a God who is just but always prepared to show himself “a merciful and gracious God, slow to anger and rich in kindness and fidelity, continuing his kindness for a thousand generations, and forgiving wickedness and crime and sin” (Ex 34:6-7).

For this very reason, our Psalm is inserted into the liturgy of Vespers for Christmas and for the whole Octave of Christmas, as well as in the liturgy of the Fourth Sunday of Easter and of the Solemnity of the Annunciation.

2. Psalm 130[129] opens with a voice that rises from the depths of evil and sin (cf. vv. 1-2). The person who is praying addresses the Lord in the first person: “I cry to you, O Lord”. The Psalm then develops in three parts, dedicated to the subject of sin and forgiveness. The Psalmist first of all addresses God directly, using the “Tu”: “If you, O Lord, should mark our guilt, Lord, who would survive? But with you is found forgiveness: for this we revere you” (vv. 3-4).

It is significant that reverent awe, a sentiment in which respect and love are mingled, is not born from punishment but from forgiveness. Rather than sparking his anger, God’s generous and disarming magnanimity must kindle in us a holy reverence. Indeed, God is not an inexorable sovereign who condemns the guilty but a loving father whom we must love, not for fear of punishment, but for his kindness, quick to forgive.

3. At the centre of the second part is the “I” of the person praying, who no longer addresses the Lord in the first person but talks about him: I trust in the Lord. “My soul is waiting for the Lord, I count on his word. My soul is longing for the Lord more than watchman for daybreak” (vv. 5-6). Expectation, hope, the certainty that God will speak a liberating word and wipe away the sin are now blossoming in the heart of the repentant Psalmist.

The third and last part in the development of the Psalm extends to the whole of Israel, to the people, frequently sinful and conscious of the need for God's saving grace: "Let Israel... count on the Lord. Because with the Lord there is mercy and fullness of redemption; Israel indeed he will redeem from all its iniquity" (vv. 7-8).

The personal salvation that the praying person implores at the outset is now extended to the entire community. The Psalmist's faith is grafted on to the historical faith of the people of the Covenant, "redeemed" by the Lord not only from the distress of the Egyptian oppression but "from all its iniquity". Only think that it is we who are now the chosen people, the People of God. And our faith grafts us on to the common faith of the Church. In this very way it gives us the certainty that God is good to us and sets us free from our sins.

Rising from the shadowy vortex of sin the supplication of the *De profundis* reaches God's shining horizon where "mercy and fullness of redemption" are dominant, two great characteristics of God who is love.

4. Let us now entrust ourselves to the meditation that Christian tradition has woven into this Psalm. Let us choose St Ambrose's words: in his writings he often recalled the reasons that motivated him to invoke pardon from God.

"We have a good Lord who wants to forgive everyone", he recalled in his *Treatise on Penance*, and he added: "If you want to be justified, confess your fault: a humble confession of sins untangles the knot of faults.... You see with what hope of forgiveness you are impelled to make your confession" (2, 6, 40-41: *Sancti Ambrosii Episcopi Mediolanensis Opera* [SAEMO], XVII, Milan-Rome, 1982, p. 253).

In the *Exposition of the Gospel according to Luke*, repeating the same invitation, the Bishop of Milan expressed his wonder at the gifts that God added to his forgiveness: "You see how good God is and ready to pardon sins: not only does he give back everything he had taken away, but he also grants unhopèd for gifts". Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, lost the ability to speak because he did not believe the angel, but subsequently, in pardoning him, God granted him the gift of prophecy in the hymn of the *Benedictus*: "The one who could not speak now prophesies", St Ambrose said, adding that "it is one of the greatest graces of the Lord, that those who have denied him should confess belief in him. Therefore, no one should lose trust, no one should despair of the divine reward, even if previous sins cause him remorse. God can change his opinion if you can make amends for your sin" (2, 33: SAEMO, XI, Milan-Rome, 1978, p. 175).

## **Canticle in Letter to Philippians (2:6-11)**

26 October 2005

## *Jesus Christ is Lord!*

Evening Prayer - Sunday of Week Fourth

1. Once again, following the itinerary proposed by the Liturgy of Vespers with various Psalms and Canticles, we have heard resound the wonderful and fundamental hymn St Paul inserted into the Letter to the Philippians (2:6-11).

Already in the past we have underlined that this text contains a two-way movement: descent and ascent. In the first, Christ Jesus, from the splendour of divinity which by nature belongs to him, chooses to descend to the humiliation of “death on a cross”. In this way he shows himself to be truly man and our Redeemer, with an authentic and full participation in our human reality of suffering and death.

2. The second movement, upwards, reveals the paschal glory of Christ, who manifests himself once more after death in the splendour of his divine majesty.

The Father, who welcomed his Son’s act of obedience in the Incarnation and passion, now “exalts” him in a supreme way, as the Greek text tells us. This exaltation is expressed not only through the enthronement at God’s right hand, but also with the conferral upon Christ of a “name which is above every name” (v. 9).

Now, in biblical language, “name” indicates a person’s true essence and specific function, manifesting his or her intimate and profound reality. To the Son, who, for love, was humiliated in death, the Father confers an incomparable dignity, the “Name” above all others, that of “Lord”, of God himself.

3. Indeed, the proclamation of faith, chorally intoned from Heaven, earth and the netherworld lying prostrate in adoration, is clear and explicit: “Jesus Christ is Lord” (v. 11). In Greek, it is affirmed that Jesus is Kyrios, undoubtedly a royal title, which in the Greek translation of the Bible renders the name of God revealed to Moses sacred and unutterable. With the name Kyrios, Jesus Christ is recognized as true God.

On the one hand, then, there is the recognition of the universal sovereignty of Jesus Christ, who receives honour from all of creation, seen as a subject lying prostrate at his feet. On the other, however, the acclamation of faith declares Christ existing in the divine form or condition, thereby presenting him as worthy of adoration.

4. In this hymn the reference made to the scandal of the cross (cf. I Cor 1:23), and even earlier to the true humanity of the Word made flesh (cf. Jn 1:14), is interwoven with and culminates in the event of the Resurrection. The sacrificial obedience of the Son is followed by the glorifying response of the Father, to which adoration is united on the part of humanity and creation. Christ’s singularity emerges from his function as Lord of the

redeemed world, which has been conferred upon him because of his perfect obedience “unto death”. In the Son, the project of salvation reaches fulfilment and the faithful are invited, especially in the liturgy, to announce and to live the fruits [of salvation].

This is the destination where the Christological hymn leads us, upon which for centuries the Church meditates, sings and considers as a guide of life: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5).

5. Let us now turn to the meditation on our hymn that has been interwoven with great wisdom by St Gregory of Nazianzus. In a poem in honour of Christ, the great fourth-century Doctor of the Church declares that Jesus Christ “does not empty himself of any part that makes up his divine nature, and notwithstanding this he saves me like a healer who bends over festering wounds.... He was of the line of David, but was the Creator of Adam; he was made of flesh, but was also a stranger to it; he was generated by a mother, but by a virgin mother; he was limited, but also immense; he was born in a stable, but a star led the Magi to him, who brought him gifts and bowed down and knelt before him. As a mortal man he battled with the devil, but, invincible as he was, he overcame the tempter with a three-fold strategy.... He was victim, but also High Priest; he was sacrificed, but was God; he offered his blood to God and in this way he purified the entire world. A cross raised him up from the earth, but sin remained nailed to it.... He descended to the dead, but came back from the netherworld redeeming many who were dead. The first event is typical of human misery, but the second is part of the richness of the incorporeal being..., that earthly form the immortal Son takes upon himself because he loves us” (Carmina arcana, 2: Collana di Testi Patristici, LVIII, Rome, 1986, pp. 236-238).

At the end of this meditation I want to underline two phrases for our lives. In the first place, this admonition of St Paul: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus”. To learn to feel as Jesus felt; to conform our way of thinking, deciding and acting to the sentiments of Jesus. We will take up this path if we look to conform our sentiments to those of Jesus. Let us take up the right path.

The other phrase is that of St Gregory of Nazianzus. “He, Jesus, loves us”. These tender words are a great consolation and comfort for us; but also a great responsibility, day after day.

## **Psalm 112[111]**

2 November 2005

## *“Open-handed, he gives to the poor”*

Evening Prayer - Sunday of Week Fourth

1. After yesterday’s celebration of the Solemnity of all the saints of Heaven, we remember today all of the faithful departed. The liturgy invites us to pray for all our loved ones who have passed away, turning our thoughts to the mystery of death, an inheritance common to all men and women.

Enlightened by faith, we look upon the human enigma of death with serenity and hope. Indeed, according to Scripture, it is more than an end; it is a new birth, it is the obligatory passageway through which the fullness of life may be attained by those who model their earthly existence according to the indications of the Word of God.

Psalms 112[111], a composition with a sapiential slant, presents us with the figure of these righteous ones who fear the Lord; they recognize his transcendence and trustingly and lovingly conform themselves to his will in the expectation of encountering him after death.

A “beatitude” is reserved to these faithful: “Happy the man who fears the Lord” (v. 1). The Psalmist immediately explains what this fear consists in: it is shown in docility to God’s commandments. He who “takes delight” in observing his commandments is blessed, finding in them joy and peace.

2. Docility to God is therefore the root of hope and interior and exterior harmony. Observance of the moral law is the source of profound peace of conscience. According to the biblical vision of “retribution”, the mantle of the divine blessing is spread over the righteous, giving stability and success to his works and to those of his descendants: “His sons will be powerful on earth; the children of the upright are blessed. Riches and wealth are in his house” (vv. 2-3; cf. v. 9).

However, to this optimistic vision are opposed the bitter observations made by Job, a just man who experiences the mystery of sorrow, feels himself unjustly punished and subjected to apparently senseless trials. Job represents many people who suffer harshly in the world. It is necessary then to read this Psalm in the global context of Revelation, which embraces the reality of human life under all its aspects.

At any rate, the trust the Psalmist wishes to communicate and be lived by those who have chosen to follow the path of morally irreprehensible conduct remains valid, rejecting every other alternative of illusory success gained through injustice and immorality.

3. The heart of this fidelity to the divine Word consists in a fundamental choice of charity towards the poor and needy: “The good man takes pity and lends.... Open-handed, he



gives to the poor” (vv. 5, 9). The person of faith, then, is generous; respecting the biblical norms, he offers help to his brother in need, asking nothing in return (cf. Dt 15:7-11), and without falling into the shame of usury which destroys the lives of the poor.

The righteous one, heeding the continual warning of the prophets, puts himself on the side of the disenfranchised and sustains them with abundant help. “Open-handed, he gives to the poor”, as is written in verse 9, thereby expressing an extreme generosity without any self-interest.

4. In addition to the portrait of the faithful and charitable man, “generous, merciful and just”, Psalm 112[111] presents finally, in only one verse (cf. v. 10), the profile of the wicked man. This individual sees the success of the right-eous person and is tortured with anger and jealousy. It is the torment of one who has an evil conscience, different from the generous man who has a “firm” and “steadfast heart” (vv. 7-8).

We fix our gaze on the serene face of the faithful person who “open-handed, gives to the poor”, and we listen to the words of Clement of Alexandria, the third-century Father of the Church who commented on an affirmation of the Lord that is difficult to understand. In the parable of the unjust steward, the expression appears according to which we must do good with “unjust money”. From there arises the question: are money and wealth unjust in themselves, or what does the Lord wish to say?

Clement of Alexandria explains this parable very well in his homily “What rich man can be saved?”, and he states: Jesus “declares unjust by nature any possession one has for oneself as one’s own good and does not make it available for those who need it; rather, he declares that from this injustice it is possible to accomplish a just and praiseworthy work, giving relief to one of those little ones who have an eternal dwelling-place near the Father (cf. Mt 10:42; 18:10)” (31, 6; Collana di Testi Patristici, CXLVIII, Rome, 1999, pp. 56-57).

Addressing the reader, Clement warns: “See in the first place that he has not ordered you to ask, nor wait to be asked, but you yourself search out those who are worth being listened to, insofar as they are disciples of the Saviour” (31, 7: *ibid.*, p. 57).

Then, citing another biblical text, he comments: “Beautiful, therefore, is the saying of the Apostle: ‘God loves a cheerful giver’ (II Cor 9:7), who enjoys giving and does not sparingly sow, so as to reap in the same way; instead, he shares without ramifications and distinctions and sorrow: this is authentic of doing good” (31, 8: *ibid.*).

On this day in which we commemorate the dead, as I was saying at the beginning of our meeting, we are all called to face the enigma of death and therefore with the question of how to live well, how to find happiness. This Psalm answers: happy is the man who gives; happy is the man who does not live life for himself but gives; happy is the man who is merciful, generous and just; happy is the man who lives in the love of God and

neighbour. In this way we live well and have no reason to fear death because we experience the everlasting happiness that comes from God.

## Psalm 135,1-9

9 November 2005

*“His mercy endures for ever!”*

*Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Fourth*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

1. This Psalm was called “the Great Hallel”, that is, the grandiose and solemn praise that the Jews intoned during their Passover liturgy. We are referring to Psalm 136[135], whose first part we have just heard, in accordance with the way the Liturgy of Vespers divides it (cf. vv. 1-9).

Let us first reflect on the refrain “for his mercy endures for ever”. At the centre of the phrase the word “mercy” rings out. In fact, it is a legitimate but limited translation of the original Hebrew term *hesed*. This is actually a word that belongs to the characteristic terminology used in the Bible to express the Covenant that exists between the Lord and his People. The term seeks to define the attitudes deriving from this relationship: faithfulness, loyalty, love, and of course, God’s mercy.

We have here a concise summary that portrays the deep, personal bond established by the Creator with his creature. With this relationship, God does not appear in the Bible as an impassive and implacable Lord against whose mysterious power it is useless to struggle.

Instead, he shows himself as a person who loves his creatures, watches over them, follows them on their way through history and suffers because of the infidelities with which the people often oppose his *hesed*, his merciful and fatherly love.

2. The first visible sign of this divine love, says the Psalmist, is to be sought in creation and then in history. The gaze, full of admiration and wonder, will rest first of all on creation: the skies, the earth, the seas, the sun, the moon and the stars.

Even before discovering the God who reveals himself in the history of a people, there is a cosmic revelation, open to all, offered to the whole of humanity by the one Creator, “God of gods” and “Lord of lords” (cf. vv. 2, 3).

As sung in Psalm 19[18]: “The heavens proclaim the glory of God and the firmament shows forth the work of his hands. Day unto day takes up the story and night unto night

makes known the message” (vv. 2-3). Thus, a divine message exists, secretly engraved in creation and a sign of the hesed, the loving fidelity of God who gives his creatures being and life, water and food, light and time.

A clear vision is essential in order to contemplate this divine revelation, recalling the recommendation of the Book of Wisdom that invites us to recognize “the greatness and the beauty of created things, [whose] original author, by analogy, is seen” (Wis 13:5; cf. Rom 1:20).

Prayerful praise, therefore, flows from contemplation of the “marvellous works” (cf. Ps 136[135]:4) that God has wrought in creation that are transformed into a joyful hymn of praise and thanksgiving to the Lord.

3. Consequently, we rise from the works of creation to the greatness of God and to his loving mercy. This is what we are taught by the Fathers of the Church, in whose voices resound the constant Christian Tradition. Thus, St Basil the Great, in one of the initial pages of his first homily on the Hexaemeron, where he comments on the creation narrative in the first chapter of Genesis, pauses to consider God’s wise action and is brought to recognize God’s goodness as the dynamic centre of creation. The following are several sayings from the long reflection of the Holy Bishop of Caesarea of Cappadocia: “‘In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth’. My words give way, overwhelmed by wonder at this thought” (1, 2, 1: Sulla Genesi [Omèlie sull’Esamerone], Milan, 1990, pp. 9, 11).

In fact, even if some, “deceived by the atheism they bore within them, imagined that the universe lacked guidance and order, at the mercy as it were of chance”, the sacred author instead “immediately enlightened our minds with the Name of God at the beginning of the account, saying: “In the beginning... God created...’. And what beauty there is in this order!” (1, 2, 3: *ibid.*, p. 11).

“So if the world has a beginning and has been created, it seeks the One who gave it being and is its Creator.... Moses prepared you with his teaching, impressing in our souls as a seal and amulet the Most Holy Name of God, when he says: “In the beginning God created’. Blessed nature, goodness exempt from envy, the one who is the object of love to all reasonable beings, beauty in addition to everything else that is desirable, the principle of beings, the source of life, the light of the mind, inaccessible wisdom, in brief, it is he who “in the beginning created the heavens and the earth” (1, 2, 6-7: *ibid.*, p. 13).

I find the words of this fourth-century Father surprisingly up to date when he says: Some people, “deceived by the atheism they bore within them, imagined that the universe lacked guidance and order, at the mercy as it were of chance”. How many these “some people” are today! Deceived by atheism they consider and seek to prove that it is

scientific to think that all things lack guidance and order as though they were at the mercy of chance. The Lord through Sacred Scripture reawakens our reason which has fallen asleep and tells us: in the beginning was the creative Word. In the beginning the creative Word - this Word that created all things, that created this intelligent design which is the cosmos - is also love.

Therefore, let us allow this Word of God to awaken us; let us pray that it will additionally illumine our minds so that we can perceive the message of creation - also written in our hearts - that the beginning of all things is creative wisdom, and this wisdom is love, it is goodness: "his mercy endures for ever".

## Psalm 135:10-26

16 November 2005

*"To the God of Heaven give thanks"*

Evening Prayer - Monday of Week Fourth

1. Our reflection returns to the hymn of praise in Psalm 136[135] which the Liturgy of Vespers presents in two successive stages, following the specific distinction of themes offered by the composition. Indeed, the celebration of the Lord's works is described in two spheres: space and time.

In the first part (Ps 135:1-9), which was the subject of our last meditation, we focused on the divine acts expressed in creation; the marvels of the universe were born from them. In that part of the Psalm, therefore, faith is expressed in God the Creator who reveals himself through his cosmic creatures.

Now, instead, the joyful hymn of the psalmist, called by Jewish tradition "the Great Hallel" or the most exalted praise raised to the Lord, leads us to a different horizon, that of history.

The first part, therefore, addresses creation as a reflection of God's beauty, and the second part speaks of history and the good that God has done for us in the course of time.

We know that biblical Revelation repeatedly proclaims that the presence of God the Saviour is manifested in particular in the history of salvation (cf. Dt 26:5-9; Jos 24:1-13).

2. Thus, the Lord's liberating actions, the heart of the fundamental event of the Exodus from Egypt, pass before the psalmist's eyes. Closely connected with the Exodus is the gruelling journey through the Sinai Desert, whose ultimate destination is the Promised Land, the divine gift that Israel continues to experience in all the pages of the Bible.

The famous crossing of the Red Sea, “divided in two”, split as it were in two and subdued like a defeated monster (cf. Ps 136[135]:13), brings forth the free people called to a mission and a glorious destiny (cf. vv. 14-15; Ex 15:1-21), who will have a new Christian interpretation in their full liberation from evil by baptismal grace (cf. I Cor 10:1-4).

The journey then begins through the desert: there the Lord is portrayed as a warrior who, by continuing the work of liberation begun in the Red Sea crossing, stands by his people to defend them by striking down their enemies. The desert and the sea thus represent the passage through evil and oppression, to receive the gift of freedom and the Promised Land (cf. Ps 136[135]:16-20).

3. In the finale, the Psalm looks out over that land which the Bible praises enthusiastically as “a good country, a land with streams of water, with springs and fountains welling up..., a land of wheat and barley, of vines and fig trees and pomegranates, of olive trees and of honey, a land where you can eat bread without stint and where you will lack nothing, a land whose stones contain iron and in whose hills you can mine copper” (Dt 8:7-9).

This emphatic celebration, which goes beyond the reality of that land, wants to exalt the divine gift, focusing our expectations on the most sublime gift of eternal life with God. It is a gift that enables people to be free, a gift that is born - as the refrain which marks every verse continues to repeat - by the hesed of the Lord, that is, his “mercy”, by his faithfulness to the commitment he made in the Covenant with Israel and by his love that continues to be revealed because “he remembered” them (cf. Ps 136[135]:23).

In the time of “humiliation”, that is, of the series of trials and oppression, Israel was always to discover the saving hand of the God of freedom and love. Even in times of hunger and wretchedness, the Lord was to arrive on the scene to offer food to all humanity, confirming his identity as Creator (cf. v. 25).

4. Consequently, with Psalm 136[135] two forms of the one divine Revelation are interwoven: the cosmic (cf. vv. 4-9) and the historical (cf. vv. 10-25). The Lord, of course, is transcendent as the Creator and Arbiter of being; but he is also close to his creatures, entering space and time. He does not remain far away, in a distant Heaven. On the contrary, his presence in our midst reaches its crowning point in Christ’s Incarnation.

This is what the Christian interpretation of the Psalm clearly proclaims, as the Fathers of the Church testified: they saw as the culminating point of the history of salvation and the supreme sign of the Father’s merciful love his gift of his Son to be the Saviour and Redeemer of humanity (cf. Jn 3:16).

Thus, at the beginning of his treatise *The Works of Charity and Alms*, St Cyprian, a third-century martyr, contemplates with wonder the acts that God accomplished for his people through Christ his Son, and finally bursts into passionate recognition of his mercy.

“Dearest brothers, many and great are God’s benefits, which the generous and copious goodness of God the Father and of Christ has accomplished and will always accomplish for our salvation. In fact, to preserve us, to give us a new life and to be able to redeem us, the Father sent the Son; the Son, who was sent, wanted to be called also Son of Man, to make us become children of God; he humbled himself to raise the people who were first lying on the ground, was wounded to heal our wounds, he became a slave to lead us, who were slaves, to freedom. He accepted death to be able to offer immortality to mortals. These are the many and great gifts of divine mercy” (1: Trattati: Collana di Testi Patristici, CLXXV, Rome, 2004, p. 108).

With these words, the holy Doctor of the Church develops the Psalm with a litany of benefits that God has given us, adding to what the psalmist did not yet know but expected, the true gift that God has made to us: the gift of his Son, the gift of the Incarnation in which God gave himself to us and stays with us, in the Eucharist and in his Word, every day, to the very end of history.

Our danger is that the memory of evil, of the evils suffered, may often be stronger than the memory of good. The Psalm’s purpose is also to reawaken in us the memory of good as well as of all the good that the Lord has done and is doing for us, which we can perceive if we become deeply attentive. It is true, God’s mercy endures for ever: it is present day after day.

## **Canticle in Letter to the Ephesians (1:3-10)**

23 November 2005

*“He chose us in him”*

*Vespers, Monday Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Every week the Liturgy of Vespers proposes to the praying Church the solemn hymn that opens the Letter to the Ephesians, the text that has just been proclaimed. It belongs to the category of *berakot*, that is, the “blessings” that already appear in the Old Testament and will be spread further in the Judaic Tradition.

Thus, it consists in a constant stream of praise that rises to God, who is celebrated in the Christian faith as “Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ”.

For this reason the figure of Christ, in whom the work of God the Father is revealed and brought about, is central in our hymn of praise. Indeed, the three principal verbs in this long but compact Canticle always lead us to the Son.

2. God “chose us in him” (Eph 1:4): he is our vocation to holiness, to adoptive sonship, hence, brotherhood with Christ. This gift, which radically transforms our state as creatures, is offered to us “through Jesus Christ” (v. 5) in an act that is part of the great divine plan of salvation, in that loving “according to the purpose of his will” (v. 5) of the Father, whom the Apostle contemplates with emotion.

The second verb after the election (“he chose us”) designates the gift of grace: “his glorious grace which he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved” (v. 6).

In Greek we have the same root twice, *charis* and *echaritosen*, to emphasize the gratuitousness of the divine initiative that preceded any human response. The grace that the Father gives us in his Only-begotten Son is therefore the manifestation of his love that enfolds and transforms us.

3. And here we come to the third fundamental verb in the Pauline Canticle: its subject is always the divine grace that was “freely bestowed” upon us (cf. v. 8). We therefore have before us a verb of fullness, we could say - keeping to its original tone - of super-abundance and unlimited and unreserved giving.

We thus penetrate the infinite and glorious depths of God’s mystery, opened and revealed through grace to whoever is called by grace and by love, since it is impossible to arrive at this revelation endowed with human intelligence and ability alone.

“Eye has not seen, ear has not heard, nor has it so much as dawned on man what God has prepared for those who love him’. Yet God has revealed this wisdom to us through the Spirit. The Spirit scrutinizes all matters, even the deep things of God” (I Cor 2:9-10).

4. The “mystery of the divine will” has a centre which is destined to coordinate the whole of the being and the whole of history, leading them to the fullness desired by God: “to unite all things in him” (Eph 1:10). In this “design”, in Greek (*oikonomia*), that is, in this harmonious plan of being and of existing, Christ rises, Head of the Body of the Church but also the axis that unites “all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth”.

Dispersion and restrictions are overcome and that “fullness” is formed which is the true goal of the plan that the divine will pre-established from its origins.

Thus, we stand before a grandiose fresco of the history of creation and salvation; let us now meditate upon it and deepen our knowledge of it through the words of St Irenaeus, a great second-century Doctor of the Church, in which, in some masterful passages of his *Treatise Adversus Haereses*, is developed an articulate reflection precisely on the recapitulation brought about by Christ.

5. The Christian faith, he affirms, recognizes that “there is only one God the Father and only one Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who has come through the whole economy and has recapitulated all things in himself. Among all things is also the human being, formed in the likeness of God. Therefore, he has also brought the human being to fulfilment in himself; the One who is invisible becomes visible, the One who is beyond understanding becomes understandable, and the One who is the Word becomes man” (3, 16, 6: *Già e non ancora*, CCCXX, Milan, 1979, p. 268).

This is why “the Word of God became man” truly and not only in appearance, for in the latter case “his work would not have been true”. Instead, “he was what he appeared to be: God who recapitulates in himself his original creature, who is man, to kill sin, destroy death and give life to man. And for this reason his works are true (3, 18, 7: *ibid.*, pp. 277-278).

He made himself Head of the Church to draw all people to himself at the right moment. In the spirit of St Irenaeus’ words let us pray: Yes, Lord, attract us to you, attract the world to you and give us peace, your peace.

## Psalm 137[136]:1-6

30 November 2005

*“If I forget you, Jerusalem”*

*Evening Prayer - Tuesday of the Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. On this first Wednesday of Advent, a liturgical season of silence, watchfulness and prayer in preparation for Christmas, let us meditate on Psalm 137[136], whose first words in the Latin version became famous: *Super flumina Babylonis*. The text evokes the tragedy lived by the Jewish people during the destruction of Jerusalem in about 586 B.C., and their subsequent and consequent exile in Babylon. We have before us a national hymn of sorrow, marked by a curt nostalgia for what has been lost.



This heartfelt invocation to the Lord to free his faithful from slavery in Babylon also expresses clearly the sentiments of hope and expectation of salvation with which we have begun our journey through Advent.

The background to the first part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 1-4) is the land of exile with its rivers and streams, indeed, the same that irrigated the Babylonian plain to which the Jews had been deported. It is, as it were, a symbolic foreshadowing of the extermination camps to which the Jewish people - in the century we have just left behind us - were taken in an abominable operation of death that continues to be an indelible disgrace in the history of humanity.

The second part of the Psalm (cf. vv. 5-6) is instead pervaded by the loving memory of Zion, the city lost but still alive in the exiles' hearts.

2. The hand, tongue, palate, voice and tears are included in the Psalmist's words. The hand is indispensable to the harp-player: but it is already paralyzed (cf. v. 5) by grief, also because the harps are hung up on the poplars.

The tongue is essential to the singer, but now it is stuck to the palate (cf. v. 6). In vain do the Babylonian captors "ask... for songs..., songs... of joy" (v. 3). "Zion's songs" are "song[s] of the Lord" (vv. 3-4), not folk songs to be performed. Only through a people's liturgy and freedom can they rise to Heaven.

3. God, who is the ultimate judge of history, will also know how to understand and accept, in accordance with his justice, the cry of victims, over and above the tones of bitterness that sometimes colours them.

Let us entrust ourselves to St Augustine for a further meditation on our Psalm. The great Father of the Church introduces a surprising and very timely note: he knows that there are also people among the inhabitants of Babylon who are committed to peace and to the good of the community, although they do not share the biblical faith; the hope of the Eternal City to which we aspire is unknown to them. Within them they have a spark of desire for the unknown, for the greater, for the transcendent: for true redemption.

And Augustine says that even among the persecutors, among the non-believers, there are people who possess this spark, with a sort of faith or hope, as far as is possible for them in the circumstances in which they live. With this faith, even in an unknown reality, they are truly on their way towards the true Jerusalem, towards Christ.

And with this openness of hope, Augustine also warns the "Babylonians" - as he calls them - those who do not know Christ or even God and yet desire the unknown, the eternal, and he warns us too, not to focus merely on the material things of the present

but to persevere on the journey to God. It is also only with this greater hope that we will be able to transform this world in the right way. St Augustine says so in these words:

“If we are citizens of Jerusalem... and must live in this land, in the confusion of this world and in this Babylon where we do not dwell as citizens but are held prisoner, then we should not just sing what the Psalm says but we should also live it: something that is done with a profound, heartfelt aspiration, a full and religious yearning for the eternal city”.

And he adds with regard to the “earthly city called Babylon”, that it “has in it people who, prompted by love for it, work to guarantee it peace - temporal peace - nourishing in their hearts no other hope, indeed, by placing in this one all their joy, without any other intention. And we see them making every effort to be useful to earthly society”.

“Now, if they strive to do these tasks with a pure conscience, God, having predestined them to be citizens of Jerusalem, will not let them perish within Babylon: this is on condition, however, that while living in Babylon, they do not thirst for ambition, short-lived magnificence or vexing arrogance.... He sees their enslavement and will show them that other city for which they must truly long and towards which they must direct their every effort” (Esposizioni sui Salmi, 136, 1-2: Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, XXVIII, Rome, 1977, pp. 397, 399).

And let us pray to the Lord that in all of us this desire, this openness to God, will be reawakened, and that even those who do not know Christ may be touched by his love so that we are all together on the pilgrimage to the definitive City, and that the light of this City may appear also in our time and in our world.

## **Psalm 138[137]**

7 December 2005

### *Judaic hymn of thanksgiving*

Evening Prayer - Tuesday of the Fourth Week

1. Psalm 138[137], the hymn of thanksgiving that we have just heard, attributed by the Judaic tradition to the patronage of David although it probably came into being in a later epoch, opens with a personal hymn by the person praying. He lifts up his voice in the setting of the assembly in the temple or at least makes a reference to the Shrine of Zion, the chair of the Lord's presence and the place of his encounter with the people of the faithful.

Indeed, the Psalmist confesses that he will “adore before your holy temple” in Jerusalem (cf. v. 2): there he sings before God, who is in heaven with his court of angels but is also listening in the earthly space of the temple (cf. v. 1). The person praying is sure that the “name” of the Lord, that is, his personal reality, alive and active, and his virtues of faithfulness and mercy, signs of the Covenant with his people, are the support of all faithfulness and hope (cf. v. 2).

2. He then briefly turns his gaze to the past, to the day of affliction: at that time the divine voice answered the anguished cry of the believer. Indeed, it instilled courage in the distressed soul (cf. v. 3). The original Hebrew speaks literally of the Lord who “increased the strength of soul” of the righteous one who is oppressed. It is as if an impetuous wind had broken into it, sweeping away hesitations and fears, instilling in it new, vital energy and making fortitude and faithfulness flourish.

After this seemingly personal premise, the Psalmist broadens his gaze to the world and imagines that his testimony takes in the whole horizon: “all earth’s kings”, in a sort of universalistic adherence, join with the Jewish person praying in a common song of praise to honour the greatness and sovereign power of the Lord (cf. vv. 4-6).

3. The content of this unanimous praise that rises from all people already shows the future Church of the pagans, the future universal Church. The first theme of this content is the “glory” and the “ways of the Lord” (cf. v. 5), that is, his projects of salvation and revelation.

Thus, one discovers that God is certainly “exalted” and transcendent, but he looks on the “lowly” with affection while he turns his face away from the proud as a sign of rejection and judgment (cf. v. 6).

As Isaiah proclaimed: “For thus says he who is high and exalted, living eternally, whose name is the Holy One: On high I dwell, and in holiness, and with the crushed and dejected in spirit, to revive the spirits of the dejected, to revive the hearts of the crushed” (Is 57:15).

God therefore chooses to take the side of the weak, victims, the lowliest: this is made known to all kings so that they will know what their option should be in the governing of nations.

Naturally, this is not only said to kings and to all governments but also to all of us, because we too must know what choice to make, what the option is: to side with the humble and the lowliest, with the poor and the weak.

4. After calling into question national leaders worldwide, not only those of that time but of all times, the person praying returns to his personal prayer of praise (cf. Ps 138[137]:7-

8). Turning his gaze to his future life, he implores God for help also for the trials that existence may still have in store for him. And we all pray like this, with this prayerful person of that time.

He speaks in concise terms of the “anger of the foes” (cf. v. 7), a sort of symbol of all the hostilities that may spring up before the righteous person on his way through history. But he knows, and with him we also know, that the Lord will never abandon him and will stretch out his hand to save and guide him.

The finale of the Psalm, then, is a last passionate profession of trust in God whose goodness is eternal: he will not “discard... the work of [his] hands”, in other words, his creature (v. 8). And we too must live in this trust, in this certainty of God’s goodness.

We must be sure that however burdensome and tempestuous the trials that await us may be, we will never be left on our own, we will never fall out of the Lord’s hands, those hands that created us and now sustain us on our journey through life. As St Paul was to confess: “he who has begun the good work in you will carry it through to completion” (Phil 1:6).

5. Thus, we too have prayed with a psalm of praise, thanksgiving and trust. Let us continue to follow this thread of hymnodic praise through the witness of a Christian hymn-writer, the great Ephrem the Syrian (fourth century), the author of texts with an extraordinary poetic and spiritual fragrance.

“However great may be our wonder for you, O Lord, your glory exceeds what our tongues can express”, Ephrem sang in one hymn (Inni sulla Verginità, 7: L’Arpa dello Spirito, Rome, 1999, p. 66); and in another: “Praise to you, to whom all things are easy, for you are almighty” (Inni sulla Natività, 11: *ibid.*, p. 48). And this is a further reason for our trust: that God has the power of mercy and uses his power for mercy. And lastly, a final quote: “Praise to you from all who understand your truth” (Inni sulla Fede, 14: *ibid.*, p. 27).

## Psalm 139[138]

14 December 2005

*“O where can I go?”*

Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week

1. The Liturgy of Vespers - on whose Psalms and Canticles we are meditating - offers us in two separate phases the reading of a sapiential hymn of clear beauty and strong emotional impact: Psalm 139[138]. Today, we have before us the first part of the

composition (cf. vv. 1-12), that is, the first two strophes which respectively exalt God's omniscience (cf. vv. 1-6) and his omnipresence in space and in time (cf. vv. 7-12).

The purpose of the forceful images and expressions is to celebrate the Creator: "If the greatness of the works created is immense", said Theodoret of Cyr, a Christian writer of the fifth century, "how much greater their Creator must be!" (Discorsi sulla Provvidenza, 4: Collana di Testi Patristici, LXXV, Rome, 1988, p. 115). The Psalmist's meditation sought above all to penetrate the mystery of God, transcendent yet close to us.

2. The substance of the message he offers us is straightforward: God knows everything and is present beside his creature who cannot elude him. However, his presence is neither threatening nor inspectorial; of course, he also looks reprovingly at evil, to which he is not indifferent.

Yet the basic element is that of a saving presence which can embrace the whole being and the whole of history. In practice, this is the spiritual scenario to which St Paul alluded at the Areopagus of Athens, with recourse to a quotation from a Greek poet: "In him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

3. The first part (cf. Ps 139[138]:1-6), as I said, is the celebration of the divine omniscience: in fact, verbs suggesting knowledge are repeated, such as "scrutinize", "know", "discern", "penetrate", "understand", "be wise".

As is well known, biblical knowledge exceeds pure and simple intellectual learning and understanding; it is a sort of communion between the One who knows and the one known: hence, the Lord is intimately close to us while we are thinking and acting.

On the other hand, the second part of our Psalm (cf. vv. 7-12) is dedicated to the divine omnipresence. The illusory desire of human beings to flee from that presence is vividly described in it. The whole of space is steeped in it: there is first of all the vertical axis "heaven-hell" (cf. v. 8), which gives way to the horizontal dimension which extends from dawn, that is, from the East, and reaches as far as the Mediterranean "sea's furthest end", that is, the West (cf. v. 9). Every sphere of space, even the most secret, contains God's active presence.

The Psalmist continues, also introducing the other reality in which we are immersed: time, symbolically portrayed by night and by light, by darkness and by day (cf. vv. 11-12).

The gaze and the manifestation of the Lord of being and time even penetrates the darkness, in which it is difficult to move about and see. His hand is always ready to grasp ours, to lead us on our earthly journey (cf. v. 10). This is not, therefore, a judgmental closeness that inspires terror, but a closeness of support and liberation.

And so we can understand what the ultimate, essential content of this Psalm is: it is a song of trust. God is always with us. Even in the darkest nights of our lives, he does not abandon us. Even in the most difficult moments, he remains present. And even in the last night, in the last loneliness in which no one can accompany us, the night of death, the Lord does not abandon us.

He is with us even in this final solitude of the night of death. And we Christians can therefore be confident: we are never left on our own. God's goodness is always with us.

4. We began with a citation by the Christian writer Theodoret of Cyr. Let us end by entrusting ourselves once again to him and to his Fourth Discourse on Divine Providence, because in the ultimate analysis this is the theme of the Psalm. He reflects on v. 6, in which the person praying exclaims: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach".

Theodoret comments on this passage by examining the interiority of the conscience and personal experience, and says: "Having turned to me and become intimate with me, after removing me from the external din, he wanted to immerse me in contemplation of my nature.... Reflecting on these things and thinking of the harmony between the mortal and the immortal natures, I am won over by so much wonder and, not succeeding in contemplating this mystery, recognize my defeat; furthermore, while I proclaim the victory of the Creator's knowledge and sing hymns of praise to him, I cry: "Too wonderful for me, [your] knowledge, too high, beyond my reach" (Collana di Testi Patristici, LXXV, Rome, 1988, pp. 116, 117).

## Psalm 139[138]

21 December 2005

*"The wonder of my being"*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today's General Audience is taking place in an atmosphere of glad and excited expectation for the Christmas festivities, now at hand. Come, Lord Jesus! This is what we repeat in prayer during these days, preparing our hearts to taste the joy of the Redeemer's birth. In this last week of Advent in particular, the liturgy accompanies and sustains us on our inner journey with repeated invitations to welcome the Saviour and to recognize him in the humble Child lying in a manger.

This is the mystery of Christmas, which a wealth of symbols helps us to understand better. These include the symbol of light, which is one of the symbols richest in spiritual significance and on which I would like briefly to reflect.

In our hemisphere, the Feast of Christmas coincides with the days of the winter solstice, after which the daylight time gradually lengthens, in accordance with the sequence of the seasons.

This helps us understand better the theme of light that overcomes the darkness. It is an evocative symbol of a reality that touches the innermost depths of the human being: I am referring to the light of good that triumphs over evil, the light of love that overcomes hatred, the light of life that defeats death. Christmas makes us think of this inner light, the divine light that returns to propose anew to us the proclamation of the definitive victory of God's love over sin and death.

Therefore, in the Novena of Holy Christmas that we are now making, there are many and significant evocations of light. The antiphon we sang at the beginning of our meeting also reminds us of light. The Saviour awaited by the people is hailed as the "Rising Star", the star that points out the way to men and women and guides them as they journey through the shadows and dangers of the world toward the salvation promised by God and fulfilled in Jesus Christ.

As we prepare to celebrate the Saviour's Birth joyfully in our families and our Ecclesial Communities, while a certain modern, consumerist culture tends to do away with the Christian symbols of the celebration of Christmas, may it be everyone's task to grasp the value of the Christmas traditions that are part of the patrimony of our faith and our culture, in order to pass them on to the young generations.

Let us remember in particular, as we look at the streets and squares of the cities decorated with dazzling lights, that these lights refer us to another light, invisible to the eyes but not to the heart. While we admire them, while we light the candles in churches or the illuminations of the crib and the Christmas tree in our homes, may our souls be open to the true spiritual light brought to all people of good will. The God-with-us, born in Bethlehem of the Virgin Mary, is the Star of our lives!

"O rising Star, splendour of eternal light, sun of justice: shine on those lost in the darkness of death!". Making our own this invocation of today's liturgy, let us ask the Lord to hasten his glorious coming among us, among all those who are suffering, for in him alone can the genuine expectations of the human heart find fulfilment.

May this Star of light that never sets communicate to us the strength to follow always the path of truth, justice and love! Let us live these last days before Christmas intensely, together with Mary, the Virgin of silence and listening.

May she who was totally enveloped by the light of the Holy Spirit help us to understand and live to the full the mystery of Christ's Nativity. With these sentiments, exhorting you to keep alive the inner wonder in fervent expectation of the celebration of the Saviour's birth that is now at hand, I am pleased to express from this moment my most cordial good wishes for a holy and happy Christmas to all of you present here, to your relatives, to your communities and to all your loved ones.

Merry Christmas to everyone!

## Psalm 139[138]

28 December 2005

*"The wonder of my being"*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. At this General Audience on Wednesday of the Octave of Christmas, the liturgical Feast of the Holy Innocents, let us resume our meditation on Psalm 139[138], proposed in the Liturgy of Vespers in two distinct stages. After contemplating in the first part (cf. vv. 1-12) the omniscient and omnipotent God, the Lord of being and history, this sapiential hymn of intense beauty and deep feeling now focuses on the loftiest, most marvellous reality of the entire universe: man, whose being is described as a "wonder" of God (cf. v. 14).

Indeed, this topic is deeply in tune with the Christmas atmosphere we are living in these days in which we celebrate the great mystery of the Son of God who became man, indeed, became a Child, for our salvation.

After pondering on the gaze and presence of the Creator that sweeps across the whole cosmic horizon, in the second part of the Psalm on which we are meditating today God turns his loving gaze upon the human being, whose full and complete beginning is reflected upon.

He is still an "unformed substance" in his mother's womb: the Hebrew term used has been understood by several biblical experts as referring to an "embryo", described in that term as a small, oval, curled-up reality, but on which God has already turned his benevolent and loving eyes (cf. v. 16).



2. To describe the divine action within the maternal womb, the Psalmist has recourse to classical biblical images, comparing the productive cavity of the mother to the “depths of the earth”, that is, the constant vitality of great mother earth (cf. v. 15).

First of all, there is the symbol of the potter and of the sculptor who “fashions” and moulds his artistic creation, his masterpiece, just as it is said about the creation of man in the Book of Genesis: “the Lord God formed man out of the clay of the ground” (Gn 2:7).

Then there is a “textile” symbol that evokes the delicacy of the skin, the flesh, the nerves, “threaded” onto the bony skeleton. Job also recalled forcefully these and other images to exalt that masterpiece which the human being is, despite being battered and bruised by suffering: “Your hands have formed me and fashioned me.... Remember that you fashioned me from clay...! Did you not pour me out as milk and thicken me like cheese? With skin and flesh you clothed me, with bones and sinews knit me together” (Jb 10:8-11).

3. The idea in our Psalm that God already sees the entire future of that embryo, still an “unformed substance”, is extremely powerful. The days which that creature will live and fill with deeds throughout his earthly existence are already written in the Lord’s book of life.

Thus, once again the transcendent greatness of divine knowledge emerges, embracing not only humanity’s past and present but also the span, still hidden, of the future. However, the greatness of this little unborn human creature, formed by God’s hands and surrounded by his love, also appears: a biblical tribute to the human being from the first moment of his existence.

Let us now entrust ourselves to the reflection that St Gregory the Great in his Homilies on Ezekiel has interwoven with the sentence of the Psalm on which we commented earlier: “Your eyes beheld my unformed substance; in your book were written every one of them [my days]” (v. 16). On those words the Pontiff and Father of the Church composed an original and delicate meditation concerning all those in the Christian Community who falter on their spiritual journey.

And he says that those who are weak in faith and in Christian life are part of the architecture of the Church. “They are nonetheless added... by virtue of good will. It is true, they are imperfect and little, yet as far as they are able to understand, they love God and their neighbour and do not neglect to do all the good that they can. Even if they do not yet attain spiritual gifts so as to open their soul to perfect action and ardent contemplation, yet they do not fall behind in love of God and neighbour, to the extent that they can comprehend it.

“Therefore, it happens that they too contribute to building the Church because, although their position is less important, although they lag behind in teaching, prophecy, the

grace of miracles and complete distaste for the world, yet they are based on foundations of awe and love, in which they find their solidity” (2, 3, 12-13, *Opere di Gregorio Magno*, III/2, Rome, 1993, pp. 79, 81).

St Gregory’s message, therefore, becomes a great consolation to all of us who often struggle wearily along on the path of spiritual and ecclesial life. The Lord knows us and surrounds us all with his love.

## **Canticle in St Paul’s Letter to the Colossians (1:3, 12-20)**

4 January 2006

*“All the fullness of God”*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. At this first General Audience of the New Year let us pause to meditate on the famous Christological Hymn contained in the Letter to the Colossians which constitutes, as it were, the solemn entrance into the wealth of this Pauline text; it is also a doorway through which to enter this year.

The hymn proposed for our reflection is framed by a rich expression of thanks (cf. vv. 3, 12-14). It helps us to create the spiritual atmosphere required to live well these first days of 2006 and our long journey throughout the new year (cf. vv. 15-20).

The praise of the Apostle, together with our praise, rises up to “God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ” (cf. v. 3), the source of that salvation which is described using negative and positive images: first as having “delivered us from the power of darkness” (cf. v. 13), that is, as “redemption, the forgiveness of sins” (v. 14), and then re-presented as “the inheritance of the saints in light” (v. 12) and as the entrance “to the Kingdom of his beloved Son” (v. 13).

2. At this point the great and full Hymn unfolds: its centre is Christ and it exalts his primacy and work both in Creation and in the history of Redemption (cf. vv. 15-20). Thus, the Canticle has two movements. In the first movement, Christ is presented as the Firstborn of all creation, Christ “generated before every creature” (cf. v. 15). Indeed, he is “the image of the invisible God” and this expression has the same impact that the “icon” has in Eastern culture: it is not only the likeness that is emphasized but the profound intimacy with the subject that is represented.

Christ visibly re-proposes among us the “invisible God”. In him we see the face of God through the common nature that unites them. By virtue of his most exalted dignity, Christ precedes “all things”, not only because of his eternity, but also and especially in his creative and provident work: “in him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible... and in him all things hold together” (cf. vv. 16-17). Indeed, they were also created “for him” (v. 16).

And so St Paul points out to us a very important truth: history has a destination, a direction. History moves toward humanity united in Christ and thus moves in the direction of the perfect man, toward the perfect humanism.

In other words, St Paul tells us: yes, there is progress in history. There is, we could say, an evolution of history. Progress is all that which brings us closer to Christ and thus closer to a united humanity, to true humanism. And so, hidden within these indications there is also an imperative for us: to work for progress, something that we all want. We can do this by working to bring others to Christ; we can do this by personally conforming ourselves to Christ, thereby taking up the path of true progress.

3. The second movement of the Hymn (cf. Col 1:18-20) is dominated by the figure of Christ the Saviour within the history of salvation. His work is revealed first of all in his being “the head of the Body, the Church” (v. 18): this is the privileged salvific horizon that manifests the fullness of liberation and redemption, the vital communion that joins the head and the members of the body, that is, between Christ and Christians. The Apostle’s gaze extends to the ultimate goal towards which history converges: Christ, “the first-born from the dead” (v. 18), is the One who opens the doors to eternal life, snatching us from the limits of death and evil.

Here, in fact is that pleroma, that “fullness” of life and grace that is in Christ himself and that was given and communicated to us (cf. v. 19). With this vital presence that allows us to share in his divinity, we are interiorally transformed, reconciled, and peace is reestablished: this is the harmony of the entire redeemed being, in whom henceforth God will be “all in all” (I Cor 15:28). To live as Christians means allowing ourselves, in this way, to be interiorly transformed into the likeness of Christ. Here, reconciliation and peace are achieved.

4. Let us now give this grandiose mystery of Redemption a contemplative look, borrowing the words of St Proclus of Constantinople, who died in 446. In his First Homily on Mary, Mother of God, he presents the mystery of Redemption anew, as a consequence of the Incarnation.

Indeed, God, the Archbishop recalls, was made man in order to save us and thus to snatch us from the powers of darkness and bring us back to the Kingdom of the Beloved

Son, exactly as this Canticle of the Letter to the Colossians recalls: “The One who redeemed us”, Proclus observes, “is not purely human; indeed, the whole of the human race was enslaved to sin; but he was also not merely a God deprived of human nature: he actually had a body. If he had not been clothed in my flesh he would not have saved me. Having been formed in the Virgin’s womb, he was clad in the guise of one condemned. In a wonderful exchange, he gave his spirit and took on flesh” (8: Testi mariani del primo millennio, I, Rome, 1988, p. 561).

We therefore stand before the work of God who brought about Redemption precisely because he was also a man. He was at the same time the Son of God, the Saviour, but also our brother, and it is with this closeness that he pours forth in us the divine gift.

It is truly God-with-us. Amen!

## Psalm 144[143]

11 January 2006

*“He is my stronghold”*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Our journey through the Psalter used by the liturgy of Vespers now comes to a royal hymn, Psalm 144[143], the first part of which has just been proclaimed: in fact, the liturgy divides this hymn into two separate sections.

The first part (cf. vv. 1-8) shows clearly the literary character of this composition: the Psalmist has recourse to citations of other texts of psalms, presenting them in a new project of song and prayer.

Precisely because the Psalm is of a later epoch, it is easy to imagine that the king who is exalted might no longer possess the features of the Davidic sovereign, since the Jewish royal house came to an end with the Babylonian Exile in the sixth century B.C., but rather represents the shining and glorious figure of the Messiah, whose triumph is no longer an event of war or politics but an intervention of liberation from evil. The “messiah” - a Hebrew word that means “anointed one”, as was a sovereign - thus gives way to the “Messiah” par excellence, who in the Christian interpretation has the Face of Jesus Christ, “son of David, son of Abraham” (cf. Mt 1:1).

2. The hymn opens with a blessing, that is, with an exclamation of praise addressed to the Lord, celebrated with a brief litany of saving titles: he is the rock, safe and sound, he

is loving grace, he is the protected fortress, the stronghold of defence, liberation, the shield that keeps at bay any assault by evil (cf. 144[143]:1-2). There is also the martial image of God who trains his faithful one for battle so that he will be able to face the hostilities of the environment, the dark powers of the world.

Before the all-powerful Lord, the person of prayer feels weak and frail, despite his royal dignity. He therefore makes a profession of humility that is formulated, as was said, with words from Psalms 8 and 39[38]. Indeed, he feels like “a breath”, similar to a fleeting shadow, ephemeral and inconsistent, plunged into the flow of time that rolls on and marked by the limitations proper to the human creature (cf. Ps 144[143]:4).

3. Here then, is the question: why does God care for and think about this creature who is so wretched and ephemeral?

This question (cf. v. 3) elicits the great manifestation of the divine, the so-called theophany that is accompanied by a procession of cosmic elements and historical events, directed at celebrating the transcendence of the supreme King of being, of the universe and of history.

Here, mountains smoke in volcanic eruptions (cf. v. 5), lightning like arrows routs the wicked (cf. v. 6), here are the “mighty waters” of the ocean that are the symbol of the chaos from which, however, the king is saved by the action of the divine hand itself (cf. v. 7).

In the background remain the wicked who tell “lies” and swear false oaths (cf. vv. 7-8): a practical depiction, in the Semitic style of idolatry, of moral perversion and evil that truly oppose God and his faithful.

4. Now, for our meditation, we will reflect initially on the profession of humility made by the Psalmist, and entrust ourselves to the words of Origen, whose commentary on our text has come down to us in St Jerome’s Latin version.

“The Psalmist speaks of the frailty of the body and of the human condition”, because “with regard to the human condition, the human person is nothing. “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity”, said Ecclesiastes”.

But the marvelling, grateful question returns: “‘Lord, what is man that you manifested yourself to him?’... It is a great happiness for men and women to know their Creator. In this we differ from wild beasts and other animals, because we know we have our Creator, whereas they do not”.

It is worth thinking a bit about these words of Origen, who sees the fundamental difference between the human being and the other animals in the fact that man is capable of recognizing God, his Creator, that man is capable of truth, capable of a

knowledge that becomes a relationship, friendship. It is important in our time that we do not forget God, together with all the other kinds of knowledge we have acquired in the meantime, and they are very numerous! They all become problematic, at times dangerous, if the fundamental knowledge that gives meaning and orientation to all things is missing: knowledge of God the Creator.

Let us return to Origen. He says: “You will not be able to save this wretch that is man unless you take it upon yourself. “Lord..., lower your heavens and come down’. Your lost sheep cannot find healing unless it is placed on your shoulders.... These words are addressed to the Son: “Lord, lower your heavens and come down’.... You have come down, lowered the heavens, stretched out your hand from on high and deigned to take our human flesh upon yourself, and many believed in you” (Origen-Jerome, 74 Homilies on the Book of Psalms, Milan, 1993, pp. 512-515).

For us Christians God is no longer a hypothesis, as he was in the philosophy that preceded Christianity, but a reality, for God “lowered the heavens and came down”. Heaven is God himself and he came down among us.

Origen rightly sees in the Parable of the Lost Sheep that the shepherd takes upon his shoulders the Parable of God’s Incarnation. Yes, in the Incarnation, he came down and took upon his shoulders our flesh, we ourselves.

Thus, knowledge of God became reality, it became friendship and communion. Let us thank the Lord because he “lowered the heavens and came down”, he took our flesh upon his shoulders and carries us on our journey through life.

The Psalm, having started with our discovery that we are weak and far from divine splendour, ends up with this great surprise of God’s action: beside us, with us, is God-Emmanuel, who for Christians has the loving Face of Jesus Christ, God made man, God made one of us.

## **Psalm 144[143]**

11 January 2006

## *“He is my stronghold”*

*Evening Prayer - Wednesday of the Fourth Week*

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## Psalm 144[143]

25 January 2006

*"Sing a new song!"*

*Vespers of Thursday of the 4 Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. Today concludes the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, during which we reflected on the constant necessity to invoke the Lord for the immense gift of full unity among all of Christ's disciples. Indeed, this prayer contributes in an essential way to make the common ecumenical effort of the Churches and Ecclesial Communities more sincere and fruitful.

At this gathering of ours, I would like to take up once more the meditation on Psalm 144[143], proposed by the Liturgy of Vespers in two distinct moments (cf. vv. 1-8 and vv. 9-15). The tone is still hymnal and entering into the scene is, also in the second movement of this Psalm, the figure of the "Anointed One", that is, the "Consecrated One" par excellence, Jesus, who draws everyone to himself to make of all "one" (cf. Jn 17:11, 21). It is not by chance that the scene dominating the hymn is marked by prosperity and peace, symbols typical of the messianic era.

2. For this reason, the hymn is defined as "new", a term which, in biblical language, evokes not so much the exterior novelty of the words, as the ultimate fullness that seals hope (cf. v. 9). It sings, therefore, of the destination of history where the voice of evil, described by the Psalmist as "lies" and "perjury", expressions which indicate idolatry (cf. v. 11), will finally be silenced.

But this negative aspect is replaced by a more spacious positive dimension, that of the new world, a joyful one about to appear. This is the true shalom or messianic “peace”, a luminous horizon that is articulated with a series of images drawn from social life: they too can become for us an auspice for the birth of a more just society.

3. It is above all the family (cf. v. 12) that is founded on generations of young people. Sons, the hope of the future, are compared to strong saplings; daughters are like sturdy columns supporting the house, similar to those of a temple.

From the family we pass on to agriculture and farming, to the fields with its crops stored in the barns, with large flocks of grazing sheep and the working animals that till the fertile fields (cf. vv. 13-14).

Our gaze then turns to the city, that is, to the entire civil society which finally enjoys the precious gift of public peace and order. Indeed, the city walls are never more to be “breached” by invaders during assaults; raids are over, that mean plundering and deportation, and finally, the “sound of weeping” of the despairing, the wounded, victims and orphans, the sad inheritance of war, is no longer raised (cf. v. 14).

4. This portrait of a different yet possible world is entrusted to the work of the Messiah and also to that of his people. Under the guidance of Christ the Messiah, we must work together for this project of harmony and peace, stopping war’s destructive action of hatred and violence. It is necessary, however, to make a choice, choosing to be on the side of the God of love and justice.

It is for this reason that the Psalm ends with the words: “Happy the people whose God is the Lord” (v. 15). God is the Good of goods, the condition of all other goods.

Only a people that knows God and defends spiritual and moral values can truly go towards a profound peace and also become a strength of peace for the world and for others; therefore, together with the Psalmist they can sing the “new song”, full of trust and hope.

Spontaneous reference is made to the new covenant, to the novelty itself of Christ and his Gospel.

This is what St Augustine reminds us. Reading this Psalm, he also interprets the words: “I will play on the ten-stringed harp to you”. To him, the ten-stringed harp is the law summed up in the Ten Commandments.

But we must find the right peg for these ten strings, these Ten Commandments. And only if these ten cords of the Ten Commandments - as St Augustine says - are strummed by the charity of the heart do they sound well.

Charity is the fullness of the law. He who lives the Commandments as a dimension of the one charity, truly sings the “new song”. Charity that is united to the sentiments of Christ is the authentic “new song” of the “new man”, able to create also a “new world”.

This Psalm invites us to sing “on the ten-stringed harp” with a new heart, to sing with the sentiments of Christ, to live the Ten Commandments in the dimension of love and to thereby contribute to the peace and harmony of the world (cf. *Esposizioni sui Salmi*, 143, 16: Nuova Biblioteca Agostiniana, XXVIII, Rome, 1977, p. 677).

## Psalm 145[144],1-13

1 February 2006

*“I will give you glory!”*

*Vespers of Friday of the 4th Week*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

1. We have just prayed Psalm 145[144], a joyful song of praise to the Lord who is exalted as a tender and loving King, concerned for all his creatures. The liturgy presents this hymn to us in two separate parts that also correspond to the two poetical and spiritual movements of the Psalm itself. We now reflect on the first part, which corresponds to verses 1-13.

The Psalm is raised to the Lord who is invoked and described as “King” (cf. Ps 145[144]:1), a depiction of the divine that is also dominant in other psalmic hymns (cf. Ps 47[46], 93[92]; 96[95]-99[98]).

Indeed, the spiritual centre of our canticle is constituted precisely by an intense and passionate celebration of the divine kingship. The Hebrew word *malkut*, “reign”, is repeated in it four times, almost as if to indicate the four cardinal points of being and of history (cf. Ps 145[144]:11-13).

We know that this royal symbolism, which was also to be central in Christ’s preaching, is the expression of God’s saving project: he is not indifferent to human history; on the contrary, he desires to put a plan of harmony and peace for human history into practice with us and for us.

The whole of humanity is called together to implement this plan in order that it comply with the divine saving will, a will that is extended to all “men”, to “all generations”, from “age to age”.

It is a universal action that uproots evil from the world and instills in it the “glory” of the Lord, that is, his personal, effective and transcendent presence.

2. The prayerful praise of the Psalmist, who makes himself the voice of all the faithful and today would like to be the voice of all of us, is directed to this heart of the Psalm, placed precisely at the centre of the composition. The loftiest biblical prayer is in fact the celebration of the works of salvation, which reveal the Lord’s love for his creatures.

In this Psalm the Psalmist continues to praise the divine “name”, that is, the person of the Lord (cf. vv. 1-2), who manifests himself in his historical action: indeed, his “works”, “splendour”, “wonderful works”, “mighty deeds”, “greatness”, “justice”, “patience”, “compassion”, “grace”, “goodness” and “love” are mentioned.

It is a prayer in the form of a litany which proclaims God’s entry into human events in order to bring the whole of created reality to a salvific fullness. We are not at the mercy of dark forces nor alone with our freedom, but rather, we are entrusted to the action of the mighty and loving Lord, who has a plan for us, a “reign” to establish (cf. v. 11).

3. This “kingdom” does not consist of power and might, triumph and oppression, as unfortunately is often the case with earthly kingdoms; rather, it is the place where compassion, love, goodness, grace and justice are manifested, as the Psalmist repeats several times in the flow of verses full of praise.

Verse 8 sums up this divine portrait: the Lord is “slow to anger, abounding in love”. These words are reminiscent of God’s presentation of himself on Sinai when he said: “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6).

We have here a preparation for the profession of faith in God of St John the Apostle, who simply tells us that he is love: “Deus caritas est” (cf. I Jn 4:8, 16).

4. Our attention, as well as being fixed on these beautiful words that portray to us a God who is “slow to anger” and “full of compassion”, always ready to forgive and to help, is also fixed on the very beautiful verse 9 which follows: “How good is the Lord to all, compassionate to all his creatures”. These are words to meditate upon, words of consolation, a certainty that he brings to our lives.

In this regard, St Peter Chrysologus (c. 380 c. 450) says in his Second Discourse on Fasting: “‘Great are the works of the Lord’; but this grandeur that we see in Creation is surpassed by the greatness of his mercy. Indeed, after the Prophet has said, ‘Great are the works of God’, in another passage he adds: ‘His compassion is greater than all his works’. Mercy, brothers and sisters, fills the heavens, fills the earth.... That is why the great, generous, unique mercy of Christ, who reserved every judgment for a single day,

allotted all of man's time to the truce of penance.... That is why the Prophet who did not trust in his own justice abandons himself entirely to God's mercy; "Have mercy on me, O God", he says, "according to your abundant mercy' (Ps 51[50]:3)" (42, 4-5: Sermoni 1-62bis, Scrittori dell'Area Santambrosiana, 1, Milan-Rome, 1996, pp. 299, 301).

And so, let us too say to the Lord, "Have mercy on me, O God, you who are great in your mercy".

## Psalm 145[144]:14-21

8 February 2006

*"The Lord is faithful in all his words"*

Vespers of Friday of the 4th Week

1. Following the liturgy that divides it into two parts, let us return to , a wonderful hymn in honour of the Lord, a loving King who is attentive to his creatures. Let us now meditate upon the second part of the Psalm: they are verses 14 to 21, which take up the fundamental theme of the hymn's first part.

In them are exalted the divine compassion, tenderness, fidelity and goodness which are extended to the whole of humanity, involving every creature. The Psalm now focuses on the love that the Lord reserves particularly for the poor and the weak.

Divine kingship is not, therefore, detached and haughty, as can be the case in the exercise of human power. God expresses his sovereignty by bending down to meet the frailest and most helpless of his creatures.

2. Indeed, he is first and foremost a father who supports those who falter and raises those who have fallen into the dust of humiliation (cf. v. 14). Consequently, living beings are reaching out to the Lord like hungry beggars and he gives them, like a tender parent, the food they need to survive (cf. v. 15).

At this point the profession of faith in justice and holiness, the two divine qualities par excellence, emerges from the lips of the person praying: "The Lord is just in all his ways and loving in all his deeds" (cf. v. 17).

In Hebrew we have two typical adjectives to illustrate the Covenant between God and his People: *saadiq* and *hasid*. They express justice that seeks to save and to liberate from evil, and the faithfulness that is a sign of the Lord's loving greatness.

3. The Psalmist takes the side of those who have benefited, whom he describes in various words: in practice, these terms portray true believers. They "call on" the Lord in trusting

prayer, they seek him in life with a sincere heart (cf. v. 18); they “fear” their God, respecting his will and obeying his word (cf. v. 19), but above all “love” him, certain that he will take them under the mantle of his protection and his closeness (cf. v. 20).

Then, the Psalmist’s closing words are the ones with which he opened his hymn: an invitation to praise and bless the Lord and his “name”, that is, as a living and holy Person who works and saves in the world and in history.

Indeed, his call is an assurance that every creature marked by the gift of life associates himself or herself with the prayerful praise: “Let all mankind bless his holy name for ever, for ages unending” (v. 21). This is a sort of perennial hymn that must be raised from earth to heaven; it is a community celebration of God’s universal love, source of peace, joy and salvation.

4. To conclude our reflection, let us return to that sweet verse which says: “[The Lord] is close to all who call him, who call on him from their hearts” (v. 18). This sentence was particularly dear to Barsanuphius of Gaza, an ascetic who died in the mid-sixth century, to whom monks, ecclesiastics and lay people would often turn because of the wisdom of his discernment.

Thus, for example, to one disciple who expressed his desire “to seek the causes of the various temptations that assailed him”, Barsanuphius responded: “Brother John, do not fear any of the temptations that come to test you, for the Lord will not let you fall prey to them. So, whenever one of these temptations comes to you, do not tire yourself by endeavouring to discern what is at stake, but cry out Jesus’ Name: “Jesus, help me!”. And he will hear you, for he “is close to all who call on him”. Do not be discouraged, but run on with enthusiasm and you will reach the destination in Christ Jesus, Our Lord” (Barsanuphius and John of Gaza, *Epistolario*, 39: Collana di Testi Patristici, XCIII, Rome, 1991, p. 109).

And these words of the ancient Father also apply to us. In our difficulties, problems, temptations, we must not simply make a theoretical reflection - where do they come from? - but must react positively; we must call on the Lord, we must keep alive our contact with the Lord. Indeed, we must cry out the Name of Jesus: “Jesus, help me!”.

And let us be certain that he hears us, because he is close to those who seek him. Let us not feel discouraged, but let us run on with enthusiasm, as this Father says, and we too will reach the destination of our lives: Jesus, the Lord.

## Magnificat

15 February 2006

## “My soul glorifies the Lord”

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We have now arrived at the final destination of the long journey begun exactly five years ago in Spring 2001, by my beloved Predecessor, the unforgettable Pope John Paul II. In his Catecheses, the great Pope wanted to cover the whole sequence of the Psalms and Canticles that constitute the fundamental prayerful fabric of the Liturgy of Lauds and Vespers. Having now reached the end of this pilgrimage through the texts, similar to a stroll in a garden filled with flowers of praise, invocation, prayer and contemplation, let us now make room for that Canticle which seals in spirit every celebration of Vespers: the Magnificat (Lk 1:46-55).

It is a canticle that reveals in filigree the spirituality of the biblical *anawim*, that is, of those faithful who not only recognize themselves as “poor” in the detachment from all idolatry of riches and power, but also in the profound humility of a heart emptied of the temptation to pride and open to the bursting in of the divine saving grace. Indeed, the whole Magnificat, which we have just heard the Sistine Chapel Choir sing, is marked by this “humility”, in Greek *tapeinosis*, which indicates a situation of material humility and poverty.

2. The first part of the Marian canticle (cf. Lk 1:46-50) is a sort of solo voice that rises to Heaven to reach the Lord. The constant resonance of the first person should be noted: “My soul... my spirit... my Saviour... has done great things for me... [they] will call me blessed...”. So it is that the soul of the prayer is the celebration of the divine grace which has burst into the heart and life of Mary, making her Mother of the Lord. We hear the Virgin’s own voice speaking of her Saviour who has done great things in her soul and body.

The intimate structure of her prayerful canticle, therefore, is praise, thanksgiving and grateful joy. But this personal witness is neither solitary nor *intimistic*, purely individualistic, because the Virgin Mother is aware that she has a mission to fulfil for humanity and her experience fits into the history of salvation.

She can thus say: “And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation” (v. 50). With this praise of the Lord, Our Lady gives a voice to all redeemed creatures, who find in her “fiat”, and thus in the figure of Jesus, born of the Virgin, the mercy of God.

3. It is at this point that the second poetic and spiritual part of the Magnificat unfolds (cf. vv. 51-55). It has a more choral tone, almost as if the voices of the whole community of the faithful were associated with Mary’s voice, celebrating God’s amazing decision.

In the original Greek of Luke's Gospel, we have seven aorist verbs that indicate the same number of actions which the Lord carries out repeatedly in history: "He has shown strength... he has scattered the proud... he has put down the mighty... he has exalted those of low degree... he has filled the hungry with good things... the rich he has sent empty away... he has helped... Israel".

In these seven divine acts, the "style" that inspires the behaviour of the Lord of history stands out: he takes the part of the lowly. His plan is one that is often hidden beneath the opaque context of human events that see "the proud, the mighty and the rich" triumph.

Yet his secret strength is destined in the end to be revealed, to show who God's true favourites are: "Those who fear him", faithful to his words: "those of low degree", "the hungry", "his servant Israel"; in other words, the community of the People of God who, like Mary, consist of people who are "poor", pure and simple of heart. It is that "little flock" which is told not to fear, for the Lord has been pleased to give it his Kingdom (cf. Lk 12:32). And this Canticle invites us to join the tiny flock and the true members of the People of God in purity and simplicity of heart, in God's love.

4. Let us therefore accept the invitation that St Ambrose, the great Doctor of the Church, addresses to us in his commentary on the text of the Magnificat: "May Mary's soul be in each one to magnify the Lord, may Mary's spirit be in each one to rejoice in God; if, according to the flesh, the Mother of Christ is one alone, according to the faith all souls bring forth Christ; each, in fact, welcomes the Word of God within.... Mary's soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God because, consecrated in soul and spirit to the Father and to the Son, she adores with devout affection one God, from whom come all things and only one Lord, by virtue of whom all things exist" (Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke, 2:26-27: SAEMO, XI, Milan-Rome, 1978, p. 169).

In this marvellous commentary on the Magnificat by St Ambrose, I am always especially moved by the surprising words: "If, according to the flesh the Mother of Christ is one alone, according to the faith all souls bring forth Christ: indeed, each one intimately welcomes the Word of God". Thus, interpreting Our Lady's very words, the Holy Doctor invites us to ensure that the Lord can find a dwelling place in our own souls and lives. Not only must we carry him in our hearts, but we must bring him to the world, so that we too can bring forth Christ for our epoch. Let us pray the Lord to help us praise him with Mary's spirit and soul, and to bring Christ back to our world.



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## **“On this rock I will build my Church”**

22 February 2006

Today, the Latin-rite liturgy celebrates the Feast of the Chair of St Peter. This is a very ancient tradition, proven to have existed in Rome since the fourth century. On it we give thanks to God for the mission he entrusted to the Apostle Peter and his Successors.

“Cathedra” literally means the established seat of the Bishop, placed in the mother church of a diocese which for this reason is known as a “cathedral”; it is the symbol of the Bishop’s authority and in particular, of his “magisterium”, that is, the evangelical teaching which, as a successor of the Apostles, he is called to safeguard and to transmit to the Christian Community.

When a Bishop takes possession of the particular Church that has been entrusted to him, wearing his mitre and holding the pastoral staff, he sits on the cathedra. From this seat, as teacher and pastor, he will guide the journey of the faithful in faith, hope and charity.

So what was the “Chair” of St Peter? Chosen by Christ as the “rock” on which to build the Church (cf. Mt 16:18), he began his ministry in Jerusalem, after the Ascension of the Lord and Pentecost. The Church’s first “seat” was the Upper Room, and it is likely that a special place was reserved for Simon Peter in that room where Mary, Mother of Jesus, also prayed with the disciples.

Subsequently, the See of Peter was Antioch, a city located on the Oronte River in Syria, today Turkey, which at the time was the third metropolis of the Roman Empire after Rome and Alexandria in Egypt. Peter was the first Bishop of that city, which was evangelized by Barnabas and Paul, where “the disciples were for the first time called Christians” (Acts 11:26), and consequently where our name “Christians” came into being. In fact, the Roman Martyrology, prior to the reform of the calendar, also established a specific celebration of the Chair of Peter in Antioch.

From there, Providence led Peter to Rome. Therefore, we have the journey from Jerusalem, the newly born Church, to Antioch, the first centre of the Church formed from pagans and also still united with the Church that came from the Jews. Then Peter went to Rome, the centre of the Empire, the symbol of the “Orbis” - the “Urbs”, which expresses “Orbis”, the earth, where he ended his race at the service of the Gospel with martyrdom.

So it is that the See of Rome, which had received the greatest of honours, also has the honour that Christ entrusted to Peter of being at the service of all the particular Churches for the edification and unity of the entire People of God.

The See of Rome, after St Peter’s travels, thus came to be recognized as the See of the Successor of Peter, and its Bishop’s “cathedra” represented the mission entrusted to him by Christ to tend his entire flock.

This is testified by the most ancient Fathers of the Church, such as, for example, St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons, but who came from Asia Minor, who in his treatise *Adversus Haereses*, describes the Church of Rome as the “greatest and most ancient, known by all... founded and established in Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul”; and he added: “The universal Church, that is, the faithful everywhere, must be in agreement with this Church because of her outstanding superiority” (III, 3, 2-3).

Tertullian, a little later, said for his part: “How blessed is the Church of Rome, on which the Apostles poured forth all their doctrine along with their blood!” (*De Praescriptione Hereticorum*, 36).

Consequently, the Chair of the Bishop of Rome represents not only his service to the Roman community but also his mission as guide of the entire People of God.

Celebrating the “Chair” of Peter, therefore, as we are doing today, means attributing a strong spiritual significance to it and recognizing it as a privileged sign of the love of God, the eternal Good Shepherd, who wanted to gather his whole Church and lead her on the path of salvation.

Among the numerous testimonies of the Fathers, I would like to quote St Jerome's. It is an extract from one of his letters, addressed to the Bishop of Rome. It is especially interesting precisely because it makes an explicit reference to the "Chair" of Peter, presenting it as a safe harbour of truth and peace.

*This is what Jerome wrote: "I decided to consult the Chair of Peter, where that faith is found exalted by the lips of an Apostle; I now come to ask for nourishment for my soul there, where once I received the garment of Christ. I follow no leader save Christ, so I enter into communion with your beatitude, that is, with the Chair of Peter, for this I know is the rock upon which the Church is built" (cf. Le lettere I, 15, 1-2).*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, in the apse of St Peter's Basilica, as you know, is the monument to the Chair of the Apostle, a mature work of Bernini. It is in the form of a great bronze throne supported by the statues of four Doctors of the Church: two from the West, St Augustine and St Ambrose, and two from the East: St John Chrysostom and St Athanasius.*

I invite you to pause before this evocative work which today can be admired, decorated with myriads of candles, and to say a special prayer for the ministry that God has entrusted to me. Raise your eyes to the alabaster glass window located directly above the Chair and call upon the Holy Spirit, so that with his enlightenment and power, he will always sustain my daily service to the entire Church. For this, as for your devoted attention, I thank you from my heart.

## **Christ and the Church**

15 March 2006

Following the Catecheses on the Psalms and Canticles of Lauds and of Vespers, I would like to dedicate the upcoming Wednesday Audiences to the mystery of the relationship between Christ and the Church, reflecting upon it from the experience of the Apostles, in light of the duty entrusted to them.

The Church was built on the foundation of the Apostles as a community of faith, hope and charity. Through the Apostles, we come to Jesus himself. The Church begins to establish herself when some fishermen of Galilee meet Jesus, allowing themselves to be won over by his gaze, his voice, his warm and strong invitation: "Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men" (Mk 1:17; Mt 4:19).

At the start of the third millennium, my beloved Predecessor John Paul II invited the Church to contemplate the Face of Christ (cf. *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 16 ff.). Continuing in the same direction, I would like to show, in the Catechesis that I begin today, how it is precisely the light of that Face that is reflected on the face of the Church

(cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1), notwithstanding the limits and shadows of our fragile and sinful humanity.

After Mary, a pure reflection of the light of Christ, it is from the Apostles, through their word and witness, that we receive the truth of Christ. Their mission is not isolated, however, but is situated within a mystery of communion that involves the entire People of God and is carried out in stages from the Old to the New Covenant.

In this regard, it must be said that the message of Jesus is completely misunderstood if it is separated from the context of the faith and hope of the Chosen People: like John the Baptist, his direct Precursor, Jesus above all addresses Israel (cf. Mt 15:24) in order to “gather” it together in the eschatological time that arrived with him. And like that of John, the preaching of Jesus is at the same time a call of grace and a sign of contradiction and of justice for the entire People of God.

And so, from the first moment of his salvific activity, Jesus of Nazareth strives to gather together the People of God. Even if his preaching is always an appeal for personal conversion, in reality he continually aims to build the People of God whom he came to bring together, purify and save.

As a result, therefore, an individualistic interpretation of Christ’s proclamation of the Kingdom, specific to liberal theology, is unilateral and without foundation, as a great liberal theologian Adolf von Harnack summed it up in the year 1900 in his lessons on The essence of Christianity: “The Kingdom of God, insofar as it comes in single individuals, is able to enter their soul and is welcomed by them. The Kingdom of God is the dominion of God, certainly, but it is the dominion of the holy God in individual hearts” (cf. Third Lesson, 100 ff.).

In reality, this individualism of liberal theology is a typically modern accentuation: in the perspective of biblical tradition and on the horizon of Judaism, where the work of Jesus is situated in all its novelty, it is clear that the entire mission of the Son-made-flesh has a communitarian finality. He truly came to unite dispersed humanity; he truly came to unite the People of God.

An evident sign of the intention of the Nazarene to gather together the community of the Covenant, to demonstrate in it the fulfilment of the promises made to the Fathers who always speak of convocation, unification, unity, is the institution of the Twelve. We heard about this institution of the Twelve in the Gospel reading. I shall read the central passage again: “And he went up into the hills and called to him those whom he desired; and they came to him. And he appointed twelve to be with him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons. The names of the twelve Apostles are these...” (Mk 3:13-16; cf. Mt 10:1-4; Lk 6:12-16).

On the site of the revelation, “the mount”, taking initiative that demonstrates absolute awareness and determination, Jesus establishes the Twelve so that, together with him, they are witnesses and heralds of the coming of the Kingdom of God.

There are no doubts about the historicity of this call, not only because of the antiquity and multiplicity of witnesses, but also for the simple reason that there is also the name of Judas, the Apostle who betrayed him, notwithstanding the difficulties that this presence could have caused the new community.

The number 12, which evidently refers to the 12 tribes of Israel, already reveals the meaning of the prophetic-symbolic action implicit in the new initiative to re-establish the holy people. As the system of the 12 tribes had long since faded out, the hope of Israel awaited their restoration as a sign of the eschatological time (as referred to at the end of the Book of Ezekiel:37:15-19; 39:23-29; 40-48).

In choosing the Twelve, introducing them into a communion of life with himself and involving them in his mission of proclaiming the Kingdom in words and works (cf. Mk 6:7-13; Mt 10:5-8; Lk 9:1-6; 6:13), Jesus wants to say that the definitive time has arrived in which to constitute the new People of God, the people of the 12 tribes, which now becomes a universal people, his Church.

### *Appeal for Israel*

With their very own existence, the Twelve - called from different backgrounds - become an appeal for all of Israel to convert and allow herself to be gathered into the new covenant, complete and perfect fulfilment of the ancient one. The fact that he entrusted to his Apostles, during the Last Supper and before his Passion, the duty to celebrate his Pasch, demonstrates how Jesus wished to transfer to the entire community, in the person of its heads, the mandate to be a sign and instrument in history of the eschatological gathering begun by him. In a certain sense we can say that the Last Supper itself is the act of foundation of the Church, because he gives himself and thus creates a new community, a community united in communion with himself.

In this light, one understands how the Risen One confers upon them, with the effusion of the Spirit, the power to forgive sins (cf. Jn 20:23). Thus, the Twelve Apostles are the most evident sign of Jesus' will regarding the existence and mission of his Church, the guarantee that between Christ and the Church there is no opposition: despite the sins of the people who make up the Church, they are inseparable.

Therefore, a slogan that was popular some years back: “Jesus yes, Church no”, is totally inconceivable with the intention of Christ. This individualistically chosen Jesus is an imaginary Jesus.

We cannot have Jesus without the reality he created and in which he communicates himself. Between the Son of God-made-flesh and his Church there is a profound, unbreakable and mysterious continuity by which Christ is present today in his people. He is always contemporary with us, he is always contemporary with the Church, built on the foundation of the Apostles and alive in the succession of the Apostles. And his very presence in the community, in which he himself is always with us, is the reason for our joy. Yes, Christ is with us, the Kingdom of God is coming.

## **‘Witnesses of Christ’**

22 March 2006

The Letter to the Ephesians presents the Church to us as a structure built “upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone” (Eph 2:20). In the Book of Revelation the role of the Apostles, and more specifically, of the Twelve, is explained in the eschatological perspective of the heavenly Jerusalem, presented as a city whose walls “had twelve foundations, and on them the twelve names of the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb” (21:14).

The Gospels agree in mentioning that the call of the Apostles marked the first steps of Jesus’ ministry, after the baptism he received from John the Baptist in the waters of the Jordan.

According to the accounts of Mark (1:16-20) and of Matthew (4:18-22), the scene of the call of the first Apostles is the Sea of Galilee. Jesus had just begun to preach about the Kingdom of God when his gaze came to rest upon two sets of brothers: Simon and Andrew, and James and John. They were fishermen busy with their daily work, casting their nets and mending them.

But it was another sort of fishing that awaited them. Jesus purposefully called them and they promptly followed him: subsequently, they were to become “fishers of men” (cf. Mk 1:17; Mt 4:19). Luke, while following the same tradition, gave a more elaborate account (5:1-11).

Luke’s account illustrates the development of the first disciples’ faith, explaining that Jesus’ invitation to follow him came after they had heard his first preaching and had seen the first miraculous signs that he worked. The miraculous catch in particular was the immediate context, and it gave its symbol to the mission of fishers of men that was entrusted to them. The destiny of those who were “called” would henceforth be closely bound to that of Jesus. An apostle is one who is sent, but even before that he is an “expert” on Jesus.

This very aspect is highlighted by the Evangelist John from Jesus' very first encounter with the future Apostles. Here the scene is different. The meeting takes place on the banks of the Jordan. The presence of the future disciples, who, like Jesus, also came from Galilee to receive the baptism administered by John, sheds light on their spiritual world.

They were men who were waiting for the Kingdom of God, anxious to know the Messiah whose coming had been proclaimed as imminent. It was enough for John the Baptist to point out Jesus to them as the Lamb of God (cf. Jn 1:36), to inspire in them the desire for a personal encounter with the Teacher.

The lines of Jesus' conversation with the first two future Apostles are most expressive. To his question "What do you seek?", they replied with another question: "'Rabbi' (which means Teacher), where are you staying?". Jesus' answer was an invitation: "Come and see" (cf. Jn 1:38-39). Come, so that you will be able to see.

This is how the Apostles' adventure began, as an encounter of people who are open to one another. For the disciples, it was the beginning of a direct acquaintance with the Teacher, seeing where he was staying and starting to get to know him. Indeed, they were not to proclaim an idea, but to witness to a person.

Before being sent out to preach, they had to "be" with Jesus (cf. Mk 3:14), establishing a personal relationship with him. On this basis, evangelization was to be no more than the proclamation of what they felt and an invitation to enter into the mystery of communion with Christ (cf. I Jn 1:1-3).

To whom would the Apostles be sent? In the Gospel Jesus seemed to limit his mission to Israel alone: "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel" (Mt 15:24). In a similar way he seemed to restrict the mission entrusted to the Twelve: "These Twelve Jesus sent out, charging them: "Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Mt 10:5ff.).

A certain rationally inspired modern criticism saw these words as showing a lack of universal awareness by the Nazarene. Actually, they should be understood in the light of his special relationship with Israel, the community of the Covenant, in continuity with the history of salvation.

According to the Messianic expectation, the divine promises directly addressed to Israel would reach fulfilment when God himself had gathered his people through his Chosen One as a shepherd gathers his flock: "I will save my flock, they shall no longer be a prey.... I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them; he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the Lord, shall be their God, and my servant David will be prince among them" (Ez 34:22-24).



Jesus is the eschatological shepherd who gathers the lost sheep of the house of Israel and goes in search of them because he knows and loves them (cf. Lk 15:4-7, Mt 18:12-14; cf. also the figure of the Good Shepherd in Jn 10:1ff.). Through this “gathering together”, the Kingdom of God is proclaimed to all peoples: “I will set my glory among the nations; and all the nations shall see my judgment which I have executed, and my hand which I have laid on them” (Ez 39:21). And Jesus followed precisely this prophetic indication. His first step was to “gather together” the people of Israel, so that all the people called to gather in communion with the Lord might see and believe.

Thus, the Twelve, taken on to share in the same mission as Jesus, cooperate with the Pastor of the last times, also seeking out the lost sheep of the house of Israel, that is, addressing the people of the promise whose reunion is the sign of salvation for all peoples, the beginning of the universalization of the Covenant.

Far from belying the universal openness of the Nazarene’s Messianic action, the initial restriction to Israel of his mission and of the Twelve thus becomes an even more effective prophetic sign. After Christ’s passion and Resurrection, this sign was to be made clear: the universal character of the Apostles’ mission was to become explicit. Christ would send the Apostles “to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15), to “all nations”, (Mt 28:19, Lk 24:47), “to the ends of the earth” (Acts 1:8).

And this mission continues. The Lord’s command to gather the peoples together in the unity of his love still continues. This is our hope and also our mandate: to contribute to this universality, to this true unity in the riches of cultures, in communion with our true Lord Jesus Christ.

## **The gift of “communion”**

29 March 2006

Through her apostolic ministry the Church, a community gathered by the Son of God who came in the flesh, will live on through the passing times, building up and nourishing the communion in Christ and in the Holy Spirit to which all are called and in which they can experience the salvation given by the Father.

The Twelve - as Pope Clement, the third Successor of Peter, said at the end of the first century - took pains, in fact, to prepare successors (cf. I Clem 42:4), so that the mission entrusted to them would be continued after their death. The Church, organically structured under the guidance of her legitimate Pastors, has thus continued down the ages to live in the world as a mystery of communion in which, to a certain extent, the Trinitarian Communion itself is mirrored.

The Apostle Paul was already referring to this supreme Trinitarian source when he wished his Christians: “The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all” (II Cor 13:14).

These words, probably echoed in the worship of the newborn Church, emphasize how the free gift of the Father in Jesus Christ is realized and expressed in the communion brought about by the Holy Spirit.

This interpretation, based on the close parallelism between the three genitives that the text establishes: (“the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ... the love of God... and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit), presents “fellowship” as a specific gift of the Spirit, the fruit of the love given by God the Father and the grace offered by the Lord Jesus.

Moreover, the immediate context, marked by the insistence on fraternal communion, guides us to perceiving the “*koinonía*” of the Holy Spirit not only as “participation” in the divine life more or less singularly, each one individually, but also, logically, as the “communion” among believers that the Spirit himself kindles as his builder and principal agent (cf. Phil 2:1).

One might say that grace, love and communion, referring respectively to Christ, to the Father and to the Holy Spirit, are different aspects of the one divine action for our salvation. This action creates the Church and makes the Church - as St Cyprian said in the third century - “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (De Orat. Dom. 23; PL 4, 553, cit. in *Lumen Gentium*, n. 4).

The idea of communion as participation in Trinitarian life is illuminated with special intensity in John’s Gospel.

Here, the communion of love that binds the Son to the Father and to men and women is at the same time the model and source of the fraternal communion that must unite disciples with one another: “Love one another as I have loved you” (Jn 15:12; cf. 13:34); “that they may all be one... even as we are one” (Jn 17:21-22). Hence, it is communion of men and women with the Trinitarian God and communion of men and women with one another.

During the time of his earthly pilgrimage, the disciple can already share through communion with the Son in his divine life and that of the Father: “our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ” (I Jn 1:3).

This life of fellowship with God and with one another is the proper goal of Gospel proclamation, the goal of conversion to Christianity: “That which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us” (I Jn 1:2).

Thus, this twofold communion with God and with one another is inseparable. Wherever communion with God, which is communion with the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, is destroyed, the root and source of our communion with one another is destroyed. And wherever we do not live communion among ourselves, communion with the Trinitarian God is not alive and true either, as we have heard.

Let us now go a step further. Communion, a fruit of the Holy Spirit, is nourished by the Eucharistic Bread (cf. I Cor 10:16-17) and is expressed in fraternal relations in a sort of anticipation of the future world.

In the Eucharist, Jesus nourishes us, he unites us with himself, with his Father, with the Holy Spirit and with one another. This network of unity that embraces the world is an anticipation of the future world in our time.

Precisely in this way, since it is an anticipation of the future world, communion is also a gift with very real consequences. It lifts us from our loneliness, from being closed in on ourselves, and makes us sharers in the love that unites us to God and to one another.

It is easy to understand how great this gift is if we only think of the fragmentation and conflicts that afflict relations between individuals, groups and entire peoples. And if the gift of unity in the Holy Spirit does not exist, the fragmentation of humanity is inevitable.

“Communion” is truly the Good News, the remedy given to us by the Lord to fight the loneliness that threatens everyone today, the precious gift that makes us feel welcomed and beloved by God, in the unity of his People gathered in the name of the Trinity; it is the light that makes the Church shine forth like a beacon raised among the peoples.

“If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not live according to the truth; but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another” (I Jn 1:6ff.).

Thus, the Church, despite all the human frailties that mark her historical profile, is revealed as a marvellous creation of love, brought into being to bring Christ close to every man and every woman who truly desire to meet him, until the end of time. And in the Church, the Lord always remains our contemporary. Scripture is not something of the past. The Lord does not speak in the past but speaks in the present, he speaks to us today, he enlightens us, he shows us the way through life, he gives us communion and thus he prepares us and opens us to peace.

## **‘Safeguarding the gift’**

5 April 2006

In the new series of Catecheses that began a few weeks ago, we are considering the origins of the Church so as to understand Jesus' original plan and thereby grasp the essential of the Church that lives on through the changing times. Thus, we also understand the reason for our being in the Church and how we must strive to live it at the dawn of a new Christian millennium.

In thinking about the newborn Church, we can discover two aspects: a first aspect is strongly highlighted by St Irenaeus of Lyons, a martyr and great theologian of the end of the second century, the first to have given us a theology that was to a certain extent systematic. St Irenaeus wrote: "Wherever the Church is, God's Spirit is too; and wherever God's Spirit is, there is the Church and every grace; for the Spirit is truth" (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 24, 1: PG 7, 966).

Thus, a deep bond exists between the Holy Spirit and the Church. The Holy Spirit builds the Church and gives her the truth; he pours out love, as St Paul says, into the hearts of believers (cf. Rom 5:5).

Then there is a second aspect. This deep bond with the Spirit does not eradicate our humanity, with all of its weaknesses. So it is that from the start the community of the disciples has known not only the joy of the Holy Spirit, the grace of truth and love, but also trials that are constituted above all by disagreements about the truths of faith, with the consequent wounds to communion.

Just as the fellowship of love has existed since the outset and will continue to the end (cf. I Jn 1:1ff.), so also, from the start, division unfortunately arose. We should not be surprised that it still exists today. "They went out from us, but they were not of us", John says in his First Letter, "for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us; but they went out, that it might be plain that they are not of us" (I Jn 2:19).

Thus, in the events of the world but also in the weaknesses of the Church, there is always a risk of losing faith, hence, also love and brotherhood. Consequently, it is a specific duty of those who believe in the Church of love and want to live in her to recognize this danger too and accept that communion is no longer possible with those who have drifted away from the doctrine of salvation (cf. II Jn 9:11).

That the newborn Church was well aware of the possible tensions in the experience of communion is clearly shown by John's First Letter: no voice is more forcefully raised in the New Testament to highlight the reality and duty of fraternal love among Christians; but the same voice is addressed with drastic severity to adversaries of the Church who used to be members of the community but now no longer belong to it.

The Church of love is also the Church of truth, understood primarily as fidelity to the Gospel entrusted by the Lord Jesus to his followers. It was being made children of the

same Father by the Spirit of truth that gave rise to Christian brotherhood: “For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God” (Rom 8:14).

However, if the family of God’s children is to live in unity and peace, it needs someone to keep it in the truth and guide it with wise and authoritative discernment: this is what the ministry of the Apostles is required to do.

And here we come to an important point. The Church is wholly of the Spirit but has a structure, the apostolic succession, which is responsible for guaranteeing that the Church endures in the truth given by Christ, from whom the capacity to love also comes.

The first brief description in the Acts sums up very effectively the convergence of these values in the life of the newborn Church: “And they devoted themselves to the Apostles’ teaching and fellowship (koinonia), to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (Acts 2:42). Communion is born from faith inspired by apostolic preaching, it is nourished by the Breaking of Bread and prayer, and is expressed in brotherly love and service.

We have before us the description of fellowship in the newborn Church with the riches of its internal dynamism and visible expressions: the gift of communion is safeguarded and promoted in particular by the apostolic ministry, which in turn is a gift for the entire community.

The Apostles and their successors are therefore the custodians and authoritative witnesses of the deposit of truth consigned to the Church, and are likewise the ministers of charity. These are two aspects that go together.

They must always be mindful of the inseparable nature of this twofold service which in fact is only one: truth and love, revealed and given by the Lord Jesus. In this regard, their service is first and foremost a service of love; and the charity they live and foster is inseparable from the truth they preserve and pass on.

Truth and love are the two faces of the same gift that comes from God and, thanks to the apostolic ministry, is safeguarded in the Church and handed down to us, to our present time!

And the love of the Trinitarian God also reaches us through the service of the Apostles and their successors, to communicate to us the truth that sets us free (cf. Jn 8:32)!

All this, which we see in the newborn Church, impels us to pray for the Successors of the Apostles, for all the Bishops and for the Successors of Peter, so that together they may truly be at the same time custodians of truth and love; so that, in this regard, they may truly be apostles of Christ and that his light, the light of truth and love, may never be extinguished in the Church or in the world.

# From darkness to light!

12 April 2006

Tomorrow begins the Easter Triduum, the fulcrum of the entire liturgical year. With the help of the sacred rites of Holy Thursday, of Good Friday and of the solemn Easter Vigil, we will relive the mystery of the passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord. These are fitting days for reawakening within us a deeper desire to adhere to Christ and to follow him generously, aware that he loved us to the point of giving his life for us.

Indeed, what are the events that the Sacred Triduum presents to us anew, other than the sublime manifestation of God's love for man? Let us therefore prepare to celebrate the Easter Triduum by accepting St Augustine's exhortation: "Consider now with attention these three most sacred days... of the Lord's Crucifixion, rest in the grave and Resurrection. Of these three, that of which the Cross is the symbol is the business of our present life: those things which are symbolized by his rest in the grave and his Resurrection we hold by faith and hope" (Letter 55, 14, 24).

The Triduum of Easter begins tomorrow, Holy Thursday, with the evening Mass, "in Cena Domini", although in the morning another important liturgical celebration is usually held, the Chrism Mass, during which the entire presbyterate of every Diocese, gathered round the Bishop, renews the priestly promises and participates in the blessing of the oils of the catechumens, of the sick and of the Chrism, and we will do this too, here in St Peter's tomorrow morning.

In addition to the institution of the Priesthood, the total offering that Christ made of himself to humanity in the Sacrament of the Eucharist is commemorated on this holy day.

As Holy Scripture records, on that same night on which he was betrayed, he left us the "new commandment" - "mandatum novum" - of brotherly love with the touching gesture of the washing of the feet, which is reminiscent of the humble service of slaves. This unique day, which calls to mind great mysteries, ends with Eucharistic Adoration, in memory of the agony of the Lord in the Garden of Gethsemane.

In the grip of profound anguish, the Gospel relates, Jesus asked his disciples to watch and pray with him: "Remain here, and watch with me" (Mt 26:38), but the disciples fell asleep. Still today, the Lord says to us: "Remain here, and watch with me"; and we realize that we too, disciples of today, are frequently dozing. For Jesus, that was the hour of abandonment and loneliness, followed by his arrest in the heart of the night and the beginning of the painful journey to Calvary.

Good Friday is focused on the mystery of the Passion. It is a day of fasting and penance, completely oriented to contemplation of Christ on the Cross. In churches, the Passion Narrative is proclaimed and the words of the Prophet Zechariah ring out: “They shall look upon him whom they have pierced” (Jn 19:37). And on Good Friday we too desire to truly turn our gaze to the pierced heart of the Redeemer, in which, St Paul writes, “are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col 2:3), indeed, “in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col 2:9).

As a result, the Apostle can affirm that he wants nothing except “Jesus Christ and him crucified” (I Cor 2:2). It is true: the Cross shows “the breadth and length and height and depth” - the cosmic dimensions is the meaning - of a love that surpasses all knowledge, a love that goes beyond what is known and fills us “with all the fullness of God” (Eph 3:18-19). In the mystery of the Crucified One “is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form” (Deus Caritas Est, n. 12).

The Cross of Christ, Pope St Leo the Great wrote in the fifth century, “is the fount of all blessings, the source of all graces” (Discourse 8 on the Passion of the Lord, 6-8; PL 54, 340-342).

On Holy Saturday the Church, spiritually united with Mary, remains in prayer at the tomb, where the Body of the Son of God is lying inert as it were in a condition of repose after the creative work of redemption brought about with his death (cf. Heb 4:1-13).

*Late at night the solemn Easter Vigil will begin, during which the joyful singing of the Gloria and Easter Alleluia will well up from the hearts of the newly baptized and the entire Christian community, rejoicing because Christ is risen and has conquered death.*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, for a fruitful celebration of Easter, the Church asks the faithful in these days to receive the Sacrament of Penance, which is like a sort of death and resurrection for each one of us. In the ancient Christian community, the Bishop presided at the Rite of the Reconciliation of Penitents on Holy Thursday. Historical conditions have certainly changed, but preparing oneself for Easter with a good confession continues to be an action to make the most of, because it offers us the possibility of giving our life a fresh start and of truly having a new beginning in the joy of the Risen One and in the communion of the forgiveness that he gives us.*

Aware that we are sinners but trusting in divine mercy, let us be reconciled by Christ, to enjoy more intensely the joy that he communicates with his Resurrection. The forgiveness which Christ gives to us in the Sacrament of Penance is a source of interior and exterior peace and makes us apostles of peace in a world where divisions, suffering and the tragedies of injustice, hatred and violence and the inability to be reconciled to one another in order to start again with a sincere pardon, unfortunately continue.

However, we know that evil does not have the last word, because it was the Crucified and Risen Christ who overcame it, and his triumph is expressed with the power of merciful love. His Resurrection gives us this certainty: despite all the darkness that exists in the world, evil does not have the last word. Sustained by this certainty, we will be able, with greater courage and enthusiasm, to commit ourselves to work for the birth of a more just world.

*I wholeheartedly formulate this wish for you, Dear Brothers and Sisters, as I express the hope that you will prepare yourselves with faith and devotion for the Easter festivities that are now at hand. May you be accompanied by Mary Most Holy, who, after following her divine Son in the hour of the Passion and the Cross, shared in the joy of his Resurrection.*

## **Pastor of God's Church**

19 April 2006

At the beginning of today's General Audience which is taking place in the joyful atmosphere of Easter, I would like to thank the Lord together with you. After calling me, exactly a year ago, to serve the Church as the Successor of the Apostle Peter - thank you for your joy, thank you for your applause - he never fails to assist me with his indispensable help.

How quickly time passes! A year has already elapsed since the Cardinals gathered in Conclave and, in a way I found absolutely unexpected and surprising, desired to choose my poor self to succeed the late and beloved Servant of God, the great Pope John Paul II. I remember with emotion my first impact with the faithful gathered in this same Square, from the central Loggia of the Basilica, immediately after my election.

That meeting is still impressed upon my mind and heart. It was followed by many others that have given me an opportunity to experience the deep truth of my words at the solemn concelebration with which I formally began to exercise my Petrine ministry: "I too can say with renewed conviction: I am not alone. I do not have to carry alone what in truth I could never carry alone" (L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 27 April 2005, p. 2).

And I feel more and more that alone I could not carry out this task, this mission. But I also feel that you are carrying it with me: thus, I am in a great communion and together we can go ahead with the Lord's mission. The heavenly protection of God and of the saints is an irreplaceable support to me and I am comforted by your closeness, dear friends, who do not let me do without the gift of your indulgence and your love. I offer very warm thanks to all those who in various ways support me from close at hand or follow me from afar in spirit with their affection and their prayers. I ask each one to



continue to support me, praying to God to grant that I may be a gentle and firm Pastor of his Church.

The Evangelist John says that precisely after his Resurrection Jesus called Peter to tend his flock (cf. Jn 21:15, 23). Who could have humanly imagined then the development which was to mark that small group of the Lord's disciples down the centuries?

Peter, together with the Apostles and then their successors, first in Jerusalem and later to the very ends of the earth, courageously spread the Gospel message, whose fundamental and indispensable core consists in the Paschal Mystery: the Passion, the death and the Resurrection of Christ.

The Church celebrates this mystery at Easter, extending its joyous resonance in the days that follow; she sings the alleluia for Christ's triumph over evil and death.

The celebration of Easter in accordance with a date on the calendar, Pope St Leo the Great remarked, reminds us of the eternal feast that surpasses all human time. Today's Easter, he noted further, is the shadow of the future Easter. For this reason we celebrate it, to move on from an annual celebration to a celebration that will last for ever.

The joy of these days extends throughout the liturgical year and is renewed especially on Sunday, the day dedicated to the memory of the Lord's Resurrection. On Sunday, as it were, the "little Easter" of every week, the liturgical assembly gathered for Holy Mass proclaims in the Creed that Jesus rose on the third day, adding that we wait for "the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come".

This shows that the event of Jesus' death and Resurrection constitutes the centre of our faith and that it is on this proclamation that the Church is founded and develops.

St Augustine recalled incisively: "Let us consider, dear friends, the Resurrection of Christ: indeed, just as his Passion stood for our old life, his Resurrection is a sacrament of new life... You have believed, you have been baptized; the old life is dead, killed on the Cross, buried in Baptism. The old life in which you lived is buried: the new life emerges. Live well: live life in such a way that when death comes you will not die (Sermo Guelferb. 9, 3).

The Gospel accounts that mention the appearances of the Risen One usually end with the invitation to overcome every uncertainty, to confront the event with the Scriptures, to proclaim that Jesus, beyond death, is alive for ever, a source of new life for all who believe in him.

This is what happened, for example, in the case of Mary Magdalene (cf. Jn 20:11-18), who found the tomb open and empty and immediately feared that the body of the Lord had been taken away. The Lord then called her by name and at that point a deep change took

place within her: her distress and bewilderment were transformed into joy and enthusiasm. She promptly went to the Apostles and announced to them: "I have seen the Lord" (Jn 20:18).

Behold: those who meet the Risen Jesus are inwardly transformed; it is impossible "to see" the Risen One without "believing" in him. Let us pray that he will call each one of us by name and thus convert us, opening us to the "vision" of faith.

Faith is born from the personal encounter with the Risen Christ and becomes an impulse of courage and freedom that makes one cry to the world: "Jesus is risen and alive for ever".

*This is the mission of the Lord's disciples in every epoch and also in our time: "If, then, you have been raised with Christ", St Paul exhorts us, "seek the things that are above.... Set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (Col 3:1-2). This does not mean cutting oneself off from one's daily commitments, neglecting earthly realities; rather, it means reviving every human activity with a supernatural breath, it means making ourselves joyful proclaimers and witnesses of the Resurrection of Christ, living for eternity (cf. Jn 20:25; Lk 24:33-34).*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, in the Pasch of his Only-begotten Son, God fully revealed himself, his victorious power over the forces of death, the power of Trinitarian Love. May the Virgin Mary, who was closely associated with the Passion, death and Resurrection of the Son and at the foot of the Cross became the Mother of all believers, help us to understand this mystery of love that changes hearts and makes us experience fully the joy of Easter, so that we in turn may be able to communicate it to the men and women of the third millennium.*

## **Communion in time: Tradition**

26 April 2006

Thank you for your affection! In the new series of catecheses, recently begun, we are seeking to understand the original plan of the Church which the Lord desired, in order to understand better our place, our Christian life, in the great communion of the Church.

So far we have understood that ecclesial communion is inspired and sustained by the Holy Spirit and preserved and promoted by the apostolic ministry. And this communion, which we call "Church", does not only extend to all believers in a specific historical period, but also embraces all the epochs and all the generations. Thus, we have a twofold universality: a synchronic universality - we are united with believers in every part of the world - and also a so-called diachronic universality, that is: all the epochs belong to us, and all the believers of the past and of the future form with us a single great communion.

The Holy Spirit appears to us as the guarantor of the active presence of the mystery in history, the One who ensures its realization down the centuries. Thanks to the Paraclete, it will always be possible for subsequent generations to have the same experience of the Risen One that was lived by the apostolic community at the origin of the Church, since it is passed on and actualized in the faith, worship and communion of the People of God, on pilgrimage through time.

And so it is that we today, in the Easter Season, are living the encounter with the Risen One not only as something of the past, but in the present communion of the faith, liturgy and life of the Church. The Church's apostolic Tradition consists in this transmission of the goods of salvation which, through the power of the Spirit makes the Christian community the permanent actualization of the original communion.

It is called "original" because it was born of the witness of the Apostles and of the community of the disciples at the time of the origins. It was passed on under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in the New Testament writings and in the sacramental life, in the life of the faith, and the Church continuously refers to it - to this Tradition, which is the whole, ever up-to-date reality of Jesus' gift - as her foundation and her law, through the uninterrupted succession of the apostolic ministry.

In his historical life furthermore, Jesus limited his mission to the house of Israel, but already made it clear that the gift was not only destined for the People of Israel but to everyone in the world and to every epoch.

The Risen One then explicitly entrusted to the Apostles (cf. Lk 6:13) the task of making disciples of all the nations, guaranteeing his presence and help to the end of the age (cf. Mt 28:19 ff.).

The universalism of salvation, moreover, requires that the Easter memorial be celebrated in history without interruption until Christ's glorious return (cf. I Cor 11:26). Who will bring about the saving presence of the Lord Jesus through the ministry of the Apostles - heads of the eschatological Israel (cf. Mt 19:28) - and through the whole life of the people of the New Covenant? The answer is clear: the Holy Spirit. The Acts of the Apostles - in continuity with the pattern of Luke's Gospel - show vividly the interpenetration between the Spirit, those sent out by Christ and the community they have gathered.

Thanks to the action of the Paraclete, the Apostles and their successors can realize in time the mission received from the Risen One. "You are witnesses of these things. And behold, I send the promise of my Father upon you" (Lk 24:48 ff.).

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1:8). And this promise, which at first seems incredible, already came true in the Apostles'

time: “And we are witnesses to these things, and so is the Holy Spirit whom God has given to those who obey him” (Acts 5:32).

So it is the Spirit himself, who through the laying on of hands and prayers of the Apostles, consecrates and sends out new Gospel missionaries (as, for example, in Acts 13:3 ff. and I Tm 4:14). It is interesting to observe that whereas in some passages it says that Paul appointed elders in every Church (cf. Acts 14:23), elsewhere it says that it is the Spirit who has made them guardians of the flock (cf. Acts 20:28).

The action of the Spirit and the action of Paul thus are deeply interwoven. At the time of solemn decisions for the life of the Church, the Spirit is present to guide her. This guiding presence of the Holy Spirit was particularly acutely felt in the Council of Jerusalem, in whose conclusive words resound the affirmation: “For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28); the Church grows and walks “in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 9:31). This permanent actualization of the active presence of the Lord Jesus in his People, brought about by the Holy Spirit and expressed in the Church through the apostolic ministry and fraternal communion is what, in a theological sense, is meant by the term “Tradition”: it is not merely the material transmission of what was given at the beginning to the Apostles, but the effective presence of the Crucified and Risen Lord Jesus who accompanies and guides in the Spirit the community he has gathered together.

Tradition is the communion of the faithful around their legitimate Pastors down through history, a communion that the Holy Spirit nurtures, assuring the connection between the experience of the apostolic faith, lived in the original community of the disciples, and the actual experience of Christ in his Church.

In other words, Tradition is the practical continuity of the Church, the holy Temple of God the Father, built on the foundation of the Apostles and held together by the cornerstone, Christ, through the life-giving action of the Spirit: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built into it for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22).

Thanks to Tradition, guaranteed by the ministry of the Apostles and by their successors, the water of life that flowed from Christ’s side and his saving blood reach the women and men of all times. Thus, Tradition is the permanent presence of the Saviour who comes to meet us, to redeem us and to sanctify us in the Spirit, through the ministry of his Church, to the glory of the Father.

Concluding and summing up, we can therefore say that Tradition is not the transmission of things or words, a collection of dead things. Tradition is the living river that links us to the origins, the living river in which the origins are ever present, the great river that leads us to the gates of eternity. And since this is so, in this living river the words of the Lord that we heard on the reader's lips to start with are ceaselessly brought about: "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28:20).

## The Apostolic Tradition of the Church

3 May 2006

In these Catecheses we wish to understand a little more what the Church is. The last time we meditated on the theme of Apostolic Tradition. We saw that it is not a collection of things or words, like a box of dead things. Tradition is the river of new life that flows from the origins, from Christ down to us, and makes us participate in God's history with humanity.

This topic of Tradition is so important that I would like to reflect upon it again today: indeed, it is of great importance for the life of the Church.

The Second Vatican Council pointed out in this regard that Tradition is primarily apostolic in its origins: "God graciously arranged that the things he had once revealed for the salvation of all peoples should remain in their entirety, throughout the ages, and be transmitted to all generations.

Therefore, Christ the Lord, in whom the entire Revelation of the Most High God is summed up (cf. II Cor 1:20; and 3:16-4, 6), commanded the Apostles to preach the Gospel... and communicate the gifts of God to all men. This Gospel was to be the source of all saving truth and moral discipline" (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, n. 7).

The Council noted further that this was faithfully done "by the Apostles who handed on, by the spoken word of their preaching, by the example they gave, by the institutions they established, what they themselves had received - whether from the lips of Christ, from his way of life and his works, or whether they had learned it at the prompting of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*).

The Council adds that there were "other men associated with the Apostles, who, under the inspiration of the same Holy Spirit, committed the message of salvation to writing" (*ibid.*).

As heads of the eschatological Israel, and likewise as Twelve, the number of the tribes of the Chosen People, the Apostles continued the "gathering" begun by the Lord and did so

first and foremost by transmitting faithfully the gift received, the Good News of the Kingdom that came to people in Jesus Christ.

Their number not only expresses continuity with the holy root, the Israel of the 12 tribes, but also the universal destination of their ministry, which brought salvation to the very ends of the earth.

This can be understood from the symbolic value that the numbers have in the Semitic world: twelve results from the multiplication of three, a perfect number, and four, a number that refers to the four cardinal points, hence, to the whole world.

The community, born from the proclamation of the Gospel, recognizes that it was called by the words of those who were the first to experience the Lord and were sent out by him.

It knows that it can count on the guidance of the Twelve, as well as that of those who were gradually associated with them as their successors in the ministry of the Word and in the service of communion. Consequently, the community feels committed to transmit to others the “Good News” of the actual presence of the Lord and of his Paschal Mystery, brought about in the Spirit.

This is clearly highlighted and visible in certain passages of the Pauline Letters: “I delivered to you... what I also received” (I Cor 15:3). And this is important. St Paul, it is well-known, originally called by Christ with a personal vocation, was a real Apostle, yet for him too, fidelity to what he received was fundamentally important. He did not want “to invent” a new, so-to-speak, “Pauline” Christianity. Therefore, he insisted, “I have passed on to you what I too received”. He passed on the initial gift that comes from the Lord and the truth that saves.

Then, towards the end of his life, he wrote to Timothy: “Guard this rich trust with the help of the Holy Spirit that dwells within us (II Tm 1:14).

It is also effectively demonstrated by this ancient testimony of the Christian faith written by Tertullian in about the year 200: “(The Apostles) after first bearing witness to the faith in Jesus Christ throughout Judea and founding Churches (there), they next went forth into the world and preached the same doctrine of the same faith to the nations. They then in like manner founded Churches in every city, from which all the other Churches, one after another, derived the tradition of the faith and the seeds of doctrine, and are every day deriving them, that they may become Churches. Indeed, it is on this account only that they will be able to deem themselves apostolic, as being the offspring of apostolic Churches” (Tertullian, *De Praescriptione Haereticorum*, 20: PL 2, 32).

The Second Vatican Council comments: “What was handed on by the Apostles comprises everything that serves to make the People of God live their lives in holiness and increase

their faith. In this way the Church, in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes" (Dei Verbum, n. 8).

The Church transmits all that she is and believes, she hands it down through worship, life and doctrine.

So it is that Tradition is the living Gospel, proclaimed by the Apostles in its integrity on the basis of the fullness of their unique and unrepeatable experience: through their activity the faith is communicated to others, even down to us, until the end of the world. Tradition, therefore, is the history of the Spirit who acts in the Church's history through the mediation of the Apostles and their successors, in faithful continuity with the experience of the origins.

This is what St Clement of Rome said towards the end of the first century: "The Apostles", he wrote, "have preached the Gospel to us from the Lord Jesus Christ; Jesus Christ was sent by God. Christ, therefore, was sent forth by God, and the Apostles by Christ.

"Both these appointments, then, were made in an orderly way, according to the will of God.... Our Apostles also knew, through Our Lord Jesus Christ, that there would be strife on account of the episcopal office.

"For this reason, therefore, inasmuch as they had obtained a perfect foreknowledge of this, they appointed those [ministers] already mentioned, and afterwards gave instructions that when these should fall asleep, other approved men should succeed them in their ministry" (Ad Corinthios, 42, 44: PG 1, 292, 296).

This chain of service has continued until today; it will continue to the end of the world. Indeed, the mandate that Jesus conferred upon the Apostles was passed on by them to their successors. Going beyond the experience of personal contact with Christ, unique and unrepeatable, the Apostles passed on to their successors the solemn mandate that they had received from the Master to go out into the world. "Apostle" comes precisely from the Greek term, "apostélein", which means "to send forth".

The apostolic mandate - as the text of Matthew shows (Mt 28:19ff.) - implies a service that is pastoral ("Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations..."), liturgical ("baptizing them"), and prophetic ("teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you"), guaranteed by the Lord's closeness, until the end of time ("and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age").

Thus, but differently from the Apostles, we too have a true, personal experience of the presence of the Risen Lord.

Therefore, through the apostolic ministry it is Christ himself who reaches those who are called to the faith. The distance of the centuries is overcome and the Risen One offers himself alive and active for our sake, in the Church and in the world today.

This is our great joy. In the living river of Tradition, Christ is not 2,000 years away but is really present among us and gives us the Truth, he gives us the light that makes us live and find the way towards the future.

## **Having a “vision from on high”**

10 May 2006

At the last two Audiences we meditated on what Tradition in the Church is and we saw that it is the permanent presence of the word and life of Jesus among his people. But in order to be present, the word needs a person, a witness.

And so it is that this reciprocity comes about: on the one hand, the word needs the person, but on the other, the person, the witness, is bound to the word, entrusted to him and not invented by him. This reciprocity between the content - the Word of God, life of the Lord - and the person who carries on the work is characteristic of the Church's structure. Let us meditate today on this personal aspect of the Church.

The Lord founded the Church, as we have seen, by calling together the Twelve, who were to represent the future People of God. Faithful to the Lord's mandate, after his Ascension, the Twelve first made up their number by appointing Matthias in Judas' place (cf. Acts 1:15-26), thereby continuing to involve others in the duties entrusted to them so that they might continue their ministry.

The Risen Lord himself called Paul (cf. Gal 1:1), but Paul, although he was called by the Lord to be an Apostle, compared his Gospel with the Gospel of the Twelve (cf. *ibid.*, 1:18), and was concerned to transmit what he had received (cf. I Cor 11:23; 15:3-4). In the distribution of missionary tasks, he was associated with the Apostles together with others, for example, Barnabas (cf. Gal 2:9).

Just as becoming an Apostle begins with being called and sent out by the Risen One, so the subsequent call and sending out to others was to be brought about, through the power of the Spirit, by those who are already ordained in the apostolic ministry. And this is the way in which this ministry, known from the second generation as the episcopal ministry, episcopate, was to be continued.

Perhaps it would be useful to explain briefly what “Bishop” means. It is the Italian form of the Greek term, “episcopos”. This word means one who has a vision from on high, who



looks with the heart. This is what St Peter himself calls Jesus in his First Letter: bishop, “Shepherd and Guardian of your souls” (I Pt 2:25).

And according to this new model of the Lord, who was the first Bishop, Guardian and Pastor of souls, the successors of the Apostles were later called Bishops, “*episcopi*”. The role of “*episcopus*” was entrusted to them. This specific role of the Bishop was gradually to evolve, in comparison with the origins, until it took the form - already clearly attested to by Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the second century (cf. *Ad Magnesios*, 6, 1: PG 5, 668) - of the threefold office of Bishop, Priest and Deacon.

This development was guided by God’s Spirit who helps the Church in the discernment of the authentic forms of Apostolic Succession, ever more clearly defined among the plurality of experiences and charismatic and ministerial forms present in the earliest communities.

In this way, succession in the role of Bishop is presented as the continuity of the Apostolic ministry, a guarantee of the permanence of the Apostolic Tradition, word and life, entrusted to us by the Lord. The link between the College of Bishops and the original community of the Apostles is understood above all in the line of historical continuity.

As we have seen, first Matthias, then Paul, then Barnabas joined the Twelve, then others, until, in the second and third generations, the Bishop’s ministry took shape.

Continuity, therefore, is expressed in this historical chain. And in the continuity of the succession lies the guarantee of the permanence, in the Ecclesial Community, of the Apostolic College that Christ had gathered around him.

This continuity, however, that we see first in the historical continuity of ministries, should also be understood in a spiritual sense, because Apostolic Succession in the ministry is considered a privileged place for the action and transmission of the Holy Spirit.

We find these convictions clearly echoed in the following text, for example, by Irenaeus of Lyons (second half of the second century): “It is within the power of all... in every Church, who may wish to see the truth, to contemplate clearly the tradition of the Apostles manifested throughout the whole world; and we are in a position to count those who were by the Apostles instituted Bishops in the Churches and... the succession of these men to our own times.... [The Apostles] were desirous that these men, whom also they were leaving behind as their successors, should be very perfect and blameless in all things, delivering up their own place of government to these men; which men, if they discharged their functions honestly, would be a great boon, but if they should fall away, the direst calamity” (*Adversus Haereses*, III, 3, 1: PG 7, 848).

Pointing to this network of Apostolic Succession as a guarantee of the permanence of the Lord's word, Irenaeus then concentrated on that Church, "the very great, the very ancient and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul", highlighting the Tradition of faith that in her comes down to us from the Apostles through the succession of the Bishops.

In this way, for Irenaeus and for the universal Church, the Episcopal Succession of the Church of Rome becomes the sign, criterion and guarantee of the unbroken transmission of apostolic faith: "For it is a matter of necessity that every Church should agree with this Church, on account of her pre-eminent authority (*propter potiore principalem*) - that is, the faithful everywhere - inasmuch as the Apostolic Tradition has been preserved continuously..." (*ibid.*, III, 3, 2: PG 7, 848).

Apostolic Succession, verified on the basis of communion with that of the Church of Rome, is therefore the criterion of the permanence of the particular Churches in the Tradition of the common apostolic faith, which from the origins has come down to us through this channel: "In this order, and by this succession, the ecclesiastical Tradition from the Apostles and the preaching of the truth have come down to us. And this is a most abundant proof that there is one and the same vivifying faith, which has been preserved in the Church from the Apostles until now, and handed down in truth" (*ibid.*, III, 3, 3: PG 7, 851).

According to this testimony of the ancient Church, the apostolicity of ecclesial communion consists in fidelity to the teaching and praxis of the Apostles, through whom the historical and spiritual bond of the Church with Christ is assured. The Apostolic Succession of the episcopal ministry is a means of guaranteeing the faithful transmission of the Apostolic witness.

What the Apostles represent in the relationship between the Lord Jesus and the Church of the origins is similarly represented by the ministerial succession in the relationship between the primitive Church and the Church of today. It is not merely a material sequence; rather, it is a historical instrument that the Spirit uses to make the Lord Jesus, Head of his people, present through those who are ordained for the ministry through the imposition of hands and the Bishops' prayer.

Consequently, through Apostolic Succession it is Christ who reaches us: in the words of the Apostles and of their successors, it is he who speaks to us; through their hands it is he who acts in the sacraments; in their gaze it is his gaze that embraces us and makes us feel loved and welcomed into the Heart of God. And still today, as at the outset, Christ himself is the true Shepherd and Guardian of our souls whom we follow with deep trust, gratitude and joy.

# Peter, the fisherman

17 May 2006

In the new series of Catecheses, we have tried above all to understand better what the Church is and what idea the Lord has about this new family of his. Then we said that the Church exists in people, and we have seen that the Lord entrusted this new reality, the Church, to the Twelve Apostles. Let us now look at them one by one, to understand through these people what it means to experience the Church and what it means to follow Jesus. We begin with St Peter.

After Jesus, Peter is the figure best known and most frequently cited in the New Testament writings: he is mentioned 154 times with the nickname of Pétros, “rock”, which is the Greek translation of the Aramaic name Jesus gave him directly: Cephas, attested to nine times, especially in Paul’s Letters; then the frequently occurring name Simon (75 times) must be added; this is a hellenization of his original Hebrew name “Symeon” (twice: Acts 15:14; II Pt 1:1).

Son of John (cf. Jn 1:42) or, in the Aramaic form, “Bar-Jona, son of Jona” (cf. Mt 16:17), Simon was from Bethsaida (cf. Jn 1:44), a little town to the east of the Sea of Galilee, from which Philip also came and of course, Andrew, the brother of Simon.

He spoke with a Galilean accent. Like his brother, he too was a fisherman: with the family of Zebedee, the father of James and John, he ran a small fishing business on the Lake of Gennesaret (cf. Lk 5:10). Thus, he must have been reasonably well-off and was motivated by a sincere interest in religion, by a desire for God - he wanted God to intervene in the world -, a desire that impelled him to go with his brother as far as Judea to hear the preaching of John the Baptist (Jn 1:35-42).

He was a believing and practising Jew who trusted in the active presence of God in his people’s history and grieved not to see God’s powerful action in the events he was witnessing at that time. He was married and his mother-in-law, whom Jesus was one day to heal, lived in the city of Capernaum, in the house where Simon also stayed when he was in that town (cf. Mt 8:14ff.; Mk 1:29ff.; Lk 4:38ff.).

Recent archaeological excavations have brought to light, beneath the octagonal mosaic paving of a small Byzantine church, the remains of a more ancient church built in that house, as the graffiti with invocations to Peter testify.

The Gospels tell us that Peter was one of the first four disciples of the Nazarene (cf. Lk 5:1-11), to whom a fifth was added, complying with the custom of every Rabbi to have five disciples (cf. Lk 5:27: called Levi). When Jesus went from five disciples to 12 (cf. Lk 9:1-6), the newness of his mission became evident: he was not one of the numerous rabbis but

had come to gather together the eschatological Israel, symbolized by the number 12, the number of the tribes of Israel.

Simon appears in the Gospels with a determined and impulsive character: he is ready to assert his own opinions even with force (remember him using the sword in the Garden of Olives: cf. Jn 18:10ff.). At the same time he is also ingenuous and fearful, yet he is honest, to the point of the most sincere repentance (cf. Mt 26:75).

The Gospels enable us to follow Peter step by step on his spiritual journey. The starting point was Jesus' call. It happened on an ordinary day while Peter was busy with his fisherman's tasks. Jesus was at the Lake of Gennesaret and crowds had gathered around him to listen to him. The size of his audience created a certain discomfort. The Teacher saw two boats moored by the shore; the fishermen had disembarked and were washing their nets. He then asked permission to board the boat, which was Simon's, and requested him to put out a little from the land. Sitting on that improvised seat, he began to teach the crowds from the boat (cf. Lk 5:1-3). Thus, the boat of Peter becomes the chair of Jesus.

When he had finished speaking he said to Simon: "Put out into the deep and let down your nets for a catch". And Simon answered, "Master, we toiled all night and took nothing! But at your word I will let down the nets" (Lk 5:4-5). Jesus, a carpenter, was not a skilled fisherman: yet Simon the fisherman trusted this Rabbi, who did not give him answers but required him to trust him.

His reaction to the miraculous catch showed his amazement and fear: "Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord" (Lk 5:8). Jesus replied by inviting him to trust and to be open to a project that would surpass all his expectations. "Do not be afraid; henceforth, you will be catching men" (Lk 5:10). Peter could not yet imagine that one day he would arrive in Rome and that here he would be a "fisher of men" for the Lord. He accepted this surprising call, he let himself be involved in this great adventure: he was generous; he recognized his limits but believed in the one who was calling him and followed the dream of his heart. He said "yes", a courageous and generous "yes", and became a disciple of Jesus.

Peter was to live another important moment of his spiritual journey near Caesarea Philippi when Jesus asked the disciples a precise question: "Who do men say that I am?" (Mk 8:27). But for Jesus hearsay did not suffice. He wanted from those who had agreed to be personally involved with him a personal statement of their position. Consequently, he insisted: "But who do you say that I am?" (Mk 8:29).

It was Peter who answered on behalf of the others: "You are the Christ" (ibid.), that is, the Messiah. Peter's answer, which was not revealed to him by "flesh and blood" but was

given to him by the Father who is in heaven (cf. Mt 16:17), contains as in a seed the future confession of faith of the Church. However, Peter had not yet understood the profound content of Jesus' Messianic mission, the new meaning of this word: Messiah.

He demonstrates this a little later, inferring that the Messiah whom he is following in his dreams is very different from God's true plan. He was shocked by the Lord's announcement of the Passion and protested, prompting a lively reaction from Jesus (cf. Mk 8:32-33).

Peter wanted as Messiah a "divine man" who would fulfil the expectations of the people by imposing his power upon them all: we would also like the Lord to impose his power and transform the world instantly. Jesus presented himself as a "human God", the Servant of God, who turned the crowd's expectations upside-down by taking a path of humility and suffering.

This is the great alternative that we must learn over and over again: to give priority to our own expectations, rejecting Jesus, or to accept Jesus in the truth of his mission and set aside all too human expectations.

Peter, impulsive as he was, did not hesitate to take Jesus aside and rebuke him. Jesus' answer demolished all his false expectations, calling him to conversion and to follow him: "Get behind me, Satan! For you are not on the side of God, but of men" (Mk 8:33). It is not for you to show me the way; I take my own way and you should follow me.

Peter thus learned what following Jesus truly means. It was his second call, similar to Abraham's in Genesis 22, after that in Genesis 12: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospel's will save it" (Mk 8:34-35). This is the demanding rule of the following of Christ: one must be able, if necessary, to give up the whole world to save the true values, to save the soul, to save the presence of God in the world (cf. Mk 8:36-37). And though with difficulty, Peter accepted the invitation and continued his life in the Master's footsteps.

And it seems to me that these conversions of St Peter on different occasions, and his whole figure, are a great consolation and a great lesson for us. We too have a desire for God, we too want to be generous, but we too expect God to be strong in the world and to transform the world on the spot, according to our ideas and the needs that we perceive.

God chooses a different way. God chooses the way of the transformation of hearts in suffering and in humility. And we, like Peter, must convert, over and over again. We must follow Jesus and not go before him: it is he who shows us the way.

So it is that Peter tells us: You think you have the recipe and that it is up to you to transform Christianity, but it is the Lord who knows the way. It is the Lord who says to me, who says to you: follow me! And we must have the courage and humility to follow Jesus, because he is the Way, the Truth and the Life.

## Peter, the Apostle

24 May 2006

In these Catecheses, we are meditating on the Church. We said that the Church lives in people and therefore, in last week's Catechesis, we began to meditate on the characters of the individual Apostles, beginning with St Peter.

We examined two decisive stages of his life: the call [to follow Jesus] near the Sea of Galilee, and then the confession of faith: "You are Christ, the Messiah". It is a confession, we said, that is still lacking, initial and yet open. St Peter puts himself on a path of "sequela", following. And so, this initial confession carries within it, like a seed, the future faith of the Church.

Today, we want to consider another two important events in the life of St Peter: the multiplication of the loaves - we heard the Lord's question and St Peter's reply in the Gospel passage just read - and then the Lord who calls Peter to be Pastor of the universal Church.

Let us now begin with the multiplication of the loaves. You know that the people had been listening to the Lord for hours. At the end, Jesus says: They are tired and hungry, we must give these people something to eat. The Apostles ask: But how? And Andrew, Peter's brother, draws Jesus' attention to a boy who had with him five loaves of bread and two fish. But what is this for so many people, the Apostles ask.

The Lord has the crowd be seated and these five loaves and two fish distributed. And the hunger of everyone is satisfied; what is more, the Lord gives the Apostles - Peter among them - the duty to collect the abundant leftovers: 12 baskets of bread (cf. Jn 6:12-13).

Afterwards, the people, seeing this miracle - that seemed to be the much-awaited renewal of a new "manna", of the gift of bread from heaven -, wanted to make him king. But Jesus does not accept and withdraws into the hills by himself to pray. The following day, on the other side of the lake in the Synagogue of Capernaum, Jesus explained the miracle - not in the sense of a kingship over Israel with a worldly power in the way the crowds hoped, but in the sense of the gift of self: "The bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh" (Jn 6:51).

Jesus announces the Cross and with the Cross the true multiplication of the loaves, the Eucharistic bread - his absolutely new way of kingship, a way completely contrary to the expectations of the people.

We can understand that these words of the Master, who does not want to multiply bread every day, who does not want to offer Israel a worldly power, would be really difficult, indeed, unacceptable, for the people. “He gives his flesh”: what does this mean?

Even for the disciples what Jesus says in this moment seems unacceptable. It was and is for our heart, for our mentality, a “hard saying” which is a trial of faith (cf. Jn 6:60). Many of the disciples went away. They wanted someone who would truly renew the State of Israel, of his people, and not one who said: “I give my flesh”.

We can imagine that the words of Jesus were difficult for Peter too, who at Caesarea Philippi he protested at the prophesy of the Cross. However, when Jesus asked the Twelve: “Will you also go away?”, Peter reacted with the enthusiasm of his generous heart, guided by the Holy Spirit.

Speaking on everyone’s behalf, he answered with immortal words, which are also our words: “Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know, that you are the Holy One of God” (cf. Jn 6:66-69).

Here, like at Caesarea, Peter begins with his words the confession of the Church’s Christological faith and becomes spokesman also for the other Apostles, and of we believers of all times. This does not mean that he had already understood the mystery of Christ in all its depth; his faith was still at the beginning of a journey of faith. It would reach its true fullness only through the experience of the Paschal events.

Nonetheless, it was already faith, open to the greatest reality; open especially because it was not faith in something, it was faith in Someone: in him, Christ.

And so, our faith too is always an initial one and we have still to carry out a great journey. But it is essential that it is an open faith and that we allow ourselves to be led by Jesus, because he does not only know the Way, but he is the Way.

Peter’s rash generosity does not protect him, however, from the risks connected with human weakness. Moreover, it is what we too can recognize in our own lives. Peter followed Jesus with enthusiasm, he overcame the trial of faith, abandoning himself to Christ. The moment comes, however, when he gives in to fear and falls: he betrays the Master (cf. Mk 14:66-72).

The school of faith is not a triumphal march but a journey marked daily by suffering and love, trials and faithfulness. Peter, who promised absolute fidelity, knew the bitterness

and humiliation of denial: the arrogant man learns the costly lesson of humility. Peter, too, must learn that he is weak and in need of forgiveness.

Once his attitude changes and he understands the truth of his weak heart of a believing sinner, he weeps in a fit of liberating repentance. After this weeping he is finally ready for his mission.

On a spring morning, this mission will be entrusted to him by the Risen Christ. The encounter takes place on the shore of the Lake of Tiberias. John the Evangelist recounts the conversation between Jesus and Peter in that circumstance. There is a very significant play on words.

In Greek, the word “fileo” means the love of friendship, tender but not all-encompassing; instead, the word “agapao” means love without reserve, total and unconditional. Jesus asks Peter the first time: “Simon... do you love me (agapas-me)” with this total and unconditional love (Jn 21:15)?

Prior to the experience of betrayal, the Apostle certainly would have said: “I love you (agapo-se) unconditionally”. Now that he has known the bitter sadness of infidelity, the drama of his own weakness, he says with humility: “Lord; you know that I love you (filo-se)”, that is, “I love you with my poor human love”. Christ insists: “Simon, do you love me with this total love that I want?”. And Peter repeats the response of his humble human love: “Kyrie, filo-se”, “Lord, I love you as I am able to love you”. The third time Jesus only says to Simon: “Fileis-me?”, “Do you love me?”.

Simon understands that his poor love is enough for Jesus, it is the only one of which he is capable, nonetheless he is grieved that the Lord spoke to him in this way. He thus replies: “Lord, you know everything; you know that I love you (filo-se)”.

This is to say that Jesus has put himself on the level of Peter, rather than Peter on Jesus’ level! It is exactly this divine conformity that gives hope to the Disciple, who experienced the pain of infidelity.

From here is born the trust that makes him able to follow [Christ] to the end: “This he said to show by what death he was to glorify God. And after this he said to him, “Follow me” (Jn 21:19).

From that day, Peter “followed” the Master with the precise awareness of his own fragility; but this understanding did not discourage him. Indeed, he knew that he could count on the presence of the Risen One beside him.

From the naïve enthusiasm of initial acceptance, passing through the sorrowful experience of denial and the weeping of conversion, Peter succeeded in entrusting himself to that Jesus who adapted himself to his poor capacity of love. And in this way he



shows us the way, notwithstanding all of our weakness. We know that Jesus adapts himself to this weakness of ours.

We follow him with our poor capacity to love and we know that Jesus is good and he accepts us.

It was a long journey for Peter that made him a trustworthy witness, “rock” of the Church, because he was constantly open to the action of the Spirit of Jesus.

Peter qualifies himself as a “witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed” (I Pt 5:1). When he was to write these words he would already be elderly, heading towards the end of his life that will be sealed with martyrdom. He will then be ready to describe true joy and to indicate where it can be drawn from: the source is believing in and loving Christ with our weak but sincere faith, notwithstanding our fragility.

He would therefore write to the Christians of his community, and says also to us: “Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy. As the outcome of your faith you obtain the salvation of your souls” (I Pt 1:8-9).

## **Peter, the rock**

7 June 2006

We are returning to the weekly Catecheses that we began this spring. In the last Catechesis two weeks ago, I spoke of Peter as the first of the Apostles; today let us return once again to this great and important figure of the Church.

In recounting Jesus’ first meeting with Simon, the brother of Andrew, John the Evangelist records a unique event: Jesus “looked at him and said, “So you are Simon the son of John? You shall be called Cephas (which means Peter)”” (Jn 1:42).

It was not Jesus’ practice to change his disciples’ names: apart from the nickname “sons of thunder”, which in specific circumstances he attributed to the sons of Zebedee (cf. Mk 3:17) and never used again. He never gave any of his disciples a new name.

Yet, he gave one to Simon, calling him “Cephas”. This name was later translated into Greek as Petros and into Latin as Petrus. And it was translated precisely because it was not only a name; it was a “mandate” that Petrus received in that way from the Lord. The new name Petrus was to recur frequently in the Gospels and ended by replacing “Simon”, his original name.

This fact acquires special importance if one bears in mind that in the Old Testament, a change of name usually preceded the entrustment of a mission (cf. Gn 17:5; 32:28ff., etc.).

Indeed, many signs indicate Christ's desire to give Peter special prominence within the Apostolic College: in Capernaum the Teacher enters Peter's house (cf. Mk 1:29); when the crowd becomes pressed on the shore of Lake Genesaret, seeing two boats moored there, Jesus chooses Simon's (cf. Lk 5:3); when, on certain occasions, Jesus takes only three disciples with him, Peter is always recorded as the first of the group: as in the raising of Jairus' daughter (cf. Mk 5:37; Lk 8:51), in the Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2; Mt 17:1; Lk 9:28) and during the agony in the Garden of Gethsemane (cf. Mk 14:33; Mt 26:37). And again: the Temple tax collectors address Peter and the Teacher pays only for himself and Peter (cf. Mt 17:24-27); it is Peter's feet that he washes first at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13:6), and for Peter alone he prays that his faith will not fail so that he will be able to strengthen the other disciples in faith (cf. Lk 22:30-31).

Moreover, Peter himself was aware of his special position: he often also spoke on behalf of the others, asking for the explanation of a difficult parable (cf. Mt 15:15), the exact meaning of a precept (cf. Mt 18:21) or the formal promise of a reward (cf. Mt 19:27).

It is Peter in particular who resolves certain embarrassing situations by intervening on behalf of all. Thus, when Jesus, saddened by the misunderstanding of the crowd after the Bread of Life discourse, asks: "Will you also go away?", Peter's answer is peremptory in tone: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life" (cf. Jn 6:67-69).

Equally decisive is the profession of faith which, again on behalf of the Twelve, he makes near Caesarea Philippi. To Jesus' question: "But who do you say that I am?", Peter answers: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:15-16). Jesus responded by pronouncing the solemn declaration that defines Peter's role in the Church once and for all: "And I tell you: you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church.... I will give you the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Mt 16:18-19).

In themselves, the three metaphors that Jesus uses are crystal clear: Peter will be the rocky foundation on which he will build the edifice of the Church; he will have the keys of the Kingdom of Heaven to open or close it to people as he sees fit; lastly, he will be able to bind or to loose, in the sense of establishing or prohibiting whatever he deems necessary for the life of the Church. It is always Christ's Church, not Peter's.

Thus, vivid images portray what the subsequent reflection will describe by the term: "primacy of jurisdiction".

This pre-eminent position that Jesus wanted to bestow upon Peter is also encountered after the Resurrection: Jesus charges the women to announce it especially to Peter, as

distinct from the other Apostles (cf. Mk 16:7); it is to Peter and John that Mary Magdalene runs to tell them that the stone has been rolled away from the entrance to the tomb (cf. Jn 20:2), and John was to stand back to let Peter enter first when they arrived at the empty tomb (cf. Jn 20:4-6).

Then, Peter was to be the first witness of an appearance of the Risen One (cf. Lk 24:34; I Cor 15:5). His role, decisively emphasized (cf. Jn 20:3-10), marks the continuity between the pre-eminence he had in the group of the Apostles and the pre-eminence he would continue to have in the community born with the paschal events, as the Book of Acts testifies (cf. 1:15-26; 2:14-40; 3:12-26; 4:8-12; 5:1-11, 29; 8:14-17; 10; etc.).

His behaviour was considered so decisive that it prompted remarks as well as criticism (cf. Acts 11:1-18; Gal 2:11-14).

At the so-called Council of Jerusalem Peter played a directive role (cf. Acts 15; Gal 2:1-10), and precisely because he was a witness of authentic faith, Paul himself recognized that he had a certain quality of “leadership” (cf. I Cor 15:5; Gal 1:18; 2:7ff., etc.).

Moreover, the fact that several of the key texts that refer to Peter can be traced back to the context of the Last Supper, during which Christ conferred upon Peter the ministry of strengthening his brethren (cf. Lk 22:31ff.), shows that the ministry entrusted to Peter was one of the constitutive elements of the Church, which was born from the commemoration of the Pasch celebrated in the Eucharist.

This contextualization of the Primacy of Peter at the Last Supper, at the moment of the Institution of the Eucharist, the Lord’s Pasch, also points to the ultimate meaning of this Primacy: Peter must be the custodian of communion with Christ for all time. He must guide people to communion with Christ; he must ensure that the net does not break, and consequently that universal communion endures. Only together can we be with Christ, who is Lord of all.

Thus, Peter is responsible for guaranteeing communion with Christ with the love of Christ, guiding people to fulfil this love in everyday life. Let us pray that the Primacy of Peter, entrusted to poor human beings, will always be exercised in this original sense as the Lord desired, and that its true meaning will therefore always be recognized by the brethren who are not yet in full communion with us.

## **Andrew, the Protoclete**

14 June 2006

In the last two catecheses we spoke about the figure of St Peter. Now, in the measure that sources allow us, we want to know the other 11 Apostles a bit better. Therefore, today we shall speak of Simon Peter's brother, St Andrew, who was also one of the Twelve.

The first striking characteristic of Andrew is his name: it is not Hebrew, as might have been expected, but Greek, indicative of a certain cultural openness in his family that cannot be ignored. We are in Galilee, where the Greek language and culture are quite present. Andrew comes second in the list of the Twelve, as in Matthew (10:1-4) and in Luke (6:13-16); or fourth, as in Mark (3:13-18) and in the Acts (1:13-14). In any case, he certainly enjoyed great prestige within the early Christian communities.

The kinship between Peter and Andrew, as well as the joint call that Jesus addressed to them, are explicitly mentioned in the Gospels. We read: "As he walked by the Sea of Galilee, he saw two brothers, Simon who is called Peter and Andrew his brother, casting a net into the sea; for they were fishermen. And he said to them, "Follow me, and I will make you fishers of men" (Mt 4:18-19; Mk 1:16-17).

From the Fourth Gospel we know another important detail: Andrew had previously been a disciple of John the Baptist: and this shows us that he was a man who was searching, who shared in Israel's hope, who wanted to know better the word of the Lord, the presence of the Lord.

He was truly a man of faith and hope; and one day he heard John the Baptist proclaiming Jesus as: "the Lamb of God" (Jn 1:36); so he was stirred, and with another unnamed disciple followed Jesus, the one whom John had called "the Lamb of God". The Evangelist says that "they saw where he was staying; and they stayed with him that day..." (Jn 1:37-39).

Thus, Andrew enjoyed precious moments of intimacy with Jesus. The account continues with one important annotation: "One of the two who heard John speak, and followed him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his brother Simon, and said to him, "We have found the Messiah' (which means Christ). He brought him to Jesus" (Jn 1:40-43), straightaway showing an unusual apostolic spirit.

Andrew, then, was the first of the Apostles to be called to follow Jesus. Exactly for this reason the liturgy of the Byzantine Church honours him with the nickname: "Protokletos", [protoclete] which means, precisely, "the first called".

And it is certain that it is partly because of the family tie between Peter and Andrew that the Church of Rome and the Church of Constantinople feel one another in a special way to be Sister Churches. To emphasize this relationship, my Predecessor Pope Paul VI, in 1964, returned the important relic of St Andrew, which until then had been kept in the

Vatican Basilica, to the Orthodox Metropolitan Bishop of the city of Patras in Greece, where tradition has it that the Apostle was crucified.

The Gospel traditions mention Andrew's name in particular on another three occasions that tell us something more about this man. The first is that of the multiplication of the loaves in Galilee. On that occasion, it was Andrew who pointed out to Jesus the presence of a young boy who had with him five barley loaves and two fish: not much, he remarked, for the multitudes who had gathered in that place (cf. Jn 6:8-9).

In this case, it is worth highlighting Andrew's realism. He noticed the boy, that is, he had already asked the question: "but what good is that for so many?" (ibid.), and recognized the insufficiency of his minimal resources. Jesus, however, knew how to make them sufficient for the multitude of people who had come to hear him.

The second occasion was at Jerusalem. As he left the city, a disciple drew Jesus' attention to the sight of the massive walls that supported the Temple. The Teacher's response was surprising: he said that of those walls not one stone would be left upon another. Then Andrew, together with Peter, James and John, questioned him: "Tell us, when will this be, and what will be the sign when these things are all to be accomplished?" (Mk 13:1-4).

In answer to this question Jesus gave an important discourse on the destruction of Jerusalem and on the end of the world, in which he asked his disciples to be wise in interpreting the signs of the times and to be constantly on their guard.

From this event we can deduce that we should not be afraid to ask Jesus questions but at the same time that we must be ready to accept even the surprising and difficult teachings that he offers us.

Lastly, a third initiative of Andrew is recorded in the Gospels: the scene is still Jerusalem, shortly before the Passion. For the Feast of the Passover, John recounts, some Greeks had come to the city, probably proselytes or God-fearing men who had come up to worship the God of Israel at the Passover Feast. Andrew and Philip, the two Apostles with Greek names, served as interpreters and mediators of this small group of Greeks with Jesus.

The Lord's answer to their question - as so often in John's Gospel - appears enigmatic, but precisely in this way proves full of meaning. Jesus said to the two disciples and, through them, to the Greek world: "The hour has come for the Son of man to be glorified. I solemnly assure you, unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains just a grain of wheat; but if it dies, it produces much fruit" (12:23-24).

Jesus wants to say: Yes, my meeting with the Greeks will take place, but not as a simple, brief conversation between myself and a few others, motivated above all by curiosity. The hour of my glorification will come with my death, which can be compared with the falling

into the earth of a grain of wheat. My death on the Cross will bring forth great fruitfulness: in the Resurrection the “dead grain of wheat” - a symbol of myself crucified - will become the bread of life for the world; it will be a light for the peoples and cultures.

Yes, the encounter with the Greek soul, with the Greek world, will be achieved in that profundity to which the grain of wheat refers, which attracts to itself the forces of heaven and earth and becomes bread.

In other words, Jesus was prophesying about the Church of the Greeks, the Church of the pagans, the Church of the world, as a fruit of his Pasch.

Some very ancient traditions not only see Andrew, who communicated these words to the Greeks, as the interpreter of some Greeks at the meeting with Jesus recalled here, but consider him the Apostle to the Greeks in the years subsequent to Pentecost. They enable us to know that for the rest of his life he was the preacher and interpreter of Jesus for the Greek world.

Peter, his brother, travelled from Jerusalem through Antioch and reached Rome to exercise his universal mission; Andrew, instead, was the Apostle of the Greek world. So it is that in life and in death they appear as true brothers - a brotherhood that is symbolically expressed in the special reciprocal relations of the See of Rome and of Constantinople, which are truly Sister Churches.

A later tradition, as has been mentioned, tells of Andrew's death at Patras, where he too suffered the torture of crucifixion. At that supreme moment, however, like his brother Peter, he asked to be nailed to a cross different from the Cross of Jesus. In his case it was a diagonal or X-shaped cross, which has thus come to be known as “St Andrew's cross”.

This is what the Apostle is claimed to have said on that occasion, according to an ancient story (which dates back to the beginning of the sixth century), entitled *The Passion of Andrew*:

“Hail, O Cross, inaugurated by the Body of Christ and adorned with his limbs as though they were precious pearls. Before the Lord mounted you, you inspired an earthly fear. Now, instead, endowed with heavenly love, you are accepted as a gift.

“Believers know of the great joy that you possess, and of the multitude of gifts you have prepared. I come to you, therefore, confident and joyful, so that you too may receive me exultant as a disciple of the One who was hung upon you.... O blessed Cross, clothed in the majesty and beauty of the Lord's limbs!... Take me, carry me far from men, and restore me to my Teacher, so that, through you, the one who redeemed me by you, may receive me. Hail, O Cross; yes, hail indeed!”.

Here, as can be seen, is a very profound Christian spirituality. It does not view the Cross as an instrument of torture but rather as the incomparable means for perfect configuration to the Redeemer, to the grain of wheat that fell into the earth.

Here we have a very important lesson to learn: our own crosses acquire value if we consider them and accept them as a part of the Cross of Christ, if a reflection of his light illuminates them.

It is by that Cross alone that our sufferings too are ennobled and acquire their true meaning.

The Apostle Andrew, therefore, teaches us to follow Jesus with promptness (cf. Mt 4:20; Mk 1:18), to speak enthusiastically about him to those we meet, and especially, to cultivate a relationship of true familiarity with him, acutely aware that in him alone can we find the ultimate meaning of our life and death.

## **James, the Greater**

21 June 2006

We are continuing the series of portraits of the Apostles chosen directly by Jesus during his earthly life. We have spoken of St Peter and of his brother, Andrew. Today we meet the figure of James. The biblical lists of the Twelve mention two people with this name: James, son of Zebedee, and James, son of Alphaeus (cf. Mk 3:17,18; Mt 10:2-3), who are commonly distinguished with the nicknames “James the Greater” and “James the Lesser”.

These titles are certainly not intended to measure their holiness, but simply to state the different importance they receive in the writings of the New Testament and, in particular, in the setting of Jesus’ earthly life. Today we will focus our attention on the first of these two figures with the same name.

The name “James” is the translation of Iakobos, the Graecised form of the name of the famous Patriarch, Jacob. The Apostle of this name was the brother of John and in the above-mentioned lists, comes second, immediately after Peter, as occurs in Mark (3:17); or in the third place, after Peter and Andrew as in the Gospels of Matthew (10:2) and Luke (6:14), while in the Acts he comes after Peter and John (1:13). This James belongs, together with Peter and John, to the group of the three privileged disciples whom Jesus admitted to important moments in his life.

Since it is very hot today, I want to be brief and to mention here only two of these occasions. James was able to take part, together with Peter and John, in Jesus’ Agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and in the event of Jesus’ Transfiguration. Thus, it is a question of situations very different from each other: in one case, James, together with

the other two Apostles, experiences the Lord's glory and sees him talking to Moses and Elijah, he sees the divine splendour shining out in Jesus.

On the other occasion, he finds himself face to face with suffering and humiliation, he sees with his own eyes how the Son of God humbles himself, making himself obedient unto death. The latter experience was certainly an opportunity for him to grow in faith, to adjust the unilateral, triumphalist interpretation of the former experience: he had to discern that the Messiah, whom the Jewish people were awaiting as a victor, was in fact not only surrounded by honour and glory, but also by suffering and weakness. Christ's glory was fulfilled precisely on the Cross, in his sharing in our sufferings.

This growth in faith was brought to completion by the Holy Spirit at Pentecost, so that James, when the moment of supreme witness came, would not draw back. Early in the first century, in the 40s, King Herod Agrippa, the grandson of Herod the Great, as Luke tells us, "laid violent hands upon some who belonged to the Church. He had James, the brother of John, killed by the sword" (Acts 12:1-2).

The brevity of the news, devoid of any narrative detail, reveals on the one hand how normal it was for Christians to witness to the Lord with their own lives, and on the other, that James had a position of relevance in the Church of Jerusalem, partly because of the role he played during Jesus' earthly existence.

A later tradition, dating back at least to Isidore of Seville, speaks of a visit he made to Spain to evangelize that important region of the Roman Empire. According to another tradition, it was his body instead that had been taken to Spain, to the city of Santiago de Compostela.

As we all know, that place became the object of great veneration and is still the destination of numerous pilgrimages, not only from Europe but from the whole world. This explains the iconographical representation of St James with the pilgrim's staff and the scroll of the Gospel in hand, typical features of the travelling Apostle dedicated to the proclamation of the "Good News" and characteristics of the pilgrimage of Christian life.

Consequently, we can learn much from St James: promptness in accepting the Lord's call even when he asks us to leave the "boat" of our human securities, enthusiasm in following him on the paths that he indicates to us over and above any deceptive presumption of our own, readiness to witness to him with courage, if necessary to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of life.

Thus James the Greater stands before us as an eloquent example of generous adherence to Christ. He, who initially had requested, through his mother, to be seated with his brother next to the Master in his Kingdom, was precisely the first to drink the chalice of the passion and to share martyrdom with the Apostles.



And, in the end, summarizing everything, we can say that the journey, not only exterior but above all interior, from the mount of the Transfiguration to the mount of the Agony, symbolizes the entire pilgrimage of Christian life, among the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God, as the Second Vatican Council says. In following Jesus, like St James, we know that even in difficulties we are on the right path.

## James, the Lesser

28 June 2006

Beside the figure of James the Greater, son of Zebedee, of whom we spoke last another James appears in the Gospels, known as “the Lesser”. He is also included in the list of the Twelve Apostles personally chosen by Jesus and is always specified as “the son of Alphaeus” (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 5; Acts 1:13). He has often been identified with another James, called “the Younger” (cf. Mk 15:40), the son of a Mary (cf. *ibid.*), possibly “Mary the wife of Clopas”, who stood, according to the Fourth Gospel, at the foot of the Cross with the Mother of Jesus (cf. Jn 19:25).

He also came from Nazareth and was probably related to Jesus (cf. Mt 13:55; Mk 6:3); according to Semitic custom he is called “brother” (Mk 6:3; Gal 1:19).

The book of the Acts of the Apostles emphasizes the prominent role that this latter James played in the Church of Jerusalem. At the Apostolic Council celebrated there after the death of James the Greater he declared, together with the others, that pagans could be received into the Church without first submitting to circumcision (cf. Acts 15:13). St Paul, who attributes a specific appearance of the Risen One to James (cf. I Cor 15:7), even named James before Cephas-Peter on the occasion of his visit to Jerusalem, describing him as a “pillar” of that Church on a par with Peter (cf. Gal 2:9).

Subsequently, Judeo-Christians considered him their main reference point. The Letter that bears the name of James is also attributed to him and is included in the New Testament canon. In it, he is not presented as a “brother of the Lord” but as a “servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas 1:1).

Among experts, the question of the identity of these two figures with the same name, James son of Alphaeus and James “the brother of the Lord”, is disputed. With reference to the period of Jesus’ earthly life, the Gospel traditions have not kept for us any account of either one of them.

The Acts of the Apostles, on the other hand, reveal that a “James” played a very important role in the early Church, as we have already mentioned, after the Resurrection of Jesus (cf. Acts 12:17; 15:13-21; 21:18).

His most important act was his intervention in the matter of the difficult relations between the Christians of Jewish origin and those of pagan origin: in this matter, together with Peter, he contributed to overcoming, or rather, to integrating the original Jewish dimension of Christianity with the need not to impose upon converted pagans the obligation to submit to all the norms of the Law of Moses. The Book of Acts has preserved for us the solution of compromise proposed precisely by James and accepted by all the Apostles present, according to which pagans who believed in Jesus Christ were to be asked only to abstain from the idolatrous practice of eating the meat of animals offered in sacrifice to the gods, and from “impropriety”, a term which probably alluded to irregular matrimonial unions. In practice, it was a question of adhering to only a few prohibitions of Mosaic Law held to be very important.

Thus, two important and complementary results were obtained, both of which are still valid today: on the one hand, the inseparable relationship that binds Christianity to the Jewish religion, as to a perennially alive and effective matrix, was recognized; and on the other, Christians of pagan origin were permitted to keep their own sociological identity which they would have lost had they been forced to observe the so-called “ceremonial precepts” of Moses.

Henceforth, these precepts were no longer to be considered binding for converted pagans. In essence, this gave rise to a practice of reciprocal esteem and respect which, despite subsequent regrettable misunderstandings, aimed by its nature to safeguard what was characteristic of each one of the two parties.

The oldest information on the death of this James is given to us by the Jewish historian Flavius Josephus. In his *Jewish Antiquities* (20, 201ff.), written in Rome towards the end of the first century, he says that the death of James was decided with an illegal initiative by the High Priest Ananus, a son of the Ananias attested to in the Gospels; in the year 62, he profited from the gap between the deposition of one Roman Procurator (Festus) and the arrival of his successor (Albinus), to hand him over for stoning.

As well as the apocryphal Proto-Gospel of James, which exalts the holiness and virginity of Mary, Mother of Jesus, the Letter that bears his name is particularly associated with the name of this James. In the canon of the New Testament, it occupies the first place among the so-called “Catholic Letters”, that is, those that were not addressed to any single particular Church - such as Rome, Ephesus, etc. - but to many Churches.

It is quite an important writing which heavily insists on the need not to reduce our faith to a purely verbal or abstract declaration, but to express it in practice in good works. Among other things, he invites us to be constant in trials, joyfully accepted, and to pray with trust to obtain from God the gift of wisdom, thanks to which we succeed in

understanding that the true values of life are not to be found in transient riches but rather in the ability to share our possessions with the poor and the needy (cf. Jas 1:27).

Thus, St James' Letter shows us a very concrete and practical Christianity. Faith must be fulfilled in life, above all, in love of neighbour and especially in dedication to the poor. It is against this background that the famous sentence must be read: "As the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (Jas 2:26).

At times, this declaration by St James has been considered as opposed to the affirmations of Paul, who claims that we are justified by God not by virtue of our actions but through our faith (cf. Gal 2:16; Rom 3:28). However, if the two apparently contradictory sentences with their different perspectives are correctly interpreted, they actually complete each other.

St Paul is opposed to the pride of man who thinks he does not need the love of God that precedes us; he is opposed to the pride of self-justification without grace, simply given and undeserved.

St James, instead, talks about works as the normal fruit of faith: "Every sound tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears evil fruit", the Lord says (Mt 7:17). And St James repeats it and says it to us.

Lastly, the Letter of James urges us to abandon ourselves in the hands of God in all that we do: "If the Lord wills" (Jas 4:15). Thus, he teaches us not to presume to plan our lives autonomously and with self interest, but to make room for the inscrutable will of God, who knows what is truly good for us.

In this way, St James remains an ever up-to-date teacher of life for each one of us.

## **John, son of Zebedee**

5 July 2006

Let us dedicate our meeting today to remembering another very important member of the Apostolic College: John, son of Zebedee and brother of James. His typically Jewish name means: "the Lord has worked grace". He was mending his nets on the shore of Lake Tiberias when Jesus called him and his brother (cf. Mt 4:21; Mk 1:19).

John was always among the small group that Jesus took with him on specific occasions. He was with Peter and James when Jesus entered Peter's house in Capernaum to cure his mother-in-law (cf. Mk 1:29); with the other two, he followed the Teacher into the house of Jairus, a ruler of the synagogue whose daughter he was to bring back to life (cf. Mk 5:37); he followed him when he climbed the mountain for his Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2).

He was beside the Lord on the Mount of Olives when, before the impressive sight of the Temple of Jerusalem, he spoke of the end of the city and of the world (cf. Mk 13:3); and, lastly, he was close to him in the Garden of Gethsemane when he withdrew to pray to the Father before the Passion (cf. Mk 14:33).

Shortly before the Passover, when Jesus chose two disciples to send them to prepare the room for the Supper, it was to him and to Peter that he entrusted this task (cf. Lk 22:8).

His prominent position in the group of the Twelve makes it somewhat easier to understand the initiative taken one day by his mother: she approached Jesus to ask him if her two sons - John and James - could sit next to him in the Kingdom, one on his right and one on his left (cf. Mt 20:20-21).

As we know, Jesus answered by asking a question in turn: he asked whether they were prepared to drink the cup that he was about to drink (cf. Mt 20:22). The intention behind those words was to open the two disciples' eyes, to introduce them to knowledge of the mystery of his person and to suggest their future calling to be his witnesses, even to the supreme trial of blood.

A little later, in fact, Jesus explained that he had not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (cf. Mt 20:28).

In the days after the Resurrection, we find "the sons of Zebedee" busy with Peter and some of the other disciples on a night when they caught nothing, but that was followed, after the intervention of the Risen One, by the miraculous catch: it was to be "the disciple Jesus loved" who first recognized "the Lord" and pointed him out to Peter (cf. Jn 21:1-13).

In the Church of Jerusalem, John occupied an important position in supervising the first group of Christians. Indeed, Paul lists him among those whom he calls the "pillars" of that community (cf. Gal 2:9). In fact, Luke in the Acts presents him together with Peter while they are going to pray in the temple (cf. Acts 3:1-4, 11) or appear before the Sanhedrin to witness to their faith in Jesus Christ (cf. Acts 4:13, 19).

Together with Peter, he is sent to the Church of Jerusalem to strengthen the people in Samaria who had accepted the Gospel, praying for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 8:14-15). In particular, we should remember what he affirmed with Peter to the Sanhedrin members who were accusing them: "We cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20).

It is precisely this frankness in confessing his faith that lives on as an example and a warning for all of us always to be ready to declare firmly our steadfast attachment to Christ, putting faith before any human calculation or concern.

According to tradition, John is the “disciple whom Jesus loved”, who in the Fourth Gospel laid his head against the Teacher’s breast at the Last Supper (cf. Jn 13:23), stood at the foot of the Cross together with the Mother of Jesus (cf. Jn 19:25) and lastly, witnessed both the empty tomb and the presence of the Risen One himself (cf. Jn 20:2; 21:7).

We know that this identification is disputed by scholars today, some of whom view him merely as the prototype of a disciple of Jesus. Leaving the exegetes to settle the matter, let us be content here with learning an important lesson for our lives: the Lord wishes to make each one of us a disciple who lives in personal friendship with him.

To achieve this, it is not enough to follow him and to listen to him outwardly: it is also necessary to live with him and like him. This is only possible in the context of a relationship of deep familiarity, imbued with the warmth of total trust. This is what happens between friends; for this reason Jesus said one day: “Greater love has no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends.... No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you” (Jn 15:13, 15).

In the apocryphal Acts of John, the Apostle is not presented as the founder of Churches nor as the guide of already established communities, but as a perpetual wayfarer, a communicator of the faith in the encounter with “souls capable of hoping and of being saved” (18:10; 23:8).

All is motivated by the paradoxical intention to make visible the invisible. And indeed, the Oriental Church calls him quite simply “the Theologian”, that is, the one who can speak in accessible terms of the divine, revealing an arcane access to God through attachment to Jesus.

Devotion to the Apostle John spread from the city of Ephesus where, according to an ancient tradition, he worked for many years and died in the end at an extraordinarily advanced age, during the reign of the Emperor Trajan.

In Ephesus in the sixth century, the Emperor Justinian had a great basilica built in his honour, whose impressive ruins are still standing today. Precisely in the East, he enjoyed and still enjoys great veneration.

In Byzantine iconography he is often shown as very elderly - according to tradition, he died under the Emperor Trajan - in the process of intense contemplation, in the attitude, as it were, of those asking for silence.

Indeed, without sufficient recollection it is impossible to approach the supreme mystery of God and of his revelation. This explains why, years ago, Athenagoras, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, the man whom Pope Paul VI embraced at a memorable

encounter, said: “John is the origin of our loftiest spirituality. Like him, “the silent ones’ experience that mysterious exchange of hearts, pray for John’s presence, and their hearts are set on fire” (O. Clément, *Dialoghi con Atenagora*, Turin 1972, p. 159).

May the Lord help us to study at John’s school and learn the great lesson of love, so as to feel we are loved by Christ “to the end” (Jn 13:1), and spend our lives for him.

## John, the theologian

9 August 2006

Before the holidays I had begun sketching small portraits of the Twelve Apostles. The Apostles were Jesus’ travelling companions, Jesus’ friends. Their journey with Jesus was not only a physical journey from Galilee to Jerusalem, but an interior journey during which they learned faith in Jesus Christ, not without difficulty, for they were people like us.

But for this very reason, because they were Jesus’ travelling companions, Jesus’ friends, who learned faith on a journey that was far from easy, they are also guides for us, who help us to know Jesus Christ, to love him and to have faith in him.

I have already commented on four of the Twelve Apostles: Simon Peter; Andrew, his brother; James, the brother of St John; and the other James, known as “The Lesser”, who wrote a Letter that we find in the New Testament. And I had started to speak about John the Evangelist, gathering together in the last Catechesis before the holidays the essential facts for this Apostle’s profile.

I would now like to focus attention on the content of his teaching. The writings that we want to examine today, therefore, are the Gospel and the Letters that go under his name.

If there is one characteristic topic that emerges from John’s writings, it is love. It is not by chance that I wanted to begin my first Encyclical Letter with this Apostle’s words, “God is love (*Deus caritas est*); he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (I Jn 4:16). It is very difficult to find texts of this kind in other religions. Thus, words such as these bring us face to face with an element that is truly peculiar to Christianity.

John, of course, is not the only author of Christian origin to speak of love. Since this is an essential constituent of Christianity, all the New Testament writers speak of it, although with different emphases.

If we are now pausing to reflect on this subject in John, it is because he has outlined its principal features insistently and incisively. We therefore trust his words. One thing is

certain: he does not provide an abstract, philosophical or even theological treatment of what love is.

No, he is not a theoretician. True love, in fact, by its nature is never purely speculative but makes a direct, concrete and even verifiable reference to real persons. Well, John, as an Apostle and a friend of Jesus, makes us see what its components are, or rather, the phases of Christian love, a movement marked by three moments.

The first concerns the very Source of love which the Apostle identifies as God, arriving at the affirmation that “God is love” (I Jn 4:8, 16). John is the only New Testament author who gives us definitions of God. He says, for example, that “God is spirit” (Jn 4:24) or that “God is light” (I Jn 1:5). Here he proclaims with radiant insight that “God is love”.

Take note: it is not merely asserted that “God loves”, or even less that “love is God”! In other words: John does not limit himself to describing the divine action but goes to its roots.

Moreover, he does not intend to attribute a divine quality to a generic and even impersonal love; he does not rise from love to God, but turns directly to God to define his nature with the infinite dimension of love.

By so doing, John wants to say that the essential constituent of God is love and hence, that all God’s activity is born from love and impressed with love: all that God does, he does out of love and with love, even if we are not always immediately able to understand that this is love, true love.

At this point, however, it is indispensable to take another step and explain that God has concretely demonstrated his love by entering human history through the Person of Jesus Christ, incarnate, dead and risen for us.

This is the second constitutive moment of God’s love. He did not limit himself to verbal declarations but, we can say, truly committed himself and “paid” in the first person.

Exactly as John writes, “God so loved the world”, that is, all of us, “that he gave his only Son” (Jn 3:16). Henceforth, God’s love for humanity is concretized and manifested in the love of Jesus himself.

Again, John writes: “Having loved his own who were in the world, he loved them to the end” (Jn 13:1). By virtue of this oblation and total love we are radically ransomed from sin, as St John writes further: “My little children... if any one does sin, we have an advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ, the righteous; and he is the expiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the sins of the whole world” (I Jn 2:1-2; cf. I Jn 1:7).

This is how Jesus' love for us reaches us: by the pouring out of his own Blood for our salvation! The Christian, pausing in contemplation before this "excess" of love, cannot but wonder what the proper response is. And I think each one of us, always and over and over again, must ask himself or herself this.

This question introduces us into the third moment of the dynamic of love: from being the recipients of a love that precedes and surpasses us, we are called to the commitment of an active response which, to be adequate, can only be a response of love.

John speaks of a "commandment". He is, in fact, referring to these words of Jesus: "A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another; even as I have loved you, that you also love one another" (Jn 13:34).

Where is the newness to which Jesus refers? It lies in the fact that he is not content with repeating what had already been requested in the Old Testament and which we also read in the other Gospels: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself" (Lv 19:18; cf. Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:29-31; Lk 10:27).

In the ancient precept the standard criterion was based on man ("as yourself"), whereas in the precept to which John refers, Jesus presents his own Person as the reason for and norm of our love: "as I have loved you".

It is in this way that love becomes truly Christian: both in the sense that it must be directed to all without distinction, and above all since it must be carried through to its extreme consequences, having no other bounds than being boundless.

Those words of Jesus, "as I have loved you", simultaneously invite and disturb us; they are a Christological goal that can appear unattainable, but at the same time they are an incentive that does not allow us to ensconce ourselves in what we have been able to achieve. It does not permit us to be content with what we are but spurs us to keep advancing towards this goal.

In *The Imitation of Christ*, that golden text of spirituality which is the small book dating back to the late Middle Ages, on this subject is written: "The love of Jesus is noble and generous: it spurs us on to do great things, and excites us to desire always that which is most perfect. Love will tend upwards and is not to be detained by things beneath. Love will be at liberty and free from all worldly affections... for love proceeds from God and cannot rest but in God above all things created. The lover flies, runs and rejoices, he is free and not held. He gives all for all and has all in all, because he rests in one sovereign good above all, from whom all good flows and proceeds" (Thomas à Kempis, *The Imitation of Christ*, Book III, Chapter V, 3-4).



What better comment could there be on the “new commandment” spelled out by John? Let us pray to the Father to be able, even if always imperfectly, to live it so intensely that we share it with those we meet on our way.

## John, the Seer of Patmos

23 August 2006

In the last Catechesis we had reached the meditation on the figure of the Apostle John. We had first sought to look at all that can be known of his life. Then, in a second Catechesis, we meditated on the central content of his Gospel and his Letters: charity, love. And today we are still concerned with the figure of John, this time to examine the Seer of the Book of Revelation. And let us immediately note that while neither the Fourth Gospel nor the Letters attributed to the Apostle ever bear his name, the Book of Revelation makes at least four references to it (cf. 1:1, 4, 9; 22:8).

It is obvious, on the one hand, that the author had no reason not to mention his own name, and on the other, that he knew his first readers would be able to precisely identify him. We know, moreover, that in the third century, scholars were already disputing the true factual identity of John of the “Apocalypse”.

For the sake of convenience we could also call him “the Seer of Patmos” because he is linked to the name of this island in the Aegean Sea where, according to his own autobiographical account, he was, as it were, deported “on account of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus” (Rev 1:9).

It was on Patmos itself, “on the Lord’s Day... caught up in ecstasy” (Rev 1:10), that John had a grandiose vision and heard extraordinary messages that were to have a strong influence on the history of the Church and of entire Western culture.

For example, from the title of his book - Apocalypse, Revelation - the words “apocalypse, apocalyptic” were introduced into our language and, although inaccurately, they call to mind the idea of an incumbent catastrophe.

The Book should be understood against the backdrop of the dramatic experiences of the seven Churches of Asia (Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea) which had to face serious difficulties at the end of the first century - persecutions and also inner tensions - in their witness to Christ.

John addresses them, showing acute pastoral sensitivity to the persecuted Christians, whom he exhorts to be steadfast in the faith and not to identify with the pagan world. His purpose is constituted once and for all by the revelation, starting with the death and Resurrection of Christ, of the meaning of human history.

The first and fundamental vision of John, in fact, concerns the figure of the Lamb who is slain yet standing (cf. Rev 5:6), and is placed before the throne on which God himself is already seated.

By saying this, John wants first of all to tell us two things: the first is that although Jesus was killed with an act of violence, instead of falling heavily to the ground, he paradoxically stands very firmly on his own feet because, with the Resurrection, he overcame death once and for all.

The other thing is that Jesus himself, precisely because he died and was raised, henceforth fully shares in the kingship and saving power of the Father. This is the fundamental vision.

On this earth, Jesus, the Son of God, is a defenceless, wounded and dead Lamb. Yet he stands up straight, on his feet, before God's throne and shares in the divine power. He has the history of the world in his hands.

Thus, the Seer wants to tell us: trust in Jesus, do not be afraid of the opposing powers, of persecution! The wounded and dead Lamb is victorious! Follow the Lamb Jesus, entrust yourselves to Jesus, take his path! Even if in this world he is only a Lamb who appears weak, it is he who triumphs!

The subject of one of the most important visions of the Book of Revelation is this Lamb in the act of opening a scroll, previously closed with seven seals that no one had been able to break open. John is even shown in tears, for he finds no one worthy of opening the scroll or reading it (cf. Rev 5:4).

History remains indecipherable, incomprehensible. No one can read it. Perhaps John's weeping before the mystery of a history so obscure expresses the Asian Churches' dismay at God's silence in the face of the persecutions to which they were exposed at that time.

It is a dismay that can clearly mirror our consternation in the face of the serious difficulties, misunderstandings and hostility that the Church also suffers today in various parts of the world.

These are trials that the Church does not of course deserve, just as Jesus himself did not deserve his torture. However, they reveal both the wickedness of man, when he abandons himself to the promptings of evil, and also the superior ordering of events on God's part.

Well then, only the sacrificed Lamb can open the sealed scroll and reveal its content, give meaning to this history that so often seems senseless. He alone can draw from it instructions and teachings for the life of Christians, to whom his victory over death

brings the message and guarantee of victory that they too will undoubtedly obtain. The whole of the vividly imaginative language that John uses aims to offer this consolation.

Also at the heart of the visions that the Book of Revelation unfolds, are the deeply significant vision of the Woman bringing forth a male child and the complementary one of the dragon, already thrown down from Heaven but still very powerful.

This Woman represents Mary, the Mother of the Redeemer, but at the same time she also represents the whole Church, the People of God of all times, the Church which in all ages, with great suffering, brings forth Christ ever anew. And she is always threatened by the dragon's power. She appears defenceless and weak.

But while she is threatened, persecuted by the dragon, she is also protected by God's comfort. And in the end this Woman wins. The dragon does not win.

This is the great prophecy of this Book that inspires confidence in us! The Woman who suffers in history, the Church which is persecuted, appears in the end as the radiant Bride, the figure of the new Jerusalem where there will be no more mourning or weeping, an image of the world transformed, of the new world whose light is God himself, whose lamp is the Lamb.

For this reason, although John's Book of Revelation is pervaded by continuous references to suffering, tribulation and tears - the dark face of history -, it is likewise permeated by frequent songs of praise that symbolize, as it were, the luminous face of history.

So it is, for example, that we read in it of a great multitude that is singing, almost shouting: "Alleluia! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready" (Rev 19:6-7).

Here we face the typical Christian paradox, according to which suffering is never seen as the last word but rather, as a transition towards happiness; indeed, suffering itself is already mysteriously mingled with the joy that flows from hope.

For this very reason John, the Seer of Patmos, can close his Book with a final aspiration, trembling with fearful expectation. He invokes the definitive coming of the Lord: "Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

This was one of the central prayers of the nascent Christianity, also translated by St Paul into its Aramaic form: "Marana tha". And this prayer, "Our Lord, come!" (I Cor 16:22) has many dimensions.

It is, naturally, first and foremost an expectation of the definitive victory of the Lord, of the new Jerusalem, of the Lord who comes and transforms the world. But at the same

time, it is also a Eucharistic prayer: “Come Jesus, now!”. And Jesus comes; he anticipates his definitive coming.

So it is that we say joyfully at the same time: “Come now and come for ever!”.

This prayer also has a third meaning: “You have already come, Lord! We are sure of your presence among us. It is our joyous experience. But come definitively!”.

And thus, let us too pray with St Paul, with the Seer of Patmos, with the newborn Christianity: “Come, Jesus! Come and transform the world! Come today already and may peace triumph!”. Amen!

## Matthew

30 August 2006

Continuing the series of portraits of the Twelve Apostles that we began a few weeks ago, let us reflect today on Matthew. To tell the truth, it is almost impossible to paint a complete picture of him because the information we have of him is scarce and fragmentary. What we can do, however, is to outline not so much his biography as, rather, the profile of him that the Gospel conveys.

In the meantime, he always appears in the lists of the Twelve chosen by Jesus (cf. Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:15; Acts 1:13).

His name in Hebrew means “gift of God”. The first canonical Gospel, which goes under his name, presents him to us in the list of the Twelve, labelled very precisely: “the tax collector” (Mt 10:3).

Thus, Matthew is identified with the man sitting at the tax office whom Jesus calls to follow him: “As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, “Follow me’. And he rose and followed him” (Mt 9:9). Mark (cf. 2:13-17) and Luke (cf. 5:27-30), also tell of the calling of the man sitting at the tax office, but they call him “Levi”.

To imagine the scene described in Mt 9:9, it suffices to recall Caravaggio’s magnificent canvas, kept here in Rome at the Church of St Louis of the French.

A further biographical detail emerges from the Gospels: in the passage that immediately precedes the account of the call, a miracle that Jesus worked at Capernaum is mentioned (cf. Mt 9:1-8; Mk 2:1-12) and the proximity to the Sea of Galilee, that is, the Lake of Tiberias (cf. Mk 2:13-14).

It is possible to deduce from this that Matthew exercised the function of tax collector at Capernaum, which was exactly located “by the sea” (Mt 4:13), where Jesus was a permanent guest at Peter’s house.

On the basis of these simple observations that result from the Gospel, we can advance a pair of thoughts.

The first is that Jesus welcomes into the group of his close friends a man who, according to the concepts in vogue in Israel at that time, was regarded as a public sinner.

Matthew, in fact, not only handled money deemed impure because of its provenance from people foreign to the People of God, but he also collaborated with an alien and despicably greedy authority whose tributes moreover, could be arbitrarily determined.

This is why the Gospels several times link “tax collectors and sinners” (Mt 9:10; Lk 15:1), as well as “tax collectors and prostitutes” (Mt 21:31).

Furthermore, they see publicans as an example of miserliness (cf. Mt 5:46: they only like those who like them), and mention one of them, Zacchaeus, as “a chief tax collector, and rich” (Lk 19:2), whereas popular opinion associated them with “extortioners, the unjust, adulterers” (Lk 18:11).

A first fact strikes one based on these references: Jesus does not exclude anyone from his friendship. Indeed, precisely while he is at table in the home of Matthew-Levi, in response to those who expressed shock at the fact that he associated with people who had so little to recommend them, he made the important statement: “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick; I came not to call the righteous, but sinners” (Mk 2:17).

The good news of the Gospel consists precisely in this: offering God’s grace to the sinner!

Elsewhere, with the famous words of the Pharisee and the publican who went up to the Temple to pray, Jesus actually indicates an anonymous tax collector as an appreciated example of humble trust in divine mercy: while the Pharisee is boasting of his own moral perfection, the “tax collector... would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, “God, be merciful to me a sinner!”.

And Jesus comments: “I tell you, this man went down to his house justified rather than the other; for every one who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Lk 18:13-14).

Thus, in the figure of Matthew, the Gospels present to us a true and proper paradox: those who seem to be the farthest from holiness can even become a model of the acceptance of God’s mercy and offer a glimpse of its marvellous effects in their own lives.

St John Chrysostom makes an important point in this regard: he notes that only in the account of certain calls is the work of those concerned mentioned. Peter, Andrew, James and John are called while they are fishing, while Matthew, while he is collecting tithes.

These are unimportant jobs, Chrysostom comments, “because there is nothing more despicable than the tax collector, and nothing more common than fishing” (In Matth. Hom.: PL 57, 363). Jesus’ call, therefore, also reaches people of a low social class while they go about their ordinary work.

Another reflection prompted by the Gospel narrative is that Matthew responds instantly to Jesus’ call: “he rose and followed him”. The brevity of the sentence clearly highlights Matthew’s readiness in responding to the call. For him it meant leaving everything, especially what guaranteed him a reliable source of income, even if it was often unfair and dishonourable. Evidently, Matthew understood that familiarity with Jesus did not permit him to pursue activities of which God disapproved.

The application to the present day is easy to see: it is not permissible today either to be attached to things that are incompatible with the following of Jesus, as is the case with riches dishonestly achieved.

Jesus once said, mincing no words: “If you would be perfect, go, sell what you possess and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me” (Mt 19:21).

This is exactly what Matthew did: he rose and followed him! In this “he rose”, it is legitimate to read detachment from a sinful situation and at the same time, a conscious attachment to a new, upright life in communion with Jesus.

Lastly, let us remember that the tradition of the ancient Church agrees in attributing to Matthew the paternity of the First Gospel. This had already begun with Bishop Papias of Hierapolis in Frisia, in about the year 130.

He writes: “Matthew set down the words (of the Lord) in the Hebrew tongue and everyone interpreted them as best he could” (in Eusebius of Cesarea, Hist. Eccl. III, 39, 16).

Eusebius, the historian, adds this piece of information: “When Matthew, who had first preached among the Jews, decided also to reach out to other peoples, he wrote down the Gospel he preached in his mother tongue; thus, he sought to put in writing, for those whom he was leaving, what they would be losing with his departure” (ibid., III, 24, 6).

The Gospel of Matthew written in Hebrew or Aramaic is no longer extant, but in the Greek Gospel that we possess we still continue to hear, in a certain way, the persuasive voice of the publican Matthew, who, having become an Apostle, continues to proclaim

God's saving mercy to us. And let us listen to St Matthew's message, meditating upon it ever anew also to learn to stand up and follow Jesus with determination.

## Philip the Apostle

6 September 2006

While we continue to outline the features of the various Apostles, as we have been doing for several weeks, today we meet Philip. He always comes fifth in the lists of the Twelve (cf. Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14; Acts 1:13); hence, he is definitely among the first.

Although Philip was of Jewish origin, his name is Greek, like that of Andrew, and this is a small sign of cultural openness that must not be underestimated. The information we have on him is provided by John's Gospel. Like Peter and Andrew, he is a native of Bethsaida (cf. Jn 1:44), a town that belonged to the Tetrarchy of a son of Herod the Great, who was also called Philip (cf. Lk 3:1).

The Fourth Gospel recounts that after being called by Jesus, Philip meets Nathanael and tells him: "We have found him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (Jn 1:45). Philip does not give way to Nathanael's somewhat sceptical answer ("Can anything good come out of Nazareth?") and firmly retorts: "Come and see!" (Jn 1:46).

In his dry but clear response, Philip displays the characteristics of a true witness: he is not satisfied with presenting the proclamation theoretically, but directly challenges the person addressing him by suggesting he have a personal experience of what he has been told.

The same two verbs are used by Jesus when two disciples of John the Baptist approach him to ask him where he is staying. Jesus answers: "Come and see" (cf. Jn 1:38-39).

We can imagine that Philip is also addressing us with those two verbs that imply personal involvement. He is also saying to us what he said to Nathanael: "Come and see". The Apostle engages us to become closely acquainted with Jesus.

In fact, friendship, true knowledge of the other person, needs closeness and indeed, to a certain extent, lives on it. Moreover, it should not be forgotten that according to what Mark writes, Jesus chose the Twelve primarily "to be with him" (Mk 3:14); that is, to share in his life and learn directly from him not only the style of his behaviour, but above all who he really was.

Indeed, only in this way, taking part in his life, could they get to know him and subsequently, proclaim him.

Later, in Paul's Letter to the Ephesians, one would read that what is important is to "learn Christ" (4:20): therefore, not only and not so much to listen to his teachings and words as rather to know him in person, that is, his humanity and his divinity, his mystery and his beauty. In fact, he is not only a Teacher but a Friend, indeed, a Brother.

How will we be able to get to know him properly by being distant? Closeness, familiarity and habit make us discover the true identity of Jesus Christ. The Apostle Philip reminds us precisely of this. And thus he invites us to "come" and "see", that is, to enter into contact by listening, responding and communion of life with Jesus, day by day.

Then, on the occasion of the multiplication of the loaves, he received a request from Jesus as precise as it was surprising: that is, where could they buy bread to satisfy the hunger of all the people who were following him (cf. Jn 6:5). Then Philip very realistically answered: "Two hundred denarii would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little" (Jn 6:7).

Here one can see the practicality and realism of the Apostle who can judge the effective implications of a situation.

We then know how things went. We know that Jesus took the loaves and after giving thanks, distributed them. Thus, he brought about the multiplication of the loaves.

It is interesting, however, that it was to Philip himself that Jesus turned for some preliminary help with solving the problem: this is an obvious sign that he belonged to the close group that surrounded Jesus.

On another occasion very important for future history, before the Passion some Greeks who had gone to Jerusalem for the Passover "came to Philip... and said to him, "Sir, we wish to see Jesus'. Philip went and told Andrew; Andrew went with Philip and they told Jesus" (cf. Jn 12:20-22).

Once again, we have an indication of his special prestige within the Apostolic College. In this case, Philip acts above all as an intermediary between the request of some Greeks - he probably spoke Greek and could serve as an interpreter - and Jesus; even if he joined Andrew, the other Apostle with a Greek name, he was in any case the one whom the foreigners addressed.

This teaches us always to be ready to accept questions and requests, wherever they come from, and to direct them to the Lord, the only one who can fully satisfy them. Indeed, it is important to know that the prayers of those who approach us are not ultimately addressed to us, but to the Lord: it is to him that we must direct anyone in need. So it is that each one of us must be an open road towards him!



There is then another very particular occasion when Philip makes his entrance. During the Last Supper, after Jesus affirmed that to know him was also to know the Father (cf. Jn 14:7), Philip quite ingenuously asks him: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (Jn 14:8). Jesus answered with a gentle rebuke: “Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip? He who has seen me has seen the Father: how can you say, “Show us the Father?” Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father in me?... Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father in me” (Jn 14:9-11).

These words are among the most exalted in John’s Gospel. They contain a true and proper revelation. At the end of the Prologue to his Gospel, John says: “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

Well, that declaration which is made by the Evangelist is taken up and confirmed by Jesus himself, but with a fresh nuance. In fact, whereas John’s Prologue speaks of an explanatory intervention by Jesus through the words of his teaching, in his answer to Philip Jesus refers to his own Person as such, letting it be understood that it is possible to understand him not only through his words but rather, simply through what he is.

To express ourselves in accordance with the paradox of the Incarnation we can certainly say that God gave himself a human face, the Face of Jesus, and consequently, from now on, if we truly want to know the Face of God, all we have to do is to contemplate the Face of Jesus! In his Face we truly see who God is and what he looks like!

The Evangelist does not tell us whether Philip grasped the full meaning of Jesus’ sentence. There is no doubt that he dedicated his whole life entirely to him. According to certain later accounts (Acts of Philip and others), our Apostle is said to have evangelized first Greece and then Frisia, where he is supposed to have died, in Hierapolis, by a torture described variously as crucifixion or stoning.

Let us conclude our reflection by recalling the aim to which our whole life must aspire: to encounter Jesus as Philip encountered him, seeking to perceive in him God himself, the heavenly Father. If this commitment were lacking, we would be reflected back to ourselves as in a mirror and become more and more lonely! Philip teaches us instead to let ourselves be won over by Jesus, to be with him and also to invite others to share in this indispensable company; and in seeing, finding God, to find true life.

## **Thomas the twin**

27 September 2006

Continuing our encounters with the Twelve Apostles chosen directly by Jesus, today we will focus our attention on Thomas. Ever present in the four lists compiled by the New Testament, in the first three Gospels he is placed next to Matthew (cf. Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:15), whereas in Acts, he is found after Philip (cf. Acts 1:13).

His name derives from a Hebrew root, ta'am, which means "paired, twin". In fact, John's Gospel several times calls him "Dydimus" (cf. Jn 11:16; 20:24; 21:2), a Greek nickname for, precisely, "twin". The reason for this nickname is unclear.

It is above all the Fourth Gospel that gives us information that outlines some important traits of his personality.

The first concerns his exhortation to the other Apostles when Jesus, at a critical moment in his life, decided to go to Bethany to raise Lazarus, thus coming dangerously close to Jerusalem (Mk 10:32).

On that occasion Thomas said to his fellow disciples: "Let us also go, that we may die with him" (Jn 11:16). His determination to follow his Master is truly exemplary and offers us a valuable lesson: it reveals his total readiness to stand by Jesus, to the point of identifying his own destiny with that of Jesus and of desiring to share with him the supreme trial of death.

In fact, the most important thing is never to distance oneself from Jesus.

Moreover, when the Gospels use the verb "to follow", it means that where he goes, his disciple must also go.

Thus, Christian life is defined as a life with Jesus Christ, a life to spend together with him. St Paul writes something similar when he assures the Christians of Corinth: "You are in our hearts, to die together and to live together" (II Cor 7:3). What takes place between the Apostle and his Christians must obviously apply first of all to the relationship between Christians and Jesus himself: dying together, living together, being in his Heart as he is in ours.

A second intervention by Thomas is recorded at the Last Supper. On that occasion, predicting his own imminent departure, Jesus announced that he was going to prepare a place for his disciples so that they could be where he is found; and he explains to them: "Where [I] am going you know the way" (Jn 14:4). It is then that Thomas intervenes, saying: "Lord, we do not know where you are going; how can we know the way?" (Jn 14:5).

In fact, with this remark he places himself at a rather low level of understanding; but his words provide Jesus with the opportunity to pronounce his famous definition: "I am the Way, and the Truth and the Life" (Jn 14:6).

Thus, it is primarily to Thomas that he makes this revelation, but it is valid for all of us and for every age. Every time we hear or read these words, we can stand beside Thomas in spirit and imagine that the Lord is also speaking to us, just as he spoke to him.

At the same time, his question also confers upon us the right, so to speak, to ask Jesus for explanations. We often do not understand him. Let us be brave enough to say: “I do not understand you, Lord; listen to me, help me to understand”. In such a way, with this frankness which is the true way of praying, of speaking to Jesus, we express our meagre capacity to understand and at the same time place ourselves in the trusting attitude of someone who expects light and strength from the One able to provide them.

Then, the proverbial scene of the doubting Thomas that occurred eight days after Easter is very well known. At first he did not believe that Jesus had appeared in his absence and said: “Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe” (Jn 20:25).

Basically, from these words emerges the conviction that Jesus can now be recognized by his wounds rather than by his face. Thomas holds that the signs that confirm Jesus’ identity are now above all his wounds, in which he reveals to us how much he loved us. In this the Apostle is not mistaken.

As we know, Jesus reappeared among his disciples eight days later and this time Thomas was present. Jesus summons him: “Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing” (Jn 20:27).

Thomas reacts with the most splendid profession of faith in the whole of the New Testament: “My Lord and my God!” (Jn 20:28). St Augustine comments on this: Thomas “saw and touched the man, and acknowledged the God whom he neither saw nor touched; but by the means of what he saw and touched, he now put far away from him every doubt, and believed the other” (In ev. Jo. 121, 5).

The Evangelist continues with Jesus’ last words to Thomas: “Have you believed because you have seen me? Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (Jn 20:29). This sentence can also be put into the present: “Blessed are those who do not see and yet believe”.

In any case, here Jesus spells out a fundamental principle for Christians who will come after Thomas, hence, for all of us.

It is interesting to note that another Thomas, the great Medieval theologian of Aquinas, juxtaposed this formula of blessedness with the apparently opposite one recorded by Luke: “Blessed are the eyes which see what you see!” (Lk 10:23). However, Aquinas

comments: “Those who believe without seeing are more meritorious than those who, seeing, believe” (In Johann. XX lectio VI 2566).

In fact, the Letter to the Hebrews, recalling the whole series of the ancient biblical Patriarchs who believed in God without seeing the fulfilment of his promises, defines faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1).

The Apostle Thomas’ case is important to us for at least three reasons: first, because it comforts us in our insecurity; second, because it shows us that every doubt can lead to an outcome brighter than any uncertainty; and, lastly, because the words that Jesus addressed to him remind us of the true meaning of mature faith and encourage us to persevere, despite the difficulty, along our journey of adhesion to him.

A final point concerning Thomas is preserved for us in the Fourth Gospel, which presents him as a witness of the Risen One in the subsequent event of the miraculous catch in the Sea of Tiberias (cf. Jn 21:2ff.).

On that occasion, Thomas is even mentioned immediately after Simon Peter: an evident sign of the considerable importance that he enjoyed in the context of the early Christian communities.

Indeed, the Acts and the Gospel of Thomas, both apocryphal works but in any case important for the study of Christian origins, were written in his name.

Lastly, let us remember that an ancient tradition claims that Thomas first evangelized Syria and Persia (mentioned by Origen, according to Eusebius of Caesarea, Ecclesiastical History 3, 1) then went on to Western India (cf. Acts of Thomas 1-2 and 17ff.), from where also he finally reached Southern India.

Let us end our reflection in this missionary perspective, expressing the hope that Thomas’ example will never fail to strengthen our faith in Jesus Christ, Our Lord and Our God.

## **Bartholomew**

4 October 2006

In the series on the Apostles called by Jesus during his earthly life, today it is the Apostle Bartholomew who attracts our attention. In the ancient lists of the Twelve he always comes before Matthew, whereas the name of the Apostle who precedes him varies; it may be Philip (cf. Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:14) or Thomas (cf. Acts 1:13).

His name is clearly a patronymic, since it is formulated with an explicit reference to his father's name. Indeed, it is probably a name with an Aramaic stamp, *bar Talmay*, which means precisely: "son of Talmay".

We have no special information about Bartholomew; indeed, his name always and only appears in the lists of the Twelve mentioned above and is therefore never central to any narrative.

However, it has traditionally been identified with Nathanael: a name that means "God has given".

This Nathanael came from Cana (cf. Jn 21:2) and he may therefore have witnessed the great "sign" that Jesus worked in that place (cf. Jn 2:1-11). It is likely that the identification of the two figures stems from the fact that Nathanael is placed in the scene of his calling, recounted in John's Gospel, next to Philip, in other words, the place that Bartholomew occupies in the lists of the Apostles mentioned in the other Gospels.

Philip told this Nathanael that he had found "him of whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph" (Jn 1:45). As we know, Nathanael's retort was rather strongly prejudiced: "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?" (Jn 1:46). In its own way, this form of protestation is important for us. Indeed, it makes us see that according to Judaic expectations the Messiah could not come from such an obscure village as, precisely, Nazareth (see also Jn 7:42).

But at the same time Nathanael's protest highlights God's freedom, which baffles our expectations by causing him to be found in the very place where we least expect him. Moreover, we actually know that Jesus was not exclusively "from Nazareth" but was born in Bethlehem (cf. Mt 2:1; Lk 2:4) and came ultimately from Heaven, from the Father who is in Heaven.

Nathanael's reaction suggests another thought to us: in our relationship with Jesus we must not be satisfied with words alone. In his answer, Philip offers Nathanael a meaningful invitation: "Come and see!" (Jn 1:46). Our knowledge of Jesus needs above all a first-hand experience: someone else's testimony is of course important, for normally the whole of our Christian life begins with the proclamation handed down to us by one or more witnesses.

However, we ourselves must then be personally involved in a close and deep relationship with Jesus; in a similar way, when the Samaritans had heard the testimony of their fellow citizen whom Jesus had met at Jacob's well, they wanted to talk to him directly, and after this conversation they told the woman: "It is no longer because of your words that we believe, for we have heard for ourselves, and we know that this is indeed the Saviour of the world" (Jn 4:42).

Returning to the scene of Nathanael's vocation, the Evangelist tells us that when Jesus sees Nathanael approaching, he exclaims: "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no guile!" (Jn 1:47). This is praise reminiscent of the text of a Psalm: "Blessed is the man... in whose spirit there is no deceit" (32[31]:2), but provokes the curiosity of Nathanael who answers in amazement: "How do you know me?" (Jn 1:48).

Jesus' reply cannot immediately be understood. He says: "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you" (Jn 1:48). We do not know what had happened under this fig tree. It is obvious that it had to do with a decisive moment in Nathanael's life.

His heart is moved by Jesus' words, he feels understood and he understands: "This man knows everything about me, he knows and is familiar with the road of life; I can truly trust this man". And so he answers with a clear and beautiful confession of faith: "Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!" (Jn 1:49). In this confession is conveyed a first important step in the journey of attachment to Jesus.

Nathanael's words shed light on a twofold, complementary aspect of Jesus' identity: he is recognized both in his special relationship with God the Father, of whom he is the Only-begotten Son, and in his relationship with the People of Israel, of whom he is the declared King, precisely the description of the awaited Messiah. We must never lose sight of either of these two elements because if we only proclaim Jesus' heavenly dimension, we risk making him an ethereal and evanescent being; and if, on the contrary, we recognize only his concrete place in history, we end by neglecting the divine dimension that properly qualifies him.

We have no precise information about Bartholomew-Nathanael's subsequent apostolic activity. According to information handed down by Eusebius, the fourth-century historian, a certain Pantaenus is supposed to have discovered traces of Bartholomew's presence even in India (cf. *Hist. eccl.* V, 10, 3).

In later tradition, as from the Middle Ages, the account of his death by flaying became very popular. Only think of the famous scene of the Last Judgment in the Sistine Chapel in which Michelangelo painted St Bartholomew, who is holding his own skin in his left hand, on which the artist left his self-portrait.

St Bartholomew's relics are venerated here in Rome in the Church dedicated to him on the Tiber Island, where they are said to have been brought by the German Emperor Otto III in the year 983.

To conclude, we can say that despite the scarcity of information about him, St Bartholomew stands before us to tell us that attachment to Jesus can also be lived and

witnessed to without performing sensational deeds. Jesus himself, to whom each one of us is called to dedicate his or her own life and death, is and remains extraordinary.

## Simon and Jude

11 October 2006

Today, let us examine two of the Twelve Apostles: Simon the Cananaean and Jude Thaddaeus (not to be confused with Judas Iscariot). Let us look at them together, not only because they are always placed next to each other in the lists of the Twelve (cf. Mt 10:3, 4; Mk 3:18; Lk 6:15; Acts 1:13), but also because there is very little information about them, apart from the fact that the New Testament Canon preserves one Letter attributed to Jude Thaddaeus.

Simon is given a nickname that varies in the four lists: while Matthew and Mark describe him as a “Cananaean”, Luke instead describes him as a “Zealot”.

In fact, the two descriptions are equivalent because they mean the same thing: indeed, in Hebrew the verb *qanà'* means “to be jealous, ardent” and can be said both of God, since he is jealous with regard to his Chosen People (cf. Ex 20:5), and of men who burn with zeal in serving the one God with unreserved devotion, such as Elijah (cf. I Kgs 19:10).

Thus, it is highly likely that even if this Simon was not exactly a member of the nationalist movement of Zealots, he was at least marked by passionate attachment to his Jewish identity, hence, for God, his People and divine Law.

If this was the case, Simon was worlds apart from Matthew, who, on the contrary, had an activity behind him as a tax collector that was frowned upon as entirely impure. This shows that Jesus called his disciples and collaborators, without exception, from the most varied social and religious backgrounds.

It was people who interested him, not social classes or labels! And the best thing is that in the group of his followers, despite their differences, they all lived side by side, overcoming imaginable difficulties: indeed, what bound them together was Jesus himself, in whom they all found themselves united with one another.

This is clearly a lesson for us who are often inclined to accentuate differences and even contrasts, forgetting that in Jesus Christ we are given the strength to get the better of our continual conflicts.

Let us also bear in mind that the group of the Twelve is the prefiguration of the Church, where there must be room for all charisms, peoples and races, all human qualities that find their composition and unity in communion with Jesus.

Then with regard to Jude Thaddaeus, this is what tradition has called him, combining two different names: in fact, whereas Matthew and Mark call him simply “Thaddaeus” (Mt 10:3; Mk 3:18), Luke calls him “Judas, the son of James” (Lk 6:16; Acts 1:13).

The nickname “Thaddaeus” is of uncertain origin and is explained either as coming from the Aramaic, *taddà’*, which means “breast” and would therefore suggest “magnanimous”, or as an abbreviation of a Greek name, such as “Teodòro, Teòdoto”.

Very little about him has come down to us. John alone mentions a question he addressed to Jesus at the Last Supper: Thaddaeus says to the Lord: “Lord, how is it that you will manifest yourself to us and not to the world?”.

This is a very timely question which we also address to the Lord: why did not the Risen One reveal himself to his enemies in his full glory in order to show that it is God who is victorious? Why did he only manifest himself to his disciples? Jesus’ answer is mysterious and profound. The Lord says: “If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:22-23).

This means that the Risen One must be seen, must be perceived also by the heart, in a way so that God may take up his abode within us. The Lord does not appear as a thing. He desires to enter our lives, and therefore his manifestation is a manifestation that implies and presupposes an open heart. Only in this way do we see the Risen One.

The paternity of one of those New Testament Letters known as “catholic”, since they are not addressed to a specific local Church but intended for a far wider circle, has been attributed to Jude Thaddaeus. Actually, it is addressed “to those who are called, beloved in God the Father and kept for Jesus Christ” (v. 1).

A major concern of this writing is to put Christians on guard against those who make a pretext of God’s grace to excuse their own licentiousness and corrupt their brethren with unacceptable teachings, introducing division within the Church “in their dreamings” (v. 8).

This is how Jude defines their doctrine and particular ideas. He even compares them to fallen angels and, mincing no words, says that “they walk in the way of Cain” (v. 11).

Furthermore, he brands them mercilessly as “waterless clouds, carried along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted; wild waves of the sea, casting up the foam of their own shame; wandering stars for whom the nether gloom of darkness has been reserved for ever” (vv. 12-13).

Today, perhaps, we are no longer accustomed to using language that is so polemic, yet that tells us something important. In the midst of all the temptations that exist, with all the currents of modern life, we must preserve our faith’s identity. Of course, the way of



indulgence and dialogue, on which the Second Vatican Council happily set out, should certainly be followed firmly and consistently.

But this path of dialogue, while so necessary, must not make us forget our duty to rethink and to highlight just as forcefully the main and indispensable aspects of our Christian identity. Moreover, it is essential to keep clearly in mind that our identity requires strength, clarity and courage in light of the contradictions of the world in which we live.

Thus, the text of the Letter continues: “But you, beloved” - he is speaking to all of us -, “build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit; keep yourselves in the love of God; wait for the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ unto eternal life. And convince some, who doubt...” (vv. 20-22).

The Letter ends with these most beautiful words: “To him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you without blemish before the presence of his glory with rejoicing, to the only God, our Saviour through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen” (vv. 24-25).

It is easy to see that the author of these lines lived to the full his own faith, to which realities as great as moral integrity and joy, trust and lastly praise belong, since it is all motivated solely by the goodness of our one God and the mercy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Therefore, may both Simon the Cananaean and Jude Thaddeus help us to rediscover the beauty of the Christian faith ever anew and to live it without tiring, knowing how to bear a strong and at the same time peaceful witness to it.

## **Judas Iscariot and Matthias**

18 October 2006

Today, concluding our walk through the portrait gallery of the Apostles called directly by Jesus during his earthly life, we cannot fail to mention the one who has always been named last in the list of the Twelve: Judas Iscariot. We want to associate him with the person who is later elected to substitute him, Matthias.

Already the very name of Judas raises among Christians an instinctive reaction of criticism and condemnation.

The meaning of the name “Judas” is controversial: the more common explanation considers him as a “man from Kerioth”, referring to his village of origin situated near Hebron and mentioned twice in Sacred Scripture (cf. Gn 15:25; Am 2:2). Others interpret

it as a variant of the term “hired assassin”, as if to allude to a warrior armed with a dagger, in Latin, *sica*.

Lastly, there are those who see in the label a simple inscription of a Hebrew-Aramaic root meaning: “the one who is to hand him over”. This designation is found twice in the Gospel: after Peter’s confession of faith (cf. Jn 6:71), and then in the course of the anointing at Bethany (cf. Jn 12:4).

Another passage shows that the betrayal was underway, saying: “he who betrayed him”; and also during the Last Supper, after the announcement of the betrayal (cf. Mt 26:25), and then at the moment of Jesus’ arrest (cf. Mt 26:46, 48; Jn 18:2, 5). Rather, the lists of the Twelve recalls the fact of the betrayal as already fulfilled: “Judas Iscariot, who betrayed him”, says Mark (3:19); Matthew (10:4) and Luke (6:16) have equivalent formulas.

The betrayal itself happens in two moments: before all, in the planning, when Judas agreed with Jesus’ enemies to 30 pieces of silver (cf. Mt 26:14-16), and then, in its execution, with the kiss given to the Master in Gethsemane (cf. Mt 26:46-50).

In any case, the Evangelists insist on the status as an Apostle that Judas held in all regards: he is repeatedly called “one of the twelve” (Mt 26:14, 47; Mk 14:10, 20; Jn 6:71) or “of the number of the twelve” (Lk 22:3).

Moreover, on two occasions, Jesus, addressing the Apostles and speaking precisely of Judas, indicates him as “one of you” (Mt 26:21; Mk 14:18; Jn 6:70; 13:21). And Peter will say of Judas that “he was numbered among us and allotted his share in this ministry” (Acts 1:17).

He is therefore a figure belonging to the group of those whom Jesus had chosen as strict companions and collaborators. This brings with it two questions in the attempt to provide an explanation for what happened.

The first consists in asking how is it that Jesus had chosen this man and trusted him. In fact, although Judas is the group’s bursar (cf. Jn. 12:6b; 13:29a), in reality he is called a “thief” (Jn 12:6a).

The mystery of the choice remains, all the more since Jesus pronounces a very severe judgement on him: “Woe to that man by whom the Son of man is betrayed!” (Mt 26:24).

What is more, it darkens the mystery around his eternal fate, knowing that Judas “repented and brought back the 30 pieces of silver to the chief priests and the elders, saying, “I have sinned in betraying innocent blood”” (Mt 27:3-4). Even though he went to hang himself (cf. Mt 27:5), it is not up to us to judge his gesture, substituting ourselves for the infinitely merciful and just God.

A second question deals with the motive of Judas' behaviour: why does he betray Jesus? The question raises several theories. Some refer to the fact of his greed for money; others hold to an explanation of a messianic order: Judas would have been disappointed at seeing that Jesus did not fit into his programme for the political-militaristic liberation of his own nation.

In fact, the Gospel texts insist on another aspect: John expressly says that “the devil had already put it into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him” (Jn 13:2). Analogously, Luke writes: “Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve” (Lk 22:3).

In this way, one moves beyond historical motivations and explanations based on the personal responsibility of Judas, who shamefully ceded to a temptation of the Evil One.

The betrayal of Judas remains, in any case, a mystery. Jesus treated him as a friend (cf. Mt 26:50); however, in his invitations to follow him along the way of the beatitudes, he does not force his will or protect it from the temptations of Satan, respecting human freedom.

In effect, the possibilities to pervert the human heart are truly many. The only way to prevent it consists in not cultivating an individualistic, autonomous vision of things, but on the contrary, by putting oneself always on the side of Jesus, assuming his point of view. We must daily seek to build full communion with him.

Let us remember that Peter also wanted to oppose him and what awaited him at Jerusalem, but he received a very strong reproval: “You are not on the side of God, but of men” (Mk 8:33)!

After his fall Peter repented and found pardon and grace. Judas also repented, but his repentance degenerated into desperation and thus became self-destructive.

For us it is an invitation to always remember what St Benedict says at the end of the fundamental Chapter Five of his “Rule”: “Never despair of God's mercy”. In fact, God “is greater than our hearts”, as St John says (I Jn 3:20).

Let us remember two things. The first: Jesus respects our freedom. The second: Jesus awaits our openness to repentance and conversion; he is rich in mercy and forgiveness.

Besides, when we think of the negative role Judas played we must consider it according to the lofty ways in which God leads events. His betrayal led to the death of Jesus, who transformed this tremendous torment into a space of salvific love by consigning himself to the Father (cf. Gal 2:20; Eph 5:2, 25).

The word “to betray” is the version of a Greek word that means “to consign”. Sometimes the subject is even God in person: it was he who for love “consigned” Jesus for all of us (Rm 8:32). In his mysterious salvific plan, God assumes Judas’ inexcusable gesture as the occasion for the total gift of the Son for the redemption of the world.

In conclusion, we want to remember he who, after Easter, was elected in place of the betrayer. In the Church of Jerusalem two were proposed to the community, and then lots were cast for their names: “Joseph called Barsabbas, who was surnamed Justus, and Matthias” (Acts 1:23).

Precisely the latter was chosen, hence, “he was enrolled with the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26). We know nothing else about him, if not that he had been a witness to all Jesus’ earthly events (cf. Acts 1:21-22), remaining faithful to him to the end. To the greatness of his fidelity was later added the divine call to take the place of Judas, almost compensating for his betrayal.

We draw from this a final lesson: while there is no lack of unworthy and traitorous Christians in the Church, it is up to each of us to counterbalance the evil done by them with our clear witness to Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour.

## Paul of Tarsus

25 October 2006

We have concluded our reflections on the Twelve Apostles, called directly by Jesus during his earthly life. Today, we begin to examine the figures of other important early Church personalities.

They also spent their lives for the Lord, the Gospel and the Church. They are men and also women who, as Luke writes in the Book of Acts, “have risked their lives for the sake of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (15:26).

The first of these, called by the Lord himself, by the Risen One, to be a true Apostle, is undoubtedly Paul of Tarsus. He shines like a star of the brightest magnitude in the Church’s history, and not only in that of its origins. St John Chrysostom praised him as a person superior even to many angels and archangels (cf. Panegirico, 7, 3). Dante Alighieri in the Divine Comedy, inspired by Luke’s account in Acts (cf. 9:15), describes him simply as “vessel of election” (Inf. 2:28), which means: instrument chosen by God. Others called him the “13th Apostle”, or directly, “the first after the Only”.

Certainly, after Jesus, he is one of the originals of whom we have the most information. In fact, we possess not only the account that Luke gives in the Acts of the Apostles, but

also a group of Letters that have come directly from his hand and which, without intermediaries, reveal his personality and thought.

Luke tells us that his name originally was Saul (cf. Acts 7:58; 8:1), in Hebrew also Saul (cf. Acts 9:14, 17; 22:7, 13; 26:14), like King Saul (cf. Acts 13:21), and he was a Jew of the diaspora, since the city of Tarsus is situated between Anatolia and Syria.

Very soon he went to Jerusalem to study the roots of Mosaic Law in the footsteps of the great Rabbi Gamaliele (cf. Acts 22:3). He also learned a manual and common trade, tent making (cf. Acts 18:3), which later permitted him to provide personally for his own support without being a weight on the Churches (cf. Acts 20:34; I Cor 4:12; II Cor 12:13).

It was decisive for him to know the community of those who called themselves disciples of Jesus. Through them he came to know a new faith - a new “way”, as it was called - that places not so much the Law of God at the centre but rather the person of Jesus, Crucified and Risen, to whom was now linked the remission of sins. As a zealous Jew, he held this message unacceptable, even scandalous, and he therefore felt the duty to persecute the followers of Christ even outside of Jerusalem.

It was precisely on the road to Damascus at the beginning of the 30s A.D. that, according to his words, “Christ made me his own” (Phil 3:12). While Luke recounts the fact with abundant detail - like how the light of the Risen One touched him and fundamentally changed his whole life -, in his Letters he goes directly to the essential and speaks not only of a vision (cf. I Cor 9:1), but of an illumination (cf. II Cor 4:6), and above all of a revelation and of a vocation in the encounter with the Risen One (cf. Gal 1:15-16).

In fact, he will explicitly define himself as “apostle by vocation” (cf. Rom 1:1; I Cor 1:1) or “apostle by the will of God” (II Cor 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:1), as if to emphasize that his conversion was not the result of a development of thought or reflection, but the fruit of divine intervention, an unforeseeable, divine grace.

Henceforth, all that had constituted for him a value paradoxically became, according to his words, a loss and refuse (cf. Phil 3:7-10). And from that moment all his energy was placed at the exclusive service of Jesus Christ and his Gospel. His existence would become that of an Apostle who wants to “become all things to all men” (I Cor 9:22) without reserve.

From here we draw a very important lesson: what counts is to place Jesus Christ at the centre of our lives, so that our identity is marked essentially by the encounter, by communion with Christ and with his Word. In his light every other value is recovered and purified from possible dross.

Another fundamental lesson offered by Paul is the universal breadth that characterizes his apostolate. Acutely feeling the problem of the Gentiles, of the pagans, to know God, who in Jesus Christ Crucified and Risen offers salvation to all without exception, he dedicates himself to make this Gospel - literally, "good news" - known, to announce the grace destined to reconcile men with God, self and others.

From the first moment he understood that this is a reality that did not concern only the Jews or a certain group of men, but one that had a universal value and concerned everyone, because God is the God of everyone.

The point of departure for his travels was the Church of Antioch in Syria, where for the first time the Gospel was announced to the Greeks and where also the name "Christians" was coined (cf. Acts 11:20, 26), believers in Christ.

From there he first went to Cyprus and then on different occasions to the regions of Asia Minor (Pisidia, Laconia, Galatia), and later to those of Europe (Macedonia, Greece). The most famous were the cities of Ephesus, Philippi, Thessalonica, Corinth, without forgetting Berea, Athens and Miletus.

In Paul's apostolate difficulties were not lacking, which he faced with courage for love of Christ. He himself recalls having endured "labours... imprisonment... beatings... numerous brushes with death.... Three times I was beaten with rods, once I was stoned, three times I was shipwrecked, I passed a night and a day on the deep; on frequent journeys, in dangers from rivers, dangers from robbers, dangers from my own race, dangers from Gentiles, dangers in the city, dangers in the wilderness, dangers at sea, dangers among false brothers; in toil and hardship, through many sleepless nights, through hunger and thirst, through frequent fastings, cold and exposure. And apart from these things there is the daily pressure upon me of my anxiety for all the Churches" (II Cor 11:23-28).

From a passage of the Letter to the Romans (cf. 15:24, 28) appears his proposal to push on even to Spain, to the Far West, to announce the Gospel everywhere, even to the then known ends of the earth. How can one not admire a man like this? How can one not thank the Lord for having given an Apostle of this stature?

It is clear that he would not have been able to face such difficult and at times desperate situations if he did not have a reason of absolute value, before which no limit could be considered insurmountable. For Paul, this reason, as we know, is Jesus Christ, of whom he writes: "The love of Christ impels us... so that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (II Cor 5:14-15), for us, for all.

In fact, the Apostle renders the supreme witness of blood under the Emperor Nero here in Rome, where we keep and venerate his mortal remains. Clement of Rome, my Predecessor to this Apostolic See, wrote of him in the last years of the first century: “Because of jealousy and discord, Paul was obliged to show us how one obtains the prize of patience.... After preaching justice to all in the world, and after having arrived at the limits of the West, he endured martyrdom before the political rulers; in this way he left this world and reached the holy place, thus becoming the greatest model of perseverance” (To the Corinthians, 5).

May the Lord help us to put into practice the exhortation left to us by the Apostle in his Letters: “Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ” (I Cor 11:1).

## St Paul’s new outlook

8 November 2006

In our previous Catechesis two weeks ago, I endeavoured to sketch the essential lines of the biography of the Apostle Paul. We saw how his encounter with Christ on the road to Damascus literally revolutionized his life. Christ became his *raison d’être* and the profound motivation of all his apostolic work.

In his Letters, after the Name of God which appears more than 500 times, the name most frequently mentioned is Christ’s (380 times). Thus, it is important to realize what a deep effect Jesus Christ can have on a person’s life, hence, also on our own lives. Actually, the history of salvation culminates in Jesus Christ, and thus he is also the true discriminating point in the dialogue with other religions.

Looking at Paul, this is how we could formulate the basic question: how does a human being’s encounter with Christ occur? And of what does the relationship that stems from it consist? The answer given by Paul can be understood in two stages.

In the first place, Paul helps us to understand the absolutely basic and irreplaceable value of faith. This is what he wrote in his Letter to the Romans: “We hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of law” (3:28).

This is what he also wrote in his Letter to the Galatians: “[M]an is not justified by works of the law but only through faith in Jesus Christ; even we have believed in Christ Jesus, in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law, because by works of the law shall no one be justified” (2:16).

“Being justified” means being made righteous, that is, being accepted by God’s merciful justice to enter into communion with him and, consequently, to be able to establish a far

more genuine relationship with all our brethren: and this takes place on the basis of the complete forgiveness of our sins.

Well, Paul states with absolute clarity that this condition of life does not depend on our possible good works but on the pure grace of God: “[We] are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rom 3:24). With these words St Paul expressed the fundamental content of his conversion, the new direction his life took as a result of his encounter with the Risen Christ.

Before his conversion, Paul had not been a man distant from God and from his Law. On the contrary, he had been observant, with an observance faithful to the point of fanaticism. In the light of the encounter with Christ, however, he understood that with this he had sought to build up himself and his own justice, and that with all this justice he had lived for himself.

He realized that a new approach in his life was absolutely essential. And we find this new approach expressed in his words: “The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal 2:20).

Paul, therefore, no longer lives for himself, for his own justice. He lives for Christ and with Christ: in giving of himself, he is no longer seeking and building himself up. This is the new justice, the new orientation given to us by the Lord, given to us by faith.

Before the Cross of Christ, the extreme expression of his self-giving, there is no one who can boast of himself, of his own self-made justice, made for himself! Elsewhere, re-echoing Jeremiah, Paul explains this thought, writing, “Let him who boasts, boast of the Lord” (I Cor 1:31 = Jer 9:23-24ff.); or: “Far be it from me to glory except in the Cross of Our Lord Jesus Christ, by which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Gal 6:14).

In reflecting on what justification means, not for actions but for faith, we thus come to the second component that defines the Christian identity described by St Paul in his own life.

This Christian identity is composed of precisely two elements: this restraint from seeking oneself by oneself but instead receiving oneself from Christ and giving oneself with Christ, thereby participating personally in the life of Christ himself to the point of identifying with him and sharing both his death and his life. This is what Paul wrote in his Letter to the Romans: “[A]ll of us... were baptized into his death... we were buried therefore with him... we have been united with him.... So you also must consider yourselves dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus” (Rom 6:3, 4, 5, 11).



These last words themselves are symptomatic: for Paul, in fact, it was not enough to say that Christians are baptized or believers; for him, it was just as important to say they are “in Christ Jesus” (cf. also Rom 8:1, 2, 39; 12:5; 16:3, 7, 10; I Cor 1:2, 3 etc.).

At other times he inverted the words and wrote: “Christ is in us/you” (Rom 8:10; II Cor 13:5) or “in me” (Gal 2:20).

This mutual compenetration between Christ and the Christian, characteristic of Paul’s teaching, completes his discourse on faith.

In fact, although faith unites us closely to Christ, it emphasizes the distinction between us and him; but according to Paul, Christian life also has an element that we might describe as “mystical”, since it entails an identification of ourselves with Christ and of Christ with us. In this sense, the Apostle even went so far as to describe our suffering as “the suffering of Christ” in us (II Cor 1:5), so that we might “always [carry] in the body the death of Jesus, so that the life of Jesus may also be manifested in our bodies” (II Cor 4:10).

We must fit all this into our daily lives by following the example of Paul, who always lived with this great spiritual range. Besides, faith must constantly express humility before God, indeed, adoration and praise.

Indeed, it is to him and his grace alone that we owe what we are as Christians. Since nothing and no one can replace him, it is necessary that we pay homage to nothing and no one else but him. No idol should pollute our spiritual universe or otherwise, instead of enjoying the freedom acquired, we will relapse into a humiliating form of slavery.

Moreover, our radical belonging to Christ and the fact that “we are in him” must imbue in us an attitude of total trust and immense joy. In short, we must indeed exclaim with St Paul: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31). And the reply is that nothing and no one “will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:39). Our Christian life, therefore, stands on the soundest and safest rock one can imagine. And from it we draw all our energy, precisely as the Apostle wrote: “I can do all things in him who strengthens me” (Phil 4:13).

Therefore, let us face our life with its joys and sorrows supported by these great sentiments that Paul offers to us. By having an experience of them we will realize how true are the words the Apostle himself wrote: “I know whom I have believed, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that Day what has been entrusted to me”; in other words, until the Day (II Tm 1:12) of our definitive meeting with Christ the Judge, Saviour of the world and our Saviour.

# St Paul and the Spirit

15 November 2006

Today too, as in our last two Catecheses, we return to St Paul and his thought. We have before us a giant, not only in terms of his actual apostolate but also of his extraordinarily profound and stimulating theological teaching.

After meditating last time on what Paul wrote about the central place that Jesus Christ occupies in our life of faith, today let us look at what he said about the Holy Spirit and about his presence in us, because here too, the Apostle has something very important to teach us.

We know what St Luke told us of the Holy Spirit from his description of the event of Pentecost in the Acts of the Apostles. The Spirit of Pentecost brought with him a strong impulse to take on the commitment of the mission in order to witness to the Gospel on the highways of the world.

Indeed, the Acts of the Apostles relates a whole series of missions the Apostles carried out, first in Samaria, then on the coastal strip of Palestine, then towards Syria. Above all, the three great missionary journeys of Paul are recounted, as I recalled at one of our previous Wednesday meetings.

In his Letters, however, St Paul also spoke to us of the Spirit from another angle. He did not end by describing solely the dynamic and active dimension of the Third Person of the Blessed Trinity, but also analyzed his presence in the lives of Christians, which marks their identity.

In other words, in Paul's reflection on the Spirit he not only explained his influence on the action of Christians, but also on their being. Indeed, it is he who said that the Spirit of God dwells in us (cf. Rom 8:9; I Cor 3:16) and that "God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts" (Gal 4:6).

In Paul's opinion, therefore, the Spirit stirs us to the very depths of our being. Here are some of his words on this subject which have an important meaning: "For the law of the Spirit of life in Christ Jesus has set me free from the law of sin and death... you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, "Abba! Father!", it is the Spirit himself" (Rom 8:2, 15) who speaks in us because, as children, we can call God "Father".

Thus, we can see clearly that even before he does anything, the Christian already possesses a rich and fruitful interiority, given to him in the Sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation, an interiority which establishes him in an objective and original

relationship of sonship with God. This is our greatest dignity: to be not merely images but also children of God. And it is an invitation to live our sonship, to be increasingly aware that we are adoptive sons in God's great family. It is an invitation to transform this objective gift into a subjective reality, decisive for our way of thinking, acting and being.

God considers us his children, having raised us to a similar if not equal dignity to that of Jesus himself, the one true Son in the full sense. Our filial condition and trusting freedom in our relationship with the Father is given or restored to us in him.

We thus discover that for Christians, the Spirit is no longer only the "Spirit of God", as he is usually described in the Old Testament and as people continue to repeat in Christian language (cf. Gn 41:38; Ex 31:3; I Cor 2:11, 12; Phil 3:3; etc.). Nor is he any longer simply a "Holy Spirit" generically understood, in the manner of the Old Testament (cf. Is 63:10, 11; Ps 51[50]:13), and of Judaism itself in its writings (Qumran, rabbinism).

Indeed, the confession of an original sharing in this Spirit by the Risen Lord, who himself became a "life-giving Spirit" (I Cor 15:45), is part of the specificity of the Christian faith.

For this very reason, St Paul spoke directly of the "Spirit of Christ" (Rom 8:9), of the "Spirit of his Son" (cf. Gal 4:6) or of the "Spirit of Jesus Christ" (Phil 1:19). It is as though he wanted to say that not only is God the Father visible in the Son (cf. Jn 14:9), but that the Spirit of God also expresses himself in the life and action of the Crucified and Risen Lord!

Paul teaches us another important thing: he says that there is no true prayer without the presence of the Spirit within us. He wrote: "The Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words. And he who searches the hearts of men knows what is the mind of the Spirit, because the Spirit intercedes for the saints according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26-27).

It is as if to say that the Holy Spirit, that is, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, is henceforth as it were the soul of our soul, the most secret part of our being, from which an impulse of prayer rises ceaselessly to God, whose words we cannot even begin to explain.

In fact, the Spirit, ever alert within us, completes what is lacking in us and offers to the Father our worship as well as our deepest aspirations.

This, of course, requires a degree of great and vital communion with the Spirit. It is an invitation to be increasingly sensitive, more attentive to this presence of the Spirit in us, to transform it into prayer, to feel this presence and thus to learn to pray, to speak to the Father as children in the Holy Spirit.

There is also another typical aspect of the Spirit which St Paul teaches us: his connection with love. Thus, the Apostle wrote: “Hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:5).

In my Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, I cited a most eloquent sentence of St Augustine: “If you see charity, you see the Trinity” (n. 19), and I continued by explaining: “The Spirit, in fact, is that interior power which harmonizes [believers’] hearts with Christ’s Heart and moves them to love their brethren as Christ loved them” (ibid.). The Spirit immerses us in the very rhythm of divine life, which is a life of love, enabling us to share personally in relations between the Father and the Son.

It is not without significance that when Paul lists the various elements that constitute the fruit of the Spirit he puts love first: “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace”, etc. (Gal 5:22).

And since by definition, love unites, this means first of all that the Spirit is the creator of communion within the Christian community, as we say at the beginning of Mass, borrowing Paul’s words: “... may the fellowship of the Holy Spirit [that is, what he brings about] be with you all” (II Cor 13:14).

Furthermore, however, it is also true that the Spirit stimulates us to weave charitable relations with all people. Therefore, when we love we make room for the Spirit and give him leeway to express himself fully within us.

We thus understand why Paul juxtaposes in the same passage of his Letter to the Romans the two exhortations: “Be aglow with the Spirit” and “Repay no one evil for evil” (Rom 12:11, 17).

Finally, according to St Paul, the Spirit is a generous downpayment given to us by God himself as a deposit and at the same time, a guarantee of our future inheritance (cf. II Cor 1:22; 5:5; Eph 1:13-14).

We therefore learn from Paul that the Spirit’s action directs our life towards the great values of love, joy, communion and hope. It is our task to experience this every day, complying with the inner promptings of the Spirit and helped in our discernment by the Apostle’s enlightened guidance.

## **St Paul and the Church**

22 November 2006

Today, we are ending our encounters with the Apostle Paul by dedicating one last reflection to him. Indeed, we cannot take our leave of him without considering one of the

decisive elements of his activity and one of the most important subjects of his thought: the reality of the Church.

We must first of all note that his initial contact with the Person of Jesus happened through the witness of the Christian community of Jerusalem. It was a turbulent contact. Having met the new group of believers, he immediately became a fierce persecutor of it. He acknowledged this himself at least three times in as many of his Letters: “I persecuted the Church of God” (I Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6), as if to describe his behaviour as the worst possible crime.

History shows us that one usually reaches Jesus by passing through the Church! In a certain sense, this proved true, we were saying, also for Paul, who encountered the Church before he encountered Jesus. In his case, however, this contact was counterproductive; it did not result in attachment but violent rejection.

For Paul, adherence to the Church was brought about by a direct intervention of Christ, who in revealing himself on the road to Damascus identified himself with the Church and made Paul realize that persecution of the Church was persecution of himself, the Lord.

In fact, the Risen One said to Paul, persecutor of the Church: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). In persecuting the Church, he was persecuting Christ.

Paul, therefore, was at the same time converted to Christ and to the Church. This leads one to understand why the Church later became so present in Paul’s thoughts, heart and activity.

In the first place, she was so present that he literally founded many Churches in the various cities where he went as an evangelizer. When he spoke of his “anxiety for all the Churches” (II Cor 11:28), he was thinking of the various Christian communities brought into being from time to time in Galatia, Ionia, Macedonia and in Achaea.

Some of those Churches also caused him worry and chagrin, as happened, for example, in the Churches of Galatia, which he saw “turning to a different gospel” (Gal 1:6), something he opposed with grim determination.

Yet, he felt bound to the Communities he founded in a way that was far from cold and bureaucratic but rather intense and passionate. Thus, for example, he described the Philippians as “my brethren, whom I love and long for, my joy and crown” (Phil 4:1).

On other occasions he compared the various Communities to a letter of recommendation, unique in its kind: “You yourselves are our letter of recommendation, written on your hearts, to be known and read by all men” (II Cor 3:2).

At yet other times, he showed a real feeling for them that was not only paternal but also maternal, such as when he turned to those he was addressing, calling them: “My little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you” (Gal 4:19; cf. also I Cor 4:14-15; I Thes 2:7-8).

Paul also illustrates for us in his Letters his teaching on the Church as such. Thus, his original definition of the Church as the “Body of Christ”, which we do not find in other Christian authors of the first century, is well known (cf. I Cor 12:27; Eph 4:12; 5:30; Col 1:24).

We find the deepest root of this surprising designation of the Church in the Sacrament of the Body of Christ. St Paul said: “Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body” (I Cor 10:17). In the same Eucharist, Christ gives us his Body and makes us his Body. Concerning this, St Paul said to the Galatians: “You are all one in Christ” (Gal 3:28). By saying all this, Paul makes us understand that not only does the belonging of the Church to Christ exist, but also a certain form of equality and identification of the Church with Christ himself.

From this, therefore, derive the greatness and nobility of the Church, that is, of all of us who are part of her: from our being members of Christ, an extension as it were of his personal presence in the world. And from this, of course, stems our duty to truly live in conformity with Christ.

Paul’s exhortations concerning the various charisms that give life and structure to the Christian community also derive from this. They can all be traced back to a single source, that is, the Spirit of the Father and of the Son, knowing well that in the Church there is no one who goes without them, for, as the Apostle wrote, “to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good” (I Cor 12:7).

It is important, however, that all the charisms cooperate with one another for the edification of the community and do not instead become the cause of a rift.

In this regard, Paul asked himself rhetorically: “Is Christ divided?” (I Cor 1:13). He knows well and teaches us that it is necessary to “maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call” (Eph 4:3-4).

Obviously, underlining the need for unity does not mean that ecclesial life should be standardized or levelled out in accordance with a single way of operating. Elsewhere, Paul taught: “Do not quench the Spirit” (I Thes 5:19), that is, make room generously for the unforeseeable dynamism of the charismatic manifestations of the Spirit, who is an ever new source of energy and vitality.

But if there is one tenet to which Paul stuck firmly it was mutual edification: “Let all things be done for edification” (I Cor 14:26). Everything contributes to weaving the ecclesial fabric evenly, not only without slack patches but also without holes or tears.

Then, there is also a Pauline Letter that presents the Church as Christ’s Bride (cf. Eph 5:21-33).

With this, Paul borrowed an ancient prophetic metaphor which made the People of Israel the Bride of the God of the Covenant (cf. Hos 2:4, 21; Is 54:5-8). He did so to express the intimacy of the relationship between Christ and his Church, both in the sense that she is the object of the most tender love on the part of her Lord, and also in the sense that love must be mutual and that we too therefore, as members of the Church, must show him passionate faithfulness.

Thus, in short, a relationship of communion is at stake: the so to speak vertical communion between Jesus Christ and all of us, but also the horizontal communion between all who are distinguished in the world by the fact that they “call on the name of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (I Cor 1:2).

This is our definition: we belong among those who call on the Name of the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, we clearly understand how desirable it is that what Paul himself was hoping for when he wrote to the Corinthians should come to pass: “If an unbeliever or an uninitiated enters while all are uttering prophecy, he will be taken to task by all and called to account by all, and the secret of his heart will be laid bare. Falling prostrate, he will worship God, crying out, “God is truly among you” (I Cor 14:24-25).

Our liturgical encounters should be like this. A non-Christian who enters one of our assemblies ought finally to be able to say: “God is truly with you”. Let us pray to the Lord to be like this, in communion with Christ and in communion among ourselves.

## **Timothy and Titus**

13 December 2006

Having spoken at length on the great Apostle Paul, today let us look at his two closest collaborators: Timothy and Titus. Three Letters traditionally attributed to Paul are addressed to them, two to Timothy and one to Titus.

Timothy is a Greek name which means “one who honours God”. Whereas Luke mentions him six times in the Acts, Paul in his Letters refers to him at least 17 times (and his name occurs once in the Letter to the Hebrews).

One may deduce from this that Paul held him in high esteem, even if Luke did not consider it worth telling us all about him.

Indeed, the Apostle entrusted Timothy with important missions and saw him almost as an alter ego, as is evident from his great praise of him in his Letter to the Philippians. “I have no one like him (isópsychon) who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare” (2:20).

Timothy was born at Lystra (about 200 kilometres northwest of Tarsus) of a Jewish mother and a Gentile father (cf. Acts 16:1).

The fact that his mother had contracted a mixed-marriage and did not have her son circumcised suggests that Timothy grew up in a family that was not strictly observant, although it was said that he was acquainted with the Scriptures from childhood (cf. II Tm 3:15). The name of his mother, Eunice, has been handed down to us, as well as that of his grandmother, Lois (cf. II Tm 1:5).

When Paul was passing through Lystra at the beginning of his second missionary journey, he chose Timothy to be his companion because “he was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium” (Acts 16:2), but he had him circumcised “because of the Jews that were in those places” (Acts 16:3).

Together with Paul and Silas, Timothy crossed Asia Minor as far as Troy, from where he entered Macedonia. We are informed further that at Philippi, where Paul and Silas were falsely accused of disturbing public order and thrown into prison for having exposed the exploitation of a young girl who was a soothsayer by several unscrupulous individuals (cf. Acts 16:16-40), Timothy was spared.

When Paul was then obliged to proceed to Athens, Timothy joined him in that city and from it was sent out to the young Church of Thessalonica to obtain news about her and to strengthen her in the faith (cf. I Thes 3:1-2). He then met up with the Apostle in Corinth, bringing him good news about the Thessalonians and working with him to evangelize that city (cf. II Cor 1:19).

We find Timothy at Ephesus during Paul's third missionary journey. It was probably from there that the Apostle wrote to Philemon and to the Philippians; he sent both Letters jointly with Timothy (cf. Phlm 1; Phil 1:1).

From Ephesus, Paul sent Timothy to Macedonia, together with a certain Erastus (cf. Acts 19:22), and then also to Corinth with the mission of taking a letter to the Corinthians, in which he recommended that they welcome him warmly (cf. I Cor 4:17; 16:10-11).

We encounter him again as the joint sender of the Second Letter to the Corinthians, and when Paul wrote the Letter to the Romans from Corinth he added Timothy's greetings as well as the greetings of the others (cf. Rom 16:21).



From Corinth, the disciple left for Troy on the Asian coast of the Aegean Sea and there awaited the Apostle who was bound for Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey (cf. Acts 20:4).

From that moment in Timothy's biography, the ancient sources mention nothing further to us, except for a reference in the Letter to the Hebrews which says: "You should understand that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom I shall see you if he comes soon" (13:23).

To conclude, we can say that the figure of Timothy stands out as a very important pastor.

According to the later *Storia Ecclesiastica* by Eusebius, Timothy was the first Bishop of Ephesus (cf. 3, 4). Some of his relics, brought from Constantinople, were found in Italy in 1239 in the Cathedral of Termoli in the Molise.

Then, as regards the figure of Titus, whose name is of Latin origin, we know that he was Greek by birth, that is, a pagan (cf. Gal 2:3). Paul took Titus with him to Jerusalem for the so-called Apostolic Council, where the preaching of the Gospel to the Gentiles that freed them from the constraints of Mosaic Law was solemnly accepted.

In the Letter addressed to Titus, the Apostle praised him and described him as his "true child in a common faith" (Ti 1:4). After Timothy's departure from Corinth, Paul sent Titus there with the task of bringing that unmanageable community to obedience.

Titus restored peace between the Church of Corinth and the Apostle, who wrote to this Church in these terms: "But God, who comforts the downcast, comforted us by the coming of Titus, and not only by his coming but also by the comfort with which he was comforted in you, as he told us of your longing, your mourning, your zeal for me.... And besides our own comfort we rejoiced still more at the joy of Titus, because his mind has been set at rest by you all" (II Cor 7:6-7, 13).

From Corinth, Titus was again sent out by Paul - who called him "my partner and fellow worker in your service" (II Cor 8:23) - to organize the final collections for the Christians of Jerusalem (cf. II Cor 8:6).

Further information from the Pastoral Letters describes him as Bishop of Crete (cf. Ti 1:5), from which, at Paul's invitation, he joined the Apostle at Nicopolis in Epirus (cf. Ti 3:12). Later, he also went to Dalmatia (cf. II Tm 4:10). We lack any further information on the subsequent movements of Titus or on his death.

To conclude, if we consider together the two figures of Timothy and Titus, we are aware of certain very significant facts. The most important one is that in carrying out his missions, Paul availed himself of collaborators. He certainly remains the Apostle par excellence, founder and pastor of many Churches.

Yet it clearly appears that he did not do everything on his own but relied on trustworthy people who shared in his endeavours and responsibilities.

Another observation concerns the willingness of these collaborators. The sources concerning Timothy and Titus highlight their readiness to take on various offices that also often consisted in representing Paul in circumstances far from easy. In a word, they teach us to serve the Gospel with generosity, realizing that this also entails a service to the Church herself.

Lastly, let us follow the recommendation that the Apostle Paul makes to Titus in the Letter addressed to him: “I desire you to insist on these things, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to apply themselves to good deeds; these are excellent and profitable to men” (Ti 3:8).

Through our commitment in practice we can and must discover the truth of these words, and precisely in this Season of Advent, we too can be rich in good deeds and thus open the doors of the world to Christ, our Saviour.

## **Stephen, the Protomartyr**

10 January 2007

After the period of festivity, we return to our Catecheses. I have meditated with you on the figures of the Twelve Apostles and on St Paul. We then began to reflect on other figures of the newborn Church and so let us consider today the person of St Stephen, whom the Church commemorates the day after Christmas.

St Stephen is the most representative of a group of seven companions. Tradition sees in this group the seed of the future ministry of “deacons”, although it must be pointed out that this category is not present in the Book of Acts. In any case, Stephen’s importance is due to the fact that Luke, in his important book, dedicates two whole chapters to him.

Luke’s narrative starts with the observation of a widespread division in the primitive Church of Jerusalem: indeed, she consisted entirely of Christians of Jewish origin, but some came from the land of Israel and were called “Hebrews”, while others, of the Old Testament Jewish faith, came from the Greek-speaking Diaspora and were known as “Hellenists”. This was the new problem: the most destitute of the Hellenists, especially widows deprived of any social support, ran the risk of being neglected in the daily distribution of their rations. To avoid this problem, the Apostles, continuing to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word, decided to appoint for this duty “seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” to help them (Acts 6:2-4), that is, by carrying out a social and charitable service.

To this end, as Luke wrote, at the Apostles' invitation the disciples chose seven men. We are even given their names. They were: "Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolaus. These they set before the Apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (cf. Acts 6:5-6).

The act of the laying on of hands can have various meanings. In the Old Testament, this gesture meant above all the transmission of an important office, just as Moses laid his hands on Joshua (cf. Nm 27:18-23), thereby designating his successor. Along the same lines, the Church of Antioch would also use this gesture in sending out Paul and Barnabas on their mission to the peoples of the world (cf. Acts 13:3).

The two Pauline Letters addressed to Timothy (cf. I Tm 4:14; II Tm 1:6) refer to a similar imposition of hands on Timothy, to confer upon him an official responsibility. From what we read in the First Letter to Timothy, we can deduce that this was an important action to be carried out after discernment: "Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor participate in another man's sins" (5:22).

Thus, we see that the act of the laying on of hands developed along the lines of a sacramental sign. In the case of Stephen and his companions, it was certainly an official conferral of an office by the Apostles, but at the same time an entreaty for the grace to carry it out.

The most important thing to note is that in addition to charitable services, Stephen also carried out a task of evangelization among his compatriots, the so-called "Hellenists". Indeed, Luke insists on the fact that Stephen, "full of grace and power" (Acts 6:8), presented in Jesus' Name a new interpretation of Moses and of God's Law itself. He reread the Old Testament in the light of the proclamation of Christ's death and Resurrection. He gave the Old Testament a Christological reinterpretation and provoked reactions from the Jews, who took his words to be blasphemous (cf. Acts 6:11-14).

For this reason he was condemned to stoning. And St Luke passes on to us the saint's last discourse, a synthesis of his preaching. Just as Jesus had shown the disciples of Emmaus that the whole of the Old Testament speaks of him, of his Cross and his Resurrection, so St Stephen, following Jesus' teaching, interpreted the whole of the Old Testament in a Christological key. He shows that the mystery of the Cross stands at the centre of the history of salvation as recounted in the Old Testament; it shows that Jesus, Crucified and Risen, is truly the goal of all this history.

St Stephen also shows that the cult of the temple was over and that Jesus, the Risen One, was the new, true "temple". It was precisely this "no" to the temple and to its cult that led to the condemnation of St Stephen, who at this moment, St Luke tells us, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and seeing

heaven, God and Jesus, St Stephen said, “Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God” (cf. Acts 7:56).

This was followed by his martyrdom, modelled in fact on the passion of Jesus himself, since he delivered his own spirit to the “Lord Jesus” and prayed that the sin of those who killed him would not be held against them (cf. Acts 7:59-60).

The place of St Stephen’s martyrdom in Jerusalem has traditionally been located outside the Damascus Gate, to the north, where indeed the Church of Saint-Étienne [St Stephen] stands beside the famous École Biblique of the Dominicans. The killing of Stephen, the first martyr of Christ, unleashed a local persecution of Christ’s disciples (cf. Acts 8:1), the first one in the history of the Church. It was these circumstances that impelled the group of Judeo-Hellenist Christians to flee from Jerusalem and scatter. Hounded out of Jerusalem, they became itinerant missionaries: “Those who were scattered went about preaching the word” (Acts 8:4).

Their persecution and consequent dispersion became a mission. Thus, the Gospel spread also to Samaria, Phoenicia and Syria, as far as the great city of Antioch where, according to Luke, it was proclaimed for the first time also to the pagans (cf. Acts 11:19-20), and where, for the first time the name “Christians” was used (Acts 11:26).

In particular, Luke noted that those who stoned Stephen “laid down their garments at the feet of a young man named Saul” (Acts 7:58), the same man who from being a persecutor was to become an outstanding Apostle of the Gospel.

This means that the young Saul must have heard Stephen’s preaching and must therefore have been acquainted with its principal content. And St Paul was probably among those who, following and listening to this discourse, “were enraged and... ground their teeth against him” (Acts 7:54).

And at this point, we can see the marvels of divine Providence. After his encounter with the Risen Christ on the road to Damascus, Saul, a relentless enemy of Stephen’s vision, took up the Christological interpretation of the Old Testament made by the First Martyr, deepening and completing it, and consequently became the “Apostle to the Gentiles”.

The Law is fulfilled, he taught, in the Cross of Christ. And faith in Christ, communion with Christ’s love, is the true fulfilment of all the Law. This is the content of Paul’s preaching. He showed in this way that the God of Abraham had become the God of all. And all believers in Jesus Christ, as children of Abraham, shared in the promises. St Stephen’s vision was brought about in St Paul’s mission.

Stephen’s story tells us many things: for example, that charitable social commitment must never be separated from the courageous proclamation of the faith. He was one of

the seven made responsible above all for charity. But it was impossible to separate charity and faith. Thus, with charity, he proclaimed the crucified Christ, to the point of accepting even martyrdom. This is the first lesson we can learn from the figure of St Stephen: charity and the proclamation of faith always go hand in hand.

Above all, St Stephen speaks to us of Christ, of the Crucified and Risen Christ as the centre of history and our life. We can understand that the Cross remains forever the centre of the Church's life and also of our life. In the history of the Church, there will always be passion and persecution. And it is persecution itself which, according to Tertullian's famous words, becomes "the seed of Christians", the source of mission for Christians to come.

I cite his words: "We multiply wherever we are mown down by you; the blood of Christians is seed..." (Apology 50, 13): *Plures efficimur quoties metimur a vobis: semen est sanguis christianorum*. But in our life too, the Cross that will never be absent, becomes a blessing.

And by accepting our cross, knowing that it becomes and is a blessing, we learn Christian joy even in moments of difficulty. The value of witness is irreplaceable, because the Gospel leads to it and the Church is nourished by it. St Stephen teaches us to treasure these lessons, he teaches us to love the Cross, because it is the path on which Christ comes among us ever anew.

## **Barnabas, Silas (also called Silvanus), and Apollos**

31 January 2007

Continuing our journey among the protagonists who were the first to spread Christianity, today let us turn our attention to some of St Paul's other collaborators. We must recognize that the Apostle is an eloquent example of a man open to collaboration: he did not want to do everything in the Church on his own but availed himself of many and very different colleagues.

We cannot reflect on all these precious assistants because they were numerous. It suffices to recall among the others, Epaphras (cf. Col 1:7; 4:12; Phlm 23); Epaphroditus (cf. Phil 2:25; 4:18), Tychicus (cf. Acts 20:4; Eph 6:21; Col 4:7; II Tm 4:12; Ti 3:12), Urbanus (cf. Rm 16:9), Gaius and Aristarchus (cf. Acts 19:29; 20:4; 27:2; Col 4:10). And women such as Phoebe, (Rom 16:1), Tryphaena and Tryphosa (cf. Rom 16:12), Persis, the mother of Rufus, whom Paul called "his mother and mine" (cf. Rom 16:12-13), not to mention married couples such as Prisca and Aquila (cf. Rom 16:3; I Cor 16:19; II Tm 4:19).

Among this great array of St Paul's male and female collaborators, let us focus today on three of these people who played a particularly significant role in the initial evangelization: Barnabas, Silas, and Apollos.

Barnabas means "son of encouragement" (Acts 4:36) or "son of consolation". He was a Levite Jew, a native of Cyprus, and this was his nickname. Having settled in Jerusalem, he was one of the first to embrace Christianity after the Lord's Resurrection. With immense generosity, he sold a field which belonged to him, and gave the money to the Apostles for the Church's needs (Acts 4:37).

It was he who vouched for the sincerity of Saul's conversion before the Jerusalem community that still feared its former persecutor (cf. Acts 9:27).

Sent to Antioch in Syria, he went to meet Paul in Tarsus, where he had withdrawn, and spent a whole year with him there, dedicated to the evangelization of that important city in whose Church Barnabas was known as a prophet and teacher (cf. Acts 13:1).

At the time of the first conversions of the Gentiles, therefore, Barnabas realized that Saul's hour had come. As Paul had retired to his native town of Tarsus, he went there to look for him. Thus, at that important moment, Barnabas, as it were, restored Paul to the Church; in this sense he gave back to her the Apostle to the Gentiles.

The Church of Antioch sent Barnabas on a mission with Paul, which became known as the Apostle's first missionary journey. In fact, it was Barnabas' missionary voyage since it was he who was really in charge of it and Paul had joined him as a collaborator, visiting the regions of Cyprus and Central and Southern Anatolia in present-day Turkey, with the cities of Attalia, Perga, Antioch of Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe (cf. Acts 13-14).

Together with Paul, he then went to the so-called Council of Jerusalem where after a profound examination of the question, the Apostles with the Elders decided to discontinue the practice of circumcision so that it was no longer a feature of the Christian identity (cf. Acts 15:1-35). It was only in this way that, in the end, they officially made possible the Church of the Gentiles, a Church without circumcision; we are children of Abraham simply through faith in Christ.

The two, Paul and Barnabas, disagreed at the beginning of the second missionary journey because Barnabas was determined to take with them as a companion John called Mark, whereas Paul was against it, since the young man had deserted them during their previous journey (cf. Acts 13:13; 15:36-40).

Hence there are also disputes, disagreements and controversies among saints. And I find this very comforting, because we see that the saints have not "fallen from Heaven". They are people like us, who also have complicated problems.

Holiness does not consist in never having erred or sinned. Holiness increases the capacity for conversion, for repentance, for willingness to start again and, especially, for reconciliation and forgiveness.

So it was that Paul, who had been somewhat harsh and bitter with regard to Mark, in the end found himself with him once again. In St Paul's last Letters, to Philemon and in his Second Letter to Timothy, Mark actually appears as one of his "fellow workers".

Consequently, it is not the fact that we have never erred but our capacity for reconciliation and forgiveness which makes us saints. And we can all learn this way of holiness. In any case, Barnabas, together with John Mark, returned to Cyprus (Acts 15:39) in about the year 49. From that moment we lose track of him. Tertullian attributes to him the Letter to the Hebrews. This is not improbable. Since he belonged to the tribe of Levi, Barnabas may have been interested in the topic of the priesthood; and the Letter to the Hebrews interprets Jesus' priesthood for us in an extraordinary way.

Silas was another of Paul's companions. "Silas" is a Greek form of a Jewish name (perhaps sheal, "to ask, to invoke", which has the same root as the name "Saul"); from which the Latin form Sylvanus also derives. The name Silas is attested to only in the Book of Acts, while the name "Silvanus" appears only in the Pauline Letters. He was a Jew from Jerusalem, one of the first to become a Christian, and he enjoyed high esteem in that Church (cf. Acts 15:22), since he was considered a prophet (cf. Acts 15:32).

He was charged to inform "the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia" (Acts 15:23) of the decisions taken at the Council of Jerusalem and to explain them. Evidently he was considered capable of bringing about a sort of mediation between Jerusalem and Antioch, between Jewish-Christians and Christians of pagan origin and thereby of serving the unity of the Church in the diversity of rites and origins.

When Paul separated from Barnabas he took Silas with him as his new travelling companion (Acts 15:40). With Paul, he reached Macedonia (and the cities of Philippi, Thessalonica and Beroea), where he stopped, while Paul went on to Athens and then to Corinth.

Silas joined him in Corinth, where he cooperated in preaching the Gospel; indeed, in the Second Letter that Paul addressed to that Church, he spoke of "Jesus Christ, whom we preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I" (II Cor 1:19). This explains how he came to be the joint author, together with Paul and Timothy, of the two Letters to the Thessalonians.

This also seems important to me. Paul does not act as a "soloist", on his own, but together with these collaborators in the "we" of the Church. This "I" of Paul is not an isolated "I" but an "I" in the "we" of the Church, in the "we" of the apostolic faith. And later, Silvanus

is also mentioned in the First Letter of Peter, in which we read: “I have written [briefly] to you... by Silvanus, a faithful brother” (5:12). Thus, we also see the communion of the Apostles. Silvanus serves Paul and he serves Peter, because the Church is one and the missionary proclamation is one.

Paul’s third companion, whom we want to recall is Apollos. This name is probably an abbreviation of Apollonius or Apollodorus. Although this is a pagan name, he was a fervent Jew from Alexandria, Egypt. Luke, in his book, the Acts of the Apostles, describes him as “an eloquent man, well versed in the Scriptures... fervent in spirit” (18:24-25).

Apollos’ entry on the scene of the first evangelization took place in the city of Ephesus. He had gone there to preach and had the good fortune to come across the Christian couple, Priscilla and Aquila, who introduced him to a fuller knowledge of the “way of God” (cf. Acts 18:26).

From Ephesus he went to Achaia and reached the city of Corinth: where he arrived with a letter of recommendation from the Christians of Ephesus, in which they charged the Corinthians to give him a good welcome (cf. Acts 18:27). In Corinth, as Luke wrote: “he greatly helped those who through grace had believed, for he powerfully confuted the Jews in public, showing by the Scriptures that the Christ was Jesus” (Acts 18:27-28), the Messiah.

His success in that city, however had a problematic sequence since there were certain members of that Church who, fascinated by his way of speaking, opposed the others in his name (cf. I Cor 1:12; 3:4-6; 4:6).

In his First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul expressed his appreciation of Apollos’ work, but reprimanded the Corinthians for wounding the Body of Christ by splitting it into opposing factions. From this whole affair he drew an important teaching: Be it I or Apollos, he says, we are none other than diakonoi, that is, simple ministers, through whom you have come to the faith (cf. I Cor 3:5).

Everyone has a different task in the field of the Lord: “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth.... we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building” (I Cor 3:6-9).

After returning to Ephesus, Apollos resisted Paul’s invitation to return to Corinth immediately, postponing the journey to a later date of which we know nothing (cf. I Cor 16:12). We have no further information about him, even though some scholars believe he is a possible author of the Letter to the Hebrews which Tertullian believed Barnabas had written.



These three men shine in the firmament of Gospel witnesses as they are distinguished by one common feature as well as by individual characteristics. They had in common, in addition to their Jewish origin, their dedication to Jesus Christ and the Gospel, besides the fact that all three were collaborators of the Apostle Paul.

In this original evangelizing mission they found their purpose in life and as such stand before us as shining examples of selflessness and generosity.

Moreover, let us think again of St Paul's phrase: both Apollos and I are servants of Jesus, each one in his own way because it is God who gives the growth. These words also apply to us today, to the Pope, the Cardinals, Bishops, priests and laity. We are all humble ministers of Jesus. We serve the Gospel as best we can, in accordance with our talents, and we pray God to make his Gospel, his Church, increase in our day.

## **Priscilla and Aquila**

7 February 2007

Taking a new step in this type of portrait gallery of the first witnesses of the Christian faith which we began some weeks ago, today we take into consideration a married couple.

The couple in question are Priscilla and Aquila, who take their place, as we already mentioned briefly last in the sphere of numerous collaborators who gravitated around the Apostle Paul. Based on the information in our possession, this married couple played a very active role in the post-Paschal origins of the Church.

The names Aquila and Priscilla are Latin, but the man and woman who bear them were of Hebrew origin. At least Aquila, however, geographically came from the diaspora of northern Anatolia, which faces the Black Sea - in today's Turkey -, while Priscilla was probably a Jewish woman from Rome (cf. Acts 18:2).

However, it was from Rome that they reached Corinth, where Paul met them at the beginning of the 50s. There he became associated with them, as Luke tells us, practicing the same trade of making tents or large draperies for domestic use, and he was even welcomed into their home (cf. Acts 18:3).

The reason they came to Corinth was the decision taken by the Emperor Claudius to expel from Rome the city's Jewish residents. Concerning this event the Roman historian Suetonius tells us that the Hebrews were expelled because "they were rioting due to someone named Chrestus" (cf. "The Lives of the Twelve Caesars, Claudius", n. 25).

One sees that he did not know the name well - instead of Christ he wrote “Chrestus” - and he had only a very confused idea of what had happened. In any case, there were internal discords within the Jewish community about the question if Jesus was the Christ. And for the Emperor these problems were the reason to simply expel all Jews from Rome.

One can deduce that the couple had already embraced the Christian faith in the 40s, and now they had found in Paul someone who not only shared with them this faith - that Jesus is the Christ - but who was also an Apostle, personally called by the Risen Lord.

Therefore, their first encounter is at Corinth, where they welcomed him into their house and worked together making tents.

In a second moment they transferred to Ephesus in Asia Minor. There they had a decisive role in completing the Christian formation of the Alexandrian Jew Apollo, who we spoke about last Wednesday.

Since he only knew the faith superficially, “Priscilla and Aquila... took him and expounded to him the way of God more accurately” (Acts 18:26).

When Paul wrote the First Letter to the Corinthians from Ephesus, together with his own greeting he explicitly sent those of “Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house” (16:19).

Hence, we come to know the most important role that this couple played in the environment of the primitive Church: that of welcoming in their own house the group of local Christians when they gathered to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist. It is exactly this type of gathering that in Greek is called “ekklesia” - the Latin word is “ecclesia”, the Italian “chiesa” - which means convocation, assembly, gathering.

In the house of Aquila and Priscilla, therefore, the Church gathered, the convocation of Christ, which celebrates here the Sacred Mysteries.

Thus, we can see the very birth of the reality of the Church in the homes of believers. Christians, in fact, from the first part of the third century did not have their own places of worship. Initially it was the Jewish Synagogue, until the original symbiosis between the Old and New Testaments dissolved and the Church of the Gentiles was forced to give itself its own identity, always profoundly rooted in the Old Testament.

Then, after this “break”, they gathered in the homes of Christians that thus become “Church”. And finally, in the third century, true and proper buildings for Christian worship were born.

But here, in the first half of the first century and in the second century, the homes of Christians become a true and proper “Church”. As I said, together they read the Sacred Scripture and celebrate the Eucharist.

That was what used to happen, for example, at Corinth, where Paul mentioned a certain “Gaius, who is host to me and to the whole church” (Rom 16:23), or at Laodicea, where the community gathered in the home of a certain Nympha (cf. Col 4:15), or at Colossae, where the meeting took place in the house of a certain Archippus (cf. Phlm 2).

Having returned subsequently to Rome, Aquila and Priscilla continue to carry out this precious function also in the capital of the Empire.

In fact, Paul, writing to the Romans, sends this precise greeting: “Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I but also all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks; greet also the church in their house” (Rom 16:3-5).

What extraordinary praise for these two married persons in these words! And it is none other than Paul who extends it. He explicitly recognizes in them two true and important collaborators of his apostolate.

The reference made to having risked their lives for him is probably linked to interventions in his favour during some prison stay, perhaps in the same Ephesus (cf. Acts 19:23; I Cor 15:32; II Cor 1:8-9). And to Paul’s own gratitude even that of all the Churches of the Gentiles is joined. Although considering the expression perhaps somewhat hyperbolic, it lets one intuit how vast their ray of action was and therefore, their influence for the good of the Gospel.

Later hagiographic tradition has given a very singular importance to Priscilla, even if the problem of identifying her with the martyr Priscilla remains.

In any case, here in Rome we have a Church dedicated to St Prisca on the Aventine Hill, near the Catacombs of Priscilla on Via Salaria.

In this way, the memory of a woman who has certainly been an active person and of great value in the history of Roman Christianity is perpetuated. One thing is sure: together with the gratitude of the early Church, of which St Paul speaks, we must also add our own, since thanks to the faith and apostolic commitment of the lay faithful, of families, of spouses like Priscilla and Aquila, Christianity has reached our generation.

It could grow not only thanks to the Apostles who announced it. In order to take root in people’s land and develop actively, the commitment of these families, these spouses, these Christian communities, of these lay faithful was necessary in order to offer the

“humus” for the growth of the faith. As always, it is only in this way that the Church grows.

This couple in particular demonstrates how important the action of Christian spouses is. When they are supported by the faith and by a strong spirituality, their courageous commitment for the Church and in the Church becomes natural. The daily sharing of their life prolongs and in some way is sublimated in the assuming of a common responsibility in favour of the Mystical Body of Christ, even if just a little part of it. Thus it was in the first generation and thus it will often be.

A further lesson we cannot neglect to draw from their example: every home can transform itself in a little church. Not only in the sense that in them must reign the typical Christian love made of altruism and of reciprocal care, but still more in the sense that the whole of family life, based on faith, is called to revolve around the singular lordship of Jesus Christ.

Not by chance does Paul compare, in the Letter to the Ephesians, the matrimonial relationship to the spousal communion that happens between Christ and the Church (cf. Eph 5:25-33). Even more, we can maintain that the Apostle indirectly models the life of the entire Church on that of the family. And the Church, in reality, is the family of God.

Therefore, we honour Aquila and Priscilla as models of conjugal life responsibly committed to the service of the entire Christian community. And we find in them the model of the Church, God’s family for all times.

## **Women at the service of the Gospel**

14 February 2007

Today, we have come to the end of our journey among the witnesses of early Christianity mentioned in the New Testament writings. And we use the last step of this first journey to dedicate our attention to the many female figures who played an effective and precious role in spreading the Gospel.

In conformity with what Jesus himself said of the woman who anointed his head shortly before the Passion: “Truly, I say to you, wherever this Gospel is preached in the whole world, what she has done will be told in memory of her” (Mt 26:13; Mk 14:9), their testimony cannot be forgotten.

The Lord wants these Gospel witnesses, these figures who have made a contribution so that faith in him would grow, to be known, and their memory kept alive in the Church. We can historically distinguish the role of the first women in early Christianity, during Jesus’ earthly life and in the events of the first Christian generation.

Jesus, as we know, certainly chose from among his disciples 12 men as Fathers of the new Israel and appointed them “to be with him, and to be sent out to preach” (Mk 3:14-15).

This fact is obvious; but, in addition to the Twelve, pillars of the Church and fathers of the new People of God, many women were also chosen to number among the disciples. I can only mention very briefly those who followed Jesus himself, beginning with the Prophetess Anna (cf. Lk 2:36-38), to the Samaritan woman (cf. Jn 4:1-39), the Syro-Phoenician woman (cf. Mk 7:24-30), the woman with the haemorrhage (cf. Mt 9:20-22) and the sinful woman whose sins were forgiven (cf. Lk 7:36-50).

I will not even refer to the protagonists of some of his effective parables, for example, the housewife who made bread (cf. Mt 13:33), the woman who lost the drachma (cf. Lk 15:8-10), the widow who pestered the judge (cf. Lk 18:1-8). More important for our topic are the women who played an active role in the context of Jesus’ mission.

In the first place, we think spontaneously of the Virgin Mary, who with her faith and maternal labours collaborated in a unique way in our Redemption to the point that Elizabeth proclaimed her “Blessed... among women” (Lk 1:42), adding: “Blessed is she who believed...” (Lk 1:45).

Having become a disciple of her Son, Mary manifested total trust in him at Cana (cf. Jn 2:5), and followed him to the foot of the Cross where she received from him a maternal mission for all his disciples of all times, represented by John (cf. Jn 19:25-27).

Then there are various women with roles of responsibility who gravitated in their different capacities around the figure of Jesus. The women who followed Jesus to assist him with their own means, some of whose names Luke has passed down to us, are an eloquent example: Mary of Magdala, Joanna, Susanna and “many others” (cf. Lk 8:2-3).

The Gospels then tell us that the women, unlike the Twelve, did not abandon Jesus in the hour of his Passion (cf. Mt 27:56, 61; Mk 15:40). Among them, Mary Magdalene stands out in particular. Not only was she present at the Passion, but she was also the first witness and herald of the Risen One (cf. Jn 20:1, 11-18).

It was precisely to Mary Magdalene that St Thomas Aquinas reserved the special title, “Apostle of the Apostles” (*apostolorum apostola*), dedicating to her this beautiful comment: “Just as a woman had announced the words of death to the first man, so also a woman was the first to announce to the Apostles the words of life” (*Super Ioannem*, ed. Cai, 2519).

Nor was the female presence in the sphere of the primitive Church in any way secondary. We will not insist on the four unnamed daughters of Philip the “Deacon” who lived at Caesarea; they were all endowed with the “gift of prophecy”, as St Luke tells us, that is,

the faculty of intervening publicly under the action of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 21:9). The brevity of information does not permit more precise deductions.

It is rather to St Paul that we are indebted for a more ample documentation on the dignity and ecclesial role of women. He begins with the fundamental principle according to which for the baptized: “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28), that is, all are united in the same basic dignity, although each with specific functions (cf. I Cor 12:27:30).

The Apostle accepts as normal the fact that a woman can “prophesy” in the Christian community (I Cor 11:5), that is, speak openly under the influence of the Spirit, as long as it is for the edification of the community and done in a dignified manner.

Thus, the following well-known exhortation: “Women should keep silence in the Churches” (I Cor 14:34) is instead to be considered relative. Let us leave to the exegetes the consequent, much discussed problem of the relationship between the first phrase - women can prophesy in Churches - and the other - they are not permitted to speak; that is, the relationship between these two apparently contradictory instructions. This is not for discussion here.

Last Wednesday we already came across the figure of Prisca or Priscilla, Aquila’s wife, who surprisingly is mentioned before her husband in two cases (cf. Acts 18:18; Rom 16:3): In any case, both are explicitly described by Paul as his *sun-ergoús*, “collaborators” (Rom 16:3).

There are several other important points that cannot be ignored. It should be noted, for example, that Paul’s short Letter to Philemon is actually also addressed to a woman called “Apphia” (cf. Phlm 2). The Latin and Syriac translations of the Greek text add to this name “Apphia”, the appellative “soror carissima” (ibid.), and it must be said that she must have held an important position in the community at Colossae. In any case, she is the only woman mentioned by Paul among those to whom he addressed a Letter.

Elsewhere, the Apostle mentions a certain “Phoebe”, described as “a deaconess of the Church at Cenchreae”, the port town east of Corinth (Rom 16:1-2). Although at that time the title had not yet acquired a specific ministerial value of a hierarchical kind, it expresses a true and proper exercise of responsibility on the part of this woman for this Christian community. Paul recommends that she be received cordially and assisted “in whatever she may require”. Then he adds: “for she has been a helper of many and of myself as well”.

In the same epistolary context the Apostle outlines with delicate touches the names of other women: a certain Mary, then Tryphaena, Tryphosa and “the beloved” Persis, as well

as Julia, of whom he writes openly that they have “worked hard among you” or “worked hard in the Lord” (Rom 16:6, 12a, 12b, 15), thereby emphasizing their strong ecclesial commitment.

Furthermore, in the Church at Philippi two women were to distinguish themselves, Euodia and Syntyche (cf. Phil 4:2). Paul’s entreaty to mutual agreement suggests that these two women played an important role in that community.

In short, without the generous contribution of many women, the history of Christianity would have developed very differently.

This is why, as my venerable and dear Predecessor John Paul II wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Mulieris Dignitatem*: “The Church gives thanks for each and every woman.... The Church gives thanks for all the manifestations of the feminine ‘genius’ which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms which the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness” (n. 31).

As we can see, the praise refers to women in the course of the Church’s history and was expressed on behalf of the entire Ecclesial Community. Let us also join in this appreciation, thanking the Lord because he leads his Church, generation after generation, availing himself equally of men and women who are able to make their faith and Baptism fruitful for the good of the entire Ecclesial Body and for the greater glory of God.

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## **St Clement, Bishop of Rome**

7 March 2007

In these past months we have meditated on the figures of the individual Apostles and on the first witnesses of the Christian faith who are mentioned in the New Testament writings.

Let us now devote our attention to the Apostolic Fathers, that is, to the first and second generations in the Church subsequent to the Apostles. And thus, we can see where the Church's journey begins in history.

St Clement, Bishop of Rome in the last years of the first century, was the third Successor of Peter, after Linus and Anacletus. The most important testimony concerning his life comes from St Irenaeus, Bishop of Lyons until 202. He attests that Clement “had seen the blessed Apostles”, “had been conversant with them”, and “might be said to have the preaching of the apostles still echoing [in his ears], and their traditions before his eyes” (Adversus Haer. 3, 3, 3).

Later testimonies which date back to between the fourth and sixth centuries attribute to Clement the title of martyr.

The authority and prestige of this Bishop of Rome were such that various writings were attributed to him, but the only one that is certainly his is the Letter to the Corinthians.

Eusebius of Caesarea, the great “archivist” of Christian beginnings, presents it in these terms: “There is extant an Epistle of this Clement which is acknowledged to be genuine and is of considerable length and of remarkable merit. He wrote it in the name of the Church of Rome to the Church of Corinth, when a sedition had arisen in the latter Church. We know that this Epistle also has been publicly used in a great many Churches both in former times and in our own” (Hist. Eccl. 3, 16).

An almost canonical character was attributed to this Letter. At the beginning of this text - written in Greek - Clement expressed his regret that “the sudden and successive calamitous events which have happened to ourselves” (1, 1) had prevented him from intervening sooner. These “calamitous events” can be identified with Domitian’s persecution: therefore, the Letter must have been written just after the Emperor’s death and at the end of the persecution, that is, immediately after the year 96.

Clement’s intervention - we are still in the first century - was prompted by the serious problems besetting the Church in Corinth: the elders of the community, in fact, had been deposed by some young contestants. The sorrowful event was recalled once again by St Irenaeus who wrote: “In the time of this Clement, no small dissension having occurred among the brethren in Corinth, the Church in Rome dispatched a most powerful Letter to the Corinthians exhorting them to peace, renewing their faith and declaring the tradition which it had lately received from the Apostles” (Adv. Haer. 3, 3, 3).

Thus, we could say that this Letter was a first exercise of the Roman primacy after St Peter’s death. Clement’s Letter touches on topics that were dear to St Paul, who had written two important Letters to the Corinthians, in particular the theological dialectic, perennially current, between the indicative of salvation and the imperative of moral commitment.

First of all came the joyful proclamation of saving grace. The Lord forewarns us and gives us his forgiveness, gives us his love and the grace to be Christians, his brothers and sisters.

It is a proclamation that fills our life with joy and gives certainty to our action: the Lord always forewarns us with his goodness and the Lord’s goodness is always greater than all our sins.

However, we must commit ourselves in a way that is consistent with the gift received and respond to the proclamation of salvation with a generous and courageous journey of conversion.

In comparison with the Pauline model, the innovation is that Clement adds to the doctrinal and practical sections, found in all the Pauline Letters, a “great prayer” that virtually concludes the Letter.

The Letter's immediate circumstances provided the Bishop of Rome with ample room for an intervention on the Church's identity and mission. If there were abuses in Corinth, Clement observed, the reason should be sought in the weakening of charity and of the other indispensable Christian virtues.

He therefore calls the faithful to humility and fraternal love, two truly constitutive virtues of being in the Church: "Seeing, therefore, that we are the portion of the Holy One", he warned, "let us do all those things which pertain to holiness" (30, 1).

In particular, the Bishop of Rome recalls that the Lord himself, "has established where and by whom he wishes liturgical functions to be carried out, so that all may be devoutly performed in accordance with his wishes and in a manner acceptable to him.... For his own peculiar services are assigned to the high priest, and their own proper place is prescribed to the priests, and their own special ministries devolve on the Levites. The layman is bound by the laws that pertain to laymen" (40, 1-5: it can be noted that here, in this early first-century Letter, the Greek word "laikós" appears for the first time in Christian literature, meaning "a member of the laos", that is, "of the People of God").

In this way, referring to the liturgy of ancient Israel, Clement revealed his ideal Church. She was assembled by "the one Spirit of grace poured out upon us" which breathes on the various members of the Body of Christ, where all, united without any divisions, are "members of one another" (46, 6-7).

The clear distinction between the "lay person" and the hierarchy in no way signifies opposition, but only this organic connection of a body, an organism with its different functions. The Church, in fact, is not a place of confusion and anarchy where one can do what one likes all the time: each one in this organism, with an articulated structure, exercises his ministry in accordance with the vocation he has received.

With regard to community leaders, Clement clearly explains the doctrine of Apostolic Succession. The norms that regulate it derive ultimately from God himself. The Father sent Jesus Christ, who in turn sent the Apostles. They then sent the first heads of communities and established that they would be succeeded by other worthy men.

Everything, therefore, was made "in an orderly way, according to the will of God" (42). With these words, these sentences, St Clement underlined that the Church's structure was sacramental and not political.

The action of God who comes to meet us in the liturgy precedes our decisions and our ideas. The Church is above all a gift of God and not something we ourselves created; consequently, this sacramental structure does not only guarantee the common order but also this precedence of God's gift which we all need.

Finally, the “great prayer” confers a cosmic breath to the previous reasoning. Clement praises and thanks God for his marvellous providence of love that created the world and continues to save and sanctify it.

The prayer for rulers and governors acquires special importance. Subsequent to the New Testament texts, it is the oldest prayer extant for political institutions. Thus, in the period following their persecution, Christians, well aware that the persecutions would continue, never ceased to pray for the very authorities who had unjustly condemned them.

The reason is primarily Christological: it is necessary to pray for one’s persecutors as Jesus did on the Cross.

But this prayer also contains a teaching that guides the attitude of Christians towards politics and the State down the centuries. In praying for the Authorities, Clement recognized the legitimacy of political institutions in the order established by God; at the same time, he expressed his concern that the Authorities would be docile to God, “devoutly in peace and meekness exercising the power given them by [God]” (61, 2).

Caesar is not everything. Another sovereignty emerges whose origins and essence are not of this world but of “the heavens above”: it is that of Truth, which also claims a right to be heard by the State.

Thus, Clement’s Letter addresses numerous themes of perennial timeliness. It is all the more meaningful since it represents, from the first century, the concern of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the other Churches.

In this same Spirit, let us make our own the invocations of the “great prayer” in which the Bishop of Rome makes himself the voice of the entire world: “Yes, O Lord, make your face to shine upon us for good in peace, that we may be shielded by your mighty hand... through the High Priest and Guardian of our souls, Jesus Christ, through whom be glory and majesty to you both now and from generation to generation, for evermore” (60-61).

## **Saint Ignatius of Antioch**

14 March 2007

As we already did last we are speaking about the figures of the early Church. Last week we spoke of Pope Clement I, the third Successor of St Peter. Today, we will be speaking of St Ignatius, who was the third Bishop of Antioch from 70 to 107, the date of his martyrdom. At that time, Rome, Alexandria and Antioch were the three great metropolises of the Roman Empire. The Council of Nicea mentioned three “primacies”: Rome, but also Alexandria and Antioch participated in a certain sense in a “primacy”.

St Ignatius was Bishop of Antioch, which today is located in Turkey. Here in Antioch, as we know from the Acts of the Apostles, a flourishing Christian community developed. Its first Bishop was the Apostle Peter - or so tradition claims - and it was there that the disciples were “for the first time called Christians” (Acts 11:26). Eusebius of Caesarea, a fourth-century historian, dedicated an entire chapter of his Church History to the life and literary works of Ignatius (cf. 3:36).

Eusebius writes: “The Report says that he [Ignatius] was sent from Syria to Rome, and became food for wild beasts on account of his testimony to Christ. And as he made the journey through Asia under the strictest military surveillance” (he called the guards “ten leopards” in his Letter to the Romans, 5:1), “he fortified the parishes in the various cities where he stopped by homilies and exhortations, and warned them above all to be especially on their guard against the heresies that were then beginning to prevail, and exhorted them to hold fast to the tradition of the Apostles”.

The first place Ignatius stopped on the way to his martyrdom was the city of Smyrna, where St Polycarp, a disciple of St John, was Bishop. Here, Ignatius wrote four letters, respectively to the Churches of Ephesus, Magnesia, Tralli and Rome. “Having left Smyrna”, Eusebius continues, Ignatius reached Troas and “wrote again”: two letters to the Churches of Philadelphia and Smyrna, and one to Bishop Polycarp.

Thus, Eusebius completes the list of his letters, which have come down to us from the Church of the first century as a precious treasure. In reading these texts one feels the freshness of the faith of the generation which had still known the Apostles. In these letters, the ardent love of a saint can also be felt.

Lastly, the martyr travelled from Troas to Rome, where he was thrown to fierce wild animals in the Flavian Amphitheatre.

No Church Father has expressed the longing for union with Christ and for life in him with the intensity of Ignatius. We therefore read the Gospel passage on the vine, which according to John’s Gospel is Jesus. In fact, two spiritual “currents” converge in Ignatius, that of Paul, straining with all his might for union with Christ, and that of John, concentrated on life in him. In turn, these two currents translate into the imitation of Christ, whom Ignatius several times proclaimed as “my” or “our God”.

Thus, Ignatius implores the Christians of Rome not to prevent his martyrdom since he is impatient “to attain to Jesus Christ”. And he explains, “It is better for me to die on behalf of Jesus Christ than to reign over all the ends of the earth.... Him I seek, who died for us: him I desire, who rose again for our sake.... Permit me to be an imitator of the Passion of my God!” (Romans, 5-6).

One can perceive in these words on fire with love, the pronounced Christological “realism” typical of the Church of Antioch, more focused than ever on the Incarnation of the Son of God and on his true and concrete humanity: “Jesus Christ”, St Ignatius wrote to the Smyrnaeans, “was truly of the seed of David”, “he was truly born of a virgin”, “and was truly nailed [to the Cross] for us” (1:1).

Ignatius’ irresistible longing for union with Christ was the foundation of a real “mysticism of unity”. He describes himself: “I therefore did what befitted me as a man devoted to unity” (Philadelphians, 8:1).

For Ignatius unity was first and foremost a prerogative of God, who, since he exists as Three Persons, is One in absolute unity. Ignatius often used to repeat that God is unity and that in God alone is unity found in its pure and original state. Unity to be brought about on this earth by Christians is no more than an imitation as close as possible to the divine archetype.

Thus, Ignatius reached the point of being able to work out a vision of the Church strongly reminiscent of certain expressions in Clement of Rome’s Letter to the Corinthians.

For example, he wrote to the Christians of Ephesus: “It is fitting that you should concur with the will of your Bishop, which you also do. For your justly renowned presbytery, worthy of God, is fitted as exactly to the Bishop as the strings are to the harp. Therefore, in your concord and harmonious love, Jesus Christ is sung. And man by man, you become a choir, that being harmonious in love and taking up the song of God in unison you may with one voice sing to the Father...” (4:1-2).

And after recommending to the Smyrnaeans: “Let no man do anything connected with Church without the Bishop”, he confides to Polycarp: “I offer my life for those who are submissive to the Bishop, to the presbyters, and to the deacons, and may I along with them obtain my portion in God! Labour together with one another; strive in company together; run together; suffer together; sleep together; and awake together as the stewards and associates and servants of God. Please him under whom you fight, and from whom you receive your wages. Let none of you be found a deserter. Let your Baptism endure as your arms; your faith as your helmet; your love as your spear; your patience as a complete panoply” (Polycarp, 6:1-2).

Overall, it is possible to grasp in the Letters of Ignatius a sort of constant and fruitful dialectic between two characteristic aspects of Christian life: on the one hand, the hierarchical structure of the Ecclesial Community, and on the other, the fundamental unity that binds all the faithful in Christ.

Consequently, their roles cannot be opposed to one another. On the contrary, the insistence on communion among believers and of believers with their Pastors was

constantly reformulated in eloquent images and analogies: the harp, strings, intonation, the concert, the symphony. The special responsibility of Bishops, priests and deacons in building the community is clear.

This applies first of all to their invitation to love and unity. “Be one”, Ignatius wrote to the Magnesians, echoing the prayer of Jesus at the Last Supper: “one supplication, one mind, one hope in love.... Therefore, all run together as into one temple of God, as to one altar, as to one Jesus Christ who came forth from one Father, and is with and has gone to one” (7:1-2).

Ignatius was the first person in Christian literature to attribute to the Church the adjective “catholic” or “universal”: “Wherever Jesus Christ is”, he said, “there is the Catholic Church” (Smyrnaeans, 8:2). And precisely in the service of unity to the Catholic Church, the Christian community of Rome exercised a sort of primacy of love: “The Church which presides in the place of the region of the Romans, and which is worthy of God, worthy of honour, worthy of the highest happiness... and which presides over love, is named from Christ, and from the Father...” (Romans, Prologue).

As can be seen, Ignatius is truly the “Doctor of Unity”: unity of God and unity of Christ (despite the various heresies gaining ground which separated the human and the divine in Christ), unity of the Church, unity of the faithful in “faith and love, to which nothing is to be preferred” (Smyrnaeans, 6:1).

Ultimately, Ignatius’ realism invites the faithful of yesterday and today, invites us all, to make a gradual synthesis between configuration to Christ (union with him, life in him) and dedication to his Church (unity with the Bishop, generous service to the community and to the world).

To summarize, it is necessary to achieve a synthesis between communion of the Church within herself and mission, the proclamation of the Gospel to others, until the other speaks through one dimension and believers increasingly “have obtained the inseparable Spirit, who is Jesus Christ” (Magnesians, 15).

Imploring from the Lord this “grace of unity” and in the conviction that the whole Church presides in charity (cf. Romans, Prologue), I address to you yourselves the same hope with which Ignatius ended his Letter to the Trallians: “Love one another with an undivided heart. Let my spirit be sanctified by yours, not only now, but also when I shall attain to God.... In [Jesus Christ] may you be found unblemished” (13).

And let us pray that the Lord will help us to attain this unity and to be found at last unstained, because it is love that purifies souls.

# St Justin, Philosopher and Martyr (c. 100-165)

21 March 2007

In these Catecheses, we are reflecting on the great figures of the early Church. Today, we will talk about St Justin, Philosopher and Martyr, the most important of the second-century apologist Fathers.

The word “apologist” designates those ancient Christian writers who set out to defend the new religion from the weighty accusations of both pagans and Jews, and to spread the Christian doctrine in terms suited to the culture of their time.

Thus, the apologists had a twofold concern: that most properly called “apologetic”, to defend the newborn Christianity (apologhía in Greek means, precisely, “defence”), and the pro-positive, “missionary” concern, to explain the content of the faith in a language and on a wavelength comprehensible to their contemporaries.

Justin was born in about the year 100 near ancient Shechem, Samaria, in the Holy Land; he spent a long time seeking the truth, moving through the various schools of the Greek philosophical tradition.

Finally, as he himself recounts in the first chapters of his Dialogue with Tryphon, a mysterious figure, an old man he met on the seashore, initially leads him into a crisis by showing him that it is impossible for the human being to satisfy his aspiration to the divine solely with his own forces. He then pointed out to him the ancient prophets as the people to turn to in order to find the way to God and “true philosophy”.

In taking his leave, the old man urged him to pray that the gates of light would be opened to him.

The story foretells the crucial episode in Justin’s life: at the end of a long philosophical journey, a quest for the truth, he arrived at the Christian faith. He founded a school in Rome where, free of charge, he initiated students into the new religion, considered as the true philosophy. Indeed, in it he had found the truth, hence, the art of living virtuously.

For this reason he was reported and beheaded in about 165 during the reign of Marcus Aurelius, the philosopher-emperor to whom Justin had actually addressed one of his Apologia.

These - the two Apologies and the Dialogue with the Hebrew, Tryphon - are his only surviving works. In them, Justin intends above all to illustrate the divine project of creation and salvation, which is fulfilled in Jesus Christ, the Logos, that is, the eternal Word, eternal Reason, creative Reason.



Every person as a rational being shares in the Logos, carrying within himself a “seed”, and can perceive glimmers of the truth. Thus, the same Logos who revealed himself as a prophetic figure to the Hebrews of the ancient Law also manifested himself partially, in “seeds of truth”, in Greek philosophy.

Now, Justin concludes, since Christianity is the historical and personal manifestation of the Logos in his totality, it follows that “whatever things were rightly said among all men are the property of us Christians” (Second Apology of St Justin Martyr, 13:4).

In this way, although Justin disputed Greek philosophy and its contradictions, he decisively oriented any philosophical truth to the Logos, giving reasons for the unusual “claim” to truth and universality of the Christian religion. If the Old Testament leaned towards Christ, just as the symbol is a guide to the reality represented, then Greek philosophy also aspired to Christ and the Gospel, just as the part strives to be united with the whole.

And he said that these two realities, the Old Testament and Greek philosophy, are like two paths that lead to Christ, to the Logos. This is why Greek philosophy cannot be opposed to Gospel truth, and Christians can draw from it confidently as from a good of their own.

Therefore, my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, described St Justin as a “pioneer of positive engagement with philosophical thinking - albeit with cautious discernment.... Although he continued to hold Greek philosophy in high esteem after his conversion, Justin claimed with power and clarity that he had found in Christianity ‘the only sure and profitable philosophy’ (Dial. 8:1)” (Fides et Ratio, n. 38).

Overall, the figure and work of Justin mark the ancient Church’s forceful option for philosophy, for reason, rather than for the religion of the pagans. With the pagan religion, in fact, the early Christians strenuously rejected every compromise. They held it to be idolatry, at the cost of being accused for this reason of “impiety” and “atheism”.

Justin in particular, especially in his first Apology, mercilessly criticized the pagan religion and its myths, which he considered to be diabolically misleading on the path of truth.

Philosophy, on the other hand, represented the privileged area of the encounter between paganism, Judaism and Christianity, precisely at the level of the criticism of pagan religion and its false myths. “Our philosophy...”: this is how another apologist, Bishop Melito of Sardis, a contemporary of Justin, came to define the new religion in a more explicit way (Ap. Hist. Eccl. 4, 26, 7).

In fact, the pagan religion did not follow the ways of the Logos, but clung to myth, even if Greek philosophy recognized that mythology was devoid of consistency with the truth.

Therefore, the decline of the pagan religion was inevitable: it was a logical consequence of the detachment of religion - reduced to an artificial collection of ceremonies, conventions and customs - from the truth of being.

Justin, and with him other apologists, adopted the clear stance taken by the Christian faith for the God of the philosophers against the false gods of the pagan religion.

It was the choice of the truth of being against the myth of custom. Several decades after Justin, Tertullian defined the same option of Christians with a lapidary sentence that still applies: "Dominus noster Christus veritatem se, non consuetudinem, cognominavit - Christ has said that he is truth not fashion" (De Virgin. Vel. 1, 1).

It should be noted in this regard that the term *consuetudo*, used here by Tertullian in reference to the pagan religion, can be translated into modern languages with the expressions: "cultural fashion", "current fads".

In a time like ours, marked by relativism in the discussion on values and on religion - as well as in interreligious dialogue - this is a lesson that should not be forgotten.

To this end, I suggest to you once again - and thus I conclude - the last words of the mysterious old man whom Justin the Philosopher met on the seashore: "Pray that, above all things, the gates of light may be opened to you; for these things cannot be perceived or understood by all, but only by the man to whom God and his Christ have imparted wisdom" (Dial. 7:3).

## **Saint Irenaeus of Lyons**

28 March 2007

In the Catechesis on the prominent figures of the early Church, today we come to the eminent personality of St Irenaeus of Lyons. The biographical information on him comes from his own testimony, handed down to us by Eusebius in his fifth book on Church History.

Irenaeus was in all probability born in Smyrna (today, Izmir in Turkey) in about 135-140, where in his youth, he attended the school of Bishop Polycarp, a disciple in his turn of the Apostle John. We do not know when he moved from Asia Minor to Gaul, but his move must have coincided with the first development of the Christian community in Lyons: here, in 177, we find Irenaeus listed in the college of presbyters. In that very year, he was sent to Rome bearing a letter from the community in Lyons to Pope Eleutherius. His

mission to Rome saved Irenaeus from the persecution of Marcus Aurelius which took a toll of at least 48 martyrs, including the 90-year old Bishop Pontinus of Lyons, who died from ill-treatment in prison. Thus, on his return Irenaeus was appointed Bishop of the city. The new Pastor devoted himself without reserve to his episcopal ministry which ended in about 202-203, perhaps with martyrdom.

Irenaeus was first and foremost a man of faith and a Pastor. Like a good Pastor, he had a good sense of proportion, a wealth of doctrine, and missionary enthusiasm. As a writer, he pursued a twofold aim: to defend true doctrine from the attacks of heretics, and to explain the truth of the faith clearly. His two extant works - the five books of *The Detection and Overthrow of the False Gnosis and Demonstration of the Apostolic Teaching* (which can also be called the oldest “catechism of Christian doctrine”) - exactly corresponded with these aims. In short, Irenaeus can be defined as the champion in the fight against heresies. The second-century Church was threatened by the so-called Gnosis, a doctrine which affirmed that the faith taught in the Church was merely a symbolism for the simple who were unable to grasp difficult concepts; instead, the initiates, the intellectuals - Gnostics, they were called - claimed to understand what was behind these symbols and thus formed an elitist and intellectualist Christianity. Obviously, this intellectual Christianity became increasingly fragmented, splitting into different currents with ideas that were often bizarre and extravagant, yet attractive to many. One element these different currents had in common was “dualism”: they denied faith in the one God and Father of all, Creator and Saviour of man and of the world. To explain evil in the world, they affirmed the existence, besides the Good God, of a negative principle. This negative principle was supposed to have produced material things, matter.

Firmly rooted in the biblical doctrine of creation, Irenaeus refuted the Gnostic dualism and pessimism which debased corporeal realities. He decisively claimed the original holiness of matter, of the body, of the flesh no less than of the spirit. But his work went far beyond the confutation of heresy: in fact, one can say that he emerges as the first great Church theologian who created systematic theology; he himself speaks of the system of theology, that is, of the internal coherence of all faith. At the heart of his doctrine is the question of the “rule of faith” and its transmission. For Irenaeus, the “rule of faith” coincided in practice with the Apostles’ Creed, which gives us the key for interpreting the Gospel, for interpreting the Creed in light of the Gospel. The Creed, which is a sort of Gospel synthesis, helps us understand what it means and how we should read the Gospel itself.

In fact, the Gospel preached by Irenaeus is the one he was taught by Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, and Polycarp's Gospel dates back to the Apostle John, whose disciple Polycarp was.

The true teaching, therefore, is not that invented by intellectuals which goes beyond the Church's simple faith. The true Gospel is the one imparted by the Bishops who received it in an uninterrupted line from the Apostles. They taught nothing except this simple faith, which is also the true depth of God's revelation. Thus, Irenaeus tells us, there is no secret doctrine concealed in the Church's common Creed. There is no superior Christianity for intellectuals. The faith publicly confessed by the Church is the common faith of all. This faith alone is apostolic, it is handed down from the Apostles, that is, from Jesus and from God. In adhering to this faith, publicly transmitted by the Apostles to their successors, Christians must observe what their Bishops say and must give special consideration to the teaching of the Church of Rome, pre-eminent and very ancient. It is because of her antiquity that this Church has the greatest apostolicity; in fact, she originated in Peter and Paul, pillars of the Apostolic College. All Churches must agree with the Church of Rome, recognizing in her the measure of the true Apostolic Tradition, the Church's one common faith. With these arguments, summed up very briefly here, Irenaeus refuted the claims of these Gnostics, these intellectuals, from the start. First of all, they possessed no truth superior to that of the ordinary faith, because what they said was not of apostolic origin, it was invented by them. Secondly, truth and salvation are not the privilege or monopoly of the few, but are available to all through the preaching of the Successors of the Apostles, especially of the Bishop of Rome. In particular - once again disputing the "secret" character of the Gnostic tradition and noting its multiple and contradictory results - Irenaeus was concerned to describe the genuine concept of the Apostolic Tradition which we can sum up here in three points.

a) Apostolic Tradition is "public", not private or secret. Irenaeus did not doubt that the content of the faith transmitted by the Church is that received from the Apostles and from Jesus, the Son of God. There is no other teaching than this. Therefore, for anyone who wishes to know true doctrine, it suffices to know "the Tradition passed down by the Apostles and the faith proclaimed to men": a tradition and faith that "have come down to us through the succession of Bishops" (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 3, 3-4). Hence, the succession of Bishops, the personal principle, and Apostolic Tradition, the doctrinal principle, coincide.

b) Apostolic Tradition is "one". Indeed, whereas Gnosticism was divided into multiple sects, Church Tradition is one in its fundamental content, which - as we have seen - Irenaeus calls precisely *regula fidei* or *veritatis*: and thus, because it is one, it creates unity through the peoples, through the different cultures, through the different peoples;

it is a common content like the truth, despite the diversity of languages and cultures. A very precious saying of St Irenaeus is found in his book *Adversus Haereses*: “The Church, though dispersed throughout the world... having received [this faith from the Apostles]... as if occupying but one house, carefully preserves it. She also believes these points [of doctrine] just as if she had but one soul and one and the same heart, and she proclaims them, and teaches them and hands them down with perfect harmony as if she possessed only one mouth. For, although the languages of the world are dissimilar, yet the import of the tradition is one and the same. For the Churches which have been planted in Germany do not believe or hand down anything different, nor do those in Spain, nor those in Gaul, nor those in the East, nor those in Egypt, nor those in Libya, nor those which have been established in the central regions of the world” (1, 10, 1-2). Already at that time - we are in the year 200 - it was possible to perceive the Church’s universality, her catholicity and the unifying power of the truth that unites these very different realities, from Germany, to Spain, to Italy, to Egypt, to Libya, in the common truth revealed to us by Christ.

c) Lastly, the Apostolic Tradition, as he says in the Greek language in which he wrote his book, is “pneumatic”, in other words, spiritual, guided by the Holy Spirit: in Greek, the word for “spirit” is “pneuma”. Indeed, it is not a question of a transmission entrusted to the ability of more or less learned people, but to God’s Spirit who guarantees fidelity to the transmission of the faith.

This is the “life” of the Church, what makes the Church ever young and fresh, fruitful with multiple charisms.

For Irenaeus, Church and Spirit were inseparable: “This faith”, we read again in the third book of *Adversus Haereses*, “which, having been received from the Church, we do preserve, and which always, by the Spirit of God, renewing its youth as if it were some precious deposit in an excellent vessel, causes the vessel itself containing it to renew its youth also.... For where the Church is, there is the Spirit of God; and where the Spirit of God is, there is the Church and every kind of grace” (3, 24, 1). As can be seen, Irenaeus did not stop at defining the concept of Tradition. His tradition, uninterrupted Tradition, is not traditionalism, because this Tradition is always enlivened from within by the Holy Spirit, who makes it live anew, causes it to be interpreted and understood in the vitality of the Church. Adhering to her teaching, the Church should transmit the faith in such a way that it must be what it appears, that is, “public”, “one”, “pneumatic”, “spiritual”. Starting with each one of these characteristics, a fruitful discernment can be made of the authentic transmission of the faith in the today of the Church. More generally, in Irenaeus’ teaching, the dignity of man, body and soul, is firmly anchored in divine creation, in the image of Christ and in the Spirit’s permanent work of sanctification. This

doctrine is like a “high road” in order to discern together with all people of good will the object and boundaries of the dialogue of values, and to give an ever new impetus to the Church’s missionary action, to the force of the truth which is the source of all true values in the world.

## **Clement of Alexandria**

18 April 2007

After the period of celebrations, let us return to our normal Catecheses even if it is still visibly festive in the Square.

With the Catecheses we are returning, as I said, to the series begun previously. We have already spoken of the Twelve Apostles, then of the disciples of the Apostles and now of the important figures in the newborn Church, the ancient Church.

At the last one, we spoke of St Irenaeus of Lyons; today, let us speak of Clement of Alexandria, a great theologian who was probably born in Athens at around the middle of the second century.

From Athens he inherited that marked interest in philosophy which was to make him one of the pioneers of the dialogue between faith and reason in the Christian tradition. While he was still young, he arrived in Alexandria, the “city-symbol” of that fertile junction between the different cultures that was a feature of the Hellenistic age.

He was a disciple of Pantaeus until he succeeded him as head of the catechetical school. Many sources testify that he was ordained a priest. During the persecution of 202-203, he fled from Alexandria, seeking refuge in Caesarea, Cappadocia, where he died in about 215.

Of his most important works three are extant: the *Protrepticus*, the *Paedagogus* and the *Stromata*. Although it does not seem that this was the author’s original intention, it is a fact that these writings constitute a true trilogy, destined to effectively accompany the Christian’s spiritual growth.

The *Protrepticus*, as the word itself suggests, is an “exhortation” addressed to those who are starting out and seek the path of faith. Better still, the *Protrepticus* coincides with a Person: the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who makes himself the exhorter of men and women so that they will set out towards the Truth with determination.

Jesus Christ himself becomes the *Paedagogus*, that is, the “tutor” of those who, by virtue of Baptism, have henceforth become children of God.

Lastly, Jesus Christ himself is also the Didascalos, the “Master” who presents the most profound teachings. These are gathered in Clement’s third work, the *Stromata*, a Greek term which means “tapestries”: indeed, they are a random composition of different topics, direct fruits of Clement’s customary teaching.

Overall, Clement’s catecheses accompanied the catechumens and the baptized step by step on their way, so that with the two “wings” of faith and reason they might reach intimate knowledge of the Truth which is Jesus Christ, the Word of God. Only this knowledge of the Person who is truth is the “true gnosis, a Greek term which means “knowledge”, “understanding”. It is the edifice built by reason under the impetus of a supernatural principle.

Faith itself builds true philosophy, that is, true conversion on the journey to take through life. Hence, authentic “gnosis” is a development of faith inspired by Jesus Christ in the soul united with him. Clement then distinguishes two steps in Christian life.

The first step: believing Christians who live the faith in an ordinary way, yet are always open to the horizons of holiness. Then the second step: “gnostics”, that is, those who lead a life of spiritual perfection.

In any case, Christians must start from the common basis of faith through a process of seeking; they must allow themselves to be guided by Christ and thus attain knowledge of the Truth and of truth that forms the content of faith.

This knowledge, Clement says, becomes a living reality in the soul: it is not only a theory, it is a life force, a transforming union of love. Knowledge of Christ is not only thought, but is love which opens the eyes, transforms the person and creates communion with the Logos, with the Divine Word who is truth and life. In this communion, which is perfect knowledge and love, the perfect Christian attains contemplation, unification with God.

Finally, Clement espouses the doctrine which claims that man’s ultimate end is to liken himself to God. We were created in the image and likeness of God, but this is also a challenge, a journey: indeed, life’s purpose, its ultimate destination, is truly to become similar to God. This is possible through the co-naturality with him which man received at the moment of creation, which is why, already in himself - already in himself - he is an image of God. This co-naturality makes it possible to know the divine realities to which man adheres, first of all out of faith, and through a lived faith the practice of virtue can grow until one contemplates God.

On the path to perfection, Clement thus attaches as much importance to the moral requisite as he gives to the intellectual. The two go hand in hand, for it is impossible to know without living and impossible to live without knowing.

Becoming likened to God and contemplating him cannot be attained with purely rational knowledge: to this end, a life in accordance with the Logos is necessary, a life in accordance with truth. Consequently, good works must accompany intellectual knowledge just as the shadow follows the body.

Two virtues above all embellish the soul of the “true gnostic”. The first is freedom from the passions (apátheia); the other is love, the true passion that assures intimate union with God. Love gives perfect peace and enables “the true gnostic” to face the greatest sacrifices, even the supreme sacrifice in following Christ, and makes him climb from step to step to the peak of virtue.

Thus, the ethical ideal of ancient philosophy, that is, liberation from the passions, is defined by Clement and conjugated with love, in the ceaseless process of making oneself similar to God.

In this way the Alexandrian creates the second important occasion for dialogue between the Christian proclamation and Greek philosophy.

We know that St Paul, at the Aeropagus in Athens where Clement was born, had made the first attempt at dialogue with Greek philosophy - and by and large had failed - but they said to him: “We will hear you again”.

Clement now takes up this dialogue and ennobles it to the maximum in the Greek philosophical tradition.

As my venerable Predecessor John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, Clement of Alexandria understood philosophy “as instruction which prepared for Christian faith” (n. 38). And in fact, Clement reached the point of maintaining that God gave philosophy to the Greeks “as their own Testament” (Strom. 6, 8, 67, 1).

For him, the Greek philosophical tradition, almost like the Law for the Jews, was a sphere of “revelation”; they were two streams which flowed ultimately to the Logos himself.

Thus, Clement continued to mark out with determination the path of those who desire “to account” for their own faith in Jesus Christ. He can serve as an example to Christians, catechists and theologians of our time, whom, in the same Encyclical, John Paul II urged “to recover and express to the full the metaphysical dimension of faith in order to enter into a demanding critical dialogue with both contemporary philosophical thought and with the philosophical tradition in all its aspects”.

Let us conclude by making our own a few words from the famous “prayer to Christ the Logos” with which Clement concludes his *Paedagogus*. He implores: “Be gracious... to us your children.... Grant us that we may live in your peace, be transferred to your city, sail over the billows of sin without capsizing, be gently wafted by your Holy Spirit, by



ineffable Wisdom, by night and day to the perfect day... giving thanks and praise to the one Father... to the Son, Instructor and Teacher, with the Holy Spirit. Amen!" (Paed. 3, 12, 101).

## Origen of Alexandria: life and work (1)

25 April 2007

In our meditations on the great figures of the early Church, today we become acquainted with one of the most remarkable. Origen of Alexandria truly was a figure crucial to the whole development of Christian thought. He gathered up the legacy of Clement of Alexandria, on whom we meditated last and launched it for the future in a way so innovative that he impressed an irreversible turning point on the development of Christian thought.

He was a true “maestro”, and so it was that his pupils remembered him with nostalgia and emotion: he was not only a brilliant theologian but also an exemplary witness of the doctrine he passed on. Eusebius of Caesarea, his enthusiastic biographer, said “his manner of life was as his doctrine, and his doctrine as his life. Therefore, by the divine power working with him he aroused a great many to his own zeal” (cf. Church History, 6, 3, 7).

His whole life was pervaded by a ceaseless longing for martyrdom. He was 17 years old when, in the 10th year of the reign of Emperor Septimius Severus, the persecution against Christians was unleashed in Alexandria. Clement, his teacher, fled the city, and Origen’s father, Leonides, was thrown into prison. His son longed ardently for martyrdom but was unable to realize his desire. So he wrote to his father, urging him not to shrink from the supreme witness of faith. And when Leonides was beheaded, the young Origen felt bound to welcome the example of his father’s life.

Forty years later, while preaching in Caesarea, he confessed: “It is of no use to me to have a martyr father if I do not behave well and honour the nobility of my ancestors, that is, the martyrdom of my father and the witness that made him illustrious in Christ” (Hom. Ez 4, 8). In a later homily—when, thanks to the extreme tolerance of the Emperor, Philip the Arab, the possibility of bearing witness by shedding one’s blood seemed no longer to exist—Origen exclaims: “If God were to grant me to be washed in my blood so as to receive the second Baptism after accepting death for Christ, I would depart this world with assurance.... But those who deserve such things are blessed” (Hom. Iud. 7, 12). These words reveal the full force of Origen’s longing for Baptism with blood.

And finally, this irresistible yearning was granted to him, at least in part. In the year 250, during Decius' persecution, Origen was arrested and cruelly tortured. Weakened by the suffering to which he had been subjected, he died a few years later. He was not yet 70.

We have mentioned the “irreversible turning point” that Origen impressed upon the history of theology and Christian thought. But of what did this turning point, this innovation so pregnant with consequences, consist? It corresponds in substance to theology's foundation in the explanation of the Scriptures.

Theology to him was essentially explaining, understanding Scripture; or we might also say that his theology was a perfect symbiosis between theology and exegesis. In fact, the proper hallmark of Origen's doctrine seems to lie precisely in the constant invitation to move from the letter to the spirit of the Scriptures, to progress in knowledge of God. Furthermore, this so-called “allegorism”, as von Balthasar wrote, coincides exactly “with the development of Christian dogma, effected by the teaching of the Church Doctors”, who in one way or another accepted Origen's “lessons”.

Thus, Tradition and the Magisterium, the foundation and guarantee of theological research, come to take the form of “scripture in action” (cf. *Origene: Il mondo, Cristo e la Chiesa*, Milan, 1972, p. 43). We can therefore say that the central nucleus of Origen's immense literary opus consists in his “threefold interpretation” of the Bible.

But before describing this “interpretation” it would be right to take an overall look at the Alexandrian's literary production.

St Jerome, in his *Epistle 33*, lists the titles of 320 books and 310 homilies by Origen. Unfortunately, most of these works have been lost, but even the few that remain make him the most prolific author of Christianity's first three centuries. His field of interest extended from exegesis to dogma, to philosophy, apologetics, ascetical theology and mystical theology. It was a fundamental and global vision of Christian life.

The inspiring nucleus of this work, as we have said, was the “threefold interpretation” of the Scriptures that Origen developed in his lifetime. By this phrase, we wish to allude to the three most important ways in which Origen devoted himself to studying the Scriptures: they are not in sequence; on the contrary, more often than not they overlap.

First of all, he read the Bible, determined to do his utmost to ascertain the biblical text and offer the most reliable version of it. This, for example, was the first step: to know truly what is written and what a specific scriptural passage intentionally and principally meant.

He studied extensively for this purpose and drafted an edition of the Bible with six parallel columns, from left to right, with the Hebrew text in Hebrew characters - he was

even in touch with rabbis to make sure he properly understood the Bible's original Hebrew text -, then the Hebrew text transliterated into Greek characters, and then four different translations in Greek that enabled him to compare the different possibilities for its translation. Hence comes the title of "Hexapla" ("six columns"), attributed to this enormous synopsis.

This is the first point: to know exactly what was written, the text as such.

Secondly, Origen read the Bible systematically with his famous Commentaries. They reproduced faithfully the explanations that the teacher offered during his lessons at Alexandria and Caesarea.

Origen proceeded verse by verse with a detailed, broad and analytical approach, with philological and doctrinal notes. He worked with great precision in order to know completely what the sacred authors meant.

Lastly, even before his ordination to the priesthood, Origen was deeply dedicated to preaching the Bible and adapted himself to a varied public. In any case, the teacher can also be perceived in his Homilies, wholly dedicated as he was to the systematic interpretation of the passage under examination, which he analyzed step by step in the sequence of the verses.

Also in his Homilies, Origen took every opportunity to recall the different dimensions of the sense of Sacred Scripture that encourage or express a process of growth in the faith: there is the "literal" sense, but this conceals depths that are not immediately apparent.

The second dimension is the "moral" sense: what we must do in living the word; and finally, the "spiritual" sense, the unity of Scripture which throughout its development speaks of Christ.

It is the Holy Spirit who enables us to understand the Christological content, hence, the unity in diversity of Scripture. It would be interesting to demonstrate this. I have made a humble attempt in my book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, to show in today's context these multiple dimensions of the Word, of Sacred Scripture, whose historical meaning must in the first place be respected.

But this sense transcends us, moving us towards God in the light of the Holy Spirit, and shows us the way, shows us how to live. Mention of it is found, for example, in the ninth Homily on Numbers, where Origen likens Scripture to [fresh] walnuts: "The doctrine of the Law and the Prophets at the school of Christ is like this", the homilist says; "the letter is bitter, like the [green-covered] skin; secondly, you will come to the shell, which is the moral doctrine; thirdly, you will discover the meaning of the mysteries, with which the souls of the saints are nourished in the present life and the future" (Hom. Num. 9, 7).

It was especially on this route that Origen succeeded in effectively promoting the “Christian interpretation” of the Old Testament, brilliantly countering the challenge of the heretics, especially the Gnostics and Marcionites, who made the two Testaments disagree to the extent that they rejected the Old Testament.

In this regard, in the same Homily on Numbers, the Alexandrian says, “I do not call the Law an “Old Testament’ if I understand it in the Spirit. The Law becomes an “Old Testament’ only for those who wish to understand it carnally”, that is, for those who stop at the literal meaning of the text.

But “for us, who understand it and apply it in the Spirit and in the Gospel sense, the Law is ever new and the two Testaments are a new Testament for us, not because of their date in time but because of the newness of the meaning.... Instead, for the sinner and those who do not respect the covenant of love, even the Gospels age” (cf. *ibid.*, 9, 4).

I invite you - and so I conclude - to welcome into your hearts the teaching of this great master of faith. He reminds us with deep delight that in the prayerful reading of Scripture and in consistent commitment to life, the Church is ever renewed and rejuvenated. The Word of God, which never ages and is never exhausted, is a privileged means to this end. Indeed, it is the Word of God, through the action of the Holy Spirit, which always guides us to the whole truth (cf. Benedict XVI, Address at the International Congress for the 50th Anniversary of Dei Verbum, L'Osservatore Romano English edition, 21 September 2005, p. 7).

And let us pray to the Lord that he will give us thinkers, theologians and exegetes who discover this multifaceted dimension, this ongoing timeliness of Sacred Scripture, its newness for today. Let us pray that the Lord will help us to read Sacred Scripture in a prayerful way, to be truly nourished with the true Bread of Life, with his Word.

## **Origen of Alexandria: The Thought (2)**

2 May 2007

Last Wednesday's Catechesis was dedicated to the important figure of Origen, the second-to-third-century doctor of Alexandria. In that Catechesis, we examined the life and literary opus of the great Alexandrian teacher, identifying his threefold interpretation of the Bible as the life-giving nucleus of all his work. I set aside - to take them up today - two aspects of Origenian doctrine which I consider among the most important and timely: I intend to speak of his teachings on prayer and the Church.

In fact, Origen - author of an important and ever timely treatise *On Prayer* - constantly interweaves his exegetical and theological writings with experiences and suggestions connected with prayer.

Notwithstanding all the theological richness of his thought, his is never a purely academic approach; it is always founded on the experience of prayer, of contact with God. Indeed, to his mind, knowledge of the Scriptures requires prayer and intimacy with Christ even more than study.

He was convinced that the best way to become acquainted with God is through love, and that there is no authentic *scientia Christi* without falling in love with him.

In his Letter to Gregory, Origen recommends: “Study first of all the *lectio* of the divine Scriptures. Study them, I say. For we need to study the divine writings deeply... and while you study these divine works with a believing and God-pleasing intention, knock at that which is closed in them and it shall be opened to you by the porter, of whom Jesus says, ‘To him the gatekeeper opens’.

“While you attend to this *lectio divina*, seek aright and with unwavering faith in God the hidden sense which is present in most passages of the divine Scriptures. And do not be content with knocking and seeking, for what is absolutely necessary for understanding divine things is *oratio*, and in urging us to this the Saviour says not only ‘knock and it will be opened to you’, and ‘seek and you will find’, but also ‘ask and it will be given you’” (Ep. Gr. 4).

The “primordial role” played by Origen in the history of *lectio divina* instantly flashes before one’s eyes. Bishop Ambrose of Milan, who learned from Origen’s works to interpret the Scriptures, later introduced them into the West to hand them on to Augustine and to the monastic tradition that followed.

As we have already said, according to Origen the highest degree of knowledge of God stems from love. Therefore, this also applies for human beings: only if there is love, if hearts are opened, can one person truly know the other.

Origen based his demonstration of this on a meaning that is sometimes attributed to the Hebrew verb to know, that is, when it is used to express the human act of love: “Adam knew Eve his wife, and she conceived” (Gn 4:1).

This suggests that union in love procures the most authentic knowledge. Just as the man and the woman are “two in one flesh”, so God and the believer become “two in one spirit”.

The prayer of the Alexandrian thus attained the loftiest levels of mysticism, as is attested to by his Homilies on the Song of Songs. A passage is presented in which Origen confessed: “I have often felt - God is my witness - that the Bridegroom came to me in the

most exalted way. Then he suddenly left, and I was unable to find what I was seeking. Once again, I am taken by the desire for his coming and sometimes he returns, and when he has appeared to me, when I hold him with my hands, once again he flees from me, and when he has vanished I start again to seek him..." (Hom. in Cant. 1, 7).

I remember what my Venerable Predecessor wrote as an authentic witness in *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, where he showed the faithful "how prayer can progress, as a genuine dialogue of love, to the point of rendering the person wholly possessed by the divine Beloved, vibrating at the Spirit's touch, resting filially within the Father's heart".

"It is", John Paul II continues, "a journey totally sustained by grace, which nonetheless demands an intense spiritual commitment and is no stranger to painful purifications.... But it leads, in various possible ways, to the ineffable joy experienced by mystics as "nuptial union" (n. 33).

Finally, we come to one of Origen's teachings on the Church, and precisely - within it - on the common priesthood of the faithful. In fact, as the Alexandrian affirms in his ninth Homily on Leviticus, "This discourse concerns us all" (Hom. in Lev. 9, 1). In the same Homily, Origen, referring to Aaron's prohibition, after the death of his two sons, from entering the *Sancta sanctorum* "at all times" (Lev 16:2), thus warned the faithful: "This shows that if anyone were to enter the sanctuary at any time without being properly prepared and wearing priestly attire, without bringing the prescribed offerings and making himself favourable to God, he would die....

"This discourse concerns us all. It requires us, in fact, to know how to accede to God's altar. Oh, do you not know that the priesthood has been conferred upon you too, that is, upon the entire Church of God and believing people? Listen to how Peter speaks to the faithful: 'chosen race', he says, "royal, priestly, holy nation, people whom God has ransomed'.

"You therefore possess the priesthood because you are "a priestly race' and must thus offer the sacrifice to God.... But to offer it with dignity, you need garments that are pure and different from the common clothes of other men, and you need the divine fire" (ibid.).

Thus, on the one hand, "girded" and in "priestly attire" mean purity and honesty of life, and on the other, with the "lamp ever alight", that is, faith and knowledge of the Scriptures, we have the indispensable conditions for the exercise of the universal priesthood, which demands purity and an honest life, faith and knowledge of the Scriptures.

For the exercise of the ministerial priesthood, there is of course all the more reason why such conditions should be indispensable.

These conditions - a pure and virtuous life, but above all the acceptance and study of the Word - establish a true and proper “hierarchy of holiness” in the common priesthood of Christians. At the peak of this ascent of perfection, Origen places martyrdom.

Again, in his ninth Homily on Leviticus, he alludes to the “fire for the holocaust”, that is, to faith and knowledge of the Scriptures which must never be extinguished on the altar of the person who exercises the priesthood.

He then adds: “But each one of us has within him” not only the fire; he “also has the holocaust and from his holocaust lights the altar so that it may burn for ever. If I renounce all my possessions, take up my cross and follow Christ, I offer my holocaust on the altar of God; and if I give up my body to be burned with love and achieve the glory of martyrdom, I offer my holocaust on the altar of God” (Hom. in Lev. 9, 9).

This tireless journey to perfection “concerns us all”, in order that “the gaze of our hearts” may turn to contemplate Wisdom and Truth, which are Jesus Christ. Preaching on Jesus’ discourse in Nazareth - when “the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him” (cf. Lk 4:16-30) - Origen seems to be addressing us: “Today, too, if you so wished, in this assembly your eyes can be fixed on the Saviour.

“In fact, it is when you turn the deepest gaze of your heart to the contemplation of Wisdom, Truth and the only Son of God that your eyes will see God. Happy the assembly of which Scripture attests that the eyes of all were fixed upon him!

“How I would like this assembly here to receive a similar testimony, and the eyes of all - the non-baptized and the faithful, women, men and children - to look at Jesus, not the eyes of the body but those of the soul!...

“Impress upon us the light of your face, O Lord, to whom be the power and the glory for ever and ever. Amen!” (Hom. in Lk 32:6).

## **Tertullian**

30 May 2007

With today’s Catechesis we return to the catechetical series we interrupted due to the Journey to Brazil and continue to speak of the ancient Church’s great personalities. They are teachers of the faith also for us today and witnesses of the perennial timeliness of the Christian faith.

Today, we speak of an African, Tertullian, who from the end of the second and beginning of the third century inaugurated Christian literature in the Latin language. He started the use of theology in Latin. His work brought decisive benefits which it would be

unforgivable to underestimate. His influence covered different areas: linguistically, from the use of language and the recovery of classical culture, to singling out a common “Christian soul” in the world and in the formulation of new proposals of human coexistence.

We do not know the exact dates of his birth and death. Instead, we know that at Carthage, toward the end of the second century, he received a solid education in rhetoric, philosophy, history and law from his pagan parents and tutors. He then converted to Christianity, attracted, so it seems, by the example of the Christian martyrs.

He began to publish his most famous writings in 197. But a too individualistic search for the truth, together with his intransigent character - he was a rigorous man - gradually led him away from communion with the Church to belong to the Montanist sect. The originality of his thought, however, together with an incisive efficacy of language, assured him a high position in ancient Christian literature.

His apologetic writings are above all the most famous. They manifest two key intentions: to refute the grave accusations that pagans directed against the new religion; and, more proactive and missionary, to proclaim the Gospel message in dialogue with the culture of the time.

His most famous work, *Apologeticus*, denounces the unjust behaviour of political authorities toward the Church; explains and defends the teachings and customs of Christians; spells out differences between the new religion and the main philosophical currents of the time; and manifests the triumph of the Spirit that counters its persecutors with the blood, suffering and patience of the martyrs: “Refined as it is”, the African writes, “your cruelty serves no purpose. On the contrary, for our community, it is an invitation. We multiply every time one of us is mowed down. The blood of Christians is effective seed” (*semen est sanguis christianorum!*, *Apologeticus*, 50:13).

Martyrdom, suffering for the truth, is in the end victorious and more efficient than the cruelty and violence of totalitarian regimes.

But Tertullian, as every good apologist, at the same time sensed the need to communicate the essence of Christianity positively. This is why he adopted the speculative method to illustrate the rational foundations of Christian dogma. He developed it in a systematic way, beginning with the description of “the God of the Christians”: “He whom we adore”, the Apologist wrote, “is the one, only God”. And he continued, using antitheses and paradoxes characteristic of his language: “He is invisible, even if you see him, difficult to grasp, even if he is present through grace; inconceivable even if the human senses can perceive him, therefore, he is true and great!” (cf. *ibid.*, 17:1-2).



Furthermore, Tertullian takes an enormous step in the development of Trinitarian dogma. He has given us an appropriate way to express this great mystery in Latin by introducing the terms “one substance” and “three Persons”. In a similar way, he also greatly developed the correct language to express the mystery of Christ, Son of God and true Man.

The Holy Spirit is also considered in the African’s writings, demonstrating his personal and divine character: “We believe that, according to his promise, Jesus Christ sent, by means of his Father, the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete, the sanctifier of the faith of all those who believe in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit” (*ibid.*, 2:1).

Again, there are in Tertullian’s writings numerous texts on the Church, whom he always recognizes as “mother”. Even after his acceptance of Montanism, he did not forget that the Church is the Mother of our faith and Christian life.

He even considers the moral conduct of Christians and the future life. His writings are important as they also show the practical trends in the Christian community regarding Mary Most Holy, the Sacraments of the Eucharist, Matrimony and Reconciliation, Petrine primacy, prayer.... In a special way, in those times of persecution when Christians seemed to be a lost minority, the Apologist exhorted them to hope, which in his treatises is not simply a virtue in itself, but something that involves every aspect of Christian existence.

We have the hope that the future is ours because the future is God’s. Therefore, the Lord’s Resurrection is presented as the foundation of our future resurrection and represents the main object of the Christian’s confidence: “And so the flesh shall rise again”, the African categorically affirms, “wholly in every man, in its own identity, in its absolute integrity. Wherever it may be, it is in safe keeping in God’s presence, through that most faithful Mediator between God and man, Jesus Christ, who shall reconcile both God to man, and man to God” (*Concerning the Resurrection of the Flesh*, 63:1).

From the human viewpoint one can undoubtedly speak of Tertullian’s own drama. With the passing of years he became increasingly exigent in regard to the Christians. He demanded heroic behaviour from them in every circumstance, above all under persecution.

Rigid in his positions, he did not withhold blunt criticism and he inevitably ended by finding himself isolated.

Besides, many questions still remain open today, not only on Tertullian’s theological and philosophical thought, but also on his attitude in regard to political institutions and pagan society.

This great moral and intellectual personality, this man who made such a great contribution to Christian thought, makes me think deeply. One sees that in the end he lacked the simplicity, the humility to integrate himself with the Church, to accept his weaknesses, to be forbearing with others and himself.

When one only sees his thought in all its greatness, in the end, it is precisely this greatness that is lost. The essential characteristic of a great theologian is the humility to remain with the Church, to accept his own and others' weaknesses, because actually only God is all holy. We, instead, always need forgiveness.

Finally, the African remains an interesting witness of the early times of the Church, when Christians found they were the authentic protagonists of a "new culture" in the critical confrontation between the classical heritage and the Gospel message.

In his famous affirmation according to which our soul "is naturally Christian" (Apologeticus 17:6), Tertullian evokes the perennial continuity between authentic human values and Christian ones. Also in his other reflection borrowed directly from the Gospel, according to which "the Christian cannot hate, not even his enemies" (cf. Apologeticus 37), is found the unavoidable moral resolve, the choice of faith which proposes "non-violence" as the rule of life. Indeed, no one can escape the dramatic aptness of this teaching, also in light of the heated debate on religions.

In summary, the treatises of this African trace many themes that we are still called to face today. They involve us in a fruitful interior examination to which I exhort all the faithful, so that they may know how to express in an always more convincing manner the Rule of faith, which - again, referring to Tertullian - "prescribes the belief that there is only one God and that he is none other than the Creator of the world, who produced all things out of nothing through his own Word, generated before all things" (cf. Concerning the Prescription of Heretics, 13:1).

## **Saint Cyprian**

6 June 2007

In the series of our catecheses on the great figures of the ancient Church, today we come to an excellent African Bishop of the third century, St Cyprian, "the first Bishop in Africa to obtain the crown of martyrdom".

His fame, Pontius the Deacon his first biographer attests, is also linked to his literary corpus and pastoral activity during the 13 years between his conversion and his martyrdom (cf. Life and Passion of St Cyprian, 19, 1; 1, 1).

Cyprian was born in Carthage into a rich pagan family. After a dissipated youth, he converted to Christianity at the age of 35.

He himself often told of his spiritual journey, “When I was still lying in darkness and gloomy night”, he wrote a few months after his Baptism, “I used to regard it as extremely difficult and demanding to do what God’s mercy was suggesting to me. “I myself was held in bonds by the innumerable errors of my previous life, from which I did not believe I could possibly be delivered, so I was disposed to acquiesce in my clinging vices and to indulge my sins....

“But after that, by the help of the water of new birth, the stain of my former life was washed away, and a light from above, serene and pure, was infused into my reconciled heart... a second birth restored me to a new man. Then, in a wondrous manner every doubt began to fade.... I clearly understood that what had first lived within me, enslaved by the vices of the flesh, was earthly and that what, instead, the Holy Spirit had wrought within me was divine and heavenly” (Ad Donatum, 3-4).

Immediately after his conversion, despite envy and resistance, Cyprian was chosen for the priestly office and raised to the dignity of Bishop. In the brief period of his episcopacy he had to face the first two persecutions sanctioned by imperial decree: that of Decius (250) and that of Valerian (257-258).

After the particularly harsh persecution of Decius, the Bishop had to work strenuously to restore order to the Christian community. Indeed, many of the faithful had abjured or at any rate had not behaved correctly when put to the test. They were the so-called lapsi - that is, the “fallen” - who ardently desired to be readmitted to the community.

The debate on their readmission actually divided the Christians of Carthage into laxists and rigorists. These difficulties were compounded by a serious epidemic of the plague which swept through Africa and gave rise to anguished theological questions both within the community and in the confrontation with pagans. Lastly, the controversy between St Cyprian and Stephen, Bishop of Rome, concerning the validity of Baptism administered to pagans by heretical Christians, must not be forgotten.

In these truly difficult circumstances, Cyprian revealed his choice gifts of government: he was severe but not inflexible with the lapsi, granting them the possibility of forgiveness after exemplary repentance. Before Rome, he staunchly defended the healthy traditions of the African Church; he was deeply human and steeped with the most authentic Gospel spirit when he urged Christians to offer brotherly assistance to pagans during the plague; he knew how to maintain the proper balance when reminding the faithful - excessively afraid of losing their lives and their earthly possessions - that true

life and true goods are not those of this world; he was implacable in combating corrupt morality and the sins that devastated moral life, especially avarice.

“Thus he spent his days”, Pontius the Deacon tells at this point, “when at the bidding of the proconsul, the officer with his soldiers all of a sudden came unexpectedly upon him in his grounds” (Life and Passion of St Cyprian, 15, 1).

On that day, the holy Bishop was arrested and after being questioned briefly, courageously faced martyrdom in the midst of his people.

The numerous treatises and letters that Cyprian wrote were always connected with his pastoral ministry. Little inclined to theological speculation, he wrote above all for the edification of the community and to encourage the good conduct of the faithful.

Indeed, the Church was easily his favourite subject. Cyprian distinguished between the visible, hierarchical Church and the invisible mystical Church but forcefully affirmed that the Church is one, founded on Peter.

He never wearied of repeating that “if a man deserts the Chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, does he think that he is in the Church?” (cf. De unit. [On the unity of the Catholic Church], 4).

Cyprian knew well that “outside the Church there is no salvation”, and said so in strong words (Epistles 4, 4 and 73, 21); and he knew that “no one can have God as Father who does not have the Church as mother” (De unit., 6). An indispensable characteristic of the Church is unity, symbolized by Christ’s seamless garment (ibid., 7): Cyprian said, this unity is founded on Peter (ibid., 4), and finds its perfect fulfilment in the Eucharist (Epistle 63, 13).

“God is one and Christ is one”, Cyprian cautioned, “and his Church is one, and the faith is one, and the Christian people is joined into a substantial unity of body by the cement of concord. Unity cannot be severed. And what is one by its nature cannot be separated” (De unit., 23).

We have spoken of his thought on the Church but, lastly, let us not forget Cyprian’s teaching on prayer. I am particularly fond of his treatise on the “Our Father”, which has been a great help to me in understanding and reciting the Lord’s Prayer better.

Cyprian teaches that it is precisely in the Lord’s Prayer that the proper way to pray is presented to Christians. And he stresses that this prayer is in the plural in order that “the person who prays it might not pray for himself alone. Our prayer”, he wrote, “is public and common; and when we pray, we pray not for one, but for the whole people, because we the whole people, are one (De Dom. orat. [Treatise on the Lord’s Prayer], 8).

Thus, personal and liturgical prayer seem to be strongly bound. Their unity stems from the fact that they respond to the same Word of God. The Christian does not say “my Father” but “our Father”, even in the secrecy of a closed room, because he knows that in every place, on every occasion, he is a member of one and the same Body.

“Therefore let us pray, beloved Brethren”, the Bishop of Carthage wrote, “as God our Teacher has taught us. It is a trusting and intimate prayer to beseech God with his own word, to raise to his ears the prayer of Christ. Let the Father acknowledge the words of his Son when we pray, and let him also who dwells within our breast himself dwell in our voice....

“But let our speech and petition when we pray be under discipline, observing quietness and modesty. Let us consider that we are standing in God’s sight. We must please the divine eyes both with the position of the body and with the measure of voice....

“Moreover, when we meet together with the brethren in one place, and celebrate divine sacrifices with God’s priest, we ought to be mindful of modesty and discipline - not to throw abroad our prayers indiscriminately, with unsubdued voices, nor to cast to God with tumultuous wordiness a petition that ought to be commended to God by modesty; for God is the hearer, not of the voice, but of the heart (non vocis sed cordis auditor est)” (3-4). Today too, these words still apply and help us to celebrate the Holy Liturgy well.

Ultimately, Cyprian placed himself at the root of that fruitful theological and spiritual tradition which sees the “heart” as the privileged place for prayer.

*Indeed, in accordance with the Bible and the Fathers, the heart is the intimate depths of man, the place in which God dwells. In it occurs the encounter in which God speaks to man, and man listens to God; man speaks to God and God listens to man. All this happens through one divine Word. In this very sense - re-echoing Cyprian - Smaragdus, Abbot of St Michael on the Meuse in the early years of the ninth century, attests that prayer “is the work of the heart, not of the lips, because God does not look at the words but at the heart of the person praying” (Diadema monachorum [Diadem of the monks], 1).*

*Dear friends, let us make our own this receptive heart and “understanding mind” of which the Bible (cf. I Kgs 3:9) and the Fathers speak. How great is our need for it! Only then will we be able to experience fully that God is our Father and that the Church, the holy Bride of Christ, is truly our Mother.*

## Eusebius of Caesarea

13 June 2007

In the history of early Christianity there is a fundamental distinction between the first three centuries and those that followed the Council of Nicaea in 325, the first Ecumenical Council. Like a “hinge” between the two periods are the so-called “conversion of Constantine” and the peace of the Church, as well as the figure of Eusebius, Bishop of Caesarea in Palestine. He was the most highly qualified exponent of the Christian culture of his time in very varied contexts, from theology to exegesis, from history to erudition. Eusebius is known above all as the first historian of Christianity, but he was also the greatest philologist of the ancient Church.

It was to Caesarea, where Eusebius was born probably in about the year 260 A.D., that Origen had fled from Alexandria. And in Caesarea, Origen founded a school and a huge library. A few decades later, the young Eusebius educated himself with these books. In 325, as Bishop of Caesarea, he played a lead role at the Council of Nicaea. He signed the Creed and the affirmation of the full divinity of the Son of God, who is consequently defined as “one in being with the Father” (*homooúsios tō Patrí*). The Creed we recite every Sunday in the Holy Liturgy is practically the same.

A sincere admirer of Constantine who had given peace to the Church, Eusebius in turn was esteemed and respected by Constantine. As well as with his works, Eusebius also celebrated the Emperor with panegyrics which he delivered on the 20th and 30th anniversary of his ascendance to the throne, and upon his death in the year 337. Two or three years later, Eusebius died too.

Eusebius was an indefatigable scholar. In his numerous writings he resolved to reflect and to give an up-to-date report on the three centuries of Christianity, three centuries lived under persecution, drawing abundantly on the Christian and pagan sources preserved in particular in the great library of Caesarea.

Thus, despite the objective importance of his apologetic, exegetic and doctrinal works, the imperishable fame of Eusebius is still mainly associated with the 10 books of his Ecclesiastical History. He was the first person to write a history of the Church which continues to be of fundamental importance, thanks to the sources which Eusebius made available to us for ever.

With this Chronicle, he succeeded in saving from the doom of oblivion numerous events, important figures and literary works of the ancient Church. Thus, his work is a primary source of knowledge of the early centuries of Christianity.

We might wonder how he structured this new work and what his intentions were in compiling it. At the beginning of his first book, the historian lists in detail the topics he intends to treat in his work: “It is my purpose to write an account of the succession of the holy Apostles, as well as of the times which have elapsed from the days of our Saviour to

our own; and to relate the many important events which are said to have occurred in the history of the Church; and to mention those who have governed and presided over the Church in the most prominent dioceses, and those who in each generation have proclaimed the divine Word either orally or in writing.

“It is my purpose also to give the names and number and times of those who through love of innovation have run into the greatest errors, and, proclaiming themselves interpreters and promoters of a false doctrine have, like fierce wolves, unmercifully devastated the flock of Christ... and to record the ways and the times in which the divine word has been attacked by the Gentiles, and to describe the character of the great men who in various periods have defended it in the face of blood and of tortures... and finally, the mercy and benevolence which Our Saviour has afforded them all” (cf. I, 1, 1-3).

Thus, Eusebius embraced different spheres: the succession of the Apostles as the backbone of the Church, the dissemination of the Message, the errors and then persecutions on the part of the pagans, and the important testimonies which are the light in this Chronicle.

In all this Eusebius saw the Saviour’s mercy and benevolence. So it was that he inaugurated, as it were, ecclesiastical historiography, extending his account to 324, the year in which Constantine, after defeating Licinius, was acclaimed as the one Emperor of Rome. This was the year before the important Council of Nicaea, which subsequently offered the “summa” of all that the Church - doctrinally, morally and also juridically - had learned in the previous 300 years.

The citation we have just quoted from the First Book of the Ecclesiastical History contains a repetition that is certainly intentional. The Christological title Saviour recurs three times in the space of a few lines with an explicit reference to “his mercy” and “his benevolence”.

Thus, we can grasp the fundamental perspective of Eusebian historiography: his is a “Christocentric” history, in which the mystery of God’s love for humankind is gradually revealed.

Eusebius recognized with genuine amazement that: “Jesus alone of all those who have ever existed is even to the present day called Christ [that is Messiah and Saviour of the world] by all men throughout the world, and is confessed and witnessed to under this name, and is commemorated both by Greeks and Barbarians and even to this day is honoured as a King by his followers throughout the world, and is admired as more than a prophet, and is glorified as the true and only High Priest of God. And besides all this, as the pre-existent Logos of God, called into being before all ages, he has received august honour from the Father, and is worshipped and adored as God. But most wonderful of all

is the fact that we who have consecrated ourselves to him, honour him not only with our voices and with the sound of words, but also with complete elevation of soul, so that we choose to give testimony unto him rather than to preserve our own lives” (cf. I, 3, 19-20).

Another feature thus springs to the fore which was to remain a constant in ancient ecclesiastical historiography: it is the “moral intention” that presides in the account. Historical analysis is never an end in itself; it is not made solely with a view to knowing the past; rather, it focuses decisively on conversion and on an authentic witness of Christian life on the part of the faithful. It is a guide for us, too.

Thus, Eusebius strongly challenges believers of all times on their approach to the events of history and of the Church in particular. He also challenges us: what is our attitude with regard to the Church’s experiences? Is it the attitude of those who are interested in it merely out of curiosity, or even in search of something sensational or shocking at all costs? Or is it an attitude full of love and open to the mystery of those who know - through faith - that they can trace in the history of the Church those signs of God’s love and the great works of salvation wrought by him?

If this is our attitude, we can only feel stimulated to a more coherent and generous response, to a more Christian witness of life, in order to bequeath the signs of God’s love also to the generations to come.

“There is a mystery”, Cardinal Jean Daniélou, an eminent Patristics scholar, never tired of saying:

“History has a hidden content.... The mystery is that of God’s works which constitute in time the authentic reality concealed behind the appearances.... However, this history which he brings about for man, God does not bring about without him.

“Pausing to contemplate the “great things’ worked by God would mean seeing only one aspect of things. The human response lies before them” (Saggio sul mistero della storia, Italian edition, Brescia, 1963, p. 182).

Today, too, so many centuries later, Eusebius of Caesarea invites believers, invites us, to wonder, to contemplate in history the great works of God for the salvation of humankind. And just as energetically, he invites us to conversion of life. Indeed, we cannot remain inert before a God who has so deeply loved us. The specific demand of love is that our entire life should be oriented to the imitation of the Beloved. Let us therefore spare no effort to leave a transparent trace of God’s love in our life.

## **Saint Athanasius of Alexandria**

20 June 2007



Continuing our revisitation of the great Teachers of the ancient Church, let us focus our attention today on St Athanasius of Alexandria.

Only a few years after his death, this authentic protagonist of the Christian tradition was already hailed as “the pillar of the Church” by Gregory of Nazianzus, the great theologian and Bishop of Constantinople (Orationes, 21, 26), and he has always been considered a model of orthodoxy in both East and West.

As a result, it was not by chance that Gian Lorenzo Bernini placed his statue among those of the four holy Doctors of the Eastern and Western Churches - together with the images of Ambrose, John Chrysostom and Augustine - which surround the Chair of St Peter in the marvellous apse of the Vatican Basilica.

Athanasius was undoubtedly one of the most important and revered early Church Fathers. But this great Saint was above all the impassioned theologian of the Incarnation of the Logos, the Word of God who - as the Prologue of the fourth Gospel says - “became flesh and dwelt among us” (Jn 1:14).

For this very reason Athanasius was also the most important and tenacious adversary of the Arian heresy, which at that time threatened faith in Christ, reduced to a creature “halfway” between God and man, according to a recurring tendency in history which we also see manifested today in various forms.

In all likelihood Athanasius was born in Alexandria, Egypt, in about the year 300 A.D. He received a good education before becoming a deacon and secretary to the Bishop of Alexandria, the great Egyptian metropolis. As a close collaborator of his Bishop, the young cleric took part with him in the Council of Nicaea, the first Ecumenical Council, convoked by the Emperor Constantine in May 325 A.D. to ensure Church unity. The Nicene Fathers were thus able to address various issues and primarily the serious problem that had arisen a few years earlier from the preaching of the Alexandrian priest, Arius.

With his theory, Arius threatened authentic faith in Christ, declaring that the Logos was not a true God but a created God, a creature “halfway” between God and man who hence remained for ever inaccessible to us. The Bishops gathered in Nicaea responded by developing and establishing the “Symbol of faith” [“Creed”] which, completed later at the First Council of Constantinople, has endured in the traditions of various Christian denominations and in the liturgy as the Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed.

In this fundamental text - which expresses the faith of the undivided Church and which we also recite today, every Sunday, in the Eucharistic celebration - the Greek term *homooúsios* is featured, in Latin *consubstantialis*: it means that the Son, the Logos, is “of

the same substance” as the Father, he is God of God, he is his substance. Thus, the full divinity of the Son, which was denied by the Arians, was brought into the limelight.

In 328 A.D., when Bishop Alexander died, Athanasius succeeded him as Bishop of Alexandria. He showed straightaway that he was determined to reject any compromise with regard to the Arian theories condemned by the Council of Nicaea.

His intransigence - tenacious and, if necessary, at times harsh - against those who opposed his episcopal appointment and especially against adversaries of the Nicene Creed, provoked the implacable hostility of the Arians and philo-Arians.

Despite the unequivocal outcome of the Council, which clearly affirmed that the Son is of the same substance as the Father, these erroneous ideas shortly thereafter once again began to prevail - in this situation even Arius was rehabilitated -, and they were upheld for political reasons by the Emperor Constantine himself and then by his son Constantius II.

Moreover, Constantine was not so much concerned with theological truth but rather with the unity of the Empire and its political problems; he wished to politicize the faith, making it more accessible - in his opinion - to all his subjects throughout the Empire.

Thus, the Arian crisis, believed to have been resolved at Nicaea, persisted for decades with complicated events and painful divisions in the Church. At least five times - during the 30 years between 336 and 366 A.D. - Athanasius was obliged to abandon his city, spending 17 years in exile and suffering for the faith. But during his forced absences from Alexandria, the Bishop was able to sustain and to spread in the West, first at Trier and then in Rome, the Nicene faith as well as the ideals of monasticism, embraced in Egypt by the great hermit, Anthony, with a choice of life to which Athanasius was always close.

St Anthony, with his spiritual strength, was the most important champion of St Athanasius' faith. Reinstated in his See once and for all, the Bishop of Alexandria was able to devote himself to religious pacification and the reorganization of the Christian communities. He died on 2 May 373, the day when we celebrate his liturgical Memorial.

The most famous doctrinal work of the holy Alexandrian Bishop is his treatise: *De Incarnatione*, *On the Incarnation of the Word*, the divine Logos who was made flesh, becoming like one of us for our salvation.

In this work Athanasius says with an affirmation that has rightly become famous that the Word of God “was made man so that we might be made God; and he manifested himself through a body so that we might receive the idea of the unseen Father; and he endured the insolence of men that we might inherit immortality” (54, 3). With his Resurrection, in fact, the Lord banished death from us like “straw from the fire” (8, 4).

The fundamental idea of Athanasius' entire theological battle was precisely that God is accessible. He is not a secondary God, he is the true God and it is through our communion with Christ that we can truly be united to God. He has really become "God-with-us".

Among the other works of this great Father of the Church - which remain largely associated with the events of the Arian crisis - let us remember the four epistles he addressed to his friend Serapion, Bishop of Thmuis, on the divinity of the Holy Spirit which he clearly affirmed, and approximately 30 "Festal" Letters addressed at the beginning of each year to the Churches and monasteries of Egypt to inform them of the date of the Easter celebration, but above all to guarantee the links between the faithful, reinforcing their faith and preparing them for this great Solemnity.

Lastly, Athanasius also wrote meditational texts on the Psalms, subsequently circulated widely, and in particular, a work that constitutes the bestseller of early Christian literature: *The Life of Anthony*, that is, the biography of St Anthony Abbot. It was written shortly after this Saint's death precisely while the exiled Bishop of Alexandria was staying with monks in the Egyptian desert.

Athanasius was such a close friend of the great hermit that he received one of the two sheepskins which Anthony left as his legacy, together with the mantle that the Bishop of Alexandria himself had given to him.

The exemplary biography of this figure dear to Christian tradition soon became very popular, almost immediately translated into Latin, in two editions, and then into various Oriental languages; it made an important contribution to the spread of monasticism in the East and in the West.

It was not by chance that the interpretation of this text, in Trier, was at the centre of a moving tale of the conversion of two imperial officials which Augustine incorporated into his *Confessions* (cf. VIII, 6, 15) as the preamble to his own conversion.

Moreover, Athanasius himself showed he was clearly aware of the influence that Anthony's fine example could have on Christian people. Indeed, he wrote at the end of this work: "The fact that his fame has been blazoned everywhere, that all regard him with wonder, and that those who have never seen him long for him, is clear proof of his virtue and God's love of his soul. For not from writings, nor from worldly wisdom, nor through any art, was Anthony renowned, but solely from his piety towards God. That this was the gift of God no one will deny.

"For from whence into Spain and into Gaul, how into Rome and Africa, was the man heard of who dwelt hidden in a mountain, unless it was God who makes his own known everywhere, who also pro-mised this to Anthony at the beginning? For even if they work

secretly, even if they wish to remain in obscurity, yet the Lord shows them as lamps to lighten all, that those who hear may thus know that the precepts of God are able to make men prosper and thus be zealous in the path of virtue” (Life of Anthony, 93, 5-6).

Yes, brothers and sisters! We have many causes for which to be grateful to St Athanasius. His life, like that of Anthony and of countless other saints, shows us that “those who draw near to God do not withdraw from men, but rather become truly close to them” (Deus Caritas Est, n. 42).

## Saint Cyril of Jerusalem

27 June 2007

Our attention today is focused on St Cyril of Jerusalem. His life is woven of two dimensions: on the one hand, pastoral care, and on the other, his involvement, in spite of himself, in the heated controversies that were then tormenting the Church of the East.

Cyril was born at or near Jerusalem in 315 A.D. He received an excellent literary education which formed the basis of his ecclesiastical culture, centred on study of the Bible. He was ordained a priest by Bishop Maximus.

When this Bishop died or was deposed in 348, Cyril was ordained a Bishop by Acacius, the influential Metropolitan of Caesarea in Palestine, a philo-Arian who must have been under the impression that in Cyril he had an ally; so as a result Cyril was suspected of having obtained his episcopal appointment by making concessions to Arianism.

Actually, Cyril very soon came into conflict with Acacius, not only in the field of doctrine but also in that of jurisdiction, because he claimed his own See to be autonomous from the Metropolitan See of Caesarea.

Cyril was exiled three times within the course of approximately 20 years: the first time was in 357, after being deposed by a Synod of Jerusalem; followed by a second exile in 360, instigated by Acacius; and finally, in 367, by a third exile - his longest, which lasted 11 years - by the philo-Arian Emperor Valens.

It was only in 378, after the Emperor’s death, that Cyril could definitively resume possession of his See and restore unity and peace to his faithful.

Some sources of that time cast doubt on his orthodoxy, whereas other equally ancient sources come out strongly in his favour. The most authoritative of them is the Synodal Letter of 382 that followed the Second Ecumenical Council of Constantinople (381), in which Cyril had played an important part.

In this Letter addressed to the Roman Pontiff, the Eastern Bishops officially recognized Cyril's flawless orthodoxy, the legitimacy of his episcopal ordination and the merits of his pastoral service, which ended with his death in 387.

Of Cyril's writings, 24 famous catecheses have been preserved, which he delivered as Bishop in about 350.

Introduced by a Procatechesis of welcome, the first 18 of these are addressed to catechumens or candidates for illumination (photizomenoi) [candidates for Baptism]; they were delivered in the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre. Each of the first ones (nn. 1-5) respectively treat the prerequisites for Baptism, conversion from pagan morals, the Sacrament of Baptism, the 10 dogmatic truths contained in the Creed or Symbol of the faith.

The next catecheses (nn. 6-18) form an "ongoing catechesis" on the Jerusalem Creed in anti-Arian tones.

Of the last five so-called "mystagogical catecheses", the first two develop a commentary on the rites of Baptism and the last three focus on the Chrism, the Body and Blood of Christ and the Eucharistic Liturgy. They include an explanation of the Our Father (Oratio dominica).

This forms the basis of a process of initiation to prayer which develops on a par with the initiation to the three Sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and the Eucharist.

The basis of his instruction on the Christian faith also served to play a polemic role against pagans, Judaeo Christians and Manicheans. The argument was based on the fulfilment of the Old Testament promises, in a language rich in imagery.

Catechesis marked an important moment in the broader context of the whole life - particularly liturgical - of the Christian community, in whose maternal womb the gestation of the future faithful took place, accompanied by prayer and the witness of the brethren.

Taken as a whole, Cyril's homilies form a systematic catechesis on the Christian's rebirth through Baptism.

He tells the catechumen: "You have been caught in the nets of the Church (cf. Mt 13:47). Be taken alive, therefore; do not escape for it is Jesus who is fishing for you, not in order to kill you but to resurrect you after death. Indeed, you must die and rise again (cf. Rom 6:11, 14)... Die to your sins and live to righteousness from this very day" (Procatechesis, 5).

From the doctrinal viewpoint, Cyril commented on the Jerusalem Creed with recourse to the typology of the Scriptures in a “symphonic” relationship between the two Testaments, arriving at Christ, the centre of the universe.

The typology was to be described decisively by Augustine of Hippo: “In the Old Testament there is a veiling of the New, and in the New Testament there is a revealing of the Old” (*De catechizandis rudibus* 4, 8).

As for the moral catechesis, it is anchored in deep unity to the doctrinal catechesis: the dogma progressively descends in souls who are thus urged to transform their pagan behaviour on the basis of new life in Christ, a gift of Baptism.

The “mystagogical” catechesis, lastly, marked the summit of the instruction that Cyril imparted, no longer to catechumens but to the newly baptized or neophytes during Easter week. He led them to discover the mysteries still hidden in the baptismal rites of the Easter Vigil.

Enlightened by the light of a deeper faith by virtue of Baptism, the neophytes were at last able to understand these mysteries better, having celebrated their rites.

Especially with neophytes of Greek origin, Cyril made use of the faculty of sight which they found congenial. It was the passage from the rite to the mystery that made the most of the psychological effect of amazement, as well as the experience of Easter night.

Here is a text that explains the mystery of Baptism: “You descended three times into the water, and ascended again, suggesting by a symbol the three days burial of Christ, imitating Our Saviour who spent three days and three nights in the heart of the earth (cf. Mt 12:40). Celebrating the first emersion in water you recall the first day passed by Christ in the sepulchre; with the first immersion you confessed the first night passed in the sepulchre: for as he who is in the night no longer sees, but he who is in the day remains in the light, so in the descent, as in the night, you saw nothing, but in ascending again you were as in the day. And at the self-same moment you were both dying and being born; and that water of salvation was at once your grave and your mother.... For you... the time to die goes hand in hand with the time to be born: one and the same time effected both of these events” (cf. *Second Mystagogical Catechesis*, n. 4).

The mystery to be understood is God’s plan, which is brought about through Christ’s saving actions in the Church.

In turn, the mystagogical dimension is accompanied by the dimension of symbols which express the spiritual experience they “explode”. Thus, Cyril’s catechesis, on the basis of the three elements described - doctrinal, moral and lastly, mystagogical - proves to be a global catechesis in the Spirit.

The mystagogical dimension brings about the synthesis of the two former dimensions, orienting them to the sacramental celebration in which the salvation of the whole human person takes place.

In short, this is an integral catechesis which, involving body, soul and spirit - remains emblematic for the catechetical formation of Christians today.

## Saint Basil

4 July 2007

Let us remember today one of the great Fathers of the Church, St Basil, described by Byzantine liturgical texts as “a luminary of the Church”.

He was an important Bishop in the fourth century to whom the entire Church of the East, and likewise the Church of the West, looks with admiration because of the holiness of his life, the excellence of his teaching and the harmonious synthesis of his speculative and practical gifts.

He was born in about 330 A.D. into a family of saints, “a true domestic Church”, immersed in an atmosphere of deep faith. He studied with the best teachers in Athens and Constantinople.

Unsatisfied with his worldly success and realizing that he had frivolously wasted much time on vanities, he himself confessed: “One day, like a man roused from deep sleep, I turned my eyes to the marvellous light of the truth of the Gospel..., and I wept many tears over my miserable life” (cf. Letter 223: PG 32, 824a).

Attracted by Christ, Basil began to look and listen to him alone (cf. *Moralia*, 80, 1: PG 31, 860bc). He devoted himself with determination to the monastic life through prayer, meditation on the Sacred Scriptures and the writings of the Fathers of the Church, and the practice of charity (cf. Letters 2, 22), also following the example of his sister, St Macrina, who was already living the ascetic life of a nun. He was then ordained a priest and finally, in the year 370, Bishop of Caesarea in Cappadocia in present-day Turkey.

Through his preaching and writings, he carried out immensely busy pastoral, theological and literary activities.

With a wise balance, he was able to combine service to souls with dedication to prayer and meditation in solitude. Availing himself of his personal experience, he encouraged the foundation of numerous “fraternities”, in other words, communities of Christians consecrated to God, which he visited frequently (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 29, in *laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 536b).

He urged them with his words and his writings, many of which have come down to us (cf. *Regulae brevius tractatae*, Proemio: PG 31, 1080ab), to live and to advance in perfection.

Various legislators of ancient monasticism drew on his works, including St Benedict, who considered Basil his teacher (cf. Rule 73, 5).

Indeed, Basil created a very special monasticism: it was not closed to the community of the local Church but instead was open to it. His monks belonged to the particular Church; they were her life-giving nucleus and, going before the other faithful in the following of Christ and not only in faith, showed a strong attachment to him - love for him - especially through charitable acts. These monks, who ran schools and hospitals, were at the service of the poor and thus demonstrated the integrity of Christian life.

In speaking of monasticism, the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: “For this reason many people think that the essential structure of the life of the Church, monasticism, was established, for all time, mainly by St Basil; or that, at least, it was not defined in its more specific nature without his decisive contribution” (Apostolic Letter *Patres Ecclesiae*, n. 2, January 1980; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 February, p. 6).

As the Bishop and Pastor of his vast Diocese Basil was constantly concerned with the difficult material conditions in which his faithful lived; he firmly denounced the evils; he did all he could on behalf of the poorest and most marginalized people; he also intervened with rulers to alleviate the sufferings of the population, especially in times of disaster; he watched over the Church's freedom, opposing even the powerful in order to defend the right to profess the true faith (cf. Gregory of Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 48-51 in *laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 557c-561c).

Basil bore an effective witness to God, who is love and charity, by building for the needy various institutions (cf. Basil, *Letter* 94: PG 32, 488bc), virtually a “city” of mercy, called “Basiliade” after him (cf. Sozomeno, *Historia Eccl.* 6, 34: PG 67, 1397a). This was the origin of the modern hospital structures where the sick are admitted for treatment.

Aware that “the liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed”, and “also the fount from which all her power flows” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, n. 10), and in spite of his constant concern to do charitable acts which is the hallmark of faith, Basil was also a wise “liturgical reformer” (cf. Gregory Nazianzus, *Oratio* 43, 34 in *laudem Basilii*: PG 36, 541c).

Indeed, he has bequeathed to us a great Eucharistic Prayer [or anaphora] which takes its name from him and has given a fundamental order to prayer and psalmody: at his prompting, the people learned to know and love the Psalms and even went to pray them during the night (cf. Basil, *In Psalmum* 1, 1-2: PG 29, 212a-213c). And we thus see how



liturgy, worship, prayer with the Church and charity go hand in hand and condition one another.

With zeal and courage Basil opposed the heretics who denied that Jesus Christ was God as Father (cf. Basil, Letter 9, 3: PG 32, 272a; Letter 52, 1-3: PG 32, 392b-396a; Adv. Eunomium 1, 20: PG 29, 556c). Likewise, against those who would not accept the divinity of the Holy Spirit, he maintained that the Spirit is also God and “must be equated and glorified with the Father and with the Son (cf. *De Spiritu Sancto*: SC 17ff., 348). For this reason Basil was one of the great Fathers who formulated the doctrine on the Trinity: the one God, precisely because he is love, is a God in three Persons who form the most profound unity that exists: divine unity.

In his love for Christ and for his Gospel, the great Cappadocian also strove to mend divisions within the Church (cf. Letters, 70, 243), doing his utmost to bring all to convert to Christ and to his word (cf. *De Iudicio* 4: PG 31, 660b-661a), a unifying force which all believers were bound to obey (cf. *ibid.* 1-3: PG 31, 653a-656c).

To conclude, Basil spent himself without reserve in faithful service to the Church and in the multiform exercise of the episcopal ministry. In accordance with the programme that he himself drafted, he became an “apostle and minister of Christ, steward of God’s mysteries, herald of the Kingdom, a model and rule of piety, an eye of the Body of the Church, a Pastor of Christ’s sheep, a loving doctor, father and nurse, a cooperater of God, a farmer of God, a builder of God’s temple” (cf. *Moralia* 80, 11-20: PG 31, 864b-868b).

This is the programme which the holy Bishop consigns to preachers of the Word - in the past as in the present -, a programme which he himself was generously committed to putting into practice. In 379 A.D. Basil, who was not yet 50, returned to God “in the hope of eternal life, through Jesus Christ Our Lord” (*De Baptismo*, 1, 2, 9).

He was a man who truly lived with his gaze fixed on Christ. He was a man of love for his neighbour. Full of the hope and joy of faith, Basil shows us how to be true Christians.

1st August 2007

After this three-week break, we are continuing with our Wednesday meetings. Today, I would simply like to resume my last Catechesis, whose subject was the life and writings of St Basil, a Bishop in present-day Turkey, in Asia Minor, in the fourth century A.D. The life and works of this great Saint are full of ideas for reflection and teachings that are also relevant for us today.

First of all is the reference to God’s mystery, which is still the most meaningful and vital reference for human beings. The Father is “the principal of all things and the cause of being of all that exists, the root of the living” (*Hom.* 15, 2 de fide: PG 31, 465c); above all,

he is “the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ” (Anaphora Sancti Basilii). Ascending to God through his creatures, we “become aware of his goodness and wisdom” (Basil, *Adversus Eunomium* 1, 14: PG 29, 544b).

The Son is the “image of the Father’s goodness and seal in the same form” (cf. Anaphora Sancti Basilii). With his obedience and his Passion, the Incarnate Word carried out his mission as Redeemer of man (cf. Basil, *In Psalmum* 48, 8; PG 29, 452ab; cf. also *De Baptismo* 1, 2: SC 357, 158).

Lastly, he spoke fully of the Holy Spirit, to whom he dedicated a whole book. He reveals to us that the Spirit enlivens the Church, fills her with his gifts and sanctifies her.

The resplendent light of the divine mystery is reflected in man, the image of God, and exalts his dignity. Looking at Christ, one fully understands human dignity.

Basil exclaims: “[Man], be mindful of your greatness, remembering the price paid for you: look at the price of your redemption and comprehend your dignity!” (*In Psalmum* 48, 8: PG 29, 452b).

Christians in particular, conforming their lives to the Gospel, recognize that all people are brothers and sisters; that life is a stewardship of the goods received from God, which is why each one is responsible for the other, and whoever is rich must be as it were an “executor of the orders of God the Benefactor” (*Hom 6 de avaritia*: PG 32, 1181-1196). We must all help one another and cooperate as members of one body (*Ep 203*, 3).

And on this point, he used courageous, strong words in his homilies. Indeed, anyone who desires to love his neighbour as himself, in accordance with God’s commandment, “must possess no more than his neighbour” (*Hom. in divites*: PG 31, 281b).

In times of famine and disaster, the holy Bishop exhorted the faithful with passionate words “not to be more cruel than beasts... by taking over what people possess in common or by grabbing what belongs to all (*Hom. tempore famis*: PG 31, 325a).

Basil’s profound thought stands out in this evocative sentence: “All the destitute look to our hands just as we look to those of God when we are in need”.

Therefore, Gregory of Nazianzus’ praise after Basil’s death was well-deserved. He said: “Basil convinces us that since we are human beings, we must neither despise men nor offend Christ, the common Head of all, with our inhuman behaviour towards people; rather, we ourselves must benefit by learning from the misfortunes of others and must lend God our compassion, for we are in need of mercy” (*Gregory Nazianzus, Orationes* 43, 63; PG 36, 580b).

These words are very timely. We see that St Basil is truly one of the Fathers of the Church's social doctrine.

Furthermore, Basil reminds us that to keep alive our love for God and for men, we need the Eucharist, the appropriate food for the baptized, which can nourish the new energies that derive from Baptism (cf. *De Baptismo* 1, 3: SC 357, 192).

It is a cause of immense joy to be able to take part in the Eucharist (cf. *Moralia* 21, 3: PG 31, 741a), instituted "to preserve unceasingly the memory of the One who died and rose for us" (*Moralia* 80, 22: PG 31, 869b).

The Eucharist, an immense gift of God, preserves in each one of us the memory of the baptismal seal and makes it possible to live the grace of Baptism to the full and in fidelity.

For this reason, the holy Bishop recommended frequent, even daily, Communion: "Communicating even daily, receiving the Holy Body and Blood of Christ, is good and useful; for he said clearly: "He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life" (Jn 6:54). So who would doubt that communicating continuously with life were not living in fullness?" (Ep. 93: PG 32, 484b).

The Eucharist, in a word, is necessary for us if we are to welcome within us true life, eternal life (cf. *Moralia* 21, 1: PG 31, 737c).

Finally, Basil was of course also concerned with that chosen portion of the People of God, the youth, society's future. He addressed a Discourse to them on how to benefit from the pagan culture of that time.

He recognized with great balance and openness that examples of virtue can be found in classical Greek and Latin literature. Such examples of upright living can be helpful to young Christians in search of the truth and the correct way of living (cf. *Ad Adolescentes* 3).

Therefore, one must take from the texts by classical authors what is suitable and conforms with the truth: thus, with a critical and open approach - it is a question of true and proper "discernment" - young people grow in freedom.

With the famous image of bees that gather from flowers only what they need to make honey, Basil recommends: "Just as bees can take nectar from flowers, unlike other animals which limit themselves to enjoying their scent and colour, so also from these writings... one can draw some benefit for the spirit. We must use these books, following in all things the example of bees. They do not visit every flower without distinction, nor seek to remove all the nectar from the flowers on which they alight, but only draw from them what they need to make honey, and leave the rest. And if we are wise, we will take

from those writings what is appropriate for us, and conforms to the truth, ignoring the rest” (Ad Adolescentes 4).

*Basil recommended above all that young people grow in virtue, in the right way of living: “While the other goods... pass from one to the other as in playing dice, virtue alone is an inalienable good and endures throughout life and after death” (Ad Adolescentes 5).*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I think one can say that this Father from long ago also speaks to us and tells us important things.*

In the first place, attentive, critical and creative participation in today’s culture.

Then, social responsibility: this is an age in which, in a globalized world, even people who are physically distant are really our neighbours; therefore, friendship with Christ, the God with the human face.

And, lastly, knowledge and recognition of God the Creator, the Father of us all: only if we are open to this God, the common Father, can we build a more just and fraternal world.

## **Saint Gregory Nazianzus**

8 August 2007

Last I talked about St Basil, a Father of the Church and a great teacher of the faith.

Today, I would like to speak of his friend, Gregory Nazianzus; like Basil, he too was a native of Cappadocia. As a distinguished theologian, orator and champion of the Christian faith in the fourth century, he was famous for his eloquence, and as a poet, he also had a refined and sensitive soul.

Gregory was born into a noble family in about 330 A.D. and his mother consecrated him to God at birth. After his education at home, he attended the most famous schools of his time: he first went to Caesarea in Cappadocia, where he made friends with Basil, the future Bishop of that city, and went on to stay in other capitals of the ancient world, such as Alexandria, Egypt and in particular Athens, where once again he met Basil (cf. Orationes 43:14-24; SC 384:146-180).

Remembering this friendship, Gregory was later to write: “Then not only did I feel full of veneration for my great Basil because of the seriousness of his morals and the maturity and wisdom of his speeches, but he induced others who did not yet know him to be like him.... The same eagerness for knowledge motivated us.... This was our competition: not who was first but who allowed the other to be first. It seemed as if we had one soul in two bodies” (Orationes 43:16, 20; SC 384:154-156, 164].

These words more or less paint the self-portrait of this noble soul. Yet, one can also imagine how this man, who was powerfully cast beyond earthly values, must have suffered deeply for the things of this world.

On his return home, Gregory received Baptism and developed an inclination for monastic life: solitude as well as philosophical and spiritual meditation fascinated him.

He himself wrote: “Nothing seems to me greater than this: to silence one’s senses, to emerge from the flesh of the world, to withdraw into oneself, no longer to be concerned with human things other than what is strictly necessary; to converse with oneself and with God, to lead a life that transcends the visible; to bear in one’s soul divine images, ever pure, not mingled with earthly or erroneous forms; truly to be a perfect mirror of God and of divine things, and to become so more and more, taking light from light...; to enjoy, in the present hope, the future good, and to converse with angels; to have already left the earth even while continuing to dwell on it, borne aloft by the spirit” (Orationes 2:7; SC 247:96).

As he confides in his autobiography (cf. *Carmina* [historica] 2:1, 11, *De Vita Sua* 340-349; PG 37:1053), he received priestly ordination with a certain reluctance for he knew that he would later have to be a Bishop, to look after others and their affairs, hence, could no longer be absorbed in pure meditation.

However, he subsequently accepted this vocation and took on the pastoral ministry in full obedience, accepting, as often happened to him in his life, to be carried by Providence where he did not wish to go (cf. Jn 21:18).

In 371, his friend Basil, Bishop of Caesarea, against Gregory’s own wishes, desired to ordain him Bishop of Sasima, a strategically important locality in Cappadocia. Because of various problems, however, he never took possession of it and instead stayed on in the city of Nazianzus.

In about 379, Gregory was called to Constantinople, the capital, to head the small Catholic community faithful to the Council of Nicea and to belief in the Trinity. The majority adhered instead to Arianism, which was “politically correct” and viewed by emperors as politically useful.

Thus, he found himself in a condition of minority, surrounded by hostility. He delivered five Theological Orations (Orationes 27-31; SC 250:70-343) in the little Church of the Anastasis precisely in order to defend the Trinitarian faith and to make it intelligible.

These discourses became famous because of the soundness of his doctrine and his ability to reason, which truly made clear that this was the divine logic. And the splendour of their form also makes them fascinating today.

It was because of these orations that Gregory acquired the nickname: “The Theologian”.

This is what he is called in the Orthodox Church: the “Theologian”. And this is because to his way of thinking theology was not merely human reflection or even less, only a fruit of complicated speculation, but rather sprang from a life of prayer and holiness, from a persevering dialogue with God. And in this very way he causes the reality of God, the mystery of the Trinity, to appear to our reason.

In the silence of contemplation, interspersed with wonder at the marvels of the mystery revealed, his soul was engrossed in beauty and divine glory.

While Gregory was taking part in the Second Ecumenical Council in 381, he was elected Bishop of Constantinople and presided over the Council; but he was challenged straightaway by strong opposition, to the point that the situation became untenable. These hostilities must have been unbearable to such a sensitive soul.

What Gregory had previously lamented with heartfelt words was repeated: “We have divided Christ, we who so loved God and Christ! We have lied to one another because of the Truth, we have harboured sentiments of hatred because of Love, we are separated from one another” (Orationes 6:3; SC 405:128).

Thus, in a tense atmosphere, the time came for him to resign.

In the packed cathedral, Gregory delivered a farewell discourse of great effectiveness and dignity (cf. Orationes 42; SC 384:48-114). He ended his heartrending speech with these words: “Farewell, great city, beloved by Christ.... My children, I beg you, jealously guard the deposit [of faith] that has been entrusted to you (cf. I Tm 6:20), remember my suffering (cf. Col 4:18). May the grace of Our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all” (cf. Orationes 42:27; SC 384:112-114).

Gregory returned to Nazianzus and for about two years devoted himself to the pastoral care of this Christian community. He then withdrew definitively to solitude in nearby Arianzo, his birthplace, and dedicated himself to studies and the ascetic life.

It was in this period that he wrote the majority of his poetic works and especially his autobiography: the *De Vita Sua*, a reinterpretation in verse of his own human and spiritual journey, an exemplary journey of a suffering Christian, of a man of profound interiority in a world full of conflicts.

He is a man who makes us aware of God’s primacy, hence, also speaks to us, to this world of ours: without God, man loses his grandeur; without God, there is no true humanism.

Consequently, let us too listen to this voice and seek to know God’s Face.

In one of his poems he wrote, addressing himself to God: “May you be benevolent, You, the hereafter of all things” (Carmina [dogmatica] 1:1, 29; PG 37:508).

And in 390, God welcomed into his arms this faithful servant who had defended him in his writings with keen intelligence and had praised him in his poetry with such great love.

22 August 2007

In the course of portraying the great Fathers and Doctors of the Church whom I seek to present in these Catecheses, I spoke last time of St Gregory Nazianzus, a fourth-century Bishop, and today I would like to fill out this portrait of a great teacher. Today, we shall try to understand some of his teachings.

Reflecting on the mission God had entrusted to him, St Gregory Nazianzus concluded: “I was created to ascend even to God with my actions” (Orationes 14, 6 De Pauperum Amore: PG 35, 865).

In fact, he placed his talents as a writer and orator at the service of God and of the Church. He wrote numerous discourses, various homilies and panegyrics, a great many letters and poetic works (almost 18,000 verses!): a truly prodigious output.

He realized that this was the mission that God had entrusted to him: “As a servant of the Word, I adhere to the ministry of the Word; may I never agree to neglect this good. I appreciate this vocation and am thankful for it; I derive more joy from it than from all other things put together” (Orationes 6, 5: SC 405, 134; cf. also Orationes 4, 10).

Nazianzus was a mild man and always sought in his life to bring peace to the Church of his time, torn apart by discord and heresy. He strove with Gospel daring to overcome his own timidity in order to proclaim the truth of the faith.

He felt deeply the yearning to draw close to God, to be united with him. He expressed it in one of his poems in which he writes: “Among the great billows of the sea of life, here and there whipped up by wild winds... one thing alone is dear to me, my only treasure, comfort and oblivion in my struggle, the light of the Blessed Trinity” (Carmina [historica] 2, 1, 15: PG 37, 125off.). Thus, Gregory made the light of the Trinity shine forth, defending the faith proclaimed at the Council of Nicea: one God in three persons, equal and distinct - Father, Son and Holy Spirit -, “a triple light gathered into one splendour” (Hymn for Vespers, Carmina [historica] 2, 1, 32: PG 37, 512).

Therefore, Gregory says further, in line with St Paul (I Cor 8:6): “For us there is one God, the Father, from whom is all; and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom is all; and one Holy Spirit, in whom is all” (Orationes 39, 12: SC 358, 172).

Gregory gave great prominence to Christ's full humanity: to redeem man in the totality of his body, soul and spirit, Christ assumed all the elements of human nature, otherwise man would not have been saved.

Disputing the heresy of Apollinaris, who held that Jesus Christ had not assumed a rational mind, Gregory tackled the problem in the light of the mystery of salvation: "What has not been assumed has not been healed" (Ep. 101, 32: SC 208, 50), and if Christ had not been "endowed with a rational mind, how could he have been a man?" (Ep. 101, 34: SC 208, 50). It was precisely our mind and our reason that needed and needs the relationship, the encounter with God in Christ.

Having become a man, Christ gave us the possibility of becoming, in turn, like him. Nazianzus exhorted people: "Let us seek to be like Christ, because Christ also became like us: to become gods through him since he himself, through us, became a man. He took the worst upon himself to make us a gift of the best" (Orationes 1, 5: SC 247, 78).

Mary, who gave Christ his human nature, is the true Mother of God (Theotokos: cf. Ep. 101, 16: SC 208, 42), and with a view to her most exalted mission was "purified in advance" (Orationes 38, 13: SC 358, 132, almost as a distant prelude to the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception). Mary is proposed to Christians, and especially to virgins, as a model and their help to call upon in times of need (cf. Orationes, 24, 11: SC 282, 60-64).

Gregory reminds us that as human persons, we must show solidarity to one another. He writes: "'We are all one in the Lord' (cf. Rom 12:5), rich and poor, slaves and free, healthy and sick alike; and one is the head from which all derive: Jesus Christ. And as with the members of one body, each is concerned with the other, and all with all".

He then concludes, referring to the sick and to people in difficulty: "This is the one salvation for our flesh and our soul: showing them charity" (Orationes 14, 8 De Pauperum Amore: PG 35, 868ab).

Gregory emphasizes that man must imitate God's goodness and love. He therefore recommends: "If you are healthy and rich, alleviate the need of whoever is sick and poor; if you have not fallen, go to the aid of whoever has fallen and lives in suffering; if you are glad, comfort whoever is sad; if you are fortunate, help whoever is smitten with misfortune. Give God proof of your gratitude for you are one who can benefit and not one who needs to be benefited.... Be rich not only in possessions but also in piety; not only in gold but in virtue, or rather, in virtue alone. Outdo your neighbour's reputation by showing yourself to be kinder than all; make yourself God for the unfortunate, imitating God's mercy" (Orationes 14, 26 De Pauperum Amore: PG 35, 892bc).

Gregory teaches us first and foremost the importance and necessity of prayer. He says: "It is necessary to remember God more often than one breathes" (Orationes 27, 4: PG 250,



78), because prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with our thirst. God is thirsting for us to thirst for him (cf. *Orationes* 40, 27: SC 358, 260).

In prayer, we must turn our hearts to God, to consign ourselves to him as an offering to be purified and transformed. In prayer we see all things in the light of Christ, we let our masks fall and immerse ourselves in the truth and in listening to God, feeding the fire of love.

In a poem which is at the same time a meditation on the purpose of life and an implicit invocation to God, Gregory writes: "You have a task, my soul, a great task if you so desire. Scrutinize yourself seriously, your being, your destiny; where you come from and where you must rest; seek to know whether it is life that you are living or if it is something more. You have a task, my soul, so purify your life: Please consider God and his mysteries, investigate what existed before this universe and what it is for you, where you come from and what your destiny will be. This is your task, my soul; therefore, purify your life" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 78: PG 37, 1425-1426).

The holy Bishop continuously asked Christ for help, to be raised and set on his way: "I have been let down, O my Christ, by my excessive presumption: from the heights, I have fallen very low. But lift me now again so that I may see that I have deceived myself; if again I trust too much in myself, I shall fall immediately and the fall will be fatal" (*Carmina [historica]* 2, 1, 67: PG 37, 1408).

So it was that Gregory felt the need to draw close to God in order to overcome his own weariness. He experienced the impetus of the soul, the vivacity of a sensitive spirit and the instability of transient happiness.

For him, in the drama of a life burdened by the knowledge of his own weakness and wretchedness, the experience of God's love always gained the upper hand.

You have a task, soul, St Gregory also says to us, the task of finding the true light, of finding the true nobility of your life. And your life is encountering God, who thirsts for our thirst.

## **Saint Gregory of Nyssa**

29 August 2007

In the last Catecheses, I spoke of two great fourth-century Doctors of the Church, Basil and Gregory Nazianzus, a Bishop in Cappadocia, in present-day Turkey. Today, we are adding a third, St Gregory of Nyssa, Basil's brother, who showed himself to be a man disposed to meditation with a great capacity for reflection and a lively intelligence open

to the culture of his time. He has thus proved to be an original and profound thinker in the history of Christianity.

He was born in about 335 A.D. His Christian education was supervised with special care by his brother Basil - whom he called "father and teacher" (Ep. 13, 4: SC 363, 198) - and by his sister Macrina. He completed his studies, appreciating in particular philosophy and rhetoric.

Initially, he devoted himself to teaching and was married. Later, like his brother and sister, he too dedicated himself entirely to the ascetic life.

He was subsequently elected Bishop of Nyssa and showed himself to be a zealous Pastor, thereby earning the community's esteem.

When he was accused of embezzlement by heretical adversaries, he was obliged for a brief period to abandon his episcopal see but later returned to it triumphant (cf. Ep. 6: SC 363, 164-170) and continued to be involved in the fight to defend the true faith.

Especially after Basil's death, by more or less gathering his spiritual legacy, Gregory cooperated in the triumph of orthodoxy. He took part in various Synods; he attempted to settle disputes between Churches; he had an active part in the reorganization of the Church and, as a "pillar of orthodoxy", played a leading role at the Council of Constantinople in 381, which defined the divinity of the Holy Spirit.

Various difficult official tasks were entrusted to him by the Emperor Theodosius, he delivered important homilies and funeral discourses, and he devoted himself to writing various theological works. In addition, in 394, he took part in another Synod, held in Constantinople. The date of his death is unknown.

Gregory expressed clearly the purpose of his studies, the supreme goal to which all his work as a theologian was directed: not to engage his life in vain things but to find the light that would enable him to discern what is truly worthwhile (cf. In Ecclesiasten hom. 1: SC 416, 106-146).

He found this supreme good in Christianity, thanks to which "the imitation of the divine nature" is possible (De Professione Christiana: PG 46, 244c).

With his acute intelligence and vast philosophical and theological knowledge, he defended the Christian faith against heretics who denied the divinity of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (such as Eunomius and the Macedonians) or compromised the perfect humanity of Christ (such as Apollinaris).

He commented on Sacred Scripture, reflecting on the creation of man. This was one of his central topics: creation. He saw in the creature the reflection of the Creator and found here the way that leads to God.

But he also wrote an important book on the life of Moses, whom he presents as a man journeying towards God: this climb to Mount Sinai became for him an image of our ascent in human life towards true life, towards the encounter with God.

He also interpreted the Lord's Prayer, the "Our Father", as well as the Beatitudes. In his "Great Catechetical Discourse (*Oratio Catechetica Magna*) he developed theology's fundamental directions, not for an academic theology closed in on itself but in order to offer catechists a reference system to keep before them in their instructions, almost as a framework for a pedagogical interpretation of the faith.

Furthermore, Gregory is distinguished for his spiritual doctrine. None of his theology was academic reflection; rather, it was an expression of the spiritual life, of a life of faith lived. As a great "father of mysticism", he pointed out in various treatises - such as his *De Professione Christiana* and *De Perfectione Christiana* - the path Christians must take if they are to reach true life, perfection.

He exalted consecrated virginity (*De Virginitate*) and proposed the life of his sister Macrina, who was always a guide and example for him (cf. *Vita Macrinae*), as an outstanding model of it.

Gregory gave various discourses and homilies and wrote numerous letters. In commenting on man's creation, he highlighted the fact that God, "the best artist, forges our nature so as to make it suitable for the exercise of royalty. Through the superiority given by the soul and through the very make-up of the body, he arranges things in such a way that man is truly fit for regal power" (*De Hominis Opificio* 4: PG 44, 136b).

Yet, we see that man, caught in the net of sin, often abuses creation and does not exercise true kingship. For this reason, in fact, that is, to act with true responsibility for creatures, he must be penetrated by God and live in his light.

Indeed, man is a reflection of that original beauty which is God: "Everything God created was very good", the holy Bishop wrote. And he added: "The story of creation (cf. Gn 1:31) witnesses to it. Man was also listed among those very good things, adorned with a beauty far superior to all of the good things. What else, in fact, could be good, on par with one who was similar to pure and incorruptible beauty?... The reflection and image of eternal life, he was truly good; no, he was very good, with the radiant sign of life on his face" (*Homilia in Canticum* 12: PG 44, 1020c).

Man was honoured by God and placed above every other creature: “The sky was not made in God’s image, not the moon, not the sun, not the beauty of the stars, no other things which appear in creation. Only you (human soul) were made to be the image of nature that surpasses every intellect, likeness of incorruptible beauty, mark of true divinity, vessel of blessed life, image of true light, that when you look upon it you become what he is, because through the reflected ray coming from your purity you imitate he who shines within you. Nothing that exists can measure up to your greatness” (Homilia in Canticum 2: PG 44, 805d).

Let us meditate on this praise of the human being. Let us also see how man was degraded by sin. And let us try to return to that original greatness: only if God is present, does man attain his true greatness.

Man therefore recognizes in himself the reflection of the divine light: by purifying his heart he is once more, as he was in the beginning, a clear image of God, exemplary Beauty (cf. Oratio Catechetica 6: SC 453, 174).

Thus, by purifying himself, man can see God, as do the pure of heart (cf. Mt 5:8): “If, with a diligent and attentive standard of living, you wash away the bad things that have deposited upon your heart, the divine beauty will shine in you.... Contemplating yourself, you will see within you he who is the desire of your heart, and you will be blessed” (De Beatitudinibus 6: PG 44, 1272ab). We should therefore wash away the ugliness stored within our hearts and rediscover God’s light within us.

Man’s goal is therefore the contemplation of God. In him alone can he find his fulfilment.

To somehow anticipate this goal in this life, he must work ceaselessly toward a spiritual life, a life in dialogue with God. In other words - and this is the most important lesson that St Gregory of Nyssa has bequeathed to us - total human fulfilment consists in holiness, in a life lived in the encounter with God, which thus becomes luminous also to others and to the world.

5 September 2007

I present to you certain aspects of the teaching of St Gregory of Nyssa, of whom we spoke last Wednesday. First of all, Gregory of Nyssa had a very lofty concept of human dignity. Man’s goal, the holy Bishop said, is to liken himself to God, and he reaches this goal first of all through the love, knowledge and practice of the virtues, “bright beams that shine from the divine nature” (De Beatitudinibus 6: PG 44, 1272c), in a perpetual movement of adherence to the good like a corridor outstretched before oneself. In this regard, Gregory uses an effective image already present in Paul’s Letter to the Philippians: ἐπεκτεινόμενος (3:13), that is, “I press on” towards what is greater, towards truth and love. This vivid expression portrays a profound reality: the perfection we desire to attain

is not acquired once and for all; perfection means journeying on, it is continuous readiness to move ahead because we never attain a perfect likeness to God; we are always on our way (cf. *Homilia in Canticum 12*: PG 44, 1025d). The history of every soul is that of a love which fills every time and at the same time is open to new horizons, for God continually stretches the soul's possibilities to make it capable of ever greater goods. God himself, who has sown the seeds of good in us and from whom every initiative of holiness stems, "models the block..., and polishing and cleansing our spirit, forms Christ within us" (*In Psalmos 2, 11*: PG 44, 544b).

Gregory was anxious to explain: "In fact, this likeness to the Divine is not our work at all; it is not the achievement of any faculty of man; it is the great gift of God bestowed upon our nature at the very moment of our birth" (*De Virginitate 12, 2*: SC 119, 408-410). For the soul, therefore, "it is not a question of knowing something about God but of having God within" (*De Beatitudinibus 6*: PG 44, 1269c). Moreover, as Gregory perceptively observes, "Divinity is purity, it is liberation from the passions and the removal of every evil: if all these things are in you, God is truly in you" (*De Beatitudinibus 6*: PG 44, 1272c).

When we have God in us, when man loves God, through that reciprocity which belongs to the law of love he wants what God himself wants (cf. *Homilia in Canticum 9*: PG 44, 956ac); hence, he cooperates with God in fashioning the divine image in himself, so that "our spiritual birth is the result of a free choice, and we are in a certain way our own parents, creating ourselves as we ourselves wish to be, and through our will forming ourselves in accordance with the model that we choose" (*Vita Moysis 2, 3*: SC 1ff., 108). To ascend to God, man must be purified: "The way that leads human nature to Heaven is none other than detachment from the evils of this world.... Becoming like God means becoming righteous, holy and good.... If, therefore, according to Ecclesiastes (5:1), 'God is in Heaven', and if, as the Prophet says, 'You have made God your refuge' (Ps 73[72]:28), it necessarily follows that you must be where God is found, since you are united with him. "Since he commanded you to call God 'Father' when you pray, he tells you definitely to be likened to your Heavenly Father and to lead a life worthy of God, as the Lord orders us more clearly elsewhere, saying, 'Be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect' (Mt 5:48)" (*De Oratione Dominica 2*: PG 44, 1145ac).

In this journey of spiritual ascesis Christ is the Model and Teacher, he shows us the beautiful image of God (cf. *De Perfectione Christiana*: PG 46, 272a). Each of us, looking at him, finds ourselves "the painter of our own life", who has the will to compose the work and the virtues as his colours (*ibid.*: PG 46, 272b). So, if man is deemed worthy of Christ's Name how should he behave? This is Gregory's answer: "[He must] always examine his own thoughts, his own words and his own actions in his innermost depths to see whether they are oriented to Christ or are drifting away from him" (*ibid.*: PG 46, 284c). And this

point is important because of the value it gives to the word “Christian”. A Christian is someone who bears Christ’s Name, who must therefore also liken his life to Christ. We Christians assume a great responsibility with Baptism.

But Christ, Gregory says, is also present in the poor, which is why they must never be offended: “Do not despise them, those who lie idle, as if for this reason they were worth nothing. Consider who they are and you will discover wherein lies their dignity: they represent the Person of the Saviour. And this is how it is: for in his goodness the Lord gives them his own Person so that through it, those who are hard of heart and enemies of the poor may be moved to compassion” (*De Pauperibus Amandis*: PG 46, 460bc). Gregory, as we said, speaks of rising: rising to God in prayer through purity of heart, but also rising to God through love of neighbour. Love is the ladder that leads to God. Consequently, Gregory of Nyssa strongly recommends to all his listeners: “Be generous with these brothers and sisters, victims of misfortune. Give to the hungry from what you deprive your own stomach” (*ibid.*: PG 46, 457c).

Gregory recalls with great clarity that we all depend on God and therefore exclaims: “Do not think that everything belongs to you! There must also be a share for the poor, God’s friends. In fact, the truth is that everything comes from God, the universal Father, and that we are brothers and sisters and belong to the same lineage” (*ibid.*: PG, 465b). The Christian should then examine himself, Gregory insists further: “But what use is it to fast and abstain from eating meat if with your wickedness all you do is to gnaw at your brother? What do you gain in God’s eyes from not eating your own food if later, acting unfairly, you snatch from their hands the food of the poor?”.

Let us end our catechesis on the three great Cappadocian Fathers by recalling that important aspect of Gregory of Nyssa’s spiritual doctrine which is prayer. To progress on the journey to perfection and to welcome God within him, to bear the Spirit of God within him, the love of God, man must turn to God trustingly in prayer: “Through prayer we succeed in being with God. But anyone who is with God is far from the enemy. Prayer is a support and protection of charity, a brake on anger, an appeasement and the control of pride. Prayer is the custody of virginity, the protection of fidelity in marriage, the hope for those who are watching, an abundant harvest for farmers, certainty for sailors” (*De Oratione Dominica* 1: PG 44, 1124ab). The Christian always prays by drawing inspiration from the Lord’s Prayer: “So if we want to pray for the Kingdom of God to come, we must ask him for this with the power of the Word: that I may be distanced from corruption, delivered from death, freed from the chains of error; that death may never reign over me, that the tyranny of evil may never have power over us, that the adversary may never dominate me nor make me his prisoner through sin but that your Kingdom may come to

me so that the passions by which I am now ruled and governed may be distanced, or better still, blotted out” (ibid., 3: PG 44, 1156d-1157a).

Having ended his earthly life, the Christian will thus be able to turn to God serenely. In speaking of this, St Gregory remembered the death of his sister Macrina and wrote that she was praying this prayer to God while she lay dying: “You who on earth have the power to take away sins, “forgive me, so that I may find refreshment’ (cf. Ps 38:14), and so that I may be found without blemish in your sight at the time when I am emptied from my body (cf. Col 2:11), so that my spirit, holy and immaculate (cf. Eph 5:27), may be accepted into your hands “like incense before you” (Ps 141: [140]:2) (Vita Macrinae 24: SC 178, 224). This teaching of St Gregory is always relevant: not only speaking of God, but carrying God within oneself. Let us do this by commitment to prayer and living in a spirit of love for all our brethren.

## Saint John Chrysostom

19 September 2007

This year is the 16th centenary of St John Chrysostom’s death (407-2007). It can be said that John of Antioch, nicknamed “Chrysostom”, that is, “golden-mouthed”, because of his eloquence, is also still alive today because of his works. An anonymous copyist left in writing that “they cross the whole globe like flashes of lightening”.

Chrysostom’s writings also enable us, as they did the faithful of his time whom his frequent exiles deprived of his presence, to live with his books, despite his absence. This is what he himself suggested in a letter when he was in exile (To Olympias, Letter 8, 45).

He was born in about the year 349 A.D. in Antioch, Syria (today Antakya in Southern Turkey). He carried out his priestly ministry there for about 11 years, until 397, when, appointed Bishop of Constantinople, he exercised his episcopal ministry in the capital of the Empire prior to his two exiles, which succeeded one close upon the other - in 403 and 407. Let us limit ourselves today to examining the years Chrysostom spent in Antioch.

He lost his father at a tender age and lived with Anthusa, his mother, who instilled in him exquisite human sensitivity and a deep Christian faith.

After completing his elementary and advanced studies crowned by courses in philosophy and rhetoric, he had as his teacher, Libanius, a pagan and the most famous rhetorician of that time. At his school John became the greatest orator of late Greek antiquity.

He was baptized in 368 and trained for the ecclesiastical life by Bishop Meletius, who instituted him as lector in 371. This event marked Chrysostom’s official entry into the ecclesiastical cursus. From 367 to 372, he attended the Asceterius, a sort of seminary in

Antioch, together with a group of young men, some of whom later became Bishops, under the guidance of the exegete Diodore of Tarsus, who initiated John into the literal and grammatical exegesis characteristic of Antiochean tradition.

He then withdrew for four years to the hermits on the neighbouring Mount Silpius. He extended his retreat for a further two years, living alone in a cave under the guidance of an “old hermit”. In that period, he dedicated himself unreservedly to meditating on “the laws of Christ”, the Gospels and especially the Letters of Paul. Having fallen ill, he found it impossible to care for himself unaided, and therefore had to return to the Christian community in Antioch (cf. Palladius, Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom, 5).

The Lord, his biographer explains, intervened with the illness at the right moment to enable John to follow his true vocation. In fact, he himself was later to write that were he to choose between the troubles of Church government and the tranquillity of monastic life, he would have preferred pastoral service a thousand times (cf. On the Priesthood, 6, 7): it was precisely to this that Chrysostom felt called.

It was here that he reached the crucial turning point in the story of his vocation: a full-time pastor of souls! Intimacy with the Word of God, cultivated in his years at the hermitage, had developed in him an irresistible urge to preach the Gospel, to give to others what he himself had received in his years of meditation. The missionary ideal thus launched him into pastoral care, his heart on fire.

Between 378 and 379, he returned to the city. He was ordained a deacon in 381 and a priest in 386, and became a famous preacher in his city’s churches. He preached homilies against the Arians, followed by homilies commemorating the Antiochean martyrs and other important liturgical celebrations: this was an important teaching of faith in Christ and also in the light of his Saints.

The year 387 was John’s “heroic year”, that of the so-called “revolt of the statues”. As a sign of protest against levied taxes, the people destroyed the Emperor’s statues. It was in those days of Lent and the fear of the Emperor’s impending reprisal that Chrysostom gave his 22 vibrant Homilies on the Statues, whose aim was to induce repentance and conversion. This was followed by a period of serene pastoral care (387-397).

Chrysostom is among the most prolific of the Fathers: 17 treatises, more than 700 authentic homilies, commentaries on Matthew and on Paul (Letters to the Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians and Hebrews) and 241 letters are extant. He was not a speculative theologian.

Nevertheless, he passed on the Church’s tradition and reliable doctrine in an age of theological controversies, sparked above all by Arianism or, in other words, the denial of



Christ's divinity. He is therefore a trustworthy witness of the dogmatic development achieved by the Church from the fourth to the fifth centuries.

His is a perfectly pastoral theology in which there is constant concern for consistency between thought expressed via words and existential experience. It is this in particular that forms the main theme of the splendid catecheses with which he prepared catechumens to receive Baptism.

On approaching death, he wrote that the value of the human being lies in "exact knowledge of true doctrine and in rectitude of life" (Letter from Exile). Both these things, knowledge of truth and rectitude of life, go hand in hand: knowledge has to be expressed in life. All his discourses aimed to develop in the faithful the use of intelligence, of true reason, in order to understand and to put into practice the moral and spiritual requirements of faith.

John Chrysostom was anxious to accompany his writings with the person's integral development in his physical, intellectual and religious dimensions. The various phases of his growth are compared to as many seas in an immense ocean: "The first of these seas is childhood" (Homily, 81, 5 on Matthew's Gospel).

Indeed, "it is precisely at this early age that inclinations to vice or virtue are manifest". Thus, God's law must be impressed upon the soul from the outset "as on a wax tablet" (Homily 3, 1 on John's Gospel): This is indeed the most important age. We must bear in mind how fundamentally important it is that the great orientations which give man a proper outlook on life truly enter him in this first phase of life.

Chrysostom therefore recommended: "From the tenderest age, arm children with spiritual weapons and teach them to make the Sign of the Cross on their forehead with their hand" (Homily, 12, 7 on First Corinthians).

Then come adolescence and youth: "Following childhood is the sea of adolescence, where violent winds blow..., for concupiscence... grows within us" (Homily 81, 5 on Matthew's Gospel).

Lastly comes engagement and marriage: "Youth is succeeded by the age of the mature person who assumes family commitments: this is the time to seek a wife" (ibid.).

He recalls the aims of marriage, enriching them - referring to virtue and temperance - with a rich fabric of personal relationships. Properly prepared spouses therefore bar the way to divorce: everything takes place with joy and children can be educated in virtue. Then when the first child is born, he is "like a bridge; the three become one flesh, because the child joins the two parts" (Homily 12, 5 on the Letter to the Colossians), and the three

constitute “a family, a Church in miniature” (Homily 20, 6 on the Letter to the Ephesians).

Chrysostom’s preaching usually took place during the liturgy, the “place” where the community is built with the Word and the Eucharist. The assembly gathered here expresses the one Church (Homily 8, 7 on the Letter to the Romans), the same word is addressed everywhere to all (Homily 24, 2 on First Corinthians), and Eucharistic Communion becomes an effective sign of unity (Homily 32, 7 on Matthew’s Gospel).

His pastoral project was incorporated into the Church’s life, in which the lay faithful assume the priestly, royal and prophetic office with Baptism. To the lay faithful he said: “Baptism will also make you king, priest and prophet” (Homily 3, 5 on Second Corinthians).

From this stems the fundamental duty of the mission, because each one is to some extent responsible for the salvation of others: “This is the principle of our social life... not to be solely concerned with ourselves!” (Homily 9, 2 on Genesis). This all takes place between two poles: the great Church and the “Church in miniature”, the family, in a reciprocal relationship.

*As you can see, Dear Brothers and Sisters, Chrysostom’s lesson on the authentically Christian presence of the lay faithful in the family and in society is still more timely than ever today. Let us pray to the Lord to make us docile to the teachings of this great Master of the faith.*

26 September 2007

Today, let us continue our reflection on St John Chrysostom. After the period he spent in Antioch, in 397 he was appointed Bishop of Constantinople, the capital of the Roman Empire of the East. John planned the reform of his Church from the outset: the austerity of the episcopal residence had to be an example for all - clergy, widows, monks, courtiers and the rich. Unfortunately, many of those he criticized distanced themselves from him. Attentive to the poor, John was also called “the Almoner”. Indeed, he was able as a careful administrator to establish highly appreciated charitable institutions. For some people, his initiatives in various fields made him a dangerous rival but as a true Pastor, he treated everyone in a warm, fatherly way. In particular, he always spoke kindly to women and showed special concern for marriage and the family. He would invite the faithful to take part in liturgical life, which he made splendid and attractive with brilliant creativity.

Despite his kind heart, his life was far from peaceful. He was the Pastor of the capital of the Empire, and often found himself involved in political affairs and intrigues because of his ongoing relations with the authorities and civil institutions. Then, within the Church, having removed six Bishops in Asia in 401 A.D. who had been improperly appointed, he was accused of having overstepped the boundaries of his own jurisdiction and thus he

easily became the target of accusations. Another accusation against him concerned the presence of some Egyptian monks, excommunicated by Patriarch Theophilus of Alexandria, who had sought refuge in Constantinople. A heated argument then flared up on account of Chrysostom's criticism of the Empress Eudoxia and her courtiers who reacted by heaping slander and insults upon him. Thus, they proceeded to his removal during the Synod organized by the same Patriarch Theophilus in 403, which led to his condemnation and his first, brief exile. After Chrysostom's return, the hostility he had instigated by his protests against the festivities in honour of the Empress, which the Bishop considered as sumptuous pagan celebrations, and by his expulsion of the priests responsible for the Baptisms during the Easter Vigil in 404, marked the beginning of the persecution of Chrysostom and his followers, the so-called "Johannites".

John then denounced the events in a letter to Innocent I, Bishop of Rome, but it was already too late. In 406, he was once again forced into exile, this time to Cucusus in Armenia. The Pope was convinced of his innocence but was powerless to help him. A Council desired by Rome to establish peace between the two parts of the Empire and among their Churches could not take place. The gruelling journey from Cucusus to Pityus, a destination that he never reached, was meant to prevent the visits of the faithful and to break the resistance of the worn-out exile: his condemnation to exile was a true death sentence! The numerous letters from his exile in which John expressed his pastoral concern in tones of participation and sorrow at the persecution of his followers are moving. His journey towards death stopped at Comana in Ponto. Here, John, who was dying, was carried into the Chapel of the Martyr St Basiliscus, where he gave up his spirit to God and was buried, one martyr next to the other (Palladius, Dialogue on the Life of St John Chrysostom, 119). It was 14 September 407, the Feast of the Triumph of the Holy Cross. He was rehabilitated in 438 through Theodosius II. The holy Bishop's relics, which had been placed in the Church of the Apostles in Constantinople, were later, in 1204, translated to the first Constantinian Basilica in Rome, and now rest in the chapel of the Choir of the Canons in St Peter's Basilica. On 24 August 2004, Pope John Paul II gave a large part of the saint's relics to Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople. The Saint's liturgical Memorial is celebrated on 13 September. Blessed John XXIII proclaimed him Patron of the Second Vatican Council.

It is said of John Chrysostom that when he was seated upon the throne of the New Rome, that is, Constantinople, God caused him to be seen as a second Paul, a doctor of the Universe. Indeed, there is in Chrysostom a substantial unity of thought and action, in Antioch as in Constantinople. It is only the role and situations that change. In his commentary on Genesis, in meditating on God's eight acts in the sequence of six days, Chrysostom desired to restore the faithful from the creation to the Creator: "It is a great good", he said, "to know the creature from the Creator", He shows us the beauty of the

creation and God's transparency in his creation, which thus becomes, as it were, a "ladder" to ascend to God in order to know him. To this first step, however, is added a second: this God Creator is also the God of indulgence (*synkatabasis*). We are weak in "climbing", our eyes grow dim. Thus, God becomes an indulgent God who sends to fallen man, foreign man, a letter, Sacred Scripture, so that the creation and Scripture may complete each another. We can decipher creation in the light of Scripture, the letter that God has given to us. God is called a "tender father" (*philostorgios*) (*ibid.*), a healer of souls (*Homily on Genesis, 40, 3*), a mother (*ibid.*) and an affectionate friend (*On Providence 8, 11-12*). But in addition to this second step - first, the creation as a "ladder" to God, and then, the indulgence of God through a letter which he has given to us, Sacred Scripture - there is a third step. God does not only give us a letter: ultimately, he himself comes down to us, he takes flesh, becomes truly "God-with-us", our brother until his death on a Cross. And to these three steps - God is visible in creation, God gives us a letter, God descends and becomes one of us - a fourth is added at the end. In the Christian's life and action, the vital and dynamic principle is the Holy Spirit (*Pneuma*) who transforms the realities of the world. God enters our very existence through the Holy Spirit and transforms us from within our hearts.

Against this background, in Constantinople itself, John proposed in his continuing *Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles* the model of the primitive Church (*Acts 4:32-37*) as a pattern for society, developing a social "utopia" (almost an "ideal city"). In fact, it was a question of giving the city a soul and a Christian face. In other words, Chrysostom realized that it is not enough to give alms, to help the poor sporadically, but it is necessary to create a new structure, a new model of society; a model based on the outlook of the New Testament. It was this new society that was revealed in the newborn Church. John Chrysostom thus truly became one of the great Fathers of the Church's social doctrine: the old idea of the Greek "polis" gave way to the new idea of a city inspired by Christian faith. With Paul (*cf. I Cor 8:11*), Chrysostom upheld the primacy of the individual Christian, of the person as such, even of the slave and the poor person. His project thus corrected the traditional Greek vision of the "polis", the city in which large sectors of the population had no access to the rights of citizenship while in the Christian city all are brothers and sisters with equal rights. The primacy of the person is also a consequence of the fact that it is truly by starting with the person that the city is built, whereas in the Greek "polis" the homeland took precedence over the individual who was totally subordinated to the city as a whole. So it was that a society built on the Christian conscience came into being with Chrysostom. And he tells us that our "polis" [city] is another, "our commonwealth is in heaven" (*Phil 3:20*) and our homeland, even on this earth, makes us all equal, brothers and sisters, and binds us to solidarity.

At the end of his life, from his exile on the borders of Armenia, “the most remote place in the world”, John, linking up with his first preaching in 386, took up the theme of the plan for humanity that God pursues, which was so dear to him: it is an “incredible and incomprehensible” plan, but certainly guided lovingly by him (cf. *On Providence*, 2, 6). Of this we are certain. Even if we are unable to unravel the details of our personal and collective history, we know that God’s plan is always inspired by his love. Thus, despite his suffering, Chrysostom reaffirmed the discovery that God loves each one of us with an infinite love and therefore desires salvation for us all. For his part, throughout his life the holy Bishop cooperated generously in this salvation, never sparing himself. Indeed, he saw the ultimate end of his existence as that glory of God which - now dying - he left as his last testament: “Glory be to God for all things” (*Palladius*, op. cit., n. 11).

## Saint Cyril of Alexandria

3 October 2007

Today too, continuing our journey following the traces left by the Fathers of the Church, we meet an important figure: St Cyril of Alexandria. Linked to the Christological controversy which led to the Council of Ephesus in 431 and the last important representative of the Alexandrian tradition in the Greek Orient, Cyril was later defined as “the guardian of exactitude” - to be understood as guardian of the true faith - and even the “seal of the Fathers”. These ancient descriptions express clearly a characteristic feature of Cyril: the Bishop of Alexandria’s constant reference to earlier ecclesiastical authors (including, in particular, Athanasius), for the purpose of showing the continuity with tradition of theology itself. He deliberately, explicitly inserted himself into the Church’s tradition, which he recognized as guaranteeing continuity with the Apostles and with Christ himself. Venerated as a Saint in both East and West, in 1882 St Cyril was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Leo XIII, who at the same time also attributed this title to another important exponent of Greek Patristics, St Cyril of Jerusalem. Thus are revealed the attention and love for the Eastern Christian traditions of this Pope, who later also chose to proclaim St John Damascene a Doctor of the Church, thereby showing that both the Eastern and Western traditions express the doctrine of Christ’s one Church.

We have almost no information on Cyril’s life prior to his election to the important See of Alexandria. He was a nephew of Theophilus, who had governed the Diocese of Alexandria as Bishop since 385 A.D. with a prestigious and iron hand. It is likely that Cyril was born in this Egyptian metropolis between 370 and 380 A.D., was initiated into ecclesiastical life while he was still very young and received a good education, both culturally and theologically. In 403, he went to Constantinople in the retinue of his

powerful uncle. It was here that he took part in the so-called “Synod of the Oak” which deposed the Bishop of the city, John (later known as “Chrysostom”), and thereby marked the triumph of the Alexandrian See over its traditional rival, the See of Constantinople, where the Emperor resided. Upon his uncle Theophilus’ death, the still young Cyril was elected in 412 as Bishop of the influential Church of Alexandria, which he governed energetically for 32 years, always seeking to affirm her primacy throughout the East, strong also because of her traditional bonds with Rome.

Two or three years later, in 417 or 418, the Bishop of Alexandria showed himself to be realistic in mending the broken communion with Constantinople, which had lasted by then since 406 as a consequence of Chrysostom’s deposition. But the old conflict with the Constantinople See flared up again about 10 years later, when in 428 Nestorius was elected, a severe and authoritarian monk trained in Antioch. The new Bishop of Constantinople, in fact, soon provoked opposition because he preferred to use as Mary’s title in his preaching “Mother of Christ” (Christotòkos) instead of “Mother of God” (Theotòkos), already very dear to popular devotion. One reason for Bishop Nestorius’ decision was his adherence to the Antiochean type of Christology, which, to safeguard the importance of Christ’s humanity, ended by affirming the division of the Divinity. Hence, the union between God and man in Christ could no longer be true, so naturally it was no longer possible to speak of the “Mother of God”.

The reaction of Cyril - at that time the greatest exponent of Alexandrian Christology, who intended on the other hand to stress the unity of Christ’s person - was almost immediate, and from 429 he left no stone unturned, even addressing several letters to Nestorius himself. In the second of Cyril’s letters to Nestorius (PG 77, 44-49), written in February 430, we read a clear affirmation of the duty of Pastors to preserve the faith of the People of God. This was his criterion, moreover, still valid today: the faith of the People of God is an expression of tradition, it is a guarantee of sound doctrine. This is what he wrote to Nestorius: “It is essential to explain the teaching and interpretation of the faith to the people in the most irreproachable way, and to remember that those who cause scandal even to only one of the little ones who believe in Christ will be subjected to an unbearable punishment”.

In the same letter to Nestorius - a letter which later, in 451, was to be approved by the Council of Chalcedon, the Fourth Ecumenical Council - Cyril described his Christological faith clearly: “Thus, we affirm that the natures are different that are united in one true unity, but from both has come only one Christ and Son; not because, due to their unity, the difference in their natures has been eliminated, but rather, because divinity and humanity, reunited in an ineffable and indescribable union, have produced for us one Lord and Christ and Son”. And this is important: true humanity and true divinity are

really united in only one Person, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, the Bishop of Alexandria continued: “We will profess only one Christ and Lord, not in the sense that we worship the man together with the Logos, in order not to suggest the idea of separation by saying “together”, but in the sense that we worship only one and the same, because he is not extraneous to the Logos, his body, with which he also sits at his Father’s side, not as if “two sons” are sitting beside him but only one, united with his own flesh”.

And soon the Bishop of Alexandria, thanks to shrewd alliances, obtained the repeated condemnation of Nestorius: by the See of Rome, consequently with a series of 12 anathemas which he himself composed, and finally, by the Council held in Ephesus in 431, the Third Ecumenical Council. The assembly which went on with alternating and turbulent events, ended with the first great triumph of devotion to Mary and with the exile of the Bishop of Constantinople, who had been reluctant to recognize the Blessed Virgin’s right to the title of “Mother of God” because of an erroneous Christology that brought division to Christ himself. After thus prevailing against his rival and his doctrine, by 433 Cyril was nevertheless already able to achieve a theological formula of compromise and reconciliation with the Antiocheans. This is also significant: on the one hand is the clarity of the doctrine of faith, but in addition, on the other, the intense search for unity and reconciliation. In the following years he devoted himself in every possible way to defending and explaining his theological stance, until his death on 27 June 444.

Cyril’s writings - truly numerous and already widely disseminated in various Latin and Eastern translations in his own lifetime, attested to by their instant success - are of the utmost importance for the history of Christianity. His commentaries on many of the New and Old Testament Books are important, including those on the entire Pentateuch, Isaiah, the Psalms and the Gospels of John and Luke. Also important are his many doctrinal works, in which the defence of the Trinitarian faith against the Arian and Nestorian theses recurs. The basis of Cyril’s teaching is the ecclesiastical tradition and in particular, as I mentioned, the writings of Athanasius, his great Predecessor in the See of Alexandria. Among Cyril’s other writings, the books Against Julian deserve mention. They were the last great response to the anti-Christian controversies, probably dictated by the Bishop of Alexandria in the last years of his life to respond to the work Against the Galileans, composed many years earlier in 363 by the Emperor known as the “Apostate” for having abandoned the Christianity in which he was raised.

The Christian faith is first and foremost the encounter with Jesus, “a Person, which gives life a new horizon” (Deus Caritas Est, n. 1). St Cyril of Alexandria was an unflagging, staunch witness of Jesus Christ, the Incarnate Word of God, emphasizing above all his unity, as he repeats in 433 in his first letter (PG 77, 228-237) to Bishop Succensus: “Only

one is the Son, only one the Lord Jesus Christ, both before the Incarnation and after the Incarnation. Indeed, the Logos born of God the Father was not one Son and the one born of the Blessed Virgin another; but we believe that the very One who was born before the ages was also born according to the flesh and of a woman". Over and above its doctrinal meaning, this assertion shows that faith in Jesus the Logos born of the Father is firmly rooted in history because, as St Cyril affirms, this same Jesus came in time with his birth from Mary, the Theotò-kos, and in accordance with his promise will always be with us. And this is important: God is eternal, he is born of a woman, and he stays with us every day. In this trust we live, in this trust we find the way for our life.

## Saint Hilary of Poitiers

10 October 2007

Today, I would like to talk about a great Father of the Church of the West, St Hilary of Poitiers, one of the important Episcopal figures of the fourth century. In the controversy with the Arians, who considered Jesus the Son of God to be an excellent human creature but only human, Hilary devoted his whole life to defending faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ, Son of God and God as the Father who generated him from eternity.

We have no reliable information on most of Hilary's life. Ancient sources say that he was born in Poitiers, probably in about the year 310 A.D. From a wealthy family, he received a solid literary education, which is clearly recognizable in his writings. It does not seem that he grew up in a Christian environment. He himself tells us of a quest for the truth which led him little by little to recognize God the Creator and the incarnate God who died to give us eternal life. Baptized in about 345, he was elected Bishop of his native city around 353-354. In the years that followed, Hilary wrote his first work, Commentary on St Matthew's Gospel. It is the oldest extant commentary in Latin on this Gospel. In 356, Hilary took part as a Bishop in the Synod of Béziers in the South of France, the "synod of false apostles", as he himself called it since the assembly was in the control of Philo-Arian Bishops who denied the divinity of Jesus Christ. "These false apostles" asked the Emperor Constantius to have the Bishop of Poitiers sentenced to exile. Thus, in the summer of 356, Hilary was forced to leave Gaul.

Banished to Phrygia in present-day Turkey, Hilary found himself in contact with a religious context totally dominated by Arianism. Here too, his concern as a Pastor impelled him to work strenuously to re-establish the unity of the Church on the basis of right faith as formulated by the Council of Nicea. To this end he began to draft his own best-known and most important dogmatic work: *De Trinitate* (On the Trinity). Hilary explained in it his personal journey towards knowledge of God and took pains to show



that not only in the New Testament but also in many Old Testament passages, in which Christ's mystery already appears, Scripture clearly testifies to the divinity of the Son and his equality with the Father. To the Arians he insisted on the truth of the names of Father and Son, and developed his entire Trinitarian theology based on the formula of Baptism given to us by the Lord himself: "In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit".

The Father and the Son are of the same nature. And although several passages in the New Testament might make one think that the Son was inferior to the Father, Hilary offers precise rules to avoid misleading interpretations: some Scriptural texts speak of Jesus as God, others highlight instead his humanity. Some refer to him in his pre-existence with the Father; others take into consideration his state of emptying of self (kenosis), his descent to death; others, finally, contemplate him in the glory of the Resurrection. In the years of his exile, Hilary also wrote the Book of Synods in which, for his brother Bishops of Gaul, he reproduced confessions of faith and commented on them and on other documents of synods which met in the East in about the middle of the fourth century. Ever adamant in opposing the radical Arians, St Hilary showed a conciliatory spirit to those who agreed to confess that the Son was essentially similar to the Father, seeking of course to lead them to the true faith, according to which there is not only a likeness but a true equality of the Father and of the Son in divinity. This too seems to me to be characteristic: the spirit of reconciliation that seeks to understand those who have not yet arrived and helps them with great theological intelligence to reach full faith in the true divinity of the Lord Jesus Christ.

In 360 or 361, Hilary was finally able to return home from exile and immediately resumed pastoral activity in his Church, but the influence of his magisterium extended in fact far beyond its boundaries. A synod celebrated in Paris in 360 or 361 borrows the language of the Council of Nicea. Several ancient authors believe that this anti-Arian turning point of the Gaul episcopate was largely due to the fortitude and docility of the Bishop of Poitiers. This was precisely his gift: to combine strength in the faith and docility in interpersonal relations. In the last years of his life he also composed the Treatises on the Psalms, a commentary on 58 Psalms interpreted according to the principle highlighted in the introduction to the work: "There is no doubt that all the things that are said in the Psalms should be understood in accordance with Gospel proclamation, so that, whatever the voice with which the prophetic spirit has spoken, all may be referred nevertheless to the knowledge of the coming of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Incarnation, Passion and Kingdom, and to the power and glory of our resurrection" (*Instructio Psalmorum*, 5). He saw in all the Psalms this transparency of the mystery of Christ and of his Body which is the Church. Hilary met St Martin on various occasions: the future Bishop of Tours founded a monastery right by Poitiers, which still exists today. Hilary died in 367. His

liturgical Memorial is celebrated on 13 January. In 1851 Blessed Pius IX proclaimed him a Doctor of the universal Church.

To sum up the essentials of his doctrine, I would like to say that Hilary found the starting point for his theological reflection in baptismal faith. In *De Trinitate*, Hilary writes: Jesus “has commanded us to baptize in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit (cf. Mt 28:19), that is, in the confession of the Author, of the Only-Begotten One and of the Gift. The Author of all things is one alone, for one alone is God the Father, from whom all things proceed. And one alone is Our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom all things exist (cf. I Cor 8:6), and one alone is the Spirit (cf. Eph 4:4), a gift in all.... In nothing can be found to be lacking so great a fullness, in which the immensity in the Eternal One, the revelation in the Image, joy in the Gift, converge in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit” (*De Trinitate* 2, 1). God the Father, being wholly love, is able to communicate his divinity to his Son in its fullness. I find particularly beautiful the following formula of St Hilary: “God knows not how to be anything other than love, he knows not how to be anyone other than the Father. Those who love are not envious and the one who is the Father is so in his totality. This name admits no compromise, as if God were father in some aspects and not in others” (*ibid.*, 9, 61).

For this reason the Son is fully God without any gaps or diminishment. “The One who comes from the perfect is perfect because he has all, he has given all” (*ibid.*, 2, 8). Humanity finds salvation in Christ alone, Son of God and Son of man. In assuming our human nature, he has united himself with every man, “he has become the flesh of us all” (*Tractatus super Psalmos* 54, 9); “he took on himself the nature of all flesh and through it became true life, he has in himself the root of every vine shoot” (*ibid.*, 51, 16). For this very reason the way to Christ is open to all - because he has drawn all into his being as a man - , even if personal conversion is always required: “Through the relationship with his flesh, access to Christ is open to all, on condition that they divest themselves of their former self (cf. Eph 4:22), nailing it to the Cross (cf. Col 2:14); provided we give up our former way of life and convert in order to be buried with him in his baptism, in view of life (cf. Col 1:12; Rom 6:4)” (*ibid.*, 91, 9).

Fidelity to God is a gift of his grace. Therefore, St Hilary asks, at the end of his *Treatise on the Trinity*, to be able to remain ever faithful to the baptismal faith. It is a feature of this book: reflection is transformed into prayer and prayer returns to reflection. The whole book is a dialogue with God.

I would like to end today's Catechesis with one of these prayers, which thus becomes our prayer:

“Obtain, O Lord”, St Hilary recites with inspiration, “that I may keep ever faithful to what I have professed in the symbol of my regeneration, when I was baptized in the Father, in the Son and in the Holy Spirit. That I may worship you, our Father, and with you, your Son; that I may deserve your Holy Spirit, who proceeds from you through your Only Begotten Son... Amen” (De Trinitate 12, 57).

## Saint Eusebius of Vercelli

17 October 2007

This morning I invite you to reflect on St Eusebius of Vercelli, the first Bishop of Northern Italy of whom we have reliable information. Born in Sardinia at the beginning of the fourth century, he moved to Rome with his family at a tender age. Later, he was instituted lector: he thus came to belong to the clergy of the city at a time when the Church was seriously troubled by the Arian heresy. The high esteem that developed around Eusebius explains his election in 345 A.D. to the Episcopal See of Vercelli. The new Bishop immediately began an intense process of evangelization in a region that was still largely pagan, especially in rural areas. Inspired by St Athanasius - who had written the Life of St Anthony, the father of monasticism in the East - he founded a priestly community in Vercelli that resembled a monastic community. This coenobium impressed upon the clergy of Northern Italy a significant hallmark of apostolic holiness and inspired important episcopal figures such as Limenius and Honoratus, successors of Eusebius in Vercelli, Gaudentius in Novara, Exuperantius in Tortona, Eustasius in Aosta, Eulogius in Ivrea and Maximus in Turin, all venerated by the Church as saints.

With his sound formation in the Nicene faith, Eusebius did his utmost to defend the full divinity of Jesus Christ, defined by the Nicene Creed as “of one being with the Father”. To this end, he allied himself with the great Fathers of the fourth century - especially St Athanasius, the standard bearer of Nicene orthodoxy - against the philo-Arian policies of the Emperor. For the Emperor, the simpler Arian faith appeared politically more useful as the ideology of the Empire. For him it was not truth that counted but rather political opportunism: he wanted to exploit religion as the bond of unity for the Empire. But these great Fathers resisted him, defending the truth against political expediency.

Eusebius was consequently condemned to exile, as were so many other Bishops of the East and West: such as Athanasius himself, Hilary of Poitiers - of whom we spoke last time - and Hosius of Cordoba. In Scythopolis, Palestine, to which he was exiled between 355 and 360, Eusebius wrote a marvellous account of his life. Here too, he founded a monastic community with a small group of disciples. It was also from here that he attended to his correspondence with his faithful in Piedmont, as can be seen in the

second of the three Letters of Eusebius recognized as authentic. Later, after 360, Eusebius was exiled to Cappadocia and the Thebaid, where he suffered serious physical ill-treatment. After his death in 361, Constantius II was succeeded by the Emperor Julian, known as “the Apostate”, who was not interested in making Christianity the religion of the Empire but merely wished to restore paganism. He rescinded the banishment of these Bishops and thereby also enabled Eusebius to be reinstated in his See. In 362 he was invited by Anastasius to take part in the Council of Alexandria, which decided to pardon the Arian Bishops as long as they returned to the secular state. Eusebius was able to exercise his episcopal ministry for another 10 years, until he died, creating an exemplary relationship with his city which did not fail to inspire the pastoral service of other Bishops of Northern Italy, whom we shall reflect upon in future Catecheses, such as St Ambrose of Milan and St Maximus of Turin.

The Bishop of Vercelli’s relationship with his city is illustrated in particular by two testimonies in his correspondence. The first is found in the Letter cited above, which Eusebius wrote from his exile in Scythopolis “to the beloved brothers and priests missed so much, as well as to the holy people with a firm faith of Vercelli, Novara, Ivrea and Tortona” (Second Letter, CCL 9, p. 104). These first words, which demonstrate the deep emotion of the good Pastor when he thought of his flock, are amply confirmed at the end of the Letter in his very warm fatherly greetings to each and every one of his children in Vercelli, with expressions overflowing with affection and love. One should note first of all the explicit relationship that bound the Bishop to the *sanctae plebes*, not only of Vercellae/Vercelli - the first and subsequently for some years the only Diocese in the Piedmont - but also of Novaria/ Novara, Eporedia/Ivrea and Dertona/ Tortona, that is, of the Christian communities in the same Diocese which had become quite numerous and acquired a certain consistency and autonomy. Another interesting element is provided by the farewell with which the Letter concludes. Eusebius asked his sons and daughters to give his greeting “also to those who are outside the Church, yet deign to nourish feelings of love for us: *etiam hos, qui foris sunt et nos dignantur diligere*”. This is an obvious proof that the Bishop’s relationship with his city was not limited to the Christian population but also extended to those who - outside the Church - recognized in some way his spiritual authority and loved this exemplary man.

The second testimony of the Bishop’s special relationship with his city comes from the Letter St Ambrose of Milan wrote to the Vercellians in about 394, more than 20 years after Eusebius’ death (Ep. extra collectionem 14: Maur. 63). The Church of Vercelli was going through a difficult period: she was divided and lacked a Bishop. Ambrose frankly declared that he hesitated to recognize these Vercellians as descending from “the lineage of the holy fathers who approved of Eusebius as soon as they saw him, without ever having known him previously and even forgetting their own fellow citizens”. In the same

Letter, the Bishop of Milan attested to his esteem for Eusebius in the clearest possible way: “Such a great man”, he wrote in peremptory tones, “well deserves to be elected by the whole of the Church”. Ambrose’s admiration for Eusebius was based above all on the fact that the Bishop of Vercelli governed his Diocese with the witness of his life: “With the austerity of fasting he governed his Church”. Indeed, Ambrose was also fascinated, as he himself admits, by the monastic ideal of the contemplation of God which, in the footsteps of the Prophet Elijah, Eusebius had pursued. First of all, Ambrose commented, the Bishop of Vercelli gathered his clergy in *vita communis* and educated its members in “the observance of the monastic rule, although they lived in the midst of the city”. The Bishop and his clergy were to share the problems of their fellow citizens and did so credibly, precisely by cultivating at the same time a different citizenship, that of Heaven (cf. Heb 13:14). And thus, they really built true citizenship and true solidarity among all the citizens of Vercelli.

*While Eusebius was adopting the cause of the sancta plebs of Vercelli, he lived a monk’s life in the heart of the city, opening the city to God. This trait, though, in no way diminished his exemplary pastoral dynamism. It seems among other things that he set up parishes in Vercelli for an orderly and stable ecclesial service and promoted Marian shrines for the conversion of the pagan populations in the countryside. This “monastic feature”, however, conferred a special dimension on the Bishop’s relationship with his hometown. Just like the Apostles, for whom Jesus prayed at his Last Supper, the Pastors and faithful of the Church “are of the world” (Jn 17:11), but not “in the world”. Therefore, Pastors, Eusebius said, must urge the faithful not to consider the cities of the world as their permanent dwelling place but to seek the future city, the definitive heavenly Jerusalem. This “eschatological reserve” enables Pastors and faithful to preserve the proper scale of values without ever submitting to the fashions of the moment and the unjust claims of the current political power. The authentic scale of values - Eusebius’ whole life seems to say - does not come from emperors of the past or of today but from Jesus Christ, the perfect Man, equal to the Father in divinity, yet a man like us. In referring to this scale of values, Eusebius never tired of “warmly recommending” his faithful “to jealously guard the faith, to preserve harmony, to be assiduous in prayer” (Second Letter, op. cit.).*

*Dear friends, I too warmly recommend these perennial values to you as I greet and bless you, using the very words with which the holy Bishop Eusebius concluded his Second Letter: “I address you all, my holy brothers and sisters, sons and daughters, faithful of both sexes and of every age group, so that you may... bring our greeting also to those who are outside the Church, yet deign to nourish sentiments of love for us” (ibid.).*

## Saint Ambrose of Milan

24 October 2007

Holy Bishop Ambrose - about whom I shall speak to you today - died in Milan in the night between 3 and 4 April 397. It was dawn on Holy Saturday. The day before, at about five o'clock in the afternoon, he had settled down to pray, lying on his bed with his arms wide open in the form of a cross. Thus, he took part in the solemn Easter Triduum, in the death and Resurrection of the Lord. "We saw his lips moving", said Paulinus, the faithful deacon who wrote his *Life* at St Augustine's suggestion, "but we could not hear his voice". The situation suddenly became dramatic. Honoratus, Bishop of Vercelli, who was assisting Ambrose and was sleeping on the upper floor, was awoken by a voice saying again and again, "Get up quickly! Ambrose is dying...". "Honoratus hurried downstairs", Paulinus continues, "and offered the Saint the Body of the Lord. As soon as he had received and swallowed it, Ambrose gave up his spirit, taking the good Viaticum with him. His soul, thus refreshed by the virtue of that food, now enjoys the company of Angels" (*Life*, 47). On that Holy Friday 397, the wide open arms of the dying Ambrose expressed his mystical participation in the death and Resurrection of the Lord. This was his last catechesis: in the silence of the words, he continued to speak with the witness of his life.

Ambrose was not old when he died. He had not even reached the age of 60, since he was born in about 340 A.D. in Treves, where his father was Prefect of the Gauls. His family was Christian.

Upon his father's death while he was still a boy, his mother took him to Rome and educated him for a civil career, assuring him a sound instruction in rhetoric and jurisprudence. In about 370 he was sent to govern the Provinces of Emilia and Liguria, with headquarters in Milan. It was precisely there that the struggle between orthodox and Arians was raging and became particularly heated after the death of the Arian Bishop Auxentius. Ambrose intervened to pacify the members of the two opposing factions; his authority was such that although he was merely a catechumen, the people acclaimed him Bishop of Milan.

Until that moment, Ambrose had been the most senior magistrate of the Empire in northern Italy. Culturally well-educated but at the same time ignorant of the Scriptures, the new Bishop briskly began to study them. From the works of Origen, the indisputable master of the "Alexandrian School", he learned to know and to comment on the Bible. Thus, Ambrose transferred to the Latin environment the meditation on the Scriptures which Origen had begun, introducing in the West the practice of *lectio divina*. The method of *lectio* served to guide all of Ambrose's preaching and writings, which stemmed precisely from prayerful listening to the Word of God. The famous introduction of an Ambrosian catechesis shows clearly how the holy Bishop applied the Old Testament to Christian life: "Every day, when we were reading about the lives of the

Patriarchs and the maxims of the Proverbs, we addressed morality”, the Bishop of Milan said to his catechumens and neophytes, “so that formed and instructed by them you may become accustomed to taking the path of the Fathers and to following the route of obedience to the divine precepts” (On the Mysteries 1, 1). In other words, the neophytes and catechumens, in accordance with the Bishop’s decision, after having learned the art of a well-ordered life, could henceforth consider themselves prepared for Christ’s great mysteries. Thus, Ambrose’s preaching - which constitutes the structural nucleus of his immense literary opus - starts with the reading of the Sacred Books (“the Patriarchs” or the historical Books and “Proverbs”, or in other words, the Wisdom Books) in order to live in conformity with divine Revelation.

It is obvious that the preacher’s personal testimony and the level of exemplarity of the Christian community condition the effectiveness of the preaching. In this perspective, a passage from St Augustine’s Confessions is relevant. He had come to Milan as a teacher of rhetoric; he was a sceptic and not Christian. He was seeking the Christian truth but was not capable of truly finding it.

What moved the heart of the young African rhetorician, sceptic and downhearted, and what impelled him to definitive conversion was not above all Ambrose’s splendid homilies (although he deeply appreciated them). It was rather the testimony of the Bishop and his Milanese Church that prayed and sang as one intact body. It was a Church that could resist the tyrannical ploys of the Emperor and his mother, who in early 386 again demanded a church building for the Arians’ celebrations. In the building that was to be requisitioned, Augustine relates, “the devout people watched, ready to die with their Bishop”. This testimony of the Confessions is precious because it points out that something was moving in Augustine, who continues: “We too, although spiritually tepid, shared in the excitement of the whole people” (Confessions 9, 7).

*Augustine learned from the life and example of Bishop Ambrose to believe and to preach. We can refer to a famous sermon of the African, which centuries later merited citation in the conciliar Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum: “Therefore, all clerics, particularly priests of Christ and others who, as deacons or catechists, are officially engaged in the ministry of the Word”, Dei Verbum recommends, “should immerse themselves in the Scriptures by constant sacred reading and diligent study. For it must not happen that anyone becomes” - and this is Augustine’s citation - “an empty preacher of the Word of God to others, not being a hearer of the Word in his own heart” (n. 25). Augustine had learned precisely from Ambrose how to “hear in his own heart” this perseverance in reading Sacred Scripture with a prayerful approach, so as truly to absorb and assimilate the Word of God in one’s heart.*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I would like further to propose to you a sort of “patristic icon”, which, interpreted in the light of what we have said, effectively represents “the heart” of Ambrosian doctrine.*

*In the sixth book of the Confessions, Augustine tells of his meeting with Ambrose, an encounter that was indisputably of great importance in the history of the Church. He writes in his text that whenever he went to see the Bishop of Milan, he would regularly find him taken up with catervae of people full of problems for whose needs he did his utmost. There was always a long queue waiting to talk to Ambrose, seeking in him consolation and hope. When Ambrose was not with them, with the people (and this happened for the space of the briefest of moments), he was either restoring his body with the necessary food or nourishing his spirit with reading. Here Augustine marvels because Ambrose read the Scriptures with his mouth shut, only with his eyes (cf. Confessions, 6, 3). Indeed, in the early Christian centuries reading was conceived of strictly for proclamation, and reading aloud also facilitated the reader's understanding. That Ambrose could scan the pages with his eyes alone suggested to the admiring Augustine a rare ability for reading and familiarity with the Scriptures. Well, in that "reading under one's breath", where the heart is committed to achieving knowledge of the Word of God - this is the "icon" to which we are referring -, one can glimpse the method of Ambrosian catechesis; it is Scripture itself, intimately assimilated, which suggests the content to proclaim that will lead to the conversion of hearts.*

Thus, with regard to the magisterium of Ambrose and of Augustine, catechesis is inseparable from witness of life. What I wrote on the theologian in the Introduction to Christianity might also be useful to the catechist. An educator in the faith cannot risk appearing like a sort of clown who recites a part "by profession". Rather - to use an image dear to Origen, a writer who was particularly appreciated by Ambrose -, he must be like the beloved disciple who rested his head against his Master's heart and there learned the way to think, speak and act. The true disciple is ultimately the one whose proclamation of the Gospel is the most credible and effective.

Like the Apostle John, Bishop Ambrose - who never tired of saying: "Omnia Christus est nobis! To us Christ is all!" - continues to be a genuine witness of the Lord. Let us thus conclude our Catechesis with his same words, full of love for Jesus: "Omnia Christus est nobis! If you have a wound to heal, he is the doctor; if you are parched by fever, he is the spring; if you are oppressed by injustice, he is justice; if you are in need of help, he is strength; if you fear death, he is life; if you desire Heaven, he is the way; if you are in the darkness, he is light.... Taste and see how good is the Lord: blessed is the man who hopes in him!" (De Virginitate, 16, 99). Let us also hope in Christ. We shall thus be blessed and shall live in peace.

## **Saint Maximus of Turin**

31 October 2007



Between the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth, another Father of the Church after St Ambrose made a great contribution to the spread and consolidation of Christianity in Northern Italy: St Maximus, whom we come across in 398 as Bishop of Turin, a year after St Ambrose's death. Very little is known about him; in compensation, we have inherited a collection of about 90 of his Sermons. It is possible to perceive in them the Bishop's profound and vital bond with his city, which attests to an evident point of contact between the episcopal ministry of Ambrose and that of Maximus.

At that time serious tensions were disturbing orderly civil coexistence. In this context, as pastor and teacher, Maximus succeeded in obtaining the Christian people's support. The city was threatened by various groups of barbarians. They entered by the Eastern passes, which went as far as the Western Alps. Turin was therefore permanently garrisoned by troops and at critical moments became a refuge for the populations fleeing from the countryside and urban centres where there was no protection. Maximus' interventions in the face of this situation testify to his commitment to respond to the civil degradation and disintegration. Although it is still difficult to determine the social composition of those for whom the Sermons were intended, it would seem that Maximus' preaching - to avoid the risk of vagueness - was specifically addressed to a chosen nucleus of the Christian community of Turin, consisting of rich landowners who had property in the Turinese countryside and a house in the city. This was a clear-sighted pastoral decision by the Bishop, who saw this type of preaching as the most effective way to preserve and strengthen his own ties with the people.

To illustrate this view of Maximus' ministry in his city, I would like to point out for example Sermons 17 and 18, dedicated to an ever timely topic: wealth and poverty in Christian communities. In this context too, the city was fraught with serious tensions. Riches were accumulated and hidden. "No one thinks about the needs of others", the Bishop remarked bitterly in his 17th Sermon. "In fact, not only do many Christians not share their own possessions but they also rob others of theirs. Not only, I say, do they not bring the money they collect to the feet of the apostles, but in addition, they drag from priests' feet their own brethren who are seeking help". And he concluded: "In our cities there are many guests or pilgrims. Do what you have promised", adhering to faith, "so that what was said to Ananias will not be said to you as well: "You have not lied to men, but to God"" (Sermon 17, 2-3).

In the next Sermon, the 18th, Maximus condemns the recurring forms of exploitation of others' misfortunes. "Tell me, Christian", the Bishop reprimands his faithful, "tell me why you snatched the booty abandoned by the plunderers? Why did you take home "ill-gotten gains' as you yourself think, torn apart and contaminated?". "But perhaps", he continues, "you say you have purchased them, and thereby believe you are avoiding the

accusation of avarice. However, this is not the way to equate purchasing with selling. “It is a good thing to make purchases, but that means what is sold freely in times of peace, not goods looted during the sack of a city... So act as a Christian and a citizen who purchases in order to repay” (Sermon 18:3). Without being too obvious, Maximus thus managed to preach a profound relationship between a Christian’s and a citizen’s duties. In his eyes, living a Christian life also meant assuming civil commitments. Vice-versa, every Christian who, “despite being able to live by his own work, seizes the booty of others with the ferocity of wild beasts”; who “tricks his neighbour, who tries every day to nibble away at the boundaries of others, to gain possession of their produce”, does not compare to a fox biting off the heads of chickens but rather to a wolf savaging pigs (Sermon 41, 4).

In comparison with the cautious, defensive attitude that Ambrose adopted to justify his famous project of redeeming prisoners of war, the historical changes that occurred in the relationship between the Bishop and the municipal institutions are clearly evident. By now sustained through legislation that invited Christians to redeem prisoners, Maximus, with the collapse of the civil authority of the Roman Empire, felt fully authorized in this regard to exercise true control over the city. This control was to become increasingly extensive and effective until it replaced the irresponsible evasion of the magistrates and civil institutions. In this context, Maximus not only strove to rekindle in the faithful the traditional love for their hometown, but he also proclaimed the precise duty to pay taxes, however burdensome and unpleasant they might appear (cf. Sermon 26, 2). In short, the tone and substance of the Sermons imply an increased awareness of the Bishop’s political responsibility in the specific historical circumstances. He was “the lookout tower” posted in the city. Whoever could these watchmen be, Maximus wonders in Sermon 92, “other than the most blessed Bishops set on a lofty rock of wisdom, so to speak, to defend the peoples and to warn them about the evils approaching in the distance?”. And in Sermon 89 the Bishop of Turin describes his tasks to his faithful, making a unique comparison between the Bishop’s function and the function of bees: “Like the bee”, he said, Bishops “observe bodily chastity, they offer the food of heavenly life using the sting of the law. They are pure in sanctifying, gentle in restoring and severe in punishing”. With these words, St Maximus described the task of the Bishop in his time.

In short, historical and literary analysis show an increasing awareness of the political responsibility of the ecclesiastical authority in a context in which it continued *de facto* to replace the civil authority.

Indeed, the ministry of the Bishop of Northwest Italy, starting with Eusebius who dwelled in his Vercelli “like a monk” to Maximus of Turin, positioned “like a sentinel” on the highest rock in the city, developed along these lines. It is obvious that the

contemporary historical, cultural and social context is profoundly different. Today's context is rather the context outlined by my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, in which he offers an articulate analysis of the challenges and signs of hope for the Church in Europe today (nn. 6-22). In any case, on the basis of the changed conditions, the believer's duties to his city and his homeland still remain effective. The combination of the commitments of the "honest citizen" with those of the "good Christian" has not in fact disappeared.

In conclusion, to highlight one of the most important aspects of the unity of Christian life, I would like to recall the words of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*: consistency between faith and conduct, between Gospel and culture. The Council exhorts the faithful "to perform their duties faithfully in the spirit of the Gospel. It is a mistake to think that, because we have here no lasting city, but seek the city which is to come, we are entitled to shirk our earthly responsibilities; this is to forget that by our faith we are bound all the more to fulfil these responsibilities according to the vocation of each one" (n. 43). In following the Magisterium of St Maximus and of many other Fathers, let us make our own the Council's desire that the faithful may be increasingly anxious to "carry out their earthly activity in such a way as to integrate human, domestic, professional, scientific and technical enterprises with religious values, under whose supreme direction all things are ordered to the glory of God" (*ibid.*) and thus for humanity's good.

## Saint Jerome

7 November 2007

Today, we turn our attention to St Jerome, a Church Father who centred his life on the Bible: he translated it into Latin, commented on it in his works, and above all, strove to live it in practice throughout his long earthly life, despite the well-known difficult, hot-tempered character with which nature had endowed him.

Jerome was born into a Christian family in about 347 A.D. in Stridon. He was given a good education and was even sent to Rome to fine-tune his studies. As a young man he was attracted by the worldly life (cf. Ep 22, 7), but his desire for and interest in the Christian religion prevailed.

He received Baptism in about 366 and opted for the ascetic life. He went to Aquileia and joined a group of fervent Christians that had formed around Bishop Valerian and which he described as almost "a choir of blessed" (*Chron. ad ann. 374*). He then left for the East and lived as a hermit in the Desert of Chalcis, south of Aleppo (Ep 14, 10), devoting himself assiduously to study. He perfected his knowledge of Greek, began learning Hebrew (cf. Ep 125, 12), and transcribed codices and Patristic writings (cf. Ep 5, 2).

Meditation, solitude and contact with the Word of God helped his Christian sensibility to mature. He bitterly regretted the indiscretions of his youth (cf. Ep. 22, 7) and was keenly aware of the contrast between the pagan mentality and the Christian life: a contrast made famous by the dramatic and lively “vision” - of which he has left us an account - in which it seemed to him that he was being scourged before God because he was “Ciceronian rather than Christian” (cf. Ep. 22, 30).

In 382 he moved to Rome: here, acquainted with his fame as an ascetic and his ability as a scholar, Pope Damasus engaged him as secretary and counsellor; the Pope encouraged him, for pastoral and cultural reasons, to embark on a new Latin translation of the Biblical texts. Several members of the Roman aristocracy, especially noblewomen such as Paula, Marcella, Asella, Lea and others, desirous of committing themselves to the way of Christian perfection and of deepening their knowledge of the Word of God, chose him as their spiritual guide and teacher in the methodical approach to the sacred texts. These noblewomen also learned Greek and Hebrew.

After the death of Pope Damasus, Jerome left Rome in 385 and went on pilgrimage, first to the Holy Land, a silent witness of Christ’s earthly life, and then to Egypt, the favourite country of numerous monks (cf. *Contra Rufinum*, 3, 22; Ep. 108, 6-14). In 386 he stopped in Bethlehem, where male and female monasteries were built through the generosity of the noblewoman, Paula, as well as a hospice for pilgrims bound for the Holy Land, “remembering Mary and Joseph who had found no room there” (Ep. 108, 14). He stayed in Bethlehem until he died, continuing to do a prodigious amount of work: he commented on the Word of God; he defended the faith, vigorously opposing various heresies; he urged the monks on to perfection; he taught classical and Christian culture to young students; he welcomed with a pastor’s heart pilgrims who were visiting the Holy Land. He died in his cell close to the Grotto of the Nativity on 30 September 419-420.

Jerome’s literary studies and vast erudition enabled him to revise and translate many biblical texts: an invaluable undertaking for the Latin Church and for Western culture. On the basis of the original Greek and Hebrew texts, and thanks to the comparison with previous versions, he revised the four Gospels in Latin, then the Psalter and a large part of the Old Testament. Taking into account the original Hebrew and Greek texts of the Septuagint, the classical Greek version of the Old Testament that dates back to pre-Christian times, as well as the earlier Latin versions, Jerome was able, with the assistance later of other collaborators, to produce a better translation: this constitutes the so-called “Vulgate”, the “official” text of the Latin Church which was recognized as such by the Council of Trent and which, after the recent revision, continues to be the “official” Latin text of the Church. It is interesting to point out the criteria which the great biblicist abided by in his work as a translator. He himself reveals them when he says that he

respects even the order of the words of the Sacred Scriptures, for in them, he says, “the order of the words is also a mystery” (Ep. 57, 5), that is, a revelation. Furthermore, he reaffirms the need to refer to the original texts: “Should an argument on the New Testament arise between Latins because of interpretations of the manuscripts that fail to agree, let us turn to the original, that is, to the Greek text in which the New Testament was written. “Likewise, with regard to the Old Testament, if there are divergences between the Greek and Latin texts we should have recourse to the original Hebrew text; thus, we shall be able to find in the streams all that flows from the source” (Ep. 106, 2). Jerome also commented on many biblical texts. For him the commentaries had to offer multiple opinions “so that the shrewd reader, after reading the different explanations and hearing many opinions - to be accepted or rejected - may judge which is the most reliable, and, like an expert moneychanger, may reject the false coin” (Contra Rufinum 1, 16).

Jerome refuted with energy and liveliness the heretics who contested the tradition and faith of the Church. He also demonstrated the importance and validity of Christian literature, which had by then become a real culture that deserved to be compared with classical literature: he did so by composing his *De Viris Illustribus*, a work in which Jerome presents the biographies of more than a hundred Christian authors. Further, he wrote biographies of monks, comparing among other things their spiritual itineraries as well as monastic ideal. In addition, he translated various works by Greek authors. Lastly, in the important *Epistulae*, a masterpiece of Latin literature, Jerome emerges with the profile of a man of culture, an ascetic and a guide of souls.

What can we learn from St Jerome? It seems to me, this above all; to love the Word of God in Sacred Scripture. St Jerome said: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. It is therefore important that every Christian live in contact and in personal dialogue with the Word of God given to us in Sacred Scripture. This dialogue with Scripture must always have two dimensions: on the one hand, it must be a truly personal dialogue because God speaks with each one of us through Sacred Scripture and it has a message for each one. We must not read Sacred Scripture as a word of the past but as the Word of God that is also addressed to us, and we must try to understand what it is that the Lord wants to tell us. However, to avoid falling into individualism, we must bear in mind that the Word of God has been given to us precisely in order to build communion and to join forces in the truth on our journey towards God. Thus, although it is always a personal Word, it is also a Word that builds community, that builds the Church. We must therefore read it in communion with the living Church. The privileged place for reading and listening to the Word of God is the liturgy, in which, celebrating the Word and making Christ’s Body present in the Sacrament, we actualize the Word in our lives and make it present among us. We must never forget that the Word of God transcends

time. Human opinions come and go. What is very modern today will be very antiquated tomorrow. On the other hand, the Word of God is the Word of eternal life, it bears within it eternity and is valid for ever. By carrying the Word of God within us, we therefore carry within us eternity, eternal life.

I thus conclude with a word St Jerome once addressed to St Paulinus of Nola. In it the great exegete expressed this very reality, that is, in the Word of God we receive eternity, eternal life. St Jerome said: “Seek to learn on earth those truths which will remain ever valid in Heaven” (Ep. 53, 10).

14 November 2007

Today, we continue the presentation of the figure of St Jerome. As we said last he dedicated his life to studying the Bible, so much so that he was recognized by my Predecessor, Pope Benedict XV, as “an outstanding doctor in the interpretation of Sacred Scripture”. Jerome emphasized the joy and importance of being familiar with biblical texts: “Does one not seem to dwell, already here on earth, in the Kingdom of Heaven when one lives with these texts, when one meditates on them, when one does not know or seek anything else?” (Ep. 53, 10). In reality, to dialogue with God, with his Word, is in a certain sense a presence of Heaven, a presence of God. To draw near to the biblical texts, above all the New Testament, is essential for the believer, because “ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ”. This is his famous phrase, cited also by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Dei Verbum* (n. 25).

Truly “in love” with the Word of God, he asked himself: “How could one live without the knowledge of Scripture, through which one learns to know Christ himself, who is the life of believers?” (Ep. 30, 7). The Bible, an instrument “by which God speaks every day to the faithful” (Ep. 133, 13), thus becomes a stimulus and source of Christian life for all situations and for each person. To read Scripture is to converse with God: “If you pray”, he writes to a young Roman noblewoman, “you speak with the Spouse; if you read, it is he who speaks to you” (Ep. 22, 25). The study of and meditation on Scripture renders man wise and serene (cf. In Eph., Prol.). Certainly, to penetrate the Word of God ever more profoundly, a constant and progressive application is needed. Hence, Jerome recommends to the priest Nepotian: “Read the divine Scriptures frequently; rather, may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach” (Ep. 52, 7). To the Roman matron Leta he gave this counsel for the Christian education of her daughter: “Ensure that each day she studies some Scripture passage.... After prayer, reading should follow, and after reading, prayer.... Instead of jewels and silk clothing, may she love the divine Books” (Ep. 107, 9, 12). Through meditation on and knowledge of the Scriptures, one “maintains the equilibrium of the soul” (Ad Eph., Prol.). Only a profound spirit of prayer and the Holy Spirit’s help can introduce us to understanding

the Bible: “In the interpretation of Sacred Scripture we always need the help of the Holy Spirit” (In Mich. 1, 1, 10, 15).

A passionate love for Scripture therefore pervaded Jerome’s whole life, a love that he always sought to deepen in the faithful, too. He recommends to one of his spiritual daughters: “Love Sacred Scripture and wisdom will love you; love it tenderly, and it will protect you; honour it and you will receive its caresses. May it be for you as your necklaces and your earrings” (Ep. 130, 20). And again: “Love the science of Scripture, and you will not love the vices of the flesh” (Ep. 125, 11).

For Jerome, a fundamental criterion of the method for interpreting the Scriptures was harmony with the Church’s Magisterium. We should never read Scripture alone because we meet too many closed doors and could easily slip into error. The Bible has been written by the People of God and for the People of God under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Only in this communion with the People of God do we truly enter into the “we”, into the nucleus of the truth that God himself wants to tell us. For him, an authentic interpretation of the Bible must always be in harmonious accord with the faith of the Catholic Church. It is not a question of an exegesis imposed on this Book from without; the Book is really the voice of the pilgrim People of God and only in the faith of this People are we “correctly attuned” to understand Sacred Scripture. Therefore, Jerome admonishes: “Remain firmly attached to the traditional doctrine that you have been taught, so that you can preach according to right doctrine and refute those who contradict it” (Ep. 52, 7). In particular, given that Jesus Christ founded his Church on Peter, every Christian, he concludes, must be in communion “with St Peter’s See. I know that on this rock the Church is built” (Ep. 15, 2). Consequently, without equivocation, he declared: “I am with whoever is united to the teaching of St Peter” (Ep. 16).

Obviously, Jerome does not neglect the ethical aspect. Indeed, he often recalls the duty to harmonize one’s life with the divine Word, and only by living it does one also find the capacity to understand it. This consistency is indispensable for every Christian, and particularly for the preacher, so that his actions may never contradict his discourses nor be an embarrassment to him. Thus, he exhorts the priest Nepotian: “May your actions never be unworthy of your words, may it not happen that, when you preach in church, someone might say to himself: “Why does he therefore not act like this?”. How could a teacher, on a full stomach, discuss fasting; even a thief can blame avarice; but in the priest of Christ the mind and words must harmonize” (Ep. 52, 7). In another Epistle Jerome repeats: “Even if we possess a splendid doctrine, the person who feels condemned by his own conscience remains disgraced” (Ep. 127, 4). Also on the theme of consistency he observes: the Gospel must translate into truly charitable behaviour, because in each human being the Person of Christ himself is present. For example, addressing the

presbyter Paulinus (who then became Bishop of Nola and a Saint), Jerome counsels: “The true temple of Christ is the soul of the faithful: adorn it and beautify this shrine, place your offerings in it and receive Christ. What is the use of decorating the walls with precious stones if Christ dies of hunger in the person of the poor?” (Ep. 58, 7). Jerome concretizes the need “to clothe Christ in the poor, to visit him in the suffering, to nourish him in the hungry, to house him in the homeless” (Ep. 130, 14). The love of Christ, nourished with study and meditation, makes us rise above every difficulty: “Let us also love Jesus Christ, always seeking union with him: then even what is difficult will seem easy to us” (Ep. 22, 40).

Prosper of Aquitaine, who defined Jerome as a “model of conduct and teacher of the human race” (*Carmen de ingratis*, 57), also left us a rich and varied teaching on Christian asceticism. He reminds us that a courageous commitment towards perfection requires constant vigilance, frequent mortifications, even if with moderation and prudence, and assiduous intellectual and manual labour to avoid idleness (cf. Epp. 125, 11; 130, 15), and above all obedience to God: “Nothing... pleases God as much as obedience..., which is the most excellent and sole virtue” (*Hom. de Oboedientia*: CCL 78, 552). The practice of pilgrimage can also be part of the ascetical journey. In particular, Jerome promoted pilgrimages to the Holy Land, where pilgrims were welcomed and housed in the lodgings that were built next to the monastery of Bethlehem, thanks to the generosity of the noblewoman Paula, a spiritual daughter of Jerome (cf. Ep. 108, 14).

Lastly, one cannot remain silent about the importance that Jerome gave to the matter of Christian pedagogy (cf. Epp. 107; 128). He proposed to form “one soul that must become the temple of the Lord” (Ep. 107, 4), a “very precious gem” in the eyes of God (Ep. 107, 13). With profound intuition he advises to preserve oneself from evil and from the occasions of sin, and to exclude equivocal or dissipating friendships (cf. Ep. 107, 4, 8-9; also Ep. 128, 3-4). Above all, he exhorts parents to create a serene and joyful environment around their children, to stimulate them to study and work also through praise and emulation (cf. Epp. 107, 4; 128, 1), encouraging them to overcome difficulties, foster good habits and avoid picking up bad habits, so that, and here he cites a phrase of Publius Siro which he heard at school: “it will be difficult for you to correct those things to which you are quietly habituating yourself” (Ep. 107, 8). Parents are the principal educators of their children, the first teachers of life. With great clarity Jerome, addressing a young girl’s mother and then mentioning her father, admonishes, almost expressing a fundamental duty of every human creature who comes into existence: “May she find in you her teacher, and may she look to you with the inexperienced wonder of childhood. Neither in you, nor in her father should she ever see behaviour that could lead to sin, as it could be copied. Remember that... you can educate her more by example than with words” (Ep. 107, 9). Among Jerome’s principal intuitions as a pedagogue, one must emphasize the importance he



attributed to a healthy and integral education beginning from early childhood, the particular responsibility belonging to parents, the urgency of a serious moral and religious formation and the duty to study for a more complete human formation. Moreover, an aspect rather disregarded in ancient times but held vital by our author is the promotion of the woman, to whom he recognizes the right to a complete formation: human, scholastic, religious, professional. We see precisely today how the education of the personality in its totality, the education to responsibility before God and man, is the true condition of all progress, all peace, all reconciliation and the exclusion of violence. Education before God and man: it is Sacred Scripture that offers us the guide for education and thus of true humanism.

We cannot conclude these quick notes on the great Father of the Church without mentioning his effective contribution to safeguarding the positive and valid elements of the ancient Hebrew, Greek and Roman cultures for nascent Christian civilization. Jerome recognized and assimilated the artistic values of the richness of the sentiments and the harmony of the images present in the classics, which educate the heart and fantasy to noble sentiments. Above all, he put at the centre of his life and activity the Word of God, which indicates the path of life to man and reveals the secrets of holiness to him. We cannot fail to be deeply grateful for all of this, even in our day.

## **Aphraates, “the Sage”**

21 November 2007

In our excursion into the world of the Fathers of the Church, I would like to guide you today to a little-known part of this universe of faith, in the territories where the Semitic-language Churches flourished, still uninfluenced by Greek thought. These Churches developed throughout the fourth century in the Near East, from the Holy Land to Lebanon and to Mesopotamia. In that century, which was a period of formation on the ecclesial and literary level, these communities contributed to the ascetic-monastic phenomenon with autochthonous characteristics that did not come under Egyptian monastic influence. The Syriac communities of the fourth century, therefore, represent the Semitic world from which the Bible itself has come, and they are an expression of a Christianity whose theological formulation had not yet entered into contact with different cultural currents, but lived in their own way of thinking. They are Churches in which asceticism in its various hermitic forms (hermits in the desert, caverns, recluses, stylites) and monasticism in forms of community life, exert a role of vital importance in the development of theological and spiritual thought.

I would like to introduce this world through the great figure of Aphraates, known also by the sobriquet “the Sage”. He was one of the most important and at the same time most enigmatic personages of fourth century Syriac Christianity. A native of the Ninive-Mossul region, today in Iraq, he lived during the first half of the fourth century. We have little information about his life; he maintained, however, close ties with the ascetic-monastic environment of the Syriac-speaking Church, of which he has given us some information in his work and to which he dedicates part of his reflection. Indeed, according to some sources he was the head of a monastery and later consecrated a Bishop. He wrote 23 homilies, known as Expositions or Demonstrations, on various aspects of Christian life, such as faith, love, fasting, humility, prayer, the ascetic life, and also the relationship between Judaism and Christianity, between the Old and New Testaments. He wrote in a simple style with short sentences and sometimes with contrasting parallelisms; nevertheless, he was able to weave consistent discourses with a well-articulated development of the various arguments he treated.

Aphraates was from an Ecclesial Community situated on the frontier between Judaism and Christianity. It was a community strongly-linked to the Mother Church of Jerusalem, and its Bishops were traditionally chosen from among the so-called “family” of James, the “brother of the Lord” (cf. Mk 6:3). They were people linked by blood and by faith to the Church of Jerusalem. Aphraates’ language was Syriac, therefore a Semitic language like the Hebrew of the Old Testament and like the Aramaic spoken by Jesus himself. Aphraates’ Ecclesial Community was a community that sought to remain faithful to the Judeo-Christian tradition, of which it felt it was a daughter. It therefore maintained a close relationship with the Jewish world and its Sacred Books. Significantly, Aphraates defines himself as a “disciple of the Sacred Scripture” of the Old and New Testaments (Expositions 22, 26), which he considers as his only source of inspiration, having recourse to it in such abundance as to make it the centre of his reflection.

Aphraates develops various arguments in his Expositions. Faithful to Syriac tradition, he often presents the salvation wrought by Christ as a healing, and thus Christ himself as the physician.

Sin, on the other hand, is seen as a wound that only penance can heal: “A man who has been wounded in battle”, Aphraates said, “is not ashamed to place himself in the hands of a wise doctor...; in the same way, the one who has been wounded by Satan must not be ashamed to recognize his fault and distance himself from it, asking for the medicine of penance” (Expositions 7, 3). Another important aspect in Aphraates’ work is his teaching on prayer, and in a special way on Christ as the teacher of prayer. The Christian prays following Jesus’ teaching and example of oration: “Our Saviour taught people to pray like

this, saying: “Pray in secret to the One who is hidden, but who sees all”; and again: “Go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you’ (Mt 6:6)... Our Saviour wants to show that God knows the desires and thoughts of the heart” (Expositions 4, 10).

For Aphraates, the Christian life is centred on the imitation of Christ, in taking up his yoke and following him on the way of the Gospel. One of the most useful virtues for Christ’s disciple is humility. It is not a secondary aspect in the Christian’s spiritual life: man’s nature is humble and it is God who exalts it to his own glory. Aphraates observed that humility is not a negative value: “If man’s roots are planted in the earth, his fruits ascend before the Lord of majesty” (Expositions 9, 14). By remaining humble in the earthly reality in which one lives, the Christian can enter into relationship with the Lord: “The humble man is humble, but his heart rises to lofty heights. The eyes of his face observe the earth and the eyes of his mind the lofty heights” (Expositions 9, 2).

*Aphraates’ vision of man and his physical reality is very positive: the human body, in the example of the humble Christ, is called to beauty, joy and light: “God draws near to the man who loves, and it is right to love humility and to remain in a humble state. The humble are simple, patient, loving, integral, upright, good, prudent, calm, wise, quiet, peaceful, merciful, ready to convert, benevolent, profound, thoughtful, beautiful and attractive” (Expositions 9, 14). Aphraates often presented the Christian life in a clear ascetic and spiritual dimension: faith is the base, the foundation; it makes of man a temple where Christ himself dwells. Faith, therefore, makes sincere charity possible, which expresses itself in love for God and neighbour. Another important aspect in Aphraates’ thought is fasting, which he understood in a broad sense. He spoke of fasting from food as a necessary practice to be charitable and pure, of fasting understood as continence with a view to holiness, of fasting from vain or detestable words, of fasting from anger, of fasting from the possession of goods with a view to ministry, of fasting from sleep to be watchful in prayer.*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, to conclude, we return again to Aphraates’ teaching on prayer. According to this ancient “Sage”, prayer is achieved when Christ dwells in the Christian’s heart, and invites him to a coherent commitment to charity towards one’s neighbour. In fact, he wrote:*

“Give relief to those in distress, visit the ailing,

help the poor: this is prayer.

Prayer is good, and its works are beautiful.

Prayer is accepted when it gives relief to one’s neighbour.

Prayer is heard when it includes forgiveness of affronts.

Prayer is strong

when it is full of God's strength" (Expositions 4, 14-16).

With these words Aphraates invites us to a prayer that becomes Christian life, a fulfilled life, a life penetrated by faith, by openness to God and therefore to love of neighbour.

## Saint Ephrem

28 November 2007

Common opinion today supposes Christianity to be a European religion which subsequently exported the culture of this Continent to other countries. But the reality is far more complex since the roots of the Christian religion are found in the Old Testament, hence, in Jerusalem and the Semitic world. Christianity is still nourished by these Old Testament roots. Furthermore, its expansion in the first centuries was both towards the West - towards the Greco-Latin world, where it later inspired European culture - and in the direction of the East, as far as Persia and India. It thus contributed to creating a specific culture in Semitic languages with an identity of its own. To demonstrate this cultural pluralism of the one Christian faith in its origins, I spoke in my Catechesis last Wednesday of a representative of this other Christianity who is almost unknown to us: Aphraates, the Persian sage. Today, along the same lines, I would like to talk about St Ephrem the Syrian, who was born into a Christian family in Nisibis in about 306 A.D. He was Christianity's most important Syriac-speaking representative and uniquely succeeded in reconciling the vocations of theologian and poet. He was educated and grew up beside James, Bishop of Nisibis (303-338), and with him founded the theological school in his city. He was ordained a deacon and was intensely active in local Christian community life until 363, the year when Nisibis fell into Persian hands. Ephrem then emigrated to Edessa, where he continued his activity as a preacher. He died in this city in 373, a victim of the disease he contracted while caring for those infected with the plague. It is not known for certain whether he was a monk, but we can be sure in any case that he remained a deacon throughout his life and embraced virginity and poverty. Thus, the common and fundamental Christian identity appears in the specificity of his own cultural expression: faith, hope - the hope which makes it possible to live poor and chaste in this world, placing every expectation in the Lord - and lastly, charity, to the point of giving his life through nursing those sick with the plague.

St Ephrem has left us an important theological inheritance. His substantial opus can be divided into four categories: works written in ordinary prose (his polemic works or biblical commentaries); works written in poetic prose; homilies in verse; and lastly, hymns, undoubtedly Ephrem's most abundant production. He is a rich and interesting author in many ways, but especially from the theological point of view. It is the fact that

theology and poetry converge in his work which makes it so special. If we desire to approach his doctrine, we must insist on this from the outset: namely, on the fact that he produces theology in poetical form. Poetry enabled him to deepen his theological reflection through paradoxes and images. At the same time, his theology became liturgy, became music; indeed, he was a great composer, a musician. Theology, reflection on the faith, poetry, song and praise of God go together; and it is precisely in this liturgical character that the divine truth emerges clearly in Ephrem's theology. In his search for God, in his theological activity, he employed the way of paradoxes and symbols. He made ample use of contrasting images because they served to emphasize the mystery of God.

I cannot present much of his writing here, partly because his poetry is difficult to translate, but to give at least some idea of his poetical theology I would like to cite a part of two hymns. First of all, and also with a view to the approach of Advent, I shall propose to you several splendid images taken from his hymns On the Nativity of Christ. Ephrem expressed his wonder before the Virgin in inspired tones:

“The Lord entered her and became a servant; the Word entered her, and became silent within her; thunder entered her and his voice was still; the Shepherd of all entered her; he became a Lamb in her, and came forth bleating.

“The belly of your Mother changed the order of things, O you who order all! Rich he went in, he came out poor: the High One went into her [Mary], he came out lowly. Brightness went into her and clothed himself, and came forth a despised form....

“He that gives food to all went in, and knew hunger. He who gives drink to all went in, and knew thirst. Naked and bare came forth from her the Clother of all things [in beauty]”

(Hymn De Nativitate 11:6-8).

To express the mystery of Christ, Ephrem uses a broad range of topics, expressions and images. In one of his hymns he effectively links Adam (in Paradise) to Christ (in the Eucharist):

“It was by closing with the sword of the cherub that the path to the tree of life was closed. But for the peoples, the Lord of this tree gave himself as food in his (Eucharistic) oblation.

“The trees of the Garden of Eden were given as food to the first Adam. For us, the gardener of the Garden in person made himself food for our souls. Indeed, we had all left Paradise together with Adam, who left it behind him.

“Now that the sword has been removed here below (on the Cross), replaced by the spear, we can return to it”

(Hymn 49:9-11).

To speak of the Eucharist, Ephrem used two images, embers or burning coal and the pearl. The burning coal theme was taken from the Prophet Isaiah (cf. 6:6). It is the image of one of the seraphim who picks up a burning coal with tongs and simply touches the lips of the Prophet with it in order to purify them; the Christian, on the other hand, touches and consumes the Burning Coal which is Christ himself:

“In your bread hides the Spirit who cannot be consumed; in your wine is the fire that cannot be swallowed. The Spirit in your bread, fire in your wine: behold a wonder heard from our lips.

“The seraph could not bring himself to touch the glowing coal with his fingers, it was Isaiah’s mouth alone that it touched; neither did the fingers grasp it nor the mouth swallow it; but the Lord has granted us to do both these things.

“The fire came down with anger to destroy sinners, but the fire of grace descends on the bread and settles in it. Instead of the fire that destroyed man, we have consumed the fire in the bread and have been invigorated”

(Hymn De Fide 10:8-10).

Here again is a final example of St Ephrem’s hymns, where he speaks of the pearl as a symbol of the riches and beauty of faith:

“I placed (the pearl), my brothers, on the palm of my hand, to be able to examine it. I began to look at it from one side and from the other: it looked the same from all sides. (Thus) is the search for the Son inscrutable, because it is all light. In its clarity I saw the Clear One who does not grow opaque; and in his purity, the great symbol of the Body of Our Lord, which is pure. In his indivisibility I saw the truth which is indivisible”

(Hymn On the Pearl 1:2-3).

The figure of Ephrem is still absolutely timely for the life of the various Christian Churches. We discover him in the first place as a theologian who reflects poetically, on the basis of Holy Scripture, on the mystery of man’s redemption brought about by Christ, the Word of God incarnate. His is a theological reflection expressed in images and symbols taken from nature, daily life and the Bible. Ephrem gives his poetry and liturgical hymns a didactic and catechetical character: they are theological hymns yet at the same time suitable for recitation or liturgical song. On the occasion of liturgical feasts, Ephrem made use of these hymns to spread Church doctrine. Time has proven them to be an extremely effective catechetical instrument for the Christian community.

Ephrem's reflection on the theme of God the Creator is important: nothing in creation is isolated and the world, next to Sacred Scripture, is a Bible of God. By using his freedom wrongly, man upsets the cosmic order. The role of women was important to Ephrem. The way he spoke of them was always inspired with sensitivity and respect: the dwelling place of Jesus in Mary's womb greatly increased women's dignity. Ephrem held that just as there is no Redemption without Jesus, there is no Incarnation without Mary. The divine and human dimensions of the mystery of our redemption can already be found in Ephrem's texts; poetically and with fundamentally scriptural images, he anticipated the theological background and in some way the very language of the great Christological definitions of the fifth-century Councils.

Ephrem, honoured by Christian tradition with the title "Harp of the Holy Spirit", remained a deacon of the Church throughout his life. It was a crucial and emblematic decision: he was a deacon, a servant, in his liturgical ministry, and more radically, in his love for Christ, whose praises he sang in an unparalleled way, and also in his love for his brethren, whom he introduced with rare skill to the knowledge of divine Revelation.

## **Saint Chromatius of Aquileia**

5 December 2007

In the last two Catecheses we made an excursion through the Eastern Churches of Semitic tongue, meditating on Aphraates the Persian and Ephrem the Syrian. Today, we return to the Latin world, to the North of the Roman Empire with St Chromatius of Aquileia. This Bishop exercised his ministry in the ancient Church of Aquileia, a fervent centre of Christian life located in the Roman Empire's Decima regione, the Venetia et Histria. In 388 A.D., when Chromatius assumed the Episcopal throne of the city, the local Christian communities had already developed a glorious history of Gospel fidelity. Between the middle of the third century and the early years of the fourth, the persecution of Decius, Valerian and Diocletian had taken a heavy toll of martyrs. Furthermore, the Church of Aquileia, like so many other Churches of that time, had had to contend with the threat of the Arian heresy. Athanasius himself - a standard-bearer of Nicene orthodoxy whom the Arians had banished to exile - had for some time been in Aquileia, where he had taken refuge. Under the guidance of its Bishops, the Christian community withstood the snares of the heresy and reinforced their own attachment to the Catholic faith.

In September 381, Aquileia was the seat of a Synod that gathered about 35 Bishops from the coasts of Africa, the Rhone Valley and the entire Decima regione. The Synod intended to eliminate the last remnants of Arianism in the West. Chromatius, a priest, also took

part in the Council as *peritus* for Bishop Valerian of Aquileia (370/1 to 387/8). The years around the Synod of 381 were the “Golden Age” of the inhabitants of Aquileia. St Jerome, a native of Dalmatia, and Rufinus of Concordia, spoke nostalgically of their sojourn in Aquileia (370-73), in that sort of theological cenacle which Jerome did not hesitate to define “*tamquam chorus beatorum*”, “like a choir of blessed” (Cronaca: PL XXVII, 697-698). It was in this Upper Room - some aspects of which are reminiscent of the community experiences directed by Eusebius of Vercelli and by Augustine - that the most outstanding figures of the Church of the Upper Adriatic were formed.

Chromatius, however, had already learned at home to know and love Christ. Jerome himself spoke of this in terms full of admiration and compared Chromatius’ mother to the Prophetess Anna, his two sisters to the Wise Virgins of the Gospel Parable, and Chromatius himself and his brother Eusebius to the young Samuel (cf. Ep. VII: PL XXII, 341). Jerome wrote further of Chromatius and Eusebius: “Blessed Chromatius and St Eusebius were brothers by blood, no less than by the identity of their ideals” (Ep. VIII: PL XXII, 342).

Chromatius was born in Aquileia in about 345 A.D. He was ordained a deacon, then a priest; finally, he was appointed Bishop of that Church (388). After receiving episcopal ordination from Bishop Ambrose he dedicated himself courageously and energetically to an immense task because of the vast territory entrusted to his pastoral care: the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of Aquileia, in fact, stretched from the present-day territories of Switzerland, Bavaria, Austria and Slovenia, as far as Hungary. How well known and highly esteemed Chromatius was in the Church of his time we can deduce from an episode in the life of St John Chrysostom. When the Bishop of Constantinople was exiled from his See, he wrote three letters to those he considered the most important Bishops of the West seeking to obtain their support with the Emperors: he wrote one letter to the Bishop of Rome, the second to the Bishop of Milan and the third to the Bishop of Aquileia, precisely, Chromatius (Ep. CLV: PG LII, 702). Those were difficult times also for Chromatius because of the precarious political situation. In all likelihood Chromatius died in exile, in Grado, while he was attempting to escape the incursions of the Barbarians in 407, the same year when Chrysostom also died.

With regard to prestige and importance, Aquileia was the fourth city of the Italian peninsula and the ninth of the Roman Empire. This is another reason that explains why it was a target that attracted both Goths and Huns. In addition to causing serious bereavements and destruction, the invasions of these peoples gravely jeopardized the transmission of the works of the Fathers preserved in the episcopal library, rich in codices. St Chromatius’ writings were also dispersed, ending up here and there, and were often attributed to other authors: to John Chrysostom (partly because of the similar



beginning of their two names, Chromatius and Chrysostom); or to Ambrose or Augustine; or even to Jerome, to whom Chromatius had given considerable help in the revision of the text and in the Latin translation of the Bible. The rediscovery of a large part of the work of Chromatius is due to fortunate events, which has made it possible only in recent years to piece together a fairly consistent corpus of his writings: more than 40 homilies, 10 of which are fragments, and more than 60 treatises of commentary on Matthew's Gospel.

Chromatius was a wise teacher and a zealous pastor. His first and main commitment was to listen to the Word, to be able to subsequently proclaim it: he always bases his teaching on the Word of God and constantly returns to it. Certain subjects are particularly dear to him: first of all, the Trinitarian mystery, which he contemplated in its revelation throughout the history of salvation.

Then, the theme of the Holy Spirit: Chromatius constantly reminds the faithful of the presence and action in the life of the Church of the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity. But the holy Bishop returns with special insistence to the mystery of Christ. The Incarnate Word is true God and true man: he took on humanity in its totality to endow it with his own divinity. These truths, which he also reaffirmed explicitly in order to counter Arianism, were to end up about 50 years later in the definition of the Council of Chalcedon. The heavy emphasis on Christ's human nature led Chromatius to speak of the Virgin Mary. His Mariological doctrine is clear and precise. To him we owe evocative descriptions of the Virgin Most Holy: Mary is the "evangelical Virgin capable of accepting God"; she is the "immaculate and inviolate ewe lamb" who conceived the "Lamb clad in purple" (cf. *Sermo XXIII*, 3: *Scrittore dell'area santambrosiana 3/1*, p. 134). The Bishop of Aquileia often compares the Virgin with the Church: both, in fact, are "virgins" and "mothers". Chromatius developed his ecclesiology above all in his commentary on Matthew. These are some of the recurring concepts: the Church is one, she is born from the Blood of Christ; she is a precious garment woven by the Holy Spirit; the Church is where the fact that Christ was born of a Virgin is proclaimed, where brotherhood and harmony flourish. One image of which Chromatius is especially fond is that of the ship in a storm - and his were stormy times, as we have heard: "There is no doubt", the Holy Bishop says, "that this ship represents the Church" (cf. *Tractatus XLII*, 5: *Scrittore dell'area santambrosiana 3/2*, p. 260).

As the zealous pastor that he was, Chromatius was able to speak to his people with a fresh, colourful and incisive language. Although he was not ignorant of the perfect Latin *cursus*, he preferred to use the vernacular, rich in images easy to understand. Thus, for example, drawing inspiration from the sea, he compared on the one hand the natural catching of fish which, caught and landed, die; and on the other, Gospel preaching,

thanks to which men and women are saved from the murky waters of death and ushered into true life (cf. *Tractatus XVI, 3: Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana 3/2*, p. 106). Again, in the perspective of a good Pastor, during a turbulent period such as his, ravaged by the incursions of Barbarians, he was able to set himself beside the faithful to comfort them and open their minds to trust in God, who never abandons his children.

Lastly, as a conclusion to these reflections, let us include an exhortation of Chromatius which is still perfectly applicable today: “Let us pray to the Lord with all our heart and with all our faith”, the Bishop of Aquileia recommends in one of his Sermons, “let us pray to him to deliver us from all enemy incursions, from all fear of adversaries. Do not look at our merits but at his mercy, at him who also in the past deigned to set the Children of Israel free, not for their own merits but through his mercy. “May he protect us with his customary merciful love and bring about for us what holy Moses said to the Children of Israel: The Lord will fight to defend you, and you will be silent. It is he who fights, it is he who wins the victory.... And so that he may condescend to do so, we must pray as much as possible. He himself said, in fact, through the mouth of the prophet: Call on me on the day of tribulation; I will set you free and you will give me glory” (*Sermo XVI, 4: Scrittori dell'area santambrosiana 3/2*, pp. 100-102).

Thus, at the very beginning of the Advent Season, St Chromatius reminds us that Advent is a time of prayer in which it is essential to enter into contact with God. God knows us, he knows me, he knows each one of us, he loves me, he will not abandon me. Let us go forward with this trust in the liturgical season that has just begun.

## **Saint Paulinus of Nola**

12 December 2007

The Father of the Church to whom we turn our attention today is St Paulinus of Nola. Paulinus, a contemporary of St Augustine to whom he was bound by a firm friendship, exercised his ministry at Nola in Campania, where he was a monk and later a priest and a Bishop. However, he was originally from Aquitaine in the South of France, to be precise, Bordeaux, where he was born into a high-ranking family. It was here, with the poet Ausonius as his teacher, that he received a fine literary education. He left his native region for the first time to follow his precocious political career, which was to see him rise while still young to the position of Governor of Campania. In this public office he attracted admiration for his gifts of wisdom and gentleness. It was during this period that grace caused the seed of conversion to grow in his heart. The incentive came from the simple and intense faith with which the people honoured the tomb of a saint, Felix the Martyr, at the Shrine of present-day Cimitile. As the head of public government,

Paulinus took an interest in this Shrine and had a hospice for the poor built and a road to facilitate access to it for the many pilgrims.

While he was doing his best to build the city on earth, he continued discovering the way to the city in Heaven. The encounter with Christ was the destination of a laborious journey, strewn with ordeals. Difficult circumstances which resulted from his loss of favour with the political Authorities made the transience of things tangible to him. Once he had arrived at faith, he was to write: “The man without Christ is dust and shadow” (Carm. X, 289). Anxious to shed light on the meaning of life, he went to Milan to attend the school of Ambrose. He then completed his Christian formation in his native land, where he was baptized by Bishop Delphinus of Bordeaux. Marriage was also a landmark on his journey of faith. Indeed, he married Therasia, a devout noblewoman from Barcelona, with whom he had a son. He would have continued to live as a good lay Christian had not the infant’s death after only a few days intervened to rouse him, showing him that God had other plans for his life. Indeed, he felt called to consecrate himself to Christ in a rigorous ascetic life.

In full agreement with his wife Therasia, he sold his possessions for the benefit of the poor and, with her, left Aquitaine for Nola. Here, the husband and wife settled beside the Basilica of the Patron Saint, Felix, living henceforth in chaste brotherhood according to a form of life which also attracted others. The community’s routine was typically monastic, but Paulinus, who had been ordained a priest in Barcelona, took it upon himself despite his priestly status to care for pilgrims. This won him the liking and trust of the Christian community, which chose Paulinus, upon the death of the Bishop in about 409, as his successor in the See of Nola. Paulinus intensified his pastoral activity, distinguished by special attention to the poor. He has bequeathed to us the image of an authentic Pastor of charity, as St Gregory the Great described him in chapter III of his Dialogues, in which he depicts Paulinus in the heroic gesture of offering himself as a prisoner in the place of a widow’s son. The historical truth of this episode is disputed, but the figure of a Bishop with a great heart who knew how to make himself close to his people in the sorrowful trials of the barbarian invasions lives on.

Paulinus’ conversion impressed his contemporaries. His teacher Ausonius, a pagan poet, felt “betrayed” and addressed bitter words to him, reproaching him on the one hand for his “contempt”, considered insane, of material goods, and on the other, for abandoning his literary vocation. Paulinus replied that giving to the poor did not mean contempt for earthly possessions but rather an appreciation of them for the loftiest aim of charity. As for literary commitments, what Paulinus had taken leave of was not his poetic talent - which he was to continue to cultivate - but poetic forms inspired by mythology and pagan ideals. A new aesthetic now governed his sensibility: the beauty of God incarnate,

crucified and risen, whose praises he now sang. Actually, he had not abandoned poetry but was henceforth to find his inspiration in the Gospel, as he says in this verse: “To my mind the only art is the faith, and Christ is my poetry” (At nobis ars una fides, et musica Christus: Carm., XX, 32).

Paulinus’ poems are songs of faith and love in which the daily history of small and great events is seen as a history of salvation, a history of God with us. Many of these compositions, the so-called *Carmina natalicia*, are linked to the annual feast of Felix the Martyr, whom he had chosen as his heavenly Patron. Remembering St Felix, Paulinus desired to glorify Christ himself, convinced as he was that the Saint’s intercession had obtained the grace of conversion for him: “In your light, joyful, I loved Christ” (Carm. XXI, 373). He desired to express this very concept by enlarging the Shrine with a new basilica, which he had decorated in such a way that the paintings, described by suitable captions, would constitute a visual catechesis for pilgrims. Thus, he explained his project in a Poem dedicated to another great catechist, St Nicetas of Remesiana, as he accompanied him on a visit to his basilicas: “I now want you to contemplate the paintings that unfold in a long series on the walls of the painted porticos.... It seemed to us useful to portray sacred themes in painting throughout the house of Felix, in the hope that when the peasants see the painted figure, these images will awaken interest in their astonished minds” (Carm. XXVII, vv. 511, 580-583). Today, it is still possible to admire the remains of these works which rightly place the Saint of Nola among the figures with a Christian archaeological reference.

Life in accordance with the ascetic discipline of Cimitile was spent in poverty and prayer and was wholly immersed in *lectio divina*. Scripture, read, meditated upon and assimilated, was the light in whose brightness the Saint of Nola examined his soul as he strove for perfection. He told those who were struck by his decision to give up material goods that this act was very far from representing total conversion. “The relinquishment or sale of temporal goods possessed in this world is not the completion but only the beginning of the race in the stadium; it is not, so to speak, the goal, but only the starting point. In fact, the athlete does not win because he strips himself, for he undresses precisely in order to begin the contest, whereas he only deserves to be crowned as victorious when he has fought properly” (cf. Ep. XXIV, 7 to Sulpicius Severus).

After the ascetic life and the Word of God came charity; the poor were at home in the monastic community. Paulinus did not limit himself to distributing alms to them: he welcomed them as though they were Christ himself. He reserved a part of the monastery for them and by so doing, it seemed to him that he was not so much giving as receiving, in the exchange of gifts between the hospitality offered and the prayerful gratitude of those assisted. He called the poor his “masters” (cf. Ep. XIII, 11 to Pammachius) and,

remarking that they were housed on the lower floor, liked to say that their prayers constituted the foundations of his house (cf. Carm. XXI, 393-394).

St Paulinus did not write theological treatises, but his poems and ample correspondence are rich in a lived theology, woven from God's Word, constantly examined as a light for life. The sense of the Church as a mystery of unity emerges in particular from them. Paulinus lived communion above all through a pronounced practice of spiritual friendship. He was truly a master in this, making his life a crossroads of elect spirits: from Martin of Tours to Jerome, from Ambrose to Augustine, from Delphinus of Bordeaux to Nicetas of Remesia, from Victricius of Rouen to Rufinus of Aquileia, from Pammachius to Sulpicius Severus and many others, more or less well known. It was in this atmosphere that the intense pages written to Augustine came into being. Over and above the content of the individual letters, one is impressed by the warmth with which the Saint of Nola sings of friendship itself as a manifestation of the one Body of Christ, enlivened by the Holy Spirit. Here is an important passage that comes at the beginning of the correspondence between the two friends: "It is not surprising if, despite being far apart, we are present to each other and, without being acquainted, know each other, because we are members of one body, we have one head, we are steeped in one grace, we live on one loaf, we walk on one road and we dwell in the same house" (Ep. VI, 2). As can be seen, this is a very beautiful description of what it means to be Christian, to be the Body of Christ, to live within the Church's communion. The theology of our time has found the key to approaching the mystery of the Church precisely in the concept of communion. The witness of St Paulinus of Nola helps us to perceive the Church, as she is presented to us by the Second Vatican Council, as a sacrament of intimate union with God, hence, of unity among all of us and, lastly, among the whole human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1).

## Saint Augustine of Hippo

9 January 2008

After the great Christmas festivities, I would like to return to the meditations on the Fathers of the Church and speak today of the greatest Father of the Latin Church, St Augustine. This man of passion and faith, of the highest intelligence and tireless in his pastoral care, a great Saint and Doctor of the Church is often known, at least by hearsay, even by those who ignore Christianity or who are not familiar with it, because he left a very deep mark on the cultural life of the West and on the whole world. Because of his special importance St Augustine's influence was widespread. It could be said on the one hand that all the roads of Latin Christian literature led to Hippo (today Annaba, on the coast of Algeria), the place where he was Bishop from 395 to his death in 430, and, on the

other, that from this city of Roman Africa, many other roads of later Christianity and of Western culture itself branched out.

A civilization has seldom encountered such a great spirit who was able to assimilate Christianity's values and exalt its intrinsic wealth, inventing ideas and forms that were to nourish the future generations, as Paul VI also stressed: "It may be said that all the thought-currents of the past meet in his works and form the source which provides the whole doctrinal tradition of succeeding ages" (Inaugural Address at the Patristic Institute of the "Augustinianum", 4 May 1970; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 21 May 1970, p. 8). Augustine is also the Father of the Church who left the greatest number of works. Possidius, his biographer, said that it seemed impossible that one man could have written so many things in his lifetime. We shall speak of these different works at one of our meetings soon. Today, we shall focus on his life, which is easy to reconstruct from his writings, in particular the *Confessions*, his extraordinary spiritual autobiography written in praise of God. This is his most famous work; and rightly so, since it is precisely Augustine's *Confessions*, with their focus on interiority and psychology, that constitute a unique model in Western (and not only Western) literature—including non-religious literature—up to modern times. This attention to the spiritual life, to the mystery of the "I", to the mystery of God who is concealed in the "I", is something quite extraordinary, without precedent, and remains for ever, as it were, a spiritual "peak".

But to come back to his life: Augustine was born in Tagaste in the Roman Province of Numidia, Africa, on 13 November 354 to Patricius, a pagan who later became a catechumen, and Monica, a fervent Christian. This passionate woman, venerated as a saint, exercised an enormous influence on her son and raised him in the Christian faith. Augustine had also received the salt, a sign of acceptance in the catechumenate, and was always fascinated by the figure of Jesus Christ; indeed, he said that he had always loved Jesus but had drifted further and further away from ecclesial faith and practice, as also happens to many young people today.

Augustine also had a brother, Navigius, and a sister whose name is unknown to us and who, after being widowed subsequently became the head of a monastery for women. As a boy with a very keen intelligence, Augustine received a good education although he was not always an exemplary student. However, he learned grammar well, first in his native town and then in Madaura, and from 370, he studied rhetoric in Carthage, the capital of Roman Africa. He mastered Latin perfectly but was not quite as successful with Greek and did not learn Punic, spoken by his contemporaries. It was in Carthage itself that for the first time Augustine read the *Hortensius*, a writing by Cicero later lost, an event that can be placed at the beginning of his journey towards conversion. In fact, Cicero's text awoke within him love for wisdom, as, by then a Bishop, he was to write in his

Confessions: “The book changed my feelings”, to the extent that “every vain hope became empty to me, and I longed for the immortality of wisdom with an incredible ardour in my heart” (III, 4, 7).

However, since he was convinced that without Jesus the truth cannot be said effectively to have been found and since Jesus’ Name was not mentioned in this book, immediately after he read it he began to read Scripture, the Bible. But it disappointed him. This was not only because the Latin style of the translation of the Sacred Scriptures was inadequate but also because to him their content itself did not seem satisfying. In the scriptural narratives of wars and other human vicissitudes, he discovered neither the loftiness of philosophy nor the splendour of the search for the truth which is part of it. Yet he did not want to live without God and thus sought a religion which corresponded to his desire for the truth and also with his desire to draw close to Jesus. Thus, he fell into the net of the Manicheans, who presented themselves as Christians and promised a totally rational religion. They said that the world was divided into two principles: good and evil. And in this way the whole complexity of human history can be explained. Their dualistic morals also pleased St Augustine, because it included a very high morality for the elect: and those like him who adhered to it could live a life better suited to the situation of the time, especially for a young man. He therefore became a Manichean, convinced at that time that he had found the synthesis between rationality and the search for the truth and love of Jesus Christ. Manicheanism also offered him a concrete advantage in life: joining the Manicheans facilitated the prospects of a career. By belonging to that religion, which included so many influential figures, he was able to continue his relationship with a woman and to advance in his career. By this woman he had a son, Adeodatus, who was very dear to him and very intelligent, who was later to be present during the preparation for Baptism near Lake Como, taking part in those “Dialogues” which St Augustine has passed down to us. The boy unfortunately died prematurely. Having been a grammar teacher since his twenties in the city of his birth, he soon returned to Carthage, where he became a brilliant and famous teacher of rhetoric. However, with time Augustine began to distance himself from the faith of the Manicheans. They disappointed him precisely from the intellectual viewpoint since they proved incapable of dispelling his doubts. He moved to Rome and then to Milan, where the imperial court resided at that time and where he obtained a prestigious post through the good offices and recommendations of the Prefect of Rome, Symmacus, a pagan hostile to St Ambrose, Bishop of Milan.

In Milan, Augustine acquired the habit of listening - at first for the purpose of enriching his rhetorical baggage - to the eloquent preaching of Bishop Ambrose, who had been a representative of the Emperor for Northern Italy. The African rhetorician was fascinated by the words of the great Milanese Prelate; and not only by his rhetoric. It was above all

the content that increasingly touched Augustine's heart. The great difficulty with the Old Testament, because of its lack of rhetorical beauty and lofty philosophy was resolved in St Ambrose's preaching through his typological interpretation of the Old Testament: Augustine realized that the whole of the Old Testament was a journey toward Jesus Christ. Thus, he found the key to understanding the beauty and even the philosophical depth of the Old Testament and grasped the whole unity of the mystery of Christ in history, as well as the synthesis between philosophy, rationality and faith in the Logos, in Christ, the Eternal Word who was made flesh.

Augustine soon realized that the allegorical interpretation of Scripture and the Neo-Platonic philosophy practised by the Bishop of Milan enabled him to solve the intellectual difficulties which, when he was younger during his first approach to the biblical texts, had seemed insurmountable to him.

Thus, Augustine followed his reading of the philosophers' writings by reading Scripture anew, especially the Pauline Letters. His conversion to Christianity on 15 August 386 therefore came at the end of a long and tormented inner journey - of which we shall speak in another catechesis -, and the African moved to the countryside, north of Milan by Lake Como - with his mother Monica, his son Adeodatus and a small group of friends - to prepare himself for Baptism. So it was that at the age of 32 Augustine was baptized by Ambrose in the Cathedral of Milan on 24 April 387, during the Easter Vigil.

After his Baptism, Augustine decided to return to Africa with his friends, with the idea of living a community life of the monastic kind at the service of God. However, while awaiting their departure in Ostia, his mother fell ill unexpectedly and died shortly afterwards, breaking her son's heart. Having returned to his homeland at last, the convert settled in Hippo for the very purpose of founding a monastery. In this city on the African coast he was ordained a priest in 391, despite his reticence, and with a few companions began the monastic life which had long been in his mind, dividing his time between prayer, study and preaching. All he wanted was to be at the service of the truth. He did not feel he had a vocation to pastoral life but realized later that God was calling him to be a pastor among others and thus to offer people the gift of the truth. He was ordained a Bishop in Hippo four years later, in 395. Augustine continued to deepen his study of Scripture and of the texts of the Christian tradition and was an exemplary Bishop in his tireless pastoral commitment: he preached several times a week to his faithful, supported the poor and orphans, supervised the formation of the clergy and the organization of men's and women's monasteries. In short, the former rhetorician asserted himself as one of the most important exponents of Christianity of that time. He was very active in the government of his Diocese - with remarkable, even civil, implications - in the more than 35 years of his Episcopate, and the Bishop of Hippo



actually exercised a vast influence in his guidance of the Catholic Church in Roman Africa and, more generally, in the Christianity of his time, coping with religious tendencies and tenacious, disruptive heresies such as Manichaeism, Donatism and Pelagianism, which endangered the Christian faith in the one God, rich in mercy.

And Augustine entrusted himself to God every day until the very end of his life: smitten by fever, while for almost three months his Hippo was being besieged by vandal invaders, the Bishop - his friend Possidius recounts in his *Vita Augustini* - asked that the penitential psalms be transcribed in large characters, “and that the sheets be attached to the wall, so that while he was bedridden during his illness he could see and read them and he shed constant hot tears” (31, 2). This is how Augustine spent the last days of his life. He died on 28 August 430, when he was not yet 76. We will devote our next encounters to his work, his message and his inner experience.

16 January 2008

Today, like last I would like to talk about the great Bishop of Hippo, St Augustine. He chose to appoint his successor four years before he died. Thus, on 26 September 426, he gathered the people in the Basilica of Peace at Hippo to present to the faithful the one he had designated for this task. He said: “In this life we are all mortal, and the day which shall be the last of life on earth is to every man at all times uncertain; but in infancy there is hope of entering boyhood... looking forward from boyhood to youth, from youth to manhood and from manhood to old age; whether these hopes may be realized or not is uncertain, but there is in each case something which may be hoped for. But old age has no other period of this life to look forward to with expectation: in any case, how long old age may be prolonged is uncertain.... I came to this town - for such was the will of God - when I was in the prime of life. I was young then, but now I am old” (Ep 213, 1). At this point Augustine named the person he had chosen as his successor, the presbyter Heraclius. The assembly burst into an applause of approval, shouting 23 times, “To God be thanks! To Christ be praise!”. With other acclamations the faithful also approved what Augustine proposed for his future: he wanted to dedicate the years that were left to him to a more intense study of Sacred Scripture (cf. Ep 213, 6).

Indeed, what followed were four years of extraordinary intellectual activity: he brought important works to conclusion, he embarked on others, equally demanding, held public debates with heretics - he was always seeking dialogue - and intervened to foster peace in the African provinces threatened by barbarian southern tribes. He wrote about this to Count Darius, who had come to Africa to settle the disagreement between Boniface and the imperial court which the tribes of Mauritania were exploiting for their incursions: “It is a higher glory still”, he said in his letter, “to stay war itself with a word, than to slay men with the sword, and to procure or maintain peace by peace, not by war. For those

who fight, if they are good men, doubtlessly seek peace; nevertheless, it is through blood. Your mission, however, is to prevent the shedding of blood” (Ep 229, 2). Unfortunately, the hope of pacification in the African territories was disappointed; in May 429, the Vandals, whom out of spite Boniface had invited to Africa, passed the straits of Gibraltar and streamed into Mauritania. The invasion rapidly reached the other rich African provinces. In May or June 430, “the destroyers of the Roman Empire”, as Possidius described these barbarians (Vita, 30, 1), were surrounding and besieging Hippo.

Boniface had also sought refuge in the city. Having been reconciled with the court too late, he was now trying in vain to block the invaders’ entry. Possidius, Augustine’s biographer, describes Augustine’s sorrow: “More tears than usual were his bread, night and day, and when he had reached the very end of his life, his old age caused him, more than others, grief and mourning (Vita, 28, 6). And he explains: “Indeed, that man of God saw the massacres and the destruction of the city; houses in the countryside were pulled down and the inhabitants killed by the enemy or put to flight and dispersed. Private churches belonging to priests and ministers were demolished, sacred virgins and Religious scattered on every side; some died under torture, others were killed by the sword, still others taken prisoner, losing the integrity of their soul and body and even their faith, reduced by their enemies to a long, drawn-out and painful slavery” (ibid., 28, 8).

Despite being old and weary, Augustine stood in the breach, comforting himself and others with prayer and meditation on the mysterious designs of Providence. In this regard, he spoke of the “old-age of the world” - and this Roman world was truly old -, he spoke of this old age as years earlier he had spoken to comfort the refugees from Italy when Alaric’s Goths had invaded the city of Rome in 410. In old age, he said, ailments proliferate: coughs, catarrh, bleary eyes, anxiety and exhaustion. Yet, if the world grows old, Christ is perpetually young; hence, the invitation: “Do not refuse to be rejuvenated united to Christ, even in the old world. He tells you: Do not fear, your youth will be renewed like that of the eagle” (cf. Sermon 81, 8). Thus, the Christian must not lose heart, even in difficult situations, but rather he must spare no effort to help those in need. This is what the great doctor suggested in his response to Honoratus, Bishop of Tiabe, who had asked him whether a Bishop or a priest or any man of the Church with the barbarians hot on his heels could flee to save his life: “When danger is common to all, that is, for Bishops, clerics and lay people, may those who need others not be abandoned by the people whom they need. In this case, either let all depart together to safe places or let those who must remain not be deserted by those through whom, in things pertaining to the Church, their necessities must be provided for; and so let them share life in common, or share in common that which the Father of their family appoints them to suffer” (Ep 228, 2). And he concluded: “Such conduct is especially the proof of love” (ibid., 3). How

can we fail to recognize in these words the heroic message that so many priests down the centuries have welcomed and made their own?

In the meantime, the city of Hippo resisted. Augustine's monastery-home had opened its doors to welcome episcopal colleagues who were asking for hospitality. Also of this number was Possidius, a former disciple of Augustine; he was able to leave us his direct testimony of those last dramatic days. "In the third month of that siege", Possidius recounts, "Augustine took to his bed with a fever: it was his last illness" (Vita, 29, 3). The holy old man made the most of that period when he was at last free to dedicate himself with greater intensity to prayer. He was in the habit of saying that no one, Bishop, Religious or layman, however irreprehensible his conduct might seem, can face death without adequate repentance. For this reason he ceaselessly repeated between his tears, the penitential psalms he had so often recited with his people (cf. *ibid.*, 31, 2).

The worse his illness became, the more the dying Bishop felt the need for solitude and prayer: "In order that no one might disturb him in his recollection, about 10 days before leaving his body, he asked those of us present not to let anyone into his room outside the hours in which the doctors came to visit him or when his meals were brought. His desire was minutely complied with and in all that time he devoted himself to prayer" (*ibid.*, 31, 3). He breathed his last on 28 August 430: his great heart rested at last in God.

"For the last rites of his body", Possidius informs us, "the sacrifice in which we took part was offered to God and then he was buried" (Vita, 31, 5). His body on an unknown date was translated to Sardinia, and from here, in about 725, to the Basilica of San Pietro in Ciel d'Oro in Pavia, where it still rests today. His first biographer has this final opinion of him: "He bequeathed to his Church a very numerous clergy and also monasteries of men and women full of people who had taken vows of chastity under the obedience of their superiors, as well as libraries containing his books and discourses and those of other saints, from which one learns what, through the grace of God, were his merits and greatness in the Church, where the faithful always find him alive" (Possidius, Vita, 31, 8). This is an opinion in which we can share. We too "find him alive" in his writings. When I read St Augustine's writings, I do not get the impression that he is a man who died more or less 1,600 years ago; I feel he is like a man of today: a friend, a contemporary who speaks to me, who speaks to us with his fresh and timely faith. In St Augustine who talks to us, talks to me in his writings, we see the everlasting timeliness of his faith; of the faith that comes from Christ, the Eternal Incarnate Word, Son of God and Son of Man. And we can see that this faith is not of the past although it was preached yesterday; it is still timely today, for Christ is truly yesterday, today and for ever. He is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Thus, St Augustine encourages us to entrust ourselves to this ever-living Christ and in this way find the path of life.

30 January 2008

In 1986, the 16th centenary of his conversion, my beloved Predecessor John Paul II dedicated a long, full Document to him, the Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*. The Pope himself chose to describe this text as “a thanksgiving to God for the gift that he has made to the Church, and through her to the whole human race”. I would like to return to the topic of conversion at another Audience. It is a fundamental theme not only for Augustine’s personal life but also for ours. In last Sunday’s Gospel the Lord himself summed up his preaching with the word: “Repent”. By following in St Augustine’s footsteps, we will be able to meditate on what this conversion is: it is something definitive, decisive, but the fundamental decision must develop, be brought about throughout our life.

Today’s Catechesis, however, is dedicated to the subject of faith and reason, a crucial, or better, the crucial theme for St Augustine’s biography. As a child he learned the Catholic faith from Monica, his mother. But he abandoned this faith as an adolescent because he could no longer discern its reasonableness and rejected a religion that was not, to his mind, also an expression of reason, that is, of the truth. His thirst for truth was radical and therefore led him to drift away from the Catholic faith. Yet his radicalism was such that he could not be satisfied with philosophies that did not go to the truth itself, that did not go to God and to a God who was not only the ultimate cosmological hypothesis but the true God, the God who gives life and enters into our lives.

Thus, Augustine’s entire intellectual and spiritual development is also a valid model today in the relationship between faith and reason, a subject not only for believers but for every person who seeks the truth, a central theme for the balance and destiny of every human being. These two dimensions, faith and reason, should not be separated or placed in opposition; rather, they must always go hand in hand. As Augustine himself wrote after his conversion, faith and reason are “the two forces that lead us to knowledge” (*Contra Academicos*, III, 20, 43). In this regard, through the two rightly famous Augustinian formulas (cf. *Sermones*, 43, 9) that express this coherent synthesis of faith and reason: *crede ut intelligas* (“I believe in order to understand”) - believing paves the way to crossing the threshold of the truth - but also, and inseparably, *intellige ut credas* (“I understand, the better to believe”), the believer scrutinizes the truth to be able to find God and to believe.

Augustine’s two affirmations express with effective immediacy and as much corresponding depth the synthesis of this problem in which the Catholic Church sees her own journey expressed. This synthesis had been acquiring its form in history even before Christ’s coming, in the encounter between the Hebrew faith and Greek thought in Hellenistic Judaism. At a later period this synthesis was taken up and developed by many

Christian thinkers. The harmony between faith and reason means above all that God is not remote: he is not far from our reason and our life; he is close to every human being, close to our hearts and to our reason, if we truly set out on the journey.

Augustine felt this closeness of God to man with extraordinary intensity. God's presence in man is profound and at the same time mysterious, but he can recognize and discover it deep down inside himself. "Do not go outside", the convert says, but "return to within yourself; truth dwells in the inner man; and if you find that your nature is changeable, transcend yourself. But remember, when you transcend yourself, you are transcending a soul that reasons. Reach, therefore, to where the light of reason is lit" (*De vera religione*, 39, 72). It is just like what he himself stresses with a very famous statement at the beginning of the *Confessions*, a spiritual biography which he wrote in praise of God: "You have made us for yourself, and our heart is restless until it rests in you" (I, 1, 1).

God's remoteness is therefore equivalent to remoteness from oneself: "But", Augustine admitted (*Confessions*, III, 6, 11), addressing God directly, "you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me", interior intimo meo et superior summo meo; so that, as he adds in another passage remembering the period before his conversion, "you were there before me, but I had departed from myself. I could not even find myself, much less you" (*Confessions*, V, 2, 2). Precisely because Augustine lived this intellectual and spiritual journey in the first person, he could portray it in his works with such immediacy, depth and wisdom, recognizing in two other famous passages from the *Confessions* (IV, 4, 9 and 14, 22), that man is "a great enigma" (*magna quaestio*) and "a great abyss" (*grande profundum*), an enigma and an abyss that only Christ can illuminate and save us from. This is important: a man who is distant from God is also distant from himself, alienated from himself, and can only find himself by encountering God. In this way he will come back to himself, to his true self, to his true identity.

The human being, Augustine stresses later in *De Civitate Dei* (XII, 27), is social by nature but antisocial by vice and is saved by Christ, the one Mediator between God and humanity and the "universal way of liberty and salvation", as my Predecessor John Paul II said (*Augustinum Hipponensem*, n. 3). Outside this way, "which has never been lacking for the human race", St Augustine says further, "no one has been set free, no one will be set free" (*De Civitate Dei*, X, 32, 2). As the one Mediator of salvation Christ is Head of the Church and mystically united with her to the point that Augustine could say: "We have become Christ. For, if he is the Head, we, the members; he and we together are the whole man" (*In Iohannis evangelium tractatus*, 21, 8).

People of God and house of God: the Church in Augustine's vision is therefore closely bound to the concept of the Body of Christ, founded on the Christological

reinterpretation of the Old Testament and on the sacramental life centred on the Eucharist, in which the Lord gives us his Body and transforms us into his Body. It is then fundamental that the Church, the People of God in a Christological and not a sociological sense, be truly inserted into Christ, who, as Augustine says in a beautiful passage, “prays for us, prays in us and prays by us; he prays for us as our priest, he prays in us as our head, and he prays by us as our God: let us therefore recognize him as our voice and ourselves as his” (Enarrationes in Psalmos, 85, 1).

At the end of the Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*, John Paul II wished to ask the Saint himself what he would have to say to the people of today and answers first of all with the words Augustine entrusted to a letter dictated shortly after his conversion: “It seems to me that the hope of finding the truth must be restored to humankind” (Epistulae, 1, 1); that truth which is Christ himself, true God, to whom is addressed one of the most beautiful prayers and most famous of the Confessions (X, 27, 38): “Late have I loved you, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. “You called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours”.

Here then, Augustine encountered God and throughout his life experienced him to the point that this reality - which is primarily his meeting with a Person, Jesus - changed his life, as it changes the lives of everyone, men and women, who in every age have the grace to encounter him. Let us pray that the Lord will grant us this grace and thereby enable us to find his peace.

20 February 2008

After the interruption for the Spiritual Exercises last week, today we return to the important figure of St Augustine, about whom I have repeatedly spoken at the Wednesday Catecheses. He is the Father of the Church who left us the greatest number of works and I intend to speak briefly of them today. Some of Augustine’s writings were of major importance, not only for the history of Christianity but also for the formation of the whole of Western culture. The clearest example is the *Confessiones*, undoubtedly one of the most widely read books of Christian antiquity. Like various Fathers of the Church in the first centuries but on an incomparably larger scale, the Bishop of Hippo in fact exercised an extensive and persistent influence, as already appears from the

superabundant manuscript transcriptions of his works, which are indeed extremely numerous.

He reviewed them himself in the *Retractationum* several years before he died, and shortly after his death they were correctly recorded in the *Indiculus* (“list”) added by his faithful friend Possidius to his biography of St Augustine, *Vita Augustini*. The list of Augustine’s works was drafted with the explicit intention of keeping their memory alive while the Vandal invasion was sweeping through all of Roman Africa, and it included at least 1,030 writings numbered by their Author, with others “that cannot be numbered because he did not give them any number”. Possidius, the Bishop of a neighbouring city, dictated these words in Hippo itself - where he had taken refuge and where he witnessed his friend’s death - , and it is almost certain that he based his list on the catalogue of Augustine’s personal library. Today, more than 300 letters of the Bishop of Hippo and almost 600 homilies are extant, but originally there were far more, perhaps even as many as between 3,000 and 4,000, the result of 40 years of preaching by the former rhetorician who had chosen to follow Jesus and no longer to speak to important figures of the imperial court, but rather, to the simple populace of Hippo.

And in recent years the discoveries of a collection of letters and several homilies have further enriched our knowledge of this great Father of the Church. “He wrote and published many books”, Possidius wrote, “many sermons were delivered in church, transcribed and corrected, both to refute the various heresies and to interpret the Sacred Scriptures for the edification of the holy children of the Church. These works”, his Bishop-friend emphasized, “are so numerous that a scholar would find it difficult to read them all and learn to know them” (*Vita Augustini*, 18, 9).

In the literary corpus of Augustine - more than 1,000 publications divided into philosophical, apologetic, doctrinal, moral, monastic, exegetic and anti-heretical writings in addition precisely to the letters and homilies - certain exceptional works of immense theological and philosophical breadth stand out. First of all, it is essential to remember the *Confessiones* mentioned above, written in 13 books between 397 and 400 in praise of God. They are a sort of autobiography in the form of a dialogue with God. This literary genre actually mirrors St Augustine’s life, which was not one closed in on itself, dispersed in many things, but was lived substantially as a dialogue with God, hence, a life with others. The title “*Confessiones*” indicates the specific nature of this autobiography. In Christian Latin this word, *confessiones*, developed from the tradition of the Psalms and has two meanings that are nevertheless interwoven. In the first place *confessiones* means the confession of our own faults, of the wretchedness of sin; but at the same time, *confessiones* also means praise of God, thanksgiving to God. Seeing our own wretchedness in the light of God becomes praise to God and thanksgiving, for God

loves and accepts us, transforms us and raises us to himself. Of these Confessiones, which met with great success during his lifetime, St Augustine wrote: “They exercised such an influence on me while I was writing them and still exercise it when I reread them. Many brothers like these works” (Retractationum, II, 6); and I can say that I am one of these “brothers”. Thanks to the Confessiones, moreover, we can follow step by step the inner journey of this extraordinary and passionate man of God. A less well-known but equally original and very important text is the Retractationum, composed in two books in about 427 A.D., in which St Augustine, by then elderly, set down a “revision” (retractatio) of his entire opus, thereby bequeathing to us a unique and very precious literary document but also a teaching of sincerity and intellectual humility.

De Civitate Dei - an impressive work crucial to the development of Western political thought and the Christian theology of history - was written between 413 and 426 in 22 books. The occasion was the sack of Rome by the Goths in 410. Numerous pagans still alive and also many Christians said: Rome has fallen; the Christian God and the Apostles can now no longer protect the city. While the pagan divinities were present, Rome was the caput mundi, the great capital, and no one could have imagined that it would fall into enemy hands. Now, with the Christian God, this great city no longer seemed safe. Therefore, the God of the Christians did not protect, he could not be the God to whom to entrust oneself. St Augustine answered this objection, which also touched Christian hearts profoundly, with this impressive work, De Civitate Dei, explaining what we should and should not expect of God, and what the relationship is between the political sphere and the sphere of faith, of the Church. This book is also today a source for defining clearly between true secularism and the Church’s competence, the great true hope that the faith gives to us.

This important book presents the history of humanity governed by divine Providence but currently divided by two loves. This is the fundamental plan, its interpretation of history, which is the struggle between two loves: love of self, “to the point of indifference to God”, and love of God, “to the point of indifference to the self” (De Civitate Dei XIV, 28), to full freedom from the self for others in the light of God. This, therefore, is perhaps St Augustine’s greatest book and is of lasting importance. Equally important is the De Trinitate, a work in 15 books on the central core of the Christian faith, faith in the Trinitarian God. It was written in two phases: the first 12 books between 399 and 412, published without the knowledge of Augustine, who in about 420 completed and revised the entire work. Here he reflects on the Face of God and seeks to understand this mystery of God who is unique, the one Creator of the world, of us all, and yet this one God is precisely Trinitarian, a circle of love. He seeks to understand the unfathomable mystery: the actual Trinitarian being, in three Persons, is the most real and profound unity of the one God. De Doctrina Christiana is instead a true and proper cultural introduction to the



interpretation of the Bible and ultimately of Christianity itself, which had a crucial importance in the formation of Western culture.

Despite all his humility, Augustine must certainly have been aware of his own intellectual stature. Yet it was far more important to him to take the Christian message to the simple than to write lofty theological works. This deepest intention of his that guided his entire life appears in a letter written to his colleague Evodius, in which he informs him of his decision to suspend the dictation of the books of *De Trinitate* for the time being, “because they are too demanding and I think that few can understand them; it is therefore urgent to have more texts which we hope will be useful to many” (*Epistulae* 169, 1, 1). Thus, it served his purpose better to communicate the faith in a manner that all could understand rather than to write great theological works. The responsibility he felt acutely with regard to the popularization of the Christian message was later to become the origin of writings such as *De Catechizandis Rudibus*, a theory and also a method of catechesis, or the *Psalmus contra Partem Donati*. The Donatists were the great problem of St Augustine’s Africa, a deliberately African schism. They said: true Christianity is African Christianity. They opposed Church unity. The great Bishop fought against this schism all his life, seeking to convince the Donatists that only in unity could “Africanness” also be true. And to make himself understood by the simple, who could not understand the difficult Latin of the rhetorician, he said: I must even write with grammatical errors, in a very simplified Latin. And he did so, especially in this *Psalmus*, a sort of simple poem against the Donatists, in order to help all the people understand that it is only through Church unity that our relationship with God may be truly fulfilled for all and that peace may grow in the world.

The mass of homilies that he would often deliver “off the cuff”, transcribed by tachygraphers during his preaching and immediately circulated, had a special importance in this production destined for a wider public. The very beautiful *Enarrationes in Psalmos*, read widely in the Middle Ages, stand out among them. The practice of publishing Augustine’s thousands of homilies - often without the author’s control - precisely explains their dissemination and later dispersion but also their vitality. In fact, because of the author’s fame, the Bishop of Hippo’s sermons became very sought after texts and, adapted to ever new contexts, also served as models for other Bishops and priests.

A fresco in the Lateran that dates back to the fourth century shows that the iconographical tradition already depicted St Augustine with a book in his hand, suggesting, of course, his literary opus which had such a strong influence on the Christian mentality and Christian thought, but it also suggests his love for books and reading as well as his knowledge of the great culture of the past. At his death he left

nothing, Possidius recounts, but “recommended that the library of the church with all the codes be kept carefully for future generations”, especially those of his own works. In these, Possidius stresses, Augustine is “ever alive” and benefits his readers, although “I believe that those who were able to see and listen to him were able to draw greater benefit from being in touch with him when he himself was speaking in church, and especially those who experienced his daily life among the people” (*Vita Augustini*, 31). Yes, for us too it would have been beautiful to be able to hear him speaking. Nonetheless, he is truly alive in his writings and present in us, and so we too see the enduring vitality of the faith to which he devoted his entire life.

27 February 2008

With today’s meeting I wish to conclude the presentation of the figure of St Augustine. After having dwelt on his life, works and some aspects of his thought, I would like today to return to his inner experience which made him one of Christian history’s greatest converts. Last year, during my Pilgrimage to Pavia to venerate the mortal remains of this Father of the Church, I particularly dedicated my reflection to this experience of his. By doing so I wished to express to him the homage of the entire Catholic Church, but also to manifest my personal devotion and gratitude in regard to a figure to whom I feel very linked for the role he has had in my life as a theologian, priest and pastor.

Today, it is still possible to trace St Augustine’s experiences, thanks above all to the *Confessions*, written to praise God and which are at the origin of one of the most specific literary forms of the West, the autobiography or personal expression of one’s self-knowledge. Well, anyone who encounters this extraordinary and fascinating book, still widely read today, soon realizes that Augustine’s conversion was not sudden or fully accomplished at the beginning, but can be defined, rather, as a true and proper journey that remains a model for each one of us. This itinerary certainly culminated with his conversion and then with baptism, but it was not concluded in that Easter Vigil of the year 387, when the African rhetorician was baptized in Milan by Bishop Ambrose. Augustine’s journey of conversion, in fact, humbly continued to the very end of his life, so much so that one can truly say that his various steps - and three can be easily distinguished - are one single great conversion.

St Augustine was a passionate seeker of truth: he was from the beginning and then throughout his life. The first step of his conversion journey was accomplished exactly in his progressive nearing to Christianity. Actually, he had received from his mother Monica, to whom he would always remain very closely bound, a Christian education, and even though he lived an errant life during the years of his youth, he always felt a deep attraction to Christ, having drunk in with his mother’s milk the love for the Lord’s Name, as he himself emphasizes (cf. *Confessions*, III, 4, 8). But also philosophy, especially that

of a Platonic stamp, led him even closer to Christ, revealing to him the existence of the Logos or creative reason. Philosophy books showed him the existence of reason, from which the whole world came, but they could not tell him how to reach this Logos, which seemed so distant. Only by reading St Paul's Epistles within the faith of the Catholic Church was the truth fully revealed to him. This experience was summarized by Augustine in one of the most famous passages of the Confessions: he recounts that, in the torment of his reflections, withdrawing to a garden, he suddenly heard a child's voice chanting a rhyme never heard before: *tolle, lege, tolle, lege*, "pick up and read, pick up and read" (VIII, 12, 29). He then remembered the conversion of Anthony, the Father of Monasticism, and carefully returned to the Pauline codex that he had recently read, opened it, and his glance fell on the passage of the Epistle to the Romans where the Apostle exhorts to abandon the works of the flesh and to be clothed with Christ (cf. 13:13-14). He understood that those words in that moment were addressed personally to him; they came from God through the Apostle and indicated to him what he had to do at that time. Thus, he felt the darkness of doubt clearing and he finally found himself free to give himself entirely to Christ: he described it as "your converting me to yourself" (Confessions, VIII, 12, 30). This was the first and decisive conversion.

The African rhetorician reached this fundamental step in his long journey thanks to his passion for man and for the truth, a passion that led him to seek God, the great and inaccessible One. Faith in Christ made him understand that God, apparently so distant, in reality was not that at all. He in fact made himself near to us, becoming one of us. In this sense, faith in Christ brought Augustine's long search on the journey to truth to completion. Only a God who made himself "tangible", one of us, was finally a God to whom he could pray, for whom and with whom he could live. This is the way to take with courage and at the same time with humility, open to a permanent purification which each of us always needs. But with the Easter Vigil of 387, as we have said, Augustine's journey was not finished. He returned to Africa and founded a small monastery where he retreated with a few friends to dedicate himself to the contemplative life and study. This was his life's dream. Now he was called to live totally for the truth, with the truth, in friendship with Christ who is truth: a beautiful dream that lasted three years, until he was, against his will, ordained a priest at Hippo and destined to serve the faithful, continuing, yes, to live with Christ and for Christ, but at the service of all. This was very difficult for him, but he understood from the beginning that only by living for others, and not simply for his private contemplation, could he really live with Christ and for Christ.

Thus, renouncing a life solely of meditation, Augustine learned, often with difficulty, to make the fruit of his intelligence available to others. He learned to communicate his faith to simple people and thus learned to live for them in what became his hometown,

tirelessly carrying out a generous and onerous activity which he describes in one of his most beautiful sermons: "To preach continuously, discuss, reiterate, edify, be at the disposal of everyone - it is an enormous responsibility, a great weight, an immense effort" (Sermon, 339, 4). But he took this weight upon himself, understanding that it was exactly in this way that he could be closer to Christ. To understand that one reaches others with simplicity and humility was his true second conversion.

But there is a last step to Augustine's journey, a third conversion, that brought him every day of his life to ask God for pardon. Initially, he thought that once he was baptized, in the life of communion with Christ, in the sacraments, in the Eucharistic celebration, he would attain the life proposed in the Sermon on the Mount: the perfection bestowed by Baptism and reconfirmed in the Eucharist. During the last part of his life he understood that what he had concluded at the beginning about the Sermon on the Mount - that is, now that we are Christians, we live this ideal permanently - was mistaken. Only Christ himself truly and completely accomplishes the Sermon on the Mount. We always need to be washed by Christ, who washes our feet, and be renewed by him. We need permanent conversion. Until the end we need this humility that recognizes that we are sinners journeying along, until the Lord gives us his hand definitively and introduces us into eternal life. It was in this final attitude of humility, lived day after day, that Augustine died.

This attitude of profound humility before the only Lord Jesus led him also to experience an intellectual humility. Augustine, in fact, who is one of the great figures in the history of thought, in the last years of his life wanted to submit all his numerous works to a clear, critical examination. This was the origin of the *Retractationum* ("Revision"), which placed his truly great theological thought within the humble and holy faith that he simply refers to by the name Catholic, that is, of the Church. He wrote in this truly original book: "I understood that only One is truly perfect, and that the words of the Sermon on the Mount are completely realized in only One - in Jesus Christ himself. The whole Church, instead - all of us, including the Apostles -, must pray everyday: Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us" (*De Sermone Domini in Monte*, I, 19, 1-3).

Augustine converted to Christ who is truth and love, followed him throughout his life and became a model for every human being, for all of us in search of God. This is why I wanted to ideally conclude my Pilgrimage to Pavia by consigning to the Church and to the world, before the tomb of this great lover of God, my first Encyclical entitled *Deus Caritas Est*. I owe much, in fact, especially in the first part, to Augustine's thought. Even today, as in his time, humanity needs to know and above all to live this fundamental reality: God is love, and the encounter with him is the only response to the restlessness of the human heart; a heart inhabited by hope, still perhaps obscure and unconscious in

many of our contemporaries but which already today opens us Christians to the future, so much so that St Paul wrote that “in this hope we were saved” (Rom 8:24). I wished to devote my second Encyclical to hope, *Spe Salvi*, and it is also largely indebted to Augustine and his encounter with God.

In a beautiful passage, St Augustine defines prayer as the expression of desire and affirms that God responds by moving our hearts toward him. On our part we must purify our desires and our hopes to welcome the sweetness of God (cf. In I Ioannis 4, 6). Indeed, only this opening of ourselves to others saves us. Let us pray, therefore, that we can follow the example of this great convert every day of our lives, and in every moment of our life encounter the Lord Jesus, the only One who saves us, purifies us and gives us true joy, true life.

## **Saint Leo the Great**

5 March 2008

Continuing our journey through the Fathers of the Church, true stars that shine in the distance, at our meeting today we encounter a Pope who in 1754 Benedict XIV proclaimed a Doctor of the Church: St Leo the Great. As the nickname soon attributed to him by tradition suggests, he was truly one of the greatest Pontiffs to have honoured the Roman See and made a very important contribution to strengthening its authority and prestige. He was the first Bishop of Rome to have been called Leo, a name used subsequently by another 12 Supreme Pontiffs, and was also the first Pope whose preaching to the people who gathered round him during celebrations has come down to us. We spontaneously think of him also in the context of today’s Wednesday General Audiences, events that in past decades have become a customary meeting of the Bishop of Rome with the faithful and the many visitors from every part of the world.

Leo was a Tuscan native. In about the year 430 A.D., he became a deacon of the Church of Rome, in which he acquired over time a very important position. In the year 440 his prominent role induced Galla Placidia, who then ruled the Empire of the West, to send him to Gaul to heal a difficult situation. But in the summer of that year, Pope Sixtus III, whose name is associated with the magnificent mosaics in St Mary Major’s, died, and it was Leo who was elected to succeed him. Leo heard the news precisely while he was carrying out his peace mission in Gaul. Having returned to Rome, the new Pope was consecrated on 29 September 440. This is how his Pontificate began. It lasted more than 21 years and was undoubtedly one of the most important in the Church’s history. Pope Leo died on 10 November 461 and was buried near the tomb of St Peter. Today, his relics are preserved in one of the altars in the Vatican Basilica.

The times in which Pope Leo lived were very difficult: constant barbarian invasions, the gradual weakening of imperial authority in the West and the long, drawn-out social crisis forced the Bishop of Rome - as was to happen even more obviously a century and a half later during the Pontificate of Gregory the Great - to play an important role in civil and political events. This, naturally, could only add to the importance and prestige of the Roman See. The fame of one particular episode in Leo's life has endured. It dates back to 452 when the Pope, together with a Roman delegation, met Attila, chief of the Huns, in Mantua and dissuaded him from continuing the war of invasion by which he had already devastated the northeastern regions of Italy. Thus, he saved the rest of the Peninsula. This important event soon became memorable and lives on as an emblematic sign of the Pontiff's action for peace. Unfortunately, the outcome of another Papal initiative three years later was not as successful, yet it was a sign of courage that still amazes us: in the spring of 455 Leo did not manage to prevent Genseric's Vandals, who had reached the gates of Rome, from invading the undefended city that they plundered for two weeks. This gesture of the Pope - who, defenceless and surrounded by his clergy, went forth to meet the invader to implore him to desist - nevertheless prevented Rome from being burned and assured that the Basilicas of St Peter, St Paul and St John, in which part of the terrified population sought refuge, were spared.

We are familiar with Pope Leo's action thanks to his most beautiful sermons - almost 100 in a splendid and clear Latin have been preserved - and thanks to his approximately 150 letters. In these texts the Pontiff appears in all his greatness, devoted to the service of truth in charity through an assiduous exercise of the Word which shows him to us as both Theologian and Pastor. Leo the Great, constantly thoughtful of his faithful and of the people of Rome but also of communion between the different Churches and of their needs, was a tireless champion and upholder of the Roman Primacy, presenting himself as the Apostle Peter's authentic heir: the many Bishops who gathered at the Council of Chalcedon, the majority of whom came from the East, were well aware of this.

This Council, held in 451 and in which 350 Bishops took part, was the most important assembly ever to have been celebrated in the history of the Church. Chalcedon represents the sure goal of the Christology of the three previous Ecumenical Councils: Nicea in 325, Constantinople in 381 and Ephesus in 431. By the sixth century these four Councils that sum up the faith of the ancient Church were already being compared to the four Gospels. This is what Gregory the Great affirms in a famous letter (I, 24): "I confess that I receive and revere, as the four books of the Gospel so also the four Councils", because on them, Gregory explains further, "as on a four-square stone, rises the structure of the holy faith". The Council of Chalcedon, which rejected the heresy of Eutyches who denied the true human nature of the Son of God, affirmed the union in his one Person, without confusion and without separation, of his two natures, human and divine.

The Pope asserted this faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, in an important doctrinal text addressed to the Bishop of Constantinople, the so-called Tome to Flavian which, read at Chalcedon, was received by the Bishops present with an eloquent acclamation. Information on it has been preserved in the proceedings of the Council: “Peter has spoken through the mouth of Leo”, the Council Fathers announced in unison. From this intervention in particular, but also from others made during the Christological controversy in those years, it is clear that the Pope felt with special urgency his responsibilities as Successor of Peter, whose role in the Church is unique since “to one Apostle alone was entrusted what was communicated to all the Apostles”, as Leo said in one of his sermons for the Feast of Sts Peter and Paul (83, 2). And the Pontiff was able to exercise these responsibilities, in the West as in the East, intervening in various circumstances with caution, firmness and lucidity through his writings and legates. In this manner he showed how exercising the Roman Primacy was as necessary then as it is today to effectively serve communion, a characteristic of Christ’s one Church.

Aware of the historical period in which he lived and of the change that was taking place - from pagan Rome to Christian Rome - in a period of profound crisis, Leo the Great knew how to make himself close to the people and the faithful with his pastoral action and his preaching. He enlivened charity in a Rome tried by famines, an influx of refugees, injustice and poverty. He opposed pagan superstitions and the actions of Manichaeian groups. He associated the liturgy with the daily life of Christians: for example, by combining the practice of fasting with charity and almsgiving above all on the occasion of the Quattro tempora, which in the course of the year marked the change of seasons. In particular, Leo the Great taught his faithful - and his words still apply for us today - that the Christian liturgy is not the memory of past events, but the actualization of invisible realities which act in the lives of each one of us. This is what he stressed in a sermon (cf. 64, 1-2) on Easter, to be celebrated in every season of the year “not so much as something of the past as rather an event of the present”. All this fits into a precise project, the Holy Pontiff insisted: just as, in fact, the Creator enlivened with the breath of rational life man formed from the dust of the ground, after the original sin he sent his Son into the world to restore to man his lost dignity and to destroy the dominion of the devil through the new life of grace.

This is the Christological mystery to which St Leo the Great, with his Letter to the Council of Ephesus, made an effective and essential contribution, confirming for all time - through this Council - what St Peter said at Caesarea Philippi. With Peter and as Peter, he professed: “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God”. And so it is that God and man together “are not foreign to the human race but alien to sin” (cf. Serm. 64). Through the force of this Christological faith he was a great messenger of peace and love. He thus shows us the way: in faith we learn charity. Let us therefore learn with St Leo the Great to

believe in Christ, true God and true Man, and to implement this faith every day in action for peace and love of neighbour.

## Boethius and Cassiodorus

12 March 2008

Today, I would like to talk about two ecclesiastical writers, Boethius and Cassiodorus, who lived in some of the most turbulent years in the Christian West and in the Italian peninsula in particular. Odoacer, King of the Rugians, a Germanic race, had rebelled, putting an end to the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.), but it was not long before he was killed by Theodoric's Ostrogoths who had controlled the Italian Peninsula for some decades. Boethius, born in Rome in about 480 from the noble Anicius lineage, entered public life when he was still young and by age 25 was already a senator. Faithful to his family's tradition, he devoted himself to politics, convinced that it would be possible to temper the fundamental structure of Roman society with the values of the new peoples. And in this new time of cultural encounter he considered it his role to reconcile and bring together these two cultures, the classical Roman and the nascent Ostrogoth culture. Thus, he was also politically active under Theodoric, who at the outset held him in high esteem. In spite of this public activity, Boethius did not neglect his studies and dedicated himself in particular to acquiring a deep knowledge of philosophical and religious subjects. However, he also wrote manuals on arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy, all with the intention of passing on the great Greco-Roman culture to the new generations, to the new times. In this context, in his commitment to fostering the encounter of cultures, he used the categories of Greek philosophy to present the Christian faith, here too seeking a synthesis between the Hellenistic-Roman heritage and the Gospel message. For this very reason Boethius was described as the last representative of ancient Roman culture and the first of the Medieval intellectuals.

His most famous work is undoubtedly *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, which he wrote in prison to help explain his unjust detention. In fact, he had been accused of plotting against King Theodoric for having taken the side of his friend Senator Albinus in a court case. But this was a pretext. Actually, Theodoric, an Arian and a barbarian, suspected that Boethius was sympathizing with the Byzantine Emperor Justinian. Boethius was tried and sentenced to death. He was executed on 23 October 524, when he was only 44 years old. It is precisely because of his tragic end that he can also speak from the heart of his own experience to contemporary man, and especially to the multitudes who suffer the same fate because of the injustice inherent in so much of "human justice". Through this work, *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, he sought consolation, enlightenment and wisdom in prison. And he said that precisely in this situation he knew how to distinguish



between apparent goods, which disappear in prison, and true goods such as genuine friendship, which even in prison do not disappear. The loftiest good is God: Boethius - and he teaches us this - learned not to sink into a fatalism that extinguishes hope. He teaches us that it is not the event but Providence that governs and Providence has a face. It is possible to speak to Providence because Providence is God. Thus, even in prison, he was left with the possibility of prayer, of dialogue with the One who saves us. At the same time, even in this situation he retained his sense of the beauty of culture and remembered the teaching of the great ancient Greek and Roman philosophers such as Plato, Aristotle - he had begun to translate these Greeks into Latin - Cicero, Seneca, and also poets such as Tibullus and Virgil.

Boethius held that philosophy, in the sense of the quest for true wisdom, was the true medicine of the soul (Bk I). On the other hand, man can only experience authentic happiness within his own interiority (Bk II). Boethius thus succeeded in finding meaning by thinking of his own personal tragedy in the light of a sapiential text of the Old Testament (Wis 7:30-8:1) which he cites: "Against wisdom evil does not prevail. She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well" (Bk III, 12: PL 63, col. 780). The so-called prosperity of the wicked is therefore proven to be false (Bk IV), and the providential nature of *adversa fortuna* is highlighted. Life's difficulties not only reveal how transient and short-lived life is, but are even shown to serve for identifying and preserving authentic relations among human beings. *Adversa fortuna*, in fact, makes it possible to discern false friends from true and makes one realize that nothing is more precious to the human being than a true friendship. The fatalistic acceptance of a condition of suffering is nothing short of perilous, the believer Boethius added, because "it eliminates at its roots the very possibility of prayer and of theological hope, which form the basis of man's relationship with God" (Bk V, 3: PL 63, col. 842).

The final peroration of *De Consolatione Philosophiae* can be considered a synthesis of the entire teaching that Boethius addressed to himself and all who might find themselves in his same conditions. Thus, in prison he wrote: "So combat vices, dedicate yourselves to a virtuous life oriented by hope, which draws the heart upwards until it reaches Heaven with prayers nourished by humility. Should you refuse to lie, the imposition you have suffered can change into the enormous advantage of always having before your eyes the supreme Judge, who sees and knows how things truly are" (Bk V, 6: PL 63, col. 862). Every prisoner, regardless of the reason why he ended up in prison, senses how burdensome this particular human condition is, especially when it is brutalized, as it was for Boethius, by recourse to torture. Then particularly absurd is the condition of those like Boethius - whom the city of Pavia recognizes and celebrates in the liturgy as a martyr of the faith - who are tortured to death for no other reason than their own ideals and

political and religious convictions. Boethius, the symbol of an immense number of people unjustly imprisoned in all ages and on all latitudes, is in fact an objective entrance way that gives access to contemplation of the mysterious Crucified One of Golgotha.

Marcus Aurelius Cassiodorus was a contemporary of Boethius, a Calabrian born in Scyllacium in about 485 A.D. and who died at a very advanced age in Vivarium in 580. Cassiodorus, a man with a privileged social status, likewise devoted himself to political life and cultural commitment as few others in the Roman West of his time. Perhaps the only men who could stand on an equal footing in this twofold interest were Boethius, whom we have mentioned, and Gregory the Great, the future Pope of Rome (590-604). Aware of the need to prevent all the human and humanist patrimony accumulated in the golden age of the Roman Empire from vanishing into oblivion, Cassiodorus collaborated generously, and with the highest degree of political responsibility, with the new peoples who had crossed the boundaries of the Empire and settled in Italy. He too was a model of cultural encounter, of dialogue, of reconciliation. Historical events did not permit him to make his political and cultural dreams come true; he wanted to create a synthesis between the Roman and Christian traditions of Italy and the new culture of the Goths. These same events, however, convinced him of the providentiality of the monastic movement that was putting down roots in Christian lands. He decided to support it and gave it all his material wealth and spiritual energy.

He conceived the idea of entrusting to the monks the task of recovering, preserving and transmitting to those to come the immense cultural patrimony of the ancients so that it would not be lost. For this reason he founded Vivarium, a coenobitic community in which everything was organized in such a way that the monk's intellectual work was esteemed as precious and indispensable. He arranged that even those monks who had no academic training must not be involved solely in physical labour and farming but also in transcribing manuscripts and thus helping to transmit the great culture to future generations. And this was by no means at the expense of monastic and Christian spiritual dedication or of charitable activity for the poor. In his teaching, expounded in various works but especially in the *Treatise De Anima* and in the *Institutiones Divinarum Litterarum* (cf. PL 69, col. 1108), prayer nourished by Sacred Scripture and particularly by assiduous recourse to the Psalms (cf. PL 69, col. 1149) always has a central place as the essential sustenance for all. Thus, for example, this most learned Calabrian introduced his *Expositio in Psalterium*: "Having rejected and abandoned in Ravenna the demands of a political career marked by the disgusting taste of worldly concerns, having enjoyed the Psalter, a book that came from Heaven, as true honey of the soul, I dived into it avidly, thirsting to examine it without a pause, to steep myself in that salutary sweetness, having had enough of the countless disappointments of active life" (PL 70, col. 10).

The search for God, the aspiration to contemplate him, Cassiodorus notes, continues to be the permanent goal of monastic life (cf. PL 69, col. 1107). Nonetheless, he adds that with the help of divine grace (cf. PL 69, col. 1131, 1142), greater profit can be attained from the revealed Word with the use of scientific discoveries and the “profane” cultural means that were possessed in the past by the Greeks and Romans (cf. PL 69, col. 1140). Personally, Cassiodorus dedicated himself to philosophical, theological and exegetical studies without any special creativity, but was attentive to the insights he considered valid in others. He read Jerome and Augustine in particular with respect and devotion. Of the latter he said: “In Augustine there is such a great wealth of writings that it seems to me impossible to find anything that has not already been abundantly treated by him” (cf. PL 70, col. 10). Citing Jerome, on the other hand, he urged the monks of Vivarium: “It is not only those who fight to the point of bloodshed or who live in virginity who win the palm of victory but also all who, with God’s help, triumph over physical vices and preserve their upright faith. But in order that you may always, with God’s help, more easily overcome the world’s pressures and enticements while remaining in it as pilgrims constantly journeying forward, seek first to guarantee for yourselves the salutary help suggested by the first Psalm which recommends meditation night and day on the law of the Lord. Indeed, the enemy will not find any gap through which to assault you if all your attention is taken up by Christ” (De Institutione Divinarum Scripturarum, 32: PL 70, col. 1147). This is a recommendation we can also accept as valid. In fact, we live in a time of intercultural encounter, of the danger of violence that destroys cultures, and of the necessary commitment to pass on important values and to teach the new generations the path of reconciliation and peace. We find this path by turning to the God with the human Face, the God who revealed himself to us in Christ.

## **Saint Benedict of Norcia**

9 April 2008

Today, I would like to speak about Benedict, the Founder of Western Monasticism and also the Patron of my Pontificate. I begin with words that St Gregory the Great wrote about St Benedict: “The man of God who shone on this earth among so many miracles was just as brilliant in the eloquent exposition of his teaching” (cf. Dialogues II, 36). The great Pope wrote these words in 592 A.D. The holy monk, who had died barely 50 years earlier, lived on in people’s memories and especially in the flourishing religious Order he had founded. St Benedict of Norcia, with his life and his work, had a fundamental influence on the development of European civilization and culture. The most important source on Benedict’s life is the second book of St Gregory the Great’s Dialogues. It is not a biography in the classical sense. In accordance with the ideas of his time, by giving the

example of a real man - St Benedict, in this case - Gregory wished to illustrate the ascent to the peak of contemplation which can be achieved by those who abandon themselves to God. He therefore gives us a model for human life in the climb towards the summit of perfection. St Gregory the Great also tells in this book of the Dialogues of many miracles worked by the Saint, and here too he does not merely wish to recount something curious but rather to show how God, by admonishing, helping and even punishing, intervenes in the practical situations of man's life. Gregory's aim was to demonstrate that God is not a distant hypothesis placed at the origin of the world but is present in the life of man, of every man.

This perspective of the "biographer" is also explained in light of the general context of his time: straddling the fifth and sixth centuries, "the world was overturned by a tremendous crisis of values and institutions caused by the collapse of the Roman Empire, the invasion of new peoples and the decay of morals". But in this terrible situation, here, in this very city of Rome, Gregory presented St Benedict as a "luminous star" in order to point the way out of the "black night of history" (cf. John Paul II, 18 May 1979). In fact, the Saint's work and particularly his Rule were to prove heralds of an authentic spiritual leaven which, in the course of the centuries, far beyond the boundaries of his country and time, changed the face of Europe following the fall of the political unity created by the Roman Empire, inspiring a new spiritual and cultural unity, that of the Christian faith shared by the peoples of the Continent. This is how the reality we call "Europe" came into being.

St Benedict was born around the year 480. As St Gregory said, he came "ex provincia Nursiae" - from the province of Norcia. His well-to-do parents sent him to study in Rome. However, he did not stay long in the Eternal City. As a fully plausible explanation, Gregory mentions that the young Benedict was put off by the dissolute lifestyle of many of his fellow students and did not wish to make the same mistakes. He wanted only to please God: "soli Deo placere desiderans" (II Dialogues, Prologue 1). Thus, even before he finished his studies, Benedict left Rome and withdrew to the solitude of the mountains east of Rome. After a short stay in the village of Enfide (today, Affile), where for a time he lived with a "religious community" of monks, he became a hermit in the neighbouring locality of Subiaco. He lived there completely alone for three years in a cave which has been the heart of a Benedictine Monastery called the "Sacro Speco" (Holy Grotto) since the early Middle Ages. The period in Subiaco, a time of solitude with God, was a time of maturation for Benedict. It was here that he bore and overcame the three fundamental temptations of every human being: the temptation of self-affirmation and the desire to put oneself at the centre, the temptation of sensuality and, lastly, the temptation of anger and revenge. In fact, Benedict was convinced that only after overcoming these temptations would he be able to say a useful word to others about their own situations of neediness. Thus, having tranquilized his soul, he could be in full control of the drive of

his ego and thus create peace around him. Only then did he decide to found his first monasteries in the Valley of the Anio, near Subiaco.

In the year 529, Benedict left Subiaco and settled in Monte Cassino. Some have explained this move as an escape from the intrigues of an envious local cleric. However, this attempt at an explanation hardly proved convincing since the latter's sudden death did not induce Benedict to return (II Dialogues, 8). In fact, this decision was called for because he had entered a new phase of inner maturity and monastic experience. According to Gregory the Great, Benedict's exodus from the remote Valley of the Anio to Monte Cassio - a plateau dominating the vast surrounding plain which can be seen from afar - has a symbolic character: a hidden monastic life has its own *raison d'être* but a monastery also has its public purpose in the life of the Church and of society, and it must give visibility to the faith as a force of life. Indeed, when Benedict's earthly life ended on 21 March 547, he bequeathed with his Rule and the Benedictine family he founded a heritage that bore fruit in the passing centuries and is still bearing fruit throughout the world.

Throughout the second book of his Dialogues, Gregory shows us how St Benedict's life was steeped in an atmosphere of prayer, the foundation of his existence. Without prayer there is no experience of God. Yet Benedict's spirituality was not an interiority removed from reality. In the anxiety and confusion of his day, he lived under God's gaze and in this very way never lost sight of the duties of daily life and of man with his practical needs. Seeing God, he understood the reality of man and his mission. In his Rule he describes monastic life as "a school for the service of the Lord" (Prol. 45) and advises his monks, "let nothing be preferred to the Work of God" [that is, the Divine Office or the Liturgy of the Hours] (43, 3). However, Benedict states that in the first place prayer is an act of listening (Prol. 9-11), which must then be expressed in action. "The Lord is waiting every day for us to respond to his holy admonitions by our deeds" (Prol. 35). Thus, the monk's life becomes a fruitful symbiosis between action and contemplation, "so that God may be glorified in all things" (57, 9). In contrast with a facile and egocentric self-fulfilment, today often exalted, the first and indispensable commitment of a disciple of St Benedict is the sincere search for God (58, 7) on the path mapped out by the humble and obedient Christ (5, 13), whose love he must put before all else (4, 21; 72, 11), and in this way, in the service of the other, he becomes a man of service and peace. In the exercise of obedience practised by faith inspired by love (5, 2), the monk achieves humility (5, 1), to which the Rule dedicates an entire chapter (7). In this way, man conforms ever more to Christ and attains true self-fulfilment as a creature in the image and likeness of God.

The obedience of the disciple must correspond with the wisdom of the Abbot who, in the monastery, "is believed to hold the place of Christ" (2, 2; 63, 13). The figure of the Abbot,

which is described above all in Chapter II of the Rule with a profile of spiritual beauty and demanding commitment, can be considered a self-portrait of Benedict, since, as St Gregory the Great wrote, “the holy man could not teach otherwise than as he himself lived” (cf. *Dialogues* II, 36). The Abbot must be at the same time a tender father and a strict teacher (cf. 2, 24), a true educator. Inflexible against vices, he is nevertheless called above all to imitate the tenderness of the Good Shepherd (27, 8), to “serve rather than to rule” (64, 8) in order “to show them all what is good and holy by his deeds more than by his words” and “illustrate the divine precepts by his example” (2, 12). To be able to decide responsibly, the Abbot must also be a person who listens to “the brethren’s views” (3, 2), because “the Lord often reveals to the youngest what is best” (3, 3). This provision makes a Rule written almost 15 centuries ago surprisingly modern! A man with public responsibility even in small circles must always be a man who can listen and learn from what he hears.

Benedict describes the Rule he wrote as “minimal, just an initial outline” (cf. 73, 8); in fact, however, he offers useful guidelines not only for monks but for all who seek guidance on their journey toward God. For its moderation, humanity and sober discernment between the essential and the secondary in spiritual life, his Rule has retained its illuminating power even to today. By proclaiming St Benedict Patron of Europe on 24 October 1964, Paul VI intended to recognize the marvellous work the Saint achieved with his Rule for the formation of the civilization and culture of Europe. Having recently emerged from a century that was deeply wounded by two World Wars and the collapse of the great ideologies, now revealed as tragic utopias, Europe today is in search of its own identity. Of course, in order to create new and lasting unity, political, economic and juridical instruments are important, but it is also necessary to awaken an ethical and spiritual renewal which draws on the Christian roots of the Continent, otherwise a new Europe cannot be built. Without this vital sap, man is exposed to the danger of succumbing to the ancient temptation of seeking to redeem himself by himself - a utopia which in different ways, in 20th-century Europe, as Pope John Paul II pointed out, has caused “a regression without precedent in the tormented history of humanity” (Address to the Pontifical Council for Culture, 12 January 1990). Today, in seeking true progress, let us also listen to the Rule of St Benedict as a guiding light on our journey. The great monk is still a true master at whose school we can learn to become proficient in true humanism.

## **Pseudo-Dionysius, the Areopagite**

14 May 2008

In the course of the Catechesis on the Fathers of the Church, today I would like to speak of a rather mysterious figure: a sixth-century theologian whose name is unknown and who wrote under the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. With this pseudonym he was alluding to the passage of Scripture we have just heard, the event recounted by St Luke in chapter 17 of the Acts of the Apostles where he tells how Paul preached in Athens at the Areopagus to an elite group of the important Greek intellectual world. In the end, the majority of his listeners proved not to be interested and went away jeering at him. Yet some, St Luke says a few, approached Paul and opened themselves to the faith. The Evangelist gives us two names: Dionysius a member of the Areopagus and a woman named Damaris.

If five centuries later the author of these books chose the pseudonym “Dionysius the Areopagite”, it means that his intention was to put Greek wisdom at the service of the Gospel, to foster the encounter of Greek culture and intelligence with the proclamation of Christ; he wanted to do what this Dionysius had intended, that is, to make Greek thought converge with St Paul’s proclamation; being a Greek, he wanted to become a disciple of St Paul, hence a disciple of Christ.

Why did he hide his name and choose this pseudonym? One part of the answer I have already given: he wanted, precisely, to express this fundamental intention of his thought. But there are two hypotheses concerning this anonymity and pseudonym. The first hypothesis says that it was a deliberate falsification by which, in dating his works back to the first century, to the time of St Paul, he wished to give his literary opus, a quasi apostolic authority. But there is another better hypothesis than this, which seems to me barely credible: namely that he himself desired to make an act of humility; he did not want to glorify his own name, he did not want to build a monument to himself with his work but rather truly to serve the Gospel, to create an ecclesial theology, neither individual nor based on himself. Actually, he succeeded in elaborating a theology which, of course, we can date to the sixth century but cannot attribute to any of the figures of that period: it is a somewhat “de-individualized” theology, that is, a theology which expresses a common thought and language. It was a period of fierce polemics following the Council of Chalcedon; indeed he said in his Seventh Epistle: “I do not wish to spark polemics; I simply speak of the truth, I seek the truth”. And the light of truth by itself causes errors to fall away and makes what is good shine forth. And with this principle he purified Greek thought and related it to the Gospel. This principle, which he affirms in his seventh letter, is also the expression of a true spirit of dialogue: it is not about seeking the things that separate, but seeking the truth in Truth itself. This then radiates and causes errors to fade away.

Therefore, although this author's theology is, so to speak, "supra-personal", truly ecclesial, we can place it in the sixth century. Why? The Greek spirit, which he placed at the service of the Gospel, he encountered in the books of Proclus, who died in Athens in 485. This author belonged to late Platonism, a current of thought which had transformed Plato's philosophy into a sort of religion, whose ultimate purpose was to create a great apologetic for Greek polytheism and return, following Christianity's success, to the ancient Greek religion. He wanted to demonstrate that in reality, the divinities were the active forces in the cosmos. The consequence to be drawn from this was that polytheism must be considered truer than monotheism with its single Creator God. What Proclus was demonstrating was a great cosmic system of divinity, of mysterious forces, through which, in this deified cosmos, man could find access to the divinity. However, he made a distinction between paths for the simple, who were incapable of rising to the heights of truth - certain rites could suffice for them - and paths for the wise who were to purify themselves to arrive at the pure light.

As can be seen, this thought is profoundly anti-Christian. It is a late reaction to the triumph of Christianity, an anti-Christian use of Plato, whereas a Christian interpretation of the great philosopher was already in course. It is interesting that this Pseudo-Dionysius dared to avail himself of this very thought to demonstrate the truth of Christ; to transform this polytheistic universe into a cosmos created by God, into the harmony of God's cosmos, where every force is praise of God, and to show this great harmony, this symphony of the cosmos that goes from the Seraphim to the Angels and Archangels, to man and to all the creatures which, together, reflect God's beauty and are praise of God. He thus transformed the polytheistic image into a praise of the Creator and his creature. In this way we can discover the essential characteristics of his thought: first and foremost, it is cosmic praise. All Creation speaks of God and is praise of God. Since the creature is praise of God, Pseudo-Dionysius' theology became a liturgical theology: God is found above all in praising him, not only in reflection; and the liturgy is not something made by us, something invented in order to have a religious experience for a certain period of time; it is singing with the choir of creatures and entering into cosmic reality itself. And in this very way the liturgy, apparently only ecclesiastical, becomes expansive and great, it becomes our union with the language of all creatures. He says: God cannot be spoken of in an abstract way; speaking of God is always - he says using a Greek word - a "hymnein", singing for God with the great hymn of the creatures which is reflected and made concrete in liturgical praise. Yet, although his theology is cosmic, ecclesial and liturgical, it is also profoundly personal. He created the first great mystical theology. Indeed, with him the word "mystic" acquires a new meaning. Until then for Christians such a word was equivalent to the word "sacramental", that is, what pertains to the "mysterion", to the sacrament. With him the word "mystic" becomes more



personal, more intimate: it expresses the soul's journey toward God. And how can God be found? Here we note once again an important element in his dialogue between Greek philosophy and Christianity, and, in particular biblical faith. Apparently what Plato says and what the great philosophy on God says is far loftier, far truer; the Bible appears somewhat "barbaric", simple or pre-critical one might say today; but he remarks that precisely this is necessary, so that in this way we can understand that the loftiest concepts on God never reach his true grandeur: they always fall short of it. In fact these images enable us to understand that God is above every concept; in the simplicity of the images we find more truth than in great concepts. The Face of God is our inability to express truly what he is. In this way one speaks - and Pseudo-Dionysius himself speaks - of a "negative theology". It is easier for us to say what God is not rather than to say what he truly is. Only through these images can we intuit his true Face, moreover this Face of God is very concrete: it is Jesus Christ.

And although Dionysius shows us, following Proclus, the harmony of the heavenly choirs in such a way that it seems that they all depend on one another, it is true that on our journey toward God we are still very far from him. Pseudo-Dionysius shows that in the end the journey to God is God himself, who makes himself close to us in Jesus Christ. Thus, a great and mysterious theology also becomes very concrete, both in the interpretation of the liturgy and in the discourse on Jesus Christ: with all this, Dionysius the Areopagite exerted a strong influence on all medieval theology and on all mystical theology, both in the East and in the West. He was virtually rediscovered in the 13th century, especially by St Bonaventure, the great Franciscan theologian who in this mystical theology found the conceptual instrument for reinterpreting the heritage - so simple and profound - of St Francis. Together with Dionysius, the "Poverello" tells us that in the end love sees more than reason. Where the light of love shines the shadows of reason are dispelled; love sees, love is an eye and experience gives us more than reflection. Bonaventure saw in St Francis what this experience is: it is the experience of a very humble, very realistic journey, day by day, it is walking with Christ, accepting his Cross. In this poverty and in this humility, in the humility that is also lived in ecclesiality, is an experience of God which is loftier than that attained by reflection. In it we really touch God's Heart.

Today Dionysius the Areopagite has a new relevance: he appears as a great mediator in the modern dialogue between Christianity and the mystical theologies of Asia, whose characteristic feature is the conviction that it is impossible to say who God is, that only indirect things can be said about him; that God can only be spoken of with the "not", and that it is only possible to reach him by entering into this indirect experience of "not". And here a similarity can be seen between the thought of the Areopagite and that of Asian religions; he can be a mediator today as he was between the Greek spirit and the Gospel.

In this context it can be seen that dialogue does not accept superficiality. It is precisely when one enters into the depths of the encounter with Christ that an ample space for dialogue also opens. When one encounters the light of truth, one realizes that it is a light for everyone; polemics disappear and it is possible to understand one another, or at least to speak to one another, to come closer. The path of dialogue consists precisely in being close to God in Christ, in a deep encounter with him, in the experience of the truth which opens us to the light and helps us reach out to others - with the light of truth, the light of love. And in the end, he tells us: take the path of experience, the humble experience of faith, every day. Then the heart is enlarged and can see and also illumine reason so that it perceives God's beauty. Let us pray to the Lord to help us today too to place the wisdom of our day at the service of the Gospel, discovering ever anew the beauty of faith, the encounter with God in Christ.

## Saint Romanus the Melodist

21 May 2008

In the series of Catecheses on the Fathers of the Church, I would like today to talk about a little-known figure: Romanus the Melodist who was born in about 490 in Emesa (today Homs), in Syria. Theologian, poet and composer, he belonged to the great ranks of theologians who transformed theology into poetry. Let us think of his compatriot, St Ephrem the Syrian, who lived 200 years before him. However, we can also think of Western theologians, such as St Ambrose, whose hymns are still part of our liturgy and still move hearts; or of a theologian, a very vigorous thinker such as St Thomas, who gave us hymns for the Feast of Corpus Christi [to be celebrated] tomorrow; we think of St John of the Cross and of so many others. Faith is love and therefore creates poetry and music. Faith is joy, therefore it creates beauty.

Thus Romanus the Melodist is one of these, a poet theologian and composer. Having acquired the rudiments of Greek and Syrian culture in his native town, he moved to Berytus (Beirut), perfecting there his classical education and his knowledge of rhetoric. After being ordained a permanent deacon (c. 515), he was a preacher here for three years. He then moved to Constantinople towards the end of the reign of Anastasius I (c. 518), and settled there in the monastery adjacent to the Church of the Theotokos, the Mother of God. It was here that the key episode of his life occurred: the Synaxarion [The Lives of the Orthodox Saints] informs us of the apparition of the Mother of God in a dream, and of the gift of the poetic charism. In fact, Mary enjoined him to swallow a scroll. On awakening the following morning - it was the Feast of the Nativity of the Lord - Romanus began declaiming from the ambo "Today the Virgin gives birth to the Transcendent"

(Hymn “On the Nativity” I. Proemio). So it was that he became a homilist-cantor until his death (after 555).

Romanus lives on in history as one of the most representative authors of liturgical hymns. At that time the homily was virtually the only opportunity for catechetical instruction afforded to the faithful. Thus, Romanus is an eminent witness of the religious feeling of his epoch, but also of a lively and original catechesis. In his compositions we can appreciate the creativity of this form of catechesis, the creativity of the theological thought and aesthetics and sacred hymnography of that time. The place in which Romanus preached was a sanctuary on the outskirts of Constantinople: he would mount the ambo that stood in the centre of the church and speak to the community utilizing a somewhat extravagant technique: he referred to the mural depictions or icons arranged on the ambo, and even made use of dialogue. He sung his homilies in metric verse known as kontakia. The term kontakion, “little rod”, would seem to refer to the staff around which a liturgical or other manuscript was wound. Eighty-nine kontakia bearing Romanus’ name have come down to us but tradition attributes 1,000 to him.

In the works of Romanus every kontakion is composed of strophes, the majority of which go from 18 to 24, with an equal number of syllables, structured on the model of the first strophe, the irmo. The rhythmic accents in the verses of all the strophes are modelled on those of the irmo. Each strophe ends with a refrain (efimnio), which is usually identical in order to create poetic unity. Furthermore, the initial letter of each stanza spell the author’s name (acrostic), and are often preceded by the adjective “humble”. A prayer referring to the events celebrated or evoked concludes the hymn. After the biblical reading, Romanus sung the Proemium, usually in the form of a prayer or supplication. Thus he announced the topic of the sermon and explained the refrain to be repeated in chorus at the end of each stanza, which he delivered in rhythmic prose.

An important example is offered to us by the kontakion for Good Friday: it is a dramatic dialogue between Mary and her Son that takes place on the Way of the Cross. Mary says: “Where are you going, my Child? For whose sake are you finishing this swift race? I never thought I would see you, my Son, in such necessity nor did I ever believe that the lawless would rage so, and unjustly stretch out their hands against you”; Jesus answers: “Why, mother, do you weep?... Lest I suffer? Lest I die? How then should I save Adam?”. Mary’s Son consoles his Mother, but reminds her of her role in the history of salvation: “Put aside your grief, mother, put it aside; mourning is not right for you

who have been called ‘Full of Grace’ (Mary at the foot of the Cross, 1-2; 4-5). Then in the hymn on Abraham’s sacrifice, Sarah claims for herself the decision on Isaac’s life. Abraham says: “When Sarah hears, my Lord, all your words, upon knowing your will, she

will say to me: If the one who has given it desires to repossess it why did he give it? .... O watchful one, leave me my son, and when he who called you wants him, it is to me that he must speak” (cf. *The Sacrifice of Abraham*, 7).

Romanus did not use the solemn Byzantine Greek of the Imperial Court, but the simple Greek that was close to the language of the populous. I would like to cite here an example of the lively and highly personal manner in which he speaks about the Lord Jesus: he calls him the “source that is never consumed by fire and the light against the darkness”, and says: “I long to hold you in my hand like a lamp; indeed, anyone who carries an oil lamp among men and women is illuminated without being burned. Illuminate me, then, You who are the light that never burns out” (*The Presentation or Feast of Encounter*, 8). The force of conviction in his preaching was based on the close consistency between his words and his life. In one prayer he says: “Make my language clear, my Saviour, open my mouth and, after filling it, penetrate my heart so that my acts may correspond to my words” (*Mission of the Apostles*, 2).

Let us now examine some of his main themes. A fundamental subject that recurs in his preaching is the unity of God’s action in history, the unity between Creation and the history of salvation, the unity between the Old and New Testaments. Another important theme is pneumatology, the teaching on the Holy Spirit. On the Feast of Pentecost Romanus stressed the continuity that exists between Christ, ascended into heaven, and the Apostles, that is, the Church, and he exalts missionary action in the world: “With divine virtue they conquered all men; they took up the Cross of Christ as a pen, they used words like ‘fishing nets’ and set them to ‘catch’ the world, they used the Word of God as a sharp hook and as bait they used the flesh of the Sovereign One of the universe” (*Pentecost 2:18*).

Another central theme is, of course, Christology. Romanus did not involve himself in the difficult theological concepts, hotly debated at that time which lacerated not only the unity of theologians but also the unity of Christians in the Church. He preached a simple but fundamental Christology, the Christology of the great Councils. Above all, however, Romanus was close to popular piety - moreover the ideas of the Councils were inspired by popular piety and knowledge of the human heart - and in this way Romanus emphasized that Christ is true man and true God, and in being the true man-God, he is only one Person, the synthesis between Creation and the Creator, in whose human words we hear the voice of the Word of God himself. He said: “Christ was a man, but he was also God, yet he was not divided in two: He is One, the Son of a Father who is One alone” (*The Passion*, 19). With regard to Mariology, grateful to the Virgin for his gift of a poetic talent, Romanus mentions her at the end of almost all his hymns and dedicated to her

some of his most beautiful kontakia: The Nativity of Christ, The Annunciation, The Divine Motherhood, The New Eve.

Lastly, his moral teachings refer to the Last Judgement (The Ten Virgins, [II]). He takes us towards this moment of truth in our lives, the appearance before the just Judge, and therefore exhorts us to conversion with penance and fasting. The positive aspect is that the Christian must practice charity and almsgiving. Romanus accentuated the primacy of charity over continence in two hymns - The Wedding at Cana and The Ten Virgins.

Charity is the greatest of the virtues: “Ten virgins possessed the virtue of virginity intact but for five of them the difficult practice proved unfruitful. The others shone with their lamps of love for humanity and for this reason the bridegroom invited them in” (The Ten Virgins, 1). Vibrant humanity, the ardour of faith and profound humility pervade the hymns of Romanus the Melodist. This great poet and composer reminds us of the whole treasure of Christian culture, born of faith, born of the heart that has encountered Christ, the Son of God. Culture, the whole of our great Christian culture, is born from this contact of the heart with the Truth who is Love. Nor, if faith stays alive, will this cultural inheritance die; rather, it will remain alive and present. To this day, images still speak to the hearts of believers, they are not relics of the past. Cathedrals are not mediaeval monuments but rather houses of life in which we feel “at home” and where we meet God and one another. Nor is great music - Gregorian chant, Bach or Mozart - something of the past; rather, it lives on in the vitality of the liturgy and in our faith. If faith is alive, Christian culture can never become “obsolete” but on the contrary will remain alive and present. And if faith is alive, today too we can respond to the imperative that is ceaselessly repeated in the Psalms: “O Sing to the Lord a new song” (Ps 98[97]:1). Creativity, innovation, a new song, a new culture and the presence of the entire cultural heritage are not mutually exclusive but form one reality: they are the presence of God’s beauty and the joy of being his children.

## **Saint Gregory the Great**

28 May 2008

Last Wednesday I spoke of a Father of the Church little known in the West, Romanus the Melodist. Today I would like to present the figure of one of the greatest Fathers in the history of the Church, one of four Doctors of the West, Pope St Gregory, who was Bishop of Rome from 590 to 604, and who earned the traditional title of Magnus/the Great. Gregory was truly a great Pope and a great Doctor of the Church! He was born in Rome about 540 into a rich patrician family of the gens Anicia, who were distinguished not only for their noble blood but also for their adherence to the Christian faith and for their

service to the Apostolic See. Two Popes came from this family: Felix III (483-492), the great-great grandfather of Gregory, and Agapetus (535-536). The house in which Gregory grew up stood on the Clivus Scauri, surrounded by majestic buildings that attested to the greatness of ancient Rome and the spiritual strength of Christianity. The example of his parents Gordian and Sylvia, both venerated as Saints, and those of his father's sisters, Aemiliana and Tharsilla, who lived in their own home as consecrated virgins following a path of prayer and self-denial, inspired lofty Christian sentiments in him.

In the footsteps of his father, Gregory entered early into an administrative career which reached its climax in 572 when he became Prefect of the city. This office, complicated by the sorry times, allowed him to apply himself on a vast range to every type of administrative problem, drawing light for future duties from them. In particular, he retained a deep sense of order and discipline: having become Pope, he advised Bishops to take as a model for the management of ecclesial affairs the diligence and respect for the law like civil functionaries. Yet this life could not have satisfied him since shortly after, he decided to leave every civil assignment in order to withdraw to his home to begin the monastic life, transforming his family home into the monastery of St Andrew on the Coelian Hill. This period of monastic life, the life of permanent dialogue with the Lord in listening to his word, constituted a perennial nostalgia which he referred to ever anew and ever more in his homilies. In the midst of the pressure of pastoral worries, he often recalled it in his writings as a happy time of recollection in God, dedication to prayer and peaceful immersion in study. Thus, he could acquire that deep understanding of Sacred Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church that later served him in his work.

But the cloistered withdrawal of Gregory did not last long. The precious experience that he gained in civil administration during a period marked by serious problems, the relationships he had had in this post with the Byzantines and the universal respect that he acquired induced Pope Pelagius to appoint him deacon and to send him to Constantinople as his "apocrisarius" - today one would say "Apostolic Nuncio" in order to help overcome the last traces of the Monophysite controversy and above all to obtain the Emperor's support in the effort to check the Lombard invaders. The stay at Constantinople, where he resumed monastic life with a group of monks, was very important for Gregory, since it permitted him to acquire direct experience of the Byzantine world, as well as to approach the problem of the Lombards, who would later put his ability and energy to the test during the years of his Pontificate. After some years he was recalled to Rome by the Pope, who appointed him his secretary. They were difficult years: the continual rain, flooding due to overflowing rivers, the famine that afflicted many regions of Italy as well as Rome. Finally, even the plague broke out, which claimed numerous victims, among whom was also Pope Pelagius II. The clergy, people and senate were unanimous in choosing Gregory as his successor to the See of Peter. He

tried to resist, even attempting to flee, but to no avail: finally, he had to yield. The year was 590.

Recognising the will of God in what had happened, the new Pontiff immediately and enthusiastically set to work. From the beginning he showed a singularly enlightened vision of reality with which he had to deal, an extraordinary capacity for work confronting both ecclesial and civil affairs, a constant and even balance in making decisions, at times with courage, imposed on him by his office.

Abundant documentation has been preserved from his governance thanks to the Register of his Letters (approximately 800), reflecting the complex questions that arrived on his desk on a daily basis. They were questions that came from Bishops, Abbots, clergy and even from civil authorities of every order and rank. Among the problems that afflicted Italy and Rome at that time was one of special importance both in the civil and ecclesial spheres: the Lombard question. The Pope dedicated every possible energy to it in view of a truly peaceful solution. Contrary to the Byzantine Emperor who assumed that the Lombards were only uncouth individuals and predators to be defeated or exterminated, St Gregory saw this people with the eyes of a good pastor, and was concerned with proclaiming the word of salvation to them, establishing fraternal relationships with them in view of a future peace founded on mutual respect and peaceful coexistence between Italians, Imperials and Lombards. He was concerned with the conversion of the young people and the new civil structure of Europe: the Visigoths of Spain, the Franks, the Saxons, the immigrants in Britain and the Lombards, were the privileged recipients of his evangelising mission. Yesterday we celebrated the liturgical memorial of St Augustine of Canterbury, the leader of a group of monks Gregory assigned to go to Britain to evangelise England.

The Pope - who was a true peacemaker - deeply committed himself to establish an effective peace in Rome and in Italy by undertaking intense negotiations with Agilulf, the Lombard King. This negotiation led to a period of truce that lasted for about three years (598-601), after which, in 603, it was possible to stipulate a more stable armistice. This positive result was obtained also thanks to the parallel contacts that, meanwhile, the Pope undertook with Queen Theodolinda, a Bavarian princess who, unlike the leaders of other Germanic peoples, was Catholic deeply Catholic. A series of Letters of Pope Gregory to this Queen has been preserved in which he reveals his respect and friendship for her. Theodolinda, little by little was able to guide the King to Catholicism, thus preparing the way to peace. The Pope also was careful to send her relics for the Basilica of St John the Baptist which she had had built in Monza, and did not fail to send his congratulations and precious gifts for the same Cathedral of Monza on the occasion of the birth and baptism of her son, Adaloald. The series of events concerning this Queen

constitutes a beautiful testimony to the importance of women in the history of the Church. Gregory constantly focused on three basic objectives: to limit the Lombard expansion in Italy; to preserve Queen Theodolinda from the influence of schismatics and to strengthen the Catholic faith; and to mediate between the Lombards and the Byzantines in view of an accord that guaranteed peace in the peninsula and at the same time permitted the evangelisation of the Lombards themselves. Therefore, in the complex situation his scope was constantly twofold: to promote understanding on the diplomatic-political level and to spread the proclamation of the true faith among the peoples.

Along with his purely spiritual and pastoral action, Pope Gregory also became an active protagonist in multifaceted social activities. With the revenues from the Roman See's substantial patrimony in Italy, especially in Sicily, he bought and distributed grain, assisted those in need, helped priests, monks and nuns who lived in poverty, paid the ransom for citizens held captive by the Lombards and purchased armistices and truces. Moreover, whether in Rome or other parts of Italy, he carefully carried out the administrative reorganization, giving precise instructions so that the goods of the Church, useful for her sustenance and evangelising work in the world, were managed with absolute rectitude and according to the rules of justice and mercy. He demanded that the tenants on Church territory be protected from dishonest agents and, in cases of fraud, were to be quickly compensated, so that the face of the Bride of Christ was not soiled with dishonest profits.

Gregory carried out this intense activity notwithstanding his poor health, which often forced him to remain in bed for days on end. The fasts practised during the years of monastic life had caused him serious digestive problems. Furthermore, his voice was so feeble that he was often obliged to entrust the reading of his homilies to the deacon, so that the faithful present in the Roman Basilicas could hear him. On feast days he did his best to celebrate the Missarum sollemnia, that is the solemn Mass, and then he met personally with the people of God, who were very fond of him, because they saw in him the authoritative reference from whom to draw security: not by chance was the title *consul Dei* quickly attributed to him. Notwithstanding the very difficult conditions in which he had to work, he gained the faithful's trust, thanks to his holiness of life and rich humanity, achieving truly magnificent results for his time and for the future. He was a man immersed in God: his desire for God was always alive in the depths of his soul and precisely because of this he was always close to his neighbour, to the needy people of his time. Indeed, during a desperate period of havoc, he was able to create peace and give hope. This man of God shows us the true sources of peace, from which true hope comes. Thus, he becomes a guide also for us today.



4 June 2008

Today, at our Wednesday appointment, I return to the extraordinary figure of Pope Gregory the Great to receive some additional light from his rich teaching.

Notwithstanding the many duties connected to his office as the Bishop of Rome, he left to us numerous works, from which the Church in successive centuries has drawn with both hands. Besides the important correspondence - in last week's catechesis I cited the Register that contains over 800 letters - first of all he left us writings of an exegetical character, among which his *Morals*, a commentary on Job (known under the Latin title *Moralia in Iob*), the *Homilies on Ezekiel* and the *Homilies on the Gospel* stand out. Then there is an important work of a hagiographical character, the *Dialogues*, written by Gregory for the edification of the Lombard Queen Theodolinda. The primary and best known work is undoubtedly the *Regula pastoralis* (*Pastoral Rule*), which the Pope published at the beginning of his Pontificate with clearly programmatic goals.

Wanting to review these works quickly, we must first of all note that, in his writings, Gregory never sought to delineate "his own" doctrine, his own originality. Rather, he intended to echo the traditional teaching of the Church, he simply wanted to be the mouthpiece of Christ and of the Church on the way that must be taken to reach God. His exegetical commentaries are models of this approach.

He was a passionate reader of the Bible, which he approached not simply with a speculative purpose: from Sacred Scripture, he thought, the Christian must draw not theoretical understanding so much as the daily nourishment for his soul, for his life as man in this world. For example, in the *Homilies on Ezekiel*, he emphasized this function of the sacred text: to approach the Scripture simply to satisfy one's own desire for knowledge means to succumb to the temptation of pride and thus to expose oneself to the risk of sliding into heresy. Intellectual humility is the primary rule for one who searches to penetrate the supernatural realities beginning from the sacred Book. Obviously, humility does not exclude serious study; but to ensure that the results are spiritually beneficial, facilitating true entry into the depth of the text, humility remains indispensable. Only with this interior attitude can one really listen to and eventually perceive the voice of God. On the other hand, when it is a question of the Word of God understanding it means nothing if it does not lead to action. In these *Homilies on Ezekiel* is also found that beautiful expression according which "the preacher must dip his pen into the blood of his heart; then he can also reach the ear of his neighbour". Reading his homilies, one sees that Gregory truly wrote with his life-blood and, therefore, he still speaks to us today.

Gregory also developed this discourse in the *Book of Morals*, a *Commentary on Job*. Following the Patristic tradition, he examined the sacred text in the three dimensions of

its meaning: the literal dimension, the allegorical dimension and the moral dimension, which are dimensions of the unique sense of Sacred Scripture. Nevertheless, Gregory gave a clear prevalence to the moral sense. In this perspective, he proposed his thought by way of some dual meanings - to know-to do, to speak-to live, to know-to act - in which he evokes the two aspects of human life that should be complementary, but which often end by being antithetical. The moral ideal, he comments, always consists in realizing a harmonious integration between word and action, thought and deed, prayer and dedication to the duties of one's state: this is the way to realize that synthesis thanks to which the divine descends to man and man is lifted up until he becomes one with God. Thus the great Pope marks out a complete plan of life for the authentic believer; for this reason the Book of Morals, a commentary on Job, would constitute in the course of the Middle Ages a kind of summa of Christian morality.

Of notable importance and beauty are also the Homilies on the Gospel. The first of these was given in St Peter's Basilica in 590 during the Advent Season, hence only a few months after Gregory's election to the Papacy; the last was delivered in St Lawrence's Basilica on the Second Sunday after Pentecost in 593. The Pope preached to the people in the churches where the "stations" were celebrated - special prayer ceremonies during the important seasons of the liturgical year - or the feasts of titular martyrs. The guiding principle, which links the different homilies, is captured in the word "preacher": not only the minister of God, but also every Christian, has the duty "to preach" of what he has experienced in his innermost being, following the example of Christ who was made man to bring to all the good news of salvation. The horizon of this commitment is eschatological: the expectation of the fulfilment of all things in Christ was a constant thought of the great Pontiff and ended by becoming the guiding reason of his every thought and activity. From here sprang his incessant reminders to be vigilant and to perform good works.

Probably the most systematic text of Gregory the Great is the Pastoral Rule, written in the first years of his Pontificate. In it Gregory proposed to treat the figure of the ideal Bishop, the teacher and guide of his flock. To this end he illustrated the seriousness of the office of Pastor of the Church and its inherent duties. Therefore, those who were not called to this office may not seek it with superficiality, instead those who assumed it without due reflection necessarily feel trepidation rise within their soul. Taking up again a favourite theme, he affirmed that the Bishop is above all the "preacher" par excellence; for this reason he must be above all an example for others, so that his behaviour may be a point of reference for all. Efficacious pastoral action requires that he know his audience and adapt his words to the situation of each person: here Gregory paused to illustrate the various categories of the faithful with acute and precise annotations, which can justify the evaluation of those who have also seen in this work a treatise on psychology. From

this one understands that he really knew his flock and spoke of all things with the people of his time and his city.

Nevertheless, the great Pontiff insisted on the Pastor's duty to recognize daily his own unworthiness in the eyes of the Supreme Judge, so that pride did not negate the good accomplished. For this the final chapter of the Rule is dedicated to humility: "When one is pleased to have achieved many virtues, it is well to reflect on one's own inadequacies and to humble oneself: instead of considering the good accomplished, it is necessary to consider what was neglected". All these precious indications demonstrate the lofty concept that St Gregory had for the care of souls, which he defined as the "ars artium", the art of arts. The Rule had such great, and the rather rare, good fortune to have been quickly translated into Greek and Anglo-Saxon.

Another significant work is the Dialogues. In this work addressed to his friend Peter, the deacon, who was convinced that customs were so corrupt as to impede the rise of saints as in times past, Gregory demonstrated just the opposite: holiness is always possible, even in difficult times.

He proved it by narrating the life of contemporaries or those who had died recently, who could well be considered saints, even if not canonised. The narration was accompanied by theological and mystical reflections that make the book a singular hagiographical text, capable of enchanting entire generations of readers. The material was drawn from the living traditions of the people and intended to edify and form, attracting the attention of the reader to a series of questions regarding the meaning of miracles, the interpretation of Scripture, the immortality of the soul, the existence of Hell, the representation of the next world - all themes that require fitting clarification. Book II is wholly dedicated to the figure of Benedict of Nursia and is the only ancient witness to the life of the holy monk, whose spiritual beauty the text highlights fully.

In the theological plan that Gregory develops regarding his works, the past, present and future are compared. What counted for him more than anything was the entire arch of salvation history, that continues to unfold in the obscure meanderings of time. In this perspective it is significant that he inserted the news of the conversion of the Angles in the middle of his Book of Morals, a commentary on Job: to his eyes the event constituted a furthering of the Kingdom of God which the Scripture treats. Therefore, it could rightly be mentioned in the commentary on a holy book. According to him the leaders of Christian communities must commit themselves to reread events in the light of the Word of God: in this sense the great Pontiff felt he had the duty to orient pastors and the faithful on the spiritual itinerary of an enlightened and correct *lectio divina*, placed in the context of one's own life.

Before concluding it is necessary to say a word on the relationship that Pope Gregory nurtured with the Patriarchs of Antioch, of Alexandria and of Constantinople itself. He always concerned himself with recognizing and respecting rights, protecting them from every interference that would limit legitimate autonomy. Still, if St Gregory, in the context of the historical situation, was opposed to the title “ecumenical” on the part of the Patriarch of Constantinople, it was not to limit or negate this legitimate authority but rather because he was concerned about the fraternal unity of the universal Church. Above all he was profoundly convinced that humility should be the fundamental virtue for every Bishop, even more so for the Patriarch. Gregory remained a simple monk in his heart and therefore was decisively contrary to great titles. He wanted to be - and this is his expression - *servus servorum Dei*. Coined by him, this phrase was not just a pious formula on his lips but a true manifestation of his way of living and acting. He was intimately struck by the humility of God, who in Christ made himself our servant. He washed and washes our dirty feet. Therefore, he was convinced that a Bishop, above all, should imitate this humility of God and follow Christ in this way. His desire was to live truly as a monk, in permanent contact with the Word of God, but for love of God he knew how to make himself the servant of all in a time full of tribulation and suffering. He knew how to make himself the “servant of the servants”. Precisely because he was this, he is great and also shows us the measure of true greatness.

## Saint Columban

11 June 2008

Today I would like to speak about the holy Abbot Columban, the best known Irishman of the early Middle Ages. Since he worked as a monk, missionary and writer in various countries of Western Europe with good reason he can be called a “European” Saint. With the Irish of his time, he had a sense of Europe’s cultural unity. The expression “*totius Europae - of all Europe*”, with reference to the Church’s presence on the Continent, is found for the first time in one of his letters, written around the year 600, addressed to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. *Epistula I, 1*).

Columban was born c. 543 in the Province of Leinster in southeast Ireland. He was educated at home by excellent tutors who introduced him to the study of liberal arts. He was then entrusted to the guidance of Abbot Sinell of the community of Cleenish in Northern Ireland, where he was able to deepen his study of Sacred Scripture. At the age of about 20 he entered the monastery of Bangor, in the northeast of the island, whose abbot, Comgall, was a monk well known for his virtue and ascetic rigour. In full agreement with his abbot, Columban zealously practiced the severe discipline of the monastery, leading a life of prayer, asceticism and study. While there, he was also ordained

a priest. His life at Bangor and the Abbot's example influenced the conception of monasticism that developed in Columban over time and that he subsequently spread in the course of his life.

When he was approximately 50 years old, following the characteristically Irish ascetic ideal of the "peregrinatio pro Christo", namely, making oneself a pilgrim for the sake of Christ, Columban left his island with 12 companions to engage in missionary work on the European Continent. We should in fact bear in mind that the migration of people from the North and the East had caused whole areas, previously Christianized, to revert to paganism. Around the year 590, the small group of missionaries landed on the Breton coast. Welcomed kindly by the King of the Franks of Austrasia (present-day France), they asked only for a small piece of uncultivated land. They were given the ancient Roman fortress of Annegray, totally ruined and abandoned and covered by forest. Accustomed to a life of extreme hardship, in the span of a few months the monks managed to build the first hermitage on the ruins. Thus their re-evangelization began, in the first place, through the witness of their lives. With the new cultivation of the land, they also began a new cultivation of souls. The fame of those foreign religious who, living on prayer and in great austerity, built houses and worked the land spread rapidly, attracting pilgrims and penitents. In particular, many young men asked to be accepted by the monastic community in order to live, like them, this exemplary life which was renewing the cultivation of the land and of souls. It was not long before the foundation of a second monastery was required. It was built a few kilometres away on the ruins of an ancient spa, Luxeuil. This monastery was to become the centre of the traditional Irish monastic and missionary outreach on the European Continent. A third monastery was erected at Fontaine, an hour's walk further north.

Columban lived at Luxeuil for almost 20 years. Here the Saint wrote for his followers the *Regula monachorum* - for a while more widespread in Europe than Benedict's Rule - which portrayed the ideal image of the monk. It is the only ancient Irish monastic rule in our possession today. Columban integrated it with the *Regula coenobialis*, a sort of penal code for the offences committed by monks, with punishments that are somewhat surprising to our modern sensibility and can only be explained by the mentality and environment of that time. With another famous work entitled: *De poenitentiarum misura taxanda*, also written at Luxeuil, Columban introduced Confession and private and frequent penance on the Continent. It was known as "tariffed" penance because of the proportion established between the gravity of the sin and the type of penance imposed by the confessor. These innovations roused the suspicion of local Bishops, a suspicion that became hostile when Columban had the courage to rebuke them openly for the practices of some of them. The controversy over the date of Easter was an opportunity to demonstrate their opposition: Ireland, in fact, followed the Eastern rather

than the Roman tradition. The Irish monk was convoked in 603 to account to a Synod at Chalon-sur-Saône for his practices regarding penance and Easter. Instead of presenting himself before the Synod, he sent a letter in which he minimized the issue, inviting the Synod Fathers not only to discuss the problem of the date of Easter, in his opinion a negligible problem, “but also all the necessary canonical norms that - something more serious - are disregarded by many” (cf. Epistula II, 1). At the same time he wrote to Pope Boniface IV - just as several years earlier he had turned to Pope Gregory the Great (cf. Epistula I) - asking him to defend the Irish tradition (cf. Epistula III).

Intransigent as he was in every moral matter, Columban then came into conflict with the royal house for having harshly reprimanded King Theuderic for his adulterous relations. This created a whole network of personal, religious and political intrigues and manoeuvres which, in 610, culminated in a Decree of expulsion banishing Columban and all the monks of Irish origin from Luxeuil and condemning them to definitive exile. They were escorted to the sea and, at the expense of the court, boarded a ship bound for Ireland. However, not far from shore the ship ran aground and the captain, who saw this as a sign from Heaven, abandoned the voyage and, for fear of being cursed by God, brought the monks back to dry land. Instead of returning to Luxeuil, they decided to begin a new work of evangelization. Thus, they embarked on a Rhine boat and travelled up the river. After a first stop in Tuggen near Lake Zurich they went to the region of Brengenz, near Lake Constance, to evangelize the Alemanni.

However, soon afterwards, because of political events unfavourable to his work, Columban decided to cross the Alps with the majority of his disciples. Only one monk whose name was Gallus stayed behind; it was from his hermitage that the famous Abbey of St Gall in Switzerland subsequently developed. Having arrived in Italy, Columban met with a warm welcome at the Lombard Royal Court but was immediately faced with considerable difficulties: the life of the Church was torn apart by the Arian heresy, still prevalent among the Lombards, and by a schism which had detached most of the Church in Northern Italy from communion with the Bishop of Rome. Columban entered authoritatively into this context, writing a satirical pamphlet against Arianism and a letter to Boniface IV to convince him to take some decisive steps with a view to re-establishing unity (cf. Epistula V). When, in 612 or 613, the King of the Lombards allocated to him a plot of land in Bobbio, in the Trebbia Valley, Columban founded a new monastery there which was later to become a cultural centre on a par with the famous monastery of Monte Cassino. Here he came to the end of his days: he died on 23 November 615 and to this day is commemorated on this date in the Roman rite.

St Columban's message is concentrated in a firm appeal to conversion and detachment from earthly goods, with a view to the eternal inheritance. With his ascetic life and

conduct free from compromises when he faced the corruption of the powerful, he is reminiscent of the severe figure of St John the Baptist. His austerity, however, was never an end in itself but merely the means with which to open himself freely to God's love and to correspond with his whole being to the gifts received from him, thereby restoring in himself the image of God, while at the same time cultivating the earth and renewing human society. I quote from his *Instructiones*: "If man makes a correct use of those faculties that God has conceded to his soul, he will be likened to God. Let us remember that we must restore to him all those gifts which he deposited in us when we were in our original condition. "He has taught us the way with his Commandments. The first of them tells us to love the Lord with all our heart, because he loved us first, from the beginning of time, even before we came into the light of this world" (cf. *Instructiones* XI). The Irish Saint truly incarnated these words in his own life. A man of great culture - he also wrote poetry in Latin and a grammar book - he proved rich in gifts of grace. He was a tireless builder of monasteries as well as an intransigent penitential preacher who spent every ounce of his energy on nurturing the Christian roots of Europe which was coming into existence. With his spiritual energy, with his faith, with his love for God and neighbour, he truly became one of the Fathers of Europe. He shows us even today the roots from which our Europe can be reborn.

## Saint Isidore of Seville

18 June 2008

Today I would like to speak about St Isidore of Seville. He was a younger brother of Leander, Archbishop of Seville, and a great friend of Pope Gregory the Great. Pointing this out is important because it enables us to bear in mind a cultural and spiritual approach that is indispensable for understanding Isidore's personality. Indeed, he owed much to Leander, an exacting, studious and austere person who created around his younger brother a family context marked by the ascetic requirements proper to a monk, and from the work pace demanded by a serious dedication to study. Furthermore, Leander was concerned to have the wherewithal to confront the political and social situation of that time: in those decades in fact, the Visigoths, barbarians and Arians, had invaded the Iberian Peninsula and taken possession of territories that belonged to the Roman Empire. It was essential to regain them for the Roman world and for Catholicism. Leander and Isidore's home was furnished with a library richly endowed with classical, pagan and Christian works. Isidore, who felt simultaneously attracted to both, was therefore taught under the responsibility of his elder brother to develop a very strong discipline, in devoting himself to study with discretion and discernment.

Thus a calm and open atmosphere prevailed in the episcopal residence in Seville. We can deduce this from Isidore's cultural and spiritual interests, as they emerge from his works themselves which include an encyclopaedic knowledge of pagan classical culture and a thorough knowledge of Christian culture. This explains the eclecticism characteristic of Isidore's literary opus who glided with the greatest of ease from Martial to Augustine or from Cicero to Gregory the Great. The inner strife that the young Isidore had to contend with, having succeeded his brother Leander on the episcopal throne of Seville in 599, was by no means unimportant. The impression of excessive voluntarism that strikes one on reading the works of this great author, considered to be the last of the Christian Fathers of antiquity, may, perhaps, actually be due to this constant struggle with himself. A few years after his death in 636, the Council of Toledo in 653 described him as "an illustrious teacher of our time and the glory of the Catholic Church".

Isidore was without a doubt a man of accentuated dialectic antitheses. Moreover, he experienced a permanent inner conflict in his personal life, similar to that which Gregory the Great and St Augustine had experienced earlier, between a desire for solitude to dedicate himself solely to meditation on the word of God, and the demands of charity to his brethren for whose salvation, as Bishop, he felt responsible. He wrote, for example, with regard to Church leaders: "The man responsible for a Church (*vir ecclesiasticus*) must on the one hand allow himself to be crucified to the world with the mortification of his flesh, and on the other, accept the decision of the ecclesiastical order - when it comes from God's will - to devote himself humbly to government, even if he does not wish to" (*Sententiarum liber III, 33, 1: PL 83, col 705 B*). Just a paragraph later he adds: "Men of God (*sancti viri*) do not in fact desire to dedicate themselves to things of the world and groan when by some mysterious design of God they are charged with certain responsibilities.... They do their utmost to avoid them but accept what they would like to shun and do what they would have preferred to avoid. "Indeed, they enter into the secrecy of the heart and seek there to understand what God's mysterious will is asking of them. And when they realize that they must submit to God's plans, they bend their hearts to the yoke of the divine decision" (*Sententiarum liber III, 33, 3: PL 83, coll. 705-706*).

To understand Isidore better it is first of all necessary to recall the complexity of the political situations in his time to which I have already referred: during the years of his boyhood he was obliged to experience the bitterness of exile. He was nevertheless pervaded with apostolic enthusiasm. He experienced the rapture of contributing to the formation of a people that was at last rediscovering its unity, both political and religious, with the providential conversion of Hermenegild, the heir to the Visigoth throne, from Arianism to the Catholic faith. Yet we must not underestimate the enormous difficulty of coming to grips with such very serious problems as were the relations with heretics and with the Jews. There was a whole series of problems which appear very concrete to us



today too, especially if we consider what is happening in certain regions in which we seem almost to be witnessing the recurrence of situations very similar to those that existed on the Iberian Peninsula in that sixth century. The wealth of cultural knowledge that Isidore had assimilated enabled him to constantly compare the Christian newness with the Greco-Roman cultural heritage, however, rather than the precious gift of synthesis it would seem that he possessed the gift of *collatio*, that is, of collecting, which he expressed in an extraordinary personal erudition, although it was not always ordered as might have been desired.

In any case, his nagging worry not to overlook anything that human experience had produced in the history of his homeland and of the whole world is admirable. Isidore did not want to lose anything that man had acquired in the epochs of antiquity, regardless of whether they had been pagan, Jewish or Christian. Hence, it should not come as a surprise if, in pursuing this goal, he did not always manage to filter the knowledge he possessed sufficiently in the purifying waters of the Christian faith as he would have wished. The point is, however, that in Isidore's intentions, the proposals he made were always in tune with the Catholic faith which he staunchly upheld. In the discussion of the various theological problems, he showed that he perceived their complexity and often astutely suggested solutions that summarize and express the complete Christian truth. This has enabled believers through the ages and to our times to profit with gratitude from his definitions. A significant example of this is offered by Isidore's teaching on the relations between active and contemplative life. He wrote: "Those who seek to attain repose in contemplation must first train in the stadium of active life; and then, free from the dross of sin, they will be able to display that pure heart which alone makes the vision of God possible" (*Differentiarum Lib. II, 34, 133: PL 83, col 91A*). Nonetheless, the realism of a true pastor convinced him of the risk the faithful run of reducing themselves to one dimension. He therefore added: "The middle way, consisting of both of these forms of life, normally turns out to be more useful in resolving those tensions which are often aggravated by the choice of a single way of life and are instead better tempered by an alternation of the two forms" (*op. cit. 134; ibid., col 91B*).

Isidore sought in Christ's example the definitive confirmation of a just orientation of life and said: "The Saviour Jesus offers us the example of active life when during the day he devoted himself to working signs and miracles in the town, but he showed the contemplative life when he withdrew to the mountain and spent the night in prayer" (*op. cit. 134: ibid.*). In the light of this example of the divine Teacher, Isidore can conclude with this precise moral teaching: "Therefore let the servant of God, imitating Christ, dedicate himself to contemplation without denying himself active life. Behaving otherwise would not be right. Indeed, just as we must love God in contemplation, so we must love our neighbour with action. It is therefore impossible to live without the

presence of both the one and the other form of life, nor can we live without experiencing both the one and the other” (op. cit., 135; *ibid.* col 91C). I consider that this is the synthesis of a life that seeks contemplation of God, dialogue with God in prayer and in the reading of Sacred Scripture, as well as action at the service of the human community and of our neighbour. This synthesis is the lesson that the great Bishop of Seville has bequeathed to us, Christians of today, called to witness to Christ at the beginning of a new millennium.

## St Maximus the Confessor

25 June 2008

Today I would like to present the figure of one of the great Fathers of the Eastern Church in later times. He is a monk, St Maximus, whose fearless courage in witnessing to - “confessing” - even while suffering, the integrity of his faith in Jesus Christ, true God and true man, Saviour of the world, earned him Christian Tradition’s title of Confessor. Maximus was born in Palestine, the land of the Lord, in about 580. As a boy he was initiated to the monastic life and the study of the Scriptures through the works of Origen, the great teacher who by the third century had already “established” the exegetic tradition of Alexandria.

Maximus moved from Jerusalem to Constantinople and from there, because of the barbarian invasions, sought refuge in Africa. Here he was distinguished by his extreme courage in the defence of orthodoxy. Maximus refused to accept any reduction of Christ’s humanity. A theory had come into being which held that there was only one will in Christ, the divine will. To defend the oneness of Christ’s Person, people denied that he had his own true and proper human will. And, at first sight, it might seem to be a good thing that Christ had only one will. But St Maximus immediately realized that this would destroy the mystery of salvation, for humanity without a will, a man without a will, is not a real man but an amputated man. Had this been so, the man Jesus Christ would not have been a true man, he would not have experienced the drama of being human which consists, precisely, of conforming our will with the great truth of being. Thus St Maximus declared with great determination: Sacred Scripture does not portray to us an amputated man with no will but rather true and complete man: God, in Jesus Christ, really assumed the totality of being human - obviously with the exception of sin - hence also a human will. And said like this, his point is clear: Christ either is or is not a man. If he is a man, he also has a will. But here the problem arises: do we not end up with a sort of dualism? Do we not reach the point of affirming two complete personalities: reason, will, sentiment? How is it possible to overcome dualism, to keep the completeness of the human being and yet succeed in preserving the unity of the Person of Christ who was not schizophrenic?

St Maximus demonstrates that man does not find his unity, the integration of himself or his totality within himself but by surpassing himself, by coming out of himself. Thus, also in Christ, by coming out of himself, man finds himself in God, in the Son of God. It is not necessary to amputate man to explain the Incarnation; all that is required is to understand the dynamism of the human being who is fulfilled only by coming out of himself; it is in God alone that we find ourselves, our totality and our completeness. Hence, we see that the person who withdraws into himself is not a complete person but the person who is open, who comes out of himself, becomes complete and finds himself, finds his true humanity, precisely in the Son of God. For St Maximus, this vision did not remain a philosophical speculation; he saw it realized in Jesus' actual life, especially in the drama of Gethsemane. In this drama of Jesus' agony, of the anguish of death, of the opposition between the human will not to die and the divine will which offers itself to death, in this drama of Gethsemane the whole human drama is played out, the drama of our redemption. St Maximus tells us that, and we know that this is true, Adam (and we ourselves are Adam) thought that the "no" was the peak of freedom. He thought that only a person who can say "no" is truly free; that if he is truly to achieve his freedom, man must say "no" to God; only in this way he believed he could at last be himself, that he had reached the heights of freedom. This tendency also carried within it the human nature of Christ, but went beyond it, for Jesus saw that it was not the "no" that was the height of freedom. The height of freedom is the "yes", in conformity with God's will. It is only in the "yes" that man truly becomes himself; only in the great openness of the "yes", in the unification of his will with the divine, that man becomes immensely open, becomes "divine".

What Adam wanted was to be like God, that is, to be completely free. But the person who withdraws into himself is not divine, is not completely free; he is freed by emerging from himself, it is in the "yes" that he becomes free; and this is the drama of Gethsemane: not my will but yours. It is by transferring the human will to the divine will that the real person is born, it is in this way that we are redeemed. This, in a few brief words, is the fundamental point of what St Maximus wanted to say and here we see that the whole human being is truly at issue; the entire question of our life lies here. In Africa St Maximus was already having problems defending this vision of man and of God. He was then summoned to Rome. In 649 he took an active part in the Lateran Council, convoked by Pope Martin I to defend the two wills of Christ against the Imperial Edict which - *pro bono pacis* - forbade discussion of this matter. Pope Martin was made to pay dearly for his courage. Although he was in a precarious state of health, he was arrested and taken to Constantinople. Tried and condemned to death, the Pope obtained the commutation of his sentence into permanent exile in the Crimea, where he died on 16 September 655, after two long years of humiliation and torment.

It was Maximus' turn shortly afterwards, in 662, as he too opposed the Emperor, repeating: "It cannot be said that Christ has a single will!" (cf. PG 91, cc. 268-269). Thus, together with his two disciples, both called Anastasius, Maximus was subjected to an exhausting trial although he was then over 80 years of age. The Emperor's tribunal condemned him with the accusation of heresy, sentencing him to the cruel mutilation of his tongue and his right hand - the two organs through which, by words and writing, Maximus had fought the erroneous doctrine of the single will of Christ. In the end, thus mutilated, the holy monk was finally exiled to the region of Colchis on the Black Sea where he died, worn out by the suffering he had endured, at the age of 82, on 13 August that same year, 662.

In speaking of Maximus' life, we mentioned his literary opus in defence of orthodoxy. We referred in particular to the Disputation with Pyrrhus, formerly Patriarch of Constantinople: in this debate he succeeded in persuading his adversary of his errors. With great honesty, in fact, Pyrrhus concluded the Disputation with these words: "I ask forgiveness for myself and for those who have preceded me: by ignorance we arrived at these absurd ideas and arguments; and I ask that a way may be found to cancel these absurdities, saving the memory of those who erred" (PG 91, c. 352). Also several dozen important works have been handed down to us, among which the *Mystagogia* is outstanding. This is one of St Maximus' most important writings, which gathers his theological thought in a well-structured synthesis.

St Maximus' thought was never merely theological, speculative or introverted because its target was always the practical reality of the world and its salvation. In this context in which he had to suffer, he could not escape into purely theoretical and philosophical affirmations. He had to seek the meaning of life, asking himself: who am I? What is the world? God entrusted to man, created in his image and likeness, the mission of unifying the cosmos. And just as Christ unified the human being in himself, the Creator unified the cosmos in man. He showed us how to unify the cosmos in the communion of Christ and thus truly arrived at a redeemed world. Hans Urs von Balthasar, one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century, referred to this powerful saving vision when, "relaunching" Maximus - he defined his thought with the vivid expression *Kosmische Liturgie*, "cosmic liturgies". Jesus, the one Saviour of the world, is always at the centre of this solemn "liturgy". The efficacy of his saving action which definitively unified the cosmos is guaranteed by the fact that in spite of being God in all things, he is also integrally a man and has the "energy" and will of a man.

The life and thought of Maximus were powerfully illumined by his immense courage in witnessing to the integral reality of Christ, without any reduction or compromise. And thus who man really is and how we should live in order to respond to our vocation

appears. We must live united to God in order to be united to ourselves and to the cosmos, giving the cosmos itself and humanity their proper form. Christ's universal "yes" also shows us clearly how to put all the other values in the right place. We think of values that are justly defended today such as tolerance, freedom and dialogue. But a tolerance that no longer distinguishes between good and evil would become chaotic and self-destructive, just as a freedom that did not respect the freedom of others or find the common measure of our respective liberties would become anarchy and destroy authority. Dialogue that no longer knows what to discuss becomes empty chatter. All these values are important and fundamental but can only remain true values if they have the point of reference that unites them and gives them true authenticity. This reference point is the synthesis between God and the cosmos, the figure of Christ in which we learn the truth about ourselves and thus where to rank all other values, because we discover their authentic meaning. Jesus Christ is the reference point that gives light to all other values. This was the conclusion of the great Confessor's witness. And it is in this way, ultimately, that Christ indicates that the cosmos must become a liturgy, the glory of God, and that worship is the beginning of true transformation, of the true renewal of the world.

I would therefore like to conclude with a fundamental passage from one of St Maximus' works: "We adore one Son together with the Father and the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning before all time, is now and ever shall be, for all time and for the time after time. Amen!" (PG 91, c. 269).

# Year of Saint Paul

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# Paul: Religious and Cultural Environment

2 July 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to begin a new cycle of Catecheses focusing on the great Apostle St Paul. As you know, this year is dedicated to him, from the liturgical Feast of Sts Peter and Paul on 29 June 2008 to the same Feast day in 2009. The Apostle Paul, an outstanding and almost inimitable yet stimulating figure, stands before us as an example of total dedication to the Lord and to his Church, as well as of great openness to humanity and its cultures. It is right, therefore, that we reserve a special place for him in not only our veneration but also in our effort to understand what he has to say to us as well, Christians of today. In this first meeting let us pause to consider the environment in which St Paul lived and worked. A theme such as this would seem to bring us far from our time, given that we must identify with the world of 2,000 years ago. Yet this is only apparently and, in any case, only partly true for we can see that various aspects of today's social and cultural context are not very different from what they were then.

A primary and fundamental fact to bear in mind is the relationship between the milieu in which Paul was born and raised and the global context to which he later belonged. He came from a very precise and circumscribed culture, indisputably a minority, which is that of the People of Israel and its tradition. In the ancient world and especially in the Roman Empire, as scholars in the subject teach us, Jews must have accounted for about 10 percent of the total population; later, here in Rome, towards the middle of the first century, this percentage was even lower, amounting to three percent of the city's inhabitants at most. Their beliefs and way of life, is still the case today, distinguished them clearly from the surrounding environment; and this could have two results: either derision, that could lead to intolerance, or admiration which was expressed in various forms of sympathy, as in the case of the "God-fearing" or "proselytes", pagans who became members of the Synagogue and who shared the faith in the God of Israel. As concrete examples of this dual attitude we can mention on the one hand the cutting opinion of an orator such as Cicero who despised their religion and even the city of Jerusalem (cf. *Pro Flacco*, 66–69) and, on the other, the attitude of

Nero's wife, Poppea, who is remembered by Flavius Josephus as a "sympathizer" of the Jews (cf. *Antichità giudaiche* 20, 195, 252); *Vita* 16), not to mention that Julius Caesar had already officially recognized specific rights of the Jews which have been recorded by the above-mentioned Jewish historian Flavius Josephus (cf. *ibid.*, 14, 200–216). It is certain that the number of Jews, as, moreover, is still the case today, was far greater outside the land of Israel, that is, in the Diaspora, than in the territory that others called Palestine.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Paul himself was the object of the dual contradictory assessment that I mentioned. One thing is certain: the particularism of the Judaic culture and religion easily found room in an institution as far-reaching as the Roman Empire. Those who would adhere with faith to the Person of Jesus of Nazareth, Jew or Gentile, were in the more difficult and troubled position, to the extent to which they were to distinguish themselves from both Judaism and the prevalent paganism. In any case, two factors were in Paul's favour. The first was the Greek, or rather Hellenistic, culture which after Alexander the Great had become a common heritage, at least of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the Middle East, and had even absorbed many elements of peoples traditionally considered barbarian. One writer of the time says in this regard that Alexander "ordered that all should consider the entire oecumene as their homeland ... and that a distinction should no longer be made between Greek and barbarian" (Plutarch, *De Alexandri Magni fortuna aut virtute*, 6, 8). The second factor was the political and administrative structure of the Roman Empire which guaranteed peace and stability from Britain as far as southern Egypt, unifying a territory of previously unheard of dimensions. It was possible to move with sufficient freedom and safety in this space, making use, among other things, of an extraordinary network of roads and finding at every point of arrival basic cultural characteristics which, without affecting local values, nonetheless represented a common fabric of unification *super partes*, so that the Jewish philosopher, Philo of Alexandria, a contemporary of Paul himself, praised the Emperor Augustus for "composing in harmony all the savage peoples, making himself the guardian of peace" (*Legatio ad Caium*, 146–147).

There is no doubt that the universalist vision characteristic of St Paul's personality, at least of the Christian Paul after the event on the road to Damascus, owes its basic impact to faith in Jesus Christ, since the figure of the



Risen One was by this time situated beyond any particularistic narrowness. Indeed, for the Apostle “there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28). Yet, even the historical and cultural situation of his time and milieu could not but have had an influence on his decisions and his work. Some have defined Paul as “a man of three cultures”, taking into account his Jewish background, his Greek tongue and his prerogative as a “*civis romanus* [Roman citizen], as the name of Latin origin suggests. Particularly the Stoic philosophy dominant in Paul’s time which influenced Christianity, even if only marginally, should be recalled. Concerning this, we cannot gloss over certain names of Stoic philosophers such as those of its founders, Zeno and Cleanthes, and then those closer to Paul in time such as Seneca, Musonius and Epictetus: in them the loftiest values of humanity and wisdom are found which were naturally to be absorbed by Christianity. As one student of the subject splendidly wrote, “Stoicism ... announced a new ideal, which imposed upon man obligations to his peers, but at the same time set him free from all physical and national ties, and made of him a purely spiritual being” (M. Pohlenz, *La Stoa*, I, Florence, 2, 1978, pp. 565 f.). One thinks, for example, of the doctrine of the universe understood as a single great harmonious body and consequently of the doctrine of equality among all people without social distinctions, of the equivalence, at least in principle, of men and women, and then of the ideal of frugality, of the just measure and self-control to avoid all excesses. When Paul wrote to the Philippians, “Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things” (Phil 4:8), he was only taking up a purely humanistic concept proper to that philosophical wisdom.

In St Paul’s time a crisis of traditional religion was taking place, at least in its mythological and even civil aspects. After Lucretius had already ruled polemically a century earlier that “religion has led to many misdeeds” (*De rerum natura*, 1, 101, On the Nature of Things), a philosopher such as Seneca, going far beyond any external ritualism, taught that “God is close to you, he is with you, he is within you” (*Epistulae morales* to Lucilius, 41, 1). Similarly, when Paul addresses an audience of Epicurean philosophers and Stoics in the Areopagus of Athens, he literally says: “God does not live in shrines made by man, ... for in him we live and

move and have our being” (Acts 17:24, 28). In saying this he certainly re-echoes the Judaic faith in a God who cannot be represented in anthropomorphic terms and even places himself on a religious wavelength that his listeners knew well. We must also take into account the fact that many pagan cults dispensed with the official temples of the town and made use of private places that favoured the initiation of their followers. It is therefore not surprising that Christian gatherings (*ekklesiai*) as Paul’s Letters attest, also took place in private homes. At that time, moreover, there were not yet any public buildings. Therefore Christian assemblies must have appeared to Paul’s contemporaries as a simple variation of their most intimate religious practice. Yet the differences between pagan cults and Christian worship are not negligible and regard the participants’ awareness of their identity as well as the participation in common of men and women, the celebration of the “Lord’s Supper”, and the reading of the Scriptures.

In conclusion, from this brief over-view of the cultural context of the first century of the Christian era, it is clear that it is impossible to understand St Paul properly without placing him against both the Judaic and pagan background of his time. Thus he grows in historical and spiritual stature, revealing both sharing and originality in comparison with the surrounding environment. However, this applies likewise to Christianity in general, of which the Apostle Paul, precisely, is a paradigm of the highest order from whom we all, always, still have much to learn. And this is the goal of the Pauline Year: to learn from St Paul, to learn faith, to learn Christ, and finally to learn the way of upright living.

## **St Edith Stein and St Maximilian Mary Kolbe**

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*13 August 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Having returned from Bressanone where I was able to spend a restful period, I am glad to meet with you and greet you, dear inhabitants of Castel Gandolfo, and you, pilgrims who have come to visit me today. I would like once again to thank all those who welcomed me and looked after me during my stay in the mountains. They were days of serene relaxation during which I continuously commended to the Lord all those who entrust themselves to my prayer. Those

who write to me asking me to pray for them are truly numerous. They tell me of their joys but also their worries, their plans and their family and work problems, the expectations and hopes that they carry in their hearts, together with their apprehensions connected with the uncertainties that humanity is living at the present time. I can assure them that I remember each and every one, especially during the daily celebration of Holy Mass and the recitation of the Rosary. I know well that the principal service I can render to the Church and to humanity is, precisely, prayer, for in praying I confidently place in the Lord's hands the ministry that he himself has entrusted to me, together with the future of the entire ecclesial and civil communities.

Those who pray never lose hope, even when they find themselves in a difficult and even humanly hopeless plight. Sacred Scripture teaches us this and Church history bears witness to this.

In fact, how many examples we could cite of situations in which it was precisely prayer that sustained the journey of Saints and of the Christian people! Among the testimonies of our epoch I would like to mention the examples of two Saints whom we are commemorating in these days: Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, whose feast we celebrated on 9 August, and Maximilian Mary Kolbe, whom we will commemorate tomorrow, on 14 August, the eve of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Both ended their earthly life with martyrdom in the concentration camp of Auschwitz. Their lives might seem to have been a defeat, but it is precisely in their martyrdom that the brightness of Love which dispels the gloom of selfishness and hatred shines forth. The following words are attributed to St Maximilian Kolbe, who is said to have spoken them when the Nazi persecution was raging: "Hatred is not a creative force: only love is creative". And heroic proof of his love was the generous offering he made of himself in exchange for a fellow prisoner, an offer that culminated in his death in the starvation bunker on 14 August 1941.

On 6 August the following year, three days before her tragic end, Edith Stein approaching some Sisters in the monastery of Echt, in the Netherlands, said to them: "I am ready for anything. Jesus is also here in our midst. Thus far I have been able to pray very well and I have said with all my heart: '*Ave, Crux, spes unica*'". Witnesses who managed to escape the terrible massacre recounted that while Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, dressed in the Carmelite habit, was making

her way, consciously, toward death, she distinguished herself by her conduct full of peace, her serene attitude and her calm behaviour, attentive to the needs of all. Prayer was the secret of this Saint, Co-Patroness of Europe, who, “*Even after she found the truth in the peace of the contemplative life, she was to live to the full the mystery of the Cross*” (Apostolic Letter *Spes Aedificandi*).

“Hail Mary!” was the last prayer on the lips of St Maximilian Mary Kolbe, as he offered his arm to the person who was about to kill him with an injection of phenolic acid. It is moving to note how humble and trusting recourse to Our Lady is always a source of courage and serenity. While we prepare to celebrate the Solemnity of the Assumption, which is one of the best-loved Marian feasts in the Christian tradition, let us renew our entrustment to her who from Heaven watches over us with motherly love at every moment. In fact, we say this in the familiar prayer of the Hail Mary, asking her to pray for us “now and at the hour of our death”.

## Reflection on several Saints

*Summer Papal Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

20 August 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Every day the Church offers for our consideration one or more Saints and Blesseds to invoke and imitate. This week, for example, we are commemorating several who are very dear to popular devotion. Yesterday it was St John Eudes, who, beset by Jansenist rigorism—we are in the 17th century—fostered a tender devotion whose inexhaustible sources he pointed out in the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. Today we are commemorating Bernard of Clairvaux who was called “*Doctor mellifluus*” by Pope Pius VIII because he excelled “in distilling from biblical texts their hidden meaning”. Desirous of living immersed in the “luminous valley” of contemplation, events lead this mystic to travel throughout Europe serving the Church’s needs of the time and defending the Christian faith. He was also described as a “Marian Doctor”. This was not because he wrote so much on Our Lady but because he knew how to grasp her essential role in the Church, presenting her as the perfect model of monastic life and of every other form of Christian life.

Tomorrow we shall be remembering St Pius X, who lived in a turbulent period of history. John Paul II said of him on visiting the town of his birth in 1985: “He fought and suffered for the Church’s freedom, and for this freedom he proved to be ready to sacrifice privileges and honours, to face misunderstanding and ridicule, since he considered this freedom as the ultimate guarantee for the integrity and coherence of the faith” (*Address to diocesan clergy in the Parish Church of Sts Matthew and Sylvester, Riese, Treviso, Saturday, 15 June 1985, n. 2; L’Osservatore Romano* English edition, 29 July 1985, p. 8).

Next Friday will be dedicated to the Queenship of Mary, a Memorial established by the Servant of God Pius XII in 1954. The liturgical renewal desired by the Second Vatican Council placed it as a complement to the Solemnity of the Assumption, so that the two privileges might form a single mystery. Lastly, on Saturday, we shall invoke St Rose of Lima, the first canonized Saint of the Latin American continent, of which she is the principal Patroness. St Rose loved to repeat: “If human beings knew what it is to live in grace, no suffering would frighten them and they would gladly suffer any hardship, for grace is the fruit of patience”. She died at the age of 31 in 1617, after a short life full of deprivations and suffering, on the feast of the Apostle St Bartholomew, to whom she was deeply devoted because he had suffered a particularly painful martyrdom.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, so it is that day after day the Church offers us the possibility of walking in the company of Saints. Hans Urs von Balthasar wrote that the Saints constitute the most important message of the Gospel, its actualization in daily life, and therefore represent for us a real means of access to Jesus. The French writer Jean Guitton described them “as the colours of the spectrum in relation to light”, because with their own tones and accentuations each one of them reflects the light of God’s holiness. How important and useful, therefore, is the commitment to cultivate knowledge of and devotion to the Saints, alongside daily meditation on the Word of God and filial love for Our Lady!*

The holiday period is without a doubt a practical time for taking up the biography and writings of a particular Saint but every day of the year affords us an opportunity to familiarize ourselves with our heavenly Patrons. Their human and spiritual experience shows that holiness is not a luxury, it is not a privilege for the few, an impossible goal for an ordinary person; it is actually the common destiny of all men called to be children of God, the universal vocation of all the baptized. Holiness is offered to all; naturally, not all the Saints are equal: in fact,

as I said, they are the spectrum of divine light. Moreover, a Saint who possesses extraordinary charisms is not necessarily a great Saint. Indeed, there are a great many whose names are known only to God, because on earth they led an apparently perfectly normal life. And precisely these “normal” saints are those habitually desired by God. Their example testifies that only when we are in touch with the Lord can we be filled with his peace and his joy and be able to spread serenity, hope and optimism everywhere. Bernanos, a great French writer who was always fascinated by the idea of the Saints,—he mentions many in his novels—considering the variety of their charisms, notes that “every Saint’s life is like a new blossom in spring”. May this also happen for us! Let us therefore permit ourselves to be attracted by the supernatural fascination of holiness! May Mary, Queen of all Saints, Mother and Refuge of sinners, obtain this grace for us!

## **Life of Saint Paul before and after Damascus**

*27 August 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the last Catechesis before the holidays—two months ago, at the beginning of July—I began a new series of topics on the occasion of the Pauline Year, examining the world in which St Paul lived. Today I would like to resume and continue the reflection on the Apostle to the Gentiles, presenting a brief biography of him. Since we shall be dedicating next Wednesday to the extraordinary event that occurred on the road to Damascus, Paul’s conversion, a fundamental turning point in his life subsequent to his encounter with Christ, let us briefly pause today on his life as a whole. We find Paul’s biographical details respectively in the Letter to Philemon, in which he says he is “an old man” (Phlm 9: *presbytes*) and in the Acts of the Apostles in which, at the time of the stoning of Stephen, he is described as “a young man” (7:58: *neanías*). Both these expressions are obviously generic but, according to ancient calculations, a man of about 30 was described as “young” whereas he would be called “old” by the time he had reached the age of about 60. The date of Paul’s birth depends largely on the dating of the Letter to Philemon. He is traditionally supposed to have written it during his imprisonment in Rome in the mid-60s. Paul would have been born in approximately the year 8. He would therefore have been about 30 at the time of the stoning of Stephen. This ought to be the correct chronology and we are

celebrating the Pauline Year in accordance with precisely this chronology. The year 2008 was chosen with a date of birth of about the year 8 in mind. In any case, Paul was born in Tarsus, Cilicia (cf. Acts 22:3). The town was the administrative capital of the region and in 51 B.C. had had as Proconsul no less than Marcus Tullius Cicero himself, while 10 years later, in 41, Tarsus was the place where Mark Anthony and Cleopatra met for the first time. A Jew from the Diaspora, he spoke Greek although his name was of Latin origin. Moreover, it derived by assonance from the original Jewish Saul/Saulos, and he was a Roman citizen (cf. Acts 22:25–28). Paul thus appears to be at the intersection between three different cultures—Roman, Greek and Jewish—and perhaps partly because of this was disposed for fruitful universalistic openness, for a mediation between cultures, for true universality. He also learned a manual trade, perhaps from his father, that of “tentmaker” (Acts 18:3: *skenopoios*). This should probably be understood as a worker of uncarded goat wool or linen fibres who made them into mats or tents (cf. Acts 20:33–35). At about the age of 12 to 13, the age in which a Jewish boy becomes a *bar mitzvah* (“son of the commandment”), Paul left Tarsus and moved to Jerusalem to be educated at the feet of Rabbi Gamaliel the Elder, a nephew of the great Rabbi Hillel, in accordance with the strictest Pharisaic norms and acquiring great zeal for the Mosaic Torah (cf. Gal 1:14; Phil 3:5–6; Acts 22:3; 23:6; 26:5).

On the basis of this profound Orthodoxy that he learned at the school of Hillel in Jerusalem, he saw the new movement that referred to Jesus of Nazareth as a risk, a threat to the Jewish identity, to the true Orthodoxy of the fathers. This explains the fact that he proudly “persecuted the Church of God” as he was to admit three times in his Letters (1 Cor 15:9; Gal 1:13; Phil 3:6). Although it is not easy to imagine in what this persecution actually consisted, his attitude was intolerant. It is here that the event of Damascus fits in; we shall return to it at our next Catechesis. It is certain that from this time Paul’s life changed and he became a tireless apostle of the Gospel. Indeed, Paul passed into history for what he did as a Christian, indeed as an Apostle, rather than as a Pharisee. Traditionally his apostolic activity is divided on the basis of his three missionary journeys, to which can be added a fourth, his voyage to Rome as a prisoner. They are all recounted by Luke in the Acts. With regard to the three missionary journeys, however, the first must be distinguished from the other two.

In fact, Paul was not directly responsible for the first (cf. Acts 13–14), which was instead entrusted to the Cypriot, Barnabas. They sailed together from Antioch on the Orontes River, sent out by that Church (cf. Acts 13:1–3) and having sailed from the port of Seleucia on the Syrian coast, crossed the island of Cyprus from Salamis to Paphos; from here they reached the southern coasts of Anatolia, today Turkey, and passed through the cities of Attalia, Perga in Pamphylia, Antioch in Pisidia, Iconium, Lystra and Derbe, from which they returned to their starting point. Thus was born the Church of the people, the Church of the Gentiles. And in the meantime, especially in Jerusalem, a discussion had been sparked, lasting until, in order to participate truly in the promises of the prophets and enter effectively into the heritage of Israel, these Christians who came from paganism were obliged to adhere to the life and laws of Israel (various observances and prescriptions that separated Israel from the rest of the world). To resolve this fundamental problem for the birth of the future Church the so-called Council of the Apostles met in Jerusalem to settle on a solution, on which the effective birth of a universal Church depended. And it was decided that the observance of Mosaic Law should not be imposed upon converted pagans (cf. Acts 15:6–30): that is, they were not to be bound by the rules of Judaism; the only thing necessary was to belong to Christ, to live with Christ and to abide by his words. Thus, in belonging to Christ, they also belonged to Abraham and to God, and were sharers in all the promises. After this decisive event Paul separated from Barnabas, chose Silas and set out on his second missionary journey (Acts 15:36–18:22). Having gone beyond Syria and Cilicia, he saw once again the city of Lystra where he was joined by Timothy (a very important figure in the nascent Church, the son of a Jewish woman and a pagan), whom he had circumcised; he crossed Central Anatolia and reached the city of Troas on the northern coast of the Aegean Sea. And here another important event happened: in a dream he saw a Macedonian from the other side of the sea, that is, in Europe, who was saying: “Come and help us!”. It was the Europe of the future that was asking for the light and help of the Gospel. On the impetus of this vision he set sail for Macedonia and thus entered Europe. Having disembarked at Neapolis, he arrived at Philippi, where he founded a beautiful community. He then travelled to Thessalonica. Having left this place because of the problems the Jews created for him, he passed through Beroea to Athens. In this capital of ancient Greek culture, he preached to pagans and Greeks, first in the Agora and then on the Areopagus. And the



discourse of the Areopagus, mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles, is the model of how to translate the Gospel into Greek culture, of how to make Greeks understand that this God of the Christians and Jews was not a God foreign to their culture but the unknown God they were awaiting, the true answer to the deepest questions of their culture. Then from Athens he arrived in Corinth, where he stayed for a year and a half. And here we have an event that is chronologically very reliable. It is the most reliable date in the whole of his biography because, during this first stay in Corinth he was obliged to appear before the Governor of the Senatorial Province of Achaia, the Proconsul Gallio, who accused him of illegitimate worship. In Corinth there is an ancient inscription, found in Delphi, which mentions this Gallio and that epoch. It says that Gallio was Proconsul in Corinth between the years 51 and 53. Thus we have one absolutely certain date. Paul stayed in Corinth in those years. We may therefore suppose that he arrived there in about the year 50 and stayed until 52. Then from Corinth, passing through Cenchreae, the port on the eastern side of the city, he set sail for Palestine and arrived in Caesarea Marittima. From here he sailed for Jerusalem, before returning to Antioch on the Orontes.

The third missionary journey (cf. Acts 18:23–21:16), began, like all his journeys, in Antioch, which had become the original core of the Church of the Gentiles, of the mission to the Gentiles, and was also the place where the term “Christian” was coined. It was here, St Luke tells us, that Jesus’ followers were called “Christians” for the first time. From Antioch Paul started out for Ephesus, the capital of the Province of Asia where he stayed two years, carrying out a ministry whose fruitful effects were felt throughout the region. It was from Ephesus that Paul wrote the Letters to the Thessalonians and the Corinthians. The population of the town, however, was set against him by the local silversmiths, who saw their income diminishing with the reduction in the number of those who worshipped Artemis (the temple dedicated to her in Ephesus, the *Artemision*, was one of the seven wonders of the ancient world); Paul was thus forced to flee north. He crossed Macedonia once again and went back to Greece, probably to Corinth, where he remained for three months and wrote his famous Letter to the Romans.

From here he retraced his steps: he went back through Macedonia, reaching Troas by boat, and then, staying very briefly on the islands of Mitylene, Chios and Samos, arrived at Miletus where he delivered an important discourse to the

elders of the Church of Ephesus, outlining a portrait of a true Pastor of the Church (cf. Acts 20). From here he set sail for Tyre from whence he came to Caesarea Marittima, on his return journey to Jerusalem. Here he was arrested on the basis of a misunderstanding. Certain Jews had mistaken other Jews of Greek origin for Gentiles, whom Paul had taken into the temple precinct reserved for Israelites. He was spared the inevitable death sentence by the intervention of the Roman tribune on guard in the Temple area (cf. Acts 21:27–36); this happened while the imperial Procurator in Judea was Antonius Felix. After a spell in prison (the duration of which is debated), and since Paul as a Roman citizen was an appellee of Caesar (at that time Nero), the subsequent Procurator, Porcius Festus, sent him to Rome under military escort.

The voyage to Rome involved putting in at the Mediterranean islands of Crete and Malta, and then the cities of Syracuse, Rhegium Calabria and Puteoli. The Roman Christians went down the Appian Way to meet him at the Appii Forum (about 70 km from the capital), and others went as far as Three Taverns (c. 40 km). In Rome he met the delegates of the Jewish community, whom he told that it was for “the hope of Israel” that he was in chains (Acts 28:20). However, Luke’s account ends with the mention of two years spent in Rome under mild military surveillance. Luke mentions neither a sentence of Caesar (Nero) nor, even less, the death of the accused. Later traditions speak of his liberation which would have been propitious for either a missionary journey to Spain or a subsequent episode in the East, and specifically in Crete, Ephesus and Nicopolis in Epirus. Still on a hypothetical basis, another arrest is conjectured and a second imprisonment in Rome (where he is supposed to have written the three so-called Pastoral Letters, that is, the two to Timothy and the Letter to Titus), with a second trial that would have proven unfavourable to him. Yet a series of reasons induce many scholars of St Paul to end his biography with Luke’s narrative in the Acts.

We shall return to his martyrdom later in the cycle of our Catecheses. For the time being, in this brief list of Paul’s journeys it suffices to note how dedicated he was to proclaiming the Gospel, sparing no energy, confronting a series of grave trials, of which he left us a list in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 11:21–28). Moreover, it is he who writes: “I do it all for the sake of the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:23), exercising with unreserved generosity what he called “anxiety for the

Churches” (2 Cor 11:28). We see a commitment that can only be explained by a soul truly fascinated by the light of the Gospel, in love with Christ, a soul sustained by profound conviction; it is necessary to bring Christ’s light to the world, to proclaim the Gospel to all of us. This seems to me to be what remains for us from this brief review of St Paul’s journeys: to see his passion for the Gospel and thereby grasp the greatness, the beauty, indeed the deep need of the Gospel for all of us. Let us pray the Lord who caused St Paul to see his light, who made him hear his word and profoundly moved his heart, that we may also see his light, so that our hearts too may be moved by his Word and thus that we too may give the light of the Gospel and the truth of Christ to today’s world which thirsts for it.

## St Paul’s “Conversion”

3 September 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today’s Catechesis is dedicated to the experience that Paul had on his way to Damascus, and therefore on what is commonly known as his conversion. It was precisely on the road to Damascus, at the beginning of the 30s in the first century and after a period in which he had persecuted the Church that the decisive moment in Paul’s life occurred. Much has been written about it and naturally from different points of view. It is certain that he reached a turning point there, indeed a reversal of perspective. And so he began, unexpectedly, to consider as “loss” and “refuse” all that had earlier constituted his greatest ideal, as it were the *raison d’être* of his life (cf. Phil 3:7–8). What had happened?

In this regard we have two types of source. The first kind, the best known, consists of the accounts we owe to the pen of Luke, who tells of the event at least three times in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 9:1–19; 22:3–21; 26:4–23). The average reader may be tempted to linger too long on certain details, such as the light in the sky, falling to the ground, the voice that called him, his new condition of blindness, his healing like scales falling from his eyes and the fast that he made. But all these details refer to the heart of the event: the Risen Christ appears as a brilliant light and speaks to Saul, transforms his thinking and his entire life. The dazzling radiance of the Risen Christ blinds him; thus what was his inner reality

is also outwardly apparent, his blindness to the truth, to the light that is Christ. And then his definitive “yes” to Christ in Baptism restores his sight and makes him really see.

In the ancient Church Baptism was also called “illumination”, because this Sacrament gives light; it truly makes one see. In Paul what is pointed out theologically was also brought about physically: healed of his inner blindness, he sees clearly. Thus St Paul was not transformed by a thought but by an event, by the irresistible presence of the Risen One whom subsequently he would never be able to doubt, so powerful had been the evidence of the event, of this encounter. It radically changed Paul’s life in a fundamental way; in this sense one can and must speak of a conversion. This encounter is the centre St Luke’s account for which it is very probable that he used an account that may well have originated in the community of Damascus. This is suggested by the local colour, provided by Ananias’ presence and by the names, of both the street and the owner of the house in which Paul stayed (Acts 9:11).

The second type of source concerning the conversion consists in St Paul’s actual Letters. He never spoke of this event in detail, I think because he presumed that everyone knew the essentials of his story: everyone knew that from being a persecutor he had been transformed into a fervent apostle of Christ. And this had not happened after his own reflection, but after a powerful event, an encounter with the Risen One. Even without speaking in detail, he speaks on various occasions of this most important event, that, in other words he too is a witness of the Resurrection of Jesus, the revelation of which he received directly from Jesus, together with his apostolic mission. The clearest text found is in his narrative of what constitutes the centre of salvation history: the death and Resurrection of Jesus and his appearances to witnesses (cf. 1 Cor 15). In the words of the ancient tradition, which he too received from the Church of Jerusalem, he says that Jesus died on the Cross, was buried and after the Resurrection appeared risen first to Cephas, that is Peter, then to the Twelve, then to 500 brethren, most of whom were still alive at Paul’s time, then to James and then to all the Apostles. And to this account handed down by tradition he adds, “Last of all ... he appeared also to me” (1 Cor 15:8). Thus he makes it clear that this is the foundation of his apostolate and of his new life. There are also other texts in which the same thing appears: “Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have

received grace and apostleship” (cf. Rm 1:4–5); and further: “Have I not seen Jesus Our Lord?” (1 Cor 9:1), words with which he alludes to something that everyone knows. And lastly, the most widely known text is read in Galatians: “But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and had called me through his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not confer with flesh and blood, nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were Apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia; and again I returned to Damascus” (1:15–17). In this “self-apology” he definitely stresses that he is a true witness of the Risen One, that he has received his own mission directly from the Risen One.

Thus we can see that the two sources, the Acts of the Apostles and the Letters of St Paul, converge and agree on the fundamental point: the Risen One spoke to Paul, called him to the apostolate and made him a true Apostle, a witness of the Resurrection, with the specific task of proclaiming the Gospel to the Gentiles, to the Greco-Roman world. And at the same time, Paul learned that despite the immediacy of his relationship with the Risen One, he had to enter into communion with the Church, he himself had to be baptized, he had to live in harmony with the other Apostles. Only in such communion with everyone could he have been a true apostle, as he wrote explicitly in the First Letter to the Corinthians: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (15:11). There is only one proclamation of the Risen One, because Christ is only one.

As can be seen, in all these passages Paul never once interprets this moment as an event of conversion. Why? There are many hypotheses, but for me the reason is very clear. This turning point in his life, this transformation of his whole being was not the fruit of a psychological process, of a maturation or intellectual and moral development. Rather it came from the outside: it was not the fruit of his thought but of his encounter with Jesus Christ. In this sense it was not simply a conversion, a development of his “ego”, but rather a death and a resurrection for Paul himself. One existence died and another, new one was born with the Risen Christ. There is no other way in which to explain this renewal of Paul. None of the psychological analyses can clarify or solve the problem. This event alone, this powerful encounter with Christ, is the key to understanding what had happened: death and resurrection, renewal on the part of the One who had shown himself

and had spoken to him. In this deeper sense we can and we must speak of conversion. This encounter is a real renewal that changed all his parameters. Now he could say that what had been essential and fundamental for him earlier had become “refuse” for him; it was no longer “gain” but loss, because henceforth the only thing that counted for him was life in Christ.

Nevertheless we must not think that Paul was thus closed in a blind event. The contrary is true because the Risen Christ is the light of truth, the light of God himself. This expanded his heart and made it open to all. At this moment he did not lose all that was good and true in his life, in his heritage, but he understood wisdom, truth, the depth of the law and of the prophets in a new way and in a new way made them his own. At the same time, his reasoning was open to pagan wisdom. Being open to Christ with all his heart, he had become capable of an ample dialogue with everyone, he had become capable of making himself everything to everyone. Thus he could truly be the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Turning now to ourselves, let us ask what this means for us. It means that for us too Christianity is not a new philosophy or a new morality. We are only Christians if we encounter Christ. Of course, he does not show himself to us in this overwhelming, luminous way, as he did to Paul to make him the Apostle to all peoples. But we too can encounter Christ in reading Sacred Scripture, in prayer, in the liturgical life of the Church. We can touch Christ’s Heart and feel him touching ours. Only in this personal relationship with Christ, only in this encounter with the Risen One do we truly become Christians. And in this way our reason opens, all Christ’s wisdom opens as do all the riches of truth.

Therefore let us pray the Lord to illumine us, to grant us an encounter with his presence in our world, and thus to grant us a lively faith, an open heart and great love for all, which is capable of renewing the world.

## **Saint Paul’s Concept of Apostolate**

*10 September 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last Wednesday I spoke of the great turning point in St Paul’s life after his encounter with the Risen Christ. Jesus entered his life and transformed him

from persecutor to Apostle. That meeting marked the start of his mission; Paul could not continue to live as he did before, he now felt that the Lord had invested him with the task of proclaiming his Gospel as an Apostle. It is precisely this new condition of life, that is, his being an apostle of Christ, that I would like to talk about today. Usually, in accordance with the Gospels, it is the Twelve that we identify with the title “Apostles”, thereby desiring to point out those who were Jesus’ companions in life and who listened to his teaching. Yet Paul too felt that he was a true Apostle and it clearly appears, therefore, that the Pauline concept of “apostolate” was not limited to the group of the Twelve. Obviously, Paul is able to markedly distinguish between his own case and that of those “who were Apostles before” him (Gal 1:17); he recognizes that they have a very special place in the life of the Church. Yet, as everyone knows, St Paul understood himself as an *Apostle* in the strict sense. It is certain that at the time of the early Christians, no one covered as many kilometres as he did over land and across the seas, with the sole aim of proclaiming the Gospel.

Therefore he had a concept of apostolate that went beyond the exclusive association of the term with the group of the Twelve that was passed down primarily by St Luke in the Acts (cf. Acts 1:2, 26; 6:2). Indeed, in the First Letter to the Corinthians Paul makes a clear distinction between “the Twelve” and “all the apostles” mentioned as two different groups of beneficiaries of the Risen One’s apparitions” (cf. 15:5, 7). In that same passage he then goes on to mention himself humbly as the “the least of the apostles”, even comparing himself to “one untimely born”, and declaring himself “unfit to be called an apostle, because I persecuted the Church of God. But by the grace of God I am what I am, and his grace toward me was not in vain. On the contrary, I worked harder than any of them, though it was not I, but the grace of God which is with me” (1 Cor 15:9–10). The metaphor of the miscarriage expresses extreme humility; this will also be found in St Ignatius of Antioch’s *Epistle to the Romans*: “I am not worthy, as being the very last of them, and one born out of due time. But I have obtained mercy to be somebody, if I shall attain to God” (9, 2). What the Bishop of Antioch was to say in relation to his imminent martyrdom, foreseeing that it would reverse his condition of unworthiness, St Paul says in relation to his own apostolic commitment: it is in this that is manifest the fruitfulness of the grace of God who knows precisely how to transform an unsuccessful man into a splendid apostle.

From a persecutor to a founder of Churches: God brought this about in one who, from the evangelical point of view, might have been considered a reject!

Therefore, according to St Paul's conception, what is it that makes him and others apostles? In his Letters three principal characteristics of the true apostle appear. The first is to have "seen Jesus our Lord" (cf. 1 Cor 9:1), that is, to have had a life-changing encounter with him. Similarly, in his Letter to the Galatians (cf. 1:15–16) Paul was to say that he had been called or chosen, almost, through God's grace with the revelation of his Son, in view of proclaiming the Good News to the Gentiles. In short, it is the Lord who appoints to the apostolate and not one's own presumption. The apostle is not made by himself but is made such by the Lord; consequently the apostle needs to relate constantly to the Lord. Not without reason does Paul say that he is "called to be an apostle" (Rm 1:1), in other words, "an apostle—not from men nor through human means, but "through Jesus Christ and God the Father" (Gal 1:1). This is the first characteristic: to have seen the Lord, to have been called by him.

The second characteristic is "to have been sent". The same Greek term *apostolos* means, precisely, "sent, dispatched", that is as ambassador and bearer of a message; he must therefore act as having been charged and as representing a sender. It is for this reason that Paul describes himself as an "apostle of *Christ Jesus*" (1 Cor 1:1; 2 Cor 1:1), that is, his delegate, placed totally at his service, even to the point that he also calls himself "a servant of Christ Jesus" (Rm 1:1). Once again the idea of someone else's initiative comes to the fore, the initiative of God in Jesus Christ, to whom Paul is fully indebted; but special emphasis is placed on the fact that Paul has received from him a mission to carry out in his name, making every personal interest absolutely secondary.

The third requisite is the task of "proclaiming the Gospel", with the consequent foundation of Churches. Indeed, the title of "apostle" is not and cannot be honorary. It involves concretely and even dramatically the entire life of the person concerned. In his First Letter to the Corinthians Paul exclaims: "Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are not you my workmanship in the Lord?" (9:1). Similarly in the Second Letter to the Corinthians he says: "You yourselves are our letters of recommendation ... a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God" (3:2–3).



Thus it should not come as a surprise that Chrysostom speaks of “a soul of diamond” (*Panegyrics*, 1, 8), and continues saying: “in the same way that fire, in setting light to different materials burns ever stronger.... So Paul’s words won over to his cause all those with whom he came into contact, and those who were hostile to him, captivated by his discourses, became the fuel of this spiritual fire” (*ibid.*, 7,11). This explains why Paul defines the apostles as “fellow workers” of God (1 Cor 3:9; 2 Cor 6:1), whose grace acts within them. A typical element of a true apostle, which St Paul highlights effectively, is a sort of identification between Gospel and evangelizer, both destined to the same fate. In fact no one emphasized as well as Paul that the proclamation of the Cross of Christ appears “a stumbling block ... and folly” (1 Cor 1:23), to which many react with incomprehension and rejection. This happened then and it should not come as a surprise that it also happens today. Consequently, the apostle shares in this destiny, in appearing as “a stumbling block ... and folly”, and Paul is aware of it; this is the experience of his life. He writes to the Corinthians, not without a vein of irony: “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death; because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels and to men. We are fools for Christ’s sake, but you are wise in Christ. We are weak, but you are strong. You are held in honour, but we in disrepute. “To the present hour we hunger and thirst, we are ill-clad and buffeted and homeless, and we labour, working with our own hands. When reviled, we bless; when persecuted, we endure; when slandered, we try to conciliate; we have become, and are now, as the refuse of the world, the scum of all” (1 Cor 4:9–13). This is a self-portrait of St Paul’s apostolic life: in all this suffering the joy of being a herald of God’s blessing and of the grace of the Gospel prevails.

Paul, moreover, shares with the Stoic philosophy of his time the idea of a tenacious constancy in all the difficulties that arise; but he overcomes the merely humanistic perspective by recalling the element of the love of God and of Christ: “Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, ‘*For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered*’. No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus

our Lord” (Rm 8:35–39). This is the certainty, the profound joy that guides the Apostle Paul through all these vicissitudes: nothing can separate us from the love of God and this love is the true treasure of human life.

As can be seen, St Paul gave himself to the Gospel with his entire existence; we could say 24 hours a day! And he exercised his ministry with faithfulness and joy, “that I might by all means save some” (1 Cor 9:22). And with regard to the Church, even knowing that he had a relationship of fatherhood with her (cf. 1 Cor 4:15), if not actually of motherhood (cf. Gal 4:19), he adopted an attitude of complete service, declaring admirably: “Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24). This remains the mission of all Christ’s apostles in all times: to be his fellow workers in true joy.

## **Paul, the Twelve and the pre-Pauline Church**

*24 September 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak about the relationship between St Paul and the Apostles who had preceded him in following Jesus. These relations were always marked by profound respect and that frankness in Paul that stemmed from defending the truth of the Gospel. Although he was virtually a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth, he never had the opportunity to meet him during his public life. For this reason, after being blinded on the road to Damascus, he felt the need to consult the Teacher’s first Disciples, those whom he had chosen to take the Gospel to the ends of the earth.

In his Letter to the Galatians, Paul wrote an important account of the contacts he had had with some of the Twelve: first of all with Peter who had been chosen as *Kephas*, the Aramaic term which means rock, on whom the Church was being built (cf. Gal 1:18), with James, “the Lord’s brother” (cf. Gal 1:19), and with John (cf. Gal 2:9). Paul does not hesitate to recognize them as “pillars” of the Church. Particularly important is his meeting with Cephas (Peter), in Jerusalem: Paul stayed with him for 15 days in order to “consult him” (cf. Gal 1:19), that is, to learn about the earthly life of the Risen One who had “taken hold” of him on the road to Damascus and was radically transforming his life; from a persecutor of God’s

Church he had become an evangelizer of that faith in the crucified Messiah and Son of God which in the past he had sought to destroy (cf. Gal 1:23).

What sort of information did Paul gather about Jesus Christ during the three years that succeeded the Damascus encounter? In the First Letter to the Corinthians, we may note two passages that Paul learned in Jerusalem and that were already formulated as central elements of the Christian tradition, a constitutive tradition. Paul passed them on verbally, as he had received them, with a very solemn formula: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received”. He insists, therefore, on the fidelity to what he himself has received and faithfully transmits to new Christians. These are constitutive elements and concern the Eucharist and the Resurrection; they are passages that were already formulated in the 30s. Thus we come to Jesus’ death, his burial in the heart of the earth and his Resurrection (cf. 1 Cor 15:3–4). Let us take both passages: for Paul, Jesus’ words at the Last Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:23–25) are truly the centre of the Church’s life: the Church is built on this centre, thus becoming herself. In addition to this Eucharistic centre, in which the Church is constantly reborn—also in all of St Paul’s theology, in all of his thought—these words have a considerable impact on Paul’s personal relationship with Jesus. On the one hand they testify that the Eucharist illumines the curse of the Cross, making it a blessing (Gal 3:13–14), and on the other, they explain the importance of Jesus’ death and Resurrection. In St Paul’s Letters, the “for you” of the Institution of the Eucharist is personalized, becoming “for me” (Gal 2:20)—since Paul realized that in that “you” he himself was known and loved by Jesus—as well as being “for all” (2 Cor 5:14). This “for you” becomes “for me” and “for her [the Church]” (Eph 5:25), that is, “for all”, in the expiatory sacrifice of the Cross (cf. Rm 3:25). The Church is built from and in the Eucharist and recognizes that she is the “Body of Christ” (1 Cor 12:27), nourished every day by the power of the Spirit of the Risen One.

The other text, on the Resurrection, once again passes on to us the same formula of fidelity. St Paul writes: “For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, then to the Twelve” (1 Cor 15:3–5). This “for our sins” also recurs in this tradition passed on to Paul, which places the emphasis on the gift that Jesus made of himself to the Father in order to set us

free from sin and death. From this gift of Jesus himself, Paul draws the most engaging and fascinating expressions of our relationship with Christ: “For our sake he made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21); “You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich” (2 Cor 8:9). Worth remembering is the comment Martin Luther made, then an Augustinian monk, on these paradoxical words of Paul: “This is that mystery which is rich in divine grace to sinners, wherein by a wonderful exchange our sins are no longer ours but Christ’s, and the righteousness of Christ is not Christ’s but ours” (*Comments on the Psalms* of 1513–1515). And thus we are saved.

In the original *kerygma* (announcement), passed on by word of mouth, the use of the verb “is risen” rather than “was risen”—which would have been more logical to use, in continuity with “died ... and was buried”—deserves mention. The verb form “is risen” has been chosen to stress that Christ’s Resurrection has an effect on the existence of believers even today; we might translate it as: “is risen and continues to live” in the Eucharist and in the Church. Thus all the Scriptures bear witness to the death and Resurrection of Christ because, as Ugo di San Vittore was to write, “the whole of divine Scripture constitutes one book and this one book is Christ, for the whole of Scripture speaks of Christ and is fulfilled in Christ” (*De arca Noe*, 2,8). If St Ambrose of Milan could say that “in Scripture we read Christ”, it is because the early Church reinterpreted all the Scriptures of Israel, starting from and returning to Christ.

The enumeration of the apparitions of the Risen One to Cephas, to the Twelve, to more than 500 brethren and to James, culminates with the mention of the apparition to Paul himself on the road to Damascus: “Last of all, as to one untimely born” (1 Cor 15:8). Since he had persecuted God’s Church, in this confession he expresses his unworthiness to be considered an Apostle on a par with those who had preceded him: but God’s grace within him was not in vain (1 Cor 15:10). Thus, the overwhelming affirmation of divine grace unites Paul with the first witnesses of Christ’s Resurrection: “Whether then it was I or they, so we preach and so you believed” (1 Cor 15:11). The identity and unity of the Gospel proclamation is important; both they and I preach the same faith, the same

Gospel of Jesus Christ who died and is risen and who gives himself in the Most Holy Eucharist.

The importance that he confers on the living Tradition of the Church, which she passes on to her communities, shows how mistaken is the view that attributes the invention of Christianity to Paul; before evangelizing Jesus Christ, his Lord, Paul has met him on the road to Damascus and visited him in the Church, observing his life in the Twelve and in those who followed him on the roads of Galilee. In the next Catecheses we will have the opportunity to examine the contributions that Paul made to the Church of the origins. However, the mission he received from the Risen One to evangelize the Gentiles needed to be confirmed and guaranteed by those who offered him and Barnabas their right hand in fellowship, as a sign of approval of their apostolate and their evangelization and of their acceptance into the one communion of Christ's Church (cf. Gal 2:9). One then understands that the expression "even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view" (2 Cor 5:16) does not mean that his earthly life has little importance for our development in the faith, but that since his Resurrection our way of relating to him has changed. He is at the same time the Son of God "who was descended from David according to the flesh and designated Son of God in power according to the Spirit of holiness by his Resurrection from the dead", as Paul was to recall at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans (1:3–4).

The more we try to trace the footsteps of Jesus of Nazareth on the roads of Galilee, the better we shall be able to understand that he took on our humanity, sharing it in all things except sin. Our faith is not born from a myth or from an idea, but from the encounter with the Risen One in the life of the Church.

## **The "Council" of Jerusalem and the Incident in Antioch**

*1st October 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Paul's relationship with the Twelve was always one of respect and veneration that did not fail when he defended the truth of the Gospel, which is nothing if not Jesus Christ, the Lord. Let us reflect today on two episodes that show the

eneration and at the same time the freedom with which the Apostle addresses Cephas and the other Apostles: the so-called “Council” of Jerusalem and the incident in Antioch, Syria, mentioned in the Letter to the Galatians (cf. 2:1–10; 2:11–14).

In the Church, every Council and Synod is an “event of the Spirit” which considers the petitions of all the People of God as it takes place. This was experienced first-hand by all those who received the gift of participating in the Second Vatican Council. For this reason, St Luke, in telling us about the Church’s First Council, held in Jerusalem, introduces the Letter which the Apostles sent on that occasion to the Christian communities in the diaspora: “It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us ...” (Acts 15:28). The Spirit, who works in the whole Church, takes the Apostles by the hand, leading them on new roads to implement his plans; he is the principal artisan who builds the Church.

And the Assembly of Jerusalem also took place at a time of no small tension in the primitive community. It was a matter of settling the question of whether or not circumcision was compulsory for the Gentiles who were adhering to Jesus Christ, the Lord, or whether it was lawful for them not to be bound by the Mosaic law, that is, the observance of the norms required in order to be upright, law-abiding people, and especially, not to be bound by those norms that concerned religious purification, clean and unclean foods and the Sabbath. Paul also refers to the Assembly of Jerusalem in Gal 2:1–10, 14 years after his encounter with the Risen One at Damascus—we are in the second half of the 40s A.D.—Paul set out with Barnabas from Antioch in Syria, taking with him Titus, his faithful collaborator who, although he was a Greek, had not been obliged to be circumcised in order to join the Church. On that occasion Paul explained to the Twelve, whom he describes as those who were “of repute”, his Gospel of freedom from the Law (cf. Gal 2:6). In the light of the encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul realized that as soon as they adhered to the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Gentiles no longer needed as a hallmark of justice either circumcision or the rules that governed food and the Sabbath: Christ is our justice and all things that conform to him are “just”. No other signs are necessary in order to be just. In the Letter to the Galatians, St Paul tells in a few lines how the assembly went. He says enthusiastically that the Gospel of freedom from the Law was approved by James, Cephas and John, “the pillars”, who offered him and Barnabas the right hand of ecclesial communion in

Christ (cf. Gal 2:9). Since, as we have noted, for Luke the Council of Jerusalem expresses the action of the Holy Spirit, for Paul it represents the crucial recognition of freedom shared among all who participate in it: a freedom from the obligations that derive from circumcision and from the Law; that freedom for which “Christ has set us free” so that we might stand fast and not submit again to a yoke of slavery (cf. Gal 5:1). The two accounts of Paul and Luke of the Assembly of Jerusalem have in common the liberating action of the Spirit, for “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom”, Paul was to say in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 3:17).

However, as very clearly appears in St Paul’s Letters, Christian freedom is never identified with libertinage or with the will to do as one pleases; it is actuated in conformity to Christ and hence in authentic service to the brethren and above all to the neediest. For this reason Paul’s account of the Assembly ends by recalling the Apostles’ recommendation to him: “only they would have us remember the poor, which very thing I was eager to do” (Gal 2:10). Every Council is born from the Church and returns to the Church: in this case it returns with an attention for the poor who are primarily of the Church of Jerusalem, as seen in various annotations in Paul’s Letters. In his concern for the poor, to which he testifies in particular in his Second Letter to the Corinthians (cf. 8–9), and in the final part of his Letter to the Romans (cf. Rm 15), Paul demonstrates his fidelity to the decisions made at the Assembly.

Perhaps we are no longer able to understand fully the meaning that Paul and his communities attributed to the collection for the poor of Jerusalem. It was a completely new initiative in the area of religious activities: it was not obligatory, but free and spontaneous; all the Churches that were founded by Paul in the West took part. The collection expressed the community’s debt to the Mother Church of Palestine, from which they had received the ineffable gift of the Gospel. The value that Paul attributes to this gesture of sharing is so great that he seldom calls it merely a “collection”. Rather, for him it is “service”, “blessing”, “gift”, “grace”, even “liturgy” (cf. 2 Cor 9).

Particularly surprising is the latter term which gives a value that is even religious to a collection of money: on the one hand it is a liturgical act or “service” offered by every community to God and on the other, it is a loving action made for

people. Love for the poor and the divine liturgy go hand in hand, love for the poor is liturgy. The two horizons are present in every liturgy that is celebrated and experienced in the Church which, by her nature, is opposed to any separation between worship and life, between faith and works, between prayer and charity for the brethren. Thus, the Council of Jerusalem came into being to settle the question of how to treat Gentiles who came to the faith, opting for freedom from circumcision and from the observances imposed by the Law, and it was settled by the ecclesial and pastoral need that is centred on faith in Jesus Christ and love for the poor of Jerusalem and the whole Church.

The second episode is the well known incident in Antioch, Syria, that attests to the inner freedom Paul enjoyed: how should one behave when eating with believers of both Jewish and Gentile origin?

Here the other epicentre of Mosaic observance emerges: the distinction between clean and unclean foods which deeply separated practising Jews from Gentiles. At the outset Cephas, Peter, shared meals with both; but with the arrival of certain Christians associated with James, “the Lord’s brother” (Gal 1:19), Peter began to avoid contact with Gentiles at table in order not to shock those who were continuing to observe the laws governing the cleanliness of food and his decision was shared by Barnabas. This decision profoundly divided the Christians who had come from circumcision and the Christians who came from paganism. This behaviour, that was a real threat to the unity and freedom of the Church, provoked a passionate reaction in Paul who even accused Peter and the others of hypocrisy: “If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?” (Gal 2:14). In fact, the thought of Paul on the one hand, and of Peter and Barnabas on the other, were different: for the latter the separation from the Gentiles was a way to safeguard and not to shock believers who came from Judaism; on the contrary, for Paul it constituted the danger of a misunderstanding of the universal salvation in Christ, offered both to Gentiles and Jews. If justification is only achieved by virtue of faith in Christ, of conformity with him, regardless of any effect of the Law, what is the point of continuing to observe the cleanliness of foods at shared meals? In all likelihood the approaches of Peter and Paul were different: the former did not want to lose the Jews who had adhered to the Gospel, and the latter did not want to diminish the saving value of Christ’s death for all believers.



It is strange to say but in writing to the Christians of Rome a few years later (in about the middle of the 50s a.D.), Paul was to find himself facing a similar situation and asked the strong not to eat unclean foods in order not to lose or scandalize the weak: “it is right not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything that makes your brother stumble” (Rm 14:21). The incident at Antioch thus proved to be as much of a lesson for Peter as it was for Paul. Only sincere dialogue, open to the truth of the Gospel, could guide the Church on her journey: “For the kingdom of God does not mean food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rm 14:17). It is a lesson that we too must learn: with the different charisms entrusted to Peter and to Paul, let us all allow ourselves to be guided by the Spirit, seeking to live in the freedom that is guided by faith in Christ and expressed in service to the brethren. It is essential to be conformed ever more closely to Christ. In this way one becomes really free, in this way the Law’s deepest core is expressed within us: love for God and neighbour. Let us pray the Lord that he will teach us to share his sentiments, to learn from him true freedom and the evangelical love that embraces every human being.

## **The Relationship with the Historical Jesus**

*8 October 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the last Catecheses on St Paul, I spoke of his encounter with the Risen Christ that profoundly changed his life and then of his relationship with the Twelve Apostles called by Jesus—especially his relationship with James, Cephas and John—and of his relationship with the Church in Jerusalem.

The question remains as to what St Paul knew about the earthly Jesus, about his life, his teachings, his Passion. Before entering into this topic, it might be useful to bear in mind that St Paul himself distinguishes between two ways of knowing Jesus, and more generally, two ways of knowing a person. He writes in his Second Letter to the Corinthians: “from now on, therefore, we regard no one from a human point of view; even though we once regarded Christ from a human point of view, we regard him thus no longer” (5:16). Knowing “from a human point of view”, in the manner of the flesh, means knowing solely in an external way, by means of external criteria: one may have seen a person various times and

hence be familiar with his features and various characteristics of his behaviour: how he speaks, how he moves, etc. Although one may know someone in this way, nevertheless one does not really know him, one does not know the essence of the person. Only with the heart does one truly know a person.

Indeed, the Pharisees and the Sadducees were externally acquainted with Jesus, they learned his teaching and knew many details about him but they did not know him in his truth. There is a similar distinction in one of Jesus' sayings. After the Transfiguration he asked the Apostles: "who do men say that the Son of man is?", and: "who do you say that I am?". The people know him, but superficially; they know various things about him, but they do not really know him. On the other hand, the Twelve, thanks to the friendship that calls the heart into question, have at least understood in substance and begun to discover who Jesus is. This different manner of knowing still exists today: there are learned people who know many details about Jesus and simple people who have no knowledge of these details but have known him in his truth: "Heart speaks to heart". And Paul wants to say that to know Jesus essentially in this way, with the heart, is to know the person essentially in his truth; and then, a little later, to get to know him better.

Having said this the question still remains: what did St Paul know about Jesus' practical life, his words, his Passion and his miracles? It seems certain that he did not meet him during his earthly life.

Through the Apostles and the nascent Church Paul certainly must have come to know the details of Jesus' earthly life. In his Letters, we may find three forms of reference to the pre-Paschal Jesus. In the first place, there are explicit and direct references. Paul speaks of the Jesus' Davidic genealogy (cf. Rm 1:3), he knows of the existence of his "brethren" or kin (1 Cor 9:5; Gal 1:19), he knows the sequence of events of the Last Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:23) and he knows other things that Jesus said, for example on the indissolubility of marriage (cf. 1 Cor 7:10 with Mk 10:11–12), on the need for those who proclaim the Gospel to be supported by the community since the labourer deserves his wages (cf. 1 Cor 9:14, with Lk 10:7). Paul knows the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper (cf. 1 Cor 11:24–25, with Lk 22:19–20), and also knows Jesus' Cross. These are direct references to words and events of Jesus' life.

In the second place, we can glimpse in a few sentences of the Pauline Letters various allusions to the tradition attested to in the Synoptic Gospels. For example, the words we read in the First Letter to the Thessalonians which say that “the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night” (5:2), could not be explained with a reference to the Old Testament prophecies, since the comparison with the nocturnal thief is only found in the Gospels of Matthew and of Luke, hence it is indeed taken from the Synoptic tradition. Thus, when we read: “God chose what is foolish in the world ...” (1 Cor 1:27–28), one hears the faithful echo of Jesus’ teaching on the simple and the poor (cf. Mt 5:3; 11:25; 19:30). Then there are the words that Jesus spoke at the messianic jubilee: “I thank you, Father, Lord of Heaven and earth, that you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and revealed them to babes”. Paul knows—from his missionary experience—how true these words are, that is, that the hearts of the simple are open to knowledge of Jesus. Even the reference to Jesus’ obedience “unto death”, which we read in Philippians 2:8, can only recall the earthly Jesus’ unreserved readiness to do his Father’s will (cf. Mk 3:35; Jn 4:34). Paul is thus acquainted with Jesus’ Passion, his Cross, the way in which he lived the last moments of his life. The Cross of Jesus and the tradition concerning this event of the Cross lies at the heart of the Pauline kerygma. Another pillar of Jesus’ life known to St Paul is the “Sermon on the Mount”, from which he cited certain elements almost literally when writing to the Romans: “love one another.... Bless those who persecute you.... Live in harmony with one another ... overcome evil with good ...”. Therefore in his Letters the Sermon on the Mount is faithfully reflected (cf. Mt 5–7).

Lastly, it is possible to individuate a third manner in which Jesus’ words are present in St Paul’s Letters: it is when he brings about a form of transposition of the pre-Paschal tradition to the situation after Easter. A typical case is the theme of the Kingdom of God. It was certainly at the heart of the historical Jesus’ preaching (cf. Mt 3:2; Mk 1:15; Lk 4:43). It is possible to note in Paul a transposition of this subject because, after the Resurrection, it is obvious that Jesus in person, the Risen One, is the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom therefore arrives where Jesus is arriving. Thus the theme of the Kingdom of God, in which Jesus’ mystery was anticipated, is transformed into Christology. Yet, the same attitudes that Jesus requested for entering the Kingdom of God apply precisely to Paul with regard to justification through faith: both entry into the Kingdom and

justification demand an approach of deep humility and openness, free from presumptions, in order to accept God's grace. For example, the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (cf. Lk 18:9–14), imparts a teaching that is found exactly as it is in Paul, when he insists on the proper exclusion of any boasting to God. Even Jesus' sentences on publicans and prostitutes, who were more willing to accept the Gospel than the Pharisees (cf. Mt 21:31; Lk 7:36–50,) and his decision to share meals with them (cf. Mt 9:10–13; Lk 15:1–2) are fully confirmed in Paul's teaching on God's merciful love for sinners (cf. Rm 5:8–10; and also Eph 2:3–5). Thus the theme of the Kingdom of God is repropounded in a new form, but always in full fidelity to the tradition of the historical Jesus.

Another example of the faithful transformation of the doctrinal nucleus imparted by Jesus is found in the "titles" he uses. Before Easter he described himself as the Son of man; after Easter it becomes obvious that the Son of man is also the Son of God. Therefore Paul's favourite title to describe Jesus is *Kýrios*, "Lord" (cf. Phil 2:9–11), which suggests Jesus' divinity. The Lord Jesus, with this title, appears in the full light of the Resurrection. On the Mount of Olives, at the moment of Jesus' extreme anguish, (cf. Mk 14:36), the disciples, before falling asleep, had heard him talking to the Father and calling him "*Abbà* Father". This is a very familiar word equivalent to our "daddy", used only by children in talking to their father. Until that time it had been unthinkable for a Jew to use such a word in order to address God; but Jesus, being a true Son, at that moment of intimacy used this form and said: "Abba, Father". Surprisingly, in St Paul's Letters to the Romans and to the Galatians, this word "Abba", that expresses the exclusivity of Jesus' sonship, appears on the lips of the baptized (cf. Rm 8:15; Gal 4:6) because they have received the "Spirit of the Son". They now carry this Spirit within them and can speak like Jesus and with Jesus as true children to their Father; they can say "Abba" because they have become sons in the Son.

And finally, I would like to mention the saving dimension of Jesus' death that we find in the Gospel saying, according to which: "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45; Mt 20:28). A faithful reflection of these words of Jesus appears in the Pauline teaching on the death of Jesus as having been bought at a price (cf. 1 Cor 6:20), as redemption (cf. Rm 3:24), as liberation (cf. Gal 5:1), and as reconciliation (cf. Rm

5:10; 2 Cor 5:18–20). This is the centre of Pauline theology that is founded on these words of Jesus.

To conclude, St Paul did not think of Jesus in historical terms, as a person of the past. He certainly knew the great tradition of the life, words, death and Resurrection of Jesus, but does not treat all this as something from the past; he presents it as the reality of the living Jesus. For Paul, Jesus' words and actions do not belong to the historical period, to the past. Jesus is alive now, he speaks to us now and lives for us. This is the true way to know Jesus and to understand the tradition about him. We must also learn to know Jesus not from the human point of view, as a person of the past, but as our Lord and Brother, who is with us today and shows us how to live and how to die.

## Paul's Ecclesiological Dimension

15 October 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In last Wednesday's Catechesis I spoke of Paul's relationship with the pre-Paschal Jesus in his earthly life. The question was: "What did Paul know about Jesus' life, his words, his Passion?". Today I would like to speak about St Paul's teaching on the Church. We must start by noting that this word "*Chiesa*" in Italian as in French "*Église*" and in Spanish "*Iglesia*" comes from the Greek "*ekklesia*". It comes from the Old Testament and means the assembly of the People of Israel, convoked by God. It particularly means the exemplary assembly at the foot of Mount Sinai. This word now means the new community of believers in Christ who feel that they are God's assembly, the new convocation of all the peoples by God and before him. The term *ekklesia* comes for the first time from the pen of Paul, the first author of a Christian text. It makes its first appearance in the *incipit* of his First Letter to the Thessalonians, where Paul textually addresses "the Church of the Thessalonians" (cf. also "the Church of the Laodiceans" in Col 4:16). In other Letters he speaks of the Church of God which is at Corinth (1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1) and of the Churches of Galatia (Gal 1:2, etc.) particular Churches therefore but he also says he persecuted "*the Church of God*": not a specific local community, but "the Church of God". Thus we see that this word, "Church", has a multi-dimensional meaning: it indicates a part of God's

assembly in a specific place (a city, a country, a house) but it also means the Church as a whole. And thus we see that “the Church of God” is not only a collection of various local Churches but that these various local Churches in turn make up one Church of God. All together they are “the Church of God” which precedes the individual local Churches and is expressed or brought into being in them.

It is important to observe that the word “Church” almost always appears with the additional qualification “of God”: she is not a human association, born from ideas or common interests, but a convocation of God. He has convoked her, thus, in all her manifestations she is one. The oneness of God creates the oneness of the Church in all the places in which she is found. Later, in the Letter to the Ephesians, Paul richly elaborated the concept of the Church’s oneness, in continuity with the concept of the People of God, Israel, considered by the prophets as “God’s bride” called to live in a spousal relationship with him. Paul presents the one Church of God as “Christ’s bride” in love, one body and one spirit with Christ himself. It is well known that as a young man Paul was a fierce adversary of the new movement constituted by the Church of Christ. He was opposed to this new movement because he saw it as a threat to fidelity to the tradition of the People of God, inspired by faith in the one God. This fidelity was expressed above all in circumcision, in the observance of the rules of religious purity, abstention from certain foods and respect for the Sabbath. The Israelites had paid for this fidelity with the blood of martyrs in the period of the Maccabees, when the Hellenistic regime wanted to force all peoples to conform to the one Hellenistic culture. Many Israelites spilled their blood to defend the proper vocation of Israel. The martyrs paid with their lives for the identity of their people who expressed themselves through these elements. After his encounter with the Risen Christ, Paul understood that Christians were not traitors; on the contrary, in the new situation the God of Israel, through Christ, had extended his call to all the peoples, becoming the God of all peoples. In this way fidelity to the one God was achieved. Distinctive signs constituted by special rules and observances were no longer necessary since all were called, in their variety, to belong to the one People of God in the “Church of God” in Christ.

One thing was immediately clear to Paul in his new situation: the fundamental, foundational value of Christ and of the “word” that he was proclaiming. Paul

knew not only that one does not become Christian by coercion but also that in the internal configuration of the new community the institutional element was inevitably linked to the living “word”, to the proclamation of the living Christ through whom God opens himself to all peoples and unites them in one People of God. It is symptomatic that in the Acts of the Apostles Luke twice uses, also with regard to Paul, the phrase “to speak the word” (cf. Acts 4:29, 31; 8:25; 11:19; 13:46; 14:25; 16:6, 32) evidently with the intention of giving the maximum emphasis to the crucial importance of the “word” of proclamation. In practice this word is constituted by the Cross and the Resurrection of Christ in which the Scriptures found fulfilment. The Paschal Mystery, which brought the Apostle to the turning point in his life on the road to Damascus, obviously lies at the heart of his preaching (1 Cor 2:2; 15:14). This Mystery, proclaimed in the Word, is brought about in the Sacraments of Baptism and of the Eucharist and then becomes reality in Christian love. Paul’s only goal in his work of evangelization is to establish the community of believers in Christ. This idea is inherent in the actual etymology of the term *ekklesia*, which Paul, and with him all Christendom, preferred to the term “synagogue”: not only because the former is originally more “secular” (deriving from the Greek practice of the political assembly which was not exactly religious), but also because it directly involves the more theological idea of a call *ab extra*, and is not, therefore, a mere gathering; believers are called by God, who gathers them in a community, his Church.

Along these lines we can also understand the original concept of the Church exclusively Pauline as the “Body of Christ”. In this regard it is necessary to bear in mind the two dimensions of this concept. One is sociological in character, according to which the body is made up of its elements and would not exist without them. This interpretation appears in the Letter to the Romans and in the First Letter to the Corinthians, in which Paul uses an image that already existed in Roman sociology: he says that a people is like a body with its different parts, each of which has its own function but all together, even its smallest and seemingly most insignificant parts are necessary if this body is to be able to live and carry out its functions. The Apostle appropriately observes that in the Church there are many vocations: prophets, apostles, teachers, simple people, all are called to practise charity every day, all are necessary in order to build the living unity of this spiritual organism. The other interpretation refers to the actual Body of Christ. Paul holds that the Church is not only an organism but

really becomes the Body of Christ in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, where we all receive his Body and really become his Body. Thus is brought about the spousal mystery that all become one body and one spirit in Christ. So it is that the reality goes far beyond any sociological image, expressing its real, profound essence, that is, the oneness of all the baptized in Christ, considered by the Apostle “one” in Christ, conformed to the Sacrament of his Body.

In saying this, Paul shows that he knows well and makes us all understand that the Church is not his and is not ours: the Church is the Body of Christ, it is a “Church of God”, “God’s field, God’s building ... God’s temple” (1 Cor 3:9, 16). This latter designation is particularly interesting because it attributes to a fabric of interpersonal relations a term that commonly served to mean a physical place, considered sacred. The relationship between church and temple therefore comes to assume two complementary dimensions: on the one hand the characteristic of separateness and purity that the sacred building deserved is applied to the ecclesial community, but on the other, the concept of a material space is also overcome, to transfer this quality to the reality of a living community of faith. If previously temples had been considered places of God’s presence, it was now known and seen that God does not dwell in buildings made of stone but that the place of God’s presence in the world is the living community of believers.

The description “People of God” would deserve a separate commentary. In Paul it is applied mainly to the People of the Old Testament and then to the Gentiles who were “the non-people” but also became People of God thanks to their insertion in Christ through the word and sacrament.

And finally, one last nuance. In his Letter to Timothy Paul describes the Church as the “household of God” (1 Tm 3:15); and this is a truly original definition because it refers to the Church as a community structure in which warm, family-type interpersonal relations are lived. The Apostle helps us to understand ever more deeply the mystery of the Church in her different dimensions as an assembly of God in the world. This is the greatness of the Church and the greatness of our call; we are a temple of God in the world, a place in which God truly dwells, and at the same time we are a community, a family of God who is love. As a family and home of God, we must practise God’s love in the world and thus, with the power that comes from faith, be a place and a sign of his presence.



Let us pray the Lord to grant us to be increasingly his Church, his Body, the place where his love is present in this world of ours and in our history.

## The Importance of Christology: Pre-existence and Incarnation

22 October 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Catecheses of these past weeks we have meditated on St Paul's "conversion", the result of his personal encounter with the crucified and Risen Jesus, and we asked ourselves what relationship the Apostle to the Gentiles had with the earthly Jesus. Today I would like to speak of the teaching that St Paul bequeathed to us on the *centrality of the Risen Christ in the mystery of salvation*, on his Christology. In truth, the Risen Jesus Christ, "exalted above every other name", is at the centre of every reflection Paul makes. Christ, for the Apostle, is the criterion for evaluating events and things, the goal of every effort that he makes to proclaim the Gospel, the great passion that sustains his footsteps on the roads of the world. And this is a real and living Christ: "Christ", Paul says, "who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2:20). This person who loves me, with whom I can speak, who listens to me and answers me, this is truly the starting point for understanding the world and finding the way through history.

Those who have read St Paul's writings know well that he was not concerned to recount the sequence of individual events in Jesus' life. Nevertheless we may think that in his catechesis he told far more about the pre-Paschal Jesus than he writes in his Letters which are admonitions in precise situations. His pastoral and theological intention was so focused on fostering the nascent communities that it came naturally to him to concentrate completely on the proclamation of Jesus Christ as "Lord", alive now and present now among his followers. Hence the characteristic essentiality of Pauline Christology, which develops the depths of the mystery with a constant and precise concern: to proclaim the living Jesus, of course, but above all to proclaim the central reality of his death and Resurrection as the culmination of his earthly existence and the root of the successive development of the whole Christian faith, the whole reality of the Church. For the Apostle the Resurrection is not an event in itself, separate from

death: the Risen One is always the One who has first been crucified. Even as the Risen One he bears his wounds: the Passion is present in him and we can say, together with Pascal, that he is the Suffering One until the end of the world, while at the same time being the Risen One and living with us and for us. Paul had understood this identification of the Risen One with the Crucified Christ at the encounter on the road to Damascus: at that moment it was clearly revealed to him that the Crucified One is the Risen One and the Risen One is the Crucified One, who asks Paul: “Why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4). Paul is persecuting Christ in the Church and then realizes that the Cross is not “accursed by God” (Dt 21:23), but is also the sacrifice for our redemption.

Fascinated, the Apostle contemplates the hidden secret of the Crucified and Risen One and, through the suffering experienced by Christ in his humanity (*earthly dimension*), goes back to that eternal existence in which he is wholly one with the Father (*dimension before time*): “When the time had fully come”, he wrote, “God sent forth his son, born of woman, born under the law, to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (Gal 4:4–5). These two dimensions, his eternal *pre-existence* with the Father and the Lord’s descent in his *Incarnation* are already announced in the Old Testament, in the figure of Wisdom. We find in the sapiential Books of the Old Testament certain texts which exalt the role of Wisdom that existed prior to the world’s creation. Passages such as the one from Psalm 90[89] should be interpreted in this sense: “Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (v. 2); or passages like this one that speaks of the creator Wisdom: “The Lord created me at the beginning of his work, the first of his acts of old. Ages ago I was set up, at the first, before the beginning of the earth” (Prv 8:22–23). The praise of Wisdom, contained in the Book of the same name, is also evocative: “She reaches mightily from one end of the earth to the other, and she orders all things well” (Wis 8:1).

The sapiential texts themselves which speak of the eternal pre-existence of Wisdom, also speak of the descent, the abasement of this Wisdom, who pitched a tent for herself among men. Thus we already hear echoing the words of the Gospel of John, who speaks of the tent of the Lord’s flesh. He created a tent for himself in the Old Testament: here the temple is shown, and worship in accordance with the Torah; but the New Testament perspective enables us to

realize that this was only a prefiguration of the tent that was far more real and meaningful: the tent of Christ's flesh. And we already see in the Books of the Old Testament that this lowering of Wisdom, her descent in the flesh, also suggests the possibility that she was rejected. St Paul, in developing his Christology, refers precisely to this sapiential perspective: in Jesus he recognizes the eternal wisdom that has always existed, the wisdom that descends and pitches a tent for herself among us and thus he can describe Christ as "the power of God and the wisdom of God" (1 Cor 1:24), he can say that Christ has become, through God's work, "our wisdom, our righteousness and sanctification and redemption" (*ibid.*, v. 30). Similarly, Paul explains that Christ, like Wisdom, can be rejected above all by the rulers of this world (cf. 1 Cor 2:6-9), so that within God's plans a paradoxical situation is created, the Cross, which was to transform itself into the means of salvation for the whole human race.

In the famous hymn contained in the Letter to the Philippians (cf. 2:6-11) a further development of this sapiential cycle sees Wisdom abase herself to then be exalted despite rejection. This is one of the most elevated texts in the whole of the New Testament. The vast majority of exegetes today agree that this passage reproduces an earlier composition than the text of the Letter to the Philippians. This is a very important fact because it means that Judaeo-Christianity, prior to St Paul, believed in Jesus' divinity. In other words, faith in the divinity of Jesus was not a Hellenistic invention that emerged much later than Jesus' earthly life, an invention which, forgetful of his humanity, would have divinized him; we see in reality that early Judaeo-Christianity believed in the divinity of Jesus. Indeed, we can say that the Apostles themselves, at the important moments in the life of their Teacher, understood that he was the Son of God, as St Peter said in Caesarea Philippi: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" (Mt 16:16). However, let us return to the hymn in the Letter to the Philippians. This text's structure is in three strophes, which illustrate the high points on the journey undertaken by Christ. His pre-existence is expressed by the words: "though he was in the form of God, he did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped" (Phil 2:6). Then comes the Son's voluntary self-abasement in the second strophe: "emptied himself, taking the form of a servant" (v. 7), to the point of humbling himself and "[becoming] obedient unto death, even death on a cross" (v. 8). The third strophe of the hymn proclaims the Father's response to the Son's humbling of himself: "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the

name which is above every name” (v. 9). What is striking is the contrast between the radical humbling of himself and his subsequent glorification in the glory of God. It is obvious that this second strophe is in contrast with the claim of Adam, who wanted to make a God of himself, and in contrast with the act of the builders of the tower of Babel, who wanted to construct a bridge to Heaven and make themselves divinities. However, this initiative of pride ended in self-destruction: this is not the way to Heaven, to true happiness, to God. The gesture of the Son of God is exactly the opposite: not pride but humility, which is the fulfilment of love and love is divine. The initiative of Christ’s abasement, of his radical humility, in stark contrast with human pride, is truly an expression of divine love; it is followed by that elevation into Heaven to which God attracts us with his love.

In addition to the Letter to the Philippians, there are other places in Pauline literature where the themes of the pre-existence and descent to the earth of the Son of God are connected to each other. A reaffirmation of the assimilation of Wisdom and Christ, with all the connected cosmic and anthropological implications, is found in the First Letter to Timothy: “He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated in the Spirit, seen by angels, preached among the nations, believed in throughout the world, taken up in glory” (3:16). It is above all on these premises that a better definition of Christ as the sole Mediator is possible, against the background of the One God of the Old Testament (cf. 1 Tm 2:5 in relation to Is 43:10–11; 44:6). Christ is the true bridge that leads us to Heaven, to communion with God.

And lastly, just a brief reference to the last developments of St Paul’s Christology in his Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians. In the former, Christ is described as the “first-born of all creation” (1:15–20). This word “first-born” suggests that the first of numerous children, the first of a great many brothers and sisters, came down to draw us and make us his brothers and sisters. In the Letter to the Ephesians we find a beautiful exposition of the *divine plan of salvation*, when Paul says that in Christ God desired to recapitulate everything (cf. Eph 1:23). Christ is the epitome of all things, he takes everything upon himself and guides us to God. And thus he involves us in a movement of descent and ascent, inviting us to share in his humility, that is, in his love for neighbour, in order also to share in his glorification, becoming with him sons in the Son. Let

us pray the Lord to help us conform to his humility, to his love, in order to be rendered participants in his divinization.

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Ghana, Guam, Japan, South Korea, Australia, Canada and the United States. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

## **The Importance of Christology: the Theology of the Cross**

*29 October 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the personal experience of St Paul there is an incontrovertible factor: while he was at first a persecutor and perpetrated violence against Christians, from the moment of his conversion on the road to Damascus he switched to the side of the Crucified Christ, making Christ his *raison d'être* and the reason for his preaching. His was a life neither quiet nor free from dangers and difficulties, but spent entirely for souls (cf. 2 Cor 12:15). In his encounter with Jesus the central significance of the Cross had been made clear to him: he understood that Jesus *had died and rose for all* and for himself. Both these things were important; universality: Jesus really died for all, and subjectivity: he also died for me. Thus God's freely given and merciful love had been made manifest in the Cross. Paul experienced this love in himself first of all (cf. Gal 2:20) and from being a sinner he became a believer, from a persecutor an apostle. Day after day, in his new life, he experienced that salvation was "grace", that everything derived from the death of Christ and not from his own merit, which moreover did not exist. The "Gospel of grace" thus became for him the only way of understanding the Cross, not only the criterion of his new existence but also his response to those who questioned him. First and foremost among these were the Jews who put their hope in deeds and from these hoped for salvation; then there were the Greeks who challenged the Cross with their human knowledge; lastly, there were those groups of heretics who had forged their own idea of Christianity to suit their own model of life.

For St Paul the Cross has a fundamental primacy in the history of humanity; it represents the focal point of his theology because to say “Cross” is to say *salvation as grace* given to every creature. The topic of the Cross of Christ becomes an essential and primary element of the Apostle’s preaching: the clearest example concerns the community of Corinth. Facing a Church in which disorder and scandal were disturbingly present, where communion was threatened by internal factions and ruptures which damaged the unity of the Body of Christ, Paul did not present himself with sublime words or wisdom but with the proclamation of Christ, of Christ crucified. His strength is not in the use of persuasive language but, paradoxically, in the weakness and trepidation of those who entrust themselves solely to the “power of God” (cf. 1 Cor 2:1–5). The Cross, for all it represents, hence also for the theological message it contains, is scandal and folly. The Apostle says so with an impressive force that it is good to hear directly from his words: “for the word of the Cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God ... it pleased God through the folly of what we preach to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:18–23).

The first Christian communities that Paul addressed knew well that Jesus was henceforth alive and risen; the Apostle does not only want to remind the Corinthians or the Galatians but also all of us that the Risen One is always the One who has been crucified. The “stumbling block” and “folly” of the Cross lie in the very fact that where there seems to be nothing but failure, sorrow and defeat, there is the full power of God’s boundless love, for the Cross is an expression of love and love is the true power that is revealed precisely in this seeming weakness. For the Jews, the Cross is *skandalon*, that is, a snare or a stumbling block. It seems to hinder the faith of the devout Israelite who finds it difficult to discover anything like it in the Sacred Scriptures. With some courage, Paul seems to be saying that here the stakes at play are high: in the opinion of the Jews the Cross contradicts the very essence of God who manifested himself in wonderful signs. To accept the Cross of Christ therefore means bringing about a profound conversion in the way of relating to God. If, for the Jews, the reason for rejecting the Cross is found in Revelation, that is, the faithfulness to the God of the Fathers, for the Greeks, that is, the Gentiles, the criterion of judgement for opposing the Cross is reason. Indeed, the Cross for the latter is *moría*, folly,

literally *ignorance*, that is, saltless food; thus, rather than an error, it is an insult to common sense.

Paul himself, on more than one occasion had the bitter experience of the rejection of the Christian proclamation, considered “insipid”, devoid of importance, not even worthy of being taken into consideration at the level of rational logic. For those who, like the Greeks, see perfection in the spirit, in pure thought, it was already unacceptable that God should become man, immersing himself in all the limitations of space and time. Then for them it was definitely inconceivable to believe that a God could end on a Cross! And we see that this Greek logic is also the common logic of our time. How could the concept of *apátheia*, indifference, as an absence of passions in God, have understood a God who became man and was defeated, and was even to reassume his body subsequently to live as the Risen One? “We will hear you again about this” (Acts 17:32) the Athenians said scornfully to Paul when they heard him talking about the resurrection of the dead. They considered liberation from the body conceived as a prison as perfection. How could they not see the resumption of the body as an aberration? In ancient culture there did not seem to be room for the message of the Incarnate God. The entire “Jesus of Nazareth” event seemed to be marked by foolishness through and through and the Cross was certainly its most emblematic point.

But why did St Paul make precisely this, the word of the Cross, the fundamental core of his teaching? The answer is not difficult: the Cross reveals “the power of God” (cf. 1 Cor 1:24), which is different from human power; indeed, it reveals his love: “For the foolishness of God is wiser than men, and the weakness of God is stronger than men” (*ibid.*, v. 25). Centuries after Paul we see that in history it was the Cross that triumphed and not the wisdom that opposed it. The Crucified One is wisdom, for he truly shows who God is, that is, a force of love which went even as far as the Cross to save men and women. God uses ways and means that seem to us at first sight to be merely weakness. The Crucified One reveals on the one hand man’s frailty and on the other, the true power of God, that is the free gift of love: this totally gratuitous love is true wisdom. St Paul experienced this even in his flesh and tells us about it in various passages of his spiritual journey which have become precise reference points for every disciple of Jesus: “He said to me, “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (2

Cor 12:9); and again “God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27). The Apostle identified so closely with Christ that in spite of being in the midst of so many trials, he too lived in the faith of the Son of God who loved him and gave himself for his sins and for the sins of all (cf. Gal 1:4; 2:20). This autobiographical fact concerning the Apostle becomes paradigmatic for all of us.

St Paul gave a wonderful synthesis of the theology of the Cross in the Second Letter to the Corinthians (5:14–21) where everything is enclosed between two fundamental affirmations: on the one hand Christ, whom God made to be sin for our sake (v. 21), *he died for all* (v. 14); and on the other, *God reconciled us to himself* without imputing our sins to us (vv. 18–20). It is from this “ministry of reconciliation” that every form of slavery is already redeemed (cf. 1 Cor 6:20; 7:23). Here it appears how important this is for our lives. We too must enter into this “ministry of reconciliation” that always implies relinquishing one’s superiority and opting for the folly of love.

St Paul sacrificed his own life, devoting himself without reserve to the ministry of reconciliation, of the Cross, which is salvation for us all. And we too must be able to do this: may we be able to find our strength precisely in the humility of love and our wisdom in the weakness of renunciation, entering thereby into God’s power. We must all model our lives on this true wisdom: we must not live for ourselves but must live in faith in that God of whom we can all say: “he loved me and gave himself for me”.

## **The Importance of Christology: the Decisiveness of the Resurrection**

*5 November 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

“If Christ has not been raised, then our preaching is in vain and your faith is in vain ... and you are still in your sins” (1 Cor 15:14–17). With these strong words from the First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul makes clear the decisive importance he attributes to the Resurrection of Jesus. In this event, in fact, lies the solution to the problem posed by the drama of the Cross. The Cross alone could not explain the Christian faith, indeed it would remain a tragedy, an



indication of the absurdity of being. The Paschal Mystery consists in the fact that the Crucified man “was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:4), as proto-Christian tradition attests. This is the keystone of Pauline Christology: everything rotates around this gravitational centre. The whole teaching of Paul the Apostle starts *from*, and arrives *at*, the mystery of him whom the Father raised from the dead. The Resurrection is a fundamental fact, almost a prior axiom (cf. 1 Cor 15:12), on the basis of which Paul can formulate his synthetic proclamation (*kerygma*). He who was crucified and who thus manifested God’s immense love for man, is risen again, and is alive among us.

It is important to understand the relationship between the proclamation of the Resurrection, as Paul formulates it, and that was in use since the first pre-Pauline Christian communities. Here indeed we can see the importance of the tradition that preceded the Apostle and that he, with great respect and care, desires to pass on in his turn. The text on the Resurrection, contained in chapter 15:1–11 of the First Letter to the Corinthians, emphasizes the connection between “receiving” and “transmitting”. St Paul attributes great importance to the literal formulation of the tradition, and at the end of the passage under consideration underlines, “What matters is that I preach what they preach” (1 Cor 15:11), so drawing attention to the oneness of the *kerygma*, of the proclamation for all believers and for those who will proclaim the Resurrection of Christ. The *tradition* to which he refers is the fount from which to draw. His Christology is never original at the expense of faithfulness to tradition. The *kerygma* of the Apostles always presides over the personal re-elaboration of Paul; each of his arguments moves from common tradition, and in them he expresses the faith shared by all the Churches, which are one single Church. In this way St Paul offers a model for all time of how to approach theology and how to preach. The theologian, the preacher, does not create new visions of the world and of life, but he is at the service of truth handed down, at the service of the real fact of Christ, of the Cross, and of the Resurrection. His task is to help us understand today the reality of “God with us” that lies behind the ancient words, and thus the reality of true life.

We should here be explicit: St Paul, in proclaiming the Resurrection, does not worry about presenting an organic doctrinal exposition he does not wish to write what would effectively be a theological handbook but he approaches the theme by

replying to doubts and concrete questions asked of him by the faithful; an unprepared discourse, then, but one full of faith and theological experience. We find here a concentration of the essential: we have been “justified”, that is made just, saved, by Christ who *died* and *rose* again for us. Above all else the *fact* of the Resurrection emerges, without which Christian life would be simply in vain. On that Easter morning something extraordinary happened, something new, and at the same time very concrete, distinguished by very precise signs and recorded by numerous witnesses. For Paul, as for the other authors of the New Testament, the Resurrection is closely bound to the *testimony* of those who had direct experience of the Risen One. This means seeing and hearing, not only with the eyes or with the senses, but also with an interior light that assists the recognition of what the external senses attest as objective fact.

Paul gives, therefore, as do the four Gospels, primary importance to the theme of the *appearances*, which constitute a fundamental condition for belief in the Risen One who left the tomb empty. These two facts are important: *the tomb is empty* and *Jesus has in fact appeared*. In this way the links of that tradition were forged, which, through the testimony of the Apostles and the first disciples, was to reach successive generations until it came down to our own. The first consequence, or the first way of expressing this testimony, is to preach the Resurrection of Christ as a synthesis of the Gospel proclamation and as the culminating point in the salvific itinerary. Paul does all this on many occasions: looking at the Letters and the Acts of the Apostles, we can see that for him the essential point is to bear witness to the Resurrection. I should like to cite just one text: Paul, arrested in Jerusalem, stands accused before the Sanhedrin. In this situation, where his life is at stake, he indicates what is the sense and content of all his preaching: “with respect to the hope and the resurrection of the dead I am on trial” (Acts 23:6). This same phrase Paul continually repeats in his Letters (cf. 1 Thes 1:9ff; 4:13–18; 5:10), in which he refers to his own personal experience, to his own meeting with the Risen Christ (cf. Gal 1:15–16, 1 Cor 9:1).

But we may wonder, what, for St Paul, is the deep meaning of the Resurrection of Jesus? What has he to say to us across these 2,000 years? Is the affirmation “Christ is risen” relevant to us today? Why is the Resurrection so important, both for him and for us? Paul gives a solemn answer to this question at the beginning of his Letter to the Romans, where he begins by referring to “the Gospel of God ...

concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh, and designated Son of God in power according to the spirit of holiness by his resurrection from the dead” (Rm 1:3–4). Paul knows well, and often says, that Jesus was always the Son of God, from the moment of his Incarnation. The novelty of the Resurrection, consists in the fact that Jesus, raised from the lowliness of his earthly existence, is constituted Son of God “in power”. Jesus, humiliated up to the moment of his death on the Cross, can now say to the Eleven, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Mt 28:18). The affirmation of Psalm 2:8 has come to pass. “Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession”. So, with the Resurrection begins the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ to all peoples the Kingdom of Christ begins, this new Kingdom that knows no power other than that of truth and love. The Resurrection thus reveals definitively the real identity and the extraordinary stature of the Crucified One. An incomparable and towering dignity: *Jesus is God!* For St Paul, the secret identity of Jesus is revealed even more in the mystery of the Resurrection than in the Incarnation. *While the title of Christ*, that is “Messiah”; “the Anointed”, in St Paul tends to become the proper name of Jesus, and that of “the Lord” indicates his personal relationship with believers, now the title “*Son of God*” comes to illustrate the intimate relationship of Jesus with God, a relationship which is fully revealed in the Paschal event. We can say, therefore, that Jesus rose again to be the Lord of the living and the dead, (cf. Rm 14:9; and 2 Cor 5:15) or in other words, our Saviour (cf. Rm 4:25).

All this bears important consequences for our lives as believers: we are called upon to take part, in our inmost selves, in the whole story of the death and Resurrection of Christ. The Apostle says: we “have died with Christ” and we believe we shall “live with him. For we know that Christ being raised from the dead, will never die again; death no longer has dominion over him” (Rm 6:8–9). This means sharing in the suffering of Christ, which is a prelude to that full unity with him through the resurrection that we hope for. This is also what happened to St Paul, whose personal experience is described in the Letters in tones as sorrowful as they are realistic: “that I may know him and the power of his Resurrection, and may share his sufferings becoming like him in his death, that if possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead” (Phil 3:10–11; cf. 2 Tm 2:8–12). The theology of the Cross is not a theory it is the reality of Christian life.

To live in the belief in Jesus Christ, to live in truth and love implies daily sacrifice, implies suffering. Christianity is not the easy road, it is, rather, a difficult climb, but one illuminated by the light of Christ and by the great hope that is born of him. St Augustine says: Christians are not spared suffering, indeed they must suffer a little more, because to live the faith expresses the courage to face in greater depth the problems that life and history present. But only in this way, through the experience of suffering, can we know life in its profundity, in its beauty, in the great hope born from Christ crucified and risen again. The believer, however, finds himself between two poles: on the one hand, the Resurrection, which in a certain sense is already present and operating within us (cf. Col 3:1–4; Eph 2:6); on the other, the urgency to enter into the process which leads everyone and everything towards that fullness described in the Letter to the Romans with a bold image: as the whole of Creation groans and suffers almost as with the pangs of childbirth, so we groan in the expectation of the redemption of our bodies, of our redemption and resurrection (cf. Rm 8:18–23).

In synthesis, we can say with Paul that the true believer obtains salvation by professing with his mouth that Jesus is the *Lord* and believing in his heart that *God has raised Him from the dead* (cf. Rm 10:9). Important above all else is the heart that believes in Christ, and which in its faith “touches” the Risen One; but it is not enough to carry our faith in our heart, we must confess it and bear witness to it with our mouths, with our lives, thus making the truth of the Cross and the Resurrection present in our history. In this way the Christian becomes part of that process by which the first Adam, a creature of the earth, and subject to corruption and death, is transformed into the last Adam, heavenly and incorruptible (cf. 1 Cor 15:20–22 and 42–49). This process was set in motion by the Resurrection of Christ, and it is, therefore, on this that we found our hope that we too may one day enter with Christ into our true homeland, which is in Heaven. Borne up by this hope, let us continue with courage and with joy.

## **Eschatology: the Expectation of the Parusia**

12 November 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The subject of the Resurrection on which we reflected last week unfolds a new perspective, that of the expectation of the Lord's return. It thus brings us to ponder on the relationship among the present time, the time of the Church and of the Kingdom of Christ, and the future (*éschaton*) that lies in store for us, when Christ will consign the Kingdom to his Father (cf. 1 Cor 15:24). Every Christian discussion of the last things, called eschatology, always starts with the event of the Resurrection; in this event the last things have already begun and, in a certain sense, are already present.

Very likely it was in the year 52 that St Paul wrote the first of his Letters, the First Letter to the Thessalonians, in which he speaks of this return of Jesus, called *parusia* or *advent*, his new, definitive and manifest presence (cf. 4:13–18). The Apostle wrote these words to the Thessalonians who were beset by doubts and problems: “For if we believe that Jesus died and rose, God will bring forth with him from the dead those who have fallen asleep” (4:14). And Paul continues: “those who have died in Christ will rise first. Then we, the living, the survivors, will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thenceforth we shall be with the Lord unceasingly” (4:16–17). Paul describes Christ's *parusia* in especially vivid tones and with symbolic imagery which, however, conveys a simple and profound message: we shall ultimately be with the Lord for ever. Over and above the images, this is the essential message: our future is “to be with the Lord”. As believers, we are already with the Lord in our lifetime; our future, eternal life, has already begun.

In his Second Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul changes his perspective. He speaks of the negative incidents that must precede the final and conclusive event. We must not let ourselves be deceived, he says, to think that, according to chronological calculations, the day of the Lord is truly imminent: “On the question of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we beg you, brothers, not to be so easily agitated or terrified, whether by an oracular utterance, or rumor, or a letter alleged to be ours, into believing that the day of the Lord is here. Let no one seduce you, no matter how” (2:1–3). The continuation of this text announces that before the Lord's arrival there will be apostasy, and one well described as the “man of lawlessness”, “the son of perdition” (2:3) must be revealed, who tradition would come to call the

Antichrist. However the intention of St Paul's Letter is primarily practical. He writes: "Indeed, when we were with you, we used to lay down the rule that who would not work, should not eat. We hear that some of you are unruly, not keeping busy but acting like busybodies. We enjoin all such and we urge them strongly in the Lord Jesus Christ, to earn the food they eat by working quietly" (3:10–12). In other words, the expectation of Jesus' *parusia* does not dispense us from working in this world but, on the contrary, creates responsibility to the divine Judge for our actions in this world. For this very reason our responsibility for working *in* and *for* this world increases. We shall see the same thing next Sunday in the Gospel of the Talents, in which the Lord tells us that he has entrusted talents to everyone and that the Judge will ask for an account of them saying: have they been put to good use? Hence the expectation of his return implies responsibility for this world.

The same thing and the same connection between *parusia* the return of the Judge/Saviour and our commitment in our lives appears in another context and with new aspects in the Letter to the Philippians. Paul is in prison, awaiting a sentence that might be condemnation to death. In this situation he is reflecting on his future existence with the Lord, but he is also thinking of the community of the Philippians who need their father, Paul, and he writes: "For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. If I am to go on living in the flesh, that means productive toil for me and I do not know which to prefer. I am strongly attracted by both: I long to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better; yet it is more urgent that I remain alive for your sakes. This fills me with confidence that I will stay with you, and persevere with you all, for your joy and progress in the faith. My being with you once again should give you ample cause to glory in Christ" (1:21–26). Paul has no fear of death; indeed, on the contrary, death indicates being totally with Christ. Yet Paul also shares in the sentiments of Christ who did not live for himself but for us. Living for others becomes his life and plan thus demonstrates his perfect readiness to do God's will, to do whatever God decides. Above all he is prepared, in the future as well, to live on this earth for others, to live for Christ, to live for his living presence and thus for the renewal of the world. We see that his being with Christ creates an broad inner freedom: freedom in the face of the threat of death but also freedom in the face of all life's commitments and sufferings. He is simply at God's disposal and truly free.

And now, after examining the various aspects of the expectation of Christ's *parusia*, let us ask ourselves: what are the basic convictions of Christians as regards the last things: death, the end of the world? Their first conviction is the certainty that Jesus is Risen and is with the Father and thus is with us forever. And no one is stronger than Christ, for he is with the Father, he is with us. We are consequently safe, free of fear. This was an essential effect of Christian preaching. Fear of spirits and divinities was widespread in the ancient world. Today too, missionaries alongside many good elements in natural religions encounter fear of the spirits, of evil powers that threaten us. Christ lives, he has overcome death, he has overcome all these powers. We live in this certainty, in this freedom, and in this joy. This is the first aspect of our living with regard to the future.

The second is the certainty that Christ is with me. And just as the future world in Christ has already begun, this also provides the certainty of hope. The future is not darkness in which no one can find his way. It is not like this. Without Christ, even today the world's future is dark, and fear of the future is so common. Christians know that Christ's light is stronger and therefore they live with a hope that is not vague, with a hope that gives them certainty and courage to face the future.

Lastly, their third conviction is that the Judge who returns at the same time as Judge and Saviour has left us the duty to live in this world in accordance with his way of living. He has entrusted his talents to us. Our third conviction, therefore, is responsibility before Christ for the world, for our brethren and at the same time also for the certainty of his mercy. Both these things are important. Since God can only be merciful we do not live as if good and evil were the same thing. This would be a deception. In reality, we live with a great responsibility. We have talents, and our responsibility is to work so that this world may be open to Christ, that it be renewed. Yet even as we work responsibly, we realize that God is the true Judge. We are also certain that this Judge is good; we know his Face, the Face of the Risen Christ, of Christ crucified for us. Therefore we can be certain of his goodness and advance with great courage.

Another element in the Pauline teaching on eschatology is the universality of the call to faith which unites Jews and Gentiles that is, non-Christians as a sign and an anticipation of the future reality. For this reason we can say that we are

already seated in Heaven with Jesus Christ, but to reveal the riches of grace in the centuries to come (Eph 2:6f.), the *after* becomes a *before*, in order to show the state of incipient fulfilment in which we live. This makes bearable the sufferings of the present time which, in any case, cannot be compared to the future glory (cf. Rm 8:18). We walk by faith, not by sight, and even if we might rather leave the body to live with the Lord, what definitively matters, whether we are dwelling in the body or are far from it, is that we be pleasing to him (cf. 2 Cor 5:7–9).

Finally, a last point that might seem to us somewhat difficult. At the end of his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul reiterates and also puts on the lips of the Corinthians a prayer that originated in the first Christian communities in the Palestinian area: *Maranà, thà!* which means literally, “Our Lord, come!” (16:22). It was the prayer of early Christianity and also of the last book of the New Testament, Revelation, which ends with it: “Come, Lord Jesus!”. Can we pray like this too? It seems to me that for us today, in our lives, in our world, it is difficult to pray sincerely for the world to perish so that the new Jerusalem, the Last Judgment and the Judge, Christ, may come. I think that even if, sincerely, we do not dare to pray like this for a number of reasons yet, in a correct and proper way, we too can say, together with the early Christians: “Come, Lord Jesus!”. We do not of course desire the end of the world. Nevertheless, we do want this unjust world to end. We also want the world to be fundamentally changed, we want the beginning of the civilization of love, the arrival of a world of justice and peace, without violence, without hunger. We want all this, yet how can it happen without Christ’s presence? Without Christ’s presence there will never be a truly just and renewed world. And even if we do so in a different way, we too can and must also say, completely and profoundly, with great urgency and amid the circumstances of our time: “Come, Lord Jesus! Come in your way, in the ways that you know. Come wherever there is injustice and violence. Come to the refugee camps, in Darfur, in North Kivu, in so many parts of the world. Come wherever drugs prevail. Come among those wealthy people who have forgotten you, who live for themselves alone. Come wherever you are unknown. Come in your way and renew today’s world. And come into our hearts, come and renew our lives, come into our hearts so that we ourselves may become the light of God, your presence. In this way let us pray with St Paul: *Maranà, thà!* “Come, Lord Jesus!” and let us pray that Christ may truly be present in our world today and renew it.



# The Doctrine of Justification: from Works to Faith

19 November 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

On the journey we are making under St Paul's guidance, let us now reflect on a topic at the centre of the controversies of the century of the Reformation: the question of justification. How does man become just in God's eyes? When Paul met the Risen One on the road to Damascus he was an accomplished man; irreproachable according to the justice deriving from the Law (cf. Phil 3:6), Paul surpassed many of his contemporaries in the observance of the Mosaic Law and zealously upheld the traditions of his fathers (cf. Gal 1:14). The illumination of Damascus radically changed his life; he began to consider all merits acquired in an impeccable religious career as "refuse", in comparison with the sublimity of knowing Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3:8). The Letter to the Philippians offers us a moving testimony of Paul's transition from a justice founded on the Law and acquired by his observance of the required actions, to a justice based on faith in Christ. He had understood that what until then had seemed to him to be a gain, before God was, in fact, a loss; and thus he had decided to stake his whole existence on Jesus Christ (cf. Phil 3:7). The treasure hidden in the field and the precious pearl for whose purchase all was to be invested were no longer in function of the Law, but Jesus Christ, his Lord.

The relationship between Paul and the Risen One became so deep as to induce him to maintain that Christ was no longer solely his life but also his very living, to the point that to be able to reach him death became a gain (cf. Phil 1:21). This is not to say he despised life, but that he realized that for him at this point there was no other purpose in life and thus he had no other desire than to reach Christ as in an athletics competition to remain with him for ever. The Risen Christ had become the beginning and the end of his existence, the cause and the goal of his race. It was only his concern for the development in faith of those he had evangelized and his anxiety for all of the Churches he founded (cf. 2 Cor 11:28) that induced him to slow down in his race towards his one Lord, to wait for his disciples so they might run with him towards the goal. Although from a perspective of moral integrity he had nothing to reproach himself in his former observance of the Law, once Christ had reached him he preferred not to make

judgments on himself (cf. 1 Cor 4:3–4). Instead he limited himself to resolving to press on, to make his own the One who had made him his own (cf. Phil 3:12).

It is precisely because of this personal experience of relationship with Jesus Christ that Paul henceforth places at the centre of his Gospel an irreducible opposition between the two alternative paths to justice: one built on the works of the Law, the other founded on the grace of faith in Christ. The alternative between justice by means of works of the Law and that by faith in Christ thus became one of the dominant themes that run through his Letters: “We ourselves, who are Jews by birth and not Gentile sinners, yet who know that a man is not justified by works of the law but through faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus in order to be justified by faith in Christ, and not by works of the law; because by works of the law no one will be justified” (Gal 2:15–16). And to the Christians of Rome he reasserts that “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus” (Rm 3:23–24). And he adds “we hold that a man is justified by faith apart from works of the law” (*ibid.*, v. 28). At this point Luther translated: “justified by faith alone”. I shall return to this point at the end of the Catechesis. First, we must explain what is this “Law” from which we are freed and what are those “works of the Law” that do not justify. The opinion that was to recur systematically in history already existed in the community at Corinth. This opinion consisted in thinking that it was a question of moral law and that the Christian freedom thus consisted in the liberation from ethics. Thus in Corinth the term “*πάντα μοι ἐξέσται*” (I can do what I like) was widespread. It is obvious that this interpretation is wrong: Christian freedom is not libertinism; the liberation of which St Paul spoke is not liberation from good works.

So what does the Law from which we are liberated and which does not save mean? For St Paul, as for all his contemporaries, the word “Law” meant the Torah in its totality, that is, the five books of Moses. The Torah, in the Pharisaic interpretation, that which Paul had studied and made his own, was a complex set of conduct codes that ranged from the ethical nucleus to observances of rites and worship and that essentially determined the identity of the just person. In particular, these included circumcision, observances concerning pure food and ritual purity in general, the rules regarding the observance of the Sabbath, etc. codes of conduct that also appear frequently in the debates between Jesus and his

contemporaries. All of these observances that express a social, cultural and religious identity had become uniquely important in the time of Hellenistic culture, starting from the third century B.C. This culture which had become the universal culture of that time and was a seemingly rational culture; a polytheistic culture, seemingly tolerant constituted a strong pressure for cultural uniformity and thus threatened the identity of Israel, which was politically constrained to enter into this common identity of the Hellenistic culture. This resulted in the loss of its own identity, hence also the loss of the precious heritage of the faith of the Fathers, of the faith in the one God and in the promises of God.

Against this cultural pressure, which not only threatened the Israelite identity but also the faith in the one God and in his promises, it was necessary to create a wall of distinction, a shield of defence to protect the precious heritage of the faith; this wall consisted precisely in the Judaic observances and prescriptions. Paul, who had learned these observances in their role of defending God's gift, of the inheritance of faith in one God alone, saw this identity threatened by the freedom of the Christians this is why he persecuted them. At the moment of his encounter with the Risen One he understood that with Christ's Resurrection the situation had changed radically. With Christ, the God of Israel, the one true God, became the God of all peoples. The wall as he says in his Letter to the Ephesians between Israel and the Gentiles, was no longer necessary: it is Christ who protects us from polytheism and all of its deviations; it is Christ who unites us *with* and *in* the one God; it is Christ who guarantees our true identity within the diversity of cultures. The wall is no longer necessary; our common identity within the diversity of cultures is Christ, and it is he who makes us just. Being just simply means being with Christ and in Christ. And this suffices. Further observances are no longer necessary. For this reason Luther's phrase: "*faith alone*" is true, if it is not opposed to faith in charity, in love. Faith is looking at Christ, entrusting oneself to Christ, being united to Christ, conformed to Christ, to his life. And the form, the life of Christ, is love; hence to believe is to conform to Christ and to enter into his love. So it is that in the Letter to the Galatians in which he primarily developed his teaching on justification St Paul speaks of faith that works through love (cf. Gal 5:14).

Paul knows that in the twofold love of God and neighbour the whole of the Law is present and carried out. Thus in communion with Christ, in a faith that creates

charity, the entire Law is fulfilled. We become just by entering into communion with Christ who is Love. We shall see the same thing in the Gospel next Sunday, the Solemnity of Christ the King. It is the Gospel of the judge whose sole criterion is love. What he asks is only this: Did you visit me when I was sick? When I was in prison? Did you give me food to eat when I was hungry, did you clothe me when I was naked? And thus justice is decided in charity. Thus, at the end of this Gospel we can almost say: love alone, charity alone. But there is no contradiction between this Gospel and St Paul. It is the same vision, according to which communion with Christ, faith in Christ, creates charity. And charity is the fulfilment of communion with Christ. Thus, we are just by being united with him and in no other way.

At the end, we can only pray the Lord that he help us to believe; really believe. Believing thus becomes life, unity with Christ, the transformation of our life. And thus, transformed by his love, by the love of God and neighbour, we can truly be just in God's eyes.

## **The Doctrine of Justification: The Apostle's Teaching on Faith and Works**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Catechesis last Wednesday I spoke of how man is justified before God. Following St Paul, we have seen that man is unable to “justify” himself with his own actions, but can only truly become “just” before God because God confers his “justice” upon him, uniting him to Christ his Son. And man obtains this union through faith. In this sense, St Paul tells us: not our deeds, but rather faith renders us “just”. This faith, however, is not a thought, an opinion, an idea. This faith is communion with Christ, which the Lord gives to us, and thus becomes life, becomes conformity with him. Or to use different words faith, if it is true, if it is real, becomes love, becomes charity, is expressed in charity. A faith without charity, without this fruit, would not be true faith. It would be a dead faith.

Thus, in our last Catechesis, we discovered two levels: that of the insignificance of our actions and of our deeds to achieve salvation, and that of “justification” through faith which produces the fruit of the Spirit. The confusion of these two

levels has caused more than a few misunderstandings in Christianity over the course of centuries. In this context it is important that St Paul, in the same Letter to the Galatians radically accentuates, on the one hand, the freely given nature of justification that is not dependent on our works, but which at the same time also emphasizes the relationship between faith and charity, between faith and works: “In Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything, but only faith working through love” (Gal 5:6). Consequently, there are on the one hand “works of the flesh”, which are “immorality, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry ...” (Gal 5:19–20): all works that are contrary to the faith; on the other, there is the action of the Holy Spirit who nourishes Christian life, inspiring “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control” (Gal 5:22–23). These are the fruits of the Spirit that blossom from faith.

*Agape*, love, is cited at the beginning of this list of virtues and self-control at the conclusion. In fact, the Spirit who is the Love of the Father and the Son pours out his first gift, *agape*, into our hearts (cf. Rm 5:5); and to be fully expressed, *agape*, love, requires self-control. In my first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, I also treated of the love of the Father and the Son which reaches us and profoundly transforms our existence. Believers know that reciprocal love is embodied in the love of God and of Christ, through the Spirit. Let us return to the Letter to the Galatians. Here St Paul says that by bearing one another’s burdens believers are fulfilling the commandment of love (cf. Gal 6:2).

Justified through the gift of faith in Christ, we are called to live in the love of Christ for neighbour, because it is on this criterion that we shall be judged at the end of our lives. In reality Paul only repeats what Jesus himself said and which is proposed to us anew by last Sunday’s Gospel, in the parable of the Last Judgment. In the First Letter to the Corinthians St Paul pours himself out in a famous eulogy of love. It is called the “hymn to love”: “If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal.... Love is patient and kind; love is not jealous or boastful; it is not arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way” (1 Cor 13:1, 4–5). Christian love is particularly demanding because it springs from Christ’s total love for us: that love that claims us, welcomes us, embraces us, sustains us, to the point of tormenting us since it forces each one to no longer live for himself, closed into his own selfishness, but for him “who for their sake died and was raised” (2 Cor 5:15). The love of Christ

makes us, in him, that new creation (cf. 2 Cor 5:17), which comes to belong to his Mystical Body that is the Church.

Seen in this perspective, the centrality of justification without works, the primary object of Paul's preaching, does not clash with faith that works through love; indeed, it demands that our faith itself be expressed in a life in accordance with the Spirit. Often there is seen an unfounded opposition between St Paul's theology and that of St James, who writes in his Letter: "as the body apart from the spirit is dead, so faith apart from works is dead" (2:26). In reality, while Paul is primarily concerned to show that faith in Christ is necessary and sufficient, James accentuates the consequential relations between faith and works (cf. Jas 2:24). Therefore, for both Paul and James, faith that is active in love testifies to the freely given gift of justification in Christ. Salvation received in Christ needs to be preserved and witnessed to "with fear and trembling. For God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.... Do all things without grumbling or questioning ... holding fast the word of life", St Paul was to say further, to the Christians of Philippi (cf. Phil 2:12-14, 16).

We are often induced to fall into the same misunderstandings that characterized the community of Corinth; those Christians thought that since they had been freely justified in Christ through faith, "they could do as they pleased". And they believed and it often seems that today's Christians also think this that it is permissible to create divisions in the Church, the Body of Christ, to celebrate the Eucharist without looking after the neediest of our brothers, to aspire to better charisms without being aware that each is a member of the other, and so forth. The consequences of a faith that is not manifested in love are disastrous, because it reduces itself to the arbitrariness and subjectivism that is most harmful to us and to our brothers. On the contrary, in following St Paul, we should gain a new awareness of the fact that precisely because we are justified in Christ, we no longer belong to ourselves but have become a temple of the Spirit and hence are called to glorify God in our body with the whole of our existence (cf. 1 Cor 6:19). We would be underselling the inestimable value of justification, purchased at the high price of Christ's Blood, if we were not to glorify him with our body. In fact, our worship at the same time reasonable and spiritual is exactly this, which is why St Paul exhorts us "to present [our] bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God" (Rm 12:1). To what would a liturgy be reduced if addressed

solely to the Lord without simultaneously becoming service to one's brothers, a faith that would not express itself in charity? And the Apostle often places his communities in confrontation with the Last Judgment, on the occasion of which: "we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive good or evil, according to what he has done in the body" (2 Cor 5:10; cf. also Rm 2:16). And this idea of the Last Judgment must illumine us in our daily lives.

If the ethics that Paul proposes to believers do not deteriorate into forms of moralism and prove themselves timely for us, it is because, each time, they start from the personal and communal relationship with Christ, to be realized concretely in a life according to the Spirit. This is essential: the Christian ethic is not born from a system of commandments but is a consequence of our friendship with Christ. This friendship influences life; if it is true it incarnates and fulfils itself in love for neighbour. For this reason, any ethical decay is not limited to the individual sphere but it also weakens personal and communal faith from which it derives and on which it has a crucial effect. Therefore let us allow ourselves to be touched by reconciliation, which God has given us in Christ, by God's "foolish" love for us; nothing and no one can ever separate us from his love (cf. Rm 8:39). We live in this certainty. It is this certainty that gives us the strength to live concretely the faith that works in love.

## **The Apostle's teaching on the relation between Adam and Christ**

*3 December 2008*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In today's Catechesis we shall reflect on the relations between Adam and Christ, defined by St Paul in the well-known passage of the Letter to the Romans (5:12–21) in which he gives the Church the essential outline of the doctrine on original sin. Indeed, Paul had already introduced the comparison between our first progenitor and Christ while addressing faith in the Resurrection in the First Letter to the Corinthians: "For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.... "The first man Adam became a living being"; the last Adam became

a life-giving spirit” (1 Cor 15:22, 45). With Romans 5:12–21, the comparison between Christ and Adam becomes more articulate and illuminating: Paul traces the history of salvation from Adam to the Law and from the latter to Christ. At the centre of the scene it is not so much Adam, with the consequences of his sin for humanity, who is found as much as it is Jesus Christ and the grace which was poured out on humanity in abundance through him. The repetition of the “all the more” with regard to Christ stresses that the gift received in him far surpasses Adam’s sin and its consequent effects on humanity, so that Paul could reach his conclusion: “but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more” (Rm 5:20). The comparison that Paul draws between Adam and Christ therefore sheds light on the inferiority of the first man compared to the prevalence of the second.

On the other hand, it is precisely in order to highlight the immeasurable gift of grace in Christ that Paul mentions Adam’s sin. One could say that if it were not to demonstrate the centrality of grace, he would not have dwelt on the treatment of sin which “came into the world through one man and death through sin” (Rm 5:12). For this reason, if, in the faith of the Church, an awareness of the dogma of original sin developed, it is because it is inseparably linked to another dogma, that of salvation and freedom in Christ. The consequence of this is that we must never treat the sin of Adam and of humanity separately from the salvific context, in other words, without understanding them within the horizon of justification in Christ.

However, as people of today we must ask ourselves: what is this original sin? What does St Paul teach, what does the Church teach? Is this doctrine still sustainable today? Many think that in light of the history of evolution, there is no longer room for the doctrine of a first sin that then would have permeated the whole of human history. And, as a result, the matter of Redemption and of the Redeemer would also lose its foundation. Therefore, does original sin exist or not? In order to respond, we must distinguish between two aspects of the doctrine on original sin. There exists an empirical aspect, that is, a reality that is concrete, visible, I would say tangible to all. And an aspect of mystery concerning the ontological foundation of this event. The empirical fact is that a contradiction exists in our being. On the one hand every person knows that he must do good and intimately wants to do it. Yet at the same time he also feels the other impulse to do the contrary, to follow the path of selfishness and violence, to



do only what pleases him, while also knowing that in this way he is acting against the good, against God and against his neighbour. In his Letter to the Romans St Paul expressed this contradiction in our being in this way: “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (7:18–19). This inner contradiction of our being is not a theory. Each one of us experiences it every day. And above all we always see around us the prevalence of this second will. It is enough to think of the daily news of injustice, violence, falsehood and lust. We see it every day. It is a fact.

As a consequence of this evil power in our souls, a murky river developed in history which poisons the geography of human history. Blaise Pascal, the great French thinker, spoke of a “second nature”, which superimposes our original, good nature. This “second nature” makes evil appear normal to man. Hence even the common expression “he’s human” has a double meaning. “He’s human”, can mean: this man is good, he really acts as one should act. But “he’s human”, can also imply falsity: evil is normal, it is human. Evil seems to have become our second nature. This contradiction of the human being, of our history, must evoke, and still evokes today, the desire for redemption. And, in reality, the desire for the world to be changed and the promise that a world of justice, peace and good will be created exists everywhere. In politics, for example, everyone speaks of this need to change the world, to create a more just world. And this is precisely an expression of the longing for liberation from the contradiction we experience within us.

Thus, the existence of the power of evil in the human heart and in human history is an undeniable fact. The question is: how can this evil be explained? In the history of thought, Christian faith aside, there exists a key explanation of this duality, with different variations. This model says: being in itself is contradictory, it bears within it both good and evil. In antiquity, this idea implied the opinion that two equally primal principles existed: a good principle and a bad principle. This duality would be insuperable; the two principles are at the same level, so this contradiction from the being’s origin would always exist. The contradiction of our being would therefore only reflect the contrary nature of the two divine principles, so to speak. In the evolutionist, atheist version of the world the same vision returns in a new form. Although in this conception the vision of being is monist, it supposes that being as such bears within itself both

evil and good from the outset. Being itself is not simply good, but open to good and to evil. Evil is equally primal with the good. And human history would develop only the model already present in all of the previous evolution. What Christians call original sin would in reality be merely the mixed nature of being, a mixture of good and evil which, according to atheist thought, belong to the same fabric of being. This is a fundamentally desperate view: if this is the case, evil is invincible. In the end all that counts is one's own interest. All progress would necessarily be paid for with a torrent of evil and those who wanted to serve progress would have to agree to pay this price. Politics is fundamentally structured on these premises and we see the effects of this. In the end, this modern way of thinking can create only sadness and cynicism.

And let us therefore ask again: what does faith witnessed to by St Paul tell us? As the first point, it confirms the reality of the competition between the two natures, the reality of this evil whose shadow weighs on the whole of Creation. We heard chapter seven of the Letter to the Romans, we shall add chapter eight. Quite simply, evil exists. As an explanation, in contrast with the dualism and monism that we have briefly considered and found distressing, faith tells us: there exist two mysteries, one of light and one of night, that is, however, enveloped by the mysteries of light. The first mystery of light is this: faith tells us that there are not two principles, one good and one evil, but there is only one single principle, God the Creator, and this principle is good, only good, without a shadow of evil. And therefore, being too is not a mixture of good and evil; being as such is good and therefore it is good to be, it is good to live. This is the good news of the faith: only one good source exists, the Creator. Therefore living is a good, it is a good thing to be a man or a woman life is good. Then follows a mystery of darkness, or night. Evil does not come from the source of being itself, it is not equally primal. Evil comes from a freedom created, from a freedom abused.

How was it possible, how did it happen? This remains obscure. Evil is not logical. Only God and good are logical, are light. Evil remains mysterious. It is presented as such in great images, as it is in chapter 3 of Genesis, with that scene of the two trees, of the serpent, of sinful man: a great image that makes us guess but cannot explain what is itself illogical. We may guess, not explain; nor may we recount it as one fact beside another, because it is a deeper reality. It remains a mystery of

darkness, of night. But a mystery of light is immediately added. Evil comes from a subordinate source. God with his light is stronger. And therefore evil can be overcome. Thus the creature, man, can be healed. The dualist visions, including the monism of evolutionism, cannot say that man is curable; but if evil comes only from a subordinate source, it remains true that man is healable. And the Book of Wisdom says: “he made the nations of the world curable” (1:14 *Vulgate*). And finally, the last point: man is not only healable, but is healed *de facto*. God introduced healing. He entered into history in person. He set a source of pure good against the permanent source of evil. The Crucified and Risen Christ, the new Adam, counters the murky river of evil with a river of light. And this river is present in history: we see the Saints, the great Saints but also the humble saints, the simple faithful. We see that the stream of light which flows from Christ is present, is strong.

Brothers and sisters, it is the season of Advent. In the language of the Church the word Advent has two meanings: presence and anticipation. Presence: the light is present, Christ is the new Adam, he is with us and among us. His light is already shining and we must open the eyes of our hearts to see the light and to enter into the river of light. Above all we must be grateful for the fact that God himself entered history as a new source of good. But Advent also means anticipation. The dark night of evil is still strong. And therefore in Advent we pray with the ancient People of God: “*Rorate caeli desuper*”. And we pray insistently: come Jesus; come, give power to light and to good; come where falsehood, ignorance of God, violence and injustice predominate. Come Lord Jesus, give power to the good in the world and help us to be bearers of your light, peacemakers, witnesses of the truth. Come, Lord Jesus!

## Theology of the sacraments

10 December 2008

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In following St Paul, we saw two things in the Catechesis last Wednesday. The first is that our human history has been polluted from the outset by the misuse of created freedom which seeks emancipation from the divine Will. Thus, it does not find true freedom but instead opposes truth and consequently falsifies our

human realities. It falsifies above all the fundamental relationships: with God, between a man and a woman, between humankind and the earth. We said that this contamination permeates the whole fabric of our history and that this hereditary defect has continued to spread within it and can now be seen everywhere. This was the first thing. The second is this: we have learned from St Paul that a new beginning exists *in* history and *of* history in Jesus Christ, the One who is man and God. With Jesus, who comes from God, a new history begins that is shaped by his “yes” to the Father and is therefore not founded on the pride of a false emancipation but on love and truth.

However, the question now arises: how can we enter this new beginning, this new history? How does this new history reach me? We are inevitably linked to the first, contaminated history through our biological descent, since we all belong to the one body of humanity; but how is communion with Jesus, how is new birth achieved in order to enter into the new humanity? How does Jesus come into my life, into my being? The fundamental response of St Paul and of the whole of the New Testament is that he comes through the action of the Holy Spirit. If the first history starts, so to speak, with biology, the second starts with the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of the Risen Christ. At Pentecost this Spirit created the beginning of the new humanity, the new community, the Church, the Body of Christ.

However we must be even more concrete: how can this Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit, become my Spirit? The answer is that this happens in three ways that are closely interconnected. This is the first: the Spirit of Christ knocks at the door of my heart, moves me from within. However since the new humanity must be a true body, since the Spirit must gather us together and really create a community, since overcoming divisions and creating a gathering of the dispersed is characteristic of the new beginning, this Spirit of Christ uses two elements visibly aggregated: the Word of the proclamation and the sacraments, Baptism and the Eucharist in particular. In his Letter to the Romans, St Paul says: “If you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved” (10:9), in other words, you will enter the new history, a history of life and not of death. St Paul then continues: “But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are

they to hear without a preacher? And how can men preach unless they are sent?” (Rm 10:14–15). In an ensuing passage he says further: “faith comes from what is heard” (Rm 10:17). Faith is not a product of our thought or our reflection; it is something new that we cannot invent but only receive as a gift, as a new thing produced by God. Moreover, faith does not come from reading but from listening. It is not only something interior but also a relationship with Someone. It implies an encounter with the proclamation; it implies the existence of the Other, who it proclaims, and creates communion.

And lastly, proclamation: the one who proclaims does not speak on his own behalf but is sent. He fits into a structure of mission that begins with Jesus, sent by the Father, passes through the Apostles the term “apostles” means “those who are sent” and continues in the ministry, in the missions passed down by the Apostles. The new fabric of history takes shape in this structure of missions in which we ultimately hear God himself speaking, his personal Word, the Son speaks with us, reaches us. The Word was made flesh, Jesus, in order really to create a new humanity. The word of proclamation thus becomes a sacrament in Baptism, which is rebirth from water and the Spirit, as St John was to say. In the sixth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul speaks of Baptism in a very profound way. We have heard the text but it might be useful to repeat it: “Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were buried therefore with him by Baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life” (6:3–4).

In this Catechesis I cannot of course enter into a detailed interpretation of this far from easy text. I would like to note briefly just three points. The first: “we have been baptized” is a passive. No one can baptize himself, he needs the other. No one can become Christian on his own. Becoming Christian is a passive process. Only by another can we be made Christians and this “other” who makes us Christians, who gives us the gift of faith, is in the first instance the community of believers, the Church. From the Church we receive faith, Baptism. Unless we let ourselves be formed by this community we do not become Christians. An autonomous, self-produced Christianity is a contradiction in itself. In the first instance, this “other” is the community of believers, the Church, yet in the second instance this community does not act on its own

either, according to its own ideas and desires. The community also lives in the same passive process: Christ alone can constitute the Church. Christ is the true giver of the sacraments. This is the first point: no one baptizes himself, no one makes himself a Christian. We become Christians.

This is the second point: Baptism is more than a cleansing. It is death and resurrection. Paul himself, speaking in the Letter to the Galatians of the turning point in his life brought about by his encounter with the Risen Christ, describes it with the words: I am dead. At that moment a new life truly begins. Becoming Christian is more than a cosmetic operation that would add something beautiful to a more or less complete existence. It is a new beginning, it is rebirth: death and resurrection. Obviously in the resurrection what was good in the previous existence reemerges.

The third point is: matter is part of the sacrament. Christianity is not a purely spiritual reality. It implies the body. It implies the cosmos. It is extended toward the new earth and the new heavens. Let us return to the last words of St Paul's text. In this way he said, "we too might walk in newness of life". It constitutes an examination of conscience for all of us: to walk in newness of life. This applies to Baptism.

We now come to the Sacrament of the Eucharist. I have already shown in other Catecheses the profound respect with which St Paul transmits verbally the tradition of the Eucharist which he received from the witnesses of the last night themselves. He passes on these words as a precious treasure entrusted to his fidelity. Thus we really hear in these words the witnesses of the last night. We heard the words of the Apostle: "For I received from the Lord what I also delivered to you, that the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, 'This is my Body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me'. In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in my Blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me'" (1 Cor 11:23–34). It is an inexhaustible text. Here too, in this Catechesis, I have only two brief remarks to make. Paul transmits the Lord's words on the cup like this: this cup is "the new covenant in my Blood". These words conceal an allusion to two fundamental texts of the Old Testament. The first refers to the promise of a new covenant in the Book of the

Prophet Jeremiah. Jesus tells the disciples and tells us: now, at this moment, with me and with my death the new covenant is fulfilled; by my Blood this new history of humanity begins in the world. However, also present in these words is a reference to the moment of the covenant on Sinai, when Moses said: “Behold the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words” (Ex 24:8). Then it was the blood of animals. The blood of animals could only be the expression of a desire, an expectation of the true sacrifice, the true worship. With the gift of the cup, the Lord gives us the true sacrifice. The one true sacrifice is the love of the Son. With the gift of this love, eternal love, the world enters into the new covenant. Celebrating the Eucharist means that Christ gives us himself, his love, to configure us to himself and thereby to create the new world.

The second important aspect of the teaching on the Eucharist appears in the same First Letter to the Corinthians where St Paul says: “the cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a participation in the Blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a participation in the Body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (10:16–17). In these words the personal and social character of the Sacrament of the Eucharist likewise appears. Christ personally unites himself with each one of us, but Christ himself is also united with the man and the woman who are next to me. And the bread is for me but it is also for the other. Thus Christ unites all of us with himself and all of us with one another. In communion we receive Christ. But Christ is likewise united with my neighbour: Christ and my neighbour are inseparable in the Eucharist. And thus we are all one bread and one body. A Eucharist without solidarity with others is a Eucharist abused. And here we come to the root and, at the same time, the kernel of the doctrine on the Church as the Body of Christ, of the Risen Christ.

We also perceive the full realism of this doctrine. Christ gives us his Body in the Eucharist, he gives himself in his Body and thus makes us his Body, he unites us with his Risen Body. If man eats ordinary bread, in the digestive process this bread becomes part of his body, transformed into a substance of human life. But in holy Communion the inverse process is brought about. Christ, the Lord, assimilates us into himself, introducing us into his glorious Body, and thus we all become his Body. Whoever reads only chapter 12 of the First Letter to the

Corinthians and chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans might think that the words about the Body of Christ as an organism of charisms is only a sort of sociological and theological parable. Actually in Roman political science this parable of the body with various members that form a single unit was used referring to the State itself, to say that the State is an organism in which each one has his role, that the multiplicity and diversity of functions form one body and each one has his place. If one reads only chapter 12 of the First Letter to the Corinthians one might think that Paul limited himself to transferring this alone to the Church, that here too it was solely a question of a sociology of the Church. Yet, bearing in mind this chapter 10, we see that the realism of the Church is something quite different, far deeper and truer than that of a State organism. Because Christ really gives his Body and makes us his Body. We really become united with the Risen Body of Christ and thereby are united with one another. The Church is not only a corporation like the State is, she is a body. She is not merely an organization but a real organism.

Lastly, just a very brief word on the Sacrament of Matrimony. In the Letter to the Corinthians there are only a few references whereas in the Letter to the Ephesians he has truly developed a profound theology of Matrimony. Here Paul defines Matrimony as a “great mystery”. He says so “in reference to Christ and the Church” (5:32) A reciprocity in a vertical dimension should be pointed out in this passage. Mutual submission must use the language of love whose model is Christ’s love for the Church. This Christ-Church relationship makes the theological aspect of matrimonial love fundamental, exalting the affective relationship between the spouses. A genuine marriage will be well lived if in the constant human and emotional growth an effort is made to remain continually bound to the efficacy of the Word and to the meaning of Baptism. Christ sanctified the Church, purifying her through the washing with water, accompanied by the Word. Apart from making it visible, a participation in the Body and Blood of the Lord does no more than seal a union rendered indissoluble by grace.

And lastly let us listen to St Paul’s words to the Philippians: “the Lord is at hand” (Phil 4:5). It seems to me that we have understood that the Lord is close to us throughout our life through the Word and through the sacraments. Let us pray



that by his closeness we may always be moved in the depths of our being so that joy may be born that joy which is born when Jesus really is at hand.

## Theological vision of Pastoral Letters

28 January 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The last of the Pauline Letters, which I would like to talk about today, are known as “Pastoral Letters”, because they were sent to individual Pastors of the Church: two to Timothy and one to Titus, both close collaborators of St Paul. In Timothy, the Apostle saw almost an “alter ego”; in fact he entrusted him with important missions (to Macedonia: cf. Acts 19:22; to Thessalonica: cf. 1 Thes 3:6–7; to Corinth: cf. 1 Cor 4:17; 16:10–11), and then wrote a flattering eulogy on him: “I have no one like him, who will be genuinely anxious for your welfare” (Phil 2:20). According to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Eusebius of Caesarea, a fourth century historian, Timothy was the first Bishop of Ephesus (cf. 3:4). Titus, too, must have been very dear to the Apostle, who explicitly describes him as “full of zeal ... my partner and fellow worker” (2 Cor 8:17–23), and further “my true son in the common faith” (Ti 1:4). He had been assigned a few very delicate missions in the Church of Corinth, whose results heartened Paul (cf. 2 Cor 7:6–7, 13; 8:6). After this, according to the tradition handed down to us, Titus joined Paul in Nicopolis in Epirus, in Greece (cf. Ti 3:12), and was then sent by him to Dalmatia (cf. 2 Tm 4:10). The Letter sent to him suggests that he was later made Bishop of Crete (cf. Ti 1:5).

The Letters addressed to these two Pastors occupy a very particular place within the New Testament. Most exegetes today are of the opinion that these Letters would not have been written by Paul himself, but would have come from the “Pauline School”, and that they reflect his legacy for a new generation, perhaps including some words or brief passages written by the Apostle himself. Some parts of the Second Letter to Timothy, for example, appear so authentic that they could have come only from the heart and mouth of the Apostle.

Without a doubt, the situation of the Church as it emerges from these Letters is very different from that of Paul’s middle years. He now, in retrospect, defines himself as the “herald, apostle, and teacher” of faith and truth to the Gentiles (cf.

1 Tm 2:7; 2 Tm 1:11); he presents himself as one who has received mercy he writes “so that in me, as an extreme case, Jesus Christ might display all his patience, and that I might become an example to those who would later have faith in him and gain everlasting life” (1 Tm 1:16). So it is of essential importance that in Paul, a persecutor converted by the presence of the Risen One, the Lord’s magnanimity is really shown to encourage us, and lead us to hope and to have faith in the Lord’s mercy who, notwithstanding our littleness, can do great things. The new cultural contexts that are assumed here go beyond the middle years of Paul’s life. In fact reference is made to the appearance of teachings that must be considered quite erroneous and false (cf. 1 Tm 4:1–2; 2 Tm 3:1–5), such as those [teachings] which held that marriage was not a good thing (cf. 1 Tm 4:3a). We can see a modern equivalent of this worry, because today, too, the Scriptures are sometimes read as an object of historical curiosity and not as the word of the Holy Spirit, in which we can hear the voice of the Lord himself and recognize his presence in history. We could say that, with this brief list of errors presented in the three Letters, there are some precocious early traces of that later erroneous movement which goes by the name of Gnosticism (cf. 1 Tm 2:5–6; 2 Tm 3:6–8).

The writer faces these doctrines with two basic reminders. The first consists in an exhortation to a spiritual reading of Sacred Scripture (cf. 2 Tm 3:14–17), that is to a reading which considers them truly “inspired” and coming from the Holy Spirit, so that one can be “instructed for salvation” by them. The correct way to read the Scriptures is to enter into dialogue with the Holy Spirit, in order to derive a light “for teaching for reproof, correction, and for training in righteousness” (2 Tm 3:16). This, the Letter adds: is “so that the man of God may be fully complete and equipped for every good work” (2 Tm 3:17). The other reminder is a reference to the good “deposit” (*parathéke*): a special word found in the Pastoral Letters and used to indicate the tradition of the apostolic faith which must be safeguarded with the help of the Holy Spirit who dwells in us. This “deposit” is therefore to be considered as the sum of the apostolic Tradition, and as a criterion of faithfulness to the Gospel message. And here we must bear in mind that the term “Scriptures”, when used in the Pastoral Letters, as in all the rest of the New Testament, means explicitly the Old Testament, since the writings of the New Testament either had not yet been written or did not yet constitute part of the Scriptural canon. Therefore the Tradition of the apostolic proclamation, this “deposit”, is the key to the reading of the Scriptures, the New

Testament. In this sense, Scripture and Tradition, Scripture and the apostolic proclamation as a key, are set side by side, and almost merge to form together the “firm foundation laid by God” (cf. 2 Tm 2:19). The apostolic proclamation that is, Tradition is necessary in order to enter into an understanding of the Scriptures, and to hear the voice of Christ in them. We must, in fact, “hold firm to the sure word as taught” by the teaching received (Ti 1:9). Indeed, at the basis of everything is faith in the historical revelation of the goodness of God, who in Jesus Christ materially manifested his “love for men”, a love which in the original Greek text is significantly expressed as *filanthropìa* (Ti 3:4; cf. 2 Tm 1:9–10); God loves humanity.

Altogether, it is clear that the Christian community is beginning to define itself in strict terms, according to an identity which not only stands aloof from incongruous interpretations, but above all affirms its ties to the essential points of faith, which here is synonymous with “truth” (1 Tm 2:4, 7; 4:3; 6:5; 2 Tm 2:15, 18, 25; 3:7–8; 4:4; Ti 1:1, 14). In faith the essential truth of who we are, who God is, and how we must live is made clear. And of this truth (the truth of faith), the Church is described as the “pillar and bulwark” (1 Tm 3:15). In any case, she remains an open community of universal breadth who prays for everyone of every rank and order, so that all may know the truth: God “wants all men to be saved, and to come to the knowledge of the truth”, because Christ Jesus “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tm 2:4–5). Therefore the sense of universality, even if the communities are still small, is strong and conclusive in these Letters. Furthermore, those in the Christian community “speak evil of no one”, and “show perfect courtesy toward all men” (Ti 3:2). This is the first important component of these Letters: universality and faith as truth, as a key to the reading of Sacred Scripture, of the Old Testament, thereby defining a unified proclamation of Scripture, a living faith open to all and a witness to God’s love for everyone.

Another component typical of these Letters is their reflection on the ministerial structure of the Church. They are the first to present the triple subdivision into Bishops, priests and deacons (cf. 1 Tm 3:1–13; 4:13; 2 Tm 1:6; Ti 1:5–9). We can observe in the Pastoral Letters the merging of two different ministerial structures, and thus the constitution of the definitive form of the ministry in the Church. In Paul’s Letters from the middle period of his life, he speaks of

“bishops” (Phil 1:1), and of “deacons”: this is the typical structure of the Church formed during the time of the Gentile world.

However, as the figure of the Apostle himself remains dominant, the other ministries only slowly develop. If, as we have said, in the Churches formed in the ancient world we have Bishops and deacons, and not priests, in the Churches formed in the Judeo-Christian world, priests are the dominant structure. At the end of the Pastoral Letters, the two structures unite: now “the bishop” appears (cf. 1 Tm 3:2; Ti 1:7), used always in the singular with the definite article “the bishop”. And beside “the bishop” we find priests and deacons. The figure of the Apostle is still prominent, but the three Letters, as I have said, are no longer addressed to communities but rather to individuals, to Timothy and Titus, who on the one hand appear as Bishops, and on the other begin to take the place of the Apostle.

This is the first indication of the reality that later would be known as “apostolic succession”. Paul says to Timothy in the most solemn tones: “Do not neglect the gift you received when, as a result of prophesy, the presbyters laid their hands on you (1 Tm 4:14). We can say that in these words the sacramental character of the ministry is first made apparent. And so we have the essential Catholic structure: Scripture and Tradition, Scripture and proclamation, form a whole, but to this structure a doctrinal structure, so to speak must be added the personal structure, the successors of the Apostles as witnesses to the apostolic proclamation.

Lastly, it is important to note that in these Letters, the Church sees herself in very human terms, analogous to the home and the family. Particularly in 1 Tm 3:2–7 we read highly detailed instructions concerning the Bishop, like these: he must be “irreprehensible, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children under control and respectful in every way, for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God’s Church?... Moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders”. A special note should be made here of the importance of an aptitude for teaching (cf. also 1 Tm 5:17), which is echoed in other passages (cf. 1 Tm 6:2c; 2 Tm 3:10; Ti 2:1), and also of a special personal characteristic, that of “paternity”. In fact the Bishop is

considered the father of the Christian community (cf. also 1 Tm 3:15). For that matter, the idea of the Church as “the Household of God” is rooted in the Old Testament (cf. Nm 12:7) and is repeated in Heb 3:2, 6, while elsewhere we read that all Christians are no longer strangers or guests, but fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God (cf. Eph 2:19).

Let us ask the Lord and St Paul that we too, as Christians, may be ever more characterized, in relation to the society in which we live, as members of the “family of God”. And we pray that the Pastors of the Church may increasingly acquire paternal sentiments tender and at the same time strong in the formation of the House of God, of the community, and of the Church.

## **St Paul’s martyrdom and heritage**

*4 February 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The series of our Catecheses on St Paul has come to its conclusion; today we shall speak of the end of his earthly life. The ancient Christian tradition witnesses unanimously that Paul died as a consequence of his martyrdom here in Rome. The New Testament writings tell us nothing of the event. The Acts of the Apostles end their account by mentioning the imprisonment of the Apostle, who was nevertheless able to welcome all who went to him (cf. Acts 28:30–31). Only in the Second Letter to Timothy do we find these premonitory words: “For I am already on the point of being sacrificed”; the time to set sail has come (2 Tm 4:6; cf. Phil 2:17). Two images are used here, the religious image of sacrifice that he had used previously in the Letter to the Philippians, interpreting martyrdom as a part of Christ’s sacrifice, and the nautical image of casting off: two images which together discreetly allude to the event of death and of a brutal death.

The first explicit testimony of St Paul’s death comes to us from the middle of the 90s in the first century, thus more than three decades after his actual death. It consists precisely in the *Epistle* that the Church of Rome, with its Bishop Clement I, wrote to the Church of Corinth. In that epistolary text is an invitation to keep her eyes fixed on the example of the Apostles and, immediately after the mention of Peter’s martyrdom, one reads: “Owing to envy, Paul also obtained the reward of patient endurance, after being seven times thrown into captivity, compelled to

flee, and stoned. After preaching both in the east and the west, he gained the illustrious reputation due to his faith, having taught righteousness to the whole world, and come to the extreme limit of the west, and suffered martyrdom under the prefects. Thus was he removed from the world, and went into a holy place, having proved himself a striking example of patience” (1 *Clem* 5:2). The patience of which Clement speaks is an expression of Paul’s communion with the Passion of Christ, of the generosity and constancy with which he accepted a long journey of suffering so as to be able to say “I bear on my body the marks of Jesus” (Gal 6:17). In St Clement’s text we heard that Paul had arrived at the “extreme limit of the west”. Whether this is a reference to a voyage in Spain undertaken by Paul is open to discussion. There is no certainty on it, but it is true that in his Letter to the Romans St Paul expresses his intention to go to Spain (cf. Rm 15:24).

The sequence in Clement’s letter of the two names of Peter and Paul is, however, very interesting, even if they were to be inverted in the testimony of Eusebius of Caesarea in the fourth century. Referring to the Emperor Nero, Eusebius was to write: “It is, therefore, recorded that Paul was beheaded in Rome itself, and that Peter likewise was crucified during Nero’s reign. This account is substantiated by the fact that their names are preserved in the cemetery of that place even to the present day” (*Ecclesiastical History*, 2, 25, 5). Eusebius then goes on to reference the earlier declaration of a Roman priest named Gaius that dates back to the early second century: “I can show the trophies of the Apostles. For if you go to the Vatican or on the Ostian Way, you will find the trophies of those who laid the foundations of this Church” (*ibid.*, 2, 25, 6–7). “Trophies” are sepulchral monuments; these were the actual tombs of Peter and Paul which we still venerate today, after 2,000 years, in those same places: that of St Peter here in the Vatican and that of the Apostle to the Gentiles in the Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls on the Ostian Way.

It is interesting to note that the two great Apostles are mentioned together. Although no ancient source speaks of a contemporary ministry of both in Rome, subsequent Christian knowledge, on the basis of their common burial in the capital of the Empire, was also to associate them as founders of the Church of Rome. In fact this can be read in Irenaeus of Lyons, toward the end of the second century, concerning apostolic succession in the various Churches: “Since, however, it would be very tedious, in such a volume as this, to reckon up the

successions of all the Churches ... [we do this] by indicating that tradition derived from the apostles, of the very great, the very ancient, and universally known Church founded and organized at Rome by the two most glorious Apostles, Peter and Paul” (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 3, 2).

However let us now set Peter aside and concentrate on Paul. His martyrdom is recounted for the first time in the *Acts of Paul*, written towards the end of the second century. They say that Nero condemned him to death by beheading, an order which was carried out immediately (cf. 9:5). The date of his death already varies in the ancient sources which set it between the persecution unleashed by Nero himself after the burning of Rome in July 64 and the last year of his reign, that is, the year 68 (cf. Jerome, *De viris ill.* 5, 8). The calculation heavily depends on the chronology of Paul’s arrival in Rome, a discussion into which we cannot enter here. Later traditions specify two other elements. One, the most legendary, is that his martyrdom occurred at the *Acquae Salviae*, on the Via Laurentina, and that his head rebounded three times, giving rise to a source of water each time that it touched the ground, which is why, to this day, the place is called the “Tre Fontane” [three fountains] (*Acts of Peter and Paul by the Pseudo-Marcellus*, fifth century). The second version, in harmony with the ancient account of the priest Gaius mentioned above, is that his burial not only took place “outside the city ... at the second mile on the Ostian Way”, but more precisely “on the estate of Lucina”, who was a Christian matron (*Passion of Paul by the Pseudo-Abdias*, fourth century). It was here, in the fourth century, that the Emperor Constantine built a first church. Then, between the fourth and fifth centuries it was considerably enlarged by the Emperors Valentinian II, Theodosius and Arcadius. The present-day Basilica of Saint Paul Outside the Walls was built here after the fire in 1800.

In any case, the figure of St Paul towers far above his earthly life and his death; in fact, he left us an extraordinary spiritual heritage. He too, as a true disciple of Christ, became a sign of contradiction.

While he was considered apostate by Mosaic law among the “Ebionites”, a Judaeo-Christian group, great veneration for St Paul already appears in the Acts of the Apostles. I would now like to prescind from the apocryphal literature, such as the *Acts of Paul and Thekla* and an apocryphal collection of Letters between the Apostle Paul and the philosopher Seneca. It is above all important to note that St

Paul's Letters very soon entered the liturgy, where the structure prophet-apostle-Gospel is crucial for the form of the Liturgy of the Word. Thus, thanks to this "presence" in the Church's liturgy, the Apostle's thought immediately gave spiritual nourishment to the faithful of every epoch.

It is obvious that the Fathers of the Church, and subsequently all theologians, were nourished by the Letters of St Paul and by his spirituality. Thus he has remained throughout the centuries and up to this day the true teacher and Apostle to the Gentiles. The first patristic comment on a New Testament text that has come down to us is that of the great Alexandrian theologian, Origen, who comments on Paul's Letter to the Romans. Unfortunately, only part of this comment is extant. St John Chrysostom, in addition to commenting on Paul's Letters, wrote seven memorable *Panegyrics* on him. It was to Paul that St Augustine owed the crucial step of his own conversion, and to Paul that he returned throughout his life. His great catholic theology derives from this ongoing dialogue with the Apostle, as does the Protestant theology in every age. St Thomas Aquinas has left us a beautiful comment on the *Pauline Letters*, which represents the ripest fruit of medieval exegesis.

A true turning point was reached in the 16th century with the Protestant Reformation. The decisive moment in Luther's life was the "Turmerlebnis" (1517), the moment in which he discovered a new interpretation of the Pauline doctrine of justification. It was an interpretation that freed him from the scruples and anxieties of his previous life and gave him a new radical trust in the goodness of God who forgives all, unconditionally. From that time Luther identified Judaeo-Christian legalism, condemned by the Apostle, with the order of life of the Catholic Church. And the Church therefore appeared to him as an expression of the slavery of the law which he countered with the freedom of the Gospel. The Council of Trent, from 1545 to 1563, profoundly interpreted the question of justification and found the synthesis between law and Gospel to be in line with the entire Catholic tradition, in conformity with the message of Sacred Scripture read in its totality and unity.

The 19th century, gathering the best heritage of the Enlightenment, underwent a new revival of Paulinism, now developed by the historical-critical interpretation of Sacred Scripture, above all at the level of scientific work. Here we shall



prescind from the fact that even in that century, as later in the 20th century, a true and proper denigration of St Paul emerged. I am thinking primarily of Nietzsche, who derided the theology of St Paul's humility, opposing it with his theology of the strong and powerful man. However, let us set this aside and examine the essential current of the new scientific interpretation of Sacred Scripture and of the new Paulinism of that century. Here, the concept of freedom has been emphasized as central to Pauline thought; in it was found the heart of Pauline thought, as Luther, moreover, had already intuited. Yet the concept of freedom was then reinterpreted in the context of modern liberalism. The differentiation between the proclamation of St Paul and the proclamation of Jesus was thus heavily emphasized. And St Paul appears almost as a new founder of Christianity. It is true that in St Paul the centrality of the Kingdom of God, crucial for the proclamation of Jesus, was transformed into the centrality of Christology, whose crucial point is the Paschal Mystery. And it is from the Paschal Mystery that the Sacraments of Baptism and of the Eucharist derive, as a permanent presence of this mystery from which the Body of Christ grows and the Church is built. However, I would say, without going into detail here, that precisely in the new centrality of Christology and of the Paschal Mystery the Kingdom of God is realized and the authentic proclamation of Jesus becomes concrete, present and active. We have seen in our previous Catecheses that this Pauline innovation is truly the deepest fidelity to the proclamation of Jesus. In the progress of exegesis, especially in the past 200 years, the points of convergence between Catholic exegesis and Protestant exegesis have increased, thereby achieving a notable consensus precisely on the point that was the origin of the greatest historical dissent. There is thus great hope for the cause of ecumenism, so central to the Second Vatican Council.

Finally, I would like to mention briefly the various religious movements named after St Paul that have come into being in the Catholic Church in modern times. This happened in the 16th century with the "Congregation of St Paul", known as the Barnabites; in the 19th century with the "Missionaries of St Paul", or Paulist Fathers; in the 20th century with the polyform "Pauline Family" founded by Bl. Giacomo Alberione, not to mention of the secular institute of the "Company of St Paul". Essentially, we still have before us the luminous figure of an Apostle and of an extremely fruitful and profound Christian thinker, from whose approach everyone can benefit. In one of his panegyrics St John Chrysostom established an

original comparison between Paul and Noah. He says: Paul “did not put beams together to build an ark; rather, instead of joining planks of wood he wrote Letters and thus rescues from the billows not two, three or five members of his own family but the entire ecumene that was on the point of perishing” (*Paneg.* 1, 5). The Apostle Paul can still and will always be able to do exactly that. Drawing from him as much from his example as from his doctrine will therefore be an incentive, if not a guarantee, for the reinforcement of the Christian identity of each one of us and for the rejuvenation of the entire Church.

## Spiritual Worship

7 January 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At this first General Audience in 2009, I would like to express to all of you my fervent good wishes for the new year that has just begun. Let us revive within us the commitment to open our minds and hearts to Christ, to be and to live as his true friends. His company will ensure that this year, even with its inevitable difficulties, will be a journey full of joy and peace. In fact, only if we remain united to Jesus will the new year be a good and happy one.

The commitment of union with Christ is the example that St Paul also offers us. Continuing the Catecheses dedicated to him, let us pause to reflect today on one of the important aspects of his thought which concerns the worship that Christians are called to exercise. In the past, it was fashionable to speak of a rather anti-religious tendency in the Apostle, of a “spiritualization” of the idea of worship. Today we understand better that Paul sees in the Cross of Christ a historic turning point that radically transforms and renews the reality of worship. In particular, there are three texts in the Letter to the Romans in which this new vision of worship appears.

1. In Romans 3:25, after speaking of the “redemption which is in Christ Jesus”, Paul continues with what to us is a mysterious formula, saying: “through his Blood, God made him the means of expiation for all who believe”. With these words that we find somewhat strange: “means of expiation”, St Paul mentions the so-called “propitiatory” of the ancient temple, that is, the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant that was considered the point of contact between God and man,

the point of his mysterious presence in the human world. On the great Day of Atonement “*Yom Kippur*” this “proprietary” was sprinkled with the blood of sacrificed animals blood that symbolically brought the sins of the past year into contact with God and thus sins cast into the abyss of divine goodness were, so to speak, absorbed by the power of God, overcome and forgiven. Life began anew.

St Paul mentions this rite and says: This rite was an expression of the desire truly to be able to cast all our sins into the abyss of divine mercy and thus make them disappear. With the blood of animals, however, this expiation was not achieved; a more real contact between human sin and divine love was required. This contact took place on the Cross of Christ. Christ, the true Son of God, who became a true man, took all our sins upon himself. He himself is the point of contact between human wretchedness and divine mercy. In his heart the grievous mass of the evil perpetrated by humanity is dissolved and life is renewed.

In revealing this change, St Paul tells us: the old form of worship with animal sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem ended with the Cross of Christ the supreme act of divine love become human love. This symbolic worship, the cult of desire, is now replaced by true worship: the love of God incarnate in Christ and brought to its fulfilment in his death on the Cross. This is not, therefore, a spiritualization of true worship; on the contrary it is true worship: real divine-human love replaces the symbolic and temporary form of worship. The Cross of Christ, his love with Flesh and Blood, is the true worship that corresponds with the reality of God and of man. In Paul’s opinion, the epoch of the temple and its worship had already ended prior to the external destruction of the temple. Here Paul finds himself in perfect harmony with the words of Jesus who had predicted the destruction of the temple and had also announced another temple, “not made with human hands” the temple of his Risen Body (cf. Mk 14:58; Jn 2:19ff.). This is the first text.

2. The second text I would like to speak of today is found in the first verse of chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans. We have heard it and I shall repeat it: “I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship”. There is an apparent paradox in these words: while the sacrifice normally requires the *death* of the victim, Paul speaks on the contrary of the *life* of the

Christian. The expression “present your bodies”, independently of the successive concept of sacrifice, acquires the religious nuance of “giving as an oblation, an offering”. The exhortation “present your bodies” refers to the person in his entirety; in fact, in Romans 6:13, he invites them to: “yield yourselves”. Moreover the explicit reference to the physical dimension of the Christian coincides with the invitation to: “glorify God in your body” (1 Cor 6:20). In other words, it is a question of honouring God in the most practical form of daily life that consists of relational and perceptible visibility.

Conduct of this kind is described by Paul as “a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God”. It is here that we actually find the word “sacrifice”. In this usage the term belongs to a sacred context and serves to designate the slaughtering of an animal, part of which can be burned in honour of the gods and another part eaten at a banquet by those who are offering the sacrifice. Paul applies it instead to the Christian’s life. In fact, he describes this sacrifice using three adjectives. The first “living” expresses vitality. The second “holy” recalls the Pauline idea of holiness not linked to places or objects but to Christians themselves. The third “acceptable to God” recalls perhaps the recurrent biblical expression of sacrifice “a pleasing odour” (cf. Lv 1:13, 17; 23:18; 26:31, etc.).

Immediately afterwards, Paul thus defines this new way of living: “which is your spiritual worship”. Commentators on this text well know that the Greek expression (*ten logiken latreian*) is not easy to translate. The Latin Bible translates it as: “*rationabile obsequium*”. The actual word “*rationabile*” appears in the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Canon: in it the faithful pray that God will accept this offering as “*rationabile*”. The usual Italian translation “*culto spirituale*” [spiritual worship] does not reflect all the nuances of the Greek text (or of the Latin). In any case it is not a matter of less real worship or even worship that is only metaphorical but rather of a more concrete and realistic worship a worship in which the human being himself, in his totality as a being endowed with reason, becomes adoration, glorification of the living God.

This Pauline formula, which returns later in the Roman Eucharistic Prayer, is the fruit of a long development of the religious experience in the centuries before Christ. In this experience theological developments of the Old Testament and trends of Greek thought are encountered. I would like at least to show some elements of this development. The Prophets and many Psalms strongly criticize

the bloody sacrifices of the temple. Psalm 50[49], in which God speaks: “if I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving ...” (vv. 12–14). The following Psalm says something similar: “You have no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burned offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise” (Ps 50[51]: vv. 18ff). In the Book of Daniel, at the time of the new destruction of the temple by the Hellenistic regime (second century b.c.), we find a new step in the same direction. In the heart of the furnace that is, of persecution, suffering Azariah prays in these words: “And at this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader, no burned offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before you or to find mercy. Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with burned offerings of rams and bulls ... such may be our sacrifice be in your sight this day, and may we wholly follow you” (Dan 3:15–17). In the destruction of the shrine and of worship, in this situation of the privation of any sign of God’s presence, the believer offers as a true holocaust his contrite heart his desire for God.

We see an important and beautiful development but with a danger. There is a spiritualization, a moralization of worship: worship becomes only something of the heart, of the mind. But it lacks the body, it lacks the community. Thus we understand, for example, that Psalm 51 and also the Book of Daniel, despite the criticism of worship, desire a return to the time of sacrifices. Yet this is a renewed time, a renewed sacrifice, in a synthesis that was not yet foreseeable, that could not yet be conceived of.

Let us return to St Paul. He is heir to these developments, of the desire for true worship, in which man himself becomes the glory of God, living adoration with his whole being. In this sense he says to the Romans: “present your bodies as a living sacrifice ... which is your spiritual worship” (Rm 12:1). Paul thus repeats what he pointed out in chapter 3: the time of animal sacrifices, substitute sacrifices, is over. The time has come for true worship. However, here there is also the danger of a misunderstanding. One might easily interpret this new worship in a moralistic sense: in offering our life we ourselves become true worship. In this way, worship with animals would be replaced by moralism: man

himself would do everything on his own with his moral strength. And this was certainly not St Paul's intention. However the question remains: how therefore, can we interpret this "[reasonable] spiritual worship"? Paul always presumes that we are all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3:28), that we died in Baptism (cf. Rm 1) and that we now live with Christ, for Christ, in Christ.

In this union and only in this way we are able to become in him and with him "a living sacrifice", to offer "true worship". The sacrificed animals were meant to replace the human being, the gift of self, but they could not. In his gift of himself to the Father and to us, Jesus Christ is not a substitute but truly bears within him the human being, our sins and our desire; he really represents us, he takes us upon himself. In communion with Christ, realized in faith and in the sacraments, despite all our inadequacies we truly become a living sacrifice: "true worship" is achieved.

This synthesis forms the background of the Roman Canon in which we pray for this offering to become "*rationabile*" for spiritual worship to be made. The Church knows that in the Holy Eucharist Christ's gift of himself, his true sacrifice, becomes present. However, the Church prays that the community celebrating may truly be united with Christ and transformed; she prays that we may become what we cannot be with our own efforts: a "rational" offering that is acceptable to God. Thus the Eucharistic Prayer interprets St Paul's words correctly. St Augustine explained all this marvellously in the 10th chapter of his "*City of God*". I cite only two sentences from it.

"This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ ...".  
"The whole redeemed city, that is to say, the congregation or community of the saints, is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself ..." (10, 6: CCL 47, 27 ff.).

3. Further, at the end, I add just a few words on the third text of the Letter to the Romans on the new worship. St Paul thus said in chapter 15: "The grace given me by God to be "a minister" of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service (*hierourgein*) of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (15:15ff.). I would like to emphasize only two aspects of this marvellous text, with regard to the unique terminology in the Pauline Letters. First of all, St Paul interprets his missionary activity among the

world's peoples to build the universal Church as priestly service. To proclaim the Gospel in order to unite the peoples in the communion of the Risen Christ is a "priestly" action. The apostle of the Gospel is a true priest, he does what is central to the priesthood: prepares the true sacrifice. And then the second aspect: the goal of missionary action is we can say the cosmic liturgy: that the peoples united in Christ, the world, may as such become the glory of God, an "acceptable [offering], sanctified by the Holy Spirit". Here the dynamic aspect appears, the aspect of hope in the Pauline conception of worship: Christ's gift of himself implies the aspiration to attract all to communion in his body, to unite the world. Only in communion with Christ, the exemplary man, one with God, does the world thus become as we all wish it to be: a mirror of divine love. This dynamism is ever present in the Eucharist this dynamism must inspire and form our life. And let us begin the new year with this dynamism. Thank you for your patience.

## **The Theological vision of the Letters to the Colossians and Ephesians**

*14 January 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In St Paul's correspondence there are two Letters to the Colossians and to the Ephesians that to a certain extent can be considered twins. In fact, they both contain expressions that are found in them alone, and it has been calculated that more than a third of the words in the Letter to the Colossians are also found in the Letter to the Ephesians. For example, while in Colossians we read literally the invitation: "admonish one another. Sing gratefully to God from your hearts in psalms, hymns and spiritual songs" (Col 3:16), in his Letter to the Ephesians St Paul likewise recommends "addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, sing praise to the Lord with all your heart" (Eph 5:19). We could meditate upon these words: the heart must sing with psalms and hymns, and the voice in the same way, in order to enter the tradition of prayer of the whole of the Church of the Old and New Testaments. Thus we learn to be with ourselves and one another and with God. In addition, the "domestic code" that is absent in the other Pauline Letters is found in these two in other words, a series of

recommendations addressed to husbands and wives, to parents and children, to masters and slaves (cf. Col 3:18–4:1 and Eph 5:22–6:9 respectively).

It is even more important to notice that only in these two Letters is the title “head” *kefalé* given to Jesus Christ. And this title is used on two levels. In the first sense, Christ is understood as head of the Church (cf. Col 2:18–19 and Eph 4:15–16). This means two things: first of all that he is the governor, the leader, the person in charge who guides the Christian community as its leader and Lord (cf. Col 1:18: “He is the head of the body, the Church”). The other meaning is then that, as head, he innervates and vivifies all the members of the body that he controls. (In fact, according to Colossians 2:19, it is necessary “[to hold] fast to the Head, from whom the whole body, [is] nourished and knit together”). That is, he is not only one who commands but also one who is organically connected with us, from whom comes the power to act in an upright way.

In both cases, the Church is considered subject to Christ, both in order to follow his supervision the commandments and to accept all of the vital influences that emanate from him. His commandments are not only words or orders but a vital energy that comes from him and helps us.

This idea is developed particularly in Ephesians where, instead of being traced back to the Spirit (as in 1 Corinthians 12), even the ministries of the Church are conferred by the Risen Christ. It is he who established “that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers” (4:11). And it is from him that “the whole body grows, and ... joined firmly together by each supporting ligament, builds itself up in love” (4:16). Christ, in fact, fully strives to “present to himself a glorious Church, holy and immaculate, without stain or wrinkle or anything of that sort” (Eph 5:27). In saying this he tells us that the power with which he builds the Church with which he guides the Church, with which he also gives the Church the right direction is precisely his love.

The first meaning is therefore Christ, Head of the Church; both with regard to her direction and, above all, with regard to her inspiration and organic revitalization by virtue of his love. Then, in a second sense, Christ is not only considered as head of the Church but also as head of the heavenly powers and of the entire cosmos. Thus, in Colossians, we read that Christ has “disarmed the principalities and powers and made a public example of them, triumphing over



them in him” (2:15). Similarly, in Ephesians we find it written that with his Resurrection God placed Christ “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in that which is to come” (1:21). With these words the two Letters bring us a highly positive and fruitful message. It is this: Christ has no possible rival to fear since he is superior to every form of power that might presume to humble man. He alone “loved us and gave himself up for us” (Eph 5:2). Thus, if we are united with Christ, we have no enemy or adversity to fear; but this therefore means that we must continue to cling firmly to him, without loosening our grip!

For the pagan world that believed in a world filled with spirits for the most part dangerous and from which it was essential to protect oneself the proclamation that Christ was the only conqueror and that those with Christ need fear no one seemed a true liberation. The same is also true for the paganism of today, since current followers of similar ideologies see the world as full of dangerous powers. It is necessary to proclaim to them that Christ is triumphant, so that those who are with Christ, who stay united to him, have nothing and no one to fear. I think that this is also important for us, that we must learn to face all fears because he is above all forms of domination, he is the true Lord of the world.

Even the entire cosmos is subject to him and converges in him as its own head. The words in the Letter to the Ephesians that speak of God’s plan “to unite all things in him, things in Heaven and things on earth” (1:10) are famous. Likewise, we read in the Letter to the Colossians that “in him all things were created, in Heaven and on earth, visible and invisible” (1:16), and that “making peace by the Blood of his Cross.... reconcile[d] to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven” (1:20). Therefore there is not, on the one hand, the great material world and, on the other, this small reality of the history of our earth, of the world of people: it is all one in Christ. He is the head of the cosmos; the cosmos too was created by him, it was created for us to the extent that we are united with him. It is a rational and personalistic vision of the universe. I would say that it would have been impossible to conceive of a vision more universalistic than this, and that it befits the Risen Christ alone. Christ is the *Pantokrator* to which all things are subordinate. Our thoughts turn precisely to Christ the Pantocrator, who fills the vault of the apse in Byzantine churches, sometimes depicted seated on high, above the whole world, or even on a rainbow, to show his equality with God

himself at whose right hand he is seated (cf. Eph 1:20; Col 3:1) and thus also his incomparable role as the guide of human destiny.

A vision of this kind can only be conceived by the Church, not in the sense that she wishes to misappropriate that to which she is not entitled, but in another double sense: both to the extent that the Church recognizes that Christ is greater than she is, given that his lordship extends beyond her confines, and to the extent that the Church alone not the cosmos is described as the Body of Christ. All of this means that we must consider earthly realities positively, since Christ sums them up in himself, and at the same time we must live to the full our specific ecclesial identity, which is the one most homogeneous to Christ's own identity.

Then there is also a special concept which is typical of these two Letters, and it is the concept of "mystery". The "mystery of [God's] will" is mentioned once (Eph 1:9) and, other times, as the "mystery of Christ" (Eph 3:4; Col 4:3) or even as "God's mystery, of Christ, in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col 2:2–3). This refers to God's inscrutable plan for the destiny of mankind, of peoples and of the world. With this language the two Epistles tell us that the fulfilment of this mystery is found in Christ. If we are with Christ, even if our minds are incapable of grasping everything, we know that we have penetrated the nucleus of this "mystery" and are on the way to the truth. It is he in his totality and not only in one aspect of his Person or at one moment of his existence who bears within him the fullness of the unfathomable divine plan of salvation. In him what is called "the manifold wisdom of God" (Eph 3:10) takes shape, for in him "the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily" (Col 2:9). From this point on, therefore, it is not possible to reflect on and worship God's will, his sovereign instruction, without comparing ourselves personally with Christ in Person, in whom that "mystery" is incarnate and may be tangibly perceived. Thus one arrives at contemplation of the "unsearchable riches of Christ" (Eph 3:8) which are beyond any human understanding. It is not that God did not leave footprints on his journey, for Christ himself is God's impression, his greatest footprint; but we realize "what is the breadth and length and height and depth" of this mystery "which surpasses knowledge" (Eph 3:18–19). Mere intellectual categories prove inadequate here, and, recognizing that many things are beyond our rational capacities, we must entrust them to the humble and joyful

contemplation not only of the mind but also of the heart. The Fathers of the Church, moreover, tell us that love understands better than reason alone.

A last word must be said on the concept, already mentioned above, of the Church as the spousal partner of Christ. In the Second Letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul had compared the Christian community to a bride, writing thus: “I feel a divine jealousy for you”, for I betrothed you to Christ to present you as a pure bride to her one husband” (11:2). The Letter to the Ephesians develops this image, explaining that the Church is not only a betrothed bride, but the real bride of Christ. He has won her, so to speak, and has done so at the cost of his life: as the text says, he “gave himself up for her” (Eph 5:25). What demonstration of love could be greater than this? But in addition, he was concerned about her beauty: not only the beauty already acquired through Baptism, but also that beauty “without stain or wrinkle” that is due to an irreproachable life which must grow in her moral conduct every day (cf. Eph 5:26–27). It is a short step from here to the common experience of Christian marriage; indeed, it is not even very clear what the initial reference point of the Letter was for its author: whether it was the Christ-Church relationship, in whose light the union of the man and woman should be seen, or whether it was the experiential event of conjugal union, in whose light should be seen the relationship between Christ and the Church. But both aspects illuminate each other reciprocally: we learn what marriage is in the light of the communion of Christ and the Church, we learn how Christ is united to us in thinking of the mystery of matrimony. In any case, our Letter presents itself as nearly a middle road between the Prophet Hosea, who expressed the relationship between God and his people in terms of the wedding that had already taken place (cf. Hos 2:4, 16, 20), and the Seer of the Apocalypse, who was to propose the eschatological encounter between the Church and the Lamb as a joyful and indefectible wedding (cf. Rev 19:7–9; 21:9).

There would be much more to say, but it seems to me that from what has been expounded it is already possible to realize that these two Letters form a great catechesis, from which we can learn not only how to be good Christians but also how to become truly human. If we begin by understanding that the cosmos is the impression of Christ, we learn our correct relationship with the cosmos, along with all of the problems of the preservation of the cosmos. Let us learn to see it with reason, but with a reason motivated by love, and with the humility and

respect that make it possible to act in the right way. And if we believe that the Church is the Body of Christ, that Christ gave himself for her, we learn how to live reciprocal love with Christ, the love that unites us to God and makes us see in the other the image of Christ, Christ himself. Let us pray the Lord to help us to meditate well upon Sacred Scripture, his word, and thus truly learn how to live well.

# Year for Priests

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## Introduction

24 June 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*Last Friday, 19 June, the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and a Day traditionally dedicated to prayer for the sanctification of priests, I had the joy of inaugurating the Year for Priests which I established on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the “birth in Heaven” of the Curé d’Ars, St John Baptist Mary Vianney. And on entering the Vatican Basilica for the celebration of Vespers, first by way of a symbolic gesture I paused in the Chapel of the Choir to venerate the relic of this holy pastor of souls: his heart. Why a Year for Priests? Why precisely in memory of the Holy Curé d’Ars who did not, apparently, achieve anything extraordinary?*

Divine Providence has ensured that his figure be juxtaposed with that of St Paul. Indeed, while the Pauline Year, dedicated to the Apostle to the Gentiles an extraordinary evangelizer who made several missionary voyages in order to spread the Gospel is drawing to a close, this new Jubilee Year invites us to look at a poor peasant who became a humble parish priest and carried out his pastoral service in a small village. If the two saints differ widely because of the paths through life that characterized them one went from one region to the next to proclaim the Gospel, the other welcomed thousands and thousands of the faithful while remaining in his own tiny parish some basic factor binds them together nevertheless; and it is their total identification with their own ministry,

their communion with Christ, which made St Paul say “I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20). And St John Mary Vianney used to like to repeat: “if we had faith, we would see God hidden in the priest like a light behind glass or like wine mixed with water”. The purpose of this Year for Priests, as I wrote in my Letter addressed to priests for this occasion, is therefore to encourage every priest in this striving for spiritual perfection on which, above all, the effectiveness of their ministry depends, and first and foremost to help priests and with them the entire People of God to rediscover and to reinforce their knowledge of the extraordinary, indispensable gift of Grace which the ordained minister represents for those who have received it, for the whole Church and for the world which would be lost without the Real Presence of Christ.

There is no doubt that the historical and social conditions in which the Curé d’Ars lived have changed and it is right to wonder how priests in today’s globalized societies can imitate him by identifying with him in their own ministries. In a world in which the common vision of life includes less and less of the sacred, instead of which “functionality” becomes the only crucial element, the Catholic concept of the priesthood might risk losing its natural esteem, at times even within the ecclesial conscience. Two different conceptions of the priesthood are frequently compared and at times even set against one another, in theological milieus as well as in actual pastoral practice and the formation of the clergy. In this regard I pointed out several years ago that there is: “on the one hand a social and functional concept that defines the essence of the priesthood with the concept of ‘service’: service to the community in the fulfilment of a function.... Moreover, there is the sacramental-ontological concept, which of course does not deny the priesthood’s character of service but sees it anchored to the minister’s existence and claims that this existence is determined by a gift granted by the Lord through the mediation of the Church, whose name is sacrament” (J. Ratzinger, *Ministero e vita del Sacerdote, in Elementi di Teologia fondamentale. Saggio su fede e ministero*, Brescia 2005, p. 165). The terminological shifting of the word “priesthood” to “service, ministry, assignment”, is also a sign of this different conception. The primacy of the Eucharist, moreover, is linked to the former, the ontological-sacramental conception, in the dual term: “priesthood-sacrifice”, whereas the primacy of the word and of the service of proclamation is held to correspond with the latter.

Clearly these two concepts are not contradictory and the tension which nevertheless exists between them may be resolved from within. Thus the Decree of the Second Vatican Council on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, says: “For, through the apostolic proclamation of the Gospel, the People of God is called together and assembled so that when all who belong to this People have been sanctified by the Holy Spirit, they can offer themselves as “a sacrifice, living, holy, pleasing to God” (Rm 12:1). Through the

ministry of priests the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ, the sole Mediator. Through the hands of priests and in the name of the whole Church, the Lord's sacrifice is offered in the Eucharist in an unbloody and sacramental manner until he himself returns" (n. 2).

Then let us ask ourselves: "What precisely does 'to evangelize' mean for priests? What does the 'primacy' of proclamation consist in?". Jesus speaks of the proclamation of the Kingdom of God as the true purpose of his coming into the world and his proclamation is not only a "discourse". At the same time it includes his action: the signs and miracles that he works show that the Kingdom comes into the world as a present reality which ultimately coincides with Jesus himself. In this sense it is only right to recall that even in the primacy of proclamation, the word and the sign are indivisible. Christian preaching does not proclaim "words", but the Word, and the proclamation coincides with the very Person of Christ, ontologically open to the relationship with the Father and obedient to his will. Thus, an authentic service to the Word requires of the priest that he strive for deeper self-denial, to the point that he can say, with the Apostle, "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me". The priest cannot consider himself "master" of the Word, but its servant. He is not the Word but, as John the Baptist, whose birth we are celebrating precisely today, proclaimed, he is the "voice" of the Word: "the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight" (Mk 1:3).

For the priest, then, being the "voice" of the Word is not merely a functional aspect. On the contrary, it implies a substantial "losing of himself" in Christ, participating with his whole being in the mystery of Christ's death and Resurrection: his understanding, his freedom, his will and the offering of his body as a living sacrifice (cf. Rm 12:1-2). Only participation in Christ's sacrifice, in his kenosis, makes preaching authentic! And this is the way he must take with Christ to reach the point of being able to say to the Father, together with Christ: let "not what I will, but what you will" be done (Mk 14:36). Proclamation, therefore, always involves self-sacrifice, a prerequisite for its authenticity and efficacy.

As an *alter Christus*, the priest is profoundly united to the Word of the Father who, in becoming incarnate took the form of a servant, he became a servant (Phil 2:5-11). The priest is a servant of Christ, in the sense that his existence, configured to Christ ontologically, acquires an essentially relational character: he is *in* Christ, *for* Christ and *with* Christ, at the service of humankind. Because he belongs to Christ, the priest is radically at the service of all people: he is the minister of their salvation, their happiness and their authentic liberation, developing, in this gradual assumption of Christ's will, in prayer, in "being heart to heart" with him. Therefore this is the indispensable condition

for every proclamation, which entails participation in the sacramental offering of the Eucharist and docile obedience to the Church.

The saintly Curé d'Ars would often say with tears in his eyes: "How dreadful it is to be a priest!". And he would add: "How a priest who celebrates Mass like an ordinary event is to be pitied! How unfortunate is a priest with no inner life!". May the Year for Priests lead all priests to identify totally with the Crucified and Risen Jesus so that, in imitation of St John the Baptist, they may be prepared to "shrink" that Christ may grow and that, in following the example of the Curé d'Ars, they feel constantly and profoundly the responsibility of their mission, which is the sign and presence of God's infinite mercy. Let us entrust to Our Lady, Mother of the Church, the Year for Priests which has just begun and all the priests of the world.

*1st July 2009*

## **Year for Priests**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The celebration of First Vespers of the Solemnity of the Holy Apostles, Peter and Paul in the Basilica of St Paul-Outside-the-Walls on 28 June, as you know, brought to a close the Pauline Year commemorating the 2,000th anniversary of the birth of the Apostle to the Gentiles.

Let us thank the Lord for the spiritual fruit that this important initiative has brought to so many Christian communities. We may accept the Apostle's invitation to deepen our knowledge of the mystery of Christ as a precious heritage of the Pauline Year because he is at the heart and the centre of our personal and community existence. This is in fact the indispensable condition for a true spiritual and ecclesial renewal. As I emphasized during the first Eucharistic Celebration in the Sistine Chapel after my election as Successor of the Apostle Peter, it is precisely from full communion with Christ that "flows every other element of the Church's life: first of all, communion among all the faithful, the commitment to proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel, the ardour of love for all, especially the poorest and lowliest". This applies to priests in the first place. For this reason let us thank God's Providence for offering us the possibility of celebrating the Year for Priests now. My heartfelt hope for every priest is that it will be an opportunity for inner renewal and, consequently, that it will firmly strengthen him in his commitment to his mission.

Just as during the Pauline Year our constant reference point was St Paul, so in the coming months we shall look in the first place to St John Mary Vianney, the Holy Curé d'Ars, recalling the 150th anniversary of his death. In the Letter I wrote to priests on this



occasion, I wished to underline what shines brightest in the life of this humble minister of the altar: his “complete identification ... with his ministry”. He used to like to say that “a good shepherd, a pastor after God’s heart, is the greatest treasure which the good Lord can grant to a parish, and one of the most precious gifts of divine mercy”, and, almost not managing to understand the greatness of the gift and task entrusted to a poor human creature, he would sigh: “O, how great is the priest! ... If he realized what he is, he would die ... God obeys him: he utters a few words and the Lord descends from heaven at his voice, to be contained within a small host”.

In fact, precisely by considering the pairing of identity with mission each priest is able to be more aware of the need for that gradual identification with Christ which will guarantee him fidelity and the fruitfulness of Gospel witness. The very title of the Year for Priests *Faithfulness of Christ, faithfulness of priests* highlights the fact that the gift of divine grace precedes every possible human response and pastoral initiative. Thus, in the priest’s life, missionary preaching and worship can never be separated, just as the ontological-sacramental identity and evangelizing mission must never be separated. Moreover, we might say that the purpose of every priest’s mission is one of worship. Thus may all people offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (cf. Rm 12:1), which in Creation itself, in people, becomes worship, praise of the Creator, receiving that love which they in turn are called to offer to each other in abundance. The early Christian communities were already clearly aware of this. St John Chrysostom said, for example, that the sacrament of the altar and the “sacrament of the brother” or “sacrament of the poor man”, are two aspects of the same mystery. Love for one’s neighbour, attention to justice and to the poor are not so much themes of a moral society as they are an expression of a sacramental conception of Christian morality. This is because, through the ministry of priests, the spiritual sacrifice of all the faithful is fulfilled in union with that of Christ, the one Mediator: a sacrifice that priests offer in an unbloody and sacramental way as they wait for the Lord to come again. This is the principal, essentially missionary and dynamic dimension of the priestly ministry and identity: through the proclamation of the Gospel they generate faith in those who do not yet believe, so that they may combine their sacrifice with Christ’s through love of God and of one’s neighbour.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, in the face of so much uncertainty and weariness that also arises in the exercise of the priestly ministry, the recovery of a clear and unequivocal opinion on the absolute primacy of divine grace is urgent, remembering what St Thomas Aquinas wrote: “The good of grace in one is greater than the good of nature in the whole universe” (Summa Theologiae, I–II, q. 113, a. 9, ad 2). The mission of each individual priest will therefore depend also and above all on knowledge of the sacramental reality of his “new being”. His ever renewed enthusiasm for the mission depends on the certainty of his own identity not artificially and humanly constructed but freely and divinely*

*given and received. And what I wrote in the Encyclical Deus Caritas Est also applies to priests: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (n. 1).*

Having received such an extraordinary gift of grace with their "consecration", priests become permanent witnesses of their encounter with Christ. Starting precisely from this inner awareness, they can fully carry out their "mission" through the proclamation of the word and the administration of the Sacraments. After the Second Vatican Council, an impression spread that there was a more pressing need in the mission of priests in our time; some thought that above all it was necessary for a new society to be built. The Gospel passage that we heard at the outset recalls instead the two essential elements of the priestly ministry. Jesus sends the Apostles out to proclaim the Gospel and gives them the power to expel evil spirits. "Proclamation" and "power", that is, "word" and "sacrament", are therefore the two basic pillars of priestly service, over and above its possible multiple circumstances.

When the "diptych" of consecration and mission is not taken into account, it becomes truly difficult to understand the identity of the priest and his ministry in the Church. Indeed, who is the priest if not a man who has been converted and renewed by the Spirit, who lives on his personal relationship with Christ, ceaselessly making the Gospel criteria his own? Who is the priest if not a man of unity and truth, aware of his own limitations and at the same time of the extraordinary greatness, of the vocation he has received, namely that of helping to spread the Kingdom of God to the very ends of the earth? Yes! The priest is a man who belongs totally to the Lord, for it is God himself who has called him and establishes him in his apostolic service. For the very reason that he belongs completely to the Lord, he belongs completely to the people, for the people. During this Year for Priests that will last until the next Solemnity of the Sacred Heart, let us pray for all priests. Let us pray that in dioceses, parishes, religious and especially monastic communities, in associations and movements, in the various pastoral groups that exist throughout the world there may be an increase in prayer initiatives and in particular in Eucharistic Adoration for the sanctification of the clergy and for priestly vocations, in response to Jesus' invitation to pray "the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest" (Mt 9:38). Prayer is the first commitment, the true path of sanctification for priests and the soul of an authentic "vocations ministry". Not only must the scarcity of ordinations to the priesthood in certain countries not discourage us, but it must also be an incentive to increase the number of places of silence and listening to the word, to better attend to spiritual direction and the sacrament of Confession. In this way God's voice, which always continues to call and to strengthen, may be heard and promptly followed by numerous young people. Those who pray are not afraid; those who pray are never alone; those who pray are saved! St John Mary Vianney is without a doubt the

model of an existence made prayer. May Mary, Mother of the Church, help all priests to follow his example in order to be, like him, witnesses of Christ and apostles of the Gospel.

## Caritas in veritate

8 July 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

My new Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* was officially presented yesterday. Its fundamental vision is inspired from a passage of the Letter of St Paul to the Ephesians, in which the Apostle speaks of acting *in accordance with truth in love*: “Speaking the truth in love”, as we have just heard, “we are to grow up in every way into him who is the Head, into Christ” (4:15). Charity in truth is therefore the principal force behind the true development of every person and of all humanity. For this reason the entire social doctrine of the Church revolves around the principle *caritas in veritate*. Only with charity, illumined by reason and by faith, is it possible to achieve goals of development endowed with humane and humanizing values. Charity in truth “is the principle around which the Church’s social doctrine turns, a principle that takes on practical form in the criteria that govern moral action” (n. 6). In the introduction the Encyclical immediately mentions two fundamental criteria: justice and the common good. Justice is an integral part of that love “in deed and in truth” (1 Jn 3:18), to which the Apostle John exhorts us (cf. n. 6). And “to love someone is to desire that person’s good and to take effective steps to secure it. Besides the good of the individual, there is a good that is linked to living in society.... The more we strive to obtain a common good corresponding to the real needs of our neighbours, the more effectively we love them” (n. 6). Hence there are two operative criteria, justice and the common good. Thanks to the latter, charity acquires a social dimension. Every Christian, the Encyclical says, is called to practise this charity, and it adds: “This is the institutional path ... of charity” (n. 7).

Like other Magisterial documents this Encyclical too takes up, continues and deepens the Church’s analysis and reflection on social themes of vital interest for mankind in our century. It is linked in a special way to what Paul VI wrote more than 40 years ago in *Populorum Progressio* a milestone in the Church’s social teaching in which the great Pontiff outlines certain crucial guidelines, which continue to be timely, for the integral development of man and of the modern world. The world situation, as the news in recent months amply demonstrates, continues to present serious problems and the “scandal” of glaring inequalities which have endured despite past efforts. On the one hand, there are signs of grave social and economic imbalances; on the other, reforms are being called for

on various sides which can no longer be postponed in order to narrow the gap in the development of peoples. To this end, the phenomenon of globalization can constitute a real opportunity, but for this reason it is important to initiate a profound moral and cultural renewal as well as responsible discernment concerning decisions leading to the common good. A better future for all is possible, if it is founded on the rediscovery of fundamental ethical values. What is needed, then, is new financial planning in order to redesign development globally, based on the ethical foundation of responsibility before God and to the human being as God's creature.

The Encyclical does not of course aim to offer technical solutions to the vast social problems of the contemporary world. This lies outside the competence of the Magisterium of the Church (cf. n. 9). Yet, it recalls the great principles that prove indispensable to building human development in the years to come. Among them, in the first place, is attention to human life, considered to be the core of all true progress; respect for the right to religious freedom that is always closely linked to human development; the rejection of a Promethean vision of the human being which maintains that he is the absolute author of his own destiny. An unlimited trust in the potential of technology ultimately shows itself to be illusory. We need upright people both in politics and in the economy who sincerely have the common good at heart. In particular, looking at the global emergencies, it is urgent to focus public opinion on the tragedy of hunger and food security which affects a considerable part of humanity. A tragedy of such proportions calls our consciences into question: it must be tackled with determination by eliminating the structural causes that give rise to it and encouraging agricultural development in the poorest countries. I am sure that this path of solidarity towards the development of the poorer countries will certainly help to find a solution to the current global crisis. Without doubt, the role and political power of States must be carefully reassessed, in an epoch in which limitations to their sovereignty *de facto* exist because of the new international economic, commercial and financial context. On the other hand, there must be no lack in the responsible participation of citizens in national and international politics thanks in part to a renewed commitment of the trade unions called to establish new synergies at the local and international levels. In this field too, a lead role is played by the means of social communication in the strengthening of the dialogue between diverse cultures and traditions.

Therefore, seeking to plan a development that is not marred by the dysfunctions and distortions that are widespread today, a serious reflection on the very meaning of the economy and on its purposes is obligatory for all. The state of the ecological health of the planet requires it; the cultural and moral crisis of man which is visibly emerging in every part of the globe demands it. If it is to function properly, the economy needs ethics; it needs to recover the important contribution of the principle of gratuitousness and the

“logic of gift” in the market economy, where the rule cannot be profit alone. However this is only possible with the commitment of all economists, and politicians, producers and consumers and it presupposes a formation of consciences that gives strength to moral criteria in the elaboration of political and economic projects. On various sides an appeal is rightly being made for rights to presuppose corresponding duties, without which they risk becoming arbitrary. As must always be reiterated, a different lifestyle for the whole of humanity is necessary in which the duties of everyone towards the environment are linked to those towards the individual, considered in himself and in relation to others. Humanity is one family and fruitful dialogue between faith and reason cannot but enrich it, making charitable work in social life more effective and providing the appropriate framework in which to encourage collaboration between believers and non-believers, in the shared perspective of working for justice and peace in the world. As criteria and guidelines for this fraternal interaction, I indicate in the Encyclical the principles of subsidiarity and solidarity, which are closely connected. Lastly, in the face of the problems of today’s world that are so immense and profound, I point out the need for a world political authority, regulated by law, which would abide by the above-mentioned principles of subsidiarity and solidarity and would be firmly oriented to the realization of the common good with respect for humanity’s great moral and religious traditions.

*The Gospel reminds us that man does not live on bread alone: it is impossible to satisfy the profound thirst of the human heart solely with material goods. The human horizon is undoubtedly higher and broader; for this reason every development programme must consider alongside the material the spiritual growth of the human person, who is endowed with both a body and a soul. This is the integral development to which the Church’s social doctrine constantly refers. The criterion that orients it is the driving force of “charity in truth”. Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us pray that this Encyclical may also help humanity to feel that it is one family committed to bringing about a world of justice and peace. Let us pray that believers who work in the financial and political sectors may realize how important their consistent Gospel witness is in the service they render to society. In particular, I invite you to pray for the Heads of State and Government of the G8 who are meeting in these days at L’Aquila. May this important World Summit result in decisions and approaches that will serve the true progress of all peoples, especially the poorest. Let us entrust these intentions to the maternal intercession of Mary, Mother of the Church and of mankind.*

5 August 2009

# St John Mary Vianney, the Holy Curé of Ars

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In today's Catechesis I would like briefly to review the life of the Holy Curé of Ars. I shall stress several features that can also serve as an example for priests in our day, different of course from the time in which he lived, yet marked in many ways by the same fundamental human and spiritual challenges. Precisely yesterday was the 150th anniversary of his birth in Heaven. Indeed it was at two o'clock in the morning on 4 August 1859 that St John Baptist Mary Vianney, having come to the end of his earthly life, went to meet the heavenly Father to inherit the Kingdom, prepared since the world's creation for those who faithfully follow his teachings (cf. Mt 25:34). What great festivities there must have been in Heaven at the entry of such a zealous pastor! What a welcome he must have been given by the multitude of sons and daughters reconciled with the Father through his work as parish priest and confessor! I wanted to use this anniversary as an inspiration to inaugurate the Year for Priests, whose theme, as is well known, is "Faithfulness of Christ, Faithfulness of Priests". The credibility of witness depends on holiness and, once and for all, on the actual effectiveness of the mission of every priest.

John Mary Vianney was born into a peasant family in the small town of Dardilly on 8 May 1786. His family was poor in material possessions but rich in humanity and in faith. Baptized on the day of his birth, as was the good custom in those days, he spent so many years of his childhood and adolescence working in the fields and tending the flocks that at the age of 17 he was still illiterate.

Nonetheless he knew by heart the prayers his devout mother had taught him and was nourished by the sense of religion in the atmosphere he breathed at home. His biographers say that since his earthly youth he sought to conform himself to God's will, even in the humblest offices. He pondered on his desire to become a priest but it was far from easy for him to achieve it. Indeed, he arrived at priestly ordination only after many ordeals and misunderstandings, with the help of far-sighted priests who did not stop at considering his human limitations but looked beyond them and glimpsed the horizon of holiness that shone out in that truly unusual young man. So it was that on 23 June 1815 he was ordained a deacon and on the following 13 August, he was ordained a priest. At last, at the age of 29, after numerous uncertainties, quite a few failures and many tears, he was able to walk up to the Lord's altar and make the dream of his life come true.

The Holy Curé of Ars always expressed the highest esteem for the gift he had received. He would say: "Oh! How great is the Priesthood! It can be properly understood only in Heaven ... if one were to understand it on this earth one would die, not of fright but of love!" (Abbé Monnin, *Esprit du Curé d'Ars*, p. 113). Moreover, as a little boy he had confided

to his mother: “If I were to become a priest, I would like to win many souls” (Abbé Monnin, *Procès de l'ordinaire*, p. 1064). And so he did. Indeed, in his pastoral service, as simple as it was extraordinarily fertile, this unknown parish priest of a forgotten village in the south of France was so successful in identifying with his ministry that he became, even in a visibly and universally recognizable manner, an *alter Christus*, an image of the Good Shepherd who, unlike the hired hand, lays down his life for his sheep (cf. Jn 10:11). After the example of the Good Shepherd, he gave his life in the decades of his priestly service. His existence was a living catechesis that acquired a very special effectiveness when people saw him celebrating Mass, pausing before the tabernacle in adoration or spending hour after hour in the confessional.

Therefore the centre of his entire life was the Eucharist, which he celebrated and adored with devotion and respect. Another fundamental characteristic of this extraordinary priestly figure was his diligent ministry of confession. He recognized in the practice of the sacrament of penance the logical and natural fulfilment of the priestly apostolate, in obedience to Christ's mandate: “if you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (cf. Jn 20:23). St John Mary Vianney thus distinguished himself as an excellent, tireless confessor and spiritual director. Passing “with a single inner impulse from the altar to the confessional”, where he spent a large part of the day, he did his utmost with preaching and persuasive advice to help his parishioners rediscover the meaning and beauty of the sacrament of Penance, presenting it as an inherent demand of the Eucharistic presence (cf. *Letter to Priests for the inauguration of the Year for Priests*).

*The pastoral methods of St John Mary Vianney might hardly appear suited to the social and cultural conditions of the present day. Indeed, how could a priest today imitate him in a world so radically changed? Although it is true that times change and many charisms are characteristic of the person, hence unrepeatable, there is nevertheless a lifestyle and a basic desire that we are all called to cultivate. At a close look, what made the Curé of Ars holy was his humble faithfulness to the mission to which God had called him; it was his constant abandonment, full of trust, to the hands of divine Providence. It was not by virtue of his own human gifts that he succeeded in moving peoples' hearts nor even by relying on a praiseworthy commitment of his will; he won over even the most refractory souls by communicating to them what he himself lived deeply, namely, his friendship with Christ. He was “in love” with Christ and the true secret of his pastoral success was the fervour of his love for the Eucharistic Mystery, celebrated and lived, which became love for Christ's flock, for Christians and for all who were seeking God. His testimony reminds us, Dear Brothers and Sisters, that for every baptized person and especially for every priest the Eucharist is not merely an event with two protagonists, a dialogue between God and me. Eucharistic Communion aspires to a total*

*transformation of one's life and forcefully flings open the whole human "I" of man and creates a new "we" (cf. Joseph Ratzinger, La Comunione nella Chiesa, p. 80).*

Thus, far from reducing the figure of St John Mary Vianney to an example albeit an admirable one of 18-century devotional spirituality, on the contrary one should understand the prophetic power that marked his human and priestly personality that is extremely timely. In post-revolutionary France which was experiencing a sort of "dictatorship of rationalism" that aimed at obliterating from society the very existence of priests and of the Church, he lived first in the years of his youth a heroic secrecy, walking kilometres at night to attend Holy Mass. Then later as a priest Vianney distinguished himself by an unusual and fruitful pastoral creativity, geared to showing that the then prevalent rationalism was in fact far from satisfying authentic human needs, hence definitively unliveable.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, 150 years after the death of the Holy Curé of Ars, contemporary society is facing challenges that are just as demanding and may have become even more complex. In his time the "dictatorship of rationalism" existed, in the current epoch a sort of "dictatorship of relativism" is evident in many contexts. Both seem inadequate responses to the human being's justifiable request to use his reason as a distinctive and constitutive element of his own identity. Rationalism was inadequate because it failed to take into account human limitations and claims to make reason alone the criterion of all things, transforming it into a goddess; contemporary relativism humiliates reason because it arrives de facto at affirming that the human being can know nothing with certainty outside the positive scientific field. Today however, as in that time, man, "a beggar for meaning and fulfilment", is constantly in quest of exhaustive answers to the basic questions that he never ceases to ask himself.*

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council had very clearly in mind this "thirst for the truth" that burns in every human heart when they said that it is the task of priests "as instructors of the people in the faith" to see to the "formation of a genuine Christian community", that can "smooth the path to Christ for all men" and exercise "a truly motherly function" for them, "showing or smoothing the path towards Christ and his Church" for non-believers and for believers, while also "encouraging, supporting and strengthening believers for their spiritual struggles" (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 6).

The teaching which in this regard the Holy Curé of Ars continues to pass on to us is that the priest must create an intimate personal union with Christ that he must cultivate and increase, day after day.

Only if he is in love with Christ will the priest be able to teach his union, this intimate friendship with the divine Teacher to all, and be able to move people's hearts and open them to the Lord's merciful love. Only in this way, consequently, will he be able to instil



enthusiasm and spiritual vitality in the communities the Lord entrusts to him. Let us pray that through the intercession of St John Mary Vianney, God will give holy priests to his Church and will increase in the faithful the desire to sustain and help them in their ministry. Let us entrust this intention to Mary, whom on this very day we invoke as Our Lady of the Snow.

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*12 August 2009*

## **Connection between the Blessed Virgin Mary and the priesthood**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The celebration of the Solemnity of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, next Saturday, is at hand and we are in the context of the Year for Priest. I therefore wish to speak of the link between Our Lady and the priesthood. This connection is deeply rooted in the Mystery of the Incarnation.

When God decided to become man in his Son, he needed the freely-spoken “yes” of one of his creatures. God does not act against our freedom. And something truly extraordinary happens: God makes himself dependent on the free decision, the “yes” of one of his creatures; he waits for this “yes”. St Bernard of Clairvaux explained dramatically in one of his homilies this crucial moment in universal history when Heaven, earth and God himself wait for what this creature will say.

Mary’s “yes” is therefore the door through which God was able to enter the world, to become man. So it is that Mary is truly and profoundly involved in the Mystery of the Incarnation, of our salvation. And the Incarnation, the Son’s becoming man, was the beginning that prepared the ground for the gift of himself; for giving himself with great love on the Cross to become Bread for the life of the world. Hence sacrifice, priesthood and Incarnation go together and Mary is at the heart of this mystery.

Let us now go to the Cross. Before dying, Jesus sees his Mother beneath the Cross and he sees the beloved son. This beloved son is certainly a person, a very important individual, but he is more; he is an example, a prefiguration of all beloved disciples, of all the people called by the Lord to be the “beloved disciple” and thus also particularly of priests. Jesus says to Mary: “Woman, behold, your son!” (Jn 19:26). It is a sort of testament: he entrusts his Mother to the care of the son, of the disciple. But he also says to the disciple: “Behold, your mother!” (Jn 19:27). The Gospel tells us that from that hour St John, the beloved son,

took his mother Mary “to his own home”. This is what it says in the [English] translation; but the Greek text is far deeper, far richer. We could translate it: he took Mary into his inner life, his inner being, “eis tà ìidia”, into the depths of his being. To take Mary with one means to introduce her into the dynamism of one’s own entire existence it is not something external and into all that constitutes the horizon of one’s own apostolate. It seems to me that one can, therefore, understand how the special relationship of motherhood that exists between Mary and priests may constitute the primary source, the fundamental reason for her special love for each one of them. In fact, Mary loves them with predilection for two reasons: because they are more like Jesus, the supreme love of her heart, and because, like her, they are committed to the mission of proclaiming, bearing witness to and giving Christ to the world. Because of his identification with and sacramental conformation to Jesus, Son of God and Son of Mary, every priest can and must feel that he really is a specially beloved son of this loftiest and humblest of Mothers.

*The Second Vatican Council invites priests to look to Mary as to the perfect model for their existence, invoking her as “Mother of the supreme and eternal Priest, as Queen of Apostles, and as Protectress of their ministry”. The Council continues, “priests should always venerate and love her, with a filial devotion and worship” (cf. Presbyterorum Ordinis, n. 18). The Holy Curé d’Ars, whom we are remembering in particular in this Year, used to like to say: “Jesus Christ, after giving us all that he could give us, wanted further to make us heirs to his most precious possession, that is, his Holy Mother (B. Nodet, Il pensiero e l’anima del Curato d’Ars, Turin 1967, p. 305). This applies for every Christian, for all of us, but in a special way for priests. Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us pray that Mary will make all priests, in all the problems of today’s world, conform with the image of her Son Jesus, as stewards of the precious treasure of his love as the Good Shepherd. Mary, Mother of priests, pray for us!*

19 August 2009

## **Saint John Eudes and the formation of the diocesan clergy**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today is the liturgical Memorial of St John Eudes, a tireless apostle of the devotion to the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary who lived in France in the 17th century that was marked by opposing religious phenomena and serious political problems. It was the time of the Thirty Years’ War, which devastated not only a large part of Central Europe but also souls. While contempt for the Christian faith was being spread by certain currents of thought which then prevailed, the Holy Spirit was inspiring a spiritual renewal full of fervour with important figures such as de Bérulle, St Vincent de Paul, St Louis-Marie

Grignon de Montfort and St John Eudes. This great “French school” of holiness also included St John Mary Vianney. Through a mysterious design of Providence, my venerable Predecessor Pius XI canonized John Eudes and the Curé d’Ars together, on 31 May 1925, holding up to the whole world two extraordinary examples of priestly holiness.

In the context of the Year for Priests, I want to dwell on the apostolic zeal of St John Eudes, which he focused in particular on the formation of the diocesan clergy. The saints are true interpreters of Sacred Scripture. In the experience of their lives the saints have verified the truth of the Gospel; thus they introduce us into a knowledge and understanding of the Gospel. In 1563 the Council of Trent issued norms for the establishment of diocesan seminaries and for the formation of priests, since the Council was well aware that the whole crisis of the Reformation was also conditioned by the inadequate formation of priests who were not properly prepared for the priesthood either intellectually or spiritually, in their hearts or in their minds. This was in 1563; but since the application and realization of the norms was delayed both in Germany and in France, St John Eudes saw the consequences of this omission. Prompted by a lucid awareness of the grave need for spiritual assistance in which souls lay because of the inadequacy of the majority of the clergy, the Saint, who was a parish priest, founded a congregation specifically dedicated to the formation of priests. He founded his first seminary in the university town of Caen, a particularly appreciated experience which he very soon extended to other dioceses. The path of holiness, which he took himself and proposed to his followers, was founded on steadfast trust in the love that God had revealed to humanity in the priestly Heart of Christ and in the maternal Heart of Mary. In those times of cruelty, of the loss of interiority, he turned to the heart to speak to the heart, a saying of the Psalms very well interpreted by St Augustine. He wanted to recall people, men and women and especially future priests, to the heart by showing them the priestly Heart of Christ and the motherly Heart of Mary. Every priest must be a witness and an apostle of this love for Christ’s Heart and Mary’s Heart. And here we come to our own time.

Today too people feel in need of priests who witness to God’s infinite mercy with a life totally “conquered” by Christ and who learn to do this in the years of their seminary training. After the Synod in 1990 Pope John Paul II published the Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* in which he returned to and updated the norms of the Council of Trent and stressed above all the necessary continuity between the priest’s initial and continuing formation. For him this is a true starting point for an authentic reform of the life and apostolate of priests. It is also the key to preventing the “new evangelization” from being merely an attractive slogan and to ensuring that it is expressed in reality. The foundations laid in seminary formation constitute that indispensable “*humus spirituale*” in which “to learn Christ”, letting oneself be gradually configured to him, the one and only

High Priest and Good Shepherd. The seminary period should therefore be seen as the actualization of the moment when the Lord Jesus, after calling the Apostles and before sending them out to preach, asks them to be with him (cf. Mk 3:14). When St Mark recounts the calling of the Twelve Apostles he says that Jesus had a twofold purpose: firstly that they should be with him, and secondly, that they should be sent out to preach. Yet, in being with him always, they really proclaim Christ and bring the reality of the Gospel to the world.

*During this Year for Priests I ask you, Dear Brothers and Sisters, to pray for priests and for all those who are preparing to receive the extraordinary gift of the ministerial priesthood. I address to you all and thus I conclude the exhortation of St John Eudes who said to priests: “Give yourselves to Jesus in order to enter the immensity of his great Heart which contains the Heart of his Holy Mother and the hearts of all the Saints and lose yourselves in this abyss of love, charity, mercy, humility, purity, patience, submission and holiness” (Coeur admirable, III, 2).*

With this in mind, let us now sing the “Our Father” in Latin.

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, including the pilgrims from India and Nigeria. Our Catechesis considers St John Eudes whose feast we celebrate today. He lived in 17th-century France which, notwithstanding considerable trials for the faith, produced many outstanding examples of spiritual courage and insight. St John Eudes’ particular contribution was the foundation of a religious congregation dedicated to the task of giving solid formation to the diocesan priesthood. He encouraged seminarians to grow in holiness and to trust in God’s love revealed to humanity in the priestly heart of Jesus and in the maternal heart of Mary. During this year let us pray in a special way for priests and seminarians that, inspired by today’s Saint, they may spiritually “enter into the heart of Jesus”, becoming men of true love, mercy, humility and patience, renewed in holiness and pastoral zeal. My Dear Brothers and Sisters, upon you and your families I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace!*

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the wonderful figure of St John Eudes, whom I have just mentioned, help each one of you to make more and more progress in loving God who gives fullness of meaning to youth, to suffering and to family life. I thank you all for your presence. May the Lord bless you!

26 August 2009

# Saint Leonard Murialdo and Saint Joseph Cottolengo

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are moving towards the end of the Year for Priests and, on this last Wednesday of April, I would like to talk to you about two holy priests who were exemplary in the gift of themselves to God, in their witness of charity, lived in and for the Church, and to their needier brethren: St Leonard Murialdo and St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo. We are commemorating the 110th anniversary of the death of the former and the 40th anniversary of his canonization, and the celebrations for the second centenary of the priestly ordination of the latter are beginning.

Murialdo was born in Turin on 26 October 1828: it was the Turin of St John Bosco and likewise of St Joseph Cottolengo, a land made fruitful by so many examples of holiness among lay people and priests. Leonard was the eighth child of a simple family. As a boy, together with his brother, he entered the College of the Piarist Fathers of Savona for the elementary classes, middle school and secondary school. There he encountered teachers trained in a pious atmosphere, based on serious catechesis with regular devotional practices. Nevertheless in adolescence he went through a profound existential and spiritual crisis that led him to go home sooner than expected and to conclude his studies in Turin, where he enrolled in the two-year philosophy course. His “return to the light” occurred as he recounts after several months with the grace of a general confession in which he rediscovered God’s immense mercy. Then, at the age of 17, he took the decision to become a priest, as a loving response to God who had grasped him with his love. Leonard Murialdo was ordained on 20 September 1851. Precisely in that period, as a catechist of the *Oratorio* of the Guardian Angel, he came to the attention of Don Bosco who appreciated his qualities and convinced him to accept the directorship of the new *Oratorio di San Luigi*, in Porta Nuova, which he held until in 1865. There Fr Leonard also came into contact with the grave problems of the poorest classes. He visited their homes, developing a deep social, educational and apostolic sensitivity which led him subsequently to undertake a wide range of projects for youth. Catecheses, school and recreational activities were the foundation of his educational method in the *Oratorio*. Don Bosco still wanted Leonard with him on the occasion of the Audience that Blessed Pius ix granted to him in 1858.

In 1873, Fr Leonard founded the Congregation of St Joseph whose aim from the start was the formation of youth, especially the poorest and most neglected. Turin at that time was marked by the vigorously flourishing works and charitable activities promoted by Murialdo until his death on 30 March 1900.

I would like to emphasize that the heart of Murialdo's spirituality was his conviction of the merciful love of God, a Father ever good, patient and generous, who reveals the grandeur and immensity of his mercy with forgiveness. St Leonard did not experience this reality at an intellectual level but rather in his life, through his vivid encounter with the Lord. He always considered himself a man whom God in his mercy had pardoned. He therefore experienced a joyful feeling of gratitude to the Lord, serene awareness of his own limitations, the ardent desire for penance, and the constant and generous commitment to conversion. He saw his whole life not only enlightened, guided and supported by this love but continuously immersed in God's infinite mercy. He wrote in his *Spiritual Testament*: "Your mercy surrounds me, O Lord ... Just as God is always and everywhere, so there is always and everywhere love, mercy is always and everywhere". Remembering the crisis he had been through in his youth, he noted: "The good Lord wanted to make his kindness and generosity shine out in a completely special way. Not only did he readmit me to his friendship, but he called me to make a decision of predilection: he called me to the priesthood, even only a few months after I had returned to him". Thus St Leonard lived his priestly vocation as a gift of God's mercy, freely given, with a sense of gratitude, joy and love. He wrote further: "God has chosen me! He has called me, he has even forced upon me the honour, glory, and ineffable happiness of being his minister, of being 'another Christ' .... And where was I when you sought me, my God? At the bottom of the abyss! I was there, and there God came to find me; there he made me hear his voice".

Underlining the greatness of the mission of the priest who must "continue the work of redemption, the great work of Jesus Christ, the work of the Saviour of the world" namely, the work of "saving souls", St Leonard always reminded himself and his brethren of the responsibility of a life consistent with the sacrament received. Love of God and love for God: this was the force that impelled him on his journey to holiness, the law of his priesthood, the deepest meaning of his apostolate among poor youths and the source of his prayer. St Leonard Murialdo abandoned himself with trust to Providence, generously doing the divine will, in touch with God and dedicating himself to poor young people. In this way he combined contemplative silence with the tireless zeal of action, fidelity to every day tasks with ingenious initiatives, fortitude in difficulty with peace of mind. This was his path of holiness in order to live the commandment of love for God and for his neighbour.

St Joseph Benedict Cottolengo, who lived 40 years before Murialdo the Founder of the work which he himself called the "Little House of Divine Providence" and which today is also called "Cottolengo" embodied this same spirit of charity. Next Sunday, during my Pastoral Visit to Turin, I shall have the opportunity to venerate the remains of this Saint and to meet the residents of the "Little House".

Joseph Benedict Cottolengo was born in Bra, a small town in the Province of Cuneo, on 3 May 1786. The eldest of 12, six of whom died in infancy, he showed great sensitivity to the poor from childhood. He embraced the way of the priesthood, setting an example to two of his brothers. The years of his youth coincided with the Napoleonic period and the consequent hardships in both the religious and social contexts. Cottolengo became a good priest much sought after by penitents and, in the Turin of that time, a preacher of spiritual exercises and conferences for university students who always met with noteworthy success. At the age of 32, he was appointed canon of the *Santissima Trinità*, a congregation of priests whose task was to officiate in the *Corpus Domini* Church and to ensure the decorum of the city's religious ceremonies, but he felt uneasy in this situation. God was preparing him for a special mission and, precisely with an unexpected and decisive encounter, made him realize what was to be his future destiny in the exercise of the ministry.

The Lord always sets signs on our path to guide us according to his will to our own true good. This also happened to Cottolengo, dramatically, on Sunday morning, 2 September 1827. The diligence from Milan arrived in Turin, more crowded than ever. Crammed into it was a whole French family. The mother, with five children, was at an advanced stage of pregnancy and had a high temperature. After traipsing to various hospitals, this family found lodgings in a public dormitory but the woman's situation was serious and some people went in search of a priest. By a mysterious design they came across Cottolengo and it was precisely he who, heavy hearted, accompanied this young mother to her death, amid the distress of the entire family. Having carried out this painful task, with deep anguish he went to the Blessed Sacrament and knelt in prayer: "My God, why? Why did you want me to be a witness? What do you want of me? Something must be done!". He got to his feet and had all the bells rung and the candles lit and, gathering in the church those who were curious, told them: "The grace has been granted! The grace has been granted!". From that time Cottolengo was transformed: all his skills, especially his financial and organizational ability, were used to give life to projects in support of the neediest.

In his undertaking he was able to involve dozens and dozens of collaborators and volunteers. Moving towards the outskirts of Turin to expand his work, he created a sort of village, in which he assigned a meaningful name to every building he managed to build: "House of Faith", "House of Hope", "House of Charity". He adopted a "familystyle", establishing true and proper communities of people with volunteers, men and women religious and lay people, who joined forces in order to face and overcome the difficulties that arose. Everyone in that Little House of Divine Providence had a precise task: work, prayer, service, teaching or administration. The healthy and the sick shared the same daily burden. With time religious life could be specifically planned in accordance with

particular needs and requirements. Cottolengo even thought of setting up his own seminary to provide specific formation for the priests of his Work. He was always ready to follow and serve Divine Providence and never questioned it. He would say: “I am a good for nothing and I don’t even know what to make of myself. But Divine Providence certainly knows what it wants. It is only up to me to support it. Let us go ahead *in Domino*”. To his poor and the neediest, he would always call himself “the labourer of Divine Providence”.

He also chose to found beside the small citadels five monasteries of contemplative sisters and one of hermits, and considered them among his most important achievements. They were a sort of “heart” which was to beat for the entire Work. He died on 30 April 1842, with these words on his lips: “*Misericordia, Domine; Misericordia, Domine*. Good and Holy Providence ... Blessed Virgin, it is now up to you”. The whole of his life, as a newspaper of the time said, was “an intense day of love”.

Dear friends, these two holy priests, a few of whose characteristics I have described, carried out their ministry with the total gift of their lives to the poorest, the neediest and the lowliest, always finding the deep roots, the inexhaustible source for their action in their relationship with God. They drew from his love in the profound conviction that it is impossible to exercise charity without living in Christ and in the Church. May their intercession and example continue to illumine the ministry of the many priests who spend themselves generously for God and for the flock entrusted to them, and help each one give himself joyfully and generously to God and neighbour.

I offer a most cordial welcome to the ecumenical delegations from the Lutheran Church of Norway and from the Church of England. My warm greeting also goes to the group of Jewish leaders visiting the Vatican with the Pave the Way Foundation. Upon all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today’s Audience, especially those from England, Scotland, Norway, Indonesia and the United States of America I invoke Almighty God’s blessings of joy and peace!

*Saint Peter’s Square*

*5 May 2010*

## **Munus sanctificandi**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

*Last Sunday, on my Pastoral Visit to Turin, I had the joy of pausing in prayer before the Holy Shroud, joining the more than two million pilgrims who have been able to contemplate it during the solemn Exposition of these days. That sacred Cloth can nourish and foster faith and reinvigorate*



*Christian devotion because it is an incentive to go to the Face of Christ, to the Body of the Crucified and Risen Christ, to contemplate the Paschal Mystery, the heart of the Christian Message. We, Dear Brothers and Sisters, are living members of the Body of the Risen Christ, alive and active in history (cf. Rom 12:5), each one in accordance with the role, that is, the task the Lord has wished to entrust to each one of us. Today, in this Catechesis, I would like to return to the specific tasks of priests, which tradition claims are essentially three: teaching, sanctifying and governing. In one of our previous Catecheses I spoke on the first of these three duties: teaching, the proclamation of the truth, the proclamation of God revealed in Christ or, in other words the prophetic task of putting the person in touch with the truth, of helping him to know the essential of his life, of reality itself.*

Today I would like to reflect with you briefly on the priest's second duty, that of sanctifying people, above all through the sacraments and the worship of the Church. Here we must ask ourselves first of all: what does the word "Holy" mean? The answer is: "Holy" is God's specific quality of being, namely, absolute truth, goodness, love, beauty pure light. Thus sanctifying a person means putting him or her in touch with God, with this being light, truth, pure love. It is obvious that such contact transforms the person. The ancients had this firm conviction: no one can see God without dying instantly. The power of truth and light is too great! If the human being touches this absolute current, he cannot survive. On the other hand there is also the conviction: without a minimal contact with God man cannot live. Truth, goodness and love are fundamental conditions of his being. The question is: how can man find that contact with God, which is fundamental, without dying overpowered by the greatness of his divine being? The Church's faith tells us that God himself creates this contact that gradually transforms us into true images of God.

Thus we have once again arrived at the priest's task of "sanctifying". No man on his own, relying on his own power, can put another in touch with God. An essential part of the priest's grace is the gift, the task of creating this contact. This is achieved in the proclamation of God's word in which his light comes to meet us. It is achieved in a particularly concentrated manner in the Sacraments. Immersion in the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ takes place in Baptism, is reinforced in Confirmation and Reconciliation and is nourished by the Eucharist, a sacrament that builds the Church as the People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, n. 32). Thus it is Christ himself who makes us holy, that is, who draws us into God's sphere. However, as an act of his infinite mercy, he calls some "to be" with him (cf. Mk 3:14) and to become, through the Sacrament of Orders, despite their human poverty, sharers in his own priesthood, ministers of this sanctification, stewards of his mysteries, "bridges" to the encounter with him and of his mediation between God and man and between man and God (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5).

In recent decades there have been tendencies that aim to give precedence, in the priest's identity and mission, to the dimension of proclamation, detaching it from that of sanctification; it is often said that it would be necessary to go beyond a merely sacramental pastoral ministry. Yet, is it possible to exercise the priestly ministry authentically by "going beyond" the sacramental ministry? What exactly does it mean for priests to evangelize, in what does the professed "primacy of proclamation" consist? As the Gospels report, Jesus says that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the goal of his mission; this proclamation, however, is not only a "discourse" but at the same time includes his action; the signs and miracles that Jesus works show that the Kingdom comes as a present reality and in the end coincides with his very Person, with his gift of himself, as we heard today in the Gospel Reading. And the same applies for the ordained ministry: he, the priest, represents Christ, the One sent by the Father, he continues his mission, through the "word" and the "sacrament", in this totality of body and soul, of sign and word. Referring to priests in a letter to Bishop Honoratus of Thiabe, St Augustine says: "Let those, therefore, who are servants of Christ, his ministers in word and sacrament, do what he has commanded or permitted" (Letter 228, 2). It is necessary to reflect on whether, in some cases, having underestimated the faithful exercise of the *munus sanctificandi* might not have represented a weakening of faith itself in the salvific efficacy of the sacraments, and ultimately in the actual action of Christ and of his Spirit, through the Church, in the world.

Who, therefore, saves the world and man? The only answer we can give is: Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ, Crucified and Risen. And where is the Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ that brings about salvation? In Christ's action through the Church, and in particular in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which makes the redemptive sacrificial offering of the Son of God present in the sacrament of Reconciliation in which from the death of sin one returns to new life, and in every other sacramental act of sanctification (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5). It is therefore important to encourage an appropriate catechesis to help the faithful understand the value of the sacraments; but it is likewise necessary, after the example of the Holy Curé d'Ars, to be available, generous and attentive in giving the brothers and sisters the treasures of grace that God has placed in our hands, and of which we are not the "masters" but rather caretakers and stewards. Especially in this time of ours, in which, on the one hand it seems that faith is weakening, and, on the other, a profound need and a widespread quest for spirituality are emerging, it is essential that every priest remember that in his mission the missionary proclamation and worship and the sacraments are never separate and encourage a healthy sacramental ministry, to form the People of God and to help it experience to the full the Liturgy, the Church's worship and the sacraments as freely given gifts of God, free and effective gestures of his saving action.

As I recalled in the Holy Chrism Mass this year: “At the centre of the Church’s worship is the notion of ‘sacrament’. This means that it is not primarily we who act, but God comes first to meet us through his action, he looks upon us and he leads us to himself.... God touches us through material things ... that he takes up into his service, making them instruments of the encounter between us and himself” (*Chrism Mass*, 1 April 2010). The truth according to which in the Sacrament “it is not primarily we who act” (*ibid.*), also concerns and must concern priestly awareness: each priest knows well that he is an instrument necessary to God’s saving action but also that he is always only an instrument. This awareness must make priests humble and generous in the administration of the Sacraments, in respect of the canonical norms, but also in the deep conviction that their mission is to ensure that all people, united to Christ, may offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (cf. Rom 12:1). St John Mary Vianney, once again, is exemplary with regard to the *munus sanctificandi* and the correct interpretation of the sacramental ministry; one day, to a man who was saying that he had no faith and wished to ask him about it, the parish priest answered: “Oh! My friend, you are not really speaking to the right person, I do not know how to reason ... but if you need some comfort, sit there ... (and he pointed to the ever present stool in the confessional) and believe me, many others have sat there before you and have had nothing to regret” (cf. Monnin, A., *Il Curato d’Ars, Vita di Gian-Battista-Maria Vianney*, Vol. I, Turin 1870, pp. 163–164).

Dear priests, experience the Liturgy and worship with joy and love: it is an action which the Risen One carries out with the power of the Holy Spirit in us, with us and for us. I would like to renew the invitation made recently to “return to the confessional as a place in which to celebrate the Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also as a place in which ‘to dwell’ more often, so that the faithful may find compassion, advice and comfort, feel that they are loved and understood by God and experience the presence of Divine Mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist” (*Address to participants in the course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, 11 March 2010). And I would also like to ask each priest to celebrate and to live intensely the Eucharist which is at the heart of the duty of sanctifying; it is Jesus who wants to be with us, to live in us, to give himself to us, to show us God’s infinite mercy and tenderness; it is the one sacrifice of the love of Christ who makes himself present, who makes himself real among us and arrives at the throne of Grace, at God’s presence ... embraces humanity ... and unites us with him (cf. *Discourse to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome*, 18 February 2010). And the priest is called to be a minister of this great Mystery, in the Sacrament and in life. If “the great ecclesial tradition has rightly separated sacramental efficacy from the concrete existential situation of the individual priest and so the legitimate expectations of the faithful are appropriately safeguarded”, this correct doctrinal explanation takes nothing “from the

necessary, indeed indispensable aspiration to moral perfection that must dwell in every authentically priestly heart”: there is also an example of faith and the testimony of holiness, that the People of God rightly expect from its Pastors (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 16 March 2009). And it is in the celebration of the Holy Mysteries that the priest finds the root of his holiness (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nn. 12–13).

Dear Friends, may you be aware of the great gift that priests are for the Church and for the world; through their ministry the Lord continues to save men, to make himself present, to sanctify. May you be able to thank God and above all be close to your priests with prayer and support, especially in difficulty, so that there may be more and more Pastors in accordance with the Heart of God. Many thanks.

### **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a cordial welcome to the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience. My warm greetings go to the teachers and students of the Institute of St Joseph in Copenhagen. Upon all of you, including those from England, Scotland, Canada, Indonesia and the United States of America, I invoke Almighty God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear young people, especially you students from Palermo, with your priest you witness to faith in Jesus Christ who calls you to build his Church together with your Pastors, each in accordance with his own responsibility. May you respond generously to his invitation. Dear *sick people*, you too are here today to make an act of faith and of ecclesial communion. If the daily burden of your sufferings is offered to Jesus Christ Crucified, it gives you the possibility to cooperate in your own and the world's salvation. and also you, dear *newlyweds*, with your union you are called to be an expression of love that binds Christ to the Church. May you always be aware of the lofty mission to which you are bound by the Sacrament you have received.

I send cordial greetings to all who will be taking part in the Congress on the Family in Jönköping, Sweden, later this month. Your message to the world is truly a message of joy, because God's gift to us of marriage and family life enables us to experience something of the infinite love that unites the three divine persons—Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, are made for love—indeed at the core of our being, we long to love and to be loved in return. Only God's love can fully satisfy our deepest needs, and yet through the love of husband and wife, the love of parents and children, the love of siblings for one another, we are offered a foretaste of the boundless love that awaits us in the life to come. Marriage is truly an instrument of

salvation, not only for married people but for the whole of society. Like any truly worthwhile goal, it places demands upon us, it challenges us, it calls us to be prepared to sacrifice our own interests for the good of the other. It requires us to exercise tolerance and to offer forgiveness. It invites us to nurture and protect the gift of new life. Those of us fortunate enough to be born into a stable family discover there the first and most fundamental school for virtuous living and the qualities of good citizenship. I encourage all of you in your efforts to promote a proper understanding and appreciation of the inestimable good that marriage and family life offer to human society. May God bless all of you.

### **Appeal to participants in the UN Conference on nuclear weapons**

On 3 May in New York, work began at the Eighth Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. Progress toward a collaborative and secure nuclear disarmament is closely connected with the full and rapid fulfilment of the relevant international commitments. Peace, in fact, rests on trust and on respect for assumed obligations, not only on the balance of power. In this spirit, I encourage the initiatives that pursue a progressive disarmament and the creation of nuclear-free zones, with a view to their complete elimination from the planet. Finally, I appeal to all the participants in the meeting in New York to break away from the trends of the past and to patiently construct political and economic grounds for peace, in order to support integral human development and the authentic hopes of all Peoples.

*Saint Peter's Square*

19 May 2010

## **Munus regendi**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Year for Priests, is drawing to a close; therefore I began to talk in the last Catecheses about the essential tasks of the priest: to teach, to sanctify and to govern. I have already given two Catecheses, one on the ministry of sanctification, the Sacraments above all, and one on that of teaching. So it remains for me today to speak of the priest's mission to govern, to guide—with the authority of Christ, not his own the portion of the People that God has entrusted to him.

How can we comprehend in our modern day culture a dimension of this kind that implies the concept of authority and has its origins in the Lord's own mandate to tend his flock? What is authority really, for us Christians? The cultural, political and historical experiences of the recent past, above all the dictatorships in Eastern and Western Europe

in the 20th century, have made contemporary man suspicious of this concept. A suspicion which is often expressed in a conviction that it is necessary to eliminate every kind of authority does not come exclusively from man, and is not regulated and controlled by him. But it is precisely in reviewing those regimes which in the last century disseminated terror and death, that we are forcibly reminded that authority, in every circumstance, when it is exercised without reference to the Transcendent, if it neglects the Supreme Authority, which is God, inevitably finishes by turning against man. It is important, therefore, to recognize that human authority is never an end in itself but always and only a means and that, necessarily and in every age, the end is the person, created by God with his own inviolable dignity and called to relate to his Creator, both along the path of his earthly journey and in eternal life; it is an authority exercised in responsibility before God, before the Creator. An authority whose sole purpose is understood to be to serve the true good of the person and to be a glass through which we can see the one and supreme Good, which is God. Not only is it not foreign to man, but on the contrary, it is a precious help on our journey towards a total fulfilment in Christ, towards salvation.

The Church is called and commits herself to exercise this kind of authority which is service and exercises it not in her own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ, who received from his Father all authority both in Heaven and on Earth (cf. Mt 28:18) Christ tends his flock through the Pastor of the Church, in fact: it is he who guides, protects and corrects them, because he loves them deeply. But the Lord Jesus, the supreme Shepherd of our souls, has willed that the Apostolic College, today the Bishops, in communion with the Successor of Peter and the priests, their most precious collaborators, to participate in his mission of taking care of God's People, of educating them in the faith and of guiding, inspiring and sustaining the Christian community, or, as the Council puts it, "to see to it ... that each member of the faithful shall be led in the Holy Spirit to the full development of his own vocation in accordance with Gospel preaching, and to sincere and active charity" and to exercise that liberty with which Christ has set us free (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6). Every Pastor, therefore, is a means through whom Christ himself loves men: it is through our ministry, dear priests, it is through us that the Lord reaches souls, instructs, guards and guides them. St Augustine, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*, says: "let it therefore be a commitment of love to feed the flock of the Lord" (cf. 123, 5); this is the supreme rule of conduct for the ministers of God, an unconditional love, like that of the Good Shepherd, full of joy, given to all, attentive to those close to us and solicitous for those who are distant (cf. St Augustine, *Discourse* 340, 1; *Discourse* 46, 15), gentle towards the weakest, the little ones, the simple, the sinners, to manifest the infinite mercy of God with the reassuring words of hope (cf. *ibid.*, *Epistle*, 95, 1).

Even if this pastoral task is founded on the Sacraments, its efficacy is not independent of the personal existence of the priest. In order to be a priest according to the heart of God (cf. Jer 3:15) it is necessary that not only the mind, but also the freedom and the will be deeply rooted in living friendship with Christ, a clear awareness of the identity received in Priestly Ordination, an unconditional readiness to lead the flock entrusted to him where the Lord desires and not in the direction which might, apparently, seem easier or more convenient. This requires, above all, a continuous and progressive willingness to allow Christ himself to govern the sacerdotal life. In fact, no one is really able to feed Christ's flock, unless he lives in profound and true obedience to Christ and the Church, and the docility of the people towards their priests depends on the docility of the priests towards Christ; for this reason the personal and constant encounter with the Lord, profound knowledge of him and the conformation of the individual will to Christ's will is always at the root of the pastoral ministry.

During the last decades, we have heard the adjective "pastoral" used almost as if it were in opposition to the concept of "hierarchical", and in the same way the idea of "communion" has also been set against it. At this point it may be useful to make a brief comment on the word "hierarchy", which is the traditional designation of the structure of sacramental authority within the Church, ordered according to the three levels of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, episcopate, presbyterate, diaconate: The concept of "hierarchy" carries, in public opinion, an element of subordination and of judgement; therefore to many the concept of hierarchy appears to be in contrast with the flexibility and vitality of the pastoral meaning and also appears contrary to the humility of the Gospel. However, this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of hierarchy, which arose in historical times from abuses of authority and careerism. But these are, in fact, abuses, and have nothing to do with the essential meaning of "hierarchy" itself. Common opinion holds that "hierarchy" is something connected with dominion and therefore cannot correspond to the real sense of the Church, that is unity in the love of Christ. But, as I have said, this is a mistaken interpretation, which has its origins in the abuses of the past, but does not correspond to the real meaning of hierarchy. Let us begin with the word. The word hierarchy is generally said to mean "sacred dominion", yet the real meaning is not this, but rather "sacred origin", that is to say: this authority does not come from man himself, but it has its origins in the sacred, in the Sacrament; so it subjects the person in second place to the vocation, to the mystery of Christ; it makes of the individual a servant of Christ, and only as a servant of Christ can he govern and guide for Christ and with Christ. Therefore he who enters into the Sacred Order of the Sacrament, the "hierarchy", is not an autocrat but he enters into a new bond of obedience to Christ: he is tied to Christ in communion with the other members of the Sacred Order, the Priesthood. Nor can the Pope, reference point for all the Pastors and for the communion

of the Church, do what he likes; on the contrary, the Pope is the custodian of obedience to Christ, to his word summed up in the “*regula fidei*”, in the Creed of the Church, and must lead the way in obedience to Christ and to his Church. Thus hierarchy implies a triple bond: in the first place the bond with Christ and with the order given by Our Lord to his Church; then the bond with the other Pastors in the one communion of the Church; and lastly, the bond with the faithful who are entrusted to the individual, in the order of the Church.

Therefore it is clear that communion and hierarchy are not contrary to each other, but they influence each other. Together they form one thing (hierarchical communion). The Pastor fulfils his role precisely when he guides and protects his flock and sometimes prevents it from scattering. Except in a vision which is clearly and explicitly supernatural, the task of governing which belongs to the priest is incomprehensible. On the contrary, sustained by a sincere desire for the salvation of each believer, he is particularly precious and necessary, also in our time. If the aim is to spread the message of Christ and to lead men and women towards a saving encounter with him, so that they may have life, then the task of guiding appears as a service lived in pure giving, for the edification of the flock in truth and holiness, often going against the tide, and remembering that he who is greater must act as the lesser, and he who governs as he who serves (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 27).

Where can a priest today find the strength for such an exercise of his ministry, in full fidelity to Christ and to the Church, and complete devotion to his flock? There is only one answer: in Christ the Lord. Jesus' way of governing was not through dominion, but in the humble and loving service of the Washing of the feet, and the kingship of Christ over the Universe is not an earthly triumph, but reaches its highest point on the wood of the Cross, which becomes a judgement for the world and a point of reference for the exercising of that authority which is the true expression of pastoral charity. The saints, among them St John Mary Vianney, carried out with love and devotion the task of caring for the portion of God's People entrusted to them, showing themselves to be strong and determined men with the single aim of promoting the true good of souls, and capable of paying a price in person, even to martyrdom, in order to remain faithful to the truth and justice of the Gospel.

Dear priests, “tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly ... being examples to the flock” (1 Pet 5:2). Therefore, do not be afraid to lead to Christ each one of the brethren whom he has entrusted to you, certain that every word and every action will bear fruit if they come from obedience to God's will: know how to live in appreciating the merits and in recognition of the limits of the culture in which we find ourselves, with the firm assurance that the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest



service to render to man. In fact, there is no greater good, in this earthly life, than to lead people to God, to reawaken faith, to lift the person out of his inertia and desperation, to give the hope that God is near and directs our personal histories and that of the world: this, in the ultimate analysis, is the deep and final meaning of the task of governing that the Lord has given to us. To form Christ in believers, through that process of sanctification that is a conversion of criteria, scale of values, and patterns of behaviour, to allow Christ to live in every one of the faithful. St Paul sums up his pastoral action in these words, “my little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you” (Gal 4:19).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I should like to invite you to pray for me, the Successor of Peter, who have a specific task in governing the Church of Christ, as have all your Bishops and priests. Pray that we may know how to take care of all the sheep, including those that are lost, that make up the flock entrusted to us. You, dear priests, I cordially invite to the closing celebrations of the Year for Priests, to be held on the 9th, 10th, and 11th June, here in Rome: we shall meditate on conversion and on mission, on the gift of the Holy Spirit and on the relationship with Mary Most Holy, and we shall renew our priestly promises, sustained by all the People of God. Thank you!*

### **To Special Groups**

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Australia, India, Barbados, Canada and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke Almighty God's blessings of joy and peace!

Finally, I address my greeting to *young people*, to the *sick* and to *newlyweds*. Today the Church remembers St Philip Neri, who is distinguished for his joy and for his special dedication to youth, whom he educated and evangelized through the inspired pastoral initiative of the Oratory. Dear *young people*, look at this saint to learn to live with evangelical simplicity. Dear *sick*, may St Philip Neri help you to make of your suffering an offering to the heavenly Father, in union with Jesus Crucified. And you, dear *newlyweds*, supported by the intercession of St Philip, be inspired always by the Gospel to build a truly Christian family.

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## **John Climacus**

*11 February 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After 20 Catecheses dedicated to the Apostle Paul, today I would like to return to presenting the great writers of the Church of the East and of the West in the Middle Ages. And I am proposing the figure of John known as Climacus, a Latin

transliteration of the Greek term *klimakos*, which means *of the ladder (klimax)*. This is the title of his most important work in which he describes the ladder of human life ascending towards God. He was born in about 575 a.d. He lived, therefore, during the years in which Byzantium, the capital of the Roman Empire of the East, experienced the greatest crisis in its history. The geographical situation of the Empire suddenly changed and the torrent of barbarian invasions swept away all its structures. Only the structure of the Church withstood them, continuing in these difficult times to carry out her missionary, human, social and cultural action, especially through the network of monasteries in which great religious figures such as, precisely, John Climacus were active.

John lived and told of his spiritual experiences in the Mountains of Sinai, where Moses encountered God and Elijah heard his voice. Information on him has been preserved in a brief *Life* (PG 88, 596–608), written by a monk, Daniel of Raithu. At the age of 16, John, who had become a monk on Mount Sinai, made himself a disciple of Abba Martyr, an “elder”, that is, a “wise man”. At about 20 years of age, he chose to live as a hermit in a grotto at the foot of the mountain in the locality of Tola, eight kilometres from the present-day St Catherine’s Monastery. Solitude, however, did not prevent him from meeting people eager for spiritual direction, or from paying visits to several monasteries near Alexandria. In fact, far from being an escape from the world and human reality, his eremitical retreat led to ardent love for others (*Life*, 5) and for God (*ibid.*, 7). After 40 years of life as a hermit, lived in love for God and for neighbour years in which he wept, prayed and fought with demons he was appointed hegumen of the large monastery on Mount Sinai and thus returned to cenobitic life in a monastery. However, several years before his death, nostalgic for the eremitical life, he handed over the government of the community to his brother, a monk in the same monastery.

John died after the year 650. He lived his life between two mountains, Sinai and Tabor and one can truly say that he radiated the light which Moses saw on Sinai and which was contemplated by the three Apostles on Mount Tabor!

He became famous, as I have already said, through his work, entitled *The Climax*, in the West known as the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* (PG 88, 632–1164). Composed at

the insistent request of the hegumen of the neighbouring Monastery of Raithu in Sinai, the *Ladder* is a complete treatise of spiritual life in which John describes the monk's journey from renunciation of the world to the perfection of love. This journey according to his book covers 30 steps, each one of which is linked to the next. The journey may be summarized in three consecutive stages: the first is expressed in renunciation of the world in order to return to a state of evangelical childhood. Thus, the essential is not the renunciation but rather the connection with what Jesus said, that is, the return to true childhood in the spiritual sense, becoming like children. John comments: "A good foundation of three layers and three pillars is: innocence, fasting and temperance. Let all babes in Christ (cf. 1 Cor 3:1) begin with these virtues, taking as their model the natural babes" (1, 20; 636). Voluntary detachment from beloved people and places permits the soul to enter into deeper communion with God. This renunciation leads to obedience which is the way to humility through humiliations which will never be absent on the part of the brethren. John comments: "Blessed is he who has mortified his will to the very end and has entrusted the care of himself to his teacher in the Lord: indeed he will be placed on the right hand of the Crucified One!" (4, 37; 704).

The second stage of the journey consists in spiritual combat against the passions. Every step of the ladder is linked to a principal passion that is defined and diagnosed, with an indication of the treatment and a proposal of the corresponding virtue. All together, these steps of the ladder undoubtedly constitute the most important treatise of spiritual strategy that we possess. The struggle against the passions, however, is steeped in the positive it does not remain as something negative thanks to the image of the "fire" of the Holy Spirit: that "all those who enter upon the good fight (cf. 1 Tm 6:12), which is hard and narrow, ... may realize that they must leap into the fire, if they really expect the celestial fire to dwell in them" (1, 18; 636). The fire of the Holy Spirit is the fire of love and truth. The power of the Holy Spirit alone guarantees victory. However, according to John Climacus it is important to be aware that the passions are not evil in themselves; they become so through human freedom's wrong use of them. If they are purified, the passions reveal to man the path towards God with energy unified by asceticism and grace and, "if they have received from the Creator an order and a beginning ..., the limit of virtue is boundless" (26/2, 37; 1068).

The last stage of the journey is Christian perfection that is developed in the last seven steps of the *Ladder*. These are the highest stages of spiritual life, which can be experienced by the “Hesychasts”: the solitaries, those who have attained quiet and inner peace; but these stages are also accessible to the more fervent cenobites. Of the first three simplicity, humility and discernment John, in line with the Desert Fathers, considered the ability to discern, the most important. Every type of behaviour must be subject to discernment; everything, in fact, depends on one’s deepest motivations, which need to be closely examined. Here one enters into the soul of the person and it is a question of reawakening in the hermit, in the Christian, spiritual sensitivity and a “feeling heart”, which are gifts from God: “After God, we ought to follow our conscience as a rule and guide in everything,” (26/1, 5; 1013). In this way one reaches tranquillity of soul, *hesychia*, by means of which the soul may gaze upon the abyss of the divine mysteries.

The state of quiet, of inner peace, prepares the Hesychast for prayer which in John is twofold: “corporeal prayer” and “prayer of the heart”. The former is proper to those who need the help of bodily movement: stretching out the hands, uttering groans, beating the breast, etc. (15, 26; 900). The latter is spontaneous, because it is an effect of the reawakening of spiritual sensitivity, a gift of God to those who devote themselves to corporeal prayer. In John this takes the name “Jesus prayer” (*Iesou euche*), and is constituted in the invocation of solely Jesus’ name, an invocation that is continuous like breathing: “May your remembrance of Jesus become one with your breathing, and you will then know the usefulness of *hesychia*”, inner peace (27/2, 26; 1112). At the end the prayer becomes very simple: the word “Jesus” simply becomes one with the breath.

The last step of the ladder (30), suffused with “the sober inebriation of the spirit”, is dedicated to the supreme “trinity of virtues”: faith, hope and above all charity. John also speaks of charity as *eros* (human love), a symbol of the matrimonial union of the soul with God, and once again chooses the image of fire to express the fervour, light and purification of love for God. The power of human love can be reoriented to God, just as a cultivated olive may be grafted on to a wild olive tree (cf. Rm 11:24) (cf. 15, 66; 893). John is convinced that an intense experience of this *eros* will help the soul to advance far more than the harsh struggle against the passions, because of its great power. Thus, in our journey, the positive aspect prevails. Yet charity is also seen in close relation to hope: “Hope is the power that

drives love. Thanks to hope, we can look forward to the reward of charity.... Hope is the doorway of love.... The absence of hope destroys charity: our efforts are bound to it, our labours are sustained by it, and through it we are enveloped by the mercy of God” (30, 16; 1157). The conclusion of the *Ladder* contains the synthesis of the work in words that the author has God himself utter: “May this ladder teach you the spiritual disposition of the virtues. I am at the summit of the ladder, and as my great initiate (St Paul) said: ‘*So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love*’ (1 Cor 13:13!)” (30, 18; 1160).

At this point, a last question must be asked: can the *Ladder*, a work written by a hermit monk who lived 1,400 years ago, say something to us today? Can the existential journey of a man who lived his entire life on Mount Sinai in such a distant time be relevant to us? At first glance it would seem that the answer must be “no”, because John Climacus is too remote from us. But if we look a little closer, we see that the monastic life is only a great symbol of baptismal life, of Christian life. It shows, so to speak, in capital letters what we write day after day in small letters. It is a prophetic symbol that reveals what the life of the baptized person is, in communion with Christ, with his death and Resurrection. The fact that the top of the “ladder”, the final steps, are at the same time the fundamental, initial and most simple virtues is particularly important to me: faith, hope and charity. These are not virtues accessible only to moral heroes; rather they are gifts of God to all the baptized: in them our life develops too. The beginning is also the end, the starting point is also the point of arrival: the whole journey towards an ever more radical realization of faith, hope and charity. The whole ascent is present in these virtues. Faith is fundamental, because this virtue implies that I renounce my arrogance, my thought, and the claim to judge by myself without entrusting myself to others. This journey towards humility, towards spiritual childhood is essential. It is necessary to overcome the attitude of arrogance that makes one say: I know better, in this my time of the 21st century, than what people could have known then. Instead, it is necessary to entrust oneself to Sacred Scripture alone, to the word of the Lord, to look out on the horizon of faith with humility, in order to enter into the enormous immensity of the universal world, of the world of God. In this way our soul grows, the sensitivity of the heart grows toward God. Rightly, John Climacus says that hope alone renders us capable of living charity; hope in which we transcend the things of every day, we do not expect success in our earthly days



but we look forward to the revelation of God himself at last. It is only in this extension of our soul, in this self-transcendence, that our life becomes great and that we are able to bear the effort and disappointments of every day, that we can be kind to others without expecting any reward. Only if there is God, this great hope to which I aspire, can I take the small steps of my life and thus learn charity. The mystery of prayer, of the personal knowledge of Jesus, is concealed in charity: simple prayer that strives only to move the divine Teacher's heart. So it is that one's own heart opens, one learns from him his own kindness, his love. Let us therefore use this "ascent" of faith, hope and charity. In this way we will arrive at true life.

## **Bede, the Venerable**

*18 February 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Saint we are approaching today is called Bede and was born in the north-east of England, to be exact, Northumbria, in the year 672 or 673. He himself recounts that when he was seven years old his parents entrusted him to the Abbot of the neighbouring Benedictine monastery to be educated: "spending all the remaining time of my life a dweller in that monastery". He recalls, "I wholly applied myself to the study of Scripture; and amidst the observance of the monastic Rule and the daily charge of singing in church, I always took delight in learning, or teaching, or writing" (*Historia eccl. Anglorum*, v, 24). In fact, Bede became one of the most outstanding erudite figures of the early Middle Ages since he was able to avail himself of many precious manuscripts which his Abbots would bring him on their return from frequent journeys to the continent and to Rome. His teaching and the fame of his writings occasioned his friendships with many of the most important figures of his time who encouraged him to persevere in his work from which so many were to benefit. When Bede fell ill, he did not stop working, always preserving an inner joy that he expressed in prayer and song. He ended his most important work, the *Historia Ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, with this invocation: "I beseech you, O good Jesus, that to the one to whom you have graciously granted sweetly to drink in the words of your knowledge, you will also vouchsafe in your loving kindness that he may one day

come to you, the Fountain of all wisdom, and appear for ever before your face". Death took him on 26 May 737: it was the Ascension.

Sacred Scripture was the constant source of Bede's theological reflection. After a critical study of the text (a copy of the monumental *Codex Amiatinus* of the Vulgate on which Bede worked has come down to us), he comments on the Bible, interpreting it in a Christological key, that is, combining two things: on the one hand he listens to exactly what the text says, he really seeks to hear and understand the text itself; on the other, he is convinced that the key to understanding Sacred Scripture as the one word of God is Christ, and with Christ, in his light, one understands the Old and New Testaments as "one" Sacred Scripture. The events of the Old and New Testaments go together, they are the way to Christ, although expressed in different signs and institutions (this is what he calls the *concordia sacramentorum*). For example, the tent of the covenant that Moses pitched in the desert and the first and second temple of Jerusalem are images of the Church, the new temple built on Christ and on the Apostles with living stones, held together by the love of the Spirit. And just as pagan peoples also contributed to building the ancient temple by making available valuable materials and the technical experience of their master builders, so too contributing to the construction of the Church there were apostles and teachers, not only from ancient Jewish, Greek and Latin lineage, but also from the new peoples, among whom Bede was pleased to list the Irish Celts and Anglo-Saxons. St Bede saw the growth of the universal dimension of the Church which is not restricted to one specific culture but is comprised of all the cultures of the world that must be open to Christ and find in him their goal.

Another of Bede's favourite topics is the history of the Church. After studying the period described in the Acts of the Apostles, he reviews the history of the Fathers and the Councils, convinced that the work of the Holy Spirit continues in history. In the *Chronica Maiora*, Bede outlines a chronology that was to become the basis of the universal Calendar "*ab incarnatione Domini*". In his day, time was calculated from the foundation of the City of Rome. Realizing that the true reference point, the centre of history, is the Birth of Christ, Bede gave us this calendar that interprets history starting from the Incarnation of the Lord. Bede records the first six Ecumenical Councils and their developments, faithfully presenting Christian doctrine, both Mariological and soteriological, and denouncing the

Monophysite and Monothelite, Iconoclastic and Neo-Pelagian heresies. Lastly he compiled with documentary rigour and literary expertise the *Ecclesiastical History of the English Peoples* mentioned above, which earned him recognition as “the father of English historiography”. The characteristic features of the Church that Bede sought to emphasize are: a) *catholicity*, seen as faithfulness to tradition while remaining open to historical developments, and as the quest for unity in multiplicity, in historical and cultural diversity according to the directives Pope Gregory the Great had given to Augustine of Canterbury, the Apostle of England; b) *apostolicity and Roman traditions*: in this regard he deemed it of prime importance to convince all the Irish, Celtic and Pict Churches to have one celebration for Easter in accordance with the Roman calendar. The *Computo*, which he worked out scientifically to establish the exact date of the Easter celebration, hence the entire cycle of the liturgical year, became the reference text for the whole Catholic Church.

Bede was also an eminent teacher of liturgical theology. In his Homilies on the Gospels for Sundays and feast days he achieves a true mystagogy, teaching the faithful to celebrate the mysteries of the faith joyfully and to reproduce them coherently in life, while awaiting their full manifestation with the return of Christ, when, with our glorified bodies, we shall be admitted to the offertory procession in the eternal liturgy of God in Heaven. Following the “realism” of the catecheses of Cyril, Ambrose and Augustine, Bede teaches that the sacraments of Christian initiation make every faithful person “not only a Christian but Christ”. Indeed, every time that a faithful soul lovingly accepts and preserves the Word of God, in imitation of Mary, he conceives and generates Christ anew. And every time that a group of neophytes receives the Easter sacraments the Church “reproduces herself” or, to use a more daring term, the Church becomes “Mother of God”, participating in the generation of her children through the action of the Holy Spirit.

By his way of creating theology, interweaving the Bible, liturgy and history, Bede has a timely message for the different “states of life”: a) for scholars (*doctores ac doctrices*) he recalls two essential tasks: to examine the marvels of the word of God in order to present them in an attractive form to the faithful; to explain the dogmatic truths, avoiding heretical complications and keeping to “Catholic simplicity”, with the attitude of the lowly and humble to whom God is pleased to

reveal the mysteries of the Kingdom; b) pastors, for their part, must give priority to preaching, not only through verbal or hagiographic language but also by giving importance to icons, processions and pilgrimages. Bede recommends that they use the vulgate as he himself does, explaining the “Our Father” and the “Creed” in Northumbrian and continuing, until the last day of his life, his commentary on the Gospel of John in the vulgate; c) Bede recommends to consecrated people who devote themselves to the Divine Office, living in the joy of fraternal communion and progressing in the spiritual life by means of asceticism and contemplation that they attend to the apostolate no one possesses the Gospel for himself alone but must perceive it as a gift for others too both by collaborating with Bishops in pastoral activities of various kinds for the young Christian communities and by offering themselves for the evangelizing mission among the pagans, outside their own country, as “*peregrini pro amore Dei*”.

Making this viewpoint his own, in his commentary on the Song of Songs Bede presents the Synagogue and the Church as collaborators in the dissemination of God’s word. Christ the Bridegroom wants a hard-working Church, “weathered by the efforts of evangelization” there is a clear reference to the word in the Song of Songs (1:5), where the bride says “*Nigra sum sed formosa*” (“I am very dark, but comely”) intent on tilling other fields or vineyards and in establishing among the new peoples “not a temporary hut but a permanent dwelling place”, in other words, intent on integrating the Gospel into their social fabric and cultural institutions. In this perspective the holy Doctor urges lay faithful to be diligent in religious instruction, imitating those “insatiable crowds of the Gospel who did not even allow the Apostles time to take a mouthful”. He teaches them how to pray ceaselessly, “reproducing in life what they celebrate in the liturgy”, offering all their actions as a spiritual sacrifice in union with Christ. He explains to parents that in their small domestic circle too they can exercise “the priestly office as pastors and guides”, giving their children a Christian upbringing. He also affirms that he knows many of the faithful (men and women, married and single) “capable of irreproachable conduct who, if appropriately guided, will be able every day to receive Eucharistic communion” (*Epist. ad Ecgbertum*, ed. Plummer, p. 419).

The fame of holiness and wisdom that Bede already enjoyed in his lifetime, earned him the title of “Venerable”. Pope Sergius I called him this when he wrote

to his Abbot in 701 asking him to allow him to come to Rome temporarily to give advice on matters of universal interest. After his death, Bede's writings were widely disseminated in his homeland and on the European continent. Bishop St Boniface, the great missionary of Germany, (d. 754), asked the Archbishop of York and the Abbot of Wearmouth several times to have some of his works transcribed and sent to him so that he and his companions might also enjoy the spiritual light that shone from them. A century later, Notker Balbulus, Abbot of Sankt Gallen (d. 912), noting the extraordinary influence of Bede, compared him to a new sun that God had caused to rise, not in the East but in the West, to illuminate the world. Apart from the rhetorical emphasis, it is a fact that with his works Bede made an effective contribution to building a Christian Europe in which the various peoples and cultures amalgamated with one another, thereby giving them a single physiognomy, inspired by the Christian faith. Let us pray that today too there may be figures of Bede's stature, to keep the whole continent united; let us pray that we may all be willing to rediscover our common roots, in order to be builders of a profoundly human and authentically Christian Europe.

## **Saint Boniface, the Apostle of the Germans**

*11 March 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, we shall reflect on a great eighth-century missionary who spread Christianity in Central Europe, indeed also in my own country: St Boniface, who has gone down in history as "the Apostle of the Germans". We have a fair amount of information on his life, thanks to the diligence of his biographers. He was born into an Anglo-Saxon family in Wessex in about 675 and was baptized with the name of Winfrid. He entered the monastery at a very early age, attracted by the monastic ideal. Since he possessed considerable intellectual ability, he seemed destined for a peaceful and brilliant academic career. He became a teacher of Latin grammar, wrote several treatises and even composed various poems in Latin. He was ordained a priest at the age of about 30 and felt called to an apostolate among the pagans on the continent. His country, Great Britain which had been evangelized barely 100 years earlier by Benedictines led by St Augustine at the time showed such sound faith and ardent charity that it could send missionaries to Central Europe to proclaim the Gospel there. In 716,

Winfrid went to Frisia (today Holland) with a few companions, but he encountered the opposition of the local chieftain and his attempt at evangelization failed. Having returned home, he did not lose heart and two years later travelled to Rome to speak to Pope Gregory ii and receive his instructions. One biographer recounts that the Pope welcomed him “with a smile and a look full of kindness”, and had “important conversations” with him in the following days (Willibaldo, [Willibald of Mainz], *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, pp. 13–14), and lastly, after conferring upon him the new name of Boniface, assigned to him, in official letters, the mission of preaching the Gospel among the German peoples.

Comforted and sustained by the Pope’s support, Boniface embarked on the preaching of the Gospel in those regions, fighting against pagan worship and reinforcing the foundations of human and Christian morality. With a deep sense of duty he wrote in one of his letters: “We are united in the fight on the Lord’s Day, because days of affliction and wretchedness have come.... We are not mute dogs or taciturn observers or mercenaries fleeing from wolves! On the contrary, we are diligent Pastors who watch over Christ’s flock, who proclaim God’s will to the leaders and ordinary folk, to the rich and the poor ... in season and out of season ...” (cf. *Epistulae*, 3, 352.354: mgh). With his tireless activity and his gift for organization, Boniface adaptable and friendly yet firm obtained great results. The Pope then “declared that he wished to confer upon him the episcopal dignity so that he might thus with greater determination correct and lead back to the path of truth those who had strayed, feeling supported by the greater authority of the apostolic dignity and being much more readily accepted by all in the office of preacher, the clearer it was that this was why he had been ordained by the Apostolic Bishop” (Othlo, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. Levison, lib. I, p. 127).

The Supreme Pontiff himself consecrated Boniface “Regional Bishop”, that is, for the whole of Germany. Boniface then resumed his apostolic labours in the territories assigned to him and extended his action also to the Church of the Gauls: with great caution he restored discipline in the Church, convoked various Synods to guarantee the authority of the sacred canons and strengthened the necessary communion with the Roman Pontiff, a point that he had very much at heart. The Successors of Pope Gregory II also held him in the highest esteem. Gregory III appointed him Archbishop of all the Germanic tribes, sent him the

pallium and granted him the faculties to organize the ecclesiastical hierarchy in those regions (cf. *Epist.* 28: *S. Bonifatii Epistulae*, ed. Tangl, Berolini 1916). Pope Zacchary confirmed him in his office and praised his dedication (cf. *Epist.* 51, 57, 58, 60, 68, 77, 80, 86, 87, 89: *op. cit.*); Pope Stephen III, newly elected, received a letter from him in which he expressed his filial respect (cf. *Epist.* 108: *op. cit.*).

In addition to this work of evangelization and organization of the Church through the founding of dioceses and the celebration of Synods, this great Bishop did not omit to encourage the foundation of various male and female monasteries so that they would become like beacons, so as to radiate human and Christian culture and the faith in the territory. He summoned monks and nuns from the Benedictine monastic communities in his homeland who gave him a most effective and invaluable help in proclaiming the Gospel and in disseminating the humanities and the arts among the population. Indeed, he rightly considered that work for the Gospel must also be work for a true human culture. Above all the Monastery of Fulda founded in about 743 was the heart and centre of outreach of religious spirituality and culture: there the monks, in prayer, work and penance, strove to achieve holiness; there they trained in the study of the sacred and profane disciplines and prepared themselves for the proclamation of the Gospel in order to be missionaries. Thus it was to the credit of Boniface, of his monks and nuns for women too had a very important role in this work of evangelization that human culture, which is inseparable from faith and reveals its beauty, flourished. Boniface himself has left us an important intellectual corpus. First of all is his copious correspondence, in which pastoral letters alternate with official letters and others private in nature, which record social events but above all reveal his richly human temperament and profound faith. In addition he composed a treatise on the *Ars grammatica* in which he explained the declinations, verbs and syntax of the Latin language, but which also became for him a means of spreading culture and the faith. An *Ars metrica* that is, an introduction on how to write poetry as well as various poetic compositions and, lastly, a collection of 15 sermons are also attributed to him.

Although he was getting on in years (he was almost 80), he prepared himself for a new evangelizing mission: with about 50 monks he returned to Frisia where he had begun his work. Almost as a prediction of his imminent death, in alluding to the journey of life, he wrote to Bishop Lull, his disciple and successor in the see of

Mainz: “I wish to bring to a conclusion the purpose of this journey; in no way can I renounce my desire to set out. The day of my end is near and the time of my death is approaching; having shed my mortal body, I shall rise to the eternal reward. May you, my dear son, ceaselessly call the people from the maze of error, complete the building of the Basilica of Fulda that has already been begun, and in it lay my body, worn out by the long years of life” (Willibald, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. cit., p. 46). While he was beginning the celebration of Mass at Dokkum (in what today is northern Holland) on 5 June 754, he was assaulted by a band of pagans. Advancing with a serene expression he “forbade his followers from fighting saying, ‘cease, my sons, from fighting, give up warfare, for the witness of Scripture recommends that we do not give an eye for an eye but rather good for evil. Here is the long awaited day, the time of our end has now come; courage in the Lord!’” (*ibid.*, pp. 49–50). These were his last words before he fell under the blows of his aggressors. The mortal remains of the Martyr Bishop were then taken to the Monastery of Fulda where they received a fitting burial. One of his first biographers had already made this judgement of him: “The holy Bishop Boniface can call himself father of all the inhabitants of Germany, for it was he who first brought them forth in Christ with the words of his holy preaching, he strengthened them with his example and lastly, he gave his life for them; no greater love than this can be shown” (Othlo, *Vita S. Bonifatii*, ed. cit., lib. I, p. 158).

Centuries later, what message can we gather today from the teaching and marvellous activity of this great missionary and martyr? For those who approach Boniface, an initial fact stands out: *the centrality of the word of God*, lived and interpreted in the faith of the Church, a word that he lived, preached and witnessed to until he gave the supreme gift of himself in martyrdom. He was so passionate about the word of God that he felt the urgent need and duty to communicate it to others, even at his own personal risk. This word was the pillar of the faith which he had committed himself to spreading at the moment of his episcopal ordination: “I profess integrally the purity of the holy Catholic faith and with the help of God I desire to remain in the unity of this faith, in which there is no doubt that the salvation of Christians lies” (*Epist. 12*, in *S. Bonifatii Epistolae*, ed. cit., p. 29). The second most important proof that emerges from the life of Boniface is his *faithful communion with the Apostolic See*, which was a firm and central reference point of his missionary work; he always preserved this communion as a rule of his mission and left it, as it were, as his will. In a letter to



Pope Zachary, he said: “I never cease to invite and to submit to obedience to the Apostolic See those who desire to remain in the Catholic faith and in the unity of the Roman Church and all those whom God grants to me as listeners and disciples in my mission” (*Epist.* 50: in *ibid.*, p. 81). One result of this commitment was the steadfast spirit of cohesion around the Successor of Peter which Boniface transmitted to the Church in his mission territory, uniting England, Germany and France with Rome and thereby effectively contributing to planting those Christian roots of Europe which were to produce abundant fruit in the centuries to come. Boniface also deserves our attention for a third characteristic: he encouraged *the encounter between the Christian-Roman culture and the Germanic culture*. Indeed, he knew that humanizing and evangelizing culture was an integral part of his mission as Bishop. In passing on the ancient patrimony of Christian values, he grafted on to the Germanic populations a new, more human lifestyle, thanks to which the inalienable rights of the person were more widely respected. As a true son of St Benedict, he was able to combine prayer and labour (manual and intellectual), pen and plough.

Boniface’s courageous witness is an invitation to us all to welcome God’s word into our lives as an essential reference point, to love the Church passionately, to feel co-responsible for her future, to seek her unity around the Successor of Peter. At the same time, he reminds us that Christianity, by encouraging the dissemination of culture, furthers human progress. It is now up to us to be equal to such a prestigious patrimony and to make it fructify for the benefit of the generations to come.

His ardent zeal for the Gospel never fails to impress me. At the age of 41 he left a beautiful and fruitful monastic life, the life of a monk and teacher, in order to proclaim the Gospel to the simple, to barbarians; once again, at the age of 80, he went to a region in which he foresaw his martyrdom.

By comparing his ardent faith, this zeal for the Gospel, with our own often lukewarm and bureaucratized faith, we see what we must do and how to renew our faith, in order to give the precious pearl of the Gospel as a gift to our time.

## **Ambrose Autpert**

22 April 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Church lives in people and those who want to know the Church better, to understand her mystery, must consider the people who have seen and lived her message, her mystery. In the Wednesday Catechesis I have therefore been speaking for some time of people from whom we can learn what the Church is. We began with the Apostles and Fathers of the Church and we have gradually reached the eighth century, Charlemagne's period. Today I want to talk about Ambrose Autpert, a lesser known author; in fact, the majority of his works were attributed to other, better known people, from St Ambrose of Milan to St Ildefonsus, not to mention those that the monks of Monte Cassino claimed came from the pen of an abbot of theirs of the same name who lived almost a century later. Apart from a few brief autobiographical notes in his important commentary on the *Apocalypse*, we have little information about his life. Yet, an attentive reading of the works whose authorship the critic recognizes makes it possible, little by little, to discover in his teaching a precious theological and spiritual treasure for our time too.

Born into a noble family in Provence according to his late biographer, Giovanni Ambrose Autpert was at the court of the Frankish King Pepin the Short where, in addition to his function as official, he somehow also played the role of tutor to the future Emperor Charlemagne. Autpert, probably in the retinue of Pope Stephen ii, who in 753–54 went to the Frankish court, came to Italy and had the opportunity of visiting the famous Benedictine Abbey of St Vincent, located near the sources of the River Volturno in the Duchy of Benevento. Founded at the beginning of the century by three brothers from Benevento Paldone, Tatone and Tasone the abbey was known as an oasis of classical and Christian culture. Shortly after his visit, Ambrose Autpert decided to embrace the religious life and entered that monastery where he acquired an appropriate education, especially in the fields of theology and spirituality, in accordance with the tradition of the Fathers. In about the year 761, he was ordained a priest and on 4 October 777 he was elected abbot with the support of the Frankish monks despite the opposition of the Lombards, who favoured Potone the Lombard. The nationalistic tension in the background did not diminish in the subsequent months. As a result, in the following year, 778, Autpert decided to resign and to seek shelter, together with several Frankish monks, in Spoleto where he could count on Charlemagne's protection. This, however, did not solve the dissension at St Vincent's Monastery. A few years later, when on the death of the abbot who had succeeded Autpert, Potone himself was elected as his successor (a. 782), the dispute flared up again and even led to the denunciation of the new abbot to Charlemagne. The latter sent the contenders to the tribunal of the Pontiff who summoned them to Rome. Autpert was also called as a witness. However, he died suddenly on the journey, perhaps murdered, on 30 January 784.

Ambrose Autpert was a monk and abbot in an epoch marked by strong political tensions which also had repercussions on life within the monasteries. We have frequent and disturbing echoes of them in his writings. He reports, for example, the contradiction between the splendid external appearance of monasteries and the tepidity of the monks: this criticism was also certainly directed at his own abbey. He wrote for his monastery the *Life* of the three founders with the clear intention of offering the new generation of monks a term of reference to measure up to. He also pursued a similar aim in a small ascetic treatise *Conflictus vitiorum atque virtutum* (“Combat between the vices and the virtues”), which met with great acclaim in the Middle Ages and was published in 1473 in Utrecht, under Gregory the Great’s name and, a year later, in Strasbourg under that of St Augustine. In it Ambrose Autpert intends to give the monks a practical training in how to face spiritual combat day after day. Significantly he applies the affirmation in 2 Tim 3:12: “All who desire to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted”, no longer by external forces but by the assault that the Christian must face within him on the part of the forces of evil. Twenty-four pairs of fighters are presented in a sort of disputation: every vice seeks to lure the soul by subtle reasoning, whereas the respective virtue rebuffs these insinuations, preferably by using words of Scripture.

In this treatise on the combat between the vices and the virtues, Autpert sets *contemptus mundi* (contempt for the world) against *cupiditas* (greed) which becomes an important figure in the spirituality of monks. This contempt for the world is not a contempt for Creation, for the beauty and goodness of Creation and of the Creator, but a contempt for the false vision of the world that is presented to us and suggested to us precisely by covetousness. It insinuates that “having” is the supreme value of our being, of our life in the world, and seems important. And thus it falsifies the creation of the world and destroys the world. Autpert then remarks that the acquisitive greed of the rich and powerful in the society of his time also exists within the souls of monks and thus he writes a treatise entitled *De cupiditate*, in which, together with the Apostle Paul, he denounces greed from the outset as the root of all evil. He writes: “In the earth’s soil various sharp thorns spring from different roots; in the human heart, on the other hand, the stings of all the vices sprout from a single root, greed” (*De cupiditate* 1: CCCM 27b, p. 963). In the light of the present global financial crisis, this report reveals its full timeliness. We see that it was precisely from this root of covetousness that the crisis sprang. Ambrose imagines the objection that the rich and powerful might raise, saying: but we are not monks, certain ascetic requirements do not apply to us. And he answers: “What you say is true, but for you, in the manner of your class and in accordance with your strength, the straight and narrow way applies because the Lord has proposed only two doors and two ways (that is, the narrow door and the wide door, the steep road and the easy one); he has not pointed to a third door or a third way” (loc. cit., p. 978). He sees

clearly that life-styles differ widely. Nonetheless the duty to combat greed, to fight the desire to possess, to appear, and the false concept of freedom as the faculty to dispose of all things as one pleases applies to the man in this world too and also to the rich. The rich person must also find the authentic road of truth, of love, and thus of an upright life. As a prudent pastor of souls, Autpert was thus able to speak a word of comfort at the end of his penitential homily: “I have not spoken against the greedy, but against greed, not against nature but against vice” (loc. cit., p. 981).

Ambrose Autpert’s most important work is without a doubt his commentary on the *Apocalypse* [*Expositio in Apocalypsim*] in 10 volumes: this constitutes, centuries later, the first broad commentary in the Latin world on the last book of Sacred Scripture. This work was the fruit of many years’ work, carried out in two phases between 758 and 767, hence prior to his election as abbot. In the premise he is careful to indicate his sources, something that was not usual in the Middle Ages. Through what was perhaps his most significant source, the commentary of Bishop Primasius of Hadrumetum, written in about the middle of the sixth century, Autpert came into contact with the interpretation of the *Apocalypse* bequeathed to us by Ticonius, an African who lived a generation before St Augustine. He was not a Catholic; he belonged to the schismatic Donatist Church, yet he was a great theologian. In his commentary he sees the *Apocalypse* above all as a reflection of the mystery of the Church. Ticonius had reached the conviction that the Church was a bipartite body: on the one hand, he says, she belongs to Christ, but there is another part of the Church that belongs to the devil. Augustine read this commentary and profited from it but strongly emphasized that the Church is in Christ’s hands, that she remains his Body, forming one with him, sharing in the mediation of grace. He therefore stresses that the Church can never be separated from Jesus Christ. In his interpretation of the *Apocalypse*, similar to that of Ticonius, Autpert is not so much concerned with the Second Coming of Christ at the end of time as rather with the consequences that derive for the Church of the present from his First Coming, his Incarnation in the womb of the Virgin Mary. And he speaks very important words to us: in reality Christ “must be born, die and be raised daily in us, who are his Body” (*In Apoc.*, III: CCCM, 27, p. 205). In the context of the mystic dimension that invests every Christian he looks to Mary as a model of the Church, a model for all of us because Christ must also be born in and among us. Under the guidance of the Fathers, who saw the “woman clothed with the sun” of Rev 12:1 as an image of the Church, Autpert argues: “the Blessed and devout Virgin ... daily gives birth to new peoples from which the general Body of the Mediator is formed. It is therefore not surprising if she, in whose blessed womb the Church herself deserved to be united with her Head, represents the type of the Church”. In this sense Autpert considers the Virgin Mary’s role decisive in the work of the Redemption (cf. also his homilies *In purificatione S. Mariae* and *In adsumptione S. Mariae*).

His great veneration and profound love for the Mother of God sometimes inspired in him formulations that in a certain way anticipated those of St Bernard and of Franciscan mysticism, yet without ever deviating to disputable forms of sentimentalism because he never separates Mary from the mystery of the Church. Therefore, with good reason, Ambrose Autpert is considered the first great Mariologist in the West. He considers that the profound study of the sacred sciences, especially meditation on the Sacred Scriptures, which he describes as “the ineffable sky, the unfathomable abyss” should be combined with the devotion that he believed must free the soul from attachment to earthly and transient pleasures (*In Apoc.* IX). In the beautiful prayer with which his commentary on the *Apocalypse* ends, underlining the priority that must be given to love in all theological research, he addresses God with these words: “When you are intellectually examined by us, you are not revealed as you truly are: when you are loved, you are attained”.

Today we can see in Ambrose Autpert a personality who lived in a time of powerful political exploitation of the Church, in which nationalism and tribalism had disfigured the face of the Church. But he, in the midst of all these difficulties with which we too are familiar, was able to discover the true face of the Church in Mary, in the Saints, and he was thus able to understand what it means to be a Catholic, to be a Christian, to live on the word of God, to enter into this abyss and thus to live the mystery of the Mother of God: to give new life to the Word of God, to offer to the Word of God one’s own flesh in the present time. And with all his theological knowledge, the depth of his knowledge, Autpert was able to understand that with merely theological research God cannot truly be known as he is. Love alone reaches him. Let us hear this message and pray the Lord to help us to live the mystery of the Church today in our time.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Lastly, I would like to say a special word to the young people of the *San Lorenzo International Youth Centre*, who today are commemorating the 25th anniversary of the consignment of the Holy Year Cross to the world’s young people.

In fact it was on 22 April 1984, at the end of the Holy Year of the Redemption, that beloved John Paul II entrusted to the young people of the world the great wooden cross which, complying with his wishes, had been kept beside the main altar in St Peter’s Basilica during that special Jubilee Year. The Cross was then welcomed at the San Lorenzo International Youth Centre and from there began to travel over the continents, opening the hearts of very many young men and women to Christ’s redeeming love. Its pilgrimage still continues, especially in preparation for the World Youth Days, so that it has become known as the “World Youth Day Cross”.

Dear friends, once again I entrust this Cross to you! Continue to carry it to every corner of the earth, so that the generations to come may discover the Mercy of God and revive in their hearts hope in the Crucified and Risen Christ!

## Germanus of Constantinople

29 April 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Patriarch Germanus of Constantinople, whom I would like to talk about today, does not belong among the most representative figures of the Greek-speaking world of Eastern Christianity. Yet, his name appears with a certain solemnity in the list of the great champions of sacred images drafted by the Second Council of Nicaea, the seventh Ecumenical Council (787). The Greek Church celebrates his Feast in the liturgy of 12 May. He played an important role in the overall history of the controversy over images during the “Iconoclastic Crisis”: he was able to resist effectively the pressures of an Iconoclast Emperor, in other words opposed to icons, such as Leo III.

During the patriarchate of Germanus (715–730) the capital of the Byzantine Empire, Constantinople, was subjected to a dangerous siege by the Saracens. On that occasion (717–718), a solemn procession was organized in the city displaying the image of the Mother of God, the *Theotokos*, and the relic of the True Cross, to invoke protection for the city from on high. In fact, Constantinople was liberated from the siege. The enemy decided to desist for ever from the idea of establishing their capital in the city that was the symbol of the Christian Empire and the people were extremely grateful for the divine help.

After that event, Patriarch Germanus was convinced that God’s intervention must be considered as obvious approval of the devotion shown by the people for the holy icons. However, the Emperor Leo III, was of the absolute opposite opinion; that very year (717) he was enthroned as the undisputed Emperor in the capital, over which he reigned until 741. After the liberation of Constantinople and after a series of other victories, the Christian Emperor began to show more and more openly his conviction that the consolidation of the Empire must begin precisely with a reordering of the manifestations of faith, with particular reference to the risk of idolatry to which, in his opinion, the people were prone because of their excessive worship of icons.

Patriarch Germanus’ appeal to the tradition of the Church and to the effective efficacy of certain images unanimously recognized as “miraculous” were to no avail. The Emperor more and more stubbornly applied his restoration project which provided for the elimination of icons. At a public meeting on 7 January 730, when he openly took a stance

against the worship of images, Germanus was in no way ready to comply with the Emperor's will on matters he himself deemed crucial for the Orthodox faith, of which he believed worship and love for images were part. As a consequence, Germanus was forced to resign from the office of Patriarch, condemning himself to exile in a monastery where he died forgotten by almost all. His name reappeared on the occasion of the Second Council of Nicaea (787), when the Orthodox Fathers decided in favour of icons, recognizing the merits of Germanus.

Patriarch Germanus took great care of the liturgical celebrations and, for a certain time, was also believed to have introduced the feast of the *Akathistos*. As is well known, the *Akathistos* is a famous ancient hymn to the *Theotokos*, the Mother of God, that came into being in the Byzantine context. Despite the fact that from the theological viewpoint Germanus cannot be described as a great thinker, some of his works had a certain resonance, especially on account of some of his insights concerning *Mariology*. In fact, various of his homilies on Marian topics are extant, and some of them profoundly marked the piety of entire generations of faithful, both in the East and in the West. His splendid *Homilies on the Presentation of Mary at the Temple* are still living testimony of the unwritten tradition of the Christian Churches. Generations of nuns and monks and the members of a great number of institutes of consecrated life continue still today to find in these texts the most precious pearls of spirituality.

Some of Germanus' Mariological texts still give rise to wonder today. They are part of the homilies he gave *In SS. Deiparae dormitionem*, a celebration that corresponds with our Feast of the Assumption. Among these texts Pope Pius xii picked out one that he set like a pearl in his Apostolic Constitution *Munificentissimus Deus* (1950), with which he declared Mary's Assumption a Dogma of faith. Pope Pius XII cited this text in the above-mentioned Constitution, presenting it as one of the arguments in favour of the permanent faith of the Church concerning the bodily Assumption of Mary into Heaven. Germanus wrote: "May it never happen Most Holy Mother of God, that Heaven and earth, honoured by your presence, and you, with your departure, leave men and women without your protection? No. It is impossible to think of such things. In fact, just as when you were in the world you did not feel foreign to the realities of Heaven so too after you had emigrated from this world, you were not foreign to the possibility of communicating in spirit with mankind.... You did not at all abandon those to whom you had guaranteed salvation ... in fact, your spirit lives in eternity nor did your flesh suffer the corruption of the tomb. You, O Mother, are close to all and protect all, and although our eyes are unable to see you, we know, O Most Holy One, that you dwell among all of us and make yourself present in the most varied ways.... You (Mary, reveal your whole self, as is written, in your beauty. Your virginal body is entirely holy, entirely chaste, entirely the dwelling place of God so that, even for this reason, it is absolutely incorruptible. It is

unchangeable since what was human in it has been taken up in incorruptibility, remaining alive and absolutely glorious, undamaged, and sharing in perfect life. Indeed, it was impossible that the one who had become the vase of God and the living temple of the most holy divinity of the Only Begotten One be enclosed in the sepulchre of the dead. On the other hand, we believe with certainty that you continue to walk with us” (PG 98, coll. 344B–346B, passim).

It has been said that for the Byzantines the decorum of the rhetorical form in preaching and especially in hymns or in the poetic compositions that they call *troparia* is equally important in the liturgical celebration as the beauty of the sacred building in which it takes place. Patriarch Germanus was recognized, in that tradition, as one who made a great contribution to keeping this conviction alive, that is, that the beauty of the words and language must coincide with the beauty of the building and the music.

I quote, to conclude, the inspired words with which Germanus described the Church at the beginning of his small masterpiece: “The Church is the temple of God, a sacred space, a house of prayer, the convocation of people, the Body of Christ.... She is Heaven on earth where the transcendent God dwells as if in his own home and passes through, but she is also an impression made (*antitypos*) of the Crucifixion, the tomb and the Resurrection.... The Church is God’s house in which the life-giving mystical sacrifice is celebrated, at the same time the most intimate part of the shrine and sacred grotto. Within her in fact the sepulchre and the table are found, nourishment for the soul and a guarantee of life. In her, lastly, are found those true and proper precious pearls which are the divine dogmas of teaching that the Lord offered directly to this disciples” (PG 98, coll. 384B–385A).

Lastly, the question remains: what does this Saint chronologically and also culturally rather distant from us have to tell us today? I am thinking mainly of three things. The first: there is a certain visibility of God in the world, in the Church, that we must learn to perceive. God has created man in his image, but this image was covered with the scum of so much sin that God almost no longer shines through it. Thus the Son of God was made true man, a perfect image of God: thus in Christ we may also contemplate the Face of God and learn to be true men ourselves, true images of God. Christ invites us to imitate him, to become similar to him, so in every person the Face of God shines out anew. To tell the truth, in the Ten Commandments God forbade the making of images of God, but this was because of the temptations to idolatry to which the believer might be exposed in a context of paganism. Yet when God made himself visible in Christ through the Incarnation, it became legitimate to reproduce the Face of Christ. The holy images teach us to see God represented in the Face of Christ. After the Incarnation of the Son of God, it therefore became possible to see God in images of Christ and also in the faces of the Saints, in the faces of all people in whom God’s holiness shines out.



The second thing is the beauty and dignity of the liturgy. To celebrate the liturgy in the awareness of God's presence, with that dignity and beauty which make a little of his splendour visible, is the commitment of every Christian trained in his faith. The third thing is to love the Church. Precisely with regard to the Church, we men and women are prompted to see above all the sins and the negative side, but with the help of faith, which enables us to see in an authentic way, today and always we can rediscover the divine beauty in her. It is in the Church that God is present, offers himself to us in the Holy Eucharist and remains present for adoration. In the Church God speaks to us, in the Church God "walks beside us" as St Germanus said. In the Church we receive God's forgiveness and learn to forgive.

Let us pray God to teach us to see his presence and his beauty in the Church, to see his presence in the world and to help us too to be transparent to his light.

Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. The Liturgy today celebrates St Catherine of Siena, a Dominican Virgin and Doctor of the Church as well as Co-Patronsess of Italy, together with St Francis of Assisi.

## John Damascene

6 May 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I should like to speak about John Damascene, a personage of prime importance in the history of Byzantine Theology, a great Doctor in the history of the Universal Church. Above all he was an eyewitness of the passage from the Greek and Syrian Christian cultures shared by the Eastern part of the Byzantine Empire, to the Islamic culture, which spread through its military conquests in the territory commonly known as the Middle or Near East. John, born into a wealthy Christian family, at an early age assumed the role, perhaps already held by his father, of Treasurer of the Caliphate. Very soon, however, dissatisfied with life at court, he decided on a monastic life, and entered the monastery of Mar Saba, near Jerusalem. This was around the year 700. He never again left the monastery, but dedicated all his energy to asceticism and literary work, not disdaining a certain amount of pastoral activity, as is shown by his numerous homilies. His liturgical commemoration is on the 4 December. Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him Doctor of the Universal Church in 1890.

In the East, his best remembered works are the three *Discourses against those who calumniate the Holy Images*, which were condemned after his death by the iconoclastic Council of Hieria (754). These discourses, however, were also the fundamental grounds for his rehabilitation and canonization on the part of the Orthodox Fathers summoned to

the Council of Nicaea (787), the Seventh Ecumenical Council. In these texts it is possible to trace the first important theological attempts to legitimise the veneration of sacred images, relating them to the mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God in the womb of the Virgin Mary.

John Damascene was also among the first to distinguish, in the cult, both public and private, of the Christians, between worship (*latreia*), and veneration (*proskynesis*): the first can only be offered to God, spiritual above all else, the second, on the other hand, can make use of an image to address the one whom the image represents. Obviously the Saint can in no way be identified with the material of which the icon is composed. This distinction was immediately seen to be very important in finding an answer in Christian terms to those who considered universal and eternal the strict Old Testament prohibition against the use of cult images. This was also a matter of great debate in the Islamic world, which accepts the Jewish tradition of the total exclusion of cult images.

Christians, on the other hand, in this context, have discussed the problem and found a justification for the veneration of images. John Damascene writes, “In other ages God had not been represented in images, being incorporate and faceless. But since God has now been seen in the flesh, and lived among men, I represent that part of God which is visible. I do not venerate matter, but the Creator of matter, who became matter for my sake and deigned to live in matter and bring about my salvation through matter. I will not cease therefore to venerate that matter through which my salvation was achieved. But I do not venerate it in absolute terms as God! How could that which, from non-existence, has been given existence, be God?... But I also venerate and respect all the rest of matter which has brought me salvation, since it is full of energy and Holy graces. Is not the wood of the Cross, three times blessed, matter?... And the ink, and the most Holy Book of the Gospels, are they not matter? The redeeming altar which dispenses the Bread of life, is it not matter?... And, before all else, are not the flesh and blood of Our Lord matter? Either we must suppress the sacred nature of all these things, or we must concede to the tradition of the Church the veneration of the images of God and that of the friends of God who are sanctified by the name they bear, and for this reason are possessed by the grace of the Holy Spirit. Do not, therefore, offend matter: it is not contemptible, because nothing that God has made is contemptible” (cf. *Contra imaginum calumniatores*, I, 16, ed. Kotter, pp. 89–90). We see that as a result of the Incarnation, matter is seen to have become divine, is seen as the habitation of God. It is a new vision of the world and of material reality. God became flesh and flesh became truly the habitation of God, whose glory shines in the human Face of Christ. Thus the arguments of the Doctor of the East are still extremely relevant today, considering the very great dignity that matter has acquired through the Incarnation, capable of becoming, through faith, a sign and a sacrament, efficacious in the meeting of man with God. John

Damascene remains, therefore, a privileged witness of the cult of icons, which would come to be one of the most distinctive aspects of Eastern spirituality up to the present day. It is, however, a form of cult which belongs simply to the Christian faith, to the faith in that God who became flesh and was made visible. The teaching of Saint John Damascene thus finds its place in the tradition of the universal Church, whose sacramental doctrine foresees that material elements taken from nature can become vehicles of grace by virtue of the invocation (*epiclesis*) of the Holy Spirit, accompanied by the confession of the true faith.

John Damascene extends these fundamental ideas to the veneration of the relics of Saints, on the basis of the conviction that the Christian Saints, having become partakers of the Resurrection of Christ, cannot be considered simply “dead”. Numbering, for example, those whose relics or images are worthy of veneration, John states in his third discourse in defence of images: “First of all (let us venerate) those among whom God reposed, he alone Holy, who reposes among the Saints (cf. Is 57:15), such as the Mother of God and all the Saints. These are those who, as far as possible, have made themselves similar to God by their own will; and by God’s presence in them, and his help, they are really called gods (cf. Ps 82[81]:6), not by their nature, but by contingency, just as the red-hot iron is called fire, not by its nature, but by contingency and its participation in the fire. He says in fact: you shall be holy, because I am Holy (cf. Lv 19:2)” (III, 33, col. 1352 a). After a series of references of this kind, John Damascene was able serenely to deduce: “God, who is good, and greater than any goodness, was not content with the contemplation of himself, but desired that there should be beings benefited by him, who might share in his goodness: therefore he created from nothing all things, visible and invisible, including man, a reality visible and invisible. And he created him envisaging him and creating him as a being capable of thought (*ennoema ergon*), enriched with the word (*logo[i] sympleroumenon*), and orientated towards the spirit (*pneumati teleioumenon*)” (II, 2, pg 94, col. 865a). And to clarify this thought further, he adds: “We must allow ourselves to be filled with wonder (*thaumazein*) at all the works of Providence (*tes pronoias erga*), to accept and praise them all, overcoming any temptation to identify in them aspects which to many may seem unjust or iniquitous, (*adika*), and admitting instead that the project of God (*pronoia*) goes beyond man’s capacity to know or to understand (*agnoston kai akatalepton*), while on the contrary only he may know our thoughts, our actions, and even our future” (ii, 29, pg 94, col. 964c). Plato had in fact already said that all philosophy begins with wonder. Our faith, too, begins with wonder at the very fact of the Creation, and at the beauty of God who makes himself visible.

The optimism of the contemplation of nature (*physike theoria*), of seeing in the visible creation the good, the beautiful, the true, this Christian optimism, is not ingenuous: it takes account of the wound inflicted on human nature by the freedom of choice desired

by God and misused by man, with all the consequences of widespread discord which have derived from it. From this derives the need, clearly perceived by John Damascene, that nature, in which the goodness and beauty of God are reflected, wounded by our fault, “should be strengthened and renewed” by the descent of the Son of God in the flesh, after God had tried in many ways and on many occasions, to show that he had created man so that he might exist not only in “being”, but also in “well-being” (cf. *The Orthodox Faith*, II, 1, pg 94, col. 981). With passionate eagerness John explains: “It was necessary for nature to be strengthened and renewed, and for the path of virtue to be indicated and effectively taught (*didachthenai aretes hodòn*), the path that leads away from corruption and towards eternal life.... So there appeared on the horizon of history the great sea of love that God bears towards man (*philanthropias pelagos*)” .... It is a fine expression. We see on one side the beauty of Creation, and on the other the destruction wrought by the fault of man. But we see in the Son of God, who descends to renew nature, the sea of love that God has for man. John Damascene continues: “he himself, the Creator and the Lord, fought for his Creation, transmitting to it his teaching by example .... And so the Son of God, while still remaining in the form of God, lowered the skies and descended ... to his servants ... achieving the newest thing of all, the only thing really new under the sun, through which he manifested the infinite power of God” (III, 1, pg 94, col. 981c–984b).

We may imagine the comfort and joy which these words, so rich in fascinating images, poured into the hearts of the faithful. We listen to them today, sharing the same feelings with the Christians of those far-off days: God desires to repose in us, he wishes to renew nature through our conversion, he wants to allow us to share in his divinity. May the Lord help us to make these words the substance of our lives.

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, including a group of Felician Sisters serving in health care administration. Upon all of you, and upon your families and loved ones, I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace.

My dear friends, this Friday I leave Rome for my Apostolic Visit to Jordan, Israel and the Palestinian Territories. I wish this morning to take the opportunity through this radio and television broadcast to greet all the peoples of those lands. I am eagerly looking forward to being with you and to sharing with you your aspirations and hopes as well as your pains and struggles. I will be coming among you as a pilgrim of peace. My primary intention is to visit the places made holy by the life of Jesus, and, to pray at them for the gift of peace and unity for your families, and all those for whom the Holy Land and the Middle East is home. Among the many religious and civic gatherings which will take place over the course of the week, will be meetings with representatives from the Muslim and Jewish communities with whom great strides have been made in dialogue and cultural exchange. In a special way I warmly greet the Catholics of the region and ask you

to join me in praying that the visit will bear much fruit for the spiritual and civic life of all who dwell in the Holy Land. May we all praise God for his goodness. May we all be people of hope. May we all be steadfast in our desire and efforts for peace.

## Saint Theodore the Studite

27 May 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Saint we meet today, St Theodore the Studite, brings us to the middle of the medieval Byzantine period, in a somewhat turbulent period from the religious and political perspectives. St Theodore was born in 759 into a devout noble family: his mother Theoctista and an uncle, Plato, Abbot of the Monastery of Saccudium in Bithynia, are venerated as saints. Indeed it was his uncle who guided him towards monastic life, which he embraced at the age of 22. He was ordained a priest by Patriarch Tarasius, but soon ended his relationship with him because of the toleration the Patriarch showed in the case of the adulterous marriage of the Emperor Constantine VI. This led to Theodore's exile in 796 to Thessalonica. He was reconciled with the imperial authority the following year under the Empress Irene, whose benevolence induced Theodore and Plato to transfer to the urban monastery of Studios, together with a large portion of the community of the monks of Saccudium, in order to avoid the Saracen incursions. So it was that the important "Studite Reform" began.

Theodore's personal life, however, continued to be eventful. With his usual energy, he became the leader of the resistance against the iconoclasm of Leo V, the Armenian who once again opposed the existence of images and icons in the Church. The procession of icons organized by the monks of Studios evoked a reaction from the police. Between 815 and 821, Theodore was scourged, imprisoned and exiled to various places in Asia Minor. In the end he was able to return to Constantinople but not to his own monastery. He therefore settled with his monks on the other side of the Bosphorus. He is believed to have died in Prinkipo on 11 November 826, the day on which he is commemorated in the Byzantine Calendar. Theodore distinguished himself within Church history as one of the great reformers of monastic life and as a defender of the veneration of sacred images, beside St Nicephorus, Patriarch of Constantinople, in the second phase of the iconoclasm.

Theodore had realized that the issue of the veneration of icons was calling into question the truth of the Incarnation itself. In his three books, the *Antirretikoi* (*Confutations*), Theodore makes a comparison between eternal intra-Trinitarian relations, in which the existence of each of the divine Persons does not destroy their unity, and the relations

between Christ's two natures, which do not jeopardize in him the one Person of the *Logos*. He also argues: abolishing veneration of the icon of Christ would mean repudiating his redeeming work, given that, in assuming human nature, the invisible eternal *Word* appeared in visible human flesh and in so doing sanctified the entire visible cosmos.

Theodore and his monks, courageous witnesses in the period of the iconoclastic persecutions, were inseparably bound to the reform of coenobitic life in the Byzantine world. Their importance was notable if only for an external circumstance: their number. Whereas the number of monks in monasteries of that time did not exceed 30 or 40, we know from the *Life of Theodore* of the existence of more than 1,000 Studite monks overall. Theodore himself tells us of the presence in his monastery of about 300 monks; thus we see the enthusiasm of faith that was born within the context of this man's being truly informed and formed by faith itself. However, more influential than these numbers was the new spirit the Founder impressed on coenobitic life. In his writings, he insists on the urgent need for a conscious return to the teaching of the Fathers, especially to St Basil, the first legislator of monastic life, and to St Dorotheus of Gaza, a famous spiritual Father of the Palestinian desert. Theodore's characteristic contribution consists in insistence on the need for order and submission on the monks' part. During the persecutions they had scattered and each one had grown accustomed to living according to his own judgement. Then, as it was possible to re-establish community life, it was necessary to do the utmost to make the monastery once again an organic community, a true family, or, as St Theodore said, a true "Body of Christ". In such a community the reality of the Church as a whole is realized concretely.

Another of St Theodore's basic convictions was this: monks, differently from lay people, take on the commitment to observe the Christian duties with greater strictness and intensity. For this reason they make a special profession which belongs to the *hagiasmata* (consecrations), and it is, as it were, a "new Baptism", symbolized by their taking the habit. Characteristic of monks in comparison with lay people, then, is the commitment to poverty, chastity and obedience. In addressing his monks, Theodore spoke in a practical, at times picturesque manner about poverty, but poverty in the following of Christ is from the start an essential element of monasticism and also points out a way for all of us. The renunciation of private property, this freedom from material things, as well as moderation and simplicity apply in a radical form only to monks, but the spirit of this renouncement is equal for all. Indeed, we must not depend on material possessions but instead must learn renunciation, simplicity, austerity and moderation. Only in this way can a supportive society develop and the great problem of poverty in this world be overcome. Therefore, in this regard the monks' radical poverty is essentially also a path for us all. Then when he explains the temptations against chastity, Theodore does not

conceal his own experience and indicates the way of inner combat to find self control and hence respect for one's own body and for the body of the other as a temple of God.

However, the most important renunciations in his opinion are those required by obedience, because each one of the monks has his own way of living, and fitting into the large community of 300 monks truly involves a new way of life which he describes as the "martyrdom of submission". Here too the monks' example serves to show us how necessary this is for us, because, after the original sin, man has tended to do what he likes. The first principle is for the life of the world, all the rest must be subjected to it. However, in this way, if each person is self-centred, the social structure cannot function. Only by learning to fit into the common freedom, to share and to submit to it, learning legality, that is, submission and obedience to the rules of the common good and life in common, can society be healed, as well as the *self*, of the pride of being the centre of the world. Thus St Theodore, with fine introspection, helped his monks and ultimately also helps us to understand true life, to resist the temptation to set up our own will as the supreme rule of life and to preserve our true personal identity which is always an identity shared with others and peace of heart.

For Theodore the Studite an important virtue on a par with obedience and humility is *philergia*, that is, the love of work, in which he sees a criterion by which to judge the quality of personal devotion: the person who is fervent and works hard in material concerns, he argues, will be the same in those of the spirit. Therefore he does not permit the monk to dispense with work, including manual work, under the pretext of prayer and contemplation; for work to his mind and in the whole monastic tradition is actually a means of finding God. Theodore is not afraid to speak of work as the "sacrifice of the monk", as his "liturgy", even as a sort of Mass through which monastic life becomes angelic life. And it is precisely in this way that the world of work must be humanized and man, through work, becomes more himself and closer to God. One consequence of this unusual vision is worth remembering: precisely because it is the fruit of a form of "liturgy", the riches obtained from common work must not serve for the monks' comfort but must be earmarked for assistance to the poor. Here we can all understand the need for the proceeds of work to be a good for all. Obviously the 'Studites' work was not only manual: they had great importance in the religious and cultural development of the Byzantine civilization as calligraphers, painters, poets, educators of youth, school teachers and librarians.

Although he exercised external activities on a truly vast scale, Theodore did not let himself be distracted from what he considered closely relevant to his role as superior: being the spiritual father of his monks. He knew what a crucial influence both his good mother and his holy uncle Plato whom he described with the significant title "father" had

had on his life. Thus he himself provided spiritual direction for the monks. Every day, his biographer says, after evening prayer he would place himself in front of the iconostasis to listen to the confidences of all. He also gave spiritual advice to many people outside the monastery. The *Spiritual Testament* and the *Letters* highlight his open and affectionate character, and show that true spiritual friendships were born from his fatherhood both in the monastic context and outside it.

The *Rule*, known by the name of *Hypotyposis*, codified shortly after Theodore's death, was adopted, with a few modifications, on Mount Athos when in 962 St Athanasius Anthonite founded the Great Laura there, and in the Kievan Rus', when at the beginning of the second millennium St Theodosius introduced it into the Laura of the Grottos. Understood in its genuine meaning, the *Rule* has proven to be unusually up to date. Numerous trends today threaten the unity of the common faith and impel people towards a sort of dangerous spiritual individualism and spiritual pride. It is necessary to strive to defend and to increase the perfect unity of the Body of Christ, in which the peace of order and sincere personal relations in the Spirit can be harmoniously composed.

It may be useful to return at the end to some of the main elements of Theodore's spiritual doctrine: love for the Lord incarnate and for his visibility in the Liturgy and in icons; fidelity to Baptism and the commitment to live in communion with the Body of Christ, also understood as the communion of Christians with each other; a spirit of poverty, moderation and renunciation; chastity, self-control, humility and obedience against the primacy of one's own will that destroys the social fabric and the peace of souls; love for physical and spiritual work; spiritual love born from the purification of one's own conscience, one's own soul, one's own life. Let us seek to comply with these teachings that really do show us the path of true life.

## Rabanus Maurus

3 June 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak of a truly extraordinary figure of the Latin West: Rabanus Maurus, a monk. Together with men such as Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede and Ambrose Autpert of whom I have already spoken in previous Catecheses, during the centuries of the so-called "High Middle Ages" he was able to preserve the contact with the great culture of the ancient scholars and of the Christian Fathers. Often remembered as the "*praeceptor Germaniae*", Rabanus Maurus was extraordinarily prolific. With his absolutely exceptional capacity for work, he perhaps made a greater contribution than



anyone else to keeping alive that theological, exegetic and spiritual culture on which successive centuries were to draw. He was referred to by great figures belonging to the monastic world such as Peter Damian, Peter the Venerable and Bernard of Clairvaux, as well as by an ever increasing number of “clerics” of the secular clergy who gave life to one of the most beautiful periods of the fruitful flourishing of human thought in the 12th and 13th centuries.

Born in Mainz in about 780, Rabanus entered the monastery at a very early age. He was nicknamed “Maurus” after the young St Maur who, according to *Book II of the Dialogues* of St Gregory the Great, was entrusted by his parents, Roman nobles, to the Abbot Benedict of Norcia. Alone this precocious insertion of Rabanus as “*puer oblatus*” in the Benedictine monastic world and the benefits he drew from it for his own human, cultural and spiritual growth, were to provide an interesting glimpse not only of the life of monks and of the Church, but also of the whole of society of his time, usually described as “Carolingian”. About them or perhaps about himself, Rabanus Maurus wrote: “There are some who have had the good fortune to be introduced to the knowledge of Scripture from a tender age (“*a cunabulis suis*”) and who were so well-nourished with the food offered to them by Holy Church as to be fit for promotion, with the appropriate training, to the highest of sacred Orders” (PL 107, col. 419 BC).

The extraordinary culture for which Rabanus Maurus was distinguished soon brought him to the attention of the great of his time. He became the advisor of princes. He strove to guarantee the unity of the Empire and, at a broader cultural level, never refused to give those who questioned him a carefully considered reply, which he found preferably in the Bible or in the texts of the Holy Fathers. First elected Abbot of the famous Monastery of Fulda and then appointed Archbishop of Mainz, his native city, this did not stop him from pursuing his studies, showing by the example of his life that it is possible to be at the same time available to others without depriving oneself of the appropriate time for reflection, study and meditation. Thus Rabanus Maurus was exegete, philosopher, poet, pastor and man of God. The Dioceses of Fulda, Mainz, Limburg and Breslau (Wroclaw) venerate him as a saint or blessed. His works fill at least six volumes of Migne’s *Patrologia Latina*. It is likely that we are indebted to him for one of the most beautiful hymns known to the Latin Church, the “*Veni Creator Spiritus*”, an extraordinary synthesis of Christian pneumatology. In fact, Rabanus’ first theological work is expressed in the form of poetry and had as its subject the mystery of the Holy Cross in a book entitled: “*De laudibus Sanctae Crucis*”, conceived in such a way as to suggest not only a conceptual content but also more exquisitely artistic stimuli, by the use of both poetic and pictorial forms within the same manuscript codex. Suggesting the image of the Crucified Christ between the lines of his writing, he says, for example: “This is the image of the Saviour who, with the position of his limbs, makes sacred for us the most salubrious, gentle and loving form of

the Cross, so that by believing in his Name and obeying his commandments we may obtain eternal life thanks to his Passion. However, every time we raise our eyes to the Cross, let us remember the one who died for us to save us from the powers of darkness, accepting death to make us heirs to eternal life” (*Lib. 1, fig. 1, PL 107 col. 151 C*).

This method of combining all the arts, the intellect, the heart and the senses, which came from the East, was to experience a great development in the West, reaching unparalleled heights in the miniature codices of the Bible and in other works of faith and art that flourished in Europe until the invention of printing and beyond. In Rabanus Maurus, in any case, is shown an extraordinary awareness of the need to involve, in the experience of faith, not only the mind and the heart, but also the senses through those other aspects of aesthetic taste and human sensitivity that lead man to benefit from the truth with his whole self, “mind, soul and body”. This is important: faith is not only thought but also touches the whole of our being. Since God became Man in flesh and blood, since he entered the tangible world, we must seek and encounter God in all the dimensions of our being. Thus the reality of God, through faith, penetrates our being and transforms it. This is why Rabanus Maurus focused his attention above all on the Liturgy as a synthesis of all the dimensions of our perception of reality. This intuition of Rabanus Maurus makes it extraordinarily up to date. Also famous among his opus are the “*Hymns*”, suggested for use especially in liturgical celebrations. In fact, since Rabanus was primarily a monk, his interest in the liturgical celebration was taken for granted. However, he did not devote himself to the art of poetry as an end in itself but, rather, used art and every other form of erudition as a means for deepening knowledge of the word of God. He therefore sought with great application and rigour to introduce his contemporaries, especially ministers (Bishops, priests and deacons), to an understanding of the profoundly theological and spiritual meaning of all the elements of the liturgical celebration.

He thus sought to understand and to present to others the theological meanings concealed in the rites, drawing from the Bible and from the tradition of the Fathers. For the sake of honesty and to give greater weight to his explanations, he did not hesitate to indicate the Patristic sources to which he owed his knowledge. Nevertheless he used them with freedom and with careful discernment, continuing the development of patristic thought. At the end of the “*Epistola prima*”, addressed to a “chorbishop” of the Diocese of Mainz, for example, after answering the requests for clarification concerning the behaviour to adopt in the exercise of pastoral responsibility, he continues, “We have written all these things for you as we deduced them from the Sacred Scriptures and the canons of the Fathers. Yet, most holy man, may you take your decisions as you think best, case by case, seeking to temper your evaluation in such a way as to guarantee discretion in all things because it is the mother of all the virtues” (*Epistulae, I, PL 112, col.*

1510 C). Thus the continuity of the Christian faith which originates in the word of God becomes visible; yet it is always alive, develops and is expressed in new ways, ever consistent with the whole construction, with the whole edifice of faith.

Since an integral part of liturgical celebration is the word of God Rabanus Maurus dedicated himself to it with the greatest commitment throughout his life. He produced appropriate exegetic explanations for almost all the biblical books of the Old and New Testament, with clearly pastoral intentions that he justified with words such as these: “I have written these things ... summing up the explanations and suggestions of many others, not only in order to offer a service to the poor reader, who may not have many books at his disposal, but also to make it easier for those who in many things do not succeed in entering in depth into an understanding of the meanings discovered by the Fathers” (*Commentariorum in Matthaemum praeafatio*, PL 107, col. 727 D). In fact, in commenting on the biblical texts he drew amply from the ancient Fathers, with special preference for Jerome, Ambrose, Augustine and Gregory the Great.

His outstanding pastoral sensitivity later led him to occupy himself above all with one of the problems most acutely felt by the faithful and sacred ministers of his time: that of Penance. Indeed, he compiled the “*Penitenziari*” this is what he called them in which, according to the sensibility of his day, sins and the corresponding punishments were listed, using as far as possible reasons found in the Bible, in the decisions of the Councils and in Papal Decretals. The “Carolingians” also used these texts in their attempt to reform the Church and society. Corresponding with the same pastoral intentions, were works such as “*De disciplina ecclesiastica*” and “*De institutione clericorum*”, in which, drawing above all from Augustine, Rabanus explained to the simple and to the clergy of his diocese the basic elements of the Christian faith: they were like little catechisms.

I would like to end the presentation of this great “churchman” by quoting some of his words in which his basic conviction is clearly reflected: “Those who are negligent in contemplation (“*qui vacare Deo negligit*”), deprive themselves of the vision of God’s light; then those who let themselves be indiscreetly invaded by worries and allow their thoughts to be overwhelmed by the tumult of worldly things condemn themselves to the absolute impossibility of penetrating the secrets of the invisible God” (*Lib I*, PL 112, col. 1263 A). I think that Rabanus Maurus is also addressing these words to us today: in periods of work, with its frenetic pace, and in holiday periods we must reserve moments for God. We must open our lives to him, addressing to him a thought, a reflection, a brief prayer, and above all we must not forget Sunday as the Lord’s Day, the day of the Liturgy, in order to perceive God’s beauty itself in the beauty of our churches, in our sacred music and in the word of God, letting him enter our being. Only in this way does our life become great, become true life.

# John Scotus Erigena

10 June 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak of a noteworthy thinker of the Christian West: John Scotus Erigena, whose origins are nonetheless obscure. He certainly came from Ireland, where he was born at the beginning of the ninth century, but we do not know when he left his Island to cross the Channel and thus fully enter that cultural world which was coming into being around the Carolingians, and in particular around Charles the Bald, in ninth-century France. Just as we are not certain of the date of his birth, likewise we do not know the year of his death but, according to the experts, it must have been in about the year 870.

John Scotus Erigena had a patristic culture, both Greek and Latin, at first hand. Indeed, he had direct knowledge of the writings of both the Latin and the Greek Fathers. He was well acquainted, among others, with the works of Augustine, Ambrose, Gregory the Great and the important Fathers of the Christian West, but he was just as familiar with the thought of Origen, Gregory of Nyssa, John Chrysostom and other Christian Fathers of the East who were equally important. He was an exceptional man who in that period had also mastered the Greek language. He devoted very special attention to St Maximus Confessor and above all to Dionysius the Areopagite. This pseudonym conceals a fifth-century ecclesiastical writer, but throughout the Middle Ages people, including John Scotus Erigena, were convinced that this author could be identified with a direct disciple of St Paul who is mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles (17:34). Scotus Erigena, convinced of the apostolicity of Dionysius' writings, described him as a "divine author" par excellence; Dionysius' writings were therefore an eminent source of his thought. John Scotus translated his works into Latin. The great medieval theologians, such as St Bonaventure, became acquainted with Dionysius' works through this translation. Throughout his life John Scotus devoted himself to deepening his knowledge and developing his thought, drawing on these writings, to the point that still today it can sometimes be difficult to distinguish where we are dealing with Scotus Erigena's thought and where, instead, he is merely proposing anew the thought of Pseudo-Dionysius.

The theological opus of John Scotus truly did not meet with much favour. Not only did the end of the Carolingian era cause his works to be forgotten; a censure on the part of the Church authorities also cast a shadow over him. In fact, John Scotus represents a radical Platonism that sometimes seems to approach a pantheistic vision, even though his personal subjective intentions were always orthodox. Some of John Scotus Erigena's works have come down to us among which the following in particular deserve mention:

the Treatise “*On the Division of Nature*” and the expositions on “*The Heavenly Hierarchy*” of St Dionysius. In them he continues to develop stimulating theological and spiritual reflections which could suggest an interesting furthering of knowledge also to contemporary theologians. I refer, for example, to what he wrote on the duty of exercising an appropriate discernment on what is presented as *auctoritas vera*, or on the commitment to continue the quest for the truth until one achieves some experience of it in the silent adoration of God.

Our author says: “*Salus nostra ex fide inchoat*: our salvation begins with faith”; in other words we cannot speak of God starting with our own inventions but rather with what God says of himself in the Sacred Scriptures. Since, however, God tells only the truth, Scotus Erigena is convinced that the authority and reason can never contradict each other; he is convinced that true religion and true philosophy coincide. In this perspective he writes: “Any type of authority that is not confirmed by true reason must be considered weak.... Indeed there is no true authority other than that which coincides with the truth, discovered by virtue of reason, even should one be dealing with an authority recommended and handed down for the use of the successors of the holy Fathers” (I, *PL* 122, col. 513 BC). Consequently, he warns: “Let no authority intimidate you or distract you from what makes you understand the conviction obtained through correct rational contemplation. Indeed, the authentic authority never contradicts right reason, nor can the latter ever contradict a true authority. “The one and the other both come indisputably from the same source, which is divine wisdom” (I *PL* 122, col. 511 B). We see here a brave affirmation of the value of reason, founded on the certainty that the true authority is reasonable, because God is creative reason.

According to Erigena, Scripture itself does not escape the need to be approached with the same criterion of discernment. In fact, although Scripture comes from God the Irish theologian maintains, proposing anew a reflection made earlier by John Chrysostom it would not be necessary had the human being not sinned. It must therefore be deduced that Scripture was given by God with a pedagogical intention and with indulgence so that man might remember all that had been impressed within his heart from the moment of his creation, “in the image and likeness of God” (cf. Gn 1:26) and that the Fall of man had caused him to forget. Erigena writes in his *Expositiones*: “It is not man who was created for Scripture, which he would not have needed had he not sinned, but rather it is Scripture, interwoven with doctrine and symbols, which was given to man. Thanks to Scripture, in fact, our rational nature may be introduced to the secrets of authentic and pure contemplation of God” (II, *PL* 122, col. 146 C). The words of Sacred Scripture purify our somewhat blind reason and help us to recover the memory of what we, as the image of God, carry in our hearts, unfortunately wounded by sin.

From this derive certain hermeneutical consequences concerning the way to interpret Scripture that still today can point out the right approach for a correct reading of Sacred Scripture. In fact it is a question of discovering the hidden meaning in the sacred text and this implies a special inner exercise through which reason is open to the sure road to the truth. This exercise consists in cultivating constant readiness for conversion. Indeed, to acquire an in-depth vision of the text it is necessary to progress at the same time in conversion of the heart and in the conceptual analysis of the biblical passage, whether it is of a cosmic, historical or doctrinal character. Indeed, it is only by means of a constant purification of both the eye of the heart and the eye of the mind that it is possible to arrive at an exact understanding.

This arduous, demanding and exciting journey, that consists of continuous achievements and the relativization of human knowledge, leads the intelligent creature to the threshold of the divine Mystery where all notions admit of their own weakness and inability and thus, with the simple free and sweet power of the truth, make it obligatory ceaselessly to surpass all that is progressively achieved. Worshipful and silent recognition of the Mystery which flows into unifying communion is therefore revealed as the only path to a relationship with the truth that is at the same time the most intimate possible and the most scrupulously respectful of otherness. John Scotus, here too using terminology dear to the Christian tradition of the Greek language, called this experience for which we strive “theosis”, or divinization, with such daring affirmations that he might be suspected of heterodox pantheism. Yet, even today one cannot but be strongly moved by texts such as the following in which with recourse to the ancient metaphor of the smelting of iron he writes: “just as all red-hot iron is liquified to the point that it seems nothing but fire and yet the substances remain distinct from one another, so it must be accepted that after the end of this world all nature, both the corporeal and the incorporeal, will show forth God alone and yet remain integral so that God can in a certain way be com-prehended while remaining in-comprehensible and that the creature itself may be transformed, with ineffable wonder, and reunited with God” (V, *PL* 122, col. 451 B).

In fact, the entire theological thought of John Scotus is the most evident demonstration of the attempt to express the expressible of the inexpressible God, based solely upon the mystery of the Word made flesh in Jesus of Nazareth. The numerous metaphors John Scotus used to point out this ineffable reality show how aware he was of the absolute inadequacy of the terms in which we speak of these things. And yet the enchantment and that aura of authentic mystical experience, which every now and then one can feel tangibly in his texts, endures. As proof of this it suffices to cite a passage from *De divisione naturae* which touches in depth even our mind as believers of the 21st century: “We should desire nothing”, he writes, “other than the joy of the truth that is Christ,

avoid nothing other than his absence. The greatest torment of a rational creature consists in the deprivation or absence of Christ. Indeed this must be considered the one cause of total and eternal sorrow. Take Christ from me and I am left with no good thing nor will anything terrify me so much as his absence. The greatest torments of a rational creature are the deprivation and absence of him” (V, *PL* 122, col. 989a). These are words that we can make our own, translating them into a prayer to the One for whom our hearts long.

## Saints Cyril and Methodius

17 June 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk about Sts Cyril and Methodius, brothers by blood and in the faith, the so-called “Apostles to the Slavs”. Cyril was born in Thessalonica to Leo, an imperial magistrate, in 826 or 827. He was the youngest of seven. As a child he learned the Slavonic language. When he was 14 years old he was sent to Constantinople to be educated and was companion to the young Emperor, Michael III. In those years Cyril was introduced to the various university disciplines, including dialectics, and his teacher was Photius. After refusing a brilliant marriage he decided to receive holy Orders and became “librarian” at the Patriarchate. Shortly afterwards, wishing to retire in solitude, he went into hiding at a monastery but was soon discovered and entrusted with teaching the sacred and profane sciences. He carried out this office so well that he earned the nickname of “Philosopher”. In the meantime, his brother Michael (born in about 815), left the world after an administrative career in Macedonia, and withdrew to a monastic life on Mount Olympus in Bithynia, where he was given the name “Methodius” (a monk’s monastic name had to begin with the same letter as his baptismal name) and became hegumen of the Monastery of Polychron.

Attracted by his brother’s example, Cyril too decided to give up teaching and go to Mount Olympus to meditate and pray. A few years later (in about 861), the imperial government sent him on a mission to the Khazars on the Sea of Azov who had asked for a scholar to be sent to them who could converse with both Jews and Saracens. Cyril, accompanied by his brother Methodius, stayed for a long time in Crimea where he learned Hebrew and sought the body of Pope Clement I who had been exiled there. Cyril found Pope Clement’s tomb and, when he made the return journey with his brother, he took Clement’s precious relics with him. Having arrived in Constantinople the two brothers were sent to Moravia by the Emperor Michael III, who had received a specific request from Prince Ratislav of Moravia: “Since our people rejected paganism”, Ratislav wrote to

Michael, “they have embraced the Christian law; but we do not have a teacher who can explain the true faith to us in our own language”. The mission was soon unusually successful. By translating the liturgy into the Slavonic language the two brothers earned immense popularity.

However, this gave rise to hostility among the Frankish clergy who had arrived in Moravia before the Brothers and considered the territory to be under their ecclesiastical jurisdiction. In order to justify themselves, in 867 the two brothers travelled to Rome. On the way they stopped in Venice, where they had a heated discussion with the champions of the so-called “trilingual heresy” who claimed that there were only three languages in which it was lawful to praise God: Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The two brothers obviously forcefully opposed this claim. In Rome Cyril and Methodius were received by Pope Adrian ii who led a procession to meet them in order to give a dignified welcome to St Clement’s relics. The Pope had also realized the great importance of their exceptional mission. Since the middle of the first millennium, in fact, thousands of Slavs had settled in those territories located between the two parts of the Roman Empire, the East and the West, whose relations were fraught with tension. The Pope perceived that the Slav peoples would be able to serve as a bridge and thereby help to preserve the union between the Christians of both parts of the Empire. Thus he did not hesitate to approve the mission of the two brothers in Great Moravia, accepting and approving the use of the Slavonic language in the liturgy. The Slavonic Books were laid on the altar of St Mary of Phatmé (St Mary Major) and the liturgy in the Slavonic tongue was celebrated in the Basilicas of St Peter, St Andrew and St Paul.

Unfortunately, Cyril fell seriously ill in Rome. Feeling that his death was at hand, he wanted to consecrate himself totally to God as a monk in one of the Greek monasteries of the City (probably Santa Prassede) and took the monastic name of Cyril (his baptismal name was Constantine). He then insistently begged his brother Methodius, who in the meantime had been ordained a Bishop, not to abandon their mission in Moravia and to return to the peoples there. He addressed this prayer to God: “Lord, my God ... hear my prayers and keep the flock you have entrusted to me faithful.... Free them from the heresy of the three languages, gather them all in unity and make the people you have chosen agree in the true faith and confession”. He died on 14 February 869.

Faithful to the pledge he had made with his brother, Methodius returned to Moravia and Pannonia (today, Hungary) the following year, 870, where once again he encountered the violent aversion of the Frankish missionaries who took him prisoner. He did not lose heart and when he was released in 873, he worked hard to organize the Church and train a group of disciples. It was to the merit of these disciples that it was possible to survive the crisis unleashed after the death of Methodius on 6 April 885: persecuted and



imprisoned, some of them were sold as slaves and taken to Venice where they were redeemed by a Constantinopolitan official who allowed them to return to the countries of the Slavonic Balkans. Welcomed in Bulgaria, they were able to continue the mission that Methodius had begun and to disseminate the Gospel in the “Land of the Rus”. God with his mysterious Providence thus availed himself of their persecution to save the work of the holy Brothers. Literary documentation of their work is extant. It suffices to think of texts such as the *Evangeliarium* (liturgical passages of the New Testament), the *Psalter*, various *liturgical texts* in Slavonic, on which both the Brothers had worked. Indeed, after Cyril’s death, it is to Methodius and to his disciples that we owe the translation of the entire *Sacred Scriptures*, the *Nomocanone* and the *Book of the Fathers*.

Wishing now to sum up concisely the profile of the two Brothers, we should first recall the enthusiasm with which Cyril approached the writings of St Gregory of Nazianzus, learning from him the value of language in the transmission of the Revelation. St Gregory had expressed the wish that Christ would speak through him: “I am a servant of the Word, so I put myself at the service of the Word”. Desirous of imitating Gregory in this service, Cyril asked Christ to deign to speak in Slavonic through him. He introduced his work of translation with the solemn invocation: “Listen, O all of you Slav Peoples, listen to the word that comes from God, the word that nourishes souls, the word that leads to the knowledge of God”. In fact, a few years before the Prince of Moravia had asked the Emperor Michael III to send missionaries to his country, it seems that Cyril and his brother Methodius, surrounded by a group of disciples, were already working on the project of collecting the Christian dogmas in books written in Slavonic. The need for new graphic characters closer to the language spoken was therefore clearly apparent: so it was that the Glagolitic alphabet came into being. Subsequently modified, it was later designated by the name “Cyrillic”, in honour of the man who inspired it. It was a crucial event for the development of the Slav civilization in general. Cyril and Methodius were convinced that the individual peoples could not claim to have received the Revelation fully unless they had heard it in their own language and read it in the characters proper to their own alphabet.

Methodius had the merit of ensuring that the work begun by his brother was not suddenly interrupted. While Cyril, the “Philosopher”, was more inclined to contemplation, Methodius on the other hand had a leaning for the active life. Thanks to this he was able to lay the foundations of the successive affirmation of what we might call the “Cyrillian-Methodian idea”: it accompanied the Slav peoples in the different periods of their history, encouraging their cultural, national and religious development. This was already recognized by Pope Pius XI in his Apostolic Letter *Quod Sanctum Cyrillum*, in which he described the two Brothers: “Sons of the East, with a Byzantine homeland, of Greek origin, for the Roman missions to reap Slav apostolic fruit” (AAS 19 [1927] 93–96).

The historic role they played was later officially proclaimed by Pope John Paul II who, with his Apostolic Letter *Egregiae Virtutis*, declared them Co-Patrons of Europe, together with St Benedict (31 December 1980; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 19 January 1981, p. 3).

Cyril and Methodius are in fact a classic example of what today is meant by the term “inculturation”: every people must integrate the message revealed into its own culture and express its saving truth in its own language. This implies a very demanding effort of “translation” because it requires the identification of the appropriate words to present anew, without distortion, the riches of the revealed word. The two holy Brothers have left us a most important testimony of this, to which the Church also looks today in order to draw from it inspiration and guidelines.

## St John Leonardi

7 October 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The day after tomorrow, 9 October, will be the 400th anniversary of the death of St John Leonardi, Founder of the religious order of Clerics Regular of the Mother of God. He was canonized on 17 April 1938 and chosen as Patron of Pharmacists on 8 August 2006. He is also remembered for his great missionary zeal. Together with Mons. Juan Bautista Vives and Martín de Funes, a Jesuit, he planned and contributed to founding a specific Congregation of the Holy See for the missions, *Propaganda Fide*, which has forged thousands of priests down the centuries, many of them martyrs. Thus he was a luminous priestly figure whom I like to point out as an example to all presbyters in this Year for Priests. He died in 1609 from influenza, contracted while he was doing all he could to minister to those stricken by the epidemic in the Campitelli neighbourhood of Rome.

John Leonardi was born in 1541 at Diecimo in the Province of Lucca. The youngest of seven siblings, his adolescence was marked by the rhythm of faith lived in a healthy, hard-working family, as well as by regular visits to a workshop in his home town that made and sold essences and medicines. When John was 17, his father enrolled him in an ordinary apothecary’s course in Lucca, aiming to make him a future pharmacist, indeed an apothecary, as it was then termed. For about 10 years young John attended this course, alert and hardworking, but when, in accordance with the legislation of the ancient Republic of Lucca he earned the official recognition that would authorize him to open his own apothecary’s shop, he started wondering whether the moment had not come to carry out a plan he had always had at heart. After mature reflection he decided to train for the priesthood. Thus, having left the apothecary’s shop and having acquired an

adequate theological formation, he was ordained a priest and, on the day of Epiphany 1572, celebrated his first Mass. However, he never lost his interest in medicine, because he felt that the professional mediation of the pharmacist would permit him to fulfil his vocation to the full, one in which he could pass on to men and women, by means of a holy life, “*the medicine of God*”, which is the Crucified and Risen Jesus Christ, the “measure of all things”.

Inspired by the conviction that all human beings need this medicine more than anything else, St John Leonardi sought to make the personal encounter with Jesus Christ his fundamental *raison d'être*. “It is necessary to start afresh from Christ”, he liked to repeat again and again. The primacy of Christ over all things became for him the concrete criterion of judgement and action and the vital principle of his priestly activity, which he exercised while a vast and widespread movement of spiritual renewal was taking place in the Church, thanks to the flourishing of new religious institutes and the luminous witness of Saints such as Charles Borromeo, Philip Neri, Ignatius of Loyola, Joseph Calasanctius, Camillus de Lellis and Aloysius Gonzaga. He dedicated himself enthusiastically to the apostolate among boys through the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, gathering around him a group of young men with whom, on 1 September 1574, he founded the Congregation of Reformed Priests of the Blessed Virgin, later called the Order of Clerics Regular of the Mother of God. He recommended his disciples to keep “before their eyes and minds only the honour, service and glory of Jesus Christ Crucified”, and, as a good pharmacist used to administering doses, he added using a precise reference: “lift up your hearts a little higher to God and with him measure all things”.

Motivated by apostolic zeal, in May 1605 he sent Pope Paul V, who had just been elected, a *Petition* in which he suggested the criteria for an authentic renewal of the Church. Observing that it is “necessary for those who aspire to the reform of human morals to seek especially and above all things, the glory of God”, he added that they must shine out “for their integrity of life and the excellence of their morals so that, rather than constraining people, they gently draw them to reform”.

He remarked that “anyone who wishes to carry out a serious religious and moral reform must first of all, like a good doctor, make an attentive diagnosis of the evils besetting the Church, thereby to be able to prescribe the most appropriate remedy for each one of them”. And he noted that “likewise the renewal of the Church must be brought about in her leaders and in their subordinates, both above and below. It must be started by those in charge and extended to their subjects”. For this reason, while asking the Pope to promote a “universal reform of the Church”, he concerned himself with the Christian

formation of the people and especially of children, to be educated “from their earliest years ... in the purity of Christian faith and holy morals”.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, the luminous figure of this Saint invites priests in the first place, and all Christians, to strive constantly for “the high standard of Christian living”, which means holiness, naturally each one in accordance with his own state. Indeed, authentic ecclesial renewal can only stem from faithfulness to Christ. In those years, on the cultural and social threshold between the 16th and 17th centuries, the premises of the contemporary culture of the future began to be outlined. It was characterized by an undue separation between faith and reason that produced, among its negative effects, the marginalization of God, with the illusion of the possible and total autonomy of man who chooses to live “as though God did not exist”. This is the crisis of modern thought, which I have frequently had the opportunity to point out and which often leads to forms of relativism. John Leonardi perceived what the real medicine for these spiritual evils was and summed it up in the expression: “Christ first of all”, Christ at the centre of the heart, at the centre of history and of the cosmos. And, St John said forcefully, humanity stands in extreme need of Christ because he is our “measure”. There is no area that cannot be touched by his power; there is no evil that cannot find a remedy in him, no problem that is not resolved in him. “Either Christ or nothing!”. This was his recipe for every type of spiritual and social reform.*

There is another aspect of St John Leonardi’s spirituality that I would like to emphasize. On various occasions he reasserted that the living encounter with Christ takes place in his Church, holy but frail, rooted in history and in its sometimes obscure unfolding, where wheat and weeds grow side by side (cf. Mt 13:30), yet always the sacrament of salvation. Since he was clearly aware that the Church is God’s field (cf. Mt 13:24), St John was not shocked at her human weaknesses. To combat the weeds he chose to be good wheat: that is, he decided to love Christ in the Church and to help make her, more and more, a transparent sign of Christ. He saw the Church very realistically, her human frailty, but he also saw her as being “God’s field”, the instrument of God for humanity’s salvation. And this was not all. Out of love for Christ he worked tirelessly to purify the Church, to make her more beautiful and holy. He realized that every reform should be made within the Church and never against the Church. In this, St John Leonardi was truly extraordinary and his example is ever timely. Every reform, of course, concerns her structures, but in the first place must have an effect in believers’ hearts. Only Saints, men and women who let themselves be guided by the divine Spirit, ready to make radical and courageous decisions in the light of the Gospel, renew the Church and make a crucial contribution to building a better world.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, St John Leonardi’s life was illumined throughout by the splendour of the “Holy Face” of Jesus, preserved and venerated in the Cathedral Church of Lucca, which has become an eloquent symbol and an indisputable synthesis of the faith that enlivened him. Conquered by*

*Christ, like the Apostle Paul, he pointed out to his followers and continues to point out to all of us, the Christocentric ideal for which “it is necessary to strip oneself of every personal interest and look only to the service of God”, keeping “before the eyes of the mind only the honour, service and glory of Jesus Christ Crucified”. Besides the Face of Christ, St John fixed his gaze on the motherly face of Mary. The One whom he chose to be Patroness of his Order was for him a teacher, sister and mother, and he experienced her constant protection. May the example and intercession of this “fascinating man of God” be a reference and an encouragement, particularly in this Year for Priests, for priests and for all Christians to live their own vocation with passionate enthusiasm.*

## **The Mendicant Orders**

13 January 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At the beginning of the New Year let us look at the history of Christianity, to see how history develops and how it can be renewed. It shows that saints, guided by God’s light, are the authentic reformers of the life of the Church and of society. As teachers with their words and witnesses with their example, they can encourage a stable and profound ecclesial renewal because they themselves are profoundly renewed, they are in touch with the real newness: God’s presence in the world. This comforting reality namely, that in every generation saints are born and bring the creativity of renewal constantly accompanies the Church’s history in the midst of the sorrows and negative aspects she encounters on her path. Indeed, century after century, we also see the birth of forces of reform and renewal, because God’s newness is inexhaustible and provides ever new strength to forge ahead. This also happened in the 13th century with the birth and the extraordinary development of the Mendicant Orders: an important model of renewal in a new historical epoch. They were given this name because of their characteristic feature of “begging”, in other words humbly turning to the people for financial support in order to live their vow of poverty and carry out their evangelizing mission. The best known and most important of the Mendicant Orders that came into being in this period are the Friars Minor and the Friars Preachers, known as Franciscans and Dominicans. Thus they are called by the names of their Founders, respectively Francis of Assisi and Dominic de Guzmán. These two great saints were able to read “the signs of the times” intelligently, perceiving the challenges that the Church of their time would be obliged to face.

A first challenge was the expansion of various groups and movements of the faithful who, in spite of being inspired by a legitimate desire for authentic Christian life often set themselves outside ecclesial communion. They were profoundly adverse to the rich and beautiful Church which had developed precisely with the flourishing of monasticism. In

recent Catecheses I have reflected on the monastic community of Cluny, which had always attracted young people, therefore vital forces, as well as property and riches. Thus, at the first stage, logically, a Church developed whose wealth was in property and also in buildings. The idea that Christ came down to earth poor and that the true Church must be the very Church of the poor clashed with this Church. The desire for true Christian authenticity was thus in contrast to the reality of the empirical Church. These were the so-called paupers' movements of the Middle Ages. They fiercely contested the way of life of the priests and monks of the time, accused of betraying the Gospel and of not practising poverty like the early Christians, and these movements countered the Bishops' ministry with their own "parallel hierarchy". Furthermore, to justify their decisions, they disseminated doctrine incompatible with the Catholic faith. For example, the Cathars' or Albigensians' movement reposed ancient heresies such as the debasement of and contempt for the material world the opposition to wealth soon became opposition to material reality as such, the denial of free will and, subsequently, dualism, the existence of a second principle of evil equivalent to God. These movements gained ground, especially in France and Italy, not only because of their solid organization but also because they were denouncing a real disorder in the Church, caused by the far from exemplary behaviour of some members of the clergy.

Both Franciscans and Dominicans, following in their Founders' footsteps, showed on the contrary that it was possible to live evangelical poverty, the truth of the Gospel as such, without being separated from the Church. They showed that the Church remains the true, authentic home of the Gospel and of Scripture. Indeed, Dominic and Francis drew the power of their witness precisely from close communion with the Church and the Papacy. With an entirely original decision in the history of consecrated life the Members of these Orders not only gave up their personal possessions, as monks had done since antiquity, but even did not want their land or goods to be made over to their communities. By so doing they meant to bear witness to an extremely modest life, to show solidarity to the poor and to trust in Providence alone, to live by Providence every day, trustingly placing themselves in God's hands. This personal and community style of the Mendicant Orders, together with total adherence to the teaching and authority of the Church, was deeply appreciated by the Pontiffs of the time, such as Innocent III and Honourius III, who gave their full support to the new ecclesial experiences, recognizing in them the voice of the Spirit. And results were not lacking: the groups of paupers that had separated from the Church returned to ecclesial communion or were gradually reduced until they disappeared. Today too, although we live in a society in which "having" often prevails over "being", we are very sensitive to the examples of poverty and solidarity that believers offer by their courageous decisions. Today too, similar projects are not lacking: the movements, which truly stem from the newness of the Gospel and

live it with radicalism in this day and age, placing themselves in God's hands to serve their neighbour. As Paul VI recalled in *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, the world listens willingly to teachers when they are also witnesses. This is a lesson never to be forgotten in the task of spreading the Gospel: to be a mirror reflecting divine love, one must first live what one proclaims.

The Franciscans and Dominicans were not only witnesses but also teachers. In fact, another widespread need in their time was for religious instruction. Many of the lay faithful who dwelled in the rapidly expanding cities, wanted to live an intensely spiritual Christian life. They therefore sought to deepen their knowledge of the faith and to be guided in the demanding but exciting path of holiness. The Mendicant Orders were felicitously able to meet this need too: the proclamation of the Gospel in simplicity and with its depth and grandeur was an aim, perhaps the principal aim, of this movement. Indeed, they devoted themselves with great zeal to preaching. Great throngs of the faithful, often true and proper crowds, would gather to listen to the preachers in the churches and in the open air; let us think, for example, of St Anthony. The preachers addressed topics close to people's lives, especially the practice of the theological and moral virtues, with practical examples that were easy to understand. They also taught ways to cultivate a life of prayer and devotion. For example, the Franciscans spread far and wide the devotion to the humanity of Christ, with the commitment to imitate the Lord. Thus it is hardly surprising that many of the faithful, men and women, chose to be accompanied on their Christian journey by Franciscan or Dominican Friars, who were much sought after and esteemed spiritual directors and confessors. In this way associations of lay faithful came into being, which drew inspiration from the spirituality of St Francis and St Dominic as it was adapted to their way of living. In other words, the proposal of a "lay holiness" won many people over. As the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council recalled, the call to holiness is not reserved to the few but is universal (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 40). In all the states of life, in accordance with the demands of each one of them a possibility of living the Gospel may be found. In our day too, each and every Christian must strive for the "high standard of Christian living", whatever the class to which he or she belongs!

The importance of the Mendicant Orders thus grew so vigorously in the Middle Ages that secular institutions, such as the labour organizations, the ancient guilds and the civil authorities themselves, often had recourse to the spiritual counselling of Members of these Orders in order to draw up their regulations and, at times, to settle both internal and external conflicts. The Franciscans and Dominicans became the spiritual animators of the medieval city. With deep insight they put into practice a pastoral strategy suited to the social changes. Since many people were moving from the countryside to the cities, they no longer built their convents in rural districts but rather in urban zones.

Furthermore, to carry out their activities for the benefit of souls they had to keep abreast of pastoral needs. With another entirely innovative decision, the Mendicant Orders relinquished their principle of stability, a classical principle of ancient monasticism, opting for a different approach. Friars Minor and Preachers travelled with missionary zeal from one place to another. Consequently they organized themselves differently in comparison with the majority of monastic Orders. Instead of the traditional autonomy that every monastery enjoyed, they gave greater importance to the Order as such and to the Superior General, as well as to the structure of the Provinces. Thus the Mendicants were more available to the needs of the universal Church. Their flexibility enabled them to send out the most suitable friars on specific missions and the Mendicant Orders reached North Africa, the Middle East and Northern Europe. With this adaptability, their missionary dynamism was renewed.

The cultural transformations taking place in that period constituted another great challenge. New issues enlivened the discussion in the universities that came into being at the end of the 12th century. Minors and Preachers did not hesitate to take on this commitment. As students and professors they entered the most famous universities of the time, set up study centres, produced texts of great value, gave life to true and proper schools of thought, were protagonists of scholastic theology in its best period and had an important effect on the development of thought. The greatest thinkers, St Thomas Aquinas and St Bonaventure, were Mendicants who worked precisely with this dynamism of the new evangelization which also renewed the courage of thought, of the dialogue between reason and faith. Today too a “charity of and in the truth” exists, an “intellectual charity” that must be exercised to enlighten minds and to combine faith with culture. The dedication of the Franciscans and Dominicans in the medieval universities is an invitation, dear faithful, to make ourselves present in the places where knowledge is tempered so as to focus the light of the Gospel, with respect and conviction, on the fundamental questions that concern Man, his dignity and his eternal destiny. Thinking of the role of the Franciscans and the Dominicans in the Middle Ages, of the spiritual renewal they inspired and of the breath of new life they communicated in the world, a monk said: “At that time the world was ageing. Two Orders were born in the Church whose youth they renewed like that of an eagle” (Burchard of Ursperg, *Chronicon*).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, at the very beginning of this year let us invoke the Holy Spirit, the eternal youth of the Church: may he make each one aware of the urgent need to offer a consistent and courageous Gospel witness so that there may always be saints who make the Church resplendent,*



*like a bride, ever pure and beautiful, without spot or wrinkle, who can attract the world irresistibly to Christ and to his salvation.*

## **Saint Francis of Assisi**

27 January 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In a recent Catechesis, I illustrated the providential role the Orders of Friars Minor and the Order of Preachers, founded by St Francis of Assisi and St Dominic de Guzmán respectively, played in the renewal of the Church in their day. Today I would like to present to you the figure of Francis, an authentic “giant” of holiness, who continues to fascinate a great many people of all age groups and every religion.

“A sun was born into the world”. With these words, in the Divine Comedy (*Paradiso*, Canto XI), the great Italian poet Dante Alighieri alludes to Francis’ birth, which took place in Assisi either at the end of 1181 or the beginning of 1182. As part of a rich family his father was a cloth merchant Francis lived a carefree adolescence and youth, cultivating the chivalrous ideals of the time. At age 20, he took part in a military campaign and was taken prisoner. He became ill and was freed. After his return to Assisi, a slow process of spiritual conversion began within him, which brought him to gradually abandon the worldly lifestyle that he had adopted thus far. The famous episodes of Francis’ meeting with the leper to whom, dismounting from his horse, he gave the kiss of peace and of the message from the Crucifix in the small Church of St Damian, date back to this period. Three times Christ on the Cross came to life, and told him: “Go, Francis, and repair my Church in ruins”. This simple occurrence of the word of God heard in the Church of St Damian contains a profound symbolism. At that moment St Francis was called to repair the small church, but the ruinous state of the building was a symbol of the dramatic and disquieting situation of the Church herself. At that time the Church had a superficial faith which did not shape or transform life, a scarcely zealous clergy, and a chilling of love. It was an interior destruction of the Church which also brought a decomposition of unity, with the birth of heretical movements. Yet, there at the centre of the Church in ruins was the Crucified Lord, and he spoke: he called for renewal, he called Francis to the manual labour of repairing the small Church of St Damian, the symbol of a much deeper call to renew Christ’s own Church, with her radicality of faith and her loving enthusiasm for Christ. This event, which probably happened in 1205, calls to mind another similar occurrence which took place in 1207: Pope Innocent III’s dream. In it, he saw the Basilica of St John Lateran, the mother of all churches, collapsing and one small and insignificant religious brother supporting the church on his shoulders to prevent it from falling. On

the one hand, it is interesting to note that it is not the Pope who was helping to prevent the church from collapsing but rather a small and insignificant brother, whom the Pope recognized in Francis when he later came to visit. Innocent III was a powerful Pope who had a great theological formation and great political influence; nevertheless he was not the one to renew the Church but the small, insignificant religious. It was St Francis, called by God. On the other hand, however, it is important to note that St Francis does not renew the Church without or in opposition to the Pope, but only in communion with him. The two realities go together: the Successor of Peter, the Bishops, the Church founded on the succession of the Apostles and the new charism that the Holy Spirit brought to life at that time for the Church's renewal. Authentic renewal grew from these together.

Let us return to the life of St Francis. When his father Bernardone reproached him for being too generous to the poor, Francis, standing before the Bishop of Assisi, in a symbolic gesture, stripped off his clothes, thus showing he renounced his paternal inheritance. Just as at the moment of creation, Francis had nothing, only the life that God gave him, into whose hands he delivered himself. He then lived as a hermit, until, in 1208, another fundamental step in his journey of conversion took place. While listening to a passage from the Gospel of Matthew Jesus' discourse to the apostles whom he sent out on mission Francis felt called to live in poverty and dedicate himself to preaching. Other companions joined him, and in 1209 he travelled to Rome, to propose to Pope Innocent III the plan for a new form of Christian life. He received a fatherly welcome from that great Pontiff, who, enlightened by the Lord, perceived the divine origin of the movement inspired by Francis. The *Poverello* of Assisi understood that every charism as a gift of the Holy Spirit existed to serve the Body of Christ, which is the Church; therefore he always acted in full communion with the ecclesial authorities. In the life of the Saints there is no contradiction between prophetic charism and the charism of governance, and if tension arises, they know to patiently await the times determined by the Holy Spirit.

Actually, several 19th-century and also 20th-century historians have sought to construct a so-called historical Francis, behind the traditional depiction of the Saint, just as they sought to create a so-called historical Jesus behind the Jesus of the Gospels. This historical Francis would not have been a man of the Church, but rather a man connected directly and solely to Christ, a man that wanted to bring about a renewal of the People of God, without canonical forms or hierarchy. The truth is that St Francis really did have an extremely intimate relationship with Jesus and with the word of God, that he wanted to pursue *sine glossa*: just as it is, in all its radicality and truth. It is also true that initially he did not intend to create an Order with the necessary canonical forms. Rather he simply wanted, through the word of God and the presence of the Lord, to renew the People of God, to call them back to listening to the word and to literal obedience to Christ.

Furthermore, he knew that Christ was never “mine” but is always “ours”, that “I” cannot possess Christ that “I” cannot rebuild in opposition to the Church, her will and her teaching. Instead it is only in communion with the Church built on the Apostolic succession that obedience too, to the word of God can be renewed.

It is also true that Francis had no intention of creating a new Order, but solely that of renewing the People of God for the Lord who comes. He understood, however, through suffering and pain that everything must have its own order and that the law of the Church is necessary to give shape to renewal. Thus he placed himself fully, with his heart, in communion with the Church, with the Pope and with the Bishops. He always knew that the centre of the Church is the Eucharist, where the Body of Christ and his Blood are made present through the priesthood, the Eucharist and the communion of the Church. Wherever the priesthood and the Eucharist and the Church come together, it is there alone that the word of God also dwells. The real historical Francis was the Francis of the Church, and precisely in this way he continues to speak to non-believers and believers of other confessions and religions as well.

Francis and his friars, who were becoming ever more numerous, established themselves at the Portiuncula, or the Church of Santa Maria degli Angeli, the sacred place par excellence of Franciscan spirituality. Even Clare, a young woman of Assisi from a noble family, followed the school of Francis. This became the origin of the Second Franciscan Order, that of the Poor Clares, another experience destined to produce outstanding figures of sainthood in the Church.

Innocent III's Successor, Pope Honorius III, with his Bull *Cum Dilecti* in 1218 supported the unique development of the first Friars Minor, who started missions in different European countries, and even in Morocco. In 1219 Francis obtained permission to visit and speak to the Muslim sultan Malik al-Kmil, to preach the Gospel of Jesus there too. I would like to highlight this episode in St Francis' life, which is very timely. In an age when there was a conflict underway between Christianity and Islam, Francis, intentionally armed only with his faith and personal humility, travelled the path of dialogue effectively. The chronicles tell us that he was given a benevolent welcome and a cordial reception by the Muslim Sultan. It provides a model which should inspire today's relations between Christians and Muslims: to promote a sincere dialogue, in reciprocal respect and mutual understanding (cf. *Nostra Aetate*, 3). It appears that later, in 1220, Francis visited the Holy Land, thus sowing a seed that would bear much fruit: his spiritual sons would in fact make of the Sites where Jesus lived a privileged space for their mission. It is with gratitude that I think today of the great merits of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land.

On his return to Italy, Francis turned over the administration of his Order to his vicar, Br Pietro Cattani, while the Pope entrusted the rapidly growing Order's protection to Cardinal Ugolino, the future Supreme Pontiff Gregory IX. For his part, the Founder, dedicated completely to his preaching, which he carried out with great success, compiled his Rule that was then approved by the Pope.

In 1224, at the hermitage in La Verna, Francis had a vision of the Crucified Lord in the form of a seraph and from that encounter received the stigmata from the Seraph Crucifix, thus becoming one with the Crucified Christ. It was a gift, therefore, that expressed his intimate identification with the Lord.

The death of Francis his *transitus* occurred on the evening of 3 October 1226, in the Portiuncula. After having blessed his spiritual children, he died, lying on the bare earthen floor. Two years later Pope Gregory ix entered him in the roll of saints. A short time after, a great basilica in his honour was constructed in Assisi, still today an extremely popular pilgrim destination. There pilgrims can venerate the Saint's tomb and take in the frescoes by Giotto, an artist who has magnificently illustrated Francis' life.

It has been said that Francis represents an *alter Christus*, that he was truly a living icon of Christ. He has also been called "the brother of Jesus". Indeed, this was his ideal: to be like Jesus, to contemplate Christ in the Gospel, to love him intensely and to imitate his virtues. In particular, he wished to ascribe interior and exterior poverty with a fundamental value, which he also taught to his spiritual sons. The first Beatitude of the Sermon on the Mount "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 5:3) found a luminous fulfilment in the life and words of St Francis. Truly, dear friends, the saints are the best interpreters of the Bible. As they incarnate the word of God in their own lives, they make it more captivating than ever, so that it really speaks to us. The witness of Francis, who loved poverty as a means to follow Christ with dedication and total freedom, continues to be for us too an invitation to cultivate interior poverty in order to grow in our trust of God, also by adopting a sober lifestyle and a detachment from material goods.

Francis' love for Christ expressed itself in a special way in the adoration of the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. In the *Fonti Francescane* (Writings of St Francis) one reads such moving expressions as: "Let everyone be struck with fear, let the whole world tremble, and let the heavens exult, when Christ, the Son of the living God, is present on the altar in the hands of a priest. Oh stupendous dignity! O humble sublimity, that the Lord of the universe, God and the Son of God, so humbles himself that for our salvation he hides himself under an ordinary piece of bread" (Francis of Assisi, *Scritti*, Editrici Francescane, Padova 2002, 401).

In this Year for Priests, I would also like to recall a piece of advice that Francis gave to priests: “When you wish to celebrate Mass, in a pure way, reverently make the true sacrifice of the Most Holy Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ” (Francis of Assisi, *Scritti*, 399). Francis always showed great deference towards priests, and asserted that they should always be treated with respect, even in cases where they might be somewhat unworthy personally. The reason he gave for this profound respect was that they receive the gift of consecrating the Eucharist. Dear brothers in the priesthood, let us never forget this teaching: the holiness of the Eucharist appeals to us to be pure, to live in a way that is consistent with the Mystery we celebrate.

From love for Christ stems love for others and also for all God’s creatures. This is yet another characteristic trait of Francis’ spirituality: the sense of universal brotherhood and love for Creation, which inspired the famous *Canticle of Creatures*. This too is an extremely timely message. As I recalled in my recent Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, development is sustainable only when it respects Creation and does not damage the environment (cf. nn. 48–52), and in the Message for the World Day of Peace this year, I also underscored that even building stable peace is linked to respect for Creation. Francis reminds us that the wisdom and benevolence of the Creator is expressed through Creation. He understood nature as a language in which God speaks to us, in which reality becomes clear, and we can speak *of* God and *with* God.

Dear friends, Francis was a great Saint and a joyful man. His simplicity, his humility, his faith, his love for Christ, his goodness towards every man and every woman, brought him gladness in every circumstance. Indeed, there subsists an intimate and indissoluble relationship between holiness and joy. A French writer once wrote that there is only one sorrow in the world: not to be saints, that is, not to be near to God. Looking at the testimony of St Francis, we understand that this is the secret of true happiness: to become saints, close to God!

May the Virgin, so tenderly loved by Francis, obtain this gift for us. Let us entrust ourselves to her with the words of the *Poverello* of Assisi himself: “Blessed Virgin Mary, no one like you among women has ever been born in the world, daughter and handmaid of the Most High King and heavenly Father, Mother of our Most Blessed Lord Jesus Christ, spouse of the Holy Spirit. Pray for us ... to your most blessed and beloved Son, Lord and Master” (Francesco di Assisi, *Scritti*, 163).

## **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

A warm welcome to all of the English-speaking pilgrims present at today’s Audience! I particularly greet high school students from Jordan and Israel, members of the initiative

*Aqabat Eilat: "one more step towards peace"*, students and faculty from the Bossey Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies, as well as pilgrims from England, Gibraltar, Hong Kong and the United States. God bless you all!

### **Appeal on the Day of Memory**

Seventy-five years ago, on 27 January 1945, the gates of the Nazi concentration camp were opened in the Polish city of Oswiecim known in German as Auschwitz and the few remaining survivors were freed. This event and the testimonies of the survivors reveal to the world the horror of the unprecedented crimes committed in the extermination camps created by Nazi Germany. Today, we observe the "Day of Memory", in remembrance of all the victims of those crimes, especially of the planned extermination of the Jews, and of all those who, in the face of homicidal madness, risked their lives to protect the persecuted. Our hearts are moved as we think of the countless victims of a blind religious and racial hatred who suffered deportation, imprisonment and death in those abhorrent and inhuman places. The memory of these events, particularly of the tragedy of the *Shoah* that struck the Hebrew people, evokes the need for an ever more earnest respect for the dignity of every person, so that all men and women may see themselves as part of one large family. May God almighty illuminate our hearts and minds, so that these kinds of tragedies may never be repeated!

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*3 February*

## **Saint Dominic Guzmán**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last week I presented the luminous figure of Francis of Assisi; today I want to talk about another Saint of the same period who made a fundamental contribution to the renewal of the Church of his time: St Dominic, the Founder of the Order of Preachers, also known as Dominican Friars.

His successor at the head of the Order, Bl. Jordan of Saxony, gives a complete picture of St Dominic in the text of a famous prayer: "Your strong love burned with heavenly fire and God-like zeal. With all the fervour of an impetuous heart and with an avowal of perfect poverty, you spent your whole self in the cause of the Apostolic life" and in preaching the Gospel. It is precisely this fundamental trait of Dominic's witness that is emphasized: he always spoke *with* God and *of* God. Love for the Lord and for neighbour, the search for God's glory and the salvation of souls in the lives of Saints always go hand in hand.

Dominic was born at Caleruega, Spain, in about 1170. He belonged to a noble family of Old Castile and, supported by a priest uncle, was educated at a famous school in Palencia. He distinguished himself straight away for his interest in the study of Sacred Scripture and for his love of the poor, to the point of selling books, that in his time were a very valuable asset, in order to support famine victims with the proceeds.

Ordained a priest, he was elected canon of the Cathedral Chapter in Osma, his native diocese. Although he may well have thought that this appointment might bring him a certain amount of prestige in the Church and in society, he did not view it as a personal privilege or as the beginning of a brilliant ecclesiastical career but, rather, as a service to carry out with dedication and humility. Are not a career and power temptations from which not even those who have a role of guidance and governance in the Church are exempt? I recalled this a few months ago during the consecration of several Bishops: “We do not seek power, prestige or esteem for ourselves.... We know how in civil society and often also in the Church things suffer because many people on whom responsibility has been conferred work for themselves rather than for the community” (16 September 2009).

The Bishop of Osma, a true and zealous Pastor whose name was Didacus, soon spotted Dominic’s spiritual qualities and wanted to avail himself of his collaboration. Together they went to Northern Europe, on the diplomatic missions entrusted to them by the King of Castile. On his travels Dominic became aware of two enormous challenges for the Church of his time: the existence of people who were not yet evangelized on the northern boundaries of the European continent, and the religious schism that undermined Christian life in the South of France where the activity of certain heretical groups was creating a disturbance and distancing people from the truth of the faith. So it was that missionary action for those who did not know the light of the Gospel and the work of the re-evangelization of Christian communities became the apostolic goals that Dominic resolved to pursue.

It was the Pope, to whom the Bishop Didacus and Dominic went to seek advice, who asked Dominic to devote himself to preaching to the Albigensians, a heretical group which upheld a dualistic conception of reality, that is, with two equally powerful creator principles, Good and Evil. This group consequently despised matter as coming from the principle of evil. They even refused marriage, and went to the point of denying the Incarnation of Christ and the sacraments in which the Lord “touches” us through matter, and the resurrection of bodies. The Albigensians esteemed the poor and austere life in this regard they were even exemplary and criticized the riches of the clergy of that time. Dominic enthusiastically accepted this mission and carried it out with the example of his own poor and austere existence, Gospel preaching and public discussions. He devoted the rest of his life to this mission of preaching the Good News. His sons were also to

make St Dominic's other dreams come true: the mission *ad gentes*, that is, to those who do not yet know Jesus and the mission to those who lived in the cities, especially the university cities where the new intellectual trends were a challenge to the faith of the cultured.

This great Saint reminds us that in the heart of the Church a missionary fire must always burn. It must be a constant incentive to make the first proclamation of the Gospel and, wherever necessary, a new evangelization. Christ, in fact, is the most precious good that the men and women of every time and every place have the right to know and love! And it is comforting to see that in the Church today too there are many pastors and lay faithful alike, members of ancient religious orders and new ecclesial movements who spend their lives joyfully for this supreme ideal, proclaiming and witnessing to the Gospel!

Many other men then joined Dominic de Guzmán, attracted by the same aspiration. In this manner, after the first foundation in Toulouse, the Order of Preachers gradually came into being. Dominic in fact, in perfect obedience to the directives of the Popes of his time, Innocent iii, and Honorius iii, used the ancient Rule of St Augustine, adapting it to the needs of apostolic life that led him and his companions to preach as they travelled from one place to another but then returning to their own convents and places of study, to prayer and community life. Dominic wanted to give special importance to two values he deemed indispensable for the success of the evangelizing mission: community life in poverty and study.

First of all Dominic and the Friars Preachers presented themselves as mendicants, that is, without vast estates to be administered. This element made them more available for study and itinerant preaching and constituted a practical witness for the people. The internal government of the Dominican convents and provinces was structured on the system of chapters which elected their own superiors, who were subsequently confirmed by the major superiors; thus it was an organization that stimulated fraternal life and the responsibility of all the members of the community, demanding strong personal convictions. The choice of this system was born precisely from the fact that as preachers of the truth of God, the Dominicans had to be consistent with what they proclaimed. The truth studied and shared in charity with the brethren is the deepest foundation of joy. Blessed Jordan of Saxony said of St Dominic: "All men were swept into the embrace of his charity, and, in loving all, he was beloved by all.... He claimed it his right to rejoice with the joyful and to weep with the sorrowful" (*Libellus de principiis Ordinis Praedicatorum autore Iordano de Saxonia*, ed. H.C. Scheeben [*Monumenta Historica Sancti Patris Nostri Dominici*, Romae, 1935]).

Secondly, with a courageous gesture, Dominic wanted his followers to acquire a sound theological training and did not hesitate to send them to the universities of the time,



even though a fair number of clerics viewed these cultural institutions with diffidence. The Constitutions of the Order of Preachers give great importance to study as a preparation for the apostolate. Dominic wanted his Friars to devote themselves to it without reserve, with diligence and with piety; a study based on the soul of all theological knowledge, that is, on Sacred Scripture, and respectful of the questions asked by reason. The development of culture requires those who carry out the ministry of the Word at various levels to be well trained. I therefore urge all those, pastors and lay people alike, to cultivate this “cultural dimension” of faith, so that the beauty of the Christian truth may be better understood and faith may be truly nourished, reinforced and also defended. In this Year for Priests, I ask seminarians and priests to esteem the spiritual value of study. The quality of the priestly ministry also depends on the generosity with which one applies oneself to the study of the revealed truths.

Dominic, who wished to found a religious Order of theologian-preachers, reminds us that theology has a spiritual and pastoral dimension that enriches the soul and life. Priests, the consecrated and also all the faithful may find profound “inner joy” in contemplating the beauty of the truth that comes from God, a truth that is ever timely and ever alive. Moreover the motto of the Friars Preachers *contemplata aliis tradere* helps us to discover a pastoral yearning in the contemplative study of this truth because of the need to communicate to others the fruit of one’s own contemplation.

When Dominic died in 1221 in Bologna, the city that declared him its Patron, his work had already had widespread success. The Order of Preachers, with the Holy See’s support, had spread to many countries in Europe for the benefit of the whole Church. Dominic was canonized in 1234 and it is he himself who, with his holiness, points out to us two indispensable means for making apostolic action effective. In the very first place is Marian devotion which he fostered tenderly and left as a precious legacy to his spiritual sons who, in the history of the Church, have had the great merit of disseminating the prayer of the Holy Rosary, so dear to the Christian people and so rich in Gospel values: a true school of faith and piety. In the second place, Dominic, who cared for several women’s monasteries in France and in Rome, believed unquestioningly in the value of prayers of intercession for the success of the apostolic work. Only in Heaven will we understand how much the prayer of cloistered religious effectively accompanies apostolic action! To each and every one of them I address my grateful and affectionate thoughts.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the life of Dominic de Guzmán spur us all to be fervent in prayer, courageous in living out our faith and deeply in love with Jesus Christ. Through his intercession, let us ask God always to enrich the Church with authentic preachers of the Gospel.*

## **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Nigeria and the United States. My greetings also go to the students present, including those from Loyola University Chicago, Rome Campus. Upon all of you I willingly invoke God's abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I wish to address my thought to you, dear *young people, sick people* and *newlyweds*. Today is the liturgical Memorial of the Martyr St Blaise, and in the next few days we shall commemorate other martyrs, St Agatha, and the Japanese St Paul Miki and his companions.

May the courage of these heroic witnesses of Christ help you, dear *young people*, to open your hearts to the heroism of holiness; may it sustain you, dear *sick people*, in offering up the precious gift of prayer and suffering for the Church; and may it give you, dear *newlyweds*, the strength to impress the Christian values on your families.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*10 February*

## **Saint Anthony of Padua**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Two weeks ago I presented St Francis of Assisi. This morning I would like to speak of another saint who belonged to the first generation of the Friars Minor: Anthony of Padua, or of Lisbon, as he is also called with reference to his native town. He is one of the most popular Saints in the whole Catholic Church, venerated not only in Padua, where a splendid Basilica has been built that contains his mortal remains, but also throughout the world. Dear to the faithful are the images and statues that portray him with the lily a symbol of his purity or with the Child Jesus in his arms, in memory of a miraculous apparition mentioned in several literary sources.

With his outstanding gifts of intelligence, balance, apostolic zeal and, primarily, mystic fervour, Anthony contributed significantly to the development of Franciscan spirituality.

He was born into a noble family in Lisbon in about 1195 and was baptized with the name of Fernando. He entered the Canons who followed the monastic Rule of St Augustine, first at St Vincent's Monastery in Lisbon and later at that of the Holy Cross in Coimbra, a renowned cultural centre in Portugal. He dedicated himself with interest and solicitude to the study of the Bible and of the Church Fathers, acquiring the theological knowledge that was to bear fruit in his teaching and preaching activities. The event that represented

a decisive turning point on his life happened in Coimbra. It was there, in 1220, that the relics were exposed of the first five Franciscan missionaries who had gone to Morocco, where they had met with martyrdom. Their story inspired in young Fernando the desire to imitate them and to advance on the path of Christian perfection. Thus he asked to leave the Augustinian Canons to become a Friar Minor. His request was granted and, having taken the name of Anthony, he too set out for Morocco, but divine Providence disposed otherwise. After an illness he was obliged to return to Italy and, in 1221, participated in the famous “Chapter of the Mats” in Assisi, where he also met St Francis. He then lived for a period in complete concealment in a convent at Forlì in northern Italy, where the Lord called him to another mission. Invited, in somewhat casual circumstances, to preach on the occasion of a priestly ordination, he showed himself to be endowed with such knowledge and eloquence that the Superiors assigned him to preaching. Thus he embarked on apostolic work in Italy and France that was so intense and effective that it induced many people who had left the Church to retrace their footsteps. Anthony was also one of the first if not the first theology teachers of the Friars Minor. He began his teaching in Bologna with the blessing of St Francis who, recognizing Anthony’s virtues, sent him a short letter that began with these words: “I would like you to teach the brethren theology”. Anthony laid the foundations of Franciscan theology which, cultivated by other outstanding thinkers, was to reach its apex with St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and Bl. Duns Scotus.

Having become Provincial Superior of the Friars Minor in northern Italy, he continued his ministry of preaching, alternating it with his office of governance. When his term as Provincial came to an end, he withdrew to a place near Padua where he had stayed on various other occasions. Barely a year later, he died at the city gates on 13 June 1231. Padua, which had welcomed him with affection and veneration in his lifetime, has always accorded him honour and devotion. Pope Gregory IX himself, having heard him preach, described him as the “Ark of the Testament” and subsequent to miracles brought about through his intercession canonized him in 1232, only a year after his death.

In the last period of his life, Anthony put in writing two cycles of “Sermons”, entitled respectively “Sunday Sermons” and “Sermons on the Saints” destined for the Franciscan Order’s preachers and teachers of theological studies. In these Sermons he commented on the texts of Scripture presented by the Liturgy, using the patristic and medieval interpretation of the four senses: the literal or historical, the allegorical or Christological, the tropological or moral, and the anagogical, which orients a person to eternal life. Today it has been rediscovered that these senses are dimensions of the one meaning of Sacred Scripture and that it is right to interpret Sacred Scripture by seeking the four dimensions of its words. St Anthony’s sermons are theological and homiletical texts that echo the live preaching in which Anthony proposes a true and proper itinerary of

Christian life. The richness of spiritual teaching contained in the “Sermons” was so great that in 1946 Venerable Pope Pius XII proclaimed Anthony a Doctor of the Church, attributing to him the title “Doctor Evangelicus”, since the freshness and beauty of the Gospel emerge from these writings. We can still read them today with great spiritual profit.

In these Sermons St Anthony speaks of prayer as of a loving relationship that impels man to speak gently with the Lord, creating an ineffable joy that sweetly enfolds the soul in prayer. Anthony reminds us that prayer requires an atmosphere of silence, which does not mean distance from external noise but rather is an interior experience that aims to remove the distractions caused by a soul's anxieties, thereby creating silence in the soul itself. According to this prominent Franciscan Doctor's teaching, prayer is structured in four indispensable attitudes which in Anthony's Latin are defined as *obsecratio, oratio, postulatio, gratiarum actio*. We might translate them in the following manner. The first step in prayer is confidently opening one's heart to God; this is not merely accepting a word but opening one's heart to God's presence. Next, is speaking with him affectionately, seeing him present with oneself; then a very natural thing presenting our needs to him; and lastly, praising and thanking him.

In St Anthony's teaching on prayer we perceive one of the specific traits of the Franciscan theology that he founded: namely the role assigned to divine love which enters into the sphere of the affections, of the will and of the heart, and which is also the source from which flows a spiritual knowledge that surpasses all other knowledge. In fact, it is in loving that we come to know.

Anthony writes further: “Charity is the soul of faith, it gives it life; without love, faith dies” (*Sermones Dominicales et Festivi II*, Messagero, Padua 1979, p. 37).

It is only the prayerful soul that can progress in spiritual life: this is the privileged object of St Anthony's preaching. He is thoroughly familiar with the shortcomings of human nature, with our tendency to lapse into sin, which is why he continuously urges us to fight the inclination to avarice, pride and impurity; instead of practising the virtues of poverty and generosity, of humility and obedience, of chastity and of purity. At the beginning of the 13th century, in the context of the rebirth of the city and the flourishing of trade, the number of people who were insensitive to the needs of the poor increased. This is why on various occasions Anthony invites the faithful to think of the true riches, those of the heart, which make people good and merciful and permit them to lay up treasure in Heaven. “O rich people”, he urged them, “befriend ... the poor, welcome them into your homes: it will subsequently be they who receive you in the eternal tabernacles in which is the beauty of peace, the confidence of security and the opulent tranquillity of eternal satiety” (*ibid.*, p. 29).

Is not this, dear friends, perhaps a very important teaching today too, when the financial crisis and serious economic inequalities impoverish many people and create conditions of poverty? In my Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* I recall: “The economy needs ethics in order to function correctly not any ethics whatsoever, but an ethics which is people-centred” (n. 45).

Anthony, in the school of Francis, always put Christ at the centre of his life and thinking, of his action and of his preaching. This is another characteristic feature of Franciscan theology: Christocentrism. Franciscan theology willingly contemplates and invites others to contemplate the mysteries of the Lord’s humanity, the man Jesus, and in a special way the mystery of the Nativity: God who made himself a Child and gave himself into our hands, a mystery that gives rise to sentiments of love and gratitude for divine goodness.

Not only the Nativity, a central point of Christ’s love for humanity, but also the vision of the Crucified One inspired in Anthony thoughts of gratitude to God and esteem for the dignity of the human person, so that all believers and non-believers might find in the Crucified One and in his image a life-enriching meaning. St Anthony writes: “Christ who is your life is hanging before you, so that you may look at the Cross as in a mirror. There you will be able to know how mortal were your wounds, that no medicine other than the Blood of the Son of God could heal. If you look closely, you will be able to realize how great your human dignity and your value are.... Nowhere other than looking at himself in the mirror of the Cross can man better understand how much he is worth” (*Sermones Dominicales et Festivi* III, pp. 213–214).

In meditating on these words we are better able to understand the importance of the image of the Crucified One for our culture, for our humanity that is born from the Christian faith. Precisely by looking at the Crucified One we see, as St Anthony says, how great are the dignity and worth of the human being. At no other point can we understand how much the human person is worth, precisely because God makes us so important, considers us so important that, in his opinion, we are worthy of his suffering; thus all human dignity appears in the mirror of the Crucified One and our gazing upon him is ever a source of acknowledgement of human dignity.

Dear friends, may Anthony of Padua, so widely venerated by the faithful, intercede for the whole Church and especially for those who are dedicated to preaching; let us pray the Lord that he will help us learn a little of this art from St Anthony. May preachers, drawing inspiration from his example, be effective in their communication by taking pains to combine solid and sound doctrine with sincere and fervent devotion. In this Year for Priests, let us pray that priests and deacons will carry out with concern this ministry of the proclamation of the word of God, making it timely for the faithful, especially through liturgical homilies. May they effectively present the eternal beauty of Christ, just as

Anthony recommended: “If you preach Jesus, he will melt hardened hearts; if you invoke him he will soften harsh temptations; if you think of him he will enlighten your mind; if you read of him he will satisfy your intellect” (*Sermones Dominicales et Festivi* III, p. 59).

I am pleased to offer a warm welcome to the Delegation of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America here with us today. I also greet all the English-speaking visitors present at this Audience, especially those from England, Denmark and the United States. Upon all of you I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace!

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*17 February*

## **Saint Bonaventure**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk about St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. I confide to you that in broaching this subject I feel a certain nostalgia, for I am thinking back to my research as a young scholar on this author who was particularly dear to me. My knowledge of him had quite an impact on my formation. A few months ago, with great joy, I made a pilgrimage to the place of his birth, Bagnoregio, an Italian town in Lazio that venerates his memory.

St Bonaventure, in all likelihood born in 1217, died in 1274. Thus he lived in the 13th century, an epoch in which the Christian faith which had deeply penetrated the culture and society of Europe inspired imperishable works in the fields of literature, the visual arts, philosophy and theology. Among the great Christian figures who contributed to the composition of this harmony between faith and culture Bonaventure stands out, a man of action and contemplation, of profound piety and prudent government.

He was called Giovanni di Fidanza. An episode that occurred when he was still a boy deeply marked his life, as he himself recounts. He fell seriously ill and even his father, who was a doctor, gave up all hope of saving him from death. So his mother had recourse to the intercession of St Francis of Assisi, who had recently been canonized. And Giovanni recovered.

The figure of the *Poverello* of Assisi became even more familiar to him several years later when he was in Paris, where he had gone to pursue his studies. He had obtained a Master of Arts Diploma, which we could compare with that of a prestigious secondary school in our time. At that point, like so many young men in the past and also today, Giovanni asked himself a crucial question: “What should I do with my life?”. Fascinated by the witness of fervour and evangelical radicalism of the Friars Minor who had arrived in

Paris in 1219, Giovanni knocked at the door of the Franciscan convent in that city and asked to be admitted to the great family of St Francis' disciples. Many years later he explained the reasons for his decision: he recognized Christ's action in St Francis and in the movement he had founded. Thus he wrote in a letter addressed to another friar: "I confess before God that the reason which made me love the life of blessed Francis most is that it resembled the birth and early development of the Church. The Church began with simple fishermen, and was subsequently enriched by very distinguished and wise teachers; the religion of Blessed Francis was not established by the prudence of men but by Christ" (*Epistula de tribus quaestionibus ad magistrum innominatum*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Introduzione generale*, Rome 1990, p. 29).

So it was that in about the year 1243 Giovanni was clothed in the Franciscan habit and took the name "Bonaventure". He was immediately sent to study and attended the Faculty of Theology of the University of Paris where he took a series of very demanding courses. He obtained the various qualifications required for an academic career earning a bachelor's degree in Scripture and in the *Sentences*. Thus Bonaventure studied profoundly Sacred Scripture, the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard the theology manual in that time and the most important theological authors. He was in contact with the teachers and students from across Europe who converged in Paris and he developed his own personal thinking and a spiritual sensitivity of great value with which, in the following years, he was able to infuse his works and his sermons, thus becoming one of the most important theologians in the history of the Church. It is important to remember the title of the thesis he defended in order to qualify to teach theology, the *licentia ubique docendi*, as it was then called. His dissertation was entitled *Questions on the knowledge of Christ*. This subject reveals the central role that Christ always played in Bonaventure's life and teaching. We may certainly say that the whole of his thinking was profoundly Christocentric.

In those years in Paris, Bonaventure's adopted city, a violent dispute was raging against the Friars Minor of St Francis Assisi and the Friars Preachers of St Dominic de Guzmán. Their right to teach at the university was contested and doubt was even being cast upon the authenticity of their consecrated life. Of course, the changes introduced by the Mendicant Orders in the way of understanding religious life, of which I have spoken in previous Catecheses, were so entirely new that not everyone managed to understand them. Then it should be added, just as sometimes happens even among sincerely religious people, that human weakness, such as envy and jealousy, came into play. Although Bonaventure was confronted by the opposition of the other university masters, he had already begun to teach at the Franciscans' Chair of theology and, to respond to those who were challenging the Mendicant Orders, he composed a text entitled *Evangelical Perfection*. In this work he shows how the Mendicant Orders, especially the

Friars Minor, in practising the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, were following the recommendations of the Gospel itself. Over and above these historical circumstances the teaching that Bonaventure provides in this work of his and in his life remains every timely: the Church is made more luminous and beautiful by the fidelity to their vocation of those sons and daughters of hers who not only put the evangelical precepts into practice but, by the grace of God, are called to observe their counsels and thereby, with their poor, chaste and obedient way of life, to witness to the Gospel as a source of joy and perfection.

The storm blew over, at least for a while, and through the personal intervention of Pope Alexander IV in 1257, Bonaventure was officially recognized as a doctor and master of the University of Paris. However, he was obliged to relinquish this prestigious office because in that same year the General Chapter of the Order elected him Minister General.

He fulfilled this office for 17 years with wisdom and dedication, visiting the provinces, writing to his brethren, and at times intervening with some severity to eliminate abuses. When Bonaventure began this service, the Order of Friars Minor had experienced an extraordinary expansion: there were more than 30,000 Friars scattered throughout the West with missionaries in North Africa, the Middle East, and even in Peking. It was necessary to consolidate this expansion and especially, to give it unity of action and of spirit in full fidelity to Francis' charism. In fact different ways of interpreting the message of the Saint of Assisi arose among his followers and they ran a real risk of an internal split. To avoid this danger in 1260 the General Chapter of the Order in Narbonne accepted and ratified a text proposed by Bonaventure in which the norms regulating the daily life of the Friars Minor were collected and unified. Bonaventure, however, foresaw that regardless of the wisdom and moderation which inspired the legislative measures they would not suffice to guarantee communion of spirit and hearts. It was necessary to share the same ideals and the same motivations.

For this reason Bonaventure wished to present the authentic charism of Francis, his life and his teaching. Thus he zealously collected documents concerning the *Poverello* and listened attentively to the memories of those who had actually known Francis. This inspired a historically well founded biography of the Saint of Assisi, entitled *Legenda Maior*. It was redrafted more concisely, hence entitled *Legenda minor*. Unlike the Italian term the Latin word does not mean a product of the imagination but, on the contrary, "*Legenda*" means an authoritative text, "to be read" officially. Indeed, the General Chapter of the Friars Minor in 1263, meeting in Pisa, recognized St Bonaventure's biography as the most faithful portrait of their Founder and so it became the Saint's official biography.

What image of St Francis emerged from the heart and pen of his follower and successor, St Bonaventure? The key point: Francis is an *alter Christus*, a man who sought Christ



passionately. In the love that impelled Francis to imitate Christ, he was entirely conformed to Christ. Bonaventure pointed out this living ideal to all Francis' followers. This ideal, valid for every Christian, yesterday, today and for ever, was also proposed as a programme for the Church in the Third Millennium by my Predecessor, Venerable John Paul II. This programme, he wrote in his Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, is centred "in Christ himself, who is to be known, loved and imitated, so that in him we may live the life of the Trinity, and with him transform history until its fulfilment in the heavenly Jerusalem" (n. 29).

In 1273, St Bonaventure experienced another great change in his life. Pope Gregory X wanted to consecrate him a Bishop and to appoint him a Cardinal. The Pope also asked him to prepare the Second Ecumenical Council of Lyons, a most important ecclesial event, for the purpose of re-establishing communion between the Latin Church and the Greek Church. Boniface dedicated himself diligently to this task but was unable to see the conclusion of this ecumenical session because he died before it ended. An anonymous papal notary composed a eulogy to Bonaventure which gives us a conclusive portrait of this great Saint and excellent theologian. "A good, affable, devout and compassionate man, full of virtue, beloved of God and human beings alike.... God in fact had bestowed upon him such grace that all who saw him were pervaded by a love that their hearts could not conceal" (cf. J.G. Bougerol, *Bonaventura*, in A. Vauchez (edited by), *Storia dei santi e della santità cristiana*. Vol. VI. *L'epoca del rinnovamento evangelico*, Milan 191, p. 91).

Let us gather the heritage of this holy doctor of the Church who reminds us of the meaning of our life with the following words: "On earth ... we may contemplate the divine immensity through reasoning and admiration; in the heavenly homeland, on the other hand, through the vision, when we are likened to God and through ecstasy ... we shall enter into the joy of God" (*La conoscenza di Cristo*, q. 6, *conclusione*, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Opuscoli Teologici / 1*, Rome 1993, p. 187).

## **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from Nigeria, Japan and the United States. To the pilgrims from Sophia University in Tokyo I offer my prayerful good wishes that the coming centenary of your University will strengthen your service to the pursuit of truth and your witness to the harmony of faith and reason. Upon you and your families I invoke God's abundant Blessings!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, prepare yourselves to face the important stages of life by founding every project of yours on

fidelity to God and to your brothers and sisters. Dear *sick people*, offer your sufferings to the heavenly Father in union with those of Christ, to contribute to building the Kingdom of God. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you be able to edify your family in listening to God in faithful and reciprocal love.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*10 March*

Vatican Basilica

## **Saint Bonaventure (2)**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last week I spoke of the life and personality of St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. This morning I would like to continue my presentation, reflecting on part of his literary opus and on his doctrine.

As I have already said, among St Bonaventure's various merits was the ability to interpret authentically and faithfully St Francis of Assisi, whom he venerated and studied with deep love. In a special way, in St Bonaventure's day a trend among the Friars Minor known as the "Spirituals" held that St Francis had ushered in a totally new phase in history and that the "eternal Gospel", of which Revelation speaks, had come to replace the New Testament. This group declared that the Church had now fulfilled her role in history. They said that she had been replaced by a charismatic community of free men guided from within by the Spirit, namely the "Spiritual Franciscans". This group's ideas were based on the writings of a Cistercian Abbot, Joachim of Fiore, who died in 1202. In his works he affirmed a Trinitarian rhythm in history. He considered the Old Testament as the age of the Fathers, followed by the time of the Son, the time of the Church. The third age was to be awaited, that of the Holy Spirit. The whole of history was thus interpreted as a history of progress: from the severity of the Old Testament to the relative freedom of the time of the Son, in the Church, to the full freedom of the Sons of God in the period of the Holy Spirit. This, finally, was also to be the period of peace among mankind, of the reconciliation of peoples and of religions. Joachim of Fiore had awakened the hope that the new age would stem from a new form of monasticism. Thus it is understandable that a group of Franciscans might have thought it recognized St Francis of Assisi as the initiator of the new epoch and his Order as the community of the new period the community of the Age of the Holy Spirit that left behind the hierarchical Church in order to begin the new Church of the Spirit, no longer linked to the old structures.

Hence they ran the risk of very seriously misunderstanding St Francis' message, of his humble fidelity to the Gospel and to the Church. This error entailed an erroneous vision of Christianity as a whole.

St Bonaventure, who became Minister General of the Franciscan Order in 1257, had to confront grave tension in his Order precisely because of those who supported the above-mentioned trend of the "Franciscan Spirituals" who followed Joachim of Fiore. To respond to this group and to restore unity to the Order, St Bonaventure painstakingly studied the authentic writings of Joachim of Fiore, as well as those attributed to him and, bearing in mind the need to present the figure and message of his beloved St Francis correctly, he wanted to set down a correct view of the theology of history. St Bonaventure actually tackled the problem in his last work, a collection of conferences for the monks of the studium in Paris. He did not complete it and it has come down to us through the transcriptions of those who heard him. It is entitled *Hexaëmeron*, in other words an allegorical explanation of the six days of the Creation. The Fathers of the Church considered the six or seven days of the Creation narrative as a prophecy of the history of the world, of humanity. For them, the seven days represented seven periods of history, later also interpreted as seven millennia. With Christ we should have entered the last, that is, the sixth period of history that was to be followed by the great sabbath of God. St Bonaventure hypothesizes this historical interpretation of the account of the days of the Creation, but in a very free and innovative way. To his mind two phenomena of his time required a new interpretation of the course of history.

The first: the figure of St Francis, the man totally united with Christ even to communion with the stigmata, almost an *alter Christus*, and, with St Francis, the new community he created, different from the monasticism known until then. This phenomenon called for a new interpretation, as an innovation of God which appeared at that moment.

The second: the position of Joachim of Fiore who announced a new monasticism and a totally new period of history, going beyond the revelation of the New Testament, demanded a response. As Minister General of the Franciscan Order, St Bonaventure had immediately realized that with the spiritualistic conception inspired by Joachim of Fiore, the Order would become ungovernable and logically move towards anarchy. In his opinion this had two consequences:

The first, the practical need for structures and for insertion into the reality of the hierarchical Church, of the real Church, required a theological foundation. This was partly because the others, those who followed the spiritualist concept, upheld what seemed to have a theological foundation.

The second, while taking into account the necessary realism, made it essential not to lose the newness of the figure of St Francis.

How did St Bonaventure respond to the practical and theoretical needs? Here I can only provide a very basic summary of his answer and it is in certain aspects incomplete:

1. St Bonaventure rejected the idea of the Trinitarian rhythm of history. God is one for all history and is not tritheistic. Hence history is one, even if it is a journey and, according to St Bonaventure, a journey of progress.

2. Jesus Christ is God's last word in him God said all, giving and expressing himself. More than himself, God cannot express or give. The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Father and of the Son. Christ himself says of the Holy Spirit: "He will bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you" (Jn 14:26), and "he will take what is mine and declare it to you" (Jn 16:15). Thus there is no loftier Gospel, there is no other Church to await. Therefore the Order of St Francis too must fit into this Church, into her faith and into her hierarchical order.

3. This does not mean that the Church is stationary, fixed in the past, or that there can be no newness within her. "*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*": Christ's works do not go backwards, they do not fail but progress, the Saint said in his letter *De Tribus Quaestionibus*. Thus St Bonaventure explicitly formulates the idea of progress and this is an innovation in comparison with the Fathers of the Church and the majority of his contemporaries. For St Bonaventure Christ was no longer the end of history, as he was for the Fathers of the Church, but rather its centre; history does not end with Christ but begins a new period. The following is another consequence: until that moment the idea that the Fathers of the Church were the absolute summit of theology predominated, all successive generations could only be their disciples. St Bonaventure also recognized the Fathers as teachers for ever, but the phenomenon of St Francis assured him that the riches of Christ's word are inexhaustible and that new light could also appear to the new generations. The oneness of Christ also guarantees newness and renewal in all the periods of history.

The Franciscan Order of course as he emphasized belongs to the Church of Jesus Christ, to the apostolic Church, and cannot be built on utopian spiritualism. Yet, at the same time, the newness of this Order in comparison with classical monasticism was valid and St Bonaventure as I said in my previous Catechesis defended this newness against the attacks of the secular clergy of Paris: the Franciscans have no fixed monastery, they may go everywhere to proclaim the Gospel. It was precisely the break with stability, the characteristic of monasticism, for the sake of a new flexibility that restored to the Church her missionary dynamism.

At this point it might be useful to say that today too there are views that see the entire history of the Church in the second millennium as a gradual decline. Some see this decline as having already begun immediately after the New Testament. In fact, “*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*”: Christ’s works do not go backwards but forwards. What would the Church be without the new spirituality of the Cistercians, the Franciscans and the Dominicans, the spirituality of St Teresa of Avila and St John of the Cross and so forth? This affirmation applies today too: “*Opera Christi non deficiunt, sed proficiunt*”, they move forward. St Bonaventure teaches us the need for overall, even strict discernment, sober realism and openness to the newness, which Christ gives his Church through the Holy Spirit. And while this idea of decline is repeated, another idea, this “spiritualistic utopianism” is also reiterated. Indeed, we know that after the Second Vatican Council some were convinced that everything was new, that there was a different Church, that the pre-Conciliar Church was finished and that we had another, totally “other” Church an anarchic utopianism! And thanks be to God the wise helmsmen of the Barque of St Peter, Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II, on the one hand defended the newness of the Council, and on the other, defended the oneness and continuity of the Church, which is always a Church of sinners and always a place of grace.

4. In this regard, St Bonaventure, as Minister General of the Franciscans, took a line of government which showed clearly that the new Order could not, as a community, live at the same “eschatological height” as St Francis, in whom he saw the future world anticipated, but guided at the same time by healthy realism and by spiritual courage he had to come as close as possible to the maximum realization of the Sermon on the Mount, which for St Francis was *the* rule, but nevertheless bearing in mind the limitations of the human being who is marked by original sin.

Thus we see that for St Bonaventure governing was not merely action but above all was thinking and praying. At the root of his government we always find prayer and thought; all his decisions are the result of reflection, of thought illumined by prayer. His intimate contact with Christ always accompanied his work as Minister General and therefore he composed a series of theological and mystical writings that express the soul of his government. They also manifest his intention of guiding the Order inwardly, that is, of governing not only by means of commands and structures, but by guiding and illuminating souls, orienting them to Christ.

I would like to mention only one of these writings, which are the soul of his government and point out the way to follow, both for the individual and for the community: the *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, [*The Mind’s Road to God*], which is a “manual” for mystical contemplation. This book was conceived in a deeply spiritual place: Mount La Verna, where St Francis had received the stigmata. In the introduction the author describes the

circumstances that gave rise to this writing: “While I meditated on the possible ascent of the mind to God, amongst other things there occurred that miracle which happened in the same place to the blessed Francis himself, namely the vision of the winged Seraph in the form of a Crucifix. While meditating upon this vision, I immediately saw that it offered me the ecstatic contemplation of Fr Francis himself as well as the way that leads to it” (cf. *The Mind’s Road to God*, Prologue, 2, in *Opere di San Bonaventura. Opuscoli Teologici* / 1, Rome 1993, p. 499).

The six wings of the Seraph thus became the symbol of the six stages that lead man progressively from the knowledge of God, through the observation of the world and creatures and through the exploration of the soul itself with its faculties, to the satisfying union with the Trinity through Christ, in imitation of St Francis of Assisi. The last words of St Bonaventure’s *Itinerarium*, which respond to the question of how it is possible to reach this mystical communion with God, should be made to sink to the depths of the heart: “If you should wish to know how these things come about, (the mystical communion with God) question grace, not instruction; desire, not intellect; the cry of prayer, not pursuit of study; the spouse, not the teacher; God, not man; darkness, not clarity; not light, but the fire that inflames all and transports to God with fullest unction and burning affection.... Let us then ... pass over into darkness; let us impose silence on cares, concupiscence, and phantasms; let us pass over *with the Crucified Christ from this world to the Father*, so that when the Father is shown to us we may say with Philip, ‘*It is enough for me*’” (cf. *ibid.*, VII 6).

Dear friends, let us accept the invitation addressed to us by St Bonaventure, the Seraphic Doctor, and learn at the school of the divine Teacher: let us listen to his word of life and truth that resonates in the depths of our soul. Let us purify our thoughts and actions so that he may dwell within us and that we may understand his divine voice which draws us towards true happiness.

### **To special groups**

I offer a warm welcome to the many school groups present, including the Bruderhof group from England and the students of St Michael’s Holy Cross Secondary School in Dublin, Ireland. The developments taking place in Northern Ireland in these days are a promising sign of hope, and I pray that they will help to consolidate the future of peace desired by all. Upon the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors I invoke God’s abundant Blessings.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may the Lenten journey we are taking be an opportunity for authentic conversion that leads you to a mature faith in Christ. Dear *sick people*, in taking part lovingly in the suffering of the

incarnate Son of God, may you share from this moment in the glory and joy of his Resurrection. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, find in the covenant which, at the price of his Blood, Christ made with this Church, the support and model of your marriage contract and your mission at the service of the Gospel.

### **Appeal for aid to Turkey and peace in Nigeria**

I am profoundly close to the people hit by the recent earthquake in Turkey and to their families. I assure each one of my prayers, while I ask the international community to contribute promptly and generously to the aid operations.

My heartfelt sympathy also goes to the victims of the atrocious violence that is staining Nigeria with blood and has not even spared defenceless children. Once again, I repeat with anguish that violence does not solve conflicts but only serves to increase their tragic consequences. I appeal to everyone in the country who has civil and religious responsibilities to do their utmost to bring security and peaceful coexistence to the entire population. Lastly, I express my closeness to the Nigerian Pastors and faithful and I pray that with strong, firm hope, they may be authentic witnesses of reconciliation.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*17 March 2010*

## **Saint Bonaventure (3)**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This morning, continuing last Wednesday's reflection, I would like to study with you some other aspects of the doctrine of St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. He is an eminent theologian who deserves to be set beside another great thinker, a contemporary of his, St Thomas Aquinas. Both scrutinized the mysteries of Revelation, making the most of the resources of human reason, in the fruitful dialogue between faith and reason that characterized the Christian Middle Ages, making it a time of great intellectual vigour, as well as of faith and ecclesial renewal, which is often not sufficiently emphasized. Other similarities link them: Both Bonaventure, a Franciscan, and Thomas, a Dominican, belonged to the Mendicant Orders which, with their spiritual freshness, as I mentioned in previous Catecheses, renewed the whole Church in the 13th century and attracted many followers. They both served the Church with diligence, passion and love, to the point that they were invited to take part in the Ecumenical Council of Lyons in 1274, the very same year in which they died; Thomas while he was on his way to Lyons, Bonaventure while the Council was taking place.

Even the statues of the two Saints in St Peter's Square are parallel. They stand right at the beginning of the colonnade, starting from the façade of the Vatican Basilica; one is on the left wing and the other on the right. Despite all these aspects, in these two great Saints we can discern two different approaches to philosophical and theological research which show the originality and depth of the thinking of each. I would like to point out some of their differences.

A first difference concerns the concept of theology. Both doctors wondered whether theology was a practical or a theoretical and speculative science. St Thomas reflects on two possible contrasting answers. The first says: theology is a reflection on faith and the purpose of faith is that the human being become good and live in accordance with God's will. Hence the aim of theology would be to guide people on the right, good road; thus it is basically a practical science. The other position says: theology seeks to know God. We are the work of God; God is above our action. God works right action in us; so it essentially concerns not our own doing but knowing God, not our own actions. St Thomas' conclusion is: theology entails both aspects: it is theoretical, it seeks to know God ever better, and it is practical: it seeks to orient our life to the good. But there is a primacy of knowledge: above all we must know God and then continue to act in accordance with God (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 1, art. 4). This primacy of knowledge in comparison with practice is significant to St Thomas' fundamental orientation.

St Bonaventure's answer is very similar but the stress he gives is different. St Bonaventure knows the same arguments for both directions, as does St Thomas, but in answer to the question as to whether theology was a practical or a theoretical science, St Bonaventure makes a triple distinction he therefore extends the alternative between the theoretical (the primacy of knowledge) and the practical (the primacy of practice), adding a third attitude which he calls "sapiential" and affirming that wisdom embraces both aspects. And he continues: wisdom seeks contemplation (as the highest form of knowledge), and has as its intention "*ut boni fiamus*" that we become good, especially this: to become good (cf. *Breviloquium*, Prologus, 5). He then adds: "faith is in the intellect, in such a way that it provokes affection. For example: the knowledge that Christ died 'for us' does not remain knowledge but necessarily becomes affection, love (*Proemium in I Sent.*, q. 3).

His defence of theology is along the same lines, namely, of the rational and methodical reflection on faith. St Bonaventure lists several arguments against engaging in theology perhaps also widespread among a section of the Franciscan friars and also present in our time: that reason would empty faith, that it would be an aggressive attitude to the word of God, that we should listen and not analyze the word of God (cf. *Letter of St Francis of Assisi to St Anthony of Padua*). The Saint responds to these arguments against theology that



demonstrate the perils that exist in theology itself saying: it is true that there is an arrogant manner of engaging in theology, a pride of reason that sets itself above the word of God. Yet real theology, the rational work of the true and good theology has another origin, not the pride of reason. One who loves wants to know his beloved better and better; true theology does not involve reason and its research prompted by pride, “*sed propter amorem eius cui assentit* [but is] motivated by love of the One who gave his consent” (*Proemium in I Sent.*, q. 2) and wants to be better acquainted with the beloved: this is the fundamental intention of theology. Thus in the end, for St Bonaventure, the primacy of love is crucial.

Consequently St Thomas and St Bonaventure define the human being’s final goal, his complete happiness in different ways. For St Thomas the supreme end, to which our desire is directed is: to see God. In this simple act of seeing God all problems are solved: we are happy, nothing else is necessary.

Instead, for St Bonaventure the ultimate destiny of the human being is to love God, to encounter him and to be united in his and our love. For him this is the most satisfactory definition of our happiness.

Along these lines we could also say that the loftiest category for St Thomas is the true, whereas for St Bonaventure it is the good. It would be mistaken to see a contradiction in these two answers. For both of them the true is also the good, and the good is also the true; to see God is to love and to love is to see. Hence it was a question of their different interpretation of a fundamentally shared vision. Both emphases have given shape to different traditions and different spiritualities and have thus shown the fruitfulness of the faith: one, in the diversity of its expressions.

Let us return to St Bonaventure. It is obvious that the specific emphasis he gave to his theology, of which I have given only one example, is explained on the basis of the Franciscan charism. The “Poverello” of Assisi, notwithstanding the intellectual debates of his time, had shown with his whole life the primacy of love. He was a living icon of Christ in love with Christ and thus he made the figure of the Lord present in his time he did not convince his contemporaries with his words but rather with his life. In all St Bonaventure’s works, precisely also his scientific works, his scholarly works, one sees and finds this Franciscan inspiration; in other words one notices that his thought starts with his encounter with the “Poverello” of Assisi. However, in order to understand the practical elaboration of the topic “primacy of love” we must bear in mind yet another source: the writings of the so-called Pseudo-Dionysius, a Syrian theologian of the 6th century who concealed himself behind the pseudonym of Dionysius the Areopagite. In the choice of this name he was referring, to a figure in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 17:34). This theologian had created a liturgical theology and a mystical theology, and had spoken

extensively of the different orders of angels. His writings were translated into Latin in the ninth century. At the time of St Bonaventure we are in the 13th century a new tradition appeared that aroused the interest of the Saint and of other theologians of his century. Two things in particular attracted St Bonaventure's attention.

1. Pseudo-Dionysius speaks of nine orders of angels whose names he had found in Scripture and then organized in his own way, from the simple angels to the seraphim. St Bonaventure interprets these orders of angels as steps on the human creature's way to God. Thus they can represent the human journey, the ascent towards communion with God. For St Bonaventure there is no doubt: St Francis of Assisi belonged to the Seraphic Order, to the supreme Order, to the choir of seraphim, namely, he was a pure flame of love. And this is what Franciscans should have been. But St Bonaventure knew well that this final step in the approach to God could not be inserted into a juridical order but is always a special gift of God. For this reason the structure of the Franciscan Order is more modest, more realistic, but nevertheless must help its members to come ever closer to a seraphic existence of pure love. Last Wednesday I spoke of this synthesis between sober realism and evangelical radicalism in the thought and action of St Bonaventure.

2. St Bonaventure, however, found in the writings of Pseudo-Dionysius another element, an even more important one. Whereas for St Augustine the *intellectus*, the seeing with reason and the heart, is the ultimate category of knowledge, Pseudo-Dionysius takes a further step: in the ascent towards God one can reach a point in which reason no longer sees. But in the night of the intellect love still sees it sees what is inaccessible to reason. Love goes beyond reason, it sees further, it enters more profoundly into God's mystery. St Bonaventure was fascinated by this vision which converged with his own Franciscan spirituality. It is precisely in the dark night of the Cross that divine love appears in its full grandeur; where reason no longer sees, love sees. The final words of his "The Journey of the Mind into God", can seem to be a superficial interpretation an exaggerated expression of devotion devoid of content; instead, read in the light of St Bonaventure's theology of the Cross, they are a clear and realistic expression of Franciscan spirituality: "If you seek in what manner these things occur (that is, the ascent towards God) interrogate grace, not doctrine, desire, not understanding; the groan of praying, not the study of reading ... not light, but the fire totally inflaming, transferring one into God" (VII 6). All this is neither anti-intellectual nor anti-rational: it implies the process of reason but transcends it in the love of the Crucified Christ. With this transformation of the mysticism of Pseudo-Dionysius, St Bonaventure is placed at the source of a great mystical current which has greatly raised and purified the human mind: it is a lofty peak in the history of the human spirit.

This theology of the Cross, born of the encounter of Pseudo-Dionysius' theology and Franciscan spirituality, must not make us forget that St Bonaventure also shares with St Francis of Assisi his love for creation, his joy at the beauty of God's creation. On this point I cite a sentence from the first chapter of the "Journey": "He who is not brightened by such splendours of created things is blind; he who does not awake at such clamours is deaf; he who does not praise God on account of all these effects is mute; he who does not turn towards the First Principle on account of such indications is stupid" (I, 15).

The whole creation speaks loudly of God, of the good and beautiful God; of his love. Hence for St Bonaventure the whole of our life is a "journey", a pilgrimage, an ascent to God. But with our own strength alone we are incapable of climbing to the loftiness of God. God himself must help us, must "pull" us up. Thus prayer is necessary. Prayer, says the Saint, is the mother and the origin of the upward movement—"sursum actio", an action that lifts us up, Bonaventure says. Accordingly I conclude with the prayer with which he begins his "Journey": "Let us therefore say to the Lord Our God: 'Lead me forth, Lord, in thy way, and let me step in thy truth; let my heart be glad, that it fears thy name'" (I, 1).

## **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today is the Feast of St Patrick, and in a special way I greet all the Irish faithful and pilgrims here present. As you know, in recent months the Church in Ireland has been severely shaken as a result of the child abuse crisis. As a sign of my deep concern I have written a Pastoral Letter dealing with this painful situation. I will sign it on the solemnity of St Joseph, the Guardian of the Holy Family and Patron of the universal Church, and send it soon after. I ask all of you to read it for yourselves with an open heart and in a spirit of faith. My hope is that it will help the process of repentance, healing and renewal.

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from England, Ireland, Denmark, Indonesia and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

And now my greeting goes to the young. Dear *young people*, meeting you is always a cause of comfort and hope because your age is the springtime of life. May you always be faithful to God's love for you. I now address an affectionate thought to you, dear *sick people*. When one is suffering the whole reality within us and around us seems to darken but, in the depths of our heart, this must not extinguish the consoling light of faith. Christ with his Cross sustains us in trial. And you, dear *newlyweds*, whom I greet warmly, may you be grateful to God for the gift of the family. Always counting on his help, make your life a mission of faithful and generous love.

## **Saint Albert the Great**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

One of the great masters of medieval theology is St Albert the Great. The title “Great”, (*Magnus*), with which he has passed into history indicates the vastness and depth of his teaching, which he combined with holiness of life. However, his contemporaries did not hesitate to attribute to him titles of excellence even then. One of his disciples, Ulric of Strasbourg, called him the “wonder and miracle of our epoch”.

He was born in Germany at the beginning of the 13th century. When he was still young he went to Italy, to Padua, the seat of one of the most famous medieval universities. He devoted himself to the study of the so-called “liberal arts”: grammar, rhetoric, dialectics, arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music, that is, to culture in general, demonstrating that characteristic interest in the natural sciences which was soon to become the favourite field for his specialization. During his stay in Padua he attended the Church of the Dominicans, whom he then joined with the profession of the religious vows. Hagiographic sources suggest that Albert came to this decision gradually. His intense relationship with God, the Dominican Friars’ example of holiness, hearing the sermons of Blessed Jordan of Saxony, St Dominic’s successor at the Master General of the Order of Preachers, were the decisive factors that helped him to overcome every doubt and even to surmount his family’s resistance. God often speaks to us in the years of our youth and points out to us the project of our life. As it was for Albert, so also for all of us, personal prayer, nourished by the Lord’s word, frequent reception of the Sacraments and the spiritual guidance of enlightened people are the means to discover and follow God’s voice. He received the religious habit from Bl. Jordan of Saxony.

After his ordination to the priesthood, his superiors sent him to teach at various theological study centres annexed to the convents of the Dominican Fathers. His brilliant intellectual qualities enabled him to perfect his theological studies at the most famous university in that period, the University of Paris. From that time on St Albert began his extraordinary activity as a writer that he was to pursue throughout his life.

Prestigious tasks were assigned to him. In 1248 he was charged with opening a theological studium at Cologne, one of the most important regional capitals of Germany, where he lived at different times and which became his adopted city. He brought with him from Paris an exceptional student, Thomas Aquinas. The sole merit of having been St Thomas’ teacher would suffice to elicit profound admiration for St Albert. A

relationship of mutual esteem and friendship developed between these two great theologians, human attitudes that were very helpful in the development of this branch of knowledge. In 1254, Albert was elected Provincial of the Dominican Fathers' "Provincia Teutoniae" Teutonic Province which included communities scattered over a vast territory in Central and Northern Europe. He distinguished himself for the zeal with which he exercised this ministry, visiting the communities and constantly recalling his confreres to fidelity, to the teaching and example of St Dominic.

His gifts did not escape the attention of the Pope of that time, Alexander iv, who wanted Albert with him for a certain time at Anagni where the Popes went frequently in Rome itself and at Viterbo, in order to avail himself of Albert's theological advice. The same Supreme Pontiff appointed Albert Bishop of Regensburg, a large and celebrated diocese, but which was going through a difficult period. From 1260 to 1262, Albert exercised this ministry with unflinching dedication, succeeding in restoring peace and harmony to the city, in reorganizing parishes and convents and in giving a new impetus to charitable activities.

In the year 1263–1264, Albert preached in Germany and in Bohemia, at the request of Pope Urban iv. He later returned to Cologne and took up his role as lecturer, scholar and writer. As a man of prayer, science and charity, his authoritative intervention in various events of the Church and of the society of the time were acclaimed: above all, he was a man of reconciliation and peace in Cologne, where the Archbishop had run seriously foul of the city's institutions; he did his utmost during the Second Council of Lyons, in 1274, summoned by Pope Gregory X, to encourage union between the Latin and Greek Churches after the separation of the great schism with the East in 1054. He also explained the thought of Thomas Aquinas which had been the subject of objections and even quite unjustified condemnations.

He died in his cell at the convent of the Holy Cross, Cologne, in 1280, and was very soon venerated by his confreres. The Church proposed him for the worship of the faithful with his beatification in 1622 and with his canonization in 1931, when Pope Pius XI proclaimed him Doctor of the Church. This was certainly an appropriate recognition of this great man of God and outstanding scholar, not only of the truths of the faith but of a great many other branches of knowledge; indeed, with a glance at the titles of his very numerous works, we realize that there was something miraculous about his culture and that his encyclopedic interests led him not only to concern himself with philosophy and theology, like other contemporaries of his, but also with every other discipline then known, from physics to chemistry, from astronomy to mineralogy, from botany to zoology. For this reason Pope Pius XII named him Patron of enthusiasts of the natural

sciences and also called him “Doctor universalis” precisely because of the vastness of his interests and knowledge.

Of course, the scientific methods that St Albert the Great used were not those that came to be established in the following centuries. His method consisted simply in the observation, description and classification of the phenomena he had studied, but it was in this way that he opened the door for future research.

He still has a lot to teach us. Above all, St Albert shows that there is no opposition between faith and science, despite certain episodes of misunderstanding that have been recorded in history. A man of faith and prayer, as was St Albert the Great, can serenely foster the study of the natural sciences and progress in knowledge of the micro- and macrocosm, discovering the laws proper to the subject, since all this contributes to fostering thirst for and love of God. The Bible speaks to us of creation as of the first language through which God who is supreme intelligence, who is the Logos reveals to us something of himself. The Book of Wisdom, for example, says that the phenomena of nature, endowed with greatness and beauty, is like the works of an artist through which, by analogy, we may know the Author of creation (cf. Wis 13:5). With a classical similitude in the Middle Ages and in the Renaissance one can compare the natural world to a book written by God that we read according to the different approaches of the sciences (cf. *Address to the participants in the Plenary Meeting of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences*, 31 October 2008; *L'Osservatore Romano English edition*, 5 November 2008, p. 6). How many scientists, in fact, in the wake of St Albert the Great, have carried on their research inspired by wonder at and gratitude for a world which, to their eyes as scholars and believers, appeared and appears as the good work of a wise and loving Creator! Scientific study is then transformed into a hymn of praise. Enrico Medi, a great astrophysicist of our time, whose cause of beatification has been introduced, wrote: “O you mysterious galaxies ... I see you, I calculate you, I understand you, I study you and I discover you, I penetrate you and I gather you. From you I take light and make it knowledge, I take movement and make it wisdom, I take sparkling colours and make them poetry; I take you stars in my hands and, trembling in the oneness of my being, I raise you above yourselves and offer you in prayer to the Creator, that through me alone you stars can worship” (*Le Opere. Inno alla creazione*).

St Albert the Great reminds us that there is friendship between science and faith and that through their vocation to the study of nature, scientists can take an authentic and fascinating path of holiness.

His extraordinary openmindedness is also revealed in a cultural feat which he carried out successfully, that is, the acceptance and appreciation of Aristotle's thought. In St Albert's time, in fact, knowledge was spreading of numerous works by this great Greek

philosopher, who lived a quarter of a century before Christ, especially in the sphere of ethics and metaphysics. They showed the power of reason, explained lucidly and clearly the meaning and structure of reality, its intelligibility and the value and purpose of human actions. St Albert the Great opened the door to the complete acceptance in medieval philosophy and theology of Aristotle's philosophy, which was subsequently given a definitive form by St Thomas. This reception of a pagan pre-Christian philosophy, let us say, was an authentic cultural revolution in that epoch. Yet many Christian thinkers feared Aristotle's philosophy, a non-Christian philosophy, especially because, presented by his Arab commentators, it had been interpreted in such a way, at least in certain points, as to appear completely irreconcilable with the Christian faith. Hence a dilemma arose: are faith and reason in conflict with each other or not?

This is one of the great merits of St Albert: with scientific rigour he studied Aristotle's works, convinced that all that is truly rational is compatible with the faith revealed in the Sacred Scriptures. In other words, St Albert the Great thus contributed to the formation of an autonomous philosophy, distinct from theology and united with it only by the unity of the truth. So it was that in the 13th century a clear distinction came into being between these two branches of knowledge, philosophy and theology, which, in conversing with each other, cooperate harmoniously in the discovery of the authentic vocation of man, thirsting for truth and happiness: and it is above all theology, that St Albert defined as "emotional knowledge", which points out to human beings their vocation to eternal joy, a joy that flows from full adherence to the truth.

St Albert the Great was capable of communicating these concepts in a simple and understandable way. An authentic son of St Dominic, he willingly preached to the People of God, who were won over by his words and by the example of his life.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us pray the Lord that learned theologians will never be lacking in holy Church, wise and devout like St Albert the Great, and that he may help each one of us to make our own the "formula of holiness" that he followed in his life: "to desire all that I desire for the glory of God, as God desires for his glory all that he desires", in other words always to be conformed to God's will, in order to desire and to do everything only and always for his glory.*

## **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I welcome all the English-speaking visitors, especially a group of priests, Religious and seminarians visiting from the Philippines. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and your families, I invoke God's abundant Blessings. Lastly, I greet the young people, the sick, and the newlyweds. May the Solemnity of the Annunciation, which we shall be celebrating tomorrow be an invitation to all to follow the example of Mary Most Holy: for you, dear young people, may it be expressed in prompt availability to the Father's call, so that you may be Gospel leaven in society; for*

*you, dear sick people, may it be an incentive to renew the serene and confident acceptance of the divine will and to transform your suffering into a means of redemption for the whole of humanity. May Mary's "yes" awaken in you, dear newlyweds, an ever more generous commitment to building a family based on reciprocal love and on the perennial Christian values.*

In our catechesis on the Christian culture of the Middle Ages, we now turn to Saint Albert, better known as *Albertus Magnus*, Albert the Great. A universal genius whose interests ranged from the natural sciences to philosophy and theology, Albert entered the Dominicans and, after studies in Paris, taught in Cologne. Elected provincial of the Teutonic province, he served as bishop of Regensburg for four years and then returned to teaching and writing. He played an important part in the Council of Lyons, and he worked to clarify and defend the teaching of Saint Thomas Aquinas, his most brilliant student. Albert was canonized and declared a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI, and Pope Pius XII named him the patron of the natural sciences. Saint Albert shows us that faith is not opposed to reason, and that the created world can be seen as a "book" written by God and capable of being "read" in its own way by the various sciences. His study of Aristotle also brought out the difference between the sciences of philosophy and theology, while insisting that both cooperate in enabling us to discover our vocation to truth and happiness, a vocation which finds its fulfilment in eternal life.

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors, especially a group of priests, Religious and seminarians visiting from the Philippines. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and your families, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*31 March 2010*

## **Munus docendi**

*Dear Friends,*

In this Easter Season that brings us to Pentecost and also ushers us into the celebrations for the closure of the Year for Priests, scheduled for this coming 9–11 June, I am eager to devote a few more reflections to the topic of the ordained Ministry, elaborating on the fruitful realities of the priest's configuration to Christ the Head in the exercise of the *tria munera* that he receives: namely, the three offices of teaching, sanctifying and governing.

In order to understand what it means for the priest to act *in persona Christi Capitis* in the person of Christ the Head and to realize what consequences derive from the duty of representing the Lord, especially in the exercise of these three offices, it is necessary first of all to explain what "representation" means. The priest represents Christ. What is



implied by “representing” someone? In ordinary language it usually means being delegated by someone to be present in his place, to speak and act in his stead because the person he represents is absent from the practical action. Let us ask ourselves: does the priest represent the Lord in this way? The answer is no, because in the Church Christ is never absent, the Church is his living Body and he is the Head of the Church, present and active within her. Christ is never absent, on the contrary he is present in a way that is untrammelled by space and time through the event of the Resurrection that we contemplate in a special way in this Easter Season.

Therefore the priest, who acts *in persona Christi Capitis* and representing the Lord, never acts in the name of someone who is absent but, rather, in the very Person of the Risen Christ, who makes himself present with his truly effective action. He really acts today and brings about what the priest would be incapable of: the consecration of the wine and the bread so that they may really be the Lord’s presence, the absolution of sins. The Lord makes his own action present in the person who carries out these gestures. These three duties of the priest which Tradition has identified in the Lord’s different words about mission: teaching, sanctifying and governing in their difference and in their deep unity are a specification of this effective representation. In fact, they are the three actions of the Risen Christ, the same that he teaches today, in the Church and in the world. Thereby he creates faith, gathers together his people, creates the presence of truth and really builds the communion of the universal Church; and sanctifies and guides.

The first duty of which I wish to speak today is the *munus docendi*, that is, the task of teaching. Today, in the midst of the educational emergency, the *munus docendi* of the Church, exercised concretely through the ministry of each priest, is particularly important. We are very confused about the fundamental choices in our life and question what the world is, where it comes from, where we are going, what we must do in order to do good, how we should live and what the truly pertinent values are. Regarding all this, there are numerous contrasting philosophies that come into being and disappear, creating confusion about the fundamental decisions on how to live; because collectively we no longer know from what and for what we have been made and where we are going. In this context the words of the Lord who took pity on the throng because the people were like sheep without a shepherd came true (cf. Mk 6:34). The Lord had noticed this when he saw the thousands of people following him in the desert because, in the diversity of the currents of that time, they no longer knew what the true meaning of Scripture was, what God was saying. The Lord, moved by compassion, interpreted God’s word, he himself is the Word of God, and thus provided an orientation. This is the function *in persona Christi* of the priest: making present, in the confusion and bewilderment of our times, the light of God’s Word, the light that is Christ himself in this our world. Therefore the priest does not teach his own ideas, a philosophy that he himself has

invented, that he has discovered or likes; the priest does not speak of himself, he does not speak for himself, to attract admirers, perhaps, or create a party of his own; he does not say his own thing, his own inventions but, in the medley of all the philosophies, the priest teaches in the name of Christ present, he proposes the truth that is Christ himself, his word and his way of living and of moving ahead. What Christ said of himself applies to the priest: “My teaching is not mine” (Jn 7:16); Christ, that is, does not propose himself but, as the Son he is the voice, the Word of the Father. The priest too must always speak and act in this way: “My teaching is not mine, I do not spread my own ideas or what I like, but I am the mouthpiece and heart of Christ and I make present this one, shared teaching that has created the universal Church and creates eternal life”.

This fact, namely that the priest does not invent, does not create or proclaim his own ideas, since the teaching he announces is not his own but Christ’s does not mean, however, that he is neutral, as if he were a spokesman reading a text that he does not, perhaps, make his own. In this case too the model of Christ who said: “I do not come from myself and I do not live for myself but I come from the Father and live for the Father” applies. Therefore, in this profound identification, Christ’s teaching is that of the Father and he himself is one with the Father. The priest who proclaims Christ’s word, the faith of the Church, and not his own ideas, must also say: “I do not live by myself and for myself, but I live with Christ and by Christ and therefore all that Christ said to us becomes my word even if it is not mine”. The priest’s life must be identified with Christ and, in this manner, the word that is not his own becomes, nevertheless, a profoundly personal word. On this topic St Augustine, speaking of priests said: “And as for us, what are we? Ministers (of Christ), his servants; for what we distribute to you is not ours but we take it from his store. And we too live of it, because we are servants like you” (*Sermo* 229/E, 4).

The teaching that the priest is called to offer, the truth of the faith, must be internalized and lived in an intense personal and spiritual process so that the priest really enters into a profound inner communion with Christ himself. The priest believes, accepts and seeks to live, first of all as his own, all that the Lord taught and that the Church has passed on in that process of identification with his own ministry of which St John Mary Vianney is an exemplary witness (cf. *Letter for the inauguration of the Year for Priests*). “For in charity itself we are all listening to him, who is our One Master in heaven” (*En. in Ps* 131:1, 7).

Consequently the priest’s voice may often seem to be “the voice of one crying in the wilderness” (Mk 1:3), but his prophetic power consists precisely in this: in never being conformist, in never conforming to any dominant culture or mindset but, rather, in showing the one newness that can bring about an authentic and profound renewal of the

human being, that is, that Christ is the Living One, he is the close God, the God who works in the life and for the life of the world and gives us the truth, the way to live.

In the careful preparation of Sunday preaching, without excluding weekday preaching, in imparting catechetical formation in schools, in academic institutions and, in a special way, through that unwritten book which is his own life, the priest is always an “educator”, he teaches; yet not with the presumption of one who imposes his own truth but on the contrary with the humble, glad certainty of someone who has encountered the Truth, who has been grasped and transformed by it, hence cannot but proclaim it. In fact, no one can choose the priesthood on his own, it is not a means of obtaining security in life or achieving a social position: no one can give it to him nor can he seek it by himself. The priesthood is the response to the Lord’s call, to his will, in order to become a herald of his truth, not a personal truth but of his truth.

Dear brother priests, the Christian people ask to hear from our teachings the genuine ecclesial doctrine, through which they can renew their encounter with Christ who gives joy, peace and salvation. In this regard Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are indispensable reference points in the exercise of the *munus docendi*, so essential for conversion, the development of faith and the salvation of humankind. “Priestly ordination ... means ... to be immersed in the Truth” (*Homily at the Chrism Mass*, Holy Thursday, 9 April 2009), that Truth which is not merely a concept or a collection of ideas to be assimilated and passed on but, rather, is the Person of Christ with whom, for whom and in whom to live and thus, necessarily, the timeliness and comprehensibility of the proclamation are also born. Only this knowledge of a Truth that became a Person in the Incarnation of the Son justifies the missionary mandate: “Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). Only if it is the Truth is it intended for every creature, it is not the imposition of some thing but openness of heart to what the creature has been created for.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, the Lord has entrusted a great task to priests: to be heralds of his word, of the Truth that saves; to be his voice in the world to bring what serves the true good of souls and the authentic path of faith (cf. 1 Cor 6:12). May St John Mary Vianney be an example to all priests. He was a man of great wisdom and heroic fortitude in resisting the cultural and social pressures of his time in order to lead souls to God: simplicity, fidelity and immediacy were the essential features of his preaching, the transparency of his faith and of his holiness. The Christian People was edified by him and as happens for genuine teachers in every epoch recognized in him the light of the Truth. In him it recognized, ultimately, what should always be recognizable in a priest: the voice of the Good Shepherd.*

## **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Korea, Canada and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Christ!

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newlyweds*. May the joy of the Risen Lord inspire fresh ardour in your lives, dear *young people*, so that you may be faithful disciples; may it be an encouragement to you, dear *sick people*, so that you may courageously face every trial and suffering; may it sustain your mutual love, dear *newlyweds*, so that in your home the peace of Christ may always prevail.

### **Appeal for China**

My thoughts turn to China and to the people hit by a severe earthquake that has claimed a heavy toll of human life, causing injuries and immense damage. I pray for the victims and I am spiritually close to the people tried by such a serious disaster; I implore for them from God relief in their suffering and courage in such adversity. I hope that they will not be left without the solidarity of all.

*Saint Peter's Square*

21 April 2010

## **Apostolic Journey to Malta**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As you know, last Saturday and Sunday I made an Apostolic Journey to Malta on which I would like to reflect briefly today. The occasion of my Pastoral Visit was the 1,950th anniversary of St Paul's shipwreck off the coast of the Maltese Archipelago and his stay in those islands for about three months. The event can be dated to about the year AD 60 and is recounted with a wealth of detail in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles (chapters 27–28). Like St Paul, I too experienced the warm welcome of the Maltese truly extraordinary and for this reason once again express my deep and cordial gratitude to the President of the Republic, to the Government and to the other State Authorities. I also extend my fraternal thanks to the Country's Bishops, together with all those who collaborated in organizing this festive meeting of the Successor of Peter and the Maltese People. The history of this People, almost 2,000 years old, is inseparable from the Catholic faith that characterizes its culture and traditions. It is said that there are at least 365 churches in Malta, "one for each day of the year", a visible sign of this profound faith!

It all began with that shipwreck: after drifting for 14 days, driven by the winds, the ship that was carrying the Apostle Paul and many others to Rome ran aground in the shallows off the Island of Malta. Thus, after the very cordial meeting with the President of the Republic in Valetta, the capital beautifully framed by the joyful greeting of so many boys and girls I went on pilgrimage straightaway to the so-called “Grotto of St Paul”, near Rabat, for an intense moment of prayer. I was also able to greet there a large group of Maltese missionaries. To think of that small archipelago in the middle of the Mediterranean and of how the seed of the Gospel got there, gives rise to a great sense of wonder at the mysterious designs of divine Providence: it comes naturally to thank the Lord and also St Paul who, in the midst of that violent storm, kept his trust and hope and communicated them to his companions on the voyage. From that shipwreck, or rather from Paul’s subsequent stay in Malta, a fervent and solid Christian community came into being. After 2,000 years it is still faithful to the Gospel and strives to combine it with the complex questions of the contemporary age. This of course is not easy, nor must it be taken for granted, but the Maltese People know how to find in the Christian outlook responses to the new challenges. For example, one sign of this is the fact that they have kept intact their profound respect for unborn life and for the sacredness of marriage, opting to refrain from introducing abortion and divorce into the Country’s legislation.

My journey therefore aimed to strengthen in the faith the Church in Malta, a very vivid reality, well structured and present on the territories of Malta and of Gozo. The whole of this community met in Floriana, in Granaries Square, in front of the Church of St Publius where I celebrated Holy Mass with a very fervent participation. It was a cause of joy and comfort to me to feel the special warmth of that people which gives the feeling of a large family, bound together by faith and a Christian approach to life. After the celebration I wanted to meet several of the victims of abuse by members of the clergy. I shared in their suffering and with emotion, I prayed with them, assuring them of the Church’s action.

Although Malta gives the feeling of a large family, we should not think, because of its geographical location that it is a society “isolated” from the world. This is not how it is, as we see, for example, from the contacts that Malta entertains with various countries and from the fact that Maltese priests are present in many nations. Indeed, the families and parishes of Malta have been able to inculcate in many young people the sense of God and of the Church, so that many of them have responded generously to Jesus’ call and have become priests. A large number of these priests have embraced the missionary commitment *ad gentes* in distant lands, heirs of the apostolic spirit that impelled St Paul to take the Gospel to places where it was not yet known. This is an aspect I willingly reasserted, namely, that “faith is strengthened when it is given to others” (Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, n. 2). Malta developed from the offshoot of this faith and is now open

to various economic, social and cultural realities to which it makes a valuable contribution.

It is clear that down the centuries Malta often had to defend itself and this can be seen from its fortifications. The strategic position of the small archipelago obviously attracted the attention of various political and military powers. Yet the deepest vocation of Malta is the Christian vocation, in other words the universal vocation to peace! The famous Maltese cross, which everyone associates with that nation, has frequently fluttered on flags amidst conflicts and contests but thanks be to God it never lost its authentic, perennial meaning. It is a sign of love and reconciliation, and this is the true vocation of peoples who welcome and embrace the Christian message!

A natural crossroads, Malta is located on a central migration route. Men and women, as St Paul once did, land on the coasts of Malta, sometimes driven by very harsh living conditions, violence and persecution. This naturally entails complex humanitarian, political and legal problems whose solution is not easy but must be sought with perseverance and tenacity, organizing interventions at the international level. It would be good to do this in all nations whose Constitutional Charters and cultures are rooted in Christian values.

The challenge of combining our contemporary complexity with the perennial validity of the Gospel is fascinating to all, but especially to the young. The new generations, in fact, are strongly aware of this and that is why I wanted a youth meeting in Malta, despite the brevity of my Visit. It was a moment of profound and intense exchanges, rendered even more beautiful by the environment in which it took place the Port of Valletta and by the enthusiasm of the young people. I could not but remind them of the youthful experience of St Paul: an extraordinary experience, unique yet able to speak to the new generations of every epoch, because of that radical transformation which followed his encounter with the Risen Christ. I therefore looked at the young people of Malta as potential heirs of the spiritual adventure of St Paul, called, like him, to discover the beauty of God's love, given to us in Jesus Christ; to embrace the mystery of his Cross; to win, despite trials and tribulations, not to fear the "storms" of life, nor shipwreck, because God's plan of love is greater even than storms and shipwreck.

Dear friends, this, to sum up, was the Message that I took to Malta. However, as I mentioned, I myself received so much from the Church there and from that people blessed by God which could effectively collaborate with his grace. Through the intercession of the Apostle Paul, of St George Preca, a priest and the first Maltese Saint, and of the Virgin Mary whom the faithful of Malta and Gozo venerate with such deep devotion, may Malta always advance in peace and in prosperity.

I welcome the newly-ordained deacons from the Pontifical Scots College, together with their family members and friends. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Indonesia, the Philippines, Canada and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Lord.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*28 April 2010*

## **Saint Clare of Assisi**

*15 September 2010*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

One of the best loved Saints is without a doubt St Clare of Assisi who lived in the 13th century and was a contemporary of St Francis. Her testimony shows us how indebted the Church is to courageous women, full of faith like her, who can give a crucial impetus to the Church's renewal.

So who was Clare of Assisi? To answer this question we possess reliable sources: not only the ancient biographies, such as that of Tommaso da Celano, but also the *Proceedings* of the cause of her canonization that the Pope promoted only a few months after Clare's death and that contain the depositions of those who had lived a long time with her.

Born in 1193, Clare belonged to a wealthy, aristocratic family. She renounced her noble status and wealth to live in humility and poverty, adopting the lifestyle that Francis of Assisi recommended. Although her parents were planning a marriage for her with some important figure, as was then the custom, Clare, with a daring act inspired by her deep desire to follow Christ and her admiration for Francis, at the age of 18 left her family home and, in the company of a friend, Bona di Guelfuccio, made her way in secret to the Friars Minor at the little Church of the Portiuncula. It was the evening of Palm Sunday in 1211. In the general commotion, a highly symbolic act took place: while his companions lit torches, Francis cut off Clare's hair and she put on a rough penitential habit. From that moment she had become the virgin bride of Christ, humble and poor, and she consecrated herself totally to him. Like Clare and her companions, down through history innumerable women have been fascinated by love for Christ which, with the beauty of his Divine Person, fills their hearts. And the entire Church, through the mystical nuptial vocation of consecrated virgins, appears what she will be for ever: the pure and beautiful Bride of Christ.

In one of the four letters that Clare sent to St Agnes of Prague the daughter of the King of Bohemia, who wished to follow in Christ's footsteps, she speaks of Christ, her beloved

Spouse, with nuptial words that may be surprising but are nevertheless moving: “When you have loved [him] you shall be chaste; when you have touched [him] you shall become purer; when you have accepted [him] you shall be a virgin. Whose power is stronger, whose generosity is more elevated, whose appearance more beautiful, whose love more tender, whose courtesy more gracious. In whose embrace you are already caught up; who has adorned your breast with precious stones ... and placed on your head a golden crown as a sign [to all] of your holiness” (*First Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague: FF, 2862*).

Especially at the beginning of her religious experience, Francis of Assisi was not only a teacher to Clare whose teachings she was to follow but also a brotherly friend. The friendship between these two Saints is a very beautiful and important aspect. Indeed, when two pure souls on fire with the same love for God meet, they find in their friendship with each other a powerful incentive to advance on the path of perfection. Friendship is one of the noblest and loftiest human sentiments which divine Grace purifies and transfigures. Like St Francis and St Clare, other Saints too experienced profound friendship on the journey towards Christian perfection. Examples are St Francis de Sales and St Jane Frances de Chantal. And St Francis de Sales himself wrote: “It is a blessed thing to love on earth as we hope to love in Heaven, and to begin that friendship here which is to endure for ever there. I am not now speaking of simple charity, a love due to all mankind, but of that spiritual friendship which binds souls together, leading them to share devotions and spiritual interests, so as to have but one mind between them” (*The Introduction to a Devout Life, III, 19*).

After spending a period of several months at other monastic communities, resisting the pressure of her relatives who did not at first approve of her decision, Clare settled with her first companions at the Church of San Damiano where the Friars Minor had organized a small convent for them. She lived in this Monastery for more than 40 years, until her death in 1253. A first-hand description has come down to us of how these women lived in those years at the beginning of the Franciscan movement. It is the admiring account of Jacques de Vitry, a Flemish Bishop who came to Italy on a visit. He declared that he had encountered a large number of men and women of every social class who, having “left all things for Christ, fled the world. They called themselves Friars Minor and Sisters Minor [Lesser] and are held in high esteem by the Lord Pope and the Cardinals.... The women live together in various homes not far from the city. They receive nothing but live on the work of their own hands. And they are deeply troubled and pained at being honoured more than they would like to be by both clerics and lay people” (*Letter of October 1216: FF, 2205, 2207*).

Jacques de Vitry had perceptively noticed a characteristic trait of Franciscan spirituality about which Clare was deeply sensitive: the radicalism of poverty associated with total



trust in Divine Providence. For this reason, she acted with great determination, obtaining from Pope Gregory IX or, probably, already from Pope Innocent III, the so-called *Privilegium Paupertatis* (cf. *FF.*, 3279). On the basis of this privilege Clare and her companions at San Damiano could not possess any material property. This was a truly extraordinary exception in comparison with the canon law then in force but the ecclesiastical authorities of that time permitted it, appreciating the fruits of evangelical holiness that they recognized in the way of life of Clare and her sisters. This shows that even in the centuries of the Middle Ages the role of women was not secondary but on the contrary considerable. In this regard, it is useful to remember that Clare was the first woman in the Church's history who composed a written Rule, submitted for the Pope's approval, to ensure the preservation of Francis of Assisi's charism in all the communities of women large numbers of which were already springing up in her time that wished to draw inspiration from the example of Francis and Clare.

In the Convent of San Damiano, Clare practised heroically the virtues that should distinguish every Christian: humility, a spirit of piety and penitence and charity. Although she was the superior, she wanted to serve the sick sisters herself and joyfully subjected herself to the most menial tasks. In fact, charity overcomes all resistance and whoever loves, joyfully performs every sacrifice. Her faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist was so great that twice a miracle happened. Simply by showing to them the Most Blessed Sacrament distanced the Saracen mercenaries, who were on the point of attacking the convent of San Damiano and pillaging the city of Assisi.

Such episodes, like other miracles whose memory lives on, prompted Pope Alexander IV to canonize her in 1255, only two years after her death, outlining her eulogy in the Bull on the Canonization of St Clare. In it we read: "How powerful was the illumination of this light and how strong the brightness of this source of light. Truly this light was kept hidden in the cloistered life; and outside them shone with gleaming rays; Clare in fact lay hidden, but her life was revealed to all. Clare was silent, but her fame was shouted out" (*FF.*, 3284). And this is exactly how it was, dear friends: those who change the world for the better are holy, they transform it permanently, instilling in it the energies that only love inspired by the Gospel can elicit. The Saints are humanity's great benefactors!

St Clare's spirituality, the synthesis of the holiness she proposed is summed up in the fourth letter she wrote to St Agnes of Prague. St Clare used an image very widespread in the Middle Ages that dates back to Patristic times: the mirror. And she invited her friend in Prague to reflect herself in that mirror of the perfection of every virtue which is the Lord himself. She wrote: "Happy, indeed, is the one permitted to share in this sacred banquet so as to be joined with all the feelings of her heart (to Christ) whose beauty all the blessed hosts of the Heavens unceasingly admire, whose affection moves, whose

contemplation invigorates, whose generosity fills, whose sweetness replenishes, whose remembrance pleasantly brings light, whose fragrance will revive the dead, and whose glorious vision will bless all the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem, because the vision of him is the *splendour of everlasting glory, the radiance of everlasting light, and a mirror without tarnish*. Look into this mirror every day, O Queen, spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually examine your face in it, so that in this way you may adorn yourself completely, inwardly and outwardly.... In this mirror shine blessed poverty, holy humility, and charity beyond words ..." (*Fourth Letter to Blessed Agnes of Prague, FF, 2901–2903*).

Grateful to God who give us Saints who speak to our hearts and offer us an example of Christian life to imitate, I would like to end with the same words of Blessing that St Clare composed for her Sisters and which the Poor Clares, who play a precious role in the Church with their prayer and with their work, still preserve today with great devotion. These are words in which the full tenderness of her spiritual motherhood emerges: "I give you my blessing now while living, and after my death, in as far as I may: nay, even more than I may, I call down on you all the blessings that the Father of mercies has bestowed and continues to bestow on his spiritual sons and daughters both in Heaven and on earth, and with which a spiritual father and mother have blessed and will bless their spiritual sons and daughters. Amen" (*FF, 2856*).

## Saint Matilda of Hackeborn

29 September 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I want to talk to you about St Matilda of Hackeborn, one of the great figures of the convent of Helfta, who lived in the 13th century. Her sister, St Gertrude the Great, tells of the special graces that God granted to St Matilda in the sixth book of *Liber Specialis Gratiae* (Book of Special Grace), which states: "What we have written is very little in comparison with what we have omitted. We are publishing these things solely for the glory of God and the usefulness of our neighbour, for it would seem wrong to us to keep quiet about the many graces that Matilda received from God, not so much for herself, in our opinion, but for us and for those who will come after us" (Mechthild von Hackeborn, *Liber specialis gratiae*, vi, 1).

This work was written by St Gertrude and by another sister of Helfta and has a unique story. At the age of 50, Matilda went through a grave spiritual crisis, as well as physical suffering. In this condition she confided to two of her sisters who were friends the special graces with which God had guided her since childhood. However, she did not know that they were writing it all down. When she found out she was deeply upset and

distressed. However, the Lord reassured her, making her realize that all that had been written was for the glory of God and for the benefit of her neighbour (cf. *ibid.*, II, 25; V, 20). This work, therefore, is the principal source to refer to for information on the life and spirituality of our Saint.

With her we are introduced into the family of Baron von Hackeborn, one of the noblest, richest and most powerful barons of Thuringia, related to the Emperor Frederick II, and we enter the convent of Helfta in the most glorious period of its history. The Baron had already given one daughter to the convent, Gertrude of Hackeborn (1231/1232–1291/1292). She was gifted with an outstanding personality. She was Abbess for 40 years, capable of giving the spirituality of the convent a particular hallmark and of bringing it to an extraordinary flourishing as the centre of mysticism and culture, a school for scientific and theological training. Gertrude offered the nuns an intellectual training of a high standard that enabled them to cultivate a spirituality founded on Sacred Scripture, on the Liturgy, on the Patristic tradition, on the Cistercian Rule and spirituality, with a particular love for St Bernard of Clairvaux and William of Saint-Thierry. She was a real teacher, exemplary in all things, in evangelical radicalism and in apostolic zeal. Matilda, from childhood, accepted and enjoyed the spiritual and cultural atmosphere created by her sister, later giving it her own personal hallmark.

Matilda was born in 1241 or 1242 in the Castle of Helfta. She was the Baron's third daughter. When she was seven she went with her mother to visit her sister Gertrude in the convent of Rodersdorf. She was so enchanted by this environment that she ardently desired to belong to it. She entered as a schoolgirl and in 1258 became a nun at the convent, which in the meantime had moved to Helfta, to the property of the Hackeborns. She was distinguished by her humility, her fervour, her friendliness, the clarity and the innocence of her life and by the familiarity and intensity with which she lived her relationship with God, the Virgin and the Saints. She was endowed with lofty natural and spiritual qualities such as knowledge, intelligence, familiarity with the humanities and a marvellously sweet voice: everything suited her to being a true treasure for the convent from every point of view (*ibid*, *Proem.*). Thus when "God's nightingale", as she was called, was still very young she became the principal of the convent's school, choir mistress and novice mistress, offices that she fulfilled with talent and unflagging zeal, not only for the benefit of the nuns but for anyone who wanted to draw on her wisdom and goodness.

Illumined by the divine gift of mystic contemplation, Matilda wrote many prayers. She was a teacher of faithful doctrine and deep humility, a counsellor, comforter and guide in discernment. We read: "she distributed doctrine in an abundance never previously seen at the convent, and alas, we are rather afraid that nothing like it will ever be seen again. The sisters would cluster round her to hear the word of God, as if she were a preacher.

“She was the refuge and consoler of all and, by a unique gift of God, was endowed with the grace of being able to reveal freely the secrets of the heart of each one. Many people, not only in the convent but also outsiders, religious and lay people, who came from afar, testified that this holy virgin had freed them from their afflictions and that they had never known such comfort as they found near her. “*Furthermore, she composed and taught so many prayers that if they were gathered together they would make a book larger than a Psalter*” (*ibid.*, VI, 1).

In 1261 a five year old girl came to the convent. Her name was Gertrude: She was entrusted to the care of Matilda, just 20 years of age, who taught her and guided her in the spiritual life until she not only made her into an excellent disciple but also her confidant. In 1271 or 1272, Matilda of Magdeburg also entered the convent. So it was that this place took in four great women two Gertrudes and two Matildas the glory of German monasticism. During her long life which she spent in the convent, Matilda was afflicted with continuous and intense bouts of suffering, to which she added the very harsh penances chosen for the conversion of sinners. In this manner she participated in the Lord’s Passion until the end of her life (cf. *ibid.*, VI, 2). Prayer and contemplation were the life-giving *humus* of her existence: her revelations, her teachings, her service to her neighbour, her journey in faith and in love have their root and their context here. In the first book of the work, *Liber Specialis Gratiae*, the nuns wrote down Matilda’s confidences pronounced on the Feasts of the Lord, the Saints and, especially, of the Blessed Virgin. This Saint had a striking capacity for living the various elements of the Liturgy, even the simplest, and bringing it into the daily life of the convent. Some of her images, expressions and applications are at times distant from our sensibility today, but, if we were to consider monastic life and her task as mistress and choir mistress, we should grasp her rare ability as a teacher and educator who, starting from the Liturgy, helped her sisters to live intensely every moment of monastic life.

Matilda gave an emphasis in liturgical prayer to the canonical hours, to the celebrations of Holy Mass and, especially, to Holy Communion. Here she was often rapt in ecstasy in profound intimacy with the Lord in his most ardent and sweetest Heart, carrying on a marvellous conversation in which she asked for inner illumination, while interceding in a special way for her community and her sisters. At the centre are the mysteries of Christ which the Virgin Mary constantly recommends to people so that they may walk on the path of holiness: “If you want true holiness, be close to my Son; he is holiness itself that sanctifies all things” (*ibid.*, I, 40). The whole world, the Church, benefactors and sinners were present in her intimacy with God. For her, Heaven and earth were united.

Her visions, her teachings, the events of her life are described in words reminiscent of liturgical and biblical language. In this way it is possible to comprehend her deep

knowledge of Sacred Scripture, which was her daily bread. She had constant recourse to the Scriptures, making the most of the biblical texts read in the Liturgy, and drawing from them symbols, terms, countryside, images and famous figures. She had a special love for the Gospel: “The words of the Gospel were a marvellous nourishment for her and in her heart stirred feelings of such sweetness that, because of her enthusiasm, she was often unable to finish reading it.... The way in which she read those words was so fervent that it inspired devotion in everyone. “Thus when she was singing in the choir, she was completely absorbed in God, uplifted by such ardour that she sometimes expressed her feelings in gestures.... “On other occasions, since she was rapt in ecstasy, she did not hear those who were calling or touching her and came back with difficulty to the reality of the things around her” (*ibid.*, VI, 1). In one of her visions, Jesus himself recommended the Gospel to her; opening the wound in his most gentle Heart, he said to her: “consider the immensity of my love: if you want to know it well, nowhere will you find it more clearly expressed than in the Gospel. No one has ever heard expressed stronger or more tender sentiments than these: ‘As my father has loved me, so I have loved you (Jn 15:9)’ ” (*ibid.*, I, 22).

Dear friends, personal and liturgical prayer, especially the Liturgy of the Hours and Holy Mass are at the root of St Matilda of Hackeborn’s spiritual experience. In letting herself be guided by Sacred Scripture and nourished by the Bread of the Eucharist, she followed a path of close union with the Lord, ever in full fidelity to the Church. This is also a strong invitation to us to intensify our friendship with the Lord, especially through daily prayer and attentive, faithful and active participation in Holy Mass. The Liturgy is a great school of spirituality.

Her disciple Gertrude gives a vivid picture of St Matilda of Hackeborn’s last moments. They were very difficult but illumined by the presence of the Blessed Trinity, of the Lord, of the Virgin Mary and of all the Saints, even Gertrude’s sister by blood. When the time came in which the Lord chose to gather her to him, she asked him let her live longer in suffering for the salvation of souls, and Jesus was pleased with this further sign of her love.

Matilda was 58 years old. The last leg of her journey was marked by eight years of serious illness. Her work and the fame of her holiness spread far and wide. When her time came, “the God of majesty ... the one delight of the soul that loves him ... sang to her: *Venite vos, benedicti Patris mei.... Venite, o voi che siete i benedetti dal Padre mio, venite a ricevere il regno ...* and he united her with his glory” (*ibid.*, VI, 8).

May St Matilda of Hackeborn commend us to the Sacred Heart of Jesus and to the Virgin Mary. She invites us to praise the Son with the Heart of the Mother, and to praise Mary with the Heart of the Son: “I greet you, O most deeply venerated Virgin, in that sweetest of dews which from the Heart of the Blessed Trinity spread within you; I greet you in the

glory and joy in which you now rejoice for ever, you who were chosen in preference to all the creatures of the earth and of Heaven even before the world's creation! Amen" (*ibid.*, I, 45).

## Saint Gertrude the Great

6 October 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

St Gertrude the Great, of whom I would like to talk to you today, brings us once again this week to the Monastery of Helfta, where several of the Latin-German masterpieces of religious literature were written by women. Gertrude belonged to this world. She is one of the most famous mystics, the only German woman to be called "Great", because of her cultural and evangelical stature: her life and her thought had a unique impact on Christian spirituality. She was an exceptional woman, endowed with special natural talents and extraordinary gifts of grace, the most profound humility and ardent zeal for her neighbour's salvation. She was in close communion with God both in contemplation and in her readiness to go to the help of those in need.

At Helfta, she measured herself systematically, so to speak, with her teacher, Matilda of Hackeborn, of whom I spoke at last Wednesday's Audience. Gertrude came into contact with Matilda of Magdeburg, another medieval mystic and grew up under the wing of Abbess Gertrude, motherly, gentle and demanding. From these three sisters she drew precious experience and wisdom; she worked them into a synthesis of her own, continuing on her religious journey with boundless trust in the Lord. Gertrude expressed the riches of her spirituality not only in her monastic world, but also and above all in the biblical, liturgical, Patristic and Benedictine contexts, with a highly personal hallmark and great skill in communicating.

Gertrude was born on 6 January 1256, on the Feast of the Epiphany, but nothing is known of her parents nor of the place of her birth. Gertrude wrote that the Lord himself revealed to her the meaning of this first uprooting: "I have chosen you for my abode because I am pleased that all that is lovable in you is my work.... For this very reason I have distanced you from all your relatives, so that no one may love you for reasons of kinship and that I may be the sole cause of the affection you receive" (*The Revelations*, I, 16, Siena 1994, pp. 76–77).

When she was five years old, in 1261, she entered the monastery for formation and education, a common practice in that period. Here she spent her whole life, the most important stages of which she herself points out. In her memoirs she recalls that the Lord equipped her in advance with forbearing patience and infinite mercy, forgetting the

years of her childhood, adolescence and youth, which she spent, she wrote, “in such mental blindness that I would have been capable ... of thinking, saying or doing without remorse everything I liked and wherever I could, had you not armed me in advance, with an inherent horror of evil and a natural inclination for good and with the external vigilance of others. “I would have behaved like a pagan ... in spite of desiring you since childhood, that is since my fifth year of age, when I went to live in the Benedictine shrine of religion to be educated among your most devout friends” (*ibid.*, II, 23, p. 140f.).

Gertrude was an extraordinary student, she learned everything that can be learned of the sciences of the trivium and quadrivium, the education of that time; she was fascinated by knowledge and threw herself into profane studies with zeal and tenacity, achieving scholastic successes beyond every expectation. If we know nothing of her origins, she herself tells us about her youthful passions: literature, music and song and the art of miniature painting captivated her. She had a strong, determined, ready and impulsive temperament. She often says that she was negligent; she recognizes her shortcomings and humbly asks forgiveness for them. She also humbly asks for advice and prayers for her conversion. Some features of her temperament and faults were to accompany her to the end of her life, so as to amaze certain people who wondered why the Lord had favoured her with such a special love.

From being a student she moved on to dedicate herself totally to God in monastic life, and for 20 years nothing exceptional occurred: study and prayer were her main activities. Because of her gifts she shone out among the sisters; she was tenacious in consolidating her culture in various fields.

Nevertheless during Advent of 1280 she began to feel disgusted with all this and realized the vanity of it all. On 27 January 1281, a few days before the Feast of the Purification of the Virgin, towards the hour of Compline in the evening, the Lord with his illumination dispelled her deep anxiety. With gentle sweetness he calmed the distress that anguished her, a torment that Gertrude saw even as a gift of God, “to pull down that tower of vanity and curiosity which, although I had both the name and habit of a nun alas I had continued to build with my pride, so that at least in this manner I might find the way for you to show me your salvation” (*ibid.*, II, p. 87). She had a vision of a young man who, in order to guide her through the tangle of thorns that surrounded her soul, took her by the hand. In that hand Gertrude recognized “the precious traces of the wounds that abrogated all the acts of accusation of our enemies” (*ibid.*, II, 1, p. 89), and thus recognized the One who saved us with his Blood on the Cross: Jesus.

From that moment her life of intimate communion with the Lord was intensified, especially in the most important liturgical seasons Advent-Christmas, Lent-Easter, the feasts of Our Lady even when illness prevented her from going to the choir. This was the

same liturgical *humus* as that of Matilda, her teacher; but Gertrude describes it with simpler, more linear images, symbols and terms that are more realistic and her references to the Bible, to the Fathers and to the Benedictine world are more direct.

Her biographer points out two directions of what we might describe as her own particular “conversion”: *in study*, with the radical passage from profane, humanistic studies to the study of theology, and *in monastic observance*, with the passage from a life that she describes as *negligent*, to the life of intense, mystical prayer, with exceptional missionary zeal. The Lord who had chosen her from her mother’s womb and who since her childhood had made her partake of the banquet of monastic life, called her again with his grace “from external things to inner life and from earthly occupations to love for spiritual things”. Gertrude understood that she was remote from him, *in the region of unlikeness*, as she said with Augustine; that she had dedicated herself with excessive greed to liberal studies, to human wisdom, overlooking spiritual knowledge, depriving herself of the taste for true wisdom; she was then led to the mountain of contemplation where she cast off her former self to be re clothed in the new. “From a grammarian she became a theologian, with the unflagging and attentive reading of all the sacred books that she could lay her hands on or contrive to obtain. She filled her heart with the most useful and sweet sayings of Sacred Scripture. Thus she was always ready with some inspired and edifying word to satisfy those who came to consult her while having at her fingertips the most suitable scriptural texts to refute any erroneous opinion and silence her opponents” (*ibid.*, I, 1, p. 25).

Gertrude transformed all this into an apostolate: she devoted herself to writing and popularizing the truth of faith with clarity and simplicity, with grace and persuasion, serving the Church faithfully and lovingly so as to be helpful to and appreciated by theologians and devout people.

Little of her intense activity has come down to us, partly because of the events that led to the destruction of the Monastery of Helfta. In addition to *The Herald of Divine Love* and *The Revelations*, we still have her *Spiritual Exercises*, a rare jewel of mystical spiritual literature.

In religious observance our Saint was “a firm pillar ... a very powerful champion of justice and truth” (*ibid.*, I, 1, p. 26), her biographer says. By her words and example she kindled great fervour in other people. She added to the prayers and penances of the monastic rule others with such devotion and such trusting abandonment in God that she inspired in those who met her an awareness of being in the Lord’s presence. In fact, God made her understand that he had called her to be an instrument of his grace. Gertrude herself felt unworthy of this immense divine treasure, and confesses that she had not safeguarded it or made enough of it. She exclaimed: “Alas! If you had given me to remember you, unworthy as I am, by even only a straw, I would have viewed it with greater respect and



reverence that I have had for all your gifts!" (*ibid.*, II, 5, p. 100). Yet, in recognizing her poverty and worthlessness she adhered to God's will, "because", she said, "I have so little profited from your graces that I cannot resolve to believe that they were lavished upon me solely for my own use, since no one can thwart your eternal wisdom. Therefore, O Giver of every good thing who has freely lavished upon me gifts so undeserved, in order that, in reading this, the heart of at least one of your friends may be moved at the thought that zeal for souls has induced you to leave such a priceless gem for so long in the abominable mud of my heart" (*ibid.*, II, 5, p. 100f.).

Two favours in particular were dearer to her than any other, as Gertrude herself writes: "The stigmata of your salvation-bearing wounds which you impressed upon me, as it were, like a valuable necklaces, in my heart, and the profound and salutary wound of love with which you marked it.

"You flooded me with your gifts, of such beatitude that even were I to live for 1,000 years with no consolation neither interior nor exterior the memory of them would suffice to comfort me, to enlighten me, to fill me with gratitude. Further, you wished to introduce me into the inestimable intimacy of your friendship by opening to me in various ways that most noble sacrarium of your Divine Being which is your Divine Heart.... To this accumulation of benefits you added that of giving me as Advocate the Most Holy Virgin Mary, your Mother, and often recommended me to her affection, just as the most faithful of bridegrooms would recommend his beloved bride to his own mother" (*ibid.*, II, 23, p. 145).

Looking forward to never-ending communion, she ended her earthly life on 17 November 1301 or 1302, at the age of about 46. In the seventh Exercise, that of preparation for death, St Gertrude wrote: "O Jesus, you who are immensely dear to me, be with me always, so that my heart may stay with you and that your love may endure with me with no possibility of division; and bless my passing, so that my spirit, freed from the bonds of the flesh, may immediately find rest in you. Amen" (*Spiritual Exercises*, Milan 2006, p. 148).

It seems obvious to me that these are not only things of the past, of history; rather St Gertrude's life lives on as a lesson of Christian life, of an upright path, and shows us that the heart of a happy life, of a true life, is friendship with the Lord Jesus. And this friendship is learned in love for Sacred Scripture, in love for the Liturgy, in profound faith, in love for Mary, so as to be ever more truly acquainted with God himself and hence with true happiness, which is the goal of our life. Many thanks.

# Blessed Angela of Foligno

13 October 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak to you about Blessed Angela of Foligno, a great medieval mystic who lived in the 13th century. People are usually fascinated by the consummate experience of union with God that she reached, but perhaps they give too little consideration to her first steps, her conversion and the long journey that led from her starting point, the “great fear of hell”, to her goal, total union with the Trinity. The first part of Angela’s life was certainly not that of a fervent disciple of the Lord. She was born into a well-off family in about 1248. Her father died and she was brought up in a somewhat superficial manner by her mother. She was introduced at a rather young age into the worldly circles of the town of Foligno, where she met a man whom she married at the age of 20 and to whom she bore children. Her life was so carefree that she was even contemptuous of the so-called “penitents”, who abounded in that period; they were people who, in order to follow Christ, sold their possessions and lived in prayer, fasting, in service to the Church and in charity.

Certain events, such as the violent earthquake in 1279, a hurricane, the endless war against Perugia and its harsh consequences, affected the life of Angela who little by little became aware of her sins, until she took a decisive step. In 1285 she called upon St Francis, who appeared to her in a vision and asked his advice on making a good general Confession. She then went to Confession with a Friar in San Feliciano. Three years later, on her path of conversion she reached another turning point: she was released from any emotional ties. In the space of a few months, her mother’s death was followed by the death of her husband and those of all her children. She therefore sold her possessions and in 1291 enrolled in the Third Order of St Francis. She died in Foligno on 4 January 1309.

*The Book of Visions and Instructions* of Blessed Angela of Foligno, in which is gathered the documentation on our Blessed, tells the story of this conversion and points out the necessary means: penance, humility and tribulation; and it recounts the steps, Angela’s successive experiences which began in 1285. Remembering them after she had experienced them, Angela then endeavoured to recount them through her Friar confessor, who faithfully transcribed them, seeking later to sort them into stages which he called “steps or mutations” but without managing to put them entirely in order (cf. *Il Libro della beata Angela da Foligno*, Cinisello Balsamo 1990, p. 51). This was because for Blessed Angela the experience of union meant the total involvement of both the spiritual and physical senses and she was left with only a “shadow” in her mind, as it were, of what

she had “understood” during her ecstasies. “I truly heard these words”, she confessed after a mystical ecstasy, but it is in no way possible for me to know or tell of what I saw and understood, or of what he [God] showed me, although I would willingly reveal what I understood with the words that I heard, but it was an absolutely ineffable abyss”. Angela of Foligno presented her mystical “life”, without elaborating on it herself because these were divine illuminations that were communicated suddenly and unexpectedly to her soul. Her Friar confessor too had difficulty in reporting these events, “partly because of her great and wonderful reserve concerning the divine gifts” (*ibid.*, p. 194). In addition to Angela’s difficulty in expressing her mystical experience was the difficulty her listeners found in understanding her. It was a situation which showed clearly that the one true Teacher, Jesus, dwells in the heart of every believer and wants to take total possession of it. So it was with Angela, who wrote to a spiritual son: “My son, if you were to see my heart you would be absolutely obliged to do everything God wants, because my heart is God’s heart and God’s heart is mine”. Here St Paul’s words ring out: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

Let us then consider only a few “steps” of our Blessed’s rich spiritual journey. The first, in fact, is an introduction: “It was the knowledge of sin”, as she explained, “after which my soul was deeply afraid of damnation; in this stage I shed bitter tears” (*Il Libro della beata Angela da Foligno*, p. 39). This “dread” of hell corresponds to the type of faith that Angela had at the time of her “conversion”; it was a faith still poor in charity, that is, in love of God. Repentance, the fear of hell and penance unfolded to Angela the prospect of the sorrowful “Way of the Cross”, which from the eighth to the 15th stages was to lead her to the “way of love”. Her Friar confessor recounted: “The faithful woman then told me: I have had this divine revelation: “after the things you have written, write that anyone who wishes to preserve grace must not lift the eyes of his soul from the Cross, either in the joy or in the sadness that I grant or permit him” (*ibid.*, p. 143). However, in this phase Angela “did not yet feel love”. She said: “The soul feels shame and bitterness and does not yet feel love but suffering” (*ibid.*, p. 39), and is unrequited.

Angela felt she should give something to God in reparation for her sins, but slowly came to realize that she had nothing to give him, indeed, that she “was nothing” before him. She understood that it would not be her will to give her God’s love, for her will could give only her own “nothingness”, her “non-love”. As she was to say: only “true and pure love, that comes from God, is in the soul and ensures that one recognizes one’s own shortcomings and the divine goodness.... Such love brings the soul to Christ and it understands with certainty that in him no deception can be found or can exist. No particle of worldly love can be mingled with this love” (*ibid.*, p. 124–125). This meant opening herself solely and totally to God’s love whose greatest expression is in Christ: “O my God” she prayed, “make me worthy of knowing the loftiest mystery that your most

ardent and ineffable love brought about for our sake, together with the love of the Trinity, in other words the loftiest mystery of your most holy Incarnation.... O incomprehensible love! There is no greater love than this love that brought my God to become man in order to make me God" (*ibid.*, p. 295). However, Angela's heart always bore the wounds of sin; even after a good Confession she would find herself forgiven and yet still stricken by sin, free and yet conditioned by the past, absolved but in need of penance. And the thought of hell accompanied her too, for the greater the progress the soul made on the way of Christian perfection, the more convinced it is not only of being "unworthy" but also deserving of hell.

And so it was that on this mystical journey Angela understood the central reality in a profound way: what would save her from her "unworthiness" and from "deserving hell" would not be her "union with God" or her possession of the "truth" but Jesus Crucified, "his crucifixion for me", his love.

In the eighth step, she said, "However, I did not yet understand whether my liberation from sins and from hell and conversion to penance was far greater, or his crucifixion for me" (*ibid.*, n. 41). This was the precarious balance between love and suffering, that she felt throughout her arduous journey towards perfection. For this very reason she preferred to contemplate Christ Crucified, because in this vision she saw the perfect balance brought about. On the Cross was the man-God, in a supreme act of suffering which was a supreme act of love. In the third *Instruction* the Blessed insisted on this contemplation and declared: "The more perfectly and purely we see, the more perfectly and purely we love.... Therefore the more we see the God and man, Jesus Christ, the more we are transformed in him through love.... What I said of love ... I also say of suffering: the more the soul contemplates the ineffable suffering of the God and man Jesus Christ the more sorrowful it becomes and is transformed through suffering" (*ibid.*, p. 190–191). Thus, unifying herself with and transforming herself into the love and suffering of Christ Crucified, she was identifying herself with him. Angela's conversion, which began from that Confession in 1285, was to reach maturity only when God's forgiveness appeared to her soul as the freely given gift of the love of the Father, the source of love: "No one can make excuses", she said, "because anyone can love God and he does not ask the soul for more than to love him, because he loves the soul and it is his love" (*ibid.*, p. 76).

On Angela's spiritual journey the transition from conversion to mystical experience, from what can be expressed to the inexpressible, took place through the Crucified One. He is the "God-man of the Passion", who became her "teacher of perfection". The whole of her mystical experience, therefore, consisted in striving for a perfect "likeness" with him, through ever deeper and ever more radical purifications and transformations. Angela threw her whole self, body and soul, into this stupendous undertaking, never sparing

herself of penance and suffering, from beginning to end, desiring to die with all the sorrows suffered by the God-man crucified in order to be totally transformed in him. “O children of God”, she recommended, “transform yourselves totally in the man-God who so loved you that he chose to die for you a most ignominious and all together unutterably painful death, and in the most painful and bitterest way. And this was solely for love of you, O man!” (*ibid.*, p. 247). This identification also meant experiencing what Jesus himself experienced: poverty, contempt and sorrow, because, as she declared, “through temporal poverty the soul will find eternal riches; through contempt and shame it will obtain supreme honour and very great glory; through a little penance, made with pain and sorrow, it will possess with infinite sweetness and consolation the Supreme Good, Eternal God” (*ibid.*, p. 293).

From conversion to mystic union with Christ Crucified, to the inexpressible. A very lofty journey, whose secret is constant prayer. “The more you pray”, she said, “the more illumined you will be and the more profoundly and intensely you will see the supreme Good, the supremely good Being; the more profoundly and intensely you see him, the more you will love him; the more you love him the more he will delight you; and the more he delights you, the better you will understand him and you will become capable of understanding him. You will then reach the fullness of light, for you will understand that you cannot understand” (*ibid.*, p. 184).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Blessed Angela's life began with a worldly existence, rather remote from God. Yet her meeting with the figure of St Francis and, finally, her meeting with Christ Crucified reawakened her soul to the presence of God, for the reason that with God alone life becomes true life, because, in sorrow for sin, it becomes love and joy. And this is how Blessed Angela speaks to us. Today we all risk living as though God did not exist; he seems so distant from daily life. However, God has thousands of ways of his own for each one, to make himself present in the soul, to show that he exists and knows and loves me. And Blessed Angela wishes to make us attentive to these signs with which the Lord touches our soul, attentive to God's presence, so as to learn the way with God and towards God, in communion with Christ Crucified. Let us pray the Lord that he make us attentive to the signs of his presence and that he teach us truly to live. Thank you.*

## Saint Elizabeth of Hungary

20 October 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to speak to you about one of the women of the Middle Ages who inspired the greatest admiration; she is St Elizabeth of Hungary, also called St Elizabeth of Thuringia.

Elizabeth was born in 1207; historians dispute her birthplace. Her father was Andrew II, the rich and powerful King of Hungary. To reinforce political ties he had married the German Countess Gertrude of Andechs-Meran, sister of St Hedwig who was wife to the Duke of Silesia. Elizabeth, together with her sister and three brothers, spent only the first four years of her childhood at the Hungarian court. She liked playing, music and dancing; she recited her prayers faithfully and already showed special attention to the poor, whom she helped with a kind word or an affectionate gesture.

Her happy childhood was suddenly interrupted when some knights arrived from distant Thuringia to escort her to her new residence in Central Germany. In fact, complying with the customs of that time, Elizabeth's father had arranged for her to become a Princess of Thuringia. The Landgrave or Count of this region was one of the richest and most influential sovereigns in Europe at the beginning of the 13th century and his castle was a centre of magnificence and culture.

However, the festivities and apparent glory concealed the ambition of feudal princes who were frequently warring with each other and in conflict with the royal and imperial authorities.

In this context the Landgrave Hermann very willingly accepted the betrothal of his son Ludwig to the Hungarian Princess. Elizabeth left her homeland with a rich dowry and a large entourage, including her personal ladies-in-waiting, two of whom were to remain faithful friends to the very end. It is they who left us the precious information on the childhood and life of the Saint.

They reached Eisenach after a long journey and made the ascent to the Fortress of Wartburg, the strong castle towering over the city. It was here that the betrothal of Ludwig and Elizabeth was celebrated. In the ensuing years, while Ludwig learned the knightly profession, Elizabeth and her companions studied German, French, Latin, music, literature and embroidery. Despite the fact that political reasons had determined their betrothal, a sincere love developed between the two young people, enlivened by faith and by the desire to do God's will. On his father's death when Ludwig was 18 years old, he began to reign over Thuringia.

Elizabeth, however, became the object of critical whispers because her behaviour was incongruous with court life. Hence their marriage celebrations were far from sumptuous and a part of the funds destined for the banquet was donated to the poor.

With her profound sensitivity, Elizabeth saw the contradictions between the faith professed and Christian practice. She could not bear compromise. Once, on entering a church on the Feast of the Assumption, she took off her crown, laid it before the Crucifix and, covering her face, lay prostrate on the ground. When her mother-in-law

reprimanded her for this gesture, Elizabeth answered: “How can I, a wretched creature, continue to wear a crown of earthly dignity, when I see my King Jesus Christ crowned with thorns?”.

She behaved to her subjects in the same way that she behaved to God. Among the *Sayings of the four maids* we find this testimony: “She did not eat any food before ascertaining that it came from her husband’s property or legitimate possessions. While she abstained from goods procured illegally, she also did her utmost to provide compensation to those who had suffered violence” (nn. 25 and 37).

She is a true example for all who have roles of leadership: the exercise of authority, at every level, must be lived as a service to justice and charity, in the constant search for the common good.

Elizabeth diligently practiced works of mercy: she would give food and drink to those who knocked at her door, she procured clothing, paid debts, cared for the sick and buried the dead. Coming down from her castle, she often visited the homes of the poor with her ladies-in-waiting, bringing them bread, meat, flour and other food. She distributed the food personally and attentively checked the clothing and mattresses of the poor.

This behaviour was reported to her husband, who not only was not displeased but answered her accusers, “So long as she does not sell the castle, I am happy with her!”.

The miracle of the loaves that were changed into roses fits into this context: while Elizabeth was on her way with her apron filled with bread for the poor, she met her husband who asked her what she was carrying. She opened her apron to show him and, instead of bread, it was full of magnificent roses. This symbol of charity often features in depictions of St Elizabeth.

Elizabeth’s marriage was profoundly happy: she helped her husband to raise his human qualities to a supernatural level and he, in exchange, stood up for his wife’s generosity to the poor and for her religious practices. Increasingly admired for his wife’s great faith, Ludwig said to her, referring to her attention to the poor: “Dear Elizabeth, it is Christ whom you have cleansed, nourished and cared for”. A clear witness to how faith and love of God and neighbour strengthen family life and deepen ever more the matrimonial union.

The young couple found spiritual support in the Friars Minor who began to spread through Thuringia in 1222. Elizabeth chose from among them Friar Rodeger (Rüdiger) as her spiritual director. When he told her about the event of the conversion of Francis of Assisi, a rich young merchant, Elizabeth was even more enthusiastic in the journey of her Christian life.

From that time she became even more determined to follow the poor and Crucified Christ, present in poor people. Even when her first son was born, followed by two other children, our Saint never neglected her charitable works. She also helped the Friars Minor to build a convent at Halberstadt, of which Friar Rodeger became superior. For this reason Elizabeth's spiritual direction was taken on by Conrad of Marburg.

The farewell to her husband was a hard trial, when, at the end of June in 1227 when Ludwig iv joined the Crusade of the Emperor Frederick ii. He reminded his wife that this was traditional for the sovereigns of Thuringia. Elizabeth answered him: "Far be it from me to detain you. I have given my whole self to God and now I must also give you".

However, fever decimated the troops and Ludwig himself fell ill and died in Otranto, before embarking, in September 1227. He was 27 years old. When Elizabeth learned the news, she was so sorrowful that she withdrew in solitude; but then, strengthened by prayer and comforted by the hope of seeing him again in Heaven, she began to attend to the affairs of the Kingdom.

However, another trial was lying in wait for Elizabeth. Her brother-in-law usurped the government of Thuringia, declaring himself to be the true heir of Ludwig and accusing Elizabeth of being a pious woman incapable of ruling. The young widow, with three children, was banished from the Castle of Wartburg and went in search of a place of refuge. Only two of her ladies remained close to her. They accompanied her and entrusted the three children to the care of Ludwig's friends. Wandering through the villages, Elizabeth worked wherever she was welcomed, looked after the sick, spun thread and cooked.

During this calvary which she bore with great faith, with patience and with dedication to God, a few relatives who had stayed faithful to her and viewed her brother-in-law's rule as illegal, restored her reputation. So it was that at the beginning of 1228, Elizabeth received sufficient income to withdraw to the family's castle in Marburg, where her spiritual director, Fra Conrad, also lived.

It was he who reported the following event to Pope Gregory ix: "On Good Friday in 1228, having placed her hands on the altar in the chapel of her city, Eisenach, to which she had welcomed the Friars Minor, in the presence of several friars and relatives Elizabeth renounced her own will and all the vanities of the world. She also wanted to resign all her possessions, but I dissuaded her out of love for the poor. Shortly afterwards she built a hospital, gathered the sick and invalids and served at her own table the most wretched and deprived. When I reprimanded her for these things, Elizabeth answered that she received from the poor special grace and humility" (*Epistula magistri Conradi*, 14–17).



We can discern in this affirmation a certain mystical experience similar to that of St Francis: the *Poverello* of Assisi declared in his testament, in fact, that serving lepers, which he at first found repugnant, was transformed into sweetness of the soul and of the body (*Testamentum*, 1–3).

Elizabeth spent her last three years in the hospital she founded, serving the sick and keeping wake over the dying. She always tried to carry out the most humble services and repugnant tasks. She became what we might call a consecrated woman in the world (*soror in saeculo*) and, with other friends clothed in grey habits, formed a religious community. It is not by chance that she is the Patroness of the Third Order Regular of St Francis and of the Franciscan Secular Order.

In November 1231 she was stricken with a high fever. When the news of her illness spread, many people flocked to see her. After about 10 days, she asked for the doors to be closed so that she might be alone with God. In the night of 17 November, she fell asleep gently in the Lord. The testimonies of her holiness were so many and such that after only four years Pope Gregory IX canonized her and, that same year, the beautiful church built in her honour at Marburg was consecrated.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, in St Elizabeth we see how faith and friendship with Christ create a sense of justice, of the equality of all, of the rights of others and how they create love, charity. And from this charity is born hope too, the certainty that we are loved by Christ and that the love of Christ awaits us thereby rendering us capable of imitating Christ and of seeing Christ in others.*

St Elizabeth invites us to rediscover Christ, to love him and to have faith; and thereby to find true justice and love, as well as the joy that one day we shall be immersed in divine love, in the joy of eternity with God. Thank you.

## Saint Bridget of Sweden

27 October 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

On the eve of the Great Jubilee in anticipation of the Year 2000 the Venerable Servant of God John Paul II proclaimed St Bridget of Sweden Co-Patroness of the whole of Europe. This morning I would like to present her, her message and the reasons why—still today—this holy woman has much to teach the Church and the world.

We are well acquainted with the events of St Bridget's life because her spiritual fathers compiled her biography in order to further the process of her canonization immediately after her death in 1373. Bridget was born 70 years earlier, in 1303, in Finster, Sweden, a Northern European nation that for three centuries had welcomed the Christian faith

with the same enthusiasm as that with which the Saint had received it from her parents, very devout people who belonged to noble families closely related to the reigning house.

We can distinguish *two periods* in this Saint's life.

The *first* was characterized by her happily married state. Her husband was called Ulf and he was Governor of an important district of the Kingdom of Sweden. The marriage lasted for 28 years, until Ulf's death. Eight children were born, the second of whom, Karin (Catherine), is venerated as a Saint. This is an eloquent sign of Bridget's dedication to her children's education. Moreover, King Magnus of Sweden so appreciated her pedagogical wisdom that he summoned her to Court for a time, so that she could introduce his young wife, Blanche of Namur, to Swedish culture. Bridget, who was given spiritual guidance by a learned religious who initiated her into the study of the Scriptures, exercised a very positive influence on her family which, thanks to her presence, became a true "domestic church". Together with her husband she adopted the Rule of the Franciscan Tertiaries. She generously practiced works of charity for the poor; she also founded a hospital. At his wife's side Ulf's character improved and he advanced in the Christian life. On their return from a long pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela, which they made in 1341 with other members of the family, the couple developed a project of living in continence; but a little while later, in the tranquillity of a monastery to which he had retired, Ulf's earthly life ended. This first period of Bridget's life helps us to appreciate what today we could describe as an authentic "conjugal spirituality": together, Christian spouses can make a journey of holiness sustained by the grace of the sacrament of Marriage. It is often the woman, as happened in the life of St Bridget and Ulf, who with her religious sensitivity, delicacy and gentleness succeeds in persuading her husband to follow a path of faith. I am thinking with gratitude of the many women who, day after day, illuminate their families with their witness of Christian life, in our time too. May the Lord's Spirit still inspire holiness in Christian spouses today, to show the world the beauty of marriage lived in accordance with the Gospel values: love, tenderness, reciprocal help, fruitfulness in begetting and in raising children, openness and solidarity to the world and participation in the life of the Church.

The *second* period of Bridget's life began when she was widowed. She did not consider another marriage in order to deepen her union with the Lord through prayer, penance and charitable works. Therefore Christian widows too may find in this Saint a model to follow. In fact, upon the death of her husband, after distributing her possessions to the poor—although she never became a consecrated religious—Bridget settled near the Cistercian Monastery of Alvastra. Here began the divine revelations that were to accompany her for the rest of her life. Bridget dictated them to her confessors-secretaries, who translated them from Swedish into Latin and gathered them in eight

volumes entitled *Revelationes* (Revelations). A supplement followed these books called, precisely, *Revelationes extravagantes* (Supplementary revelations).

St Bridget's *Revelations* have a very varied content and style. At times the revelations are presented in the form of dialogues between the divine Persons, the Virgin, the Saints and even demons; they are dialogues in which Bridget also takes part. At other times, instead, a specific vision is described; and in yet others what the Virgin Mary reveals to her concerning the life and mysteries of the Son. The value of St Bridget's *Revelations*, sometimes the object of criticism Venerable John Paul II explained in his Letter *Spes Aedificandi*: "The Church, which recognized Bridget's holiness without ever pronouncing on her individual revelations, has accepted the overall authenticity of her interior experience" (n. 5). Indeed, reading these *Revelations* challenges us on many important topics. For example, the description of Christ's Passion, with very realistic details, frequently recurs. Bridget always had a special devotion to Christ's Passion, contemplating in it God's infinite love for human beings. She boldly places these words on the lips of the Lord who speaks to her: "O my friends, I love my sheep so tenderly that were it possible I would die many other times for each one of them that same death I suffered for the redemption of all" (*Revelationes*, Book I, c. 59). The sorrowful motherhood of Mary, which made her Mediatrix and Mother of Mercy, is also a subject that recurs frequently in the *Revelations*.

In receiving these charisms, Bridget was aware that she had been given a gift of special love on the Lord's part: "My Daughter"—we read in the First Book of *Revelations*—"I have chosen you for myself, love me with all your heart ... more than all that exists in the world" (c. 1). Bridget, moreover, knew well and was firmly convinced that every charism is destined to build up the Church. For this very reason many of her revelations were addressed in the form of admonishments, even severe ones, to the believers of her time, including the Religious and Political Authorities, that they might live a consistent Christian life; but she always reprimanded them with an attitude of respect and of full fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church and in particular to the Successor of the Apostle Peter.

*In 1349 Bridget left Sweden for good and went on pilgrimage to Rome. She was not only intending to take part in the Jubilee of the Year 1350 but also wished to obtain from the Pope approval for the Rule of a Religious Order that she was intending to found, called after the Holy Saviour and made up of monks and nuns under the authority of the Abbess. This is an element we should not find surprising: in the Middle Ages monastic foundations existed with both male and female branches, but with the practice of the same monastic Rule that provided for the Abbess' direction. In fact, in the great Christian tradition the woman is accorded special dignity and—always based on the example of Mary, Queen of Apostles—a place of her own in the Church, which, without coinciding with the*

ordained priesthood is equally important for the spiritual growth of the Community. Furthermore, the collaboration of consecrated men and women, always with respect for their specific vocation, is of great importance in the contemporary world. In Rome, in the company of her daughter Karin, Bridget dedicated herself to a life of intense apostolate and prayer. And from Rome she went on pilgrimage to various Italian Shrines, in particular to Assisi, the homeland of St Francis for whom Bridget had always had great devotion. Finally, in 1371, her deepest desire was crowned: to travel to the Holy Land, to which she went accompanied by her spiritual children, a group that Bridget called “the friends of God”. In those years the Pontiffs lived at Avignon, a long way from Rome: Bridget addressed a heartfelt plea to them to return to the See of Peter, in the Eternal City. She died in 1373, before Pope Gregory XI returned to Rome definitively. She was buried temporarily in the Church of San Lorenzo in Panisperna in Rome but in 1374 her children, Birger and Karin, took her body back to her homeland, to the Monastery of Vadstena, the headquarters of the Religious Order St Bridget had founded. The order immediately experienced a considerable expansion. In 1391 Pope Boniface IX solemnly canonized her. Bridget’s holiness, characterized by the multiplicity of her gifts and the experiences that I have wished to recall in this brief biographical and spiritual outline, makes her an eminent figure in European history. In coming from Scandinavia, St Bridget bears witness to the way Christianity had deeply permeated the life of all the peoples of this Continent. In declaring her Co-Patroness of Europe, Pope John Paul II hoped that St Bridget—who lived in the 14th century when Western Christianity had not yet been wounded by division—may intercede effectively with God to obtain the grace of full Christian unity so deeply longed for. Let us pray, Dear Brothers and Sisters, for this same intention, which we have very much at heart, and that Europe may always be nourished by its Christian roots, invoking the powerful intercession of St Bridget of Sweden, a faithful disciple of God and Co-Patroness of Europe. Thank you for your attention.

## Marguerite d’Oingt

3 November 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

With Marguerite d’Oingt, of whom I would like to speak to you today, we are introduced to Carthusian spirituality which draws its inspiration from the evangelical synthesis lived and proposed by St Bruno. We do not know the date of her birth, although some place it around 1240. Marguerite came from a powerful family of the old nobility of Lyons, the Oingt. We know that her mother was also called Marguerite, that she had two brothers—Giscard and Louis—and three sisters: Catherine, Elizabeth and Agnes. The latter followed her to the Carthusian monastery, succeeding her as Prioress.

We have no information on her childhood, but from her writings it seems that she spent it peacefully in an affectionate family environment. In fact, to express God’s boundless

love, she valued images linked to the family, with particular reference to the figure of the father and of the mother. In one of her meditations she prays thus: “Most gentle Lord, when I think of the special graces that you have given me through your solicitude: first of all, how you took care of me since my childhood and how you removed me from the danger of this world and called me to dedicate myself to your holy service, and how you provided everything that was necessary for me: food, drink, dress and footwear (and you did so) in such a way that I had no occasion to think of these things but of your great mercy” (Marguerite d’Oingt, *Scritti Spirituali, Meditazione V*, 100, Cinisello Balsamo, 1997, p. 74).

Again from her meditations we know that she entered the Carthusian monastery of Poiteins in response to the Lord’s call, leaving everything behind and accepting the strict Carthusian Rule in order to belong totally to the Lord, to be with him always. She wrote: “Gentle Lord, I left my father and my mother and my siblings and all the things of this world for love of you; but this is very little, because the riches of this world are but thorns that prick; and the more one possesses the more unfortunate one is. And because of this it seems to me that I left nothing other than misery and poverty; but you know, gentle Lord, that if I possessed a gentle thousand worlds and could dispose of them as I pleased, I would abandon everything for love of you; and even if you gave me everything that you possess in Heaven and on earth, I would not consider myself satiated until I had you, because you are the life of my soul, I do not have and do not want to have a father and mother outside of you” (*ibid.*, *Meditazione II*, 32, p. 59).

We also have little data on her life in the Carthusian monastery. We know that in 1288 she became its fourth Prioress, a post she held until her death, 11 February 1310. From her writings, however, we do not deduce particular stages in her spiritual itinerary. She conceived the entirety of life as a journey of purification up to full configuration with Christ. He is the book that is written, which is inscribed daily in her own heart and life, in particular his saving Passion. In the work “Speculum”, referring to herself in the third person Marguerite stresses that by the Lord’s grace “she had engraved in her heart the holy life that Jesus Christ God led on earth, his good example and his good doctrine. She had placed the gentle Jesus Christ so well in her heart that it even seemed to her that he was present and that he had a closed book in his hand, to instruct her” (*ibid.*, I, 2–3, p. 81). “In this book she found written the life that Jesus Christ led on earth, from his birth to his ascension into Heaven” (*ibid.*, I, 12, p. 83). Every day, beginning in the morning, Marguerite dedicated herself to the study of this book. And, when she had looked at it well, she began to read the book of her own conscience, which showed the falsehoods and lies of her own life (cf. *ibid.*, I, 6–7, p. 82); she wrote about herself to help others and to fix more deeply in her heart the grace of the presence of God, so as to make every day of her life marked by comparison with the words and actions of Jesus, with the Book of his life.

And she did this so that Christ's life would be imprinted in her soul in a permanent and profound way, until she was able to see the Book internally, that is, until contemplating the mystery of God Trinity (cf. *ibid.*, II, 14–22; III, 23–40, pp. 84–90).

Through her writings, Marguerite gives us some traces of her spirituality, enabling us to understand some features of her personality and of her gifts of governance. She was a very learned woman; she usually wrote in Latin, the language of the erudite, but she also wrote in Provençal, and this too is a rarity: thus her writings are the first of those known to be written in that language. She lived a life rich in mystical experiences described with simplicity, allowing one to intuit the ineffable mystery of God, stressing the limits of the mind to apprehend it and the inadequacy of human language to express it. Marguerite had a linear personality, simple, open, of gentle affectivity, great balance and acute discernment, able to enter into the depths of the human spirit, discerning its limits, its ambiguities, but also its aspirations, the soul's *élan* toward God. She showed an outstanding aptitude for governance, combining her profound mystical spiritual life with service to her sisters and to the community. Significant in this connection is a passage of a letter to her father. She wrote: "My dear father, I wish to inform you that I am very busy because of the needs of our house, so that I am unable to apply my mind to good thoughts; in fact, I have so much to do that I do not know which way to turn. We did not harvest the wheat in the seventh month of the year and our vineyards were destroyed by the storm. Moreover, our church is in such a sorry state that we are obliged to reconstruct it in part" (*ibid.*, *Lettere*, III, 14, p. 127).

A Carthusian nun thus describes the figure of Marguerite: "Revealed through her work is a fascinating personality, of lively intelligence, oriented to speculation and at the same time favoured by mystical graces: in a word, a holy and wise woman who is able to express with a certain humour an affectivity altogether spiritual" (*Una Monaca Certosina; Certosine*, in the *Dizionario degli Istituti di Perfezione*, Rome, 1975, col. 777). In the dynamism of mystical life, Marguerite valued the experience of natural affections, purified by grace, as a privileged means to understand more profoundly and to second divine action with greater alacrity and ardour. The reason lies in the fact that the human person is created in the image of God and is therefore called to build with God a wonderful history of love, allowing himself to be totally involved in his initiative.

The God-Trinity, the God-love who reveals himself in Christ fascinated her, and Marguerite lived a relationship of profound love for the Lord and, in contrast, sees human ingratitude to the point of betrayal, even to the paradox of the Cross. She says that the Cross of Christ is similar to the bench of travail. Jesus' pain is compared with that of a mother. She wrote: "The mother who carried me in her womb suffered greatly in giving birth to me, for a day or a night, but you, most gentle Lord, were tormented for

me not only for one night or one day, but for more than 30 years!... How bitterly you suffered because of me throughout your life! And when the moment of delivery arrived, your work was so painful that your holy sweat became as drops of blood which ran down your whole body to the ground” (*ibid.*, *Meditazione I*, 33, p. 59). In evoking the accounts of Jesus’ Passion, Marguerite contemplated these sorrows with profound compassion. She said: “You were placed on the hard bed of the Cross, so that you could not move or turn or shake your limbs as a man usually does when suffering great pain, because you were completely stretched and pierced with the nails ... and ... all your muscles and veins were lacerated.... But all these pains ... were still not sufficient for you, so much so that you desired that your side be pierced so cruelly by the lance that your defenceless body should be totally ploughed and torn and your precious blood spurted with such violence that it formed a long path, almost as if it were a current”. Referring to Mary, she said: “It was no wonder that the sword that lacerated your body also penetrated the heart of your glorious Mother who so wanted to support you ... because your love was loftier than any other love” (*ibid.*, *Meditazione II*, 36–39.42, p. 60f).

Dear friends, Marguerite d’Oingt invites us to meditate daily on the life of sorrow and love of Jesus and that of his mother, Mary. Here is our hope, the meaning of our existence. From contemplation of Christ’s love for us are born the strength and joy to respond with the same love, placing our life at the service of God and of others. With Marguerite we also say: “Gentle Lord, all that you did, for love of me and of the whole human race, leads me to love you, but the remembrance of your most holy Passion gives unequalled vigour to my power of affection to love you. That is why it seems to me that ... I have found what I so much desired: not to love anything other than you or in you or for love of you” (*ibid.*, *Meditazione II*, 46, p. 62).

At first glance this figure of a Medieval Carthusian nun, as well as her life and her thought, seems distant from us, from our life, from our way of thinking and acting. But if we look at the essential aspect of this life we see that it also affects us and that it would also become the essential aspect of our own existence.

We have heard that Marguerite considered the Lord as a book, she fixed her gaze on the Lord, she considered him a mirror in which her own conscience also appeared. And from this mirror light entered her soul. She let into their own being the word, the life of Christ and thus she was transformed; her conscience was enlightened, she found criteria and light and was cleansed. It is precisely this that we also need: to let the words, life and light of Christ enter our conscience so that it is enlightened, understands what is true and good and what is wrong; may our conscience be enlightened and cleansed. Rubbish is not only on different streets of the world. There is also rubbish in our consciences and in our souls. Only the light of the Lord, his strength and his love, cleanses us, purifies us,

showing us the right path. Therefore let us follow holy Marguerite in this gaze fixed on Jesus. Let us read the book of his life, let us allow ourselves to be enlightened and cleansed, to learn the true life. Thank you.

## Saint Juliana of Cornillon

17 November 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This morning too I would like to introduce a female figure to you. She is little known but the Church is deeply indebted to her, not only because of the holiness of her life but also because, with her great fervour, she contributed to the institution of one of the most important solemn Liturgies of the year: *Corpus Christi*.

She is St Juliana de Cornillon, also known as St Juliana of Liège. We know several facts about her life, mainly from a Biography that was probably written by a contemporary cleric; it is a collection of various testimonies of people who were directly acquainted with the Saint.

Juliana was born near Liège, Belgium between 1191 and 1192. It is important to emphasize this place because at that time the Diocese of Liège was, so to speak, a true “Eucharistic Upper Room”. Before Juliana, eminent theologians had illustrated the supreme value of the Sacrament of the Eucharist and, again in Liège, there were groups of women generously dedicated to Eucharistic worship and to fervent communion. Guided by exemplary priests, they lived together, devoting themselves to prayer and to charitable works.

Orphaned at the age of five, Juliana, together with her sister Agnes, was entrusted to the care of the Augustinian nuns at the convent and leprosarium of Mont-Cornillon.

She was taught mainly by a sister called “Sapienza” [wisdom], who was in charge of her spiritual development to the time Juliana received the religious habit and thus became an Augustinian nun.

She became so learned that she could read the words of the Church Fathers, of St Augustine and St Bernard in particular, in Latin. In addition to a keen intelligence, Juliana showed a special propensity for contemplation from the outset. She had a profound sense of Christ’s presence, which she experienced by living the Sacrament of the Eucharist especially intensely and by pausing frequently to meditate upon Jesus’ words: “And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:20).



When Juliana was 16 she had her first vision which recurred subsequently several times during her Eucharistic adoration. Her vision presented the moon in its full splendour, crossed diametrically by a dark stripe. The Lord made her understand the meaning of what had appeared to her. The moon symbolized the life of the Church on earth, the opaque line, on the other hand, represented the absence of a liturgical feast for whose institution Juliana was asked to plead effectively: namely, a feast in which believers would be able to adore the Eucharist so as to increase in faith, to advance in the practice of the virtues and to make reparation for offences to the Most Holy Sacrament.

Juliana, who in the meantime had become Prioress of the convent, kept this revelation that had filled her heart with joy a secret for about 20 years. She then confided it to two other fervent adorers of the Eucharist, Blessed Eva, who lived as a hermit, and Isabella, who had joined her at the Monastery of Mont-Cornillon. The three women established a sort of “spiritual alliance” for the purpose of glorifying the Most Holy Sacrament.

They also chose to involve a highly regarded Priest, John of Lausanne, who was a canon of the Church of St Martin in Liège. They asked him to consult theologians and clerics on what was important to them. Their affirmative response was encouraging.

What happened to Juliana of Cornillon occurs frequently in the lives of Saints. To have confirmation that an inspiration comes from God it is always necessary to be immersed in prayer to wait patiently, to seek friendship and exchanges with other good souls and to submit all things to the judgement of the Pastors of the Church.

It was in fact Bishop Robert Torote, Liège who, after initial hesitation, accepted the proposal of Juliana and her companions and first introduced the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* in his diocese. Later other Bishops following his example instituted this Feast in the territories entrusted to their pastoral care.

However, to increase their faith the Lord often asks Saints to sustain trials. This also happened to Juliana who had to bear the harsh opposition of certain members of the clergy and even of the superior on whom her monastery depended.

Of her own free will, therefore, Juliana left the Convent of Mont-Cornillon with several companions. For 10 years—from 1248 to 1258—she stayed as a guest at various monasteries of Cistercian sisters.

She edified all with her humility, she had no words of criticism or reproach for her adversaries and continued zealously to spread Eucharistic worship.

She died at Fosses-La-Ville, Belgium, in 1258. In the cell where she lay the Blessed Sacrament was exposed and, according to her biographer’s account, Juliana died contemplating with a last effusion to love Jesus in the Eucharist whom she had always

loved, honoured and adored. Jacques Pantaléon of Troyes was also won over to the good cause of the Feast of *Corpus Christi* during his ministry as Archdeacon in Lièges. It was he who, having become Pope with the name of Urban iv in 1264, instituted the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi* on the Thursday after Pentecost as a feast of precept for the universal Church.

In the Bull of its institution, entitled *Transiturus de hoc mundo*, (11 Aug. 1264), Pope Urban even referred discreetly to Juliana's mystical experiences, corroborating their authenticity. He wrote: "Although the Eucharist is celebrated solemnly every day, we deem it fitting that at least once a year it be celebrated with greater honour and a solemn commemoration.

"Indeed we grasp the other things we commemorate with our spirit and our mind, but this does not mean that we obtain their real presence. On the contrary, in this sacramental commemoration of Christ, even though in a different form, Jesus Christ is present with us in his own substance. While he was about to ascend into Heaven he said 'And lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age' (Matthew 28:20)".

The Pontiff made a point of setting an example by celebrating the solemnity of *Corpus Christi* in Orvieto, the town where he was then residing. Indeed, he ordered that the famous *Corporal* with the traces of the Eucharistic miracle which had occurred in Bolsena the previous year, 1263, be kept in Orvieto Cathedral—where it still is today.

While a priest was consecrating the bread and the wine he was overcome by strong doubts about the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of Christ in the sacrament of the Eucharist. A few drops of blood began miraculously to ooze from the consecrated Host, thereby confirming what our faith professes.

Urban iv asked one of the greatest theologians of history, St Thomas Aquinas—who at that time was accompanying the Pope and was in Orvieto—to compose the texts of the Liturgical Office for this great feast. They are masterpieces, still in use in the Church today, in which theology and poetry are fuse. These texts pluck at the heartstrings in an expression of praise and gratitude to the Most Holy Sacrament, while the mind, penetrating the mystery with wonder, recognizes in the Eucharist the Living and Real Presence of Jesus, of his Sacrifice of love that reconciles us with the Father, and gives us salvation.

Although after the death of Urban iv the celebration of the Feast of *Corpus Christi* was limited to certain regions of France, Germany, Hungary and Northern Italy, it was another Pontiff, John xxii, who in 1317 re-established it for the universal Church. Since then the Feast experienced a wonderful development and is still deeply appreciated by the Christian people.

I would like to affirm with joy that today there is a “Eucharistic springtime” in the Church: How many people pause in silence before the Tabernacle to engage in a loving conversation with Jesus! It is comforting to know that many groups of young people have rediscovered the beauty of praying in adoration before the Most Blessed Sacrament.

I am thinking, for example, of our Eucharistic adoration in Hyde Park, London. I pray that this Eucharistic “springtime” may spread increasingly in every parish and in particular in Belgium, St Juliana’s homeland.

Venerable John Paul II said in his Encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*: “In many places, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament is also an important daily practice and becomes an inexhaustible source of holiness. The devout participation of the faithful in the Eucharistic procession on the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ is a grace from the Lord which yearly brings joy to those who take part in it. Other positive signs of Eucharistic faith and love might also be mentioned” (n. 10).

In remembering St Juliana of Cornillon let us also renew our faith in the Real Presence of Christ in the Eucharist. As we are taught by the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “Jesus Christ is present in the Eucharist in a unique and incomparable way. He is present in a true, real and substantial way, with his Body and his Blood, with his Soul and his Divinity. In the Eucharist, therefore, there is present in a sacramental way, that is, under the Eucharistic Species of bread and wine, Christ whole and entire, God and Man” (n. 282).

Dear friends, fidelity to the encounter with the Christ in the Eucharist in Holy Mass on Sunday is essential for the journey of faith, but let us also seek to pay frequent visits to the Lord present in the Tabernacle! In gazing in adoration at the consecrated Host, we discover the gift of God’s love, we discover Jesus’ Passion and Cross and likewise his Resurrection. It is precisely through our gazing in adoration that the Lord draws us towards him into his mystery in order to transform us as he transforms the bread and the wine.

The Saints never failed to find strength, consolation and joy in the Eucharistic encounter. Let us repeat before the Lord present in the Most Blessed Sacrament the words of the Eucharistic hymn “*Adoro te devote*”: [Devoutly I adore Thee]: Make me believe ever more in you, “Draw me deeply into faith, / Into Your hope, into Your love”.

Thank you.

## Saint Catherine of Siena

24 November 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk to you about a woman who played an eminent role in the history of the Church: St Catherine of Siena. The century in which she lived—the 14th—was a troubled period in the life of the Church and throughout the social context of Italy and Europe. Yet, even in the most difficult times, the Lord does not cease to bless his People, bringing forth Saints who give a jolt to minds and hearts, provoking conversion and renewal.

Catherine is one of these and still today speaks to us and impels us to walk courageously toward holiness to be ever more fully disciples of the Lord.

Born in Siena in 1347, into a very large family, she died in Rome in 1380. When Catherine was 16 years old, motivated by a vision of St Dominic, she entered the Third Order of the Dominicans, the female branch known as the *Mantellate*. While living at home, she confirmed her vow of virginity made privately when she was still an adolescent and dedicated herself to prayer, penance and works of charity, especially for the benefit of the sick.

When the fame of her holiness spread, she became the protagonist of an intense activity of spiritual guidance for people from every walk of life: nobles and politicians, artists and ordinary people, consecrated men and women and religious, including Pope Gregory xi who was living at Avignon in that period and whom she energetically and effectively urged to return to Rome.

She travelled widely to press for the internal reform of the Church and to foster peace among the States. It was also for this reason that Venerable Pope John Paul ii chose to declare her Co-Patroness of Europe: may the Old Continent never forget the Christian roots that are at the origin of its progress and continue to draw from the Gospel the fundamental values that assure justice and harmony.

Like many of the Saints, Catherine knew great suffering. Some even thought that they should not trust her, to the point that in 1374, six years before her death, the General Chapter of the Dominicans summoned her to Florence to interrogate her. They appointed Raymund of Capua, a learned and humble Friar and a future Master General of the Order, as her spiritual guide. Having become her confessor and also her “spiritual son”, he wrote a first complete biography of the Saint. She was canonized in 1461.

The teaching of Catherine, who learned to read with difficulty and learned to write in adulthood, is contained in the *Dialogue of Divine Providence* or *Libro della Divina Dottrina*, a masterpiece of spiritual literature, in her *Epistolario* and in the collection of her *Prayers*.

Her teaching is endowed with such excellence that in 1970 the Servant of God Paul VI declared her a Doctor of the Church, a title that was added to those of Co-Patroness of the City of Rome—at the wish of Bl. Pius ix—and of Patroness of Italy—in accordance with the decision of Venerable Pius XII.

In a vision that was ever present in Catherine’s heart and mind Our Lady presented her to Jesus who gave her a splendid ring, saying to her: “I, your Creator and Saviour, espouse you in the faith, that you will keep ever pure until you celebrate your eternal nuptials with me in Heaven” (Bl. Raimondo da Capua, *S. Caterina da Siena, Legenda maior*, n. 115, Siena 1998). This ring was visible to her alone. In this extraordinary episode we see the vital centre of Catherine’s religious sense, and of all authentic spirituality: Christocentrism. For her Christ was like the spouse with whom a relationship of intimacy, communion and faithfulness exists; he was the best beloved whom she loved above any other good. This profound union with the Lord is illustrated by another episode in the life of this outstanding mystic: the exchange of hearts. According to Raymond of Capua who passed on the confidences Catherine received, the Lord Jesus appeared to her “holding in his holy hands a human heart, bright red and shining”. He opened her side and put the heart within her saying: “Dearest daughter, as I took your heart away from you the other day, now, you see, I am giving you mine, so that you can go on living with it for ever” (*ibid.*). Catherine truly lived St. Paul’s words, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

*Like the Sieneese Saint, every believer feels the need to be conformed with the sentiments of the heart of Christ to love God and his neighbour as Christ himself loves. And we can all let our hearts be transformed and learn to love like Christ in a familiarity with him that is nourished by prayer, by meditation on the Word of God and by the sacraments, above all by receiving Holy Communion frequently and with devotion. Catherine also belongs to the throng of Saints devoted to the Eucharist with which I concluded my Apostolic Exhortation Sacramentum Caritatis (cf. n. 94). Dear Brothers and Sisters, the Eucharist is an extraordinary gift of love that God continually renews to nourish our journey of faith, to strengthen our hope and to inflame our charity, to make us more and more like him.*

A true and authentic spiritual family was built up around such a strong and genuine personality; people fascinated by the moral authority of this young woman with a most exalted lifestyle were at times also impressed by the mystical phenomena they witnessed, such as her frequent ecstasies. Many put themselves at Catherine’s service and above all considered it a privilege to receive spiritual guidance from her. They called her “mother” because, as her spiritual children, they drew spiritual nourishment from her. Today too the Church receives great benefit from the exercise of spiritual motherhood by so many women, lay and consecrated, who nourish souls with thoughts of God, who strengthen

the people's faith and direct Christian life towards ever loftier peaks. "Son, I say to you and call you", Catherine wrote to one of her spiritual sons, Giovanni Sabbatini, a Carthusian, "inasmuch as I give birth to you in continuous prayers and desire in the presence of God, just as a mother gives birth to a son" (*Epistolario, Lettera* n. 141: *To Fr Giovanni de' Sabbatini*). She would usually address the Dominican Fr Bartolomeo de Dominicis with these words: "Most beloved and very dear brother and son in Christ sweet Jesus".

Another trait of Catherine's spirituality is linked to the gift of tears. They express an exquisite, profound sensitivity, a capacity for being moved and for tenderness. Many Saints have had the gift of tears, renewing the emotion of Jesus himself who did not hold back or hide his tears at the tomb of his friend Lazarus and at the grief of Mary and Martha or at the sight of Jerusalem during his last days on this earth. According to Catherine, the tears of Saints are mingled with the blood of Christ, of which she spoke in vibrant tones and with symbolic images that were very effective: "Remember Christ crucified, God and man.... Make your aim the Crucified Christ, hide in the wounds of the Crucified Christ and drown in the blood of the Crucified Christ" (*Epistolario, Lettera* n. 21: *Ad uno il cui nome si tace* [to one who remains anonymous]). Here we can understand why, despite her awareness of the human shortcomings of priests, Catherine always felt very great reverence for them: through the sacraments and the word they dispense the saving power of Christ's Blood. The Siense Saint always invited the sacred ministers, including the Pope whom she called "sweet Christ on earth", to be faithful to their responsibilities, motivated always and only by her profound and constant love of the Church. She said before she died: "in leaving my body, truly I have consumed and given my life in the Church and for the Holy Church, which is for me a most unique grace" (*Raimondo da Capua, S. Caterina da Siena, Legenda maior*, n. 363). Hence we learn from St Catherine the most sublime science: to know and love Jesus Christ and his Church. In the Dialogue of Divine Providence, she describes Christ, with an unusual image, as a bridge flung between Heaven and earth. This bridge consists of three great stairways constituted by the feet, the side and the mouth of Jesus. Rising by these stairways the soul passes through the three stages of every path to sanctification: detachment from sin, the practice of the virtues and of love, sweet and loving union with God.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, let us learn from St Catherine to love Christ and the Church with courage, intensely and sincerely. Therefore let us make our own St Catherine's words that we read in the Dialogue of Divine Providence at the end of the chapter that speaks of Christ as a bridge: "out of mercy you have washed us in his Blood, out of mercy you have wished to converse with creatures. O crazed with love! It did not suffice for you to take flesh, but you also wished to die!... O mercy! My*

heart drowns in thinking of you: for no matter where I turn to think, I find only mercy” (chapter 30, pp. 79–80). Thank you.

## Julian of Norwich

1 December 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I still remember with great joy the Apostolic Journey I made in the United Kingdom last September. England is a land that has given birth to a great many distinguished figures who enhanced Church history with their testimony and their teaching. One of them, venerated both in the Catholic Church and in the Anglican Communion, is the mystic Julian of Norwich, of whom I wish to speak this morning.

The—very scant—information on her life in our possession comes mainly from her *Revelations of Divine Love in Sixteen Showings*, the book in which this kindly and devout woman set down the content of her visions.

It is known that she lived from 1342 until about 1430, turbulent years both for the Church, torn by the schism that followed the Pope’s return to Rome from Avignon, and for the life of the people who were suffering the consequences of a long drawn-out war between the Kingdoms of England and of France. God, however, even in periods of tribulation, does not cease to inspire figures such as Julian of Norwich, to recall people to peace, love and joy.

As Julian herself recounts, in May 1373, most likely on the 13th of that month, she was suddenly stricken with a very serious illness that in three days seemed to be carrying her to the grave. After the priest, who hastened to her bedside, had shown her the Crucified One not only did Julian rapidly recover her health but she received the 16 revelations that she subsequently wrote down and commented on in her book, *Revelations of Divine Love*.

And it was the Lord himself, 15 years after these extraordinary events, who revealed to her the meaning of those visions.

“Would you learn to see clearly your Lord’s meaning in this thing? Learn it well: Love was his meaning. Who showed it to you? Love... Why did he show it to you? For Love’.... Thus I was taught that Love was our Lord’s meaning” (Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 86).

Inspired by divine love, Julian made a radical decision. Like an ancient anchoress, she decided to live in a cell located near the church called after St Julian, in the city of Norwich—in her time an important urban centre not far from London.

She may have taken the name of Julian precisely from that Saint to whom was dedicated the church in whose vicinity she lived for so many years, until her death.

This decision to live as a “recluse”, the term in her day, might surprise or even perplex us. But she was not the only one to make such a choice. In those centuries a considerable number of women opted for this form of life, adopting rules specially drawn up, for them, such as the rule compiled by St Aelred of Rievaulx.

The anchoresses or “recluses”, in their cells, devoted themselves to prayer, meditation and study. In this way they developed a highly refined human and religious sensitivity which earned them the veneration of the people. Men and women of every age and condition in need of advice and comfort, would devoutly seek them. It was not, therefore, an individualistic choice; precisely with this closeness to the Lord, Julian developed the ability to be a counsellor to a great many people and to help those who were going through difficulties in this life.

We also know that Julian too received frequent visitors, as is attested by the autobiography of another fervent Christian of her time, Margery Kempe, who went to Norwich in 1413 to receive advice on her spiritual life. This is why, in her lifetime, Julian was called “Dame Julian”, as is engraved on the funeral monument that contains her remains. She had become a mother to many.

Men and women who withdraw to live in God’s company acquire by making this decision a great sense of compassion for the suffering and weakness of others. As friends of God, they have at their disposal a wisdom that the world—from which they have distanced themselves—does not possess and they amiably share it with those who knock at their door.

I therefore recall with admiration and gratitude the women and men’s cloistered monasteries. Today more than ever they are oases of peace and hope, a precious treasure for the whole Church, especially since they recall the primacy of God and the importance, for the journey of faith, of constant and intense prayer.

It was precisely in the solitude infused with God that Julian of Norwich wrote her *Revelations of Divine Love*. Two versions have come down to us, one that is shorter, probably the older, and one that is longer. This book contains a message of optimism based on the certainty of being loved by God and of being protected by his Providence.

In this book we read the following wonderful words: “And I saw full surely that ere God made us he loved us; which love was never lacking nor ever shall be. And in this love he has made all his works; and in this love he has made all things profitable to us; and in this love our life is everlasting ... in which love we have our beginning. And all this shall we see in God, without end” (*Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 86).



The theme of divine love recurs frequently in the visions of Julian of Norwich who, with a certain daring, did not hesitate to compare them also to motherly love. This is one of the most characteristic messages of her mystical theology.

The tenderness, concern and gentleness of God's kindness to us are so great that they remind us, pilgrims on earth, of a mother's love for her children. In fact the biblical prophets also sometimes used this language that calls to mind the tenderness, intensity and totality of God's love, which is manifested in creation and in the whole history of salvation that is crowned by the Incarnation of the Son.

God, however, always excels all human love, as the Prophet Isaiah says: "Can a woman forget her sucking child, that she should have no compassion on the son of her womb? Even these may forget, yet I will never forget you" (Is 49:15).

Julian of Norwich understood the central message for spiritual life: God is love and it is only if one opens oneself to this love, totally and with total trust, and lets it become one's sole guide in life, that all things are transfigured, true peace and true joy found and one is able to radiate it.

I would like to emphasize another point. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* cites the words of Julian of Norwich when it explains the viewpoint of the Catholic faith on an argument that never ceases to be a provocation to all believers (cf. nn. 304–313, 314).

If God is supremely good and wise, why do evil and the suffering of innocents exist? And the Saints themselves asked this very question. Illumined by faith, they give an answer that opens our hearts to trust and hope: in the mysterious designs of Providence, God can draw a greater good even from evil, as Julian of Norwich wrote: "Here I was taught by the grace of God that I should steadfastly hold me in the Faith ... and that ... I should take my stand on and earnestly believe in ... that 'all manner of thing shall be well'" (*The Revelations of Divine Love*, Chapter 32).

*Yes, Dear Brothers and Sisters, God's promises are ever greater than our expectations. If we present to God, to his immense love, the purest and deepest desires of our heart, we shall never be disappointed. "And all will be well", "all manner of things shall be well": this is the final message that Julian of Norwich transmits to us and that I am also proposing to you today. Many thanks.*

## **Saint Veronica Giuliani**

15 December 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to present a mystic who did not live in the Middle Ages. She is St Veronica Giuliani, a Poor Clare Capuchin nun. The reason is that 27 December will be the 350th anniversary of her birth. Città di Castello, the place where she lived the longest and where she died, as well as Mercatello—her birthplace—and the Diocese of Urbino are celebrating this event with joy.

Indeed, Veronica was born on 27 December 1660 in Mercatello, in the Metauro Valley to Francesco Giuliani and Benedetta Mancini. She was the last of seven sisters, three of whom were to embrace the monastic life.

She was given the name “Orsola” [Ursula]. She was seven years old when her mother died and her father moved to Piacenza as customs superintendent of the Duchy of Parma. It was in this city that Ursula felt a growing desire to dedicate her life to Christ. The call to her became ever more pressing so that, when she was 17, she entered the strict cloister of the monastery of Capuchin Poor Clares in Città di Castello. She was to remain here for the rest of her life. Here she received the name of “Veronica”, which means “true image” and she was in fact to become a true image of the Crucified Christ.

A year later she made her solemn religious profession and the process of configuration to Christ began for her, through much penance, great suffering, and several mystic experiences linked to the Passion of Jesus: being crowned with thorns, the mystical espousal, the wound in her heart and the stigmata.

In 1716, when she was 56, she became Abbess of the monastery. She was reconfirmed in this office until her death in 1727, after a very painful prolonged agony that lasted 33 days and culminated in a joy so profound that her last words were: “I have found Love, Love has let himself be seen! This is the cause of my suffering. Tell everyone about it, tell everyone!” (*Summarium Beatificationis*, 115–120).

On 9 July she left her earthly dwelling place for the encounter with God. She was 67 years old; 50 of those years she spent in the monastery of Città di Castello. She was canonized on May 26, 1893, by Pope Gregory XVI.

Veronica Giuliani wrote prolifically: letters, autobiographical reports, poems. However, the main source for reconstructing her thought is her *Diary*, which she began in 1693: about 22,000 handwritten pages that cover a span of 34 years of cloistered life.

Her writing flows spontaneously and continuously. There are no crossings-out, corrections or punctuation marks in it, nor was the material divided into chapters or parts according to a plan.

Veronica did not intend to compose a literary work; on the contrary, Fr Girolamo Bastianelli, a Filippini religious, in agreement with the diocesan Bishop Antonio Eustachi, obliged her to set down her experiences in writing.

St Veronica has a markedly Christological and spousal spirituality: She experienced being loved by Christ, her faithful and sincere Bridegroom, to whom she wished to respond with an ever more involved and passionate love. She interpreted everything in the key of love and this imbued her with deep serenity. She lived everything in union with Christ, for love of him, and with the joy of being able to demonstrate to him all the love of which a creature is capable.

The Christ to whom Veronica was profoundly united was the suffering Christ of the Passion, death and Resurrection; it was Jesus in the act of offering himself to the Father in order to save us.

Her intense and suffering love for the Church likewise stemmed from this experience, in its dual form of prayer and offering. The Saint lived in this perspective: she prayed, suffered and sought “holy poverty”, as one “dispossessed” and the loss of self (*cf. ibid.*, III, 523), precisely in order to be like Christ who gave the whole of himself.

In every page of her writings Veronica commends someone to the Lord, reinforcing her prayers of intercession with the offering of herself in every form of suffering. Her heart dilated to embrace all “the needs of the Holy Church”, living anxiously the desire for the salvation of “the whole world” (*ibid.*, III–IV, *passim*).

Veronica cried: “O sinners ... all men and all women, come to Jesus’ heart; come to be cleansed by his most precious blood.... He awaits you with open arms to embrace you” (*ibid.*, II, 16–17).

Motivated by ardent love, she gave her sisters in the monastery attention, understanding and forgiveness. She offered her prayers and sacrifices for the Pope, for her Bishop, for priests and for all those in need, including the souls in Purgatory.

She summed up her contemplative mission in these words: “We cannot go about the world preaching to convert souls but are bound to pray ceaselessly for all those souls who are offending God ... particularly with our sufferings, that is, with a principle of crucified life” (*ibid.*, IV, 877). Our Saint conceived this mission as “being in the midst” of men and God, of sinners and the Crucified Christ.

Veronica lived profound participation in the suffering love of Jesus, certain that “to suffer with joy” is the “key to love” (*cf. ibid.*, I, 299.417; III, 330.303.871; IV, 192). She emphasizes that Jesus suffers for humanity’s sins, but also for the suffering that his

faithful servants would have to endure down the centuries, in the time of the Church, precisely because of their solid and consistent faith.

She wrote: “His Eternal Father made them see and feel the extent of all the suffering that his chosen ones would have to endure, the souls dearest to him, that is, those who would benefit from his Blood and from all his sufferings” (*ibid.*, II, 170).

As the Apostle Paul says of himself: “Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I complete what is lacking in Christ’s afflictions for the sake of his Body, that is, the Church” (Col 1:24).

Veronica reached the point of asking Jesus to be crucified with him. “In an instant”, she wrote, “I saw five radiant rays issue from his most holy wounds; and they all shone on my face. And I saw these rays become, as it were, little tongues of fire. In four of them were the nails; and in one was the spear, as of gold, red hot and white hot: and it went straight through my heart, from one side to the other ... and the nails pierced my hands and feet. I felt great pain but in this same pain I saw myself, I felt myself totally transformed into God” (*Diary*, I, 897).

The Saint was convinced that she was already participating in the Kingdom of God, but at the same time she invoked all the Saints of the Blessed Homeland to come to her aid on the earthly journey of her self-giving while she waited for eternal beatitude; this was her undying aspiration throughout her life (*cf. ibid.*, II, 909; V, 246).

With regard to the preaching of that time which often focused on “saving one’s soul” in individual terms, Veronica shows a strong “sense of solidarity”, a sense of communion with all her brothers and sisters on their way towards Heaven and she lives, prays and suffers for all. The penultimate, earthly things, although appreciated in the Franciscan sense as gifts of the Creator, were always relative, altogether subordinate to “God’s taste” and under the sign of radical poverty.

In the *communio sanctorum*, she explains the gift of herself to the Church, as the relationship between the pilgrim Church and the heavenly Church. “All the Saints”, she wrote, “are up there thanks to the merit and the Passion of Jesus; but they cooperated with all that the Lord did, so that their life was totally ordered ... regulated by these same works (his)” (*ibid.*, III, 203).

We find many biblical citations in Veronica’s writings, at times indirectly, but always precise. She shows familiarity with the Sacred Text, by which her spiritual experience was nourished. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that the intense moments of Veronica’s mystical experience are never separate from the salvific events celebrated in the Liturgy, where the proclamation of the Word of God and listening to it has a special place. Hence Sacred Scripture illumines, purifies and confirms Veronica’s experience,

rendering it ecclesial. On the other hand, however, her experience itself, anchored in Sacred Scripture with uncommon intensity, guides one to a more profound and “spiritual” reading of the text itself, to enter into its hidden depths. Not only does she express herself with the words of Sacred Scripture but she also really lives by them, they take on life in her.

For example, our Saint often quotes the words of the Apostle Paul: “If God is for us, who is against us?” (Rom 8:31; cf. *Diary*, I, 714; II 116.1021; III, 48).

The assimilation of this Pauline text, her great trust and profound joy, becomes a *fait accompli* within her. “My soul”, she wrote, “was bound to the divine will and I was truly established and fixed for ever in the will of God. It seemed to me that I should never again have to be separated from this will of God and I came to myself with these precise words: nothing will be able to separate me from the will of God, neither anxieties, nor sorrows nor toil nor contempt nor temptation nor creatures nor demons nor darkness, not even death itself, because, in life and in death, I want all, and in all things, the will of God” (*Diary*, IV, 272). Thus we have the certainty that death is not the last word, we are *fixed* in God’s will, hence, truly, in eternal life.

In particular, Veronica proved a courageous witness of the beauty and power of Divine Love which attracted her, pervaded her and inflamed her. Crucified Love was impressed within her flesh as it was in that of St Francis of Assisi, with Jesus’ stigmata. “ ‘My Bride’, the Crucified Christ whispers to me, ‘the penance you do for those who suffer my disgrace is dear to me’ ... Then detaching one of his arms from the Cross he made a sign to me to draw near to his side ... and I found myself in the arms of the Crucified One. What I felt at that point I cannot describe: I should have liked to remain for ever in his most holy side” (*ibid.*, I, 37). This is also an image of her spiritual journey, of her interior life: to be in the embrace of the Crucified One and thus to remain in Christ’s love for others.

Veronica also experienced a relationship of profound intimacy with the Virgin Mary, attested by the words she heard Our Lady say one day, which she reports in her *Diary*: “I made you rest on my breast, you were united with my soul, and from it you were taken as in flight to God” (IV, 901).

St Veronica Giuliani invites us to develop, in our Christian life, our union with the Lord in living for others, abandoning ourselves to his will with complete and total trust, and the union with the Church, the Bride of Christ.

She invites us to participate in the suffering love of Jesus Crucified for the salvation of all sinners; she invites us to fix our gaze on Heaven, the destination of our earthly journey, where we shall live together with so many brothers and sisters the joy of full communion

with God; she invites us to nourish ourselves daily with the Word of God, to warm our hearts and give our life direction. The Saint's last words can be considered the synthesis of her passionate mystical experience: "*I have found Love, Love has let himself be seen!*". Thank you.

## Saint Catherine of Bologna

29 December 2010

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In a recent Catechesis I spoke of St Catherine of Siena. Today I would like to present to you another less well known Saint who has the same name: St Catherine of Bologna, a very erudite yet very humble woman. She was dedicated to prayer but was always ready to serve; generous in sacrifice but full of joy in welcoming Christ with the Cross.

Catherine was born in Bologna on 8 September 1413, the eldest child of Benvenuta Mammolini and John de' Vigri, a rich and cultured patrician of Ferrara, a doctor in law and a public lector in Padua, where he carried out diplomatic missions for Nicholas III d'Este, Marquis of Ferrara.

Not much information about Catherine's infancy and childhood is available and not all of it is reliable. As a child she lived in her grandparents' house in Bologna, where she was brought up by relatives, especially by her mother who was a woman of deep faith.

With her, Catherine moved to Ferrara when she was about 10 years old and entered the court of Nicholas III d'Este as lady-in-waiting to Margaret, Nicholas' illegitimate daughter. The Marquis was transforming Ferrara into a fine city, summoning artists and scholars from various countries. He encouraged culture and, although his private life was not exemplary, took great care of the spiritual good, moral conduct and education of his subjects.

In Ferrara Catherine was unaware of the negative aspects that are often part and parcel of court life. She enjoyed Margaret's friendship and became her confidante. She developed her culture by studying music, painting and dancing; she learned to write poetry and literary compositions and to play the viola; she became expert in the art of miniature-painting and copying; she perfected her knowledge of Latin.

In her future monastic life she was to put to good use the cultural and artistic heritage she had acquired in these years. She learned with ease, enthusiasm and tenacity. She showed great prudence, as well as an unusual modesty, grace and kindness in her behaviour.

However, one absolutely clear trait distinguished her: her spirit, constantly focused on the things of Heaven. In 1427, when she was only 14 years old and subsequent to certain family events, Catherine decided to leave the court to join a group of young noble women who lived a community life dedicating themselves to God. Her mother trustingly consented in spite of having other plans for her daughter.

We know nothing of Catherine's spiritual path prior to this decision. Speaking in the third person, she states that she entered God's service, "illuminated by divine grace ... with an upright conscience and great fervour", attentive to holy prayer by night and by day, striving to acquire all the virtues she saw in others, "not out of envy but the better to please God in whom she had placed all her love" (*Le sette armi necessarie alla battaglia spirituali*, [The seven spiritual weapons], VII, 8, Bologna 1998, p. 12).

She made considerable spiritual progress in this new phase of her life but her trials, her inner suffering and especially the temptations of the devil were great and terrible. She passed through a profound spiritual crisis and came to the brink of despair (*cf. ibid.*, VII, 2, pp. 12–29). She lived in the night of the spirit, and was also deeply shaken by the temptation of disbelief in the Eucharist.

After so much suffering, the Lord comforted her: he gave her, in a vision, a clear awareness of the Real Presence in the Eucharist, an awareness so dazzling that Catherine was unable to express it in words (*cf. ibid.*, VIII, 2, pp. 42–46).

In this same period a sorrowful trial afflicted the community: tension arose between those who wished to follow the Augustinian spirituality and those who had more of an inclination for Franciscan spirituality.

Between 1429 and 1430, Lucia Mascheroni, in charge of the group, decided to found an Augustinian monastery. Catherine, on the other hand chose with others to bind herself to the Rule of St Clare of Assisi. It was a gift of Providence, because the community dwelled in the vicinity of the Church of the Holy Spirit, annexed to the convent of the Friars Minor who had adhered to the movement of the Observance.

Thus Catherine and her companions could take part regularly in liturgical celebrations and receive adequate spiritual assistance. They also had the joy of listening to the preaching of St Bernardine of Siena (*cf. ibid.*, VII, 62, p. 26). Catherine recounts that in 1429—the third year since her conversion—she went to make her confession to one of the Friars Minor whom she esteemed, she made a good Confession and prayed the Lord intensely to grant her forgiveness for all her sins and the suffering connected with them.

In a vision God revealed to her that he had forgiven her everything. It was a very strong experience of divine mercy which left an indelible mark upon her, giving her a fresh impetus to respond generously to God's immense love (*cf. ibid.* IX, 2, pp. 46–48).

In 1431 she had a vision of the Last Judgement. The terrifying spectacle of the damned impelled her to redouble her prayers and penance for the salvation of sinners. The devil continued to assail her and she entrusted herself ever more totally to the Lord and to the Virgin Mary (cf. *ibid.*, X, 3, pp. 53–54).

In her writings, Catherine has left us a few essential notes concerning this mysterious battle from which, with God's grace, she emerged victorious. She did so in order to instruct her sisters and those who intend to set out on the path of perfection: she wanted to put them on their guard against the temptations of the devil who often conceals himself behind deceptive guises, later to sow doubts about faith, vocational uncertainty and sensuality.

In her autobiographical and didactic treatise, *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*, Catherine offers in this regard teaching of deep wisdom and profound discernment. She speaks in the third person in reporting the extraordinary graces which the Lord gives to her and in the first person in confessing her sins. From her writing transpires the purity of her faith in God, her profound humility, the simplicity of her heart, her missionary zeal, her passion for the salvation of souls. She identifies seven weapons in the fight against evil, against the devil:

1. always to be careful and diligently strive to do good;
2. to believe that alone we will never be able to do something truly good;
3. to trust in God and, for love of him, never to fear in the battle against evil, either in the world or within ourselves;
4. to meditate often on the events and words of the life of Jesus, and especially on his Passion and his death;
5. to remember that we must die;
6. to focus our minds firmly on memory of the goods of Heaven;
7. to be familiar with Sacred Scripture, always cherishing it in our hearts so that it may give direction to all our thoughts and all our actions.

A splendid programme of spiritual life, today too, for each one of us!

In the convent Catherine, in spite of being accustomed to the court in Ferrara, served in the offices of laundress, dressmaker and breadmaker and even looked after the animals. She did everything, even the lowliest tasks, with love and ready obedience, offering her sisters a luminous witness. Indeed she saw disobedience as that spiritual pride which destroys every other virtue. Out of obedience she accepted the office of novice mistress, although she considered herself unfit for this office, and God continued to inspire her with his presence and his gifts: in fact she proved to be a wise and appreciated mistress.

Later the service of the parlour was entrusted to her. She found it trying to have to interrupt her prayers frequently in order to respond to those who came to the monastery grill, but this time too the Lord did not fail to visit her and to be close to her.



With her the monastery became an increasingly prayerful place of self-giving, of silence, of endeavour and of joy.

Upon the death of the abbess, the superiors thought immediately of her, but Catherine urged them to turn to the Poor Clares of Mantua who were better instructed in the Constitutions and in religious observance.

Nevertheless, a few years later, in 1456, she was asked at her monastery to open a new foundation in Bologna. Catherine would have preferred to end her days in Ferrara, but the Lord appeared to her and exhorted her to do God's will by going to Bologna as abbess. She prepared herself for the new commitment with fasting, scourging and penance.

She went to Bologna with 18 sisters. As superior she set the example in prayer and in service; she lived in deep humility and poverty. At the end of her three-year term as abbess she was glad to be replaced but after a year she was obliged to resume her office because the newly elected abbess became blind. Although she was suffering and was afflicted with serious ailments that tormented her, she carried out her service with generosity and dedication.

For another year she urged her sisters to an evangelical life, to patience and constancy in trial, to fraternal love, to union with the divine Bridegroom, Jesus, so as to prepare her dowry for the eternal nuptials.

It was a dowry that Catherine saw as knowing how to share the sufferings of Christ, serenely facing hardship, apprehension, contempt and misunderstanding (cf. *Le sette armi spirituali*, X, 20, pp. 57–58).

At the beginning of 1463 her health deteriorated. For the last time she gathered the sisters in Chapter, to announce her death to them and to recommend the observance of the Rule. Towards the end of February she was harrowed by terrible suffering that was never to leave her, yet despite her pain it was she who comforted her sisters, assuring them that she would also help them from Heaven.

After receiving the last Sacraments, she gave her confessor the text she had written: *The Seven Spiritual Weapons*, and entered her agony; her face grew beautiful and translucent; she still looked lovingly at those who surrounded her and died gently, repeating three times the name of Jesus. It was 9 March 1463 (cf. I. Bembo, *Specchio di illuminazione, Vita di S. Caterina a Bologna*, Florence 2001, chap. III). Catherine was to be canonized by Pope Clement XI on 22 May 1712. Her incorrupt body is preserved in the city of Bologna, in the chapel of the monastery of Corpus Domini.

Dear friends, with her words and with her life, St Catherine of Bologna is a pressing invitation to let ourselves always be guided by God, to do his will daily, even if it often

does not correspond with our plans, to trust in his Providence which never leaves us on our own. In this perspective, St Catherine speaks to us; from the distance of so many centuries she is still very modern and speaks to our lives.

She, like us, suffered temptations, she suffered the temptations of disbelief, of sensuality, of a difficult spiritual struggle. She felt forsaken by God, she found herself in the darkness of faith. Yet in all these situations she was always holding the Lord's hand, she did not leave him, she did not abandon him. And walking hand in hand with the Lord, she walked on the right path and found the way of light.

So it is that she also tells us: take heart, even in the night of faith, even amidst our many doubts, do not let go of the Lord's hand, walk hand in hand with him, believe in God's goodness. This is how to follow the right path!

And I would like to stress another aspect: her great humility. She was a person who did not want to be someone or something; she did not care for appearances, she did not want to govern. She wanted to serve, to do God's will, to be at the service of others. And for this very reason Catherine was credible in her authority, because she was able to see that for her authority meant, precisely, serving others.

Let us ask God, through the intercession of Our Saint, for the gift to achieve courageously and generously the project he has for us, so that he alone may be the firm rock on which our lives are built. Thank you.

I greet the seminarians of the American College of Louvain and I offer prayerful good wishes for your studies. May this pilgrimage to Rome be a source of spiritual enrichment as you prepare for priestly ministry in the United States. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience I cordially invoke the joy and peace of Christ our newborn Saviour.

## Saint Catherine of Genoa

12 January 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After Catherine of Siena and Catherine of Bologna, today I would like to speak to you about another Saint: Catherine of Genoa, known above all for her vision of purgatory. The text that describes her life and thought was published in this Ligurian city in 1551. It is in three sections: her Vita [Life], properly speaking, the *Dimostrazione et dechiaratione del purgatorio*—better known as *Treatise on purgatory*—and her *Dialogo tra l'anima e il corpo* (cf. *Libro de la Vita mirabile et dottrina santa, de la beata Caterinetta da Genoa. Nel quale si contiene*

*una utile et catholica dimostrazione et dechiARATIONe del purgatorio*, Genoa 1551). The final version was written by Catherine's confessor, Fr Cattaneo Marabotto.

Catherine was born in Genoa in 1447. She was the youngest of five. Her father, Giacomo Fieschi, died when she was very young. Her mother, Francesca di Negro provided such an effective Christian education that the elder of her two daughters became a religious.

When Catherine was 16, she was given in marriage to Giuliano Adorno, a man who after various trading and military experiences in the Middle East had returned to Genoa in order to marry.

Married life was far from easy for Catherine, partly because of the character of her husband who was given to gambling. Catherine herself was at first induced to lead a worldly sort of life in which, however, she failed to find serenity. After 10 years, her heart was heavy with a deep sense of emptiness and bitterness.

A unique experience on 20 March 1473 sparked her conversion. She had gone to the Church of San Benedetto in the monastery of Nostra Signora delle Grazie [Our Lady of Grace], to make her confession and, kneeling before the priest, "received", as she herself wrote, "a wound in my heart from God's immense love". It came with such a clear vision of her own wretchedness and shortcomings and at the same time of God's goodness, that she almost fainted.

Her heart was moved by this knowledge of herself—knowledge of the empty life she was leading and of the goodness of God. This experience prompted the decision that gave direction to her whole life. She expressed it in the words: "no longer the world, no longer sin" (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 3rv). Catherine did not stay to make her Confession.

On arriving home she entered the remotest room and spent along time weeping. At that moment she received an inner instruction on prayer and became aware of God's immense love for her, a sinner. It was a spiritual experience she had no words to describe (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 4r).

It was on this occasion that the suffering Jesus appeared to her, bent beneath the Cross, as he is often portrayed in the Saint's iconography. A few days later she returned to the priest to make a good confession at last. It was here that began the "life of purification" which for many years caused her to feel constant sorrow for the sins she had committed and which spurred her to impose forms of penance and sacrifice upon herself, in order to show her love to God.

On this journey Catherine became ever closer to the Lord until she attained what is called “unitive life”, namely, a relationship of profound union with God.

In her Vita it is written that her soul was guided and instructed from within solely by the sweet love of God which gave her all she needed. Catherine surrendered herself so totally into the hands of the Lord that she lived, for about 25 years, as she wrote, “without the assistance of any creature, taught and governed by God alone” (Vita, 117r–118r), nourished above all by constant prayer and by Holy Communion which she received every day, an unusual practice in her time. Only many years later did the Lord give her a priest who cared for her soul.

Catherine was always reluctant to confide and reveal her experience of mystical communion with God, especially because of the deep humility she felt before the Lord’s graces. The prospect of glorifying him and of being able to contribute to the spiritual journey of others alone spurred her to recount what had taken place within her, from the moment of her conversion, which is her original and fundamental experience.

The place of her ascent to mystical peaks was Pammatone Hospital, the largest hospital complex in Genoa, of which she was director and animator. Hence Catherine lived a totally active existence despite the depth of her inner life. In Pammatone a group of followers, disciples and collaborators formed around her, fascinated by her life of faith and her charity.

Indeed her husband, Giuliano Adorno, was so so won over that he gave up his dissipated life, became a Third Order Franciscan and moved into the hospital to help his wife.

Catherine’s dedication to caring for the sick continued until the end of her earthly life on 15 September 1510. From her conversion until her death there were no extraordinary events but two elements characterize her entire life: on the one hand her mystical experience, that is, the profound union with God, which she felt as spousal union, and on the other, assistance to the sick, the organization of the hospital and service to her neighbour, especially the neediest and the most forsaken. These two poles, God and neighbour, totally filled her life, virtually all of which she spent within the hospital walls.

Dear friends, we must never forget that the more we love God and the more constantly we pray, the better we will succeed in truly loving those who surround us, who are close to us, so that we can see in every person the Face of the Lord whose love knows no bounds and makes no distinctions. The mystic does not create distance from others or an abstract life, but rather approaches other people so that they may begin to see and act with God’s eyes and heart.

Catherine's thought on purgatory, for which she is particularly well known, is summed up in the last two parts of the book mentioned above: *The Treatise on purgatory* and the *Dialogues between the body and the soul*. It is important to note that Catherine, in her mystical experience, never received specific revelations on purgatory or on the souls being purified there. Yet, in the writings inspired by our Saint, purgatory is a central element and the description of it has characteristics that were original in her time.

The first original passage concerns the “place” of the purification of souls. In her day it was depicted mainly using images linked to space: a certain space was conceived of in which purgatory was supposed to be located.

Catherine, however, did not see purgatory as a scene in the bowels of the earth: for her it is not an exterior but rather an interior fire. This is purgatory: an inner fire.

The Saint speaks of the Soul's journey of purification on the way to full communion with God, starting from her own experience of profound sorrow for the sins committed, in comparison with God's infinite love (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 171v).

We heard of the moment of conversion when Catherine suddenly became aware of God's goodness, of the infinite distance of her own life from this goodness and of a burning fire within her. And this is the fire that purifies, the interior fire of purgatory. Here too is an original feature in comparison with the thought of her time.

In fact, she does not start with the afterlife in order to recount the torments of purgatory—as was the custom in her time and perhaps still is today—and then to point out the way to purification or conversion. Rather our Saint begins with the inner experience of her own life on the way to Eternity.

“The soul”, Catherine says, “presents itself to God still bound to the desires and suffering that derive from sin and this makes it impossible for it to enjoy the beatific vision of God”. Catherine asserts that God is so pure and holy that a soul stained by sin cannot be in the presence of the divine majesty (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 177r).

We too feel how distant we are, how full we are of so many things that we cannot see God. The soul is aware of the immense love and perfect justice of God and consequently suffers for having failed to respond in a correct and perfect way to this love; and love for God itself becomes a flame, love itself cleanses it from the residue of sin.

In Catherine we can make out the presence of theological and mystical sources on which it was normal to draw in her time. In particular, we find an image typical of Dionysius the Areopagite: the thread of gold that links the human heart to God himself. When God

purified man, he bound him with the finest golden thread, that is, his love, and draws him toward himself with such strong affection that man is as it were “overcome and won over and completely beside himself”.

Thus man’s heart is pervaded by God’s love that becomes the one guide, the one driving force of his life (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 246rv). This situation of being uplifted towards God and of surrender to his will, expressed in the image of the thread, is used by Catherine to express the action of divine light on the souls in purgatory, a light that purifies and raises them to the splendour of the shining radiance of God (cf. *Vita Mirabile*, 179r).

Dear friends, in their experience of union with God, Saints attain such a profound knowledge of the divine mysteries in which love and knowledge interpenetrate, that they are of help to theologians themselves in their commitment to study, to *intelligentia fidei*, to an *intelligentia* of the mysteries of faith, to attain a really deeper knowledge of the mysteries of faith, for example, of what purgatory is.

With her life St Catherine teaches us that the more we love God and enter into intimacy with him in prayer the more he makes himself known to us, setting our hearts on fire with his love.

In writing about purgatory, the Saint reminds us of a fundamental truth of faith that becomes for us an invitation to pray for the deceased so that they may attain the beatific vision of God in the Communion of Saints (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1032).

Moreover the humble, faithful and generous service in Pammatone Hospital that the Saint rendered throughout her life is a shining example of charity for all and an encouragement, especially for women who, with their precious work enriched by their sensitivity and attention to the poorest and neediest, make a fundamental contribution to society and to the Church. Many thanks.

I am pleased to greet the many university students present at today’s Audience. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, especially those from Finland, Malta, China, Indonesia and the United States of America, I cordially invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace.

## **Saint Joan of Arc**

26 January 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk to you about Joan of Arc, a young Saint who lived at the end of the Middle Ages who died at the age of 19, in 1431. This French Saint, mentioned several times in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, is particularly close to St Catherine of Siena, Patroness of Italy and of Europe, of whom I spoke in a recent Catechesis. They were in fact two young women of the people, lay women consecrated in virginity, two committed mystics, not in the cloister, but in the midst of the most dramatic reality of the Church and the world of their time. They are perhaps the most representative of those “strong women” who, at the end of the Middle Ages, fearlessly bore the great light of the Gospel in the complex events of history. We could liken them to the holy women who stayed on Calvary, close to the Crucified Jesus and to Mary his Mother, while the Apostles had fled and Peter himself had denied him three times.

The Church in that period was going through the profound crisis of the great schism of the West, which lasted almost 40 years. In 1380, when Catherine of Siena died, there was not only a Pope but also an antipope; when Joan was born, in 1412, there was a Pope as well as two antipopes. In addition to this internal laceration in the Church, were the continuous fratricidal wars among the Christian peoples of Europe, the most dramatic of which was the protracted Hundred Years’ War between France and England.

Joan of Arc did not know how to read or write, but the depths of her soul can be known thanks to two sources of exceptional historical value: the two *Trials* that concern her. The first, the *Trial of Condemnation (PCon)*, contains the transcription of the long and numerous interrogations to which Joan was subjected in the last months of her life (February–May 1431) and reports the Saint’s own words. The second, the *Trial of Nullity of the Condemnation* or of “rehabilitation” (*PNul*), contains the depositions of about 120 eyewitnesses of all the periods of her life (cf. *Procès de Condamnation de Jeanne d’Arc*, 3 vol. and *Procès en Nullité de la Condamnation de Jeanne d’Arc*, 5 vol., ed. Klincksieck, Paris, 1960–1989).

Joan was born at Domremy, a little village on the border between France and Lorraine. Her parents were well-off peasants, known to all as good Christians. From them she received a sound religious upbringing, considerably influenced by the spirituality of the *Name of Jesus*, taught by St Bernardine of Siena and spread in Europe by the Franciscans.

The *Name of Mary* was always associated with the Name of Jesus and thus, against the background of popular piety, Joan’s spirituality was profoundly Christocentric and Marian. From childhood, she showed great love and compassion for the poorest, the sick and all the suffering, in the dramatic context of the war.

We know from Joan's own words that her religious life developed as a mystical experience from the time when she was 13 (*PCon*, I, p. 47–48). Through the “voice” of St Michael the Archangel, Joan felt called by the Lord to intensify her Christian life and also to commit herself in the first person to the liberation of her people. Her immediate response, her “yes”, was her vow of virginity, with a new commitment to sacramental life and to prayer: daily participation in Mass, frequent Confession and Communion and long periods of silent prayer before the Crucified One or the image of Our Lady.

The young French peasant girl's compassion and dedication in the face of her people's suffering were intensified by her mystical relationship with God. One of the most original aspects of this young woman's holiness was precisely this link between mystical experience and political mission. The years of her hidden life and her interior development were followed by the brief but intense two years of her public life: a year of *action* and a year of *passion*.

At the beginning of 1429, Joan began her work of liberation. The many witnesses show us this young woman who was only 17 years old as a very strong and determined person, able to convince people who felt insecure and discouraged. Overcoming all obstacles, she met the Dauphin of France, the future King Charles VII, who subjected her to an examination in Poitiers by some theologians of the university. Their opinion was positive: they saw in her nothing evil, only a good Christian.

On 22 March 1429 Joan dictated an important letter to the King of England and to his men at arms who were besieging the city of Orléans (*ibid.*, pp. 221–222). Hers was a true proposal of peace in justice between the two Christian peoples in light of the Name of Jesus and Mary, but it was rejected and Joan had to gird herself to fight for the city's liberation which took place on 8 May. The other culminating moment of her political action was the coronation of King Charles VII in Rheims on 17 July 1429. For a whole year, Joan lived with the soldiers, carrying out among them a true mission of evangelization. Many of them testified to her goodness, her courage and her extraordinary purity. She was called by all and by herself “La pucelle” (“the Maid”), that is, virgin.

Joan's *passion* began on 23 May 1430, when she fell into enemy hands and was taken prisoner. On 23 December she was led to the city of Rouen. There the long and dramatic *Trial of Condemnation* took place, that began in February 1431 and ended on 30 May with her being burned at the stake.

It was a great and solemn Trial, at which two ecclesiastical judges presided, Bishop Pierre Cauchon and the Inquisitor Jean le Maistre, but in fact it was conducted entirely by a large group of theologians from the renowned University of Paris, who took part in



the Trial as assessors. They were French clerics, who, on the side politically opposed to Joan's, had *a priori* a negative opinion of both her and her mission. This Trial is a distressing page in the history of holiness and also an illuminating page on the mystery of the Church which, according to the words of the Second Vatican Council, is "at once holy and always in need of purification" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

The Trial was the dramatic encounter between this Saint and her judges, who were clerics. Joan was accused and convicted by them, even condemned as a heretic and sent to the terrible death of being burned at the stake. Unlike the holy theologians who had illuminated the University of Paris, such as St Bonaventure, St Thomas Aquinas and Bl. Duns Scotus, of whom I have spoken in several Catecheses, these judges were theologians who lacked charity and the humility to see God's action in this young woman.

The words of Jesus, who said that God's mysteries are revealed to those who have a child's heart while they remain hidden to the learned and the wise who have no humility (cf. Lk 10:21), spring to mind. Thus, Joan's judges were radically incapable of understanding her or of perceiving the beauty of her soul. They did not know that they were condemning a Saint.

Joan's appeal to the Pope, on 24 May, was rejected by the tribunal. On the morning of 30 May, in prison, she received Holy Communion for the last time and was immediately led to her torture in the Old Market Square. She asked one of the priests to hold up a processional Cross in front of the stake. Thus she died, her gaze fixed upon the Crucified Jesus and crying out several times the Name of Jesus (*PNul*, I, p. 457; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 435). About 25 years later the *Trial of Nullity*, which opened under the authority of Pope Calixtus III, ended with a solemn sentence that declared the condemnation null and void (7 July 1456; *PNul*, II, pp. 604–610). This long trial, which collected the evidence of witnesses and the opinions of many theologians, all favourable to Joan, sheds light on her innocence and on her perfect fidelity to the Church. Joan of Arc was subsequently canonized by Benedict XV in 1920.

Dear brothers and sisters, the *Name of Jesus*, invoked by our Saint until the very last moments of her earthly life was like the continuous breathing of her soul, like the beating of her heart, the centre of her whole life. *The Mystery of the Charity of Joan of Arc* which so fascinated the poet Charles Péguy was this total love for Jesus and for her neighbour in Jesus and for Jesus. This Saint had understood that Love embraces the whole of the reality of God and of the human being, of Heaven and of earth, of the Church and of the world. Jesus always had pride of place in her life, in accordance to her beautiful affirmation: "We must serve God first" (*PCon*, I, p. 288; cf. *Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica*,

n. 223). Loving him means always doing his will. She declared with total surrender and trust: “I entrust myself to God my Creator, I love him with my whole my heart” (*PCon*, I, p. 337). With the vow of virginity, Joan consecrated her whole being exclusively to the one Love of Jesus: “it was the promise that she made to Our Lord to preserve the virginity of her body and her mind well” (*PCon*, I, pp. 149–150).

Virginity of soul is the *state of grace*, a supreme value, for her more precious than life. It is a gift of God which is to be received and preserved with humility and trust. One of the best known texts of the first *Trial* concerns precisely this: “Asked if she knew that she was in God’s grace, she replied: ‘If I am not, may it please God to put me in it; if I am, may it please God to keep me there’” (*ibid.*, p. 62; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2005).

Our Saint lived prayer in the form of a continuous dialogue with the Lord who also illuminated her dialogue with the judges and gave her peace and security. She asked him with trust: Sweetest God, in honour of your holy Passion, I ask you, if you love me, to show me how I must answer these men of the Church” (*PCon*, I, p. 252). Joan saw Jesus as the “King of Heaven and of the earth”. She therefore had painted on her standard the image of “Our Lord holding the world” (*ibid.*, p. 172): the emblem of her political mission. The liberation of her people was a work of human justice which Joan carried out in charity, for love of Jesus. Her holiness is a beautiful example for lay people engaged in politics, especially in the most difficult situations. Faith is the light that guides every decision, as a century later another great Saint, the Englishman Thomas More, was to testify.

In Jesus Joan contemplated the whole reality of the Church, the “Church triumphant” of Heaven, as well as the “Church militant” on earth. According to her words, “About Jesus Christ and the Church, I simply know they’re just one thing” (*ibid.*, p. 166). This affirmation, cited in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (n. 795), has a truly heroic character in the context of the *Trial of Condemnation*, before her judges, men of the Church who were persecuting and condemning her. In the Love of Jesus Joan found the strength to love the Church to the very end, even at the moment she was sentenced.

I like to recall that St Joan of Arc had a profound influence on a young Saint of the modern age: Thérèse of the Child Jesus. In the context of a completely different life, spent in the cloister, the Carmelite of Lisieux felt very close to Joan, living in the heart of the Church and participating in Christ’s suffering for the world’s salvation. The Church has brought them together as Patronesses of France, after the Virgin Mary.

St Thérèse expressed her desire to die, like Joan, with the Name of Jesus on her lips (*Manoscritto B*, 3r), and she was motivated by the same great love for Jesus and her neighbour, lived in consecrated virginity.

Dear brothers and sisters, with her luminous witness St Joan of Arc invites us to a high standard of Christian living: to make prayer the guiding motive of our days; to have full trust in doing God's will, whatever it may be; to live charity without favouritism, without limits and drawing, like her, from the Love of Jesus a profound love for the Church. Thank you.

## Saint Teresa of Avila

2 February 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the course of the Catecheses that I have chosen to dedicate to the Fathers of the Church and to great theologians and women of the Middle Ages I have also had the opportunity to reflect on certain Saints proclaimed Doctors of the Church on account of the eminence of their teaching.

Today I would like to begin a brief series of meetings to complete the presentation on the Doctors of the Church and I am beginning with a Saint who is one of the peaks of Christian spirituality of all time—St Teresa of Avila [also known as St Teresa of Jesus].

St Teresa, whose name was Teresa de Cepeda y Ahumada, was born in Avila, Spain, in 1515. In her autobiography she mentions some details of her childhood: she was born into a large family, her “father and mother, who were devout and feared God”, into a large family. She had three sisters and nine brothers.

While she was still a child and not yet nine years old she had the opportunity to read the lives of several Martyrs which inspired in her such a longing for martyrdom that she briefly ran away from home in order to die a Martyr's death and to go to Heaven (*cf. Vida, [Life]*, 1, 4); “I want to see God”, the little girl told her parents.

A few years later Teresa was to speak of her childhood reading and to state that she had discovered in it the way of truth which she sums up in two fundamental principles.

On the one hand was the fact that “all things of this world will pass away” while on the other God alone is “for ever, ever, ever”, a topic that recurs in her best known poem: “Let nothing disturb you, Let nothing frighten you, All things are passing away: God never

changes. Patience obtains all things. Whoever has God lacks nothing; God alone suffices". She was about 12 years old when her mother died and she implored the Virgin Most Holy to be her mother (cf. *Vida*, I, 7).

If in her adolescence the reading of profane books had led to the distractions of a worldly life, her experience as a pupil of the Augustinian nuns of Santa María de las Gracias de Avila and her reading of spiritual books, especially the classics of Franciscan spirituality, introduced her to recollection and prayer.

When she was 20 she entered the Carmelite Monastery of the Incarnation, also in Avila. In her religious life she took the name "Teresa of Jesus". Three years later she fell seriously ill, so ill that she remained in a coma for four days, looking as if she were dead (cf. *Vida*, 5, 9).

In the fight against her own illnesses too the Saint saw the combat against weaknesses and the resistance to God's call: "I wished to live", she wrote, "but I saw clearly that I was not living, but rather wrestling with the shadow of death; there was no one to give me life, and I was not able to take it. He who could have given it to me had good reasons for not coming to my aid, seeing that he had brought me back to himself so many times, and I as often had left him" (*Vida*, 7, 8).

In 1543 she lost the closeness of her relatives; her father died and all her siblings, one after another, emigrated to America. In Lent 1554, when she was 39 years old, Teresa reached the climax of her struggle against her own weaknesses. The fortuitous discovery of the statue of "a Christ most grievously wounded", left a deep mark on her life (cf. *Vida*, 9).

The Saint, who in that period felt deeply in tune with the St Augustine of the *Confessions*, thus describes the decisive day of her mystical experience: "and ... a feeling of the presence of God would come over me unexpectedly, so that I could in no wise doubt either that he was within me, or that I was wholly absorbed in him" (*Vida*, 10, 1).

Parallel to her inner development, the Saint began in practice to realize her ideal of the reform of the Carmelite Order: in 1562 she founded the first reformed Carmel in Avila, with the support of the city's Bishop, Don Alvaro de Mendoza, and shortly afterwards also received the approval of John Baptist Rossi, the Order's Superior General.

In the years that followed, she continued her foundations of new Carmelite convents, 17 in all. Her meeting with St John of the Cross was fundamental. With him, in 1568, she set up the first convent of Discalced Carmelites in Duruelo, not far from Avila.

In 1580 she obtained from Rome the authorization for her reformed Carmels as a separate, autonomous Province. This was the starting point for the Discalced Carmelite Order.

Indeed, Teresa's earthly life ended while she was in the middle of her founding activities. She died on the night of 15 October 1582 in Alba de Tormes, after setting up the Carmelite Convent in Burgos, while on her way back to Avila. Her last humble words were: "After all I die as a child of the Church", and "O my Lord and my Spouse, the hour that I have longed for has come. It is time to meet one another".

Teresa spent her entire life for the whole Church although she spent it in Spain. She was beatified by Pope Paul V in 1614 and canonized by Gregory XV in 1622. The Servant of God Paul VI proclaimed her a "Doctor of the Church" in 1970.

Teresa of Jesus had no academic education but always set great store by the teachings of theologians, men of letters and spiritual teachers. As a writer, she always adhered to what she had lived personally through or had seen in the experience of others (*cf. Prologue to The Way of Perfection*), in other words basing herself on her own first-hand knowledge.

Teresa had the opportunity to build up relations of spiritual friendship with many Saints and with St John of the Cross in particular. At the same time she nourished herself by reading the Fathers of the Church, St Jerome, St Gregory the Great and St Augustine.

Among her most important works we should mention first of all her autobiography, *El libro de la vida* (the book of life), which she called *Libro de las misericordias del Señor* [book of the Lord's mercies].

Written in the Carmelite Convent at Avila in 1565, she describes the biographical and spiritual journey, as she herself says, to submit her soul to the discernment of the "Master of things spiritual", St John of Avila. Her purpose was to highlight the presence and action of the merciful God in her life. For this reason the work often cites her dialogue in prayer with the Lord. It makes fascinating reading because not only does the Saint recount that she is reliving the profound experience of her relationship with God but also demonstrates it.

In 1566, Teresa wrote *El Camino de Perfección* [The Way of Perfection]. She called it *Advertencias y consejos que da Teresa de Jesús a sus hermanas* [recommendations and advice that Teresa of Jesus offers to her sisters]. It was composed for the 12 novices of the Carmel of St Joseph in Avila. Teresa proposes to them an intense programme of contemplative life at the service of the Church, at the root of which are the evangelical virtues and prayer.

Among the most precious passages is her commentary on the *Our Father*, as a model for prayer. St Teresa's most famous mystical work is *El Castillo interior* [The Interior Castle]. She wrote it in 1577 when she was in her prime. It is a reinterpretation of her own spiritual journey and, at the same time, a codification of the possible development of Christian life towards its fullness, holiness, under the action of the Holy Spirit.

Teresa refers to the structure of a castle with seven rooms as an image of human interiority. She simultaneously introduces the symbol of the silk worm reborn as a butterfly, in order to express the passage from the natural to the supernatural.

The Saint draws inspiration from Sacred Scripture, particularly the Song of Songs, for the final symbol of the "Bride and Bridegroom" which enables her to describe, in the seventh room, the four crowning aspects of Christian life: the Trinitarian, the Christological, the anthropological and the ecclesial.

St Teresa devoted the *Libro de la fundaciones* [book of the foundations], which she wrote between 1573 and 1582, to her activity as Foundress of the reformed Carmels. In this book she speaks of the life of the nascent religious group. This account, like her autobiography, was written above all in order to give prominence to God's action in the work of founding new monasteries.

It is far from easy to sum up in a few words Teresa's profound and articulate spirituality. I would like to mention a few essential points. In the first place St Teresa proposes the evangelical virtues as the basis of all Christian and human life and in particular, detachment from possessions, that is, evangelical poverty, and this concerns all of us; love for one another as an essential element of community and social life; humility as love for the truth; determination as a fruit of Christian daring; theological hope, which she describes as the thirst for living water. Then we should not forget the human virtues: affability, truthfulness, modesty, courtesy, cheerfulness, culture.

Secondly, St Teresa proposes a profound harmony with the great biblical figures and eager listening to the word of God. She feels above all closely in tune with the Bride in the Song of Songs and with the Apostle Paul, as well as with Christ in the Passion and with Jesus in the Eucharist. The Saint then stresses how essential prayer is. Praying, she says, "means being on terms of friendship with God frequently conversing in secret with him who, we know, loves us" (*Vida* 8, 5). St Teresa's idea coincides with Thomas Aquinas' definition of theological charity as "*amicitia quaedam hominis ad Deum*", a type of human friendship with God, who offered humanity his friendship first; it is from God that the initiative comes (*cf. Summa Theologiae* II-II, 23, 1).

Prayer is life and develops gradually, in pace with the growth of Christian life: it begins with vocal prayer, passes through interiorization by means of meditation and recollection, until it attains the union of love with Christ and with the Holy Trinity. Obviously, in the development of prayer climbing to the highest steps does not mean abandoning the previous type of prayer. Rather, it is a gradual deepening of the relationship with God that envelops the whole of life.

Rather than a pedagogy Teresa's is a true "mystagogy" of prayer: she teaches those who read her works how to pray by praying with them. Indeed, she often interrupts her account or exposition with a prayerful outburst.

Another subject dear to the Saint is the centrality of Christ's humanity. For Teresa, in fact, Christian life is the personal relationship with Jesus that culminates in union with him through grace, love and imitation. Hence the importance she attaches to meditation on the Passion and on the Eucharist as the presence of Christ in the Church for the life of every believer, and as the heart of the Liturgy. St Teresa lives out unconditional love for the Church: she shows a lively "*sensus Ecclesiae*", in the face of the episodes of division and conflict in the Church of her time.

She reformed the Carmelite Order with the intention of serving and defending the "Holy Roman Catholic Church", and was willing to give her life for the Church (cf. *Vida*, 33, 5).

A final essential aspect of Teresian doctrine which I would like to emphasize is perfection, as the aspiration of the whole of Christian life and as its ultimate goal. The Saint has a very clear idea of the "fullness" of Christ, relived by the Christian. At the end of the route through *The Interior Castle*, in the last "room", Teresa describes this fullness, achieved in the indwelling of the Trinity, in union with Christ through the mystery of his humanity.

Dear brothers and sisters, St Teresa of Jesus is a true teacher of Christian life for the faithful of every time. In our society, which all too often lacks spiritual values, St Teresa teaches us to be unflagging witnesses of God, of his presence and of his action. She teaches us truly to feel this thirst for God that exists in the depths of our hearts, this desire to see God, to seek God, to be in conversation with him and to be his friends.

This is the friendship we all need that we must seek anew, day after day. May the example of this Saint, profoundly contemplative and effectively active, spur us too every day to dedicate the right time to prayer, to this openness to God, to this journey, in order to seek God, to see him, to discover his friendship and so to find true life; indeed many of us should truly say: "I am not alive, I am not truly alive because I do not live the essence of my life".

Therefore time devoted to prayer is not time wasted, it is time in which the path of life unfolds, the path unfolds to learning from God an ardent love for him, for his Church, and practical charity for our brothers and sisters. Many thanks.

## Saint Peter Canisius

9 February 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I want to talk to you about St Peter Kanis, Canisius in the Latin form of his surname, a very important figure of the Catholic 16th century.

He was born on 8 May 1521 in Wijmegen, Holland. His father was Burgomaster of the town. While he was a student at the University of Cologne he regularly visited the Carthusian monks of St Barbara, a driving force of Catholic life, and other devout men who cultivated the spirituality of the so-called *devotio moderna* [modern devotion].

He entered the Society of Jesus on 8 May 1543 in Mainz (Rhineland—Palatinate), after taking a course of spiritual exercises under the guidance of Bl. Pierre Favre, Petrus [Peter] Faber, one of St Ignatius of Loyola's first companions.

He was ordained a priest in Cologne. Already the following year, in June 1546, he attended the Council of Trent, as the theologian of Cardinal Otto Truchsess von Waldburg, Bishop of Augsburg, where he worked with two confreres, Diego Laínez and Alfonso Salmerón. In 1548, St Ignatius had him complete his spiritual formation in Rome and then sent him to the College of Messina to carry out humble domestic duties.

He earned a doctorate in theology at Bologna on 4 October 1549 and St Ignatius assigned him to carry out the apostolate in Germany. On 2 September of that same year he visited Pope Paul III at Castel Gandolfo and then went to St Peter's Basilica to pray. Here he implored the great Holy Apostles Peter and Paul for help to make the Apostolic Blessing permanently effective for the future of his important new mission. He noted several words of this prayer in his spiritual journal.

He said: "There I felt that a great consolation and the presence of grace had been granted to me through these intercessors [Peter and Paul]. They confirmed my mission in Germany and seemed to transmit to me, as an apostle of Germany, the support of their benevolence. You know, Lord, in how many ways and how often on that same day you entrusted Germany to me, which I was later to continue to be concerned about and for which I would have liked to live and die".



We must bear in mind that we are dealing with the time of the Lutheran Reformation, at the moment when the Catholic faith in the German-speaking countries seemed to be dying out in the face of the fascination of the Reformation. The task of Canisius—charged with revitalizing or renewing the Catholic faith in the Germanic countries—was almost impossible.

It was possible only by virtue of prayer. It was possible only from the centre, namely, a profound personal friendship with Jesus Christ, a friendship with Christ in his Body, the Church, which must be nourished by the Eucharist, his Real Presence.

In obedience to the mission received from Ignatius and from Pope Paul III, Canisius left for Germany. He went first to the Duchy of Bavaria, which for several years was the place where he exercised his ministry.

As dean, rector and vice chancellor of the University of Ingolstadt, he supervised the academic life of the Institute and the religious and moral reform of the people. In Vienna, where for a brief time he was diocesan administrator, he carried out his pastoral ministry in hospitals and prisons, both in the city and in the countryside, and prepared the publication of his *Catechism*. In 1556 he founded the College of Prague and, until 1569, was the first superior of the Jesuit Province of Upper Germany.

In this office he established a dense network of communities of his Order in the Germanic countries, especially colleges, that were starting points for the Catholic Reformation, for the renewal of the Catholic faith.

At that time he also took part in the Colloquy of Worms with Protestant divines, including Philip Melancthon (1557); He served as Papal Nuncio in Poland (1558); he took part in the two Diets of Augsburg (1559 and 1565); he accompanied Cardinal Stanislaw Hozjusz, Legate of Pope Pius IV, to Emperor Ferdinand (1560); and he took part in the last session of the Council of Trent where he spoke on the issue of Communion under both Species and on the Index of Prohibited Books (1562).

In 1580 he withdrew to Fribourg, Switzerland, where he devoted himself entirely to preaching and writing. He died there on 21 December 1597. Bl. Pius IX beatified him in 1864 and in 1897 Pope Leo XIII proclaimed him the “Second Apostle of Germany”. Pope Pius XI canonized him and proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1925.

St Peter Canisius spent a large part of his life in touch with the most important people of his time and exercised a special influence with his writings. He edited the complete works of Cyril of Alexandria and of St Leo the Great, the Letters of St Jerome and the

Orations of St Nicholas of Flüe. He published devotional books in various languages, biographies of several Swiss Saints and numerous homiletic texts.

However, his most widely disseminated writings were the three *Catechisms* he compiled between 1555 and 1558. The first *Catechism* was addressed to students who could grasp the elementary notions of theology; the second, to young people of the populace for an initial religious instruction; the third, to youth with a scholastic formation of middle and high school levels. He explained Catholic doctrine with questions and answers, concisely, in biblical terms, with great clarity and with no polemical overtones.

There were at least 200 editions of this *Catechism* in his lifetime alone! And hundreds of editions succeeded one another until the 20th century. So it was that still in my father's generation people in Germany were calling the *Catechism* simply “*the Canisius*”. He really was the *Catechist* of Germany for centuries, he formed people's faith for centuries.

This was a characteristic of St Peter Canisius: his ability to combine harmoniously fidelity to dogmatic principles with the respect that is due to every person. St Canisius distinguished between a conscious, blameworthy apostasy from faith and a blameless loss of faith through circumstances.

Moreover, he declared to Rome that the majority of Germans who switched to Protestantism were blameless. In a historical period of strong confessional differences, Canisius avoided—and this is something quite extraordinary—the harshness and rhetoric of anger—something rare, as I said, in the discussions between Christians in those times—and aimed only at presenting the spiritual roots and at reviving the faith in the Church. His vast and penetrating knowledge of Sacred Scripture and of the Fathers of the Church served this cause: the same knowledge that supported his personal relationship with God and the austere spirituality that he derived from the *Devotio Moderna* and Rhenish mysticism.

Characteristic of St Canisius' spirituality was his profound personal friendship with Jesus. For example, on 4 September 1549 he wrote in his journal, speaking with the Lord: “In the end, as if you were opening to me the heart of the Most Sacred Body, which it seemed to me I saw before me, you commanded me to drink from that source, inviting me, as it were, to draw the waters of my salvation from your founts, O my Saviour”.

Then he saw that the Saviour was giving him a garment with three pieces that were called peace, love and perseverance. And with this garment, made up of peace, love and perseverance, Canisius carried out his work of renewing Catholicism. His friendship with Jesus—which was the core of his personality—nourished by love of the Bible, by love of the Blessed Sacrament and by love of the Fathers, this friendship was clearly united

with the awareness of being a perpetuator of the Apostles' mission in the Church. And this reminds us that every genuine evangelizer is always an instrument united with Jesus and with his Church and is fruitful for this very reason.

Friendship with Jesus had been inculcated in St Peter Canisius in the spiritual environment of the Charterhouse of Cologne, in which he had been in close contact with two Carthusian mystics: Johannes Lansperger, whose name has been Latinized as "Lanspergius" and Nikolaus van Esche, Latinized as "Eschius".

He subsequently deepened the experience of this friendship, *familiaritas stupenda nimis*, through contemplation of the mysteries of Jesus' life, which form a large part of St Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises. This is the foundation of his intense devotion to the Heart of the Lord, which culminated in his consecration to the apostolic ministry in the Vatican Basilica.

The Christocentric spirituality of St Peter Canisius is rooted in a profound conviction: no soul anxious for perfection fails to practice prayer daily, mental prayer, an ordinary means that enables the disciple of Jesus to live in intimacy with the divine Teacher.

For this reason in his writings for the spiritual education of the people, our Saint insists on the importance of the Liturgy with his comments on the Gospels, on Feasts, on the Rite of Holy Mass and on the sacraments; yet, at the same time, he is careful to show the faithful the need for and beauty of personal daily prayer, which should accompany and permeate participation in the public worship of the Church.

This exhortation and method have kept their value intact, especially after being authoritatively proposed anew by the Second Vatican Council in the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium*: Christian life does not develop unless it is nourished by participation in the Liturgy—particularly at Sunday Mass—and by personal daily prayer, by personal contact with God.

Among the thousands of activities and multiple distractions that surround us, we must find moments for recollection before the Lord every day, in order to listen to him and speak with him.

At the same time, the example that St Peter Canisius has bequeathed to us, not only in his works but especially with his life, is ever timely and of lasting value. He teaches clearly that the apostolic ministry is effective and produces fruits of salvation in hearts only if the preacher is a personal witness of Jesus and an instrument at his disposal, bound to him closely by faith in his Gospel and in his Church, by a morally consistent life

and by prayer as ceaseless as love. And this is true for every Christian who wishes to live his adherence to Christ with commitment and fidelity. Thank you.

## Saint John of the Cross

16 February 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Two weeks ago I presented the figure of the great Spanish mystic, Teresa of Jesus. Today I would like to talk about another important saint of that country, a spiritual friend of St Teresa, the reformer, with her, of the Carmelite religious family: St John of the Cross. He was proclaimed a Doctor of the Church by Pope Pius XI in 1926 and is traditionally known as *Doctor mysticus*, “Mystical Doctor”.

John of the Cross was born in 1542 in the small village of Fontiveros, near Avila in Old Castille, to Gonzalo de Yepes and Catalina Alvarez. The family was very poor because his father, Gonzalo, from a noble family of Toledo, had been thrown out of his home and disowned for marrying Catalina, a humble silk weaver.

Having lost his father at a tender age, when John was nine he moved with his mother and his brother Francisco to Medina del Campo, not far from Valladolid, a commercial and cultural centre. Here he attended the *Colegio de los Doctrinos*, carrying out in addition several humble tasks for the sisters of the Church-Convent of the Maddalena. Later, given his human qualities and his academic results, he was admitted first as a male nurse to the Hospital of the Conception, then to the recently founded Jesuit College at Medina del Campo.

He entered the College at the age of 18 and studied the humanities, rhetoric and classical languages for three years. At the end of his formation he had a clear perception of his vocation: the religious life, and, among the many orders present in Medina, he felt called to Carmel.

In the summer of 1563 he began his novitiate with the Carmelites in the town, taking the religious name of Juan de Santo Matía. The following year he went to the prestigious University of Salamanca, where he studied the humanities and philosophy for three years.

He was ordained a priest in 1567 and returned to Medina del Campo to celebrate his first Mass surrounded by his family's love. It was precisely here that John and Teresa of Jesus first met. The meeting was crucial for them both. Teresa explained to him her plan for

reforming Carmel, including the male branch of the Order, and suggested to John that he support it “for the greater glory of God”. The young priest was so fascinated by Teresa’s ideas that he became a great champion of her project.

For several months they worked together, sharing ideals and proposals aiming to inaugurate the first house of Discalced Carmelites as soon as possible. It was opened on 28 December 1568 at Duruelo in a remote part of the Province of Avila.

This first reformed male community consisted of John and three companions. In renewing their religious profession in accordance with the primitive Rule, each of the four took a new name: it was from this time that John called himself “of the Cross”, as he came to be known subsequently throughout the world.

At the end of 1572, at St Teresa’s request, he became confessor and vicar of the Monastery of the Incarnation in Avila where Teresa of Jesus was prioress. These were years of close collaboration and spiritual friendship which enriched both. The most important Teresian works and John’s first writings date back to this period.

Promoting adherence to the Carmelite reform was far from easy and cost John acute suffering. The most traumatic episode occurred in 1577, when he was seized and imprisoned in the Carmelite Convent of the Ancient Observance in Toledo, following an unjust accusation. The Saint, imprisoned for months, was subjected to physical and moral deprivations and constrictions. Here, together with other poems, he composed the well-known *Spiritual Canticle*. Finally, in the night between 16 and 17 August 1578, he made a daring escape and sought shelter at the Monastery of Discalced Carmelite Nuns in the town. St Teresa and her reformed companions celebrated his liberation with great joy and, after spending a brief period recovering, John was assigned to Andalusia where he spent 10 years in various convents, especially in Granada.

He was charged with ever more important offices in his Order, until he became vicar provincial and completed the draft of his spiritual treatises. He then returned to his native land as a member of the General Government of the Teresian religious family which already enjoyed full juridical autonomy.

He lived in the Carmel of Segovia, serving in the office of community superior. In 1591 he was relieved of all responsibility and assigned to the new religious Province of Mexico. While he was preparing for the long voyage with 10 companions he retired to a secluded convent near Jaén, where he fell seriously ill.

John faced great suffering with exemplary serenity and patience. He died in the night between 13 and 14 December 1591, while his confreres were reciting Matins. He took his

leave of them saying: “Today I am going to sing the Office in Heaven”. His mortal remains were translated to Segovia. He was beatified by Clement X in 1675 and canonized by Benedict XIII in 1726.

John is considered one of the most important lyric poets of Spanish literature. His major works are four: *The Ascent of Mount Carmel*, *The Dark Night*, *The Spiritual Canticle* and *The Living Flame of Love*.

In *The Spiritual Canticle* St John presents the process of the soul's purification and that is the gradual, joyful possession of God, until the soul succeeds in feeling that it loves God with the same love with which it is loved by him. *The Living Flame of Love* continues in this perspective, describing in greater detail the state of the transforming union with God.

The example that John uses is always that of fire: just as the stronger the fire burns and consumes wood, the brighter it grows until it blazes into a flame, so the Holy Spirit, who purifies and “cleanses” the soul during the dark night, with time illuminates and warms it as though it were a flame. The life of the soul is a continuous celebration of the Holy Spirit which gives us a glimpse of the glory of union with God in eternity.

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel* presents the spiritual itinerary from the viewpoint of the gradual purification of the soul, necessary in order to scale the peaks of Christian perfection, symbolized by the summit of Mount Carmel. This purification is proposed as a journey the human being undertakes, collaborating with divine action, to free the soul from every attachment or affection contrary to God's will.

Purification which, if it is to attain the union of love with God must be total, begins by purifying the life of the senses and continues with the life obtained through the three theological virtues: faith, hope and charity, which purify the intention, the memory and the will.

*The Dark Night* describes the “passive” aspect, that is, God's intervention in this process of the soul's “purification”. In fact human endeavour on its own is unable to reach the profound roots of the person's bad inclinations and habits: all it can do is to check them but cannot entirely uproot them. This requires the special action of God which radically purifies the spirit and prepares it for the union of love with him.

St John describes this purification as “passive”, precisely because, although it is accepted by the soul, it is brought about by the mysterious action of the Holy Spirit who, like a burning flame, consumes every impurity. In this state the soul is subjected to every kind of trial, as if it were in a dark night.

This information on the Saint's most important works help us to approach the salient points of his vast and profound mystical doctrine, whose purpose is to describe a sure way to attain holiness, the state of perfection to which God calls us all.

According to John of the Cross, all that exists, created by God, is good. Through creatures we may arrive at the discovery of the One who has left within them a trace of himself. Faith, in any case, is the one source given to the human being to know God as he is in himself, as the Triune God. All that God wished to communicate to man, he said in Jesus Christ, his Word made flesh. Jesus Christ is the only and definitive way to the Father (*cf.* Jn 14:6). Any created thing is nothing in comparison to God and is worth nothing outside him, consequently, to attain to the perfect love of God, every other love must be conformed in Christ to the divine love.

From this derives the insistence of St John of the Cross on the need for purification and inner self-emptying in order to be transformed into God, which is the one goal of perfection. This "purification" does not consist in the mere physical absence of things or of their use; on the contrary what makes the soul pure and free is the elimination of every disorderly dependence on things. All things should be placed in God as the centre and goal of life.

Of course, the long and difficult process of purification demands a personal effort, but the real protagonist is God: all that the human being can do is to "prepare" himself, to be open to divine action and not to set up obstacles to it. By living the theological virtues, human beings raise themselves and give value to their commitment. The growth of faith, hope and charity keeps pace with the work of purification and with the gradual union with God until they are transformed in him.

When it reaches this goal, the soul is immersed in Trinitarian life itself, so that St John affirms that it has reached the point of loving God with the same love with which he loves it, because he loves it in the Holy Spirit.

For this reason the Mystical Doctor maintains that there is no true union of love with God that does not culminate in Trinitarian union. In this supreme state the holy soul knows everything in God and no longer has to pass through creatures in order to reach him. The soul now feels bathed in divine love and rejoices in it without reserve.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the end the question is: does this Saint with his lofty mysticism, with this demanding journey towards the peak of perfection have anything to say to us, to the ordinary Christian who lives in the circumstances of our life today, or is he an example, a model for only a few elect souls who are truly able to undertake this journey of purification, of mystical ascesis?

To find the answer we must first of all bear in mind that the life of St John of the Cross did not “float on mystical clouds”; rather he had a very hard life, practical and concrete, both as a reformer of the Order, in which he came up against much opposition and from the Provincial Superior as well as in his confreres’ prison where he was exposed to unbelievable insults and physical abuse.

His life was hard yet it was precisely during the months he spent in prison that he wrote one of his most beautiful works. And so we can understand that the journey with Christ, travelling with Christ, “the Way”, is not an additional burden in our life, it is not something that would make our burden even heavier but something quite different. It is a light, a power that helps us to bear it.

If a person bears great love in himself, this love gives him wings, as it were, and he can face all life’s troubles more easily because he carries in himself this great light; this is faith: being loved by God and letting oneself be loved by God in Jesus Christ. Letting oneself be loved in this way is the light that helps us to bear our daily burden.

And holiness is not a very difficult action of ours but means exactly this “openness”: opening the windows of our soul to let in God’s light, without forgetting God because it is precisely in opening oneself to his light that one finds strength, one finds the joy of the redeemed.

Let us pray the Lord to help us discover this holiness, to let ourselves be loved by God who is our common vocation and the true redemption. Many thanks.

## **Saint Robert Bellarmine**

*23 February 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Born on 4 October 1542 in Montepulciano near Siena, he was the nephew, on his mother’s side, of Pope Marcellus II. He had an excellent formation in the humanities before entering the Society of Jesus on 20 September 1560. His philosophy and theology studies, at the Roman College in Padua and at Louvain, focused on St Thomas and the Fathers of the Church. They were crucial to his theological orientation.

He was ordained a priest on 25 March 1570 and for a few years was professor of theology at Louvain. Later, summoned to Rome to teach at the Roman College, he was entrusted with the chair of apologetics. In the decade in which he held it (1576–1586), he compiled a



course of lessons which subsequently formed the *Controversiae* [Controversies], a work whose clarity, rich content and mainly historical tone earned it instant renown.

The Council of Trent had just ended and in the face of the Protestant Reformation, the Catholic Church was impelled to reinforce and confirm her identity. Bellarmine's action fitted into this context. From 1588 to 1594 he was first spiritual director of the Jesuit students at the Roman College—among whom he met and gave direction to St Aloysius Gonzaga—then religious superior.

Pope Clement VIII appointed Fr Bellarmine Papal Theologian, consultor to the Holy Office and rector of the College of Confessors at St Peter's. His short catechism, *Dottrina cristiana* [Christian doctrine] dates back to the two-year period 1597–1598. It was one of his most popular works.

Pope Clement VIII created him a cardinal on 3 March 1599 and on 18 March 1602 he was appointed Archbishop of Capua. He received episcopal ordination on 21 April that same year. In the three years in which he was a diocesan bishop, he distinguished himself by his zeal as a preacher in his cathedral, by his weekly visits to parishes, by three Diocesan Synods and by a Provincial Council which he founded.

After taking part in the Conclaves that elected Pope Leo XI and Pope Paul V, he was called to Rome again, where he became a member of the Congregations of the Holy Office, of the Index, for Rites, for Bishops and for the Propagation of the Faith. He also had diplomatic responsibilities in the Republic of Venice and in England, to defend the rights of the Apostolic See.

In his last years he composed various books on spirituality in which he concentrated the results of his annual spiritual exercises. Christian people today still draw great edification from reading them. He died in Rome on 17 September 1621. Pope Pius XI beatified him in 1923, canonized him in 1930 and proclaimed him a Doctor of the Church in 1931.

St Robert Bellarmine carried out an important role in the Church of the last decades of the 16th century and the first of decades of 17th. His *Controversiae* were a reference point, still valid, for Catholic ecclesiology on questions concerning Revelation, the nature of the Church, the sacraments and theological anthropology. In them the institutional aspect of the Church is emphasized because of the errors that were then circulating on these issues.

Nevertheless, Bellarmine also explained the invisible aspects of the Church as the Mystical Body and illustrated them with the analogy of body and soul, to the point that he

described the relationship between the Church's inner riches and the external aspects that enable her to be perceived. In this monumental work that endeavours to organize the theological controversies of that time, he avoids any polemical and aggressive approach in speaking of the ideas of the Reformation. Instead, using the arguments of reason and the Tradition of the Church, he illustrates the Catholic doctrine clearly and effectively.

Yet his inheritance consists in the way in which he conceived of his work. Indeed, the burdensome offices of governance did not prevent him from striving daily for holiness, faithful to the demands of his own state as a religious, priest and bishop. From this fidelity came his commitment to preaching assiduously. Since as a priest and bishop he was first and foremost a pastor of souls, he felt it was his duty to preach diligently. He gave hundreds of *sermones*—homilies—in Flanders, Rome, Naples and Capua, during liturgical celebrations.

Equally prolific were his *expositiones* and his *explanationes* to the parish priests, women religious and students of the Roman College on Sacred Scripture and especially on St Paul's Letters.

His preaching and his catechesis have that same character of essentiality which he had learned from his Ignatian education, entirely directed to concentrating the soul's energies on the Lord Jesus intensely known, loved and imitated. In the writings of this man of governance one is clearly aware, despite the reserve behind which he conceals his sentiments, of the primacy he gives to Christ's teaching.

St Bellarmine thus offers a model of prayer, the soul of every activity: a prayer that listens to the word of God, that is satisfied in contemplating his grandeur, that does not withdraw into self but is pleased to abandon itself to God.

A hallmark of Bellarmine's spirituality is his vivid personal perception of God's immense goodness. This is why our Saint truly felt he was a beloved son of God. It was a source of great joy to him to pause in recollection, with serenity and simplicity, in prayer and in contemplation of God.

In his book *De ascensione mentis in Deum*—Elevation of the mind to God—composed in accordance with the plan of the *Itinerarium* [Journey of the mind into God] of St Bonaventure, he exclaims: "O soul, your example is God, infinite beauty, light without shadow, splendour that exceeds that of the moon and the sun. He raised his eyes to God in whom is found the archetypes of all things, and of whom, as from a source of infinite fertility, derives this almost infinite variety of things. For this reason you must conclude: whoever finds God finds everything, whoever loses God loses everything".

In this text an echo of the famous *contemplatio ad amorem obtineundum*—contemplation in order to obtain love—of the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius of Loyola can be heard. Bellarmine, who lived in the lavish and often unhealthy society of the end of late 16th and early 17th centuries, drew from this contemplation practical applications and applied them to the situation of the Church of his time with a lively pastoral inspiration.

In his book *De arte bene moriendi*—the art of dying a good death—for example, he points out as a reliable norm for a good life and also for a good death regular and serious meditation that should account to God for one's actions and one's way of life, and seek not to accumulate riches on this earth but rather to live simply and charitably in such a way as to lay up treasure in Heaven.

In his book *De gemitu columbae*—the lament of the dove—in which the dove represents the Church, is a forceful appeal to all the clergy and faithful to undertake a personal and concrete reform of their own life in accordance with the teachings of Scripture and of the saints, among whom he mentions in particular St Gregory Nazianzus, St John Chrysostom, St Jerome and St Augustine, as well as the great founders of religious orders, such as St Benedict, St Dominic and St Francis.

Bellarmino teaches with great clarity and with the example of his own life that there can be no true reform of the Church unless there is first our own personal reform and the conversion of our own heart.

Bellarmino found in the *Spiritual Exercises* of St Ignatius recommendations for communicating the profound beauty of the mysteries of faith, even to the simplest of people. He wrote: “If you have wisdom, may you understand that you have been created for the glory of God and for your eternal salvation. This is your goal, this is the centre of your soul, this the treasure of your heart. Therefore consider as truly good for you what leads you to your goal, and truly evil what causes you to miss it. The wise person must not seek felicitous or adverse events, wealth or poverty, health or sickness, honours or offences, life or death. They are good and desirable only if they contribute to the glory of God and to your eternal happiness, they are evil and to be avoided if they hinder it” (*De ascensione mentis in Deum*, grad. 1).

These are obviously not words that have gone out of fashion but words on which we should meditate at length today, to direct our journey on this earth. They remind us that the aim of our life is the Lord, God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, in whom he continues to call us and to promise us communion with him. They remind us of the importance of trusting in the Lord, of expending ourselves in a life faithful to the Gospel,

of accepting and illuminating every circumstance and every action of our life with faith and with prayer, ever reaching for union with him. Many thanks.

## Saint Francis de Sales

2 March 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

“God is God of the human heart” (*The Treatise on the Love of God*, I, XV). These apparently simple words give us an impression of the spirituality of a great teacher of whom I would like to speak to you today: St Francis de Sales, a Bishop and Doctor of the Church.

Born in 1567, in a French border region, he was the son of the Lord of Boisy, an ancient and noble family of Savoy. His life straddled two centuries, the 16th and 17th, and he summed up in himself the best of the teachings and cultural achievements of the century drawing to a close, reconciling the heritage of humanism striving for the Absolute that is proper to mystical currents.

He received a very careful education; he undertook higher studies in Paris, where he dedicated himself to theology, and at the University of Padua, where he studied jurisprudence, complying with his father’s wishes and graduating brilliantly with degrees in *utroque iure*, in canon law and in civil law.

In his harmonious youth, reflection on the thought of St Augustine and of St Thomas Aquinas led to a deep crisis. This prompted him to question his own eternal salvation and the predestination of God concerning himself; he suffered as a true spiritual drama the principal theological issues of his time. He prayed intensely but was so fiercely tormented by doubt that for a few weeks he could barely eat or sleep.

At the climax of his trial, he went to the Dominicans’ church in Paris, opened his heart and prayed in these words: “Whatever happens, Lord, you who hold all things in your hand and whose ways are justice and truth; whatever you have ordained for me ... you who are ever a just judge and a merciful Father, I will love you Lord.... I will love you here, O my God, and I will always hope in your mercy and will always repeat your praise.... O Lord Jesus you will always be my hope and my salvation in the land of the living” (*I Proc. Canon.*, Vol. I, art. 4).

The 20-year-old Francis found peace in the radical and liberating love of God: loving him without asking anything in return and trusting in divine love; no longer asking what will God do with me: I simply love him, independently of all that he gives me or does not give

me. Thus I find peace and the question of predestination—which was being discussed at that time—was resolved, because he no longer sought what he might receive from God; he simply loved God and abandoned himself to his goodness. And this was to be the secret of his life which would shine out in his main work: the *The Treatise on the Love of God*.

Overcoming his father's resistance, Francis followed the Lord's call and was ordained a priest on 18 December 1593. In 1602, he became Bishop of Geneva, in a period in which the city was the stronghold of Calvinism so that his episcopal see was transferred, "in exile" to Annecy.

As the Pastor of a poor and tormented diocese in a mountainous area whose harshness was as well known as its beauty, he wrote: "I found [God] sweet and gentle among our loftiest rugged mountains, where many simple souls love him and worship him in all truth and sincerity; and mountain goats and chamois leap here and there between the fearful frozen peaks to proclaim his praise" (*Letter to Mother de Chantal*, October 1606, in *Oeuvres*, éd. Mackey, t. XIII, p. 223).

Nevertheless the influence of his life and his teaching on Europe in that period and in the following centuries is immense. He was an apostle, preacher, writer, man of action and of prayer dedicated to implanting the ideals of the Council of Trent; he was involved in controversial issues dialogue with the Protestants, experiencing increasingly, over and above the necessary theological confrontation, the effectiveness of personal relationship and of charity; he was charged with diplomatic missions in Europe and with social duties of mediation and reconciliation.

Yet above all St Francis de Sales was a director: from his encounter with a young woman, Madame de Charmoisy, he was to draw the inspiration to write one of the most widely read books of the modern age, *The Introduction to a Devout Life*.

A new religious family was to come into being from his profound spiritual communion with an exceptional figure, St Jane Frances de Chantal: The Foundation of the Visitation, as the Saint wished, was characterized by total consecration to God lived in simplicity and humility, in doing ordinary things extraordinarily well: "I want my Daughters", he wrote, not to have any other ideal than that of glorifying [Our Lord] with their humility" (*Letter to Bishop de Marquemond*, June 1615). He died in 1622, at the age of 55, after a life marked by the hardness of the times and by his apostolic effort.

The life of St Francis de Sales was a relatively short life but was lived with great intensity. The figure of this Saint radiates an impression of rare fullness, demonstrated in the serenity of his intellectual research, but also in the riches of his affection and the

“sweetness” of his teachings, which had an important influence on the Christian conscience.

He embodied the different meanings of the word “humanity” which this term can assume today, as it could in the past: culture and courtesy, freedom and tenderness, nobility and solidarity. His appearance reflected something of the majesty of the landscape in which he lived and preserved its simplicity and naturalness. Moreover the words of the past and the images he used resonate unexpectedly in the ears of men and women today, as a native and familiar language.

To Philotea, the ideal person to whom he dedicated his *Introduction to a Devout Life* (1607), Francis de Sales addressed an invitation that might well have seemed revolutionary at the time. It is the invitation to belong completely to God, while living to the full her presence in the world and the tasks proper to her state. “My intention is to teach those who are living in towns, in the conjugal state, at court” (*Preface to The Introduction to a Devout Life*). The Document with which Pope Leo xiii, more than two centuries later, was to proclaim him a Doctor of the Church, would insist on this expansion of the call to perfection, to holiness.

It says: “[true piety] shone its light everywhere and gained entrance to the thrones of kings, the tents of generals, the courts of judges, custom houses, workshops, and even the huts of herdsman” (*cf. Brief, Dives in Misericordia*, 16 November 1877).

Thus came into being the appeal to lay people and the care for the consecration of temporal things and for the sanctification of daily life on which the Second Vatican Council and the spirituality of our time were to insist.

The ideal of a reconciled humanity was expressed in the harmony between prayer and action in the world, between the search for perfection and the secular condition, with the help of God’s grace that permeates the human being and, without destroying him, purifies him, raising him to divine heights. To Theotimus, the spiritually mature Christian adult to whom a few years later he addressed his *Treatise on the Love of God*, St Francis de Sales offered a more complex lesson.

At the beginning it presents a precise vision of the human being, an anthropology: human “reason”, indeed “our soul in so far as it is reasonable”, is seen there as harmonious architecture, a temple, divided into various courts around a centre, which, together with the great mystics he calls the “extremity and summit of our soul, this highest point of our spirit”.

This is the point where reason, having ascended all its steps, “closes its eyes” and knowledge becomes one with love (cf. Book I, chapter XII). The fact that love in its theological and divine dimension, may be the *raison d’être* of all things, on an ascending ladder that does not seem to experience breaks or abysses, St Francis de Sales summed up in a famous sentence: “man is the perfection of the universe; the spirit is the perfection of man; love, that of the spirit; and charity, that of love” (*ibid.*, Book X, chap. 1).

In an intensely flourishing season of mysticism *The Treatise on the Love of God* was a true and proper *summa* and at the same time a fascinating literary work. St Francis’ description of the journey towards God starts from recognition of the “natural inclination” (*ibid.*, Book 1, chapter XVI), planted in man’s heart—although he is a sinner—to love God above all things.

According to the model of Sacred Scripture, St Francis de Sales speaks of the union between God and man, developing a whole series of images and interpersonal relationships. His God is Father and Lord, husband and friend, who has the characteristics of mother and of wet-nurse and is the sun of which even the night is a mysterious revelation. Such a God draws man to himself with bonds of love, namely, true freedom for: “love has neither convicts nor slaves, but brings all things under its obedience with a force so delightful, that as nothing is so strong as love nothing also is so sweet as its strength” (*ibid.*, Book 1, chapter VI).

In our Saint’s *Treatise* we find a profound meditation on the human will and the description of its flowing, passing and dying in order to live (cf. *ibid.* Book IX, chapter XIII) in complete surrender not only to God’s will but also to what pleases him, to his “bon plaisir”, his good pleasure (cf. *ibid.*, Book IX, chapter I).

As well as by raptures of contemplative ecstasy, union with God is crowned by that reappearance of charitable action that is attentive to all the needs of others and which he calls “the ecstasy of action and life” (*ibid.*, Book VII, chapter VI).

In reading his book on the love of God and especially his many letters of spiritual direction and friendship one clearly perceives that St Francis was well acquainted with the human heart. He wrote to St Jane de Chantal: “... this is the rule of our obedience, which I write for you in capital letters: do all through love, nothing through constraint; love obedience more than you fear disobedience. I leave you the spirit of freedom, not that which excludes obedience, which is the freedom of the world, but that liberty that excludes violence, anxiety and scruples” (*Letter of 14 October 1604*).

It is not for nothing that we rediscover traces precisely of this teacher at the origin of many contemporary paths of pedagogy and spirituality; without him neither St John Bosco nor the heroic “Little Way” of St Thérèse of Lisieux would have come into being.

Dear brothers and sisters, in an age such as ours that seeks freedom, even with violence and unrest, the timeliness of this great teacher of spirituality and peace who gave his followers the “spirit of freedom”, the true spirit.

St Francis de Sales is an exemplary witness of Christian humanism; with his familiar style, with words which at times have a poetic touch, he reminds us that human beings have planted in their innermost depths the longing for God and that in him alone can they find true joy and the most complete fulfilment.

## **Saint Lawrence of Brindisi**

*23 March 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I still remember with joy the festive welcome I was given in Brindisi in 2008. It was in this city that in 1559 was born a distinguished Doctor of the Church, St Lawrence of Brindisi, the name that Julius Caesar Russo took upon entering the Capuchin Order.

He had been attracted since childhood by the family of St Francis of Assisi. In fact, his father died when he was seven years old and his mother entrusted him to the care of the Friars Minor Conventual in his hometown. A few years later, however, Lawrence and his mother moved to Venice and it was precisely there that he became acquainted with the Capuchins who in that period were generously dedicated to serving the whole Church in order to further the important spiritual reform promoted by the Council of Trent.

With his religious profession in 1575, Lawrence became a Capuchin friar and in 1582 he was ordained a priest. During his ecclesiastical studies for the priesthood he already showed the eminent intellectual qualities with which he had been endowed. He learned with ease the ancient languages, such as Greek, Hebrew and Syriac, as well as modern languages, such as French and German. He added these to his knowledge of Italian and of Latin that was once spoken fluently by all clerics and by all cultured people.

Thanks to his mastery of so many languages, Lawrence was able to carry out a busy apostolate among the different categories of people. As an effective preacher, his



knowledge, not only of the Bible but also of the rabbinic literature was so profound that even the Rabbis, impressed and full of admiration, treated him with esteem and respect.

As a theologian steeped in Sacred Scripture and in the Fathers of the Church, he was also able to illustrate Catholic doctrine in an exemplary manner to Christians who, especially in Germany, had adhered to the Reformation. With his calm, clear exposition he demonstrated the biblical and patristic foundation of all the articles of faith disputed by Martin Luther. These included the primacy of St Peter and of his Successors, the divine origin of the Episcopate, justification as an inner transformation of man, and the need to do good works for salvation.

Lawrence's success helps us to realize that today too, in pursuing ecumenical dialogue with such great hope, the reference to Sacred Scripture, interpreted in accordance with the Tradition of the Church, is an indispensable element of fundamental importance. I wished to recall this in my Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* (n. 46)

Even the simplest members of the faithful, those not endowed with great culture, benefited from the convincing words of Lawrence, who addressed humble people to remind them all to make their lives consistent with the faith they professed.

This was a great merit of the Capuchins and of other religious Orders which, in the 16th and 17th centuries, contributed to the renewal of Christian life, penetrating the depths of society with their witness of life and their teaching. Today too, the new evangelization stands in need of well-trained apostles, zealous and courageous, so that the light and beauty of the Gospel may prevail over the cultural tendencies of ethical relativism and religious indifference and transform the various ways of thinking and acting into genuine Christian humanism.

It is surprising that St Lawrence of Brindisi was able to continue without interruption his work as an appreciated and unflagging preacher in many cities of Italy and in different countries, in spite of holding other burdensome offices of great responsibility.

Indeed, within the Order of Capuchins he was professor of theology, novice master, for several mandates minister provincial and definitor general, and finally, from 1602 to 1605, minister general.

In the midst of this mountain of work, Lawrence cultivated an exceptionally fervent spiritual life. He devoted much time to prayer and, especially, to the celebration of Holy Mass—often protracted for hours—caught up in and moved by the memorial of the Passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord.

At the school of the saints, every priest, as was emphasized frequently during the recent Year for Priests, may only avoid the danger of activism—acting, that is, without remembering the profound motives of his ministry—if he attends to his own inner life.

In speaking to priests and seminarians in the Cathedral of Brindisi, St Lawrence's birthplace, I recalled that "the time he spends in prayer is the most important time in a priest's life, in which divine grace acts with greater effectiveness, making his ministry fruitful. The first service to render to the community is prayer. And, therefore, time for prayer must be given true priority in our life ... if we are not interiorly in communion with God we cannot even give anything to others. Therefore, God is the first priority. We must always reserve the time necessary to be in communion of prayer with Our Lord" (*Address of Benedict XVI to priests, deacons and seminarians of the Archdiocese of Brindisi, Cathedral of Brindisi, 15 June 2008*).

Moreover, with the unmistakable ardour of his style, Lawrence urged everyone, and not only priests, to cultivate a life of prayer, for it is through prayer that we speak to God and that God speaks to us: "Oh, if we were to consider this reality!", he exclaimed. "In other words that God is truly present to us when we speak to him in prayer; that he truly listens to our prayers, even if we pray only with our hearts and minds. And that not only is he present and hears us, indeed he willingly and with the greatest of pleasure wishes to grant our requests".

Another trait that characterizes the opus of this son of St Frances is his action for peace. Time and again both Supreme Pontiffs and Catholic Princes entrusted him with important diplomatic missions, to settle controversies and to encourage harmony among the European States, threatened in those days by the Ottoman Empire.

The moral authority he enjoyed made him a counsellor both sought after and listened to. Today, as in the times of St Lawrence, the world is in great need of peace, it needs peaceful and peacemaking men and women. All who believe in God must always be sources and artisans of peace.

It was precisely on the occasion of one of these diplomatic missions that Lawrence's earthly life ended, in 1619 in Lisbon, where he had gone to see King Philip iii of Spain, to plead the cause of the Neapolitan subjects oppressed by the local authorities.

He was canonized in 1881, and his vigorous and intense activity, his vast and harmonious knowledge, earned him the title of *Doctor Apostolicus*, "Apostolic Doctor". The title was conferred on him by Bl. Pope John XXIII in 1959, on the occasion of the fourth centenary of his birth. This recognition was also granted to Lawrence of Brindisi because he was the author of numerous works of biblical exegesis, theology and sermons. In them he offers

an organic presentation of the history of salvation, centred on the mystery of the Incarnation, the greatest expression of divine love for humankind.

Furthermore, since he was a highly qualified Mariologist, the author of a collection of sermons on Our Lady entitled “Mariale”, he highlighted the unique role of the Virgin Mary, whose Immaculate Conception and whose role in the redemption brought about by Christ he clearly affirms.

With a fine theological sensitivity, Lawrence of Brindisi also pointed out the Holy Spirit’s action in the believer’s life. He reminds us that the Third Person of the Most Holy Trinity illumines and assists us with his gifts in our commitment to live joyously the Gospel message.

“The Holy Spirit”, St Lawrence wrote, “sweetens the yoke of the divine law and lightens its weight, so that we may observe God’s commandments with the greatest of ease and even with pleasure”.

I would like to complete this brief presentation of the life and doctrine of St Lawrence of Brindisi by underlining that the whole of his activity was inspired by great love for Sacred Scripture, which he knew thoroughly and by heart, and by the conviction that listening to and the reception of the word of God produces an inner transformation that leads us to holiness.

“The word of the Lord”, he said, “is a light for the mind and a fire for the will, so that man may know and love God. For the inner man, who lives through the living grace of God’s Spirit, it is bread and water, but bread sweeter than honey and water better than wine or milk.... It is a weapon against a heart stubbornly entrenched in vice. It is a sword against the flesh, the world and the devil, to destroy every sin”.

St Lawrence of Brindisi teaches us to love Sacred Scripture, to increase in familiarity with it, to cultivate daily relations of friendship with the Lord in prayer, so that our every action, our every activity, may have its beginning and its fulfilment in him. This is the source from which to draw so that our Christian witness may be luminous and able to lead the people of our time to God.

## **Saint Alphonsus Liguori**

*30 March 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to present to you the figure of a holy Doctor of the Church to whom we are deeply indebted because he was an outstanding moral theologian and a teacher of spiritual life for all, especially simple people. He is the author of the words and music of one of the most popular Christmas carols in Italy and not only Italy: *Tu scendi dalle stelle* [You come down from the stars].

Belonging to a rich noble family of Naples, Alfonso Maria de' Liguori [known in English as Alphonsus Liguori] was born in 1696. Endowed with outstanding intellectual qualities, when he was only 16 years old he obtained a degree in civil and canon law. He was the most brilliant lawyer in the tribunal of Naples: for eight years he won all the cases he defended. However, in his soul thirsting for God and desirous of perfection, the Lord led Alphonsus to understand that he was calling him to a different vocation. In fact, in 1723, indignant at the corruption and injustice that was ruining the legal milieu, he abandoned his profession—and with it riches and success—and decided to become a priest despite the opposition of his father.

He had excellent teachers who introduced him to the study of Sacred Scripture, of the Church history and of mysticism. He acquired a vast theological culture which he put to good use when, after a few years, he embarked on his work as a writer.

He was ordained a priest in 1726 and, for the exercise of his ministry entered the diocesan Congregation of Apostolic Missions. Alphonsus began an activity of evangelization and catechesis among the humblest classes of Neapolitan society, to whom he liked preaching, and whom he instructed in the basic truths of the faith. Many of these people, poor and modest, to whom he addressed himself, were very often prone to vice and involved in crime. He patiently taught them to pray, encouraging them to improve their way of life.

Alphonsus obtained excellent results: in the most wretched districts of the city there were an increasing number of groups that would meet in the evenings in private houses and workshops to pray and meditate on the word of God, under the guidance of several catechists trained by Alphonsus and by other priests, who regularly visited these groups of the faithful. When at the wish of the Archbishop of Naples, these meetings were held in the chapels of the city, they came to be known as “evening chapels”. They were a true and proper source of moral education, of social improvement and of reciprocal help among the poor: thefts, duels, prostitution ended by almost disappearing.

Even though the social and religious context of the time of St Alphonsus was very different from our own, the “evening chapels” appear as a model of missionary action from which we may draw inspiration today too, for a “new evangelization”, particularly

of the poorest people, and for building a more just, fraternal and supportive coexistence. Priests were entrusted with a task of spiritual ministry, while well-trained lay people could be effective Christian animators, an authentic Gospel leaven in the midst of society.

After having considered leaving to evangelize the pagan peoples, when Alphonsus was 35 years old, he came into contact with the peasants and shepherds of the hinterland of the Kingdom of Naples. Struck by their ignorance of religion and the state of neglect in which they were living, he decided to leave the capital and to dedicate himself to these people, poor both spiritually and materially. In 1732 he founded the religious Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer, which he put under the protection of Bishop Tommaso Falcoia, and of which he subsequently became the superior.

These religious, guided by Alphonsus, were authentic itinerant missionaries, who also reached the most remote villages, exhorting people to convert and to persevere in the Christian life, especially through prayer. Still today the Redemptorists, scattered in so many of the world's countries, with new forms of apostolate continue this mission of evangelization. I think of them with gratitude, urging them to be ever faithful to the example of their holy Founder.

Esteemed for his goodness and for his pastoral zeal, in 1762 Alphonsus was appointed Bishop of Sant'Agata dei Goti, a ministry which he left, following the illness which debilitated him, in 1775, through a concession of Pope Pius VI. On learning of his death in 1787, which occurred after great suffering, the Pontiff exclaimed: "he was a saint!". And he was not mistaken: Alphonsus was canonized in 1839 and in 1871 he was declared a Doctor of the Church. This title suited him for many reasons. First of all, because he offered a rich teaching of moral theology, which expressed adequately the Catholic doctrine, to the point that Pope Pius XII proclaimed him "Patron of all confessors and moral theologians".

In his day, there was a very strict and widespread interpretation of moral life because of the Jansenist mentality which, instead of fostering trust and hope in God's mercy, fomented fear and presented a grim and severe face of God, very remote from the face revealed to us by Jesus. Especially in his main work entitled *Moral Theology*, St Alphonsus proposed a balanced and convincing synthesis of the requirements of God's law, engraved on our hearts, fully revealed by Christ and interpreted authoritatively by the Church, and of the dynamics of the conscience and of human freedom, which precisely in adherence to truth and goodness permit the person's development and fulfilment.

Alphonsus recommended to pastors of souls and confessors that they be faithful to the Catholic moral doctrine, assuming at the same time a charitable, understanding and gentle attitude so that penitents might feel accompanied, supported and encouraged on their journey of faith and of Christian life.

St Alphonsus never tired of repeating that priests are a visible sign of the infinite mercy of God who forgives and enlightens the mind and heart of the sinner so that he may convert and change his life. In our epoch, in which there are clear signs of the loss of the moral conscience and—it must be recognized—of a certain lack of esteem for the sacrament of Confession, St Alphonsus' teaching is still very timely.

Together with theological works, St Alphonsus wrote many other works, destined for the religious formation of the people. His style is simple and pleasing. Read and translated into many languages, the works of St Alphonsus have contributed to molding the popular spirituality of the last two centuries. Some of the texts can be read with profit today too, such as *The Eternal Maxims*, the *Glories of Mary*, *The Practice of Loving Jesus Christ*, which latter work is the synthesis of his thought and his masterpiece.

He stressed the need for prayer, which enables one to open oneself to divine Grace in order to do God's will every day and to obtain one's own sanctification. With regard to prayer he writes: "God does not deny anyone the grace of prayer, with which one obtains help to overcome every form of concupiscence and every temptation. And I say, and I will always repeat as long as I live, that the whole of our salvation lies in prayer". Hence his famous axiom: "He who prays is saved" (*Del gran mezzo della preghiera e opuscoli affini. Opere ascetiche* II, Rome 1962, p. 171).

In this regard, an exhortation of my Predecessor, the Venerable Servant of God John Paul II comes to mind. "our Christian communities must become genuine 'schools' of prayer.... It is therefore essential that education in prayer should become in some way a key-point of all pastoral planning" (Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, nn. 33, 34).

Among the forms of prayer fervently recommended by St Alphonsus, stands out the visit to the Blessed Sacrament, or as we would call it today, "adoration", brief or extended, personal or as a community, before the Eucharist. "Certainly", St Alphonsus writes, "amongst all devotions, after that of receiving the sacraments, that of adoring Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament takes the first place, is the most pleasing to God, and the most useful to ourselves.... Oh, what a beautiful delight to be before an altar with faith ... to represent our wants to him, as a friend does to a friend in whom he places all his trust" (*Visits to the Most Blessed Sacrament and to the Blessed Virgin Mary for Each Day of the Month. Introduction*).

Alphonsian spirituality is in fact eminently Christological, centred on Christ and on his Gospel. Meditation on the mystery of the Incarnation and on the Lord's Passion were often the subject of St Alphonsus' preaching. In these events, in fact, Redemption is offered to all human beings "in abundance". And precisely because it is Christological, Alphonsian piety is also exquisitely Marian. Deeply devoted to Mary he illustrates her role in the history of salvation: an associate in the Redemption and Mediatrix of grace, Mother, Advocate and Queen.

In addition, St Alphonsus states that devotion to Mary will be of great comfort to us at the moment of our death. He was convinced that meditation on our eternal destiny, on our call to participate for ever in the beatitude of God, as well as on the tragic possibility of damnation, contributes to living with serenity and dedication and to facing the reality of death, ever preserving full trust in God's goodness.

St Alphonsus Maria Liguori is an example of a zealous Pastor who conquered souls by preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments combined with behaviour impressed with gentle and merciful goodness that was born from his intense relationship with God, who is infinite Goodness. He had a realistically optimistic vision of the resources of good that the Lord gives to every person and gave importance to the affections and sentiments of the heart, as well as to the mind, to be able to love God and neighbour.

To conclude, I would like to recall that our Saint, like St Francis de Sales—of whom I spoke a few weeks ago—insists that holiness is accessible to every Christian: "the religious as a religious; the secular as a secular; the priest as a priest; the married as married; the man of business as a man of business; the soldier as a soldier; and so of every other state of life" (*Practica di amare Gesù Cristo. Opere ascetiche [The Practice of the Love of Jesus Christ]* Ascetic Works 1, Rome 1933, p. 79).

Let us thank the Lord who, with his Providence inspired saints and doctors in different times and places, who speak the same language to invite us to grow in faith and to live with love and with joy our being Christians in the simple everyday actions, to walk on the path of holiness, on the path towards God and towards true joy. Thank you.

## **Saint Thérèse of Lisieux**

6 April 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk to you about St Thérèse of Lisieux, Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face, who lived in this world for only 24 years, at the end of the 19th century, leading a very simple and hidden life but who, after her death and the publication of her writings, became one of the best-known and best-loved saints. “Little Thérèse” has never stopped helping the simplest souls, the little, the poor and the suffering who pray to her. However, she has also illumined the whole Church with her profound spiritual doctrine to the point that Venerable Pope John Paul II chose, in 1997, to give her the title “Doctor of the Church”, in addition to that of Patroness of Missions, which Pius XI had already attributed to her in 1939. My beloved Predecessor described her as an “expert in the *scientia amoris*” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 42). Thérèse expressed this science, in which she saw the whole truth of the faith shine out in love, mainly in the *story of her life*, published a year after her death with the title *The Story of a Soul*. The book immediately met with enormous success, it was translated into many languages and disseminated throughout the world.

I would like to invite you to rediscover this small-great treasure, this luminous comment on the Gospel lived to the full! *The Story of a Soul*, in fact, is a marvellous *story of Love*, told with such authenticity, simplicity and freshness that the reader cannot but be fascinated by it! But what was this Love that filled Thérèse’s whole life, from childhood to death? Dear friends, this Love has a Face, it has a Name, it is Jesus! The Saint speaks continuously of Jesus. Let us therefore review the important stages of her life, to enter into the heart of her teaching.

Thérèse was born on 2 January 1873 in Alençon, a city in Normandy, in France. She was the last daughter of Louis and Zélie Martin, a married couple and exemplary parents, who were beatified together on 19 October 2008. They had nine children, four of whom died at a tender age. Five daughters were left, who all became religious. Thérèse, at the age of four, was deeply upset by the death of her mother (Ms A 13r). Her father then moved with his daughters to the town of Lisieux, where the Saint was to spend her whole life. Later Thérèse, affected by a serious nervous disorder, was healed by a divine grace which she herself described as the “smile of Our Lady” (*ibid.*, 29v–30v). She then received her First Communion, which was an intense experience (*ibid.*, 35r), and made Jesus in the Eucharist the centre of her life.

The “Grace of Christmas” of 1886 marked the important turning-point, which she called her “complete conversion” (*ibid.*, 44v–45r). In fact she recovered totally, from her childhood hyper-sensitivity and began a “to run as a giant”. At the age of 14, Thérèse became ever closer, with great faith, to the Crucified Jesus. She took to heart the apparently desperate case of a criminal sentenced to death who was impenitent. “I wanted at all costs to prevent him from going to hell”, the Saint wrote, convinced that her



prayers would put him in touch with the redeeming Blood of Jesus. It was her first and fundamental experience of *spiritual motherhood*: “I had such great trust in the Infinite Mercy of Jesus”, she wrote. Together with Mary Most Holy, young Thérèse loved, believed and hoped with “a mother’s heart” (cf. Pr 6/ior).

In November 1887, Thérèse went on pilgrimage to Rome with her father and her sister Céline (*ibid.*, 55v–67r). The culminating moment for her was the Audience with Pope Leo XIII, whom she asked for permission to enter the Carmel of Lisieux when she was only just 15. A year later her wish was granted. She became a Carmelite, “to save souls and to pray for priests” (*ibid.*, 69v).

At the same time, her father began to suffer from a painful and humiliating mental illness. It caused Thérèse great suffering which led her to contemplation of the Face of Jesus in his Passion (*ibid.*, 71rc). Thus, her name as a religious—*Sr Thérèse of the Child Jesus and of the Holy Face*—expresses the programme of her whole life in communion with the central Mysteries of the Incarnation and the Redemption. Her religious profession, on the Feast of the Nativity of Mary, 8 September 1890, was a true spiritual espousal in evangelical “littleness”, characterized by the symbol of the flower: “It was the Nativity of Mary. What a beautiful feast on which to become the Spouse of Jesus! It was the *little* newborn Holy Virgin who presented her *little* Flower to the *little* Jesus” (*ibid.*, 77r).

For Thérèse, being a religious meant being a *bride of Jesus and a mother of souls* (cf. Ms B, 2v). On the same day, the Saint wrote a prayer which expressed the entire orientation of her life: she asked Jesus for the gift of his infinite Love, to be the smallest, and above all she asked for the salvation of all human being: “That no soul may be damned today” (Pr 2).

Of great importance is her *Offering to Merciful Love*, made on the Feast of the Most Holy Trinity in 1895 (Ms A, 83v–84r; Pr 6). It was an offering that Thérèse immediately shared with her sisters, since she was already acting novice mistress.

Ten years after the “Grace of Christmas” in 1896, came the “Grace of Easter”, which opened the last period of Thérèse’s life with the beginning of her passion in profound union with the Passion of Jesus. It was the passion of her body, with the illness that led to her death through great suffering, but it was especially the passion of the soul, with a very painful *trial of faith* (Ms C, 4v–7v). With Mary beside the Cross of Jesus, Thérèse then lived the most heroic faith, as a light in the darkness that invaded her soul. The Carmelite was aware that she was living this great trial for the salvation of all the atheists of the modern world, whom she called “brothers”.

She then lived fraternal love even more intensely (8r–33v): for the sisters of her community, for her two spiritual missionary brothers, for the priests and for all people, especially the most distant. She truly became a “universal sister”! Her lovable, smiling charity was the expression of the profound joy whose secret she reveals: “Jesus, my joy is loving you” (P 45/7). In this context of suffering, living the greatest love in the smallest things of daily life, the Saint brought to fulfilment her vocation to be Love in the heart of the Church (cf. Ms B, 3v).

Thérèse died on the evening of 30 September 1897, saying the simple words, “My God, I love you!”, looking at the Crucifix she held tightly in her hands. These last words of the Saint are the key to her whole doctrine, to her interpretation of the Gospel the act of love, expressed in her last breath was as it were the continuous breathing of her soul, the beating of her heart. The simple words “*Jesus I love you*”, are at the heart of all her writings. The act of love for Jesus immersed her in the Most Holy Trinity. She wrote: “Ah, you know, Divine Jesus I love you / The spirit of Love enflames me with his fire, / It is in loving you that I attract the Father” (P 17/2).

Dear friends, we too, with St Thérèse of the Child Jesus must be able to repeat to the Lord every day that we want to live of love for him and for others, to learn at the school of the saints to love authentically and totally. Thérèse is one of the “little” ones of the Gospel who let themselves be led by God to the depths of his Mystery. A guide for all, especially those who, in the People of God, carry out their ministry as theologians. With humility and charity, faith and hope, Thérèse continually entered the heart of Sacred Scripture which contains the Mystery of Christ. And this interpretation of the Bible, nourished by the *science of love*, is not in opposition to academic knowledge. The *science of the saints*, in fact, of which she herself speaks on the last page of her *The Story of a Soul*, is the loftiest science.

“All the saints have understood and in a special way perhaps those who fill the universe with the radiance of the evangelical doctrine. Was it not from prayer that St Paul, St Augustine, St John of the Cross, St Thomas Aquinas, Francis, Dominic, and so many other friends of God drew that *wonderful science* which has enthralled the loftiest minds?” (cf. Ms C 36r). Inseparable from the Gospel, for Thérèse the Eucharist was the sacrament of Divine Love that stoops to the extreme to raise us to him. In her last *Letter*, on an image that represents Jesus the Child in the consecrated Host, the Saint wrote these simple words: “I cannot fear a God who made himself so small for me! [...] I love him! In fact, he is nothing but Love and Mercy!” (LT 266).

In the Gospel Thérèse discovered above all the Mercy of Jesus, to the point that she said: “To me, He has given his Infinite Mercy, and it is in this ineffable mirror that I

contemplate his other divine attributes. Therein all appear to me radiant with Love. His Justice, even more perhaps than the rest, seems to me to be clothed with Love” (Ms A, 84r).

In these words she expresses herself in the last lines of *The Story of a Soul*: “I have only to open the Holy Gospels and at once I breathe the perfume of Jesus’ life, and then I know which way to run; and it is not to the first place, but to the last, that I hasten... I feel that even had I on my conscience every crime one could commit ... my heart broken with sorrow, I would throw myself into the arms of my Saviour Jesus, because I know that he loves the Prodigal Son” who returns to him. (Ms C, 36v–37r).

“Trust and Love” are therefore the final point of the account of her life, two words, like beacons, that illumined the whole of her journey to holiness, to be able to guide others on the same “little way of trust and love”, of spiritual childhood (cf. Ms C, 2v–3r; LT 226).

Trust, like that of the child who abandons himself in God’s hands, inseparable from the strong, radical commitment of true love, which is the total gift of self for ever, as the Saint says, contemplating Mary: “Loving is giving all, and giving oneself” (*Why I love thee, Mary*, P 54/22). Thus Thérèse points out to us all that Christian life consists in living to the full the grace of Baptism in the total gift of self to the Love of the Father, in order to live like Christ, in the fire of the Holy Spirit, his same love for all the others.

## Saint Odo of Cluny

2 September 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After a long pause, I would like to resume the presentation of important writers of the Eastern and Western Church in the Middle Ages because in their life and writings we see as in a mirror what it means to be Christian. Today I present to you the luminous figure of St Odo, Abbot of Cluny. He fits into that period of medieval monasticism which saw the surprising success in Europe of the life and spirituality inspired by the *Rule of St Benedict*. In those centuries there was a wonderful increase in the number of cloisters that sprang up and branched out over the continent, spreading the Christian spirit and sensibility far and wide. St Odo takes us back in particular to Cluny, one of the most illustrious and famous monasteries in the Middle Ages that still today reveals to us, through its majestic ruins, the signs of a past rendered glorious by intense dedication to asceticism, study and, in a special way, to divine worship, endowed with decorum and beauty.

Odo was the second Abbot of Cluny. He was born in about 880, on the boundary between the Maine and the Touraine regions of France. Odo's father consecrated him to the holy Bishop Martin of Tours, in whose beneficent shadow and memory he was to spend his entire life, which he ended close to St Martin's tomb. His choice of religious consecration was preceded by the inner experience of a special moment of grace, of which he himself spoke to another monk, John the Italian, who later became his biographer. Odo was still an adolescent, about 16 years old, when one Christmas Eve he felt this prayer to the Virgin rise spontaneously to his lips: "My Lady, Mother of Mercy, who on this night gave birth to the Saviour, pray for me. May your glorious and unique experience of childbirth, O Most Devout Mother, be my refuge" (*Vita sancti Odonis*, I, 9: PL 133, 747). The name "Mother of Mercy", with which young Odo then invoked the Virgin, was to be the title by which he always subsequently liked to address Mary. He also called her "the one Hope of the world ... thanks to whom the gates of Heaven were opened to us" (*In veneratione S. Mariae Magdalenae*: PL 133, 721). At that time Odo chanced to come across the *Rule of St Benedict* and to comment on it, "bearing, while not yet a monk, the light yoke of monks" (*ibid.*, I, 14, PL 133, 50). In one of his sermons Odo was to celebrate Benedict as the "lamp that shines in the dark period of life" (*De sancto Benedicto abbate*: PL 133, 725), and to describe him as "a teacher of spiritual discipline" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 727). He was to point out with affection that Christian piety, "with the liveliest gentleness commemorates him" in the knowledge that God raised him "among the supreme and elect Fathers of Holy Church" (*ibid.*, PL 133, 722).

Fascinated by the Benedictine ideal, Odo left Tours and entered the Benedictine Abbey of Baume as a monk; he later moved to Cluny, of which in 927 he became abbot. From that centre of spiritual life he was able to exercise a vast influence over the monasteries on the continent. Various monasteries or coenobiums were able to benefit from his guidance and reform, including that of St Paul Outside-the-Walls. More than once Odo visited Rome and he even went as far as Subiaco, Monte Cassino and Salerno. He actually fell ill in Rome in the summer of 942. Feeling that he was nearing his end, he was determined, and made every effort, to return to St Martin in Tours, where he died, in the Octave of the Saint's feast, on 18 November 942. His biographer, stressing the "virtue of patience" that Odo possessed, gives a long list of his other virtues that include contempt of the world, zeal for souls and the commitment to peace in the Churches. Abbot Odo's great aspirations were: concord between kings and princes, the observance of the commandments, attention to the poor, the correction of youth and respect for the elderly (cf. *Vita sancti Odonis*, I, 17: PL 133, 49).

He loved the cell in which he dwelled, "removed from the eyes of all, eager to please God alone" (*ibid.*, I, 14: PL 133, 49). However, he did not fail also to exercise, as a "superabundant source", the ministry of the word and to set an example, "regretting the

immense wretchedness of this world” (*ibid.*, I, 17: PL 133, 51). In a single monk, his biographer comments, were combined the different virtues that exist, which are found to be few and far between in other monasteries: “Jesus, in his goodness, drawing on the various gardens of monks, in a small space created a paradise, in order to water the hearts of the faithful from its fountains” (*ibid.*, I, 14: PL 133, 49). In a passage from a sermon in honour of Mary of Magdala the Abbot of Cluny reveals to us how he conceived of monastic life: “Mary, who, seated at the Lord’s feet, listened attentively to his words, is the symbol of the sweetness of contemplative life; the more its savour is tasted, the more it induces the mind to be detached from visible things and the tumult of the world’s preoccupations” (*In ven. S. Mariae Magd.*, PL 133, 717). Odo strengthened and developed this conception in his other writings. From them transpire his love for interiority, a vision of the world as a brittle, precarious reality from which to uproot oneself, a constant inclination to detachment from things felt to be sources of anxiety, an acute sensitivity to the presence of evil in the various types of people and a deep eschatological aspiration. This vision of the world may appear rather distant from our own; yet Odo’s conception of it, his perception of the fragility of the world, values an inner life that is open to the other, to the love of one’s neighbour, and in this very way transforms life and opens the world to God’s light.

The “devotion” to the Body and Blood of Christ which Odo in the face of a widespread neglect of them which he himself deeply deplored always cultivated with conviction deserves special mention. Odo was in fact firmly convinced of the Real Presence, under the Eucharistic species, of the Body and Blood of the Lord, by virtue of the conversion of the “substance” of the bread and the wine.

He wrote: “God, Creator of all things, took the bread saying that this was his Body and that he would offer it for the world, and he distributed the wine, calling it his Blood”; now, “it is a law of nature that the change should come about in accordance with the Creator’s command”, and thus “nature immediately changes its usual condition: the bread instantly becomes flesh, and the wine becomes blood”; at the Lord’s order, “the substance changes” (*Odonis Abb. Cluniac. occupatio*, ed. A. Swoboda, Leipzig 1900, p. 121). Unfortunately, our abbot notes, this “sacrosanct mystery of the Lord’s Body, in whom the whole salvation of the world consists”, (*Collationes*, XXVIII: PL 133, 572), is celebrated carelessly. “Priests”, he warns, “who approach the altar unworthily, stain the bread, that is, the Body of Christ” (*ibid.*, PL 133, 572–573). Only those who are spiritually united to Christ may worthily participate in his Eucharistic Body: should the contrary be the case, to eat his Flesh and to drink his Blood would not be beneficial but rather a condemnation (cf. *ibid.*, XXX, PL 133, 575). All this invites us to believe the truth of the Lord’s presence with new force and depth. The presence in our midst of the Creator, who gives himself

into our hands and transforms us as he transforms the bread and the wine, thus transforms the world.

St Odo was a true spiritual guide both for the monks and for the faithful of his time. In the face of the “immensity of the vices widespread in society, the remedy he strongly advised was that of a radical change of life, based on humility, austerity, detachment from ephemeral things and adherence to those that are eternal (cf. *Collationes*, XXX, PL 133, 613). In spite of the realism of his diagnosis on the situation of his time, Odo does not indulge in pessimism: “We do not say this”, he explains, “in order to plunge those who wish to convert into despair. Divine mercy is always available; it awaits the hour of our conversion” (*ibid.*, PL 133, 563). And he exclaims: “O ineffable bowels of divine piety! God pursues wrongs and yet protects sinners” (*ibid.*, PL 133, 592). Sustained by this conviction, the Abbot of Cluny used to like to pause to contemplate the mercy of Christ, the Saviour whom he describes evocatively as “a lover of men”: “*amator hominum Christus*” (*ibid.*, LIII: PL 133, 637). He observes “Jesus took upon himself the scourging that would have been our due in order to save the creature he formed and loves (cf. *ibid.*, PL 133, 638).

Here, a trait of the holy abbot appears that at first sight is almost hidden beneath the rigour of his austerity as a reformer: his deep, heartfelt kindness. He was austere, but above all he was good, a man of great goodness, a goodness that comes from contact with the divine goodness. Thus Odo, his peers tell us, spread around him his overflowing joy. His biographer testifies that he never heard “such mellifluous words” on human lips (*ibid.*, I, 17: PL 133, 31). His biographer also records that he was in the habit of asking the children he met along the way to sing, and that he would then give them some small token, and he adds: “Abbot Odo’s words were full of joy ... his merriment instilled in our hearts deep joy” (*ibid.*, II, 5: PL 133, 63). In this way the energetic yet at the same time lovable medieval abbot, enthusiastic about reform, with incisive action nourished in his monks, as well as in the lay faithful of his time, the resolution to progress swiftly on the path of Christian perfection.

Let us hope that his goodness, the joy that comes from faith, together with austerity and opposition to the world’s vices, may also move our hearts, so that we too may find the source of the joy that flows from God’s goodness.

## **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, including those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Nigeria and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the Servants of the Holy Spirit, as well as the young people

from the Holy Study House of Prayer. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I greet in particular the participants in the Inter-Christian Symposium sponsored by the Antonianum Pontifical University and the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, and I hope that the common reflection between Catholics and Orthodox on the figure of St Augustine will strengthen us on our way towards full communion.

Lastly, I address an affectionate greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. I invite you *young people* to welcome and live the word of God with courage and the creativity typical of your age. I encourage you, dear *sick people*, to preserve the Gospel teachings in your hearts to draw from them strength, serenity and support in the trial of suffering. I hope that you *newlyweds* will set out with generous fidelity on the way suggested by the Son of God, so that your new family may be built upon the firm rock of his word.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*9 September 2009*

## **Saint Peter Damian**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

During the Catecheses of these Wednesdays I am commenting on several important people in the life of the Church from her origins. Today I would like to reflect on one of the most significant figures of the 11th century, St Peter Damian, a monk, a lover of solitude and at the same time a fearless man of the Church, committed personally to the task of reform, initiated by the Popes of the time. He was born in Ravenna in 1007, into a noble family but in straitened circumstances. He was left an orphan and his childhood was not exempt from hardships and suffering, although his sister Roselinda tried to be a mother to him and his elder brother, Damian, adopted him as his son. For this very reason he was to be called Piero di Damiano, Pier Damiani [Peter of Damian, Peter Damian]. He was educated first at Faenza and then at Parma where, already at the age of 25, we find him involved in teaching. As well as a good grounding in the field of law, he acquired a refined expertise in the art of writing the *ars scribendi* and, thanks to his knowledge of the great Latin classics, became "one of the most accomplished Latinists of his time, one of the greatest writers of medieval Latin" (J. Leclercq, *Pierre Damien, ermite et homme d'Église*, Rome, 1960, p. 172).

He distinguished himself in the widest range of literary forms: from letters to sermons, from hagiographies to prayers, from poems to epigrams. His sensitivity to beauty led him to poetic contemplation of the world. Peter Damian conceived of the universe as a never-ending “parable” and a sequence of symbols on which to base the interpretation of inner life and divine and supra-natural reality. In this perspective, in about the year 1034, contemplation of the absolute of God impelled him gradually to detach himself from the world and from its transient realities and to withdraw to the Monastery of Fonte Avellana. It had been founded only a few decades earlier but was already celebrated for its austerity. For the monks’ edification he wrote the *Life* of the Founder, St Romuald of Ravenna, and at the same time strove to deepen their spirituality, expounding on his ideal of eremitic monasticism.

*One detail should be immediately emphasized: the Hermitage at Fonte Avellana was dedicated to the Holy Cross and the Cross was the Christian mystery that was to fascinate Peter Damian more than all the others. “Those who do not love the Cross of Christ do not love Christ”, he said (Sermo XVIII, 11, p. 117); and he described himself as “Petrus crucis Christi servorum famulus Peter, servant of the servants of the Cross of Christ” (Ep, 9, 1). Peter Damian addressed the most beautiful prayers to the Cross in which he reveals a vision of this mystery which has cosmic dimensions for it embraces the entire history of salvation: “O Blessed Cross”, he exclaimed, “You are venerated, preached and honoured by the faith of the Patriarchs, the predictions of the Prophets, the senate that judges the Apostles, the victorious army of Martyrs and the throngs of all the Saints” (Sermo XLVII, 14, p. 304). Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the example of St Peter Damian spur us too always to look to the Cross as to the supreme act God’s love for humankind of God, who has given us salvation.*

This great monk compiled a Rule for eremitical life in which he heavily stressed the “rigour of the hermit”: in the silence of the cloister the monk is called to spend a life of prayer, by day and by night, with prolonged and strict fasting; he must put into practice generous brotherly charity in ever prompt and willing obedience to the prior. In study and in the daily meditation of Sacred Scripture, Peter Damian discovered the mystical meaning of the word of God, finding in it nourishment for his spiritual life. In this regard he described the hermit’s cell as the “parlour in which God converses with men”. For him, living as a hermit was the peak of Christian existence, “the loftiest of the states of life” because the monk, now free from the bonds of worldly life and of his own self, receives “a dowry from the Holy Spirit and his happy soul is united with its heavenly Spouse” (Ep 18, 17; cf. Ep 28, 43 ff.). This is important for us today too, even though we are not monks: to know how to make silence within us to listen to God’s voice, to seek, as it were, a “parlour” in which God speaks with us: learning the word of God in prayer and in meditation is the path to life.



St Peter Damian, who was essentially a man of prayer, meditation and contemplation, was also a fine theologian: his reflection on various doctrinal themes led him to important conclusions for life. Thus, for example, he expresses with clarity and liveliness the Trinitarian doctrine, already using, under the guidance of biblical and patristic texts, the three fundamental terms which were subsequently to become crucial also for the philosophy of the West: *processio*, *relatio* and *persona* (cf. *Opusc. XXXVIII: PL CXLV*, 633–642; and *Opusc. II and III: ibid.*, 41 ff. and 58 ff). However, because theological analysis of the mystery led him to contemplate the intimate life of God and the dialogue of ineffable love between the three divine Persons, he drew ascetic conclusions from them for community life and even for relations between Latin and Greek Christians, divided on this topic. His meditation on the figure of Christ is significantly reflected in practical life, since the whole of Scripture is centred on him. The “Jews”, St Peter Damian notes, “through the pages of Sacred Scripture, bore Christ on their shoulders as it were” (*Sermo XLVI*, 15). Therefore Christ, he adds, must be the centre of the monk’s life: “May Christ be heard in our language, may Christ be seen in our life, may he be perceived in our hearts” (*Sermo VIII*, 5). Intimate union with Christ engages not only monks but all the baptized. Here we find a strong appeal for us too not to let ourselves be totally absorbed by the activities, problems and preoccupations of every day, forgetting that Jesus must truly be the centre of our life.

Communion with Christ creates among Christians a unity of love. In Letter 28, which is a brilliant ecclesiological treatise, Peter Damian develops a profound theology of the Church as communion. “Christ’s Church”, he writes, is united by the bond of charity to the point that just as she has many members so is she, mystically, entirely contained in a single member; in such a way that the whole universal Church is rightly called the one Bride of Christ in the singular, and each chosen soul, through the sacramental mystery, is considered fully Church”. This is important: not only that the whole universal Church should be united, but that the Church should be present in her totality in each one of us. Thus the service of the individual becomes “an expression of universality” (Ep 28, 9–23). However, the ideal image of “Holy Church” illustrated by Peter Damian does not correspond as he knew well to the reality of his time. For this reason he did not fear to denounce the state of corruption that existed in the monasteries and among the clergy, because, above all, of the practice of the conferral by the lay authorities of ecclesiastical offices; various Bishops and Abbots were behaving as the rulers of their subjects rather than as pastors of souls. Their moral life frequently left much to be desired. For this reason, in 1057 Peter Damian left his monastery with great reluctance and sorrow and accepted, if unwillingly, his appointment as Cardinal Bishop of Ostia. So it was that he entered fully into collaboration with the Popes in the difficult task of Church reform. He saw that to make his own contribution of helping in the work of the Church’s renewal

contemplation did not suffice. He thus relinquished the beauty of the hermitage and courageously undertook numerous journeys and missions.

Because of his love for monastic life, 10 years later, in 1067, he obtained permission to return to Fonte Avellana and resigned from the Diocese of Ostia. However, the tranquillity he had longed for did not last long: two years later, he was sent to Frankfurt in an endeavour to prevent the divorce of Henry iv from his wife Bertha. And again, two years later, in 1071, he went to Monte Cassino for the consecration of the abbey church and at the beginning of 1072, to Ravenna, to re-establish peace with the local Archbishop who had supported the antipope bringing interdiction upon the city.

On the journey home to his hermitage, an unexpected illness obliged him to stop at the Benedictine Monastery of Santa Maria Vecchia Fuori Porta in Faenza, where he died in the night between 22 and 23 February 1072.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is a great grace that the Lord should have raised up in the life of the Church a figure as exuberant, rich and complex as St Peter Damian. Moreover, it is rare to find theological works and spirituality as keen and vibrant as those of the Hermitage at Fonte Avellana. St Peter Damian was a monk through and through, with forms of austerity which to us today might even seem excessive. Yet, in that way he made monastic life an eloquent testimony of God's primacy and an appeal to all to walk towards holiness, free from any compromise with evil. He spent himself, with lucid consistency and great severity, for the reform of the Church of his time. He gave all his spiritual and physical energies to Christ and to the Church, but always remained, as he liked to describe himself, Petrus ultimus monachorum servus, Peter, the lowliest servant of the monks.*

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Sweden, Gibraltar, Japan and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke the Lord's abundant blessings of joy and peace!

I address a special welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I greet you, all ecclesiastical advisers, directors and representatives of *Coldiretti* and I encourage you to continue with commitment your social and spiritual service in the world of agriculture. May the theme of your congress be an incentive to you to reaffirm the ethical principles of the economy to revive hope with solidarity. I greet the exponents of the *Associazione Nazionale Mutilati ed Invalidi del Lavoro*, as well as those of the *Associazione Invalidi Civili*, in the hope that with regard to these brethren of ours society and the institutions will pay them ever greater attention. I greet with affection the members of the *Lyons Club Nardò* and assure each one of them and their respective families of my fervent prayers.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday we celebrated the liturgical Memorial of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary. The Second Vatican Council says that Mary goes before us on the journey of faith because “she believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45). I ask the blessed Virgin for the gift of an ever more mature faith for you *young people*; a hope ever stronger for you *sick people*; and for you *newlyweds*, a love that is ever deeper and more enduring.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*16 September 2009*

## Symeon the New Theologian

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today we pause to reflect on an Eastern monk, Symeon the New Theologian, whose writings have had a notable influence on the theology and spirituality of the East, in particular with regard to the experience of mystical union with God. Symeon the New Theologian was born in 949 in Galatai, Paphlagonia, in Asia Minor, into a provincial noble family. While he was still young he moved to Constantinople to complete his education and enter the Emperor’s service. However, he did not feel attracted by the civil career that awaited him. Under the influence of the inner illumination he was experiencing, he set out in search of someone who would guide him in the period of doubt and perplexity he was living through and help him advance on the path of union with God. He found this spiritual guide in Symeon the Pious (*Eulabes*), a simple monk of the *Studios* in Constantinople who advised him to read Mark the Monk’s treatise, *The Spiritual Law*. Symeon the New Theologian found in this text a teaching that made a deep impression on him: “If you seek spiritual healing, be attentive to your conscience,” he read in it. “Do all that it tells you and you will find what serves you”. From that very moment, he himself says, he never went to sleep without first asking himself whether his conscience had anything with which to reproach him.

Symeon entered the Studite monastery where, however, his mystical experiences and extraordinary devotion to his spiritual father caused him some difficulty. He moved to the small convent of *St Mamas*, also in Constantinople, of which three years later he became abbot, *hegumen*. There he embarked on an intense quest for spiritual union with Christ which gave him great authority. It is interesting to note that he was given the title of the “New Theologian”, in spite of the tradition that reserved this title for two figures, John the Evangelist and Gregory of Nazianzus. Symeon suffered misunderstandings and exile but was rehabilitated by Patriarch Sergius II of Constantinople.

Symeon the New Theologian spent the last stage of his life at the Monastery of St Marina where he wrote a large part of his opus, becoming ever more famous for his teaching and his miracles. He died on 12 March 1022.

The best known of his disciples, Niceta Stethatos, who collected and copied Symeon's writings, compiled a posthumous edition of them and subsequently wrote his biography. Symeon's opus consists of nine volumes that are divided into *theological, gnostic and practical chapters*, three books of *catecheses addressed to monks*, two books of *theological and ethical treatises* and one of *hymns*. Moreover, his numerous *Letters* should not be forgotten. All these works have had an important place in the Eastern monastic tradition to our day.

Symeon focused his reflection on the Holy Spirit's presence in the baptized and on the awareness they must have of this spiritual reality. "Christian life", he emphasized, "is intimate, personal communion with God, divine grace illumines the believer's heart and leads him to a mystical vision of the Lord". Along these lines, Symeon the New Theologian insisted that true knowledge of God does not come from books but rather from spiritual experience, from spiritual life. Knowledge of God is born from a process of inner purification that begins with conversion of heart through the power of faith and love. It passes through profound repentance and sincere sorrow for one's sins to attain union with Christ, the source of joy and peace, suffused with the light of his presence within us. For Symeon this experience of divine grace did not constitute an exceptional gift for a few mystics but rather was the fruit of Baptism in the life of every seriously committed believer.

A point on which to reflect, dear brothers and sisters! This holy Eastern monk calls us all to pay attention to our spiritual life, to the hidden presence of God within us, to the sincerity of the conscience and to purification, to conversion of heart, so that the Holy Spirit may really become present in us and guide us. Indeed, if rightly we are concerned to care for our physical, human and intellectual development, it is even more important not to neglect our inner growth. This consists in the knowledge of God, in true knowledge, not only learned from books but from within and in communion with God, to experience his help at every moment and in every circumstance. Basically it is this that Symeon describes when he recounts his own mystical experience. Already as a young man, before entering the monastery, while at home one night immersed in prayer and invoking God's help to fight temptations, he saw the room fill with light. Later, when he entered the monastery, he was given spiritual books for instruction but reading them did not procure for him the peace that he sought. He felt, he himself says, as if he were a poor little bird without wings. He humbly accepted this situation without rebelling and it was then that his visions of light began once again to increase. Wishing to assure himself of their authenticity, Symeon asked Christ directly: "Lord, is it truly you who are here?"

He heard the affirmative answer resonating in his heart and was supremely comforted. “That, Lord”, he was to write later, “was the first time that you considered me, a prodigal son, worthy of hearing your voice”. However, not even this revelation left him entirely at peace. He wondered, rather, whether he ought to consider that experience an illusion. At last, one day an event occurred that was crucial to his mystical experience. He began to feel like “a poor man who loves his brethren” (*ptochós philádelphos*). Around him he saw hordes of enemies bent on ensnaring him and doing him harm, yet he felt within an intense surge of love for them. How can this be explained? Obviously, such great love could not come from within him but must well up from another source. Symeon realized that it was coming from Christ present within him and everything became clear: he had a sure proof that the source of love in him was Christ’s presence. He was certain that having in ourselves a love that exceeds our personal intentions suggests that the source of love is in us. Thus we can say on the one hand that if we are without a certain openness to love Christ does not enter us, and on the other, that Christ becomes a source of love and transforms us. Dear friends, this experience remains particularly important for us today if we are to find the criteria that tell us whether we are truly close to God, whether God exists and dwells in us. God’s love develops in us if we stay united to him with prayer and with listening to his word, with an open heart. Divine love alone prompts us to open our hearts to others and makes us sensitive to their needs, bringing us to consider everyone as brothers and sisters and inviting us to respond to hatred with love and to offence with forgiveness.

In thinking about this figure of Symeon the New Theologian, we may note a further element of his spirituality. On the path of ascetic life which he proposed and took, the monk’s intense attention and concentration on the inner experience conferred an essential importance on the spiritual father of the monastery. The same young Symeon, as has been said, had found a spiritual director who gave him substantial help and whom he continued to hold in the greatest esteem such as to profess veneration for him, even in public, after his death. And I would like to say that the invitation to have recourse to a good spiritual father who can guide every individual to profound knowledge of himself and lead him to union with the Lord so that his life may be in ever closer conformity with the Gospel still applies for all priests, consecrated and lay people, and especially youth. To go towards the Lord we always need a guide, a dialogue. We cannot do it with our thoughts alone. And this is also the meaning of the ecclesiality of our faith, of finding this guide.

To conclude, we may sum up the teaching and mystical experience of Symeon the New Theologian in these words: in his ceaseless quest for God, even amidst the difficulties he encountered and the criticism of which he was the object, in the end he let himself be guided by love. He himself was able to live and teach his monks that for every disciple of

Jesus the essential is to grow in love; thus we grow in the knowledge of Christ himself, to be able to say with St Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2:20).

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here this morning, including the priests and brothers of the Society of Mary gathered in Rome for their chapter, and the various schools and university groups present. Upon you all, I willingly invoke God’s abundant graces.

I now address my greeting to the young people, the sick and the newlyweds. Yesterday we commemorated Our Lady of Sorrows, who stood beneath the cross with faith. Dear young people; do not be afraid to stand like Mary beside the Cross, to find the courage to overcome every obstacle in your life. and you, dear sick people, may you find in Mary comfort and support for learning from the Crucified Lord the saving value of suffering. May you, dear newlyweds, in difficult moments turn with trust to Our lady of Sorrows, who will help you face them with her motherly intercession.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*23 September 2009*

## **Saint Anselm**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Benedictine Abbey of Sant’Anselmo [St Anselm] is located on the Aventine Hill in Rome. As the headquarters of an academic institute of higher studies and of the Abbot Primate of the Confederated Benedictines it is a place that unites within it prayer, study and governance, the same three activities that were a feature of the life of the Saint to whom it is dedicated: Anselm of Aosta, the ninth anniversary of whose death occurs this year. The many initiatives promoted for this happy event, especially by the Diocese of Aosta, have highlighted the interest that this medieval thinker continues to rouse. He is also known as Anselm of Bec and Anselm of Canterbury because of the cities with which he was associated. Who is this figure to whom three places, distant from one another and located in three different nations Italy, France, England feel particularly bound? A monk with an intense spiritual life, an excellent teacher of the young, a theologian with an extraordinary capacity for speculation, a wise man of governance and an intransigent defender of *libertas Ecclesiae*, of the Church’s freedom, Anselm is one of the eminent

figures of the Middle Ages who was able to harmonize all these qualities, thanks to the profound mystical experience that always guided his thought and his action.

St Anselm was born in 1033 (or at the beginning of 1034) in Aosta, the first child of a noble family. His father was a coarse man dedicated to the pleasures of life who squandered his possessions. On the other hand, Anselm's mother was a profoundly religious woman of high moral standing (cf. Eadmer, *Vita Sancti Anselmi*, PL 159, col. 49). It was she, his mother, who saw to the first human and religious formation of her son whom she subsequently entrusted to the Benedictines at a priory in Aosta. Anselm, who since childhood as his biographer recounts imagined that the good Lord dwelled among the towering, snow-capped peaks of the Alps, dreamed one night that he had been invited to this splendid kingdom by God himself, who had a long and affable conversation with him and then gave him to eat "a very white bread roll" (*ibid.*, col. 51). This dream left him with the conviction that he was called to carry out a lofty mission. At the age of 15, he asked to be admitted to the Benedictine Order but his father brought the full force of his authority to bear against him and did not even give way when his son, seriously ill and feeling close to death, begged for the religious habit as a supreme comfort. After his recovery and the premature death of his mother, Anselm went through a period of moral dissipation. He neglected his studies and, consumed by earthly passions, grew deaf to God's call. He left home and began to wander through France in search of new experiences. Three years later, having arrived in Normandy, he went to the Benedictine Abbey of Bec, attracted by the fame of Lanfranc of Pavia, the Prior. For him this was a providential meeting, crucial to the rest of his life. Under Lanfranc's guidance Anselm energetically resumed his studies and it was not long before he became not only the favourite pupil but also the teacher's confidante. His monastic vocation was rekindled and, after an attentive evaluation, at the age of 27 he entered the monastic order and was ordained a priest. Asceticism and study unfolded new horizons before him, enabling him to rediscover at a far higher level the same familiarity with God which he had had as a child.

When Lanfranc became Abbot of Caen in 1063, Anselm, after barely three years of monastic life, was named Prior of the Monastery of Bec and teacher of the cloister school, showing his gifts as a refined educator. He was not keen on authoritarian methods; he compared young people to small plants that develop better if they are not enclosed in greenhouses and granted them a "healthy" freedom. He was very demanding with himself and with others in monastic observance, but rather than imposing his discipline he strove to have it followed by persuasion. Upon the death of Abbot Herluin, the founder of the Abbey of Bec, Anselm was unanimously elected to succeed him; it was February 1079. In the meantime numerous monks had been summoned to Canterbury to bring to their brethren on the other side of the Channel the renewal that was being brought about on the continent. Their work was so well received that Lanfranc of Pavia, Abbot of Caen,

became the new Archbishop of Canterbury. He asked Anselm to spend a certain period with him in order to instruct the monks and to help him in the difficult plight in which his ecclesiastical community had been left after the Norman conquest. Anselm's stay turned out to be very fruitful; he won such popularity and esteem that when Lanfranc died he was chosen to succeed him in the archiepiscopal See of Canterbury. He received his solemn episcopal consecration in December 1093.

Anselm immediately became involved in a strenuous struggle for the Church's freedom, valiantly supporting the independence of the spiritual power from the temporal. Anselm defended the Church from undue interference by political authorities, especially King William Rufus and Henry I, finding encouragement and support in the Roman Pontiff to whom he always showed courageous and cordial adherence. In 1103, this fidelity even cost him the bitterness of exile from his See of Canterbury. Moreover, it was only in 1106, when King Henry I renounced his right to the conferral of ecclesiastical offices, as well as to the collection of taxes and the confiscation of Church properties, that Anselm could return to England, where he was festively welcomed by the clergy and the people. Thus the long battle he had fought with the weapons of perseverance, pride and goodness ended happily. This holy Archbishop, who roused such deep admiration around him wherever he went, dedicated the last years of his life to the moral formation of the clergy and to intellectual research into theological topics. He died on 21 April 1109, accompanied by the words of the Gospel proclaimed in Holy Mass on that day: "You are those who have continued with me in my trials; as my Father appointed a kingdom for me, so do I appoint for you that you may eat and drink at my table in my kingdom ..." (Lk 22:28–30). So it was that the dream of the mysterious banquet he had had as a small boy, at the very beginning of his spiritual journey, found fulfilment. Jesus, who had invited him to sit at his table, welcomed Anselm upon his death into the eternal Kingdom of the Father.

"I pray, O God, to know you, to love you, that I may rejoice in you. And if I cannot attain to full joy in this life may I at least advance from day to day, until that joy shall come to the full" (*Prosligion*, chapter 14). This prayer enables us to understand the mystical soul of this great Saint of the Middle Ages, the founder of scholastic theology, to whom Christian tradition has given the title: "Magnificent Doctor", because he fostered an intense desire to deepen his knowledge of the divine Mysteries but in the full awareness that the quest for God is never ending, at least on this earth. The clarity and logical rigour of his thought always aimed at "raising the mind to contemplation of God" (*ibid.*, *Proemium*). He states clearly that whoever intends to study theology cannot rely on his intelligence alone but must cultivate at the same time a profound experience of faith. The theologian's activity, according to St Anselm, thus develops in three stages: *faith*, a gift God freely offers, to be received with humility; *experience*, which consists in incarnating God's word in one's own daily life; and therefore true *knowledge*, which is never the fruit



of ascetic reasoning but rather of contemplative intuition. In this regard his famous words remain more useful than ever, even today, for healthy theological research and for anyone who wishes to deepen his knowledge of the truths of faith: “I do not endeavour, O Lord, to penetrate your sublimity, for in no wise do I compare my understanding with that; but I long to understand in some degree your truth, which my heart believes and loves. For I do not seek to understand that I may believe, but I believe in order to understand. For this also I believe, that unless I believed, I should not understand” (*ibid.*, 1).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the love of the truth and the constant thirst for God that marked St Anselm’s entire existence be an incentive to every Christian to seek tirelessly an ever more intimate union with Christ, the Way, the Truth and the Life. In addition, may the zeal full of courage that distinguished his pastoral action and occasionally brought him misunderstanding, sorrow and even exile be an encouragement for Pastors, for consecrated people and for all the faithful to love Christ’s Church, to pray, to work and to suffer for her, without ever abandoning or betraying her. May the Virgin Mother of God, for whom St Anselm had a tender, filial devotion, obtain this grace for us. “Mary, it is you whom my heart yearns to love”, St Anselm wrote, “it is you whom my tongue ardently desires to praise”.*

30 September 2009

## Peter the Venerable

14 October 2009

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Peter the Venerable who I would like to present at today’s Catechesis takes us back to the famous Abbey of Cluny, to its *decor* (decorum) and *nitor* (clarity) to use terms that recur in the Cluny texts a decorum and splendour that were admired especially in the beauty of the liturgy, a privileged way for reaching God. Even more than these aspects, however, Peter’s personality recalls the holiness of the great abbots of Cluny: in Cluny “there was not a single abbot who was not a saint”, Pope Gregory VII said in 1080. These holy men include Peter the Venerable who possessed more or less all the virtues of his predecessors although, under him, in comparison with the new Orders such as *Cîteaux*, Cluny began to feel some symptoms of crisis. Peter is a wonderful example of an ascetic strict with himself and understanding of others. He was born in about 1094 in the French region of Auvergne, he entered the Monastery of Sauxillanges as a child and became a monk there and then prior. In 1122 he was elected Abbot of Cluny and remained in this office until he died, on Christmas day 1156, as he had wished. “A lover of peace”, his biographer Rudolph wrote, “he obtained peace in the glory of God on the day of peace” (*Vita*, I, 17; PL 189, 28).

All who knew him praised his refined meekness, his serene equilibrium, rectitude, loyalty, reasonableness and his special approach to mediation. “It is in my nature” he wrote, “to be particularly inclined to indulgence; I am urged to this by my habit of forgiveness. I am accustomed to toleration and forgiveness” (*Ep.* 192, in: *The Letters of Peter the Venerable*, Harvard University Press, 1967, p. 446). He said further: “With those who hate peace let us always seek to be peacemakers” (*Ep.* 100, *loc. cit.*, p. 261). And he wrote of himself: “I am not the type who is discontented with his lot ... whose mind is always tormented by anxiety or doubt and who complains that everyone else is resting while they are the only ones working” (*Ep.* 182, p. 425). With a sensitive and affectionate nature, he could combine love for the Lord with tenderness to his family members, especially his mother, and to his friends. He cultivated friendship, especially with his monks who used to confide in him, certain that they would be heard and understood. According to his biographer’s testimony: “he did not look down on anyone and never turned anyone away” (*Vita*, 1, 3: *PL* 189, 19); “he appeared friendly to all; in his innate goodness he was open to all” (*ibid.*, 1, 1: *PL*. 189, 17).

We could say that this holy Abbot also sets an example to the monks and Christians of our day, marked by a frenetic pace, when episodes of intolerance, incommunicability, division and conflict are common. His testimony invites us to be able to combine love of God with love of neighbour and not to tire of building relations of brotherhood and reconciliation. Effectively Peter the Venerable acted in this way. He found himself in charge of the Monastery of Cluny in years that were far from tranquil for various reasons, both within the Abbey and outside it, and managed to be at the same time both strict and profoundly human. He used to say: “One may obtain more from a man by tolerating him than by irritating him with reproach” (*Ep.* 172, *loc. cit.*, p. 409). By virtue of his office he had to undertake frequent journeys to Italy, England, Germany and Spain. He found it hard to be wrenched from the quiet of contemplation. He confessed: “I go from one place to the next, I hurry, I am anxious, I am tormented, dragged here and there: my mind now on my own affairs and now on those of others, not without great mental agitation” (*Ep.* 91, *loc. cit.*, p. 233). Although he was obliged to navigate between the powers and nobles who surrounded Cluny, he succeeded in preserving his habitual calm, thanks to his sense of measure, magnanimity and realism. Among the important figures with whom he came into contact was Bernard of Clairvaux with whom he maintained a relationship of increasing friendship, despite the differences of their temperaments and approaches. Bernard described him as: “an important man, occupied with important affairs” and held him in high esteem (*Ep.* 147, ed. *Scriptorium Claravallense*, Milan 1986, VI/1, pp. 658–660), while Peter the Venerable described Bernard as a “lamp of the Church” (*Ep.* 164, p. 396), and a “strong and splendid pillar of the monastic order and of the whole Church” (*Ep.* 175, p. 418).

With a lively sense of Church, Peter the Venerable affirmed that the vicissitudes of the Christian people must be felt in the “depths of the heart” by those who will be numbered “among the members of Christ’s Body” (Ep. 164, *ibid.*, p. 397). And he added: “those who do not smart from the wounds of Christ’s body are not nourished by the Spirit of Christ”, wherever they may be produced (*ibid.*). In addition, he also showed care and concern for people outside the Church, in particular Jews and Muslims: to increase knowledge of the latter he provided for the translation of the Qur’an. A historian recently remarked on this subject: “In the midst of the intransigence of medieval people, even the greatest among them, we admire here a sublime example of the sensitivity to which Christian charity leads” (J. Leclercq, *Pietro il Venerabile*, Jaca Book, 1991, p. 189). Other aspects of Christian life dear to him were love for the Eucharist and devotion to the Virgin Mary. On the Blessed Sacrament he has left passages that constitute “one of the masterpieces of Eucharistic literature of all time” (*ibid.*, p. 267) and on the Mother of God he wrote illuminating reflections, contemplating her ever closely related to Jesus the Redeemer and his work of salvation. It suffices to present his inspired prayer: “Hail, Blessed Virgin, who put execration to flight. Hail, Mother of the Most High, Bride of the meekest Lamb. You have defeated the serpent, you crushed its head, when the God you bore destroyed it... Shining Star of the East who dispelled the shadows of the west. Dawn who precedes the sun, day that knows no night... Pray God who was born of you to dissolve our sin and, after pardoning it, to grant us his grace and his glory” (*Carmina*, PL 189, 1018–1019).

Peter the Venerable also had a predilection for literary activity and a gift for it. He noted his reflections, persuaded of the importance of using the pen as if it were a plough, to “to scatter the seed of the Word on paper” (Ep. 20, p. 38). Although he was not a systematic theologian, he was a great investigator of God’s mystery. His theology is rooted in prayer, especially in liturgical prayer, and among the mysteries of Christ he preferred the Transfiguration which prefigures the Resurrection. It was Peter himself who introduced this feast at Cluny, composing a special office for it that mirrors the characteristic theological devotion of Peter and of the Cluniac Order, which was focused entirely on contemplation of the glorious Face (*gloriosa facies*) of Christ, finding in it the reasons for that ardent joy which marked his spirit and shone out in the monastery’s liturgy.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, this holy monk is certainly a great example of monastic holiness, nourished from the sources of the Benedictine tradition. For him, the ideal of the monk consists in “adhering tenaciously to Christ” (Ep. 53, loc. cit., p. 161), in a cloistered life distinguished by “monastic humility” (ibid.) and hard work (Ep. 77, loc. cit., p. 211) as well as an atmosphere of silent contemplation and constant praise of God. The first and most important occupation of the monk, according to Peter of Cluny, is the solemn celebration of the Divine Office “a heavenly action and the most useful of all” (Statutes, I, 1026) to be accompanied by reading, meditation, personal prayer and penance observed with discretion (cf. Ep. 20, loc. cit., p. 40). In this way the whole of life is pervaded*

*by profound love of God and love of others, a love that is expressed in sincere openness to neighbour, in forgiveness and in the quest for peace. We might say, to conclude, that if this lifestyle, combined with daily work, was the monk's ideal for St Benedict, it also concerns all of us and can be to a large extent the lifestyle of the Christian who wants to become an authentic disciple of Christ, characterized precisely by tenacious adherence to him and by humility, diligence and the capacity for forgiveness and peace.*

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the pupils and staff from St Andrew's High School, Carntyne, Glasgow, and other school and university groups from England and Norway. May your visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, tomorrow we shall be celebrating the Feast of St Teresa of Avila, Doctor of the Church. May this great Saint witness to you, dear *young people*, that authentic love cannot be separated from truth: may she help you, dear *sick people*, to understand that the Cross of Christ is a mystery of love that redeems human suffering. For you, dear *newlyweds*, may she be a model of fidelity to God, who entrusts a special mission to each one.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*21 October 2009*

## **Saint Bernard of Clairvaux**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk about St Bernard of Clairvaux, called "the last of the Fathers" of the Church because once again in the 12th century he renewed and brought to the fore the important theology of the Fathers. We do not know in any detail about the years of his childhood; however, we know that he was born in 1090 in Fontaines, France, into a large and fairly well-to-do family. As a very young man he devoted himself to the study of the so-called liberal arts especially grammar, rhetoric and dialectics at the school of the canons of the Church of Saint-Vorles at Châtillon-sur-Seine; and the decision to enter religious life slowly matured within him. At the age of about 20, he entered Cîteaux, a new monastic foundation that was more flexible in comparison with the ancient and venerable monasteries of the period while at the same time stricter in the practice of the evangelical counsels. A few years later, in 1115, Bernard was sent by Stephen Harding, the

third Abbot of Cîteaux, to found the monastery of Clairvaux. Here the young Abbot he was only 25 years old was able to define his conception of monastic life and set about putting it into practice. In looking at the discipline of other monasteries, Bernard firmly recalled the need for a sober and measured life, at table as in clothing and monastic buildings, and recommended the support and care of the poor. In the meantime the community of Clairvaux became ever more numerous and its foundations multiplied.

In those same years before 1130 Bernard started a prolific correspondence with many people of both important and modest social status. To the many *Epistolae* of this period must be added numerous *Sermones*, as well as *Sententiae* and *Tractatus*. Bernard's great friendship with William, Abbot of Saint-Thierry, and with William of Champeaux, among the most important figures of the 12th century, also date to this period. As from 1130, Bernard began to concern himself with many serious matters of the Holy See and of the Church. For this reason he was obliged to leave his monastery ever more frequently and he sometimes also travelled outside France. He founded several women's monasteries and was the protagonist of a lively correspondence with Peter the Venerable, Abbot of Cluny, of whom I spoke last Wednesday. In his polemical writings he targeted in particular Abelard, a great thinker who had conceived of a new approach to theology, introducing above all the dialectic and philosophical method in the construction of theological thought. On another front Bernard combated the heresy of the Cathars, who despised matter and the human body and consequently despised the Creator. On the other hand, he felt it was his duty to defend the Jews, and condemned the ever more widespread outbursts of anti-Semitism. With regard to this aspect of his apostolic action, several decades later Rabbi Ephraim of Bonn addressed a vibrant tribute to Bernard. In the same period the holy Abbot wrote his most famous works such as the celebrated *Sermons on the Song of Songs [In Canticum Sermones]*. In the last years of his life he died in 1153 Bernard was obliged to curtail his journeys but did not entirely stop travelling. He made the most of this time to review definitively the whole collection of his *Letters*, *Sermons* and *Treatises*. Worthy of mention is a quite unusual book that he completed in this same period, in 1145, when Bernardo Pignatelli, a pupil of his, was elected Pope with the name of Eugene III. On this occasion, Bernard as his spiritual father, dedicated to his spiritual son the text *De Consideratione* [Five Books on Consideration] which contains teachings on how to be a good Pope. In this book, which is still appropriate reading for the Popes of all times, Bernard did not only suggest how to be a good Pope, but also expressed a profound vision of the Mystery of the Church and of the Mystery of Christ which is ultimately resolved in contemplation of the mystery of the Triune God. "The search for this God who is not yet sufficiently sought must be continued", the holy Abbot wrote, "yet it may be easier" to search for him and find him in

prayer rather than in discussion. So let us end the book here, but not the search” (XIV, 32: PL 182, 808) and in journeying on towards God.

*I would now like to reflect on only two of the main aspects of Bernard’s rich doctrine: they concern Jesus Christ and Mary Most Holy, his Mother. His concern for the Christian’s intimate and vital participation in God’s love in Jesus Christ brings no new guidelines to the scientific status of theology. However, in a more decisive manner than ever, the Abbot of Clairvaux embodies the theologian, the contemplative and the mystic. Jesus alone Bernard insists in the face of the complex dialectical reasoning of his time Jesus alone is “honey in the mouth, song to the ear, jubilation in the heart (mel in ore, in aure melos, in corde iubilum)”. The title Doctor Mellifluus, attributed to Bernard by tradition, stems precisely from this; indeed, his praise of Jesus Christ “flowed like honey”. In the extenuating battles between Nominalists and Realists two philosophical currents of the time the Abbot of Clairvaux never tired of repeating that only one name counts, that of Jesus of Nazareth. “All food of the soul is dry”, he professed, “unless it is moistened with this oil; insipid, unless it is seasoned with this salt. What you write has no savour for me unless I have read Jesus in it” (In Canticum Sermones XV, 6: PL 183, 847). For Bernard, in fact, true knowledge of God consisted in a personal, profound experience of Jesus Christ and of his love. And, Dear Brothers and Sisters, this is true for every Christian: faith is first and foremost a personal, intimate encounter with Jesus, it is having an experience of his closeness, his friendship and his love. It is in this way that we learn to know him ever better, to love him and to follow him more and more. May this happen to each one of us!*

In another famous *Sermon on the Sunday in the Octave of the Assumption* the Holy Abbot described with passionate words Mary’s intimate participation in the redeeming sacrifice of her Son. “O Blessed Mother”, he exclaimed, “a sword has truly pierced your soul!... So deeply has the violence of pain pierced your soul, that we may rightly call you more than a martyr for in you participation in the passion of the Son by far surpasses in intensity the physical sufferings of martyrdom” (14: PL 183, 437–438). Bernard had no doubts: “*per Mariam ad Iesum*”, through Mary we are led to Jesus. He testifies clearly to Mary’s subordination to Jesus, in accordance with the foundation of traditional Mariology. Yet the text of the *Sermone* also documents the Virgin’s privileged place in the economy of salvation, subsequent to the Mother’s most particular participation (*compassio*) in the sacrifice of the Son. It is not for nothing that a century and a half after Bernard’s death, Dante Alighieri, in the last canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, was to put on the lips of the *Doctor Mellifluus* the sublime prayer to Mary: “Virgin Mother, daughter of your own Son, / humble and exalted more than any creature, / fixed term of the eternal counsel” (*Paradise XXXIII*, vv. 1 ff.).

These reflections, characteristic of a person in love with Jesus and Mary as was Bernard, are still a salutary stimulus not only to theologians but to all believers. Some claim to

have solved the fundamental questions on God, on man and on the world with the power of reason alone. St Bernard, on the other hand, solidly founded on the Bible and on the Fathers of the Church, reminds us that without a profound faith in God, nourished by prayer and contemplation, by an intimate relationship with the Lord, our reflections on the divine mysteries risk becoming an empty intellectual exercise and losing their credibility. Theology refers us back to the “knowledge of the Saints”, to their intuition of the mysteries of the living God and to their wisdom, a gift of the Holy Spirit, which become a reference point for theological thought. Together with Bernard of Clairvaux, we too must recognize that man seeks God better and finds him more easily “in prayer than in discussion”. In the end, the truest figure of a theologian and of every evangelizer remains the Apostle John who laid his head on the Teacher’s breast.

I would like to conclude these reflections on St Bernard with the invocations to Mary that we read in one of his beautiful homilies. “In danger, in distress, in uncertainty”, he says, “think of Mary, call upon Mary. She never leaves your lips, she never departs from your heart; and so that you may obtain the help of her prayers, never forget the example of her life. If you follow her, you cannot falter; if you pray to her, you cannot despair; if you think of her, you cannot err. If she sustains you, you will not stumble; if she protects you, you have nothing to fear; if she guides you, you will never flag; if she is favourable to you, you will attain your goal ...” (*Hom. II super Missus est*, 17: PL 183, 70–71).

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today’s Audience, especially from the Dioceses of Lismore and Saginaw accompanied by their Bishops, as well as from Holy Cross and St Margaret Mary Parish in Edinburgh. I also greet the visitors from The Netherlands, Nigeria, Tanzania, England, Ireland, Norway and Sweden. Upon all of you I invoke God’s Blessings of peace, joy and hope!

I address a cordial greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims and, in particular, to the participants in the General Chapter of the Comboni Missionaries of the Heart of Jesus and while I thank this Religious Family for the missionary work they carry out, especially in Africa, I hope it will continue with renewed apostolic zeal to make the charism of St Daniel Comboni ever more up to date in the world.

I greet the Religious, Servants of Charity Opera Don Guanella and in the imminence of their Founder’s Feast, I encourage them to work in the Church with generous dedication.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear friends, the month of October invites us to renew our active cooperation with the Church’s mission. With the fresh energy of youth, with the power of prayer and sacrifice and with the potential of

married life, may you be Gospel missionaries and offer your concrete support to all who toil, dedicating their whole life to the evangelization of peoples.

*Saint Peter's Square*

28 October 2009

## Monastic Theology and Scholastic Theology

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I am reflecting on an interesting page of history that concerns the flourishing of Latin theology in the 12th century which occurred through a series of providential coincidences. A relative peace prevailed in the countries of Western Europe at that time which guaranteed economic development and the consolidation of political structures in society, encouraging lively cultural activity also through its contacts with the East. The benefits of the vast action known as the “Gregorian reform” were already being felt within the Church. Vigorously promoted in the previous century, they had brought greater evangelical purity to the life of the ecclesial community, especially to the clergy, and had restored to the Church and to the Papacy authentic freedom of action. Furthermore, a wide-scale spiritual renewal supported by the vigorous development of consecrated life was spreading; new religious orders were coming into being and expanding, while those already in existence were experiencing a promising spiritual revival.

Theology also flourished anew, acquiring a greater awareness of its own nature: it refined its method; it tackled the new problems; advanced in the contemplation of God's mysteries; produced fundamental works; inspired important initiatives of culture, from art to literature; and prepared the masterpieces of the century to come, the century of Thomas Aquinas and Bonaventure of Bagnoregio. This intense theological activity took place in two milieus: the monasteries and the urban Schools, the *scholae*, some of which were the forerunners of universities, one of the characteristic “inventions” of the Christian Middle Ages. It is on the basis of these two milieus, monasteries and *scholae*, that it is possible to speak of the two different theological models: “monastic theology” and “scholastic theology”. The representatives of monastic theology were monks, usually abbots, endowed with wisdom and evangelical zeal, dedicated essentially to inspiring and nourishing God's loving design. The representatives of Scholastic theology were cultured men, passionate about research; they were *magistri* anxious to show the reasonableness and soundness of the Mysteries of God and of man, believed with faith, of course, but also understood by reason. Their different finalities explain the differences in their method and in their way of doing theology.



In 12th-century monasteries the theological method mainly entailed the explanation of Sacred Scripture, the *sacra pagina* to borrow the words of the authors of that period; biblical theology in particular was practised. The monks, in other words, were devout listeners to and readers of the Sacred Scriptures and one of their chief occupations consisted in *lectio divina*, that is, the prayed reading of the Bible. For them the mere reading of the Sacred Text did not suffice to perceive its profound meaning, its inner unity and transcendent message. It was therefore necessary to practise a biblical theology, in docility to the Holy Spirit. Thus, at the school of the Fathers, the Bible was interpreted allegorically in order to discover on every page of both the Old and New Testaments what it says about Christ and his work of salvation.

Last year, the Synod of Bishops on the “Word of God in the life and mission of the Church” reminded us of the importance of the spiritual approach to the Sacred Scriptures. It is useful for this purpose to take into account monastic theology, an uninterrupted biblical exegesis, as well as the works written by its exponents, precious ascetic commentaries on the Books of the Bible. Thus monastic theology incorporated the spiritual aspect into literary formation. It was aware, in other words that a purely theoretical and unversed interpretation is not enough: to enter into the heart of Sacred Scripture it must be read in the spirit in which it was written and created. Literary knowledge was necessary in order to understand the exact meaning of the words and to grasp the meaning of the text, refining the grammatical and philological sensibility. Thus *Jean Leclercq*, a Benedictine scholar in the past century, entitled the essay in which he presents the characteristics of monastic theology: *L'amour des lettres et le désir de Dieu* (Love of words and the desire for God). In fact, the desire to know and to love God which comes to meet us through his words to be received, meditated upon and put into practice, leads us to seek to deepen our knowledge of the biblical texts in all their dimensions. Then there is another attitude on which those who practise monastic theology insist: namely an intimate, prayerful disposition that must precede, accompany and complete the study of Sacred Scripture. Since, ultimately, monastic theology is listening to God's word, it is impossible not to purify the heart in order to receive it and, especially, it is impossible not to enkindle in it a longing to encounter the Lord. Theology thus becomes meditation, prayer, a song of praise and impels us to sincere conversion. On this path, many exponents of monastic theology attained the highest goals of mystic experience and extend an invitation to us too to nourish our lives with the word of God, for example, through listening more attentively to the Readings and the Gospel, especially during Sunday Mass. It is also important to set aside a certain period each day for meditation on the Bible, so that the word of God may be a light that illumines our daily pilgrimage on earth.

Scholastic theology, on the other hand as I was saying was practised at the *scholae* which came into being beside the great cathedrals of that time for the formation of the clergy, or around a teacher of theology and his disciples, to train professionals of culture in a period in which the appreciation of knowledge was constantly growing. Central to the method of the Scholastics was the *quaestio*, that is, the problem the reader faces in approaching the words of Scripture and of Tradition. In the face of the problem that these authoritative texts pose, questions arise and the debate between teacher and student comes into being. In this discussion, on the one hand the arguments of the authority appear and on the other those of reason, and the ensuing discussion seeks to come to a synthesis between authority and reason in order to reach a deeper understanding of the word of God. In this regard St Bonaventure said that theology is “*per additionem*” (cf. *Commentaria in quatuor libros sententiarum*, I, *proem.*, q. 1, *concl.*), that is, theology adds the dimension of reason to the word of God and thus creates a faith that is deeper, more personal, hence also more concrete in the person’s life. In this regard various solutions were found and conclusions reached which began to build a system of theology. The organization of the *quaestiones* led to the compilation of ever more extensive syntheses, that is, the different *quaestiones* were composed with the answers elicited, thereby creating a synthesis, the *summae* that were in reality extensive theological and dogmatic treatises born from the confrontation of human reason with the word of God. Scholastic theology aimed to present the unity and harmony of the Christian Revelation with a method, called, precisely “Scholastic” of the school which places trust in human reason. Grammar and philology are at the service of theological knowledge, but logic even more so, namely the discipline that studies the “functioning” of human reasoning, in such a way that the truth of a proposal appears obvious. Still today, in reading the Scholastic *summae* one is struck by the order, clarity and logical continuity of the arguments and by the depth of certain insights. With technical language a precise meaning is attributed to every word and, between believing and understanding, a reciprocal movement of clarification is established.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, in echoing the invitation of the First Letter of Peter, Scholastic theology stimulates us to be ever ready to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 3:15), hearing the questions as our own and thus also being capable of giving an answer. It reminds us that a natural friendship exists between faith and reason, founded in the order of Creation itself. In the incipit of the Encyclical Fides et Ratio, the Servant of God John Paul II wrote: “Faith and reason are like two wings on which the human spirit rises to the contemplation of truth”. Faith is open to the effort of understanding by reason; reason, in turn, recognizes that faith does not mortify her but on the contrary impels her towards vaster and loftier horizons. The eternal lesson of monastic theology fits in here. Faith and reason, in reciprocal dialogue, are vibrant with joy when they are both inspired by the search for intimate union with God. When love enlivens the prayerful dimension of theology, knowledge,*

*acquired by reason, is broadened. Truth is sought with humility, received with wonder and gratitude: in a word, knowledge only grows if one loves truth. Love becomes intelligence and authentic theology wisdom of the heart, which directs and sustains the faith and life of believers. Let us therefore pray that the journey of knowledge and of the deepening of God's Mysteries may always be illumined by divine love.*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Nigeria, India and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the priests attending a course at the Pontifical North American College and to the seminarians of the Pontifical Scots College. Upon all of you I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

*Saint Peter's Square*

*4 November 2009*

## **Two Theological Models in Comparison: Bernard and Abelard**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In my last Catechesis I presented the main features of 12th-century monastic theology and scholastic theology which, in a certain sense, we might call respectively "theology of the heart" and "theology of reason". Among the exponents of both these theological currents a broad and at times heated discussion developed, symbolically represented by the controversy between St Bernard of Clairvaux and Abelard.

In order to understand this confrontation between the two great teachers it helps to remember that theology is the search for a rational understanding, as far as this is possible, of the mysteries of Christian Revelation, believed through faith: *fides quaerens intellectum* faith seeks understanding to borrow a traditional, concise and effective definition. Now, whereas St Bernard, a staunch representative of monastic theology, puts the accent on the first part of the definition, namely on *fides* faith, Abelard, who was a scholastic, insists on the second part, that is, on the *intellectus*, on understanding through reason. For Bernard faith itself is endowed with a deep certitude based on the testimony of Scripture and on the teaching of the Church Fathers. Faith, moreover, is reinforced by the witness of the Saints and by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit in the individual believer's soul. In cases of doubt and ambiguity, faith is protected and illumined by the exercise of the Magisterium of the Church. So it was that Bernard had difficulty in reaching agreement with Abelard and, more in general, with those who submitted the truths of faith to the critical examination of the intellect; an examination

which in his opinion entailed a serious danger, that is, intellectualism, the relativization of truth, the questioning of the actual truths of faith. In this approach Bernard saw audacity taken to the point of unscrupulousness, a product of the pride of human intelligence that claims to “grasp” the mystery of God. In a letter he writes with regret: “Human ingenuity takes possession of everything, leaving nothing to faith. It confronts what is above and beyond it, scrutinizes what is superior to it, bursts into the world of God, alters rather than illumines the mysteries of faith; it does not open what is closed and sealed but rather uproots it, and what it does not find viable in itself it considers as nothing and refuses to believe in it” (*Epistola CLXXXVIII*, 1: PL 182, 1, 353).

Theology for Bernard had a single purpose: to encourage the intense and profound experience of God. Theology is therefore an aid to loving the Lord ever more and ever better, as the title of his Treatise on the Duty to love God says (*Liber de diligendo Deo*). On this journey there are various stages that Bernard describes in detail, which lead to the crowning experience when the believer’s soul becomes inebriated in ineffable love. Already on earth the human soul can attain this mystical union with the divine Word, a union that the *Doctor Mellifluus* describes as “spiritual nuptials”. The divine Word visits the soul, eliminates the last traces of resistance, illuminates, inflames and transforms it. In this mystical union the soul enjoys great serenity and sweetness and sings a hymn of joy to its Bridegroom. As I mentioned in the Catechesis on the life and doctrine of St Bernard, theology for him could not but be nourished by contemplative prayer, in other words by the affective union of the heart and the mind with God.

On the other hand Abelard, who among other things was the very person who introduced the term “theology” in the sense in which we understand it today, puts himself in a different perspective. Born in Brittany, France, this famous teacher of the 12th century was endowed with a keen intelligence and his vocation was to study. He first concerned himself with philosophy and then applied the results he achieved in this discipline to theology which he taught in Paris, the most cultured city of the time, and later in the monasteries in which he lived. He was a brilliant orator: literally crowds of students attended his lectures. He had a religious spirit but a restless personality and his life was full of dramatic events: he contested his teachers and he had a son by Héloïse, a cultured and intelligent woman. He often argued with his theological colleagues and also underwent ecclesiastical condemnations although he died in full communion with the Church, submitting to her authority with a spirit of faith. Actually St Bernard contributed to condemning certain teachings of Abelard at the Provincial Synod of Sens in 1140 and went so far as to request Pope Innocent II’s intervention. The Abbot of Clairvaux contested, as we have seen, the excessively intellectualistic method of Abelard who in his eyes reduced faith to mere opinion, detached from the revealed truth. Bernard’s fears were not unfounded and were, moreover, shared by other great thinkers

of his time. Indeed, an excessive use of philosophy dangerously weakened Abelard's Trinitarian teaching, hence also his idea of God. In the moral field his teaching was not devoid of ambiguity: he insisted on considering the intention of the subject as the sole source for defining the goodness or evil of moral acts, thereby neglecting the objective significance and moral value of the actions: a dangerous subjectivism. This as we know is a very timely aspect for our epoch in which all too often culture seems to be marked by a growing tendency to ethical relativism; the self alone decides what is good for it, for oneself, at this moment. However, the great merits of Abelard, who had many disciples and made a crucial contribution to the development of scholastic theology destined to be expressed in a more mature and fruitful manner in the following century should not be forgotten. Nor should some of his insights be underestimated, such as, for example, his affirmation that non-Christian religious traditions already contain a preparation for the acceptance of Christ, the divine Word.

What can we learn today from the confrontation, frequently in very heated tones, between Bernard and Abelard and, in general, between monastic theology and scholastic theology? First of all I believe that it demonstrates the usefulness and need for healthy theological discussion within the Church, especially when the questions under discussion are not defined by the Magisterium, which nevertheless remains an ineluctable reference point. St Bernard, but also Abelard himself, always recognized her authority unhesitatingly. Furthermore, Abelard's condemnation on various occasions reminds us that in the theological field there must be a balance between what we may call the architectural principles given to us by Revelation, which therefore always retain their priority importance, and the principles for interpretation suggested by philosophy, that is, by reason, which have an important but exclusively practical role. When this balance between the architecture and the instruments for interpretation is lacking, theological reflection risks being distorted by errors and it is then the task of the Magisterium to exercise that necessary service to the truth which belongs to it. It must be emphasized in addition that among the reasons that induced Bernard to "take sides" against Abelard and to call for the intervention of the Magisterium, was also his concern to safeguard simple and humble believers, who must be defended when they risk becoming confused or misled by excessively personal opinions or by anti-conformist theological argumentation that might endanger their faith.

Lastly, I would like to recall that the theological confrontation between Bernard and Abelard ended with their complete reconciliation, thanks to the mediation of a common friend, Peter the Venerable, the Abbot of Cluny of whom I have spoken in one of my previous Catecheses. Abelard showed humility in recognizing his errors, Bernard used great benevolence. They both upheld the most important value in a theological controversy: to preserve the Church's faith and to make the truth in charity triumph.

Today too may this be the attitude with which we confront one another in the Church, having as our goal the constant quest for truth.

**To the English-speaking pilgrims:**

I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience. I particularly greet priests from the Dioceses of England and Wales celebrating Jubilees, pilgrims from the Diocese of Wichita, student and teachers from Catholic schools in Denmark, and Catholic nurses from the United States. God's Blessings upon you all!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newlyweds*. Today is the liturgical memorial of St Charles Borromeo, an outstanding Bishop of the Diocese of Milan, who, inspired by ardent love of Christ, was a tireless teacher and guide for people. May his example help you, dear *young people* to be led by Christ in your daily decisions; may it encourage you, dear *sick people* to offer your afflictions for the Pastors of the Church and for the salvation of souls; may it support you, dear *newlyweds*, in basing your family on the Gospel values.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*11 November 2009*

## **The Cluniac Reform**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This morning I would like to speak to you about a monastic movement that was very important in the Middle Ages and which I have already mentioned in previous Catecheses. It is the Order of Cluny which at the beginning of the 12th century, at the height of its expansion, had almost 1,200 monasteries: a truly impressive figure! A monastery was founded at Cluny in 910, precisely 1,100 years ago, and subsequent to the donation of William the Pious, Duke of Aquitaine, was placed under the guidance of Abbot Berno. At that time Western monasticism, which had flourished several centuries earlier with St Benedict, was experiencing a severe decline for various reasons: unstable political and social conditions due to the continuous invasions and sacking by peoples who were not integrated into the fabric of Europe, widespread poverty and, especially, the dependence of abbeys on the local nobles who controlled all that belonged to the territories under their jurisdiction. In this context, Cluny was the heart and soul of a profound renewal of monastic life that led it back to its original inspiration.

At Cluny the Rule of St Benedict was restored with several adaptations which had already been introduced by other reformers. The main objective was to guarantee the central role that the Liturgy must have in Christian life. The Cluniac monks devoted themselves with

love and great care to the celebration of the Liturgical Hours, to the singing of the Psalms, to processions as devout as they were solemn, and above all, to the celebration of Holy Mass. They promoted sacred music, they wanted architecture and art to contribute to the beauty and solemnity of the rites; they enriched the liturgical calendar with special celebrations such as, for example, at the beginning of November, the Commemoration of All Souls, which we too have just celebrated; and they intensified the devotion to the Virgin Mary. Great importance was given to the Liturgy because the monks of Cluny were convinced that it was participation in the liturgy of Heaven. And the monks felt responsible for interceding at the altar of God for the living and the dead, given large numbers of the faithful were insistently asking them to be remembered in prayer. Moreover, it was with this same aim that William the Pious had desired the foundation of the Abbey of Cluny. In the ancient document that testifies to the foundation we read: "With this gift I establish that a monastery of regulars be built at Cluny in honour of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, where monks who live according to the Rule of St Benedict shall gather ... so that a venerable sanctuary of prayer with vows and supplications may be visited there, and the heavenly life be sought after and yearned for with every desire and with deep ardour, and that assiduous prayers, invocations and supplications be addressed to the Lord". To preserve and foster this atmosphere of prayer, the Cluniac Rule emphasized the importance of silence, to which discipline the monks willingly submitted, convinced that the purity of the virtues to which they aspired demanded deep and constant recollection. It is not surprising that before long the Monastery of Cluny gained a reputation for holiness and that many other monastic communities decided to follow its discipline. Numerous princes and Popes asked the abbots of Cluny to extend their reform so that in a short time a dense network of monasteries developed that were linked to Cluny, either by true and proper juridical bonds or by a sort of charismatic affiliation. Thus a spiritual Europe gradually took shape in the various regions of France and in Italy, Spain, Germany and Hungary.

Cluny's success was assured primarily not only by the lofty spirituality cultivated there but also by several other conditions that ensured its development. In comparison with what had happened until then, the Monastery of Cluny and the communities dependent upon it were recognized as exempt from the jurisdiction of the local Bishops and were directly subject to that of the Roman Pontiff. This meant that Cluny had a special bond with the See of Peter and, precisely because of the protection and encouragement of the Pontiffs the ideals of purity and fidelity proposed by the Cluniac Reform spread rapidly. Furthermore, the abbots were elected without any interference from the civil authorities, unlike what happened in other places. Truly worthy people succeeded one another at the helm of Cluny and of the numerous monastic communities dependent upon it: Abbot Odo of Cluny, of whom I spoke in a Catechesis two months ago, and other great figures

such as Eymard, Majolus, Odilo and especially Hugh the Great, who served for long periods, thereby assuring stability and the spread of the reform embarked upon. As well as Odo, Majolus, Odilo and Hugh are venerated as Saints.

Not only did the Cluniac Reform have positive effects in the purification and reawakening of monastic life but also in the life of the universal Church. In fact, the aspiration to evangelical perfection was an incentive to fight two great abuses that afflicted the Church in that period: simony, that is the acquisition of pastoral offices for money, and immorality among the secular clergy. The abbots of Cluny with their spiritual authority, the Cluniac monks who became Bishops and some of them even Popes, took the lead in this impressive action of spiritual renewal. And it yielded abundant fruit: celibacy was once again esteemed and practised by priests and more transparent procedures were introduced in the designation of ecclesiastical offices.

Also significant were the benefits that monasteries inspired by the Cluniac Reform contributed to society. At a time when Church institutions alone provided for the poor, charity was practised with dedication. In all the houses, the almoner was bound to offer hospitality to needy wayfarers and pilgrims, travelling priests and religious and especially the poor, who came asking for food and a roof over their heads for a few days. Equally important were two other institutions promoted by Cluny that were characteristic of medieval civilization: the “Truce of God” and the “Peace of God”. In an epoch heavily marked by violence and the spirit of revenge, with the “Truces of God” long periods of non-belligerence were guaranteed, especially on the occasion of specific religious feasts and certain days of the week. With “the Peace of God”, on pain of a canonical reprimand, respect was requested for defenceless people and for sacred places.

In this way, in the conscience of the peoples of Europe during that long process of gestation, which was to lead to their ever clearer recognition two fundamental elements for the construction of society matured, namely, the value of the human person and the primary good of peace. Furthermore, as happened for other monastic foundations, the Cluniac monasteries had likewise at their disposal extensive properties which, diligently put to good use, helped to develop the economy. Alongside the manual work there was no lack of the typical cultural activities of medieval monasticism such as schools for children, the foundation of libraries and *scriptoria* for the transcription of books.

In this way, 1,000 years ago when the development of the European identity had gathered momentum, the experience of Cluny, which had spread across vast regions of the European continent, made its important and precious contribution. It recalled the primacy of spiritual benefits; it kept alive the aspiration to the things of God; it inspired and encouraged initiatives and institutions for the promotion of human values; it taught a spirit of peace. Dear brothers and sisters let us pray that all those who have at heart an



authentic humanism and the future of Europe may be able to rediscover, appreciate and defend the rich cultural and religious heritage of these centuries.

### **To special groups**

I cordially welcome the English-speaking visitors in attendance at today's Audience. I particularly greet pilgrims from the Diocese of Fort Worth, students and staff from the Franciscan University of Steubenville, Diocesan Directors of Communications from England and Wales, as well as priests from Japan. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I now extend my greeting to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear young people, especially you, beloved students of the "Santa Teresa del Bambino Gesù" School at Santa Marinella, follow the example of St Martin, whose feast we are celebrating today, for a generous commitment of Gospel witness. May you, dear *sick people*, trust in the Lord who does not abandon us in moments of trial. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, enlivened by the faith that distinguished St Martin, always be able to respect and serve life, which is a gift of God.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*18 November 2009*

## **The Cathedral from the Romanesque to the Gothic Architecture: The Theological Background**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Catecheses of the past few weeks I have presented several aspects of medieval theology. The Christian faith, however, deeply rooted in the men and women of those centuries, did not only give rise to masterpieces of theological literature, thought and faith. It also inspired one of the loftiest expressions of universal civilization: the cathedral, the true glory of the Christian Middle Ages. Indeed, for about three centuries, from the beginning of the 11th century Europe experienced extraordinary artistic creativity and fervour. An ancient chronicler described the enthusiasm and the hard-working spirit of those times in these words: "It happens that throughout the world, but especially in Italy and in Gaul, people began rebuilding churches although many had no need of such restoration because they were still in good condition. "It was like a competition between one people and another; one might have believed that the world, shaking off its rags and tatters, wanted to be reclad throughout in the white mantle of new churches. In short, all these cathedral churches, a large number of monastic

churches and even village oratories, were restored by the faithful at that time” (Rodolphus Glaber, *Historiarum*, libri quinque, 3, 4).

Various factors contributed to this rebirth of religious architecture. First of all more favourable historical conditions, such as greater political stability, accompanied by a constant increase in the population and the gradual development of the cities, trade and wealth. Furthermore, architects found increasingly complicated technical solutions to increase the size of buildings, at the same time guaranteeing them both soundness and majesty. It was mainly thanks to the enthusiasm and spiritual zeal of monasticism, at the height of its expansion, that abbey churches were built in which the Liturgy might be celebrated with dignity and solemnity. They became the destination of continuous pilgrimages where the faithful, attracted by the veneration of saints’ relics, could pause in prayer. So it was that the Romanesque churches and cathedrals came into being. They were characterized by the longitudinal development, in length, of the aisles, in order to accommodate numerous faithful. They were very solid churches with thick walls, stone vaults and simple, spare lines. An innovation was the introduction of sculptures. Because Romanesque churches were places for monastic prayer and for the worship of the faithful, rather than being concerned with technical perfection the sculptors turned their attention in particular to the educational dimension. Since it was necessary to inspire in souls strong impressions, sentiments that could persuade them to shun vice and evil and to practise virtue and goodness, the recurrent theme was the portrayal of Christ as Universal Judge surrounded by figures of the Apocalypse. It was usually the portals of the Romanesque churches which displayed these figures, to emphasize that Christ is the Door that leads to Heaven. On crossing the threshold of the sacred building, the faithful entered a space and time different from that of their ordinary life. Within the church, believers in a sovereign, just and merciful Christ in the artists’ intention could enjoy in anticipation eternal beatitude in the celebration of the liturgy and of devotional acts carried out in the sacred building.

In the 12th and 13th centuries another kind of architecture for sacred buildings spread from the north of France: the Gothic. It had two new characteristics in comparison with the Romanesque, a soaring upward movement and luminosity. Gothic cathedrals show a synthesis of faith and art harmoniously expressed in the fascinating universal language of beauty which still elicits wonder today. By the introduction of vaults with pointed arches supported by robust pillars, it was possible to increase their height considerably. The upward thrust was intended as an invitation to prayer and at the same time was itself a prayer. Thus the Gothic cathedral intended to express in its architectural lines the soul’s longing for God. In addition, by employing the new technical solutions, it was possible to make openings in the outer walls and to embellish them with stained-glass windows. In other words the windows became great luminous images, very suitable for

instructing the people in faith. In them scene by scene the life of a saint, a parable or some other biblical event were recounted. A cascade of light poured through the stained-glass upon the faithful to tell them the story of salvation and to involve them in this story.

Another merit of Gothic cathedrals is that the whole Christian and civil community participated in their building and decoration in harmonious and complementary ways. The lowly and the powerful, the illiterate and the learned; all participated because in this common house all believers were instructed in the faith. Gothic sculpture in fact has made cathedrals into “stone Bibles”, depicting Gospel episodes and illustrating the content of the liturgical year, from the Nativity to the glorification of the Lord. In those centuries too, the perception of the Lord’s humanity became ever more widespread and the sufferings of his Passion were represented realistically: the suffering Christ (*Christus patiens*) an image beloved by all and apt to inspire devotion and repentance for sins. Nor were Old Testament figures lacking; thus to the faithful who went to the cathedral their histories became familiar as part of the one common history of salvation. With faces full of beauty, gentleness and intelligence, Gothic sculpture of the 13th century reveals a happy and serene religious sense, glad to show a heartfelt filial devotion to the Mother of God, sometimes seen as a young woman, smiling and motherly, but mainly portrayed as the Queen of Heaven and earth, powerful and merciful. The faithful who thronged the Gothic cathedrals also liked to find there, expressed in works of art, saints, models of Christian life and intercessors with God. And there was no shortage of the “secular” scenes of life, thus, here and there, there are depictions of work in the fields, of the sciences and arts. All was oriented and offered to God in the place in which the Liturgy was celebrated. We may understand better the meaning attributed to a Gothic cathedral by reflecting on the text of the inscription engraved on the central portal of Saint-Denis in Paris: “Passerby, who is stirred to praise the beauty of these doors, do not let yourself be dazzled by the gold or by the magnificence, but rather by the painstaking work. Here a famous work shines out, but may Heaven deign that this famous work that shines make spirits resplendent so that, with the luminous truth, they may walk toward the true light, where Christ is the true door”.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I would now like to emphasize two elements of Romanesque and Gothic art that are also helpful to us. The first: the masterpieces of art created in Europe in past centuries are incomprehensible unless one takes into account the religious spirit that inspired them. Marc Chagall, an artist who has always witnessed to the encounter between aesthetics and faith, wrote that “For centuries painters dipped their brushes into that colourful alphabet which was the Bible”. When faith, celebrated in the Liturgy in a special way, encounters art, it creates a profound harmony because each can and wishes to speak of God, making the Invisible visible. I would like to share this encounter with artists on 21 November, renewing to them the proposal of friendship between Christian spirituality and art that my venerable Predecessors hoped for, especially the Servants of*

*God Paul VI and John Paul II. The second element: the strength of the Romanesque style and the splendour of the Gothic cathedrals remind us that the via pulchritudinis, the way of beauty, is a privileged and fascinating path on which to approach the Mystery of God. What is the beauty that writers, poets, musicians, and artists contemplate and express in their language other than the reflection of the splendour of the eternal Word made flesh? Then St Augustine says: "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread around everywhere, question the beauty of the sky, question the serried ranks of the stars, question the sun making the day glorious with its bright beams, question the moon tempering the darkness of the following night with its shining rays, question the animals that move in the waters, that amble about on dry land, that fly in the air; their souls hidden, their bodies evident; the visible bodies needing to be controlled, the invisible souls controlling them. Question all these things. They all answer you, 'Here we are, look; we're beautiful!' Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable?" (Sermo CCXLI, 2: PL 38, 1134).*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, may the Lord help us to rediscover the way of beauty as one of the itineraries, perhaps the most attractive and fascinating, on which to succeed in encountering and loving God.*

### **To special groups**

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking pilgrims at today's Audience, especially the board members of the World Union of Catholic Women's Organizations. Upon you all I cordially invoke God's abundant Blessings!

I now address a cordial greeting to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular, I am pleased to welcome the Cardinals, Bishops and all the members of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, headed by Cardinal Ivan Dias. Your presence gives me the opportunity to renew to each one the expression of my deep gratitude for the generous commitment with which you work to spread the Gospel message. I entrust your Plenary Assembly to the protection of Mary Most Holy, Queen of Apostles, invoking her maternal help upon all who are involved in missionary action in every corner of the earth.

Lastly I greet the young people, the sick and the newlyweds. In today's Liturgy, we are celebrating the Dedication of St Peter's Basilica in the Vatican and that of St Paul on the Ostian Way. This celebration offers us the opportunity to shed light on the significance and value of the Church. Dear young people, love the Church and cooperate enthusiastically in building her up.

Dear sick people, live out the offering of your suffering as a precious contribution to the spiritual growth of the Christian communities. And may you, dear newlyweds, be a living sign of Christ's love in the world.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*25 November 2009*

## **Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At these Wednesday Audiences I am presenting several exemplary figures of believers who were dedicated to showing the harmony between reason and faith and to witnessing with their lives to the proclamation of the Gospel. I intend to speak today about Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor. Both were among those philosophers and theologians known as “Victorines” because they lived and taught at the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, founded at the beginning of the 12th century by William of Champeaux. William himself was a well-known teacher who succeeded in giving his abbey a solid cultural identity. Indeed, a school for the formation of the monks, also open to external students, was founded at Saint-Victor, where a felicitous synthesis was achieved between the two theological models of which I have spoken in previous Catecheses. These are monastic theology, primarily oriented to contemplation of the mysteries of the faith in Scripture; and scholastic theology, which aimed to use reason to scrutinize these mysteries with innovative methods in order to create a theological system.

We have little information about the life of Hugh of Saint-Victor. The date and place of his birth are uncertain; he may have been born in Saxony or in Flanders. It is known that having arrived in Paris the European cultural capital at that time he spent the rest of his days at the Abbey of Saint-Victor, where he was first a disciple and subsequently a teacher. Even before his death in 1141, he earned great fame and esteem, to the point that he was called a “second St Augustine”. Like Augustine, in fact, he meditated deeply on the relationship between faith and reason, between the secular sciences and theology. According to Hugh of Saint-Victor, in addition to being useful for understanding the Scriptures, all the branches of knowledge have intrinsic value and must be cultivated in order to broaden human knowledge, as well as to answer the human longing to know the truth. This healthy intellectual curiosity led him to counsel students always to give free reign to their desire to learn. In his treatise on the methodology of knowledge and pedagogy, entitled significantly *Didascalicon (On Teaching)* his recommendation was: “Learn willingly what you do not know from everyone. The person who has sought to learn something from everyone will be wiser than them all. The person who receives

something from everyone ends by becoming the richest of all” (*Eruditiones Didascalicae*, 3, 14; *PL* 176, 774).

The knowledge with which the philosophers and theologians known as *Victorines* were concerned in particular was theology, which requires first and foremost the loving study of Sacred Scripture. In fact, in order to know God one cannot but begin with what God himself has chosen to reveal of himself in the Scriptures. In this regard Hugh of Saint-Victor is a typical representative of monastic theology, based entirely on biblical exegesis. To interpret Scripture he suggests the traditional patristic and medieval structure, namely, the literal and historical sense first of all, then the allegorical and anagogical and, lastly, the moral. These are four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture that are being rediscovered even today. For this reason one sees that in the text and in the proposed narrative a more profound meaning is concealed: the thread of faith that leads us heavenwards and guides us on this earth, teaching us how to live. Yet, while respecting these four dimensions of the meaning of Scripture, in an original way in comparison with his contemporaries, Hugh of Saint-Victor insists and this is something new on the importance of the historical and literal meaning. In other words before discovering the symbolic value, the deeper dimensions of the biblical text, it is necessary to know and to examine the meaning of the event as it is told in Scripture. Otherwise, he warns, using an effective comparison, one risks being like grammarians who do not know the elementary rules. To those who know the meaning of history as described in the Bible, human events appear marked by divine Providence, in accordance with a clearly ordained plan. Thus, for Hugh of Saint-Victor, history is neither the outcome of a blind destiny nor as meaningless as it might seem. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit is at work in human history and inspires the marvellous dialogue of human beings with God, their friend. This theological view of history highlights the astonishing and salvific intervention of God who truly enters and acts in history. It is almost as if he takes part in our history, while ever preserving and respecting the human being’s freedom and responsibility.

Our author considered that the study of Sacred Scripture and its historical and literal meaning makes possible true and proper theology, that is, the systematic illustration of truths, knowledge of their structure, the illustration of the dogmas of the faith. He presents these in a solid synthesis in his Treatise *De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei* (The Sacraments of the Christian Faith). Among other things, he provides a definition of “sacrament” which, further perfected by other theologians, contains ideas that are still very interesting today. “The sacrament is a corporeal or material element proposed in an external and tangible way”, he writes, “which by its likeness *makes present* an invisible and spiritual grace; it *signifies* it, because it was instituted to this end, and *contains* it, because it is capable of sanctifying” (9, 2: *PL* 176, 317). On the one hand is the visibility in the

symbol, the “corporeity” of the gift of God. On the other hand, however, in him is concealed the divine grace that comes from the history of Jesus Christ, who himself created the fundamental symbols. Therefore, there are three elements that contribute to the definition of a sacrament, according to Hugh of Saint-Victor: the institution by Christ; the communication of grace; and the analogy between the visible or material element and the invisible element: the divine gifts. This vision is very close to our contemporary understanding, because the sacraments are presented with a language interwoven with symbols and images capable of speaking directly to the human heart. Today too it is important that liturgical animators, and priests in particular, with pastoral wisdom, give due weight to the signs proper to sacramental rites to this visibility and tangibility of Grace. They should pay special attention to catechesis, to ensure that all the faithful experience every celebration of the sacraments with devotion, intensity and spiritual joy.

Richard, who came from Scotland, was Hugh of Saint-Victor's worthy disciple. He was prior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor from 1162 to 1173, the year of his death. Richard too, of course, assigned a fundamental role to the study of the Bible but, unlike his master, gave priority to the allegorical sense, the symbolic meaning of Scripture. This is what he uses, for example, in his interpretation of the Old Testament figure of Benjamin, the son of Jacob, as a model of contemplation and the epitome of the spiritual life. Richard addresses this topic in two texts, *Benjamin Minor* and *Benjamin Maior*. In these he proposes to the faithful a spiritual journey which is primarily an invitation to exercise the various virtues, learning to discipline and to control with reason the sentiments and the inner affective and emotional impulses. Only when the human being has attained balance and human maturity in this area is he or she ready to approach contemplation, which Richard defines as “a profound and pure gaze of the soul, fixed on the marvels of wisdom, combined with an ecstatic sense of wonder and admiration” (*Benjamin Maior* 1, 4: *PL* 196, 67).

Contemplation is therefore the destination, the result of an arduous journey that involves dialogue between faith and reason, that is once again a theological discourse. Theology stems from truths that are the subject of faith but seeks to deepen knowledge of them by the use of reason, taking into account the gift of faith. This application of reason to the comprehension of faith is presented convincingly in Richard's masterpiece, one of the great books of history, the *De Trinitate (The Trinity)*. In the six volumes of which it is composed he reflects perspicaciously on the Mystery of the Triune God. According to our author, since God is love the one divine substance includes communication, oblation and love between the two Persons, the Father and the Son, who are placed in a reciprocal, eternal exchange of love. However the perfection of happiness and goodness admits of no exclusivism or closure. On the contrary, it requires the eternal presence of a third

Person, the Holy Spirit. Trinitarian love is participatory, harmonious and includes a superabundance of delight, enjoyment and ceaseless joy. Richard, in other words, supposes that God is love, analyzes the essence of love of what the reality love entails and thereby arrives at the Trinity of the Persons, which really is the logical expression of the fact that God is love.

Yet Richard is aware that love, although it reveals to us the essence of God, although it makes us “understand” the Mystery of the Trinity, is nevertheless always an analogy that serves to speak of a Mystery that surpasses the human mind. Being the poet and mystic that he is, Richard also has recourse to other images. For example, he compares divinity to a river, to a loving wave which originates in the Father and ebbs and flows in the Son, to be subsequently spread with joy through the Holy Spirit.

Dear friends, authors such as Hugh and Richard of Saint-Victor raise our minds to contemplation of the divine realities. At the same time, the immense joy we feel at the thought, admiration and praise of the Blessed Trinity supports and sustains the practical commitment to be inspired by this perfect model of communion in love in order to build our daily human relationships. The Trinity is truly perfect communion! How the world would change if relations were always lived in families, in parishes and in every other community by following the example of the three divine Persons in whom each lives not only *with* the other, but *for* the other and *in* the other! A few months ago at the Angelus I recalled: “Love alone makes us happy because we live in a relationship, and we live to love and to be loved” (*Angelus*, Trinity Sunday, 7 June 2009). It is love that works this ceaseless miracle. As in the life of the Blessed Trinity, plurality is recomposed in unity, where all is kindness and joy. With St Augustine, held in great honour by the *Victorines*, we too may exclaim: “*Vides Trinitatem, si caritatem vides* you contemplate the Trinity, if you see charity” (*De Trinitate* VIII, 8, 12).

### **To special groups**

I offer a warm welcome to the pilgrimage of Bishops and faithful from Japan celebrating the first anniversary of the Beatification of Blessed Peter Kibe and Companions. My cordial greeting also goes to the groups from Denmark and the United States of America. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today’s Audience, I invoke God’s Blessings of joy and peace!

I would also like to address a warm greeting to the directors and operators of *Télé Lumière Noursat* of Lebanon, as well as to their President, Bishop Aboujaoudé. Dear friends, I encourage you to persevere generously in your mission at the service of Gospel proclamation, peace and reconciliation in Leban and throughout the region. I impart to you all and to all the viewers of *Noursat* a special Apostolic Blessing.



Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Season of Advent begins next Sunday. I urge you, *young people*, to live this “strong time” with vigilant prayer and generous evangelical commitment. I encourage you, *sick people*, to sustain with the offering of your suffering, the process of preparation for Holy Christmas of the Christian people. I hope that you, *newlyweds*, may be witnesses of the Spirit of love who enlivens and supports the entire Family of God.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*2 December 2009*

## **William of Saint-Thierry**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In a previous Catechesis I presented Bernard of Clairvaux, the “Doctor Mellifluus”, a great protagonist of the 12th century. His biographer a friend who esteemed him was William of Saint-Thierry on whom I am reflecting in this morning's Catechesis.

William was born in Liège between 1075 and 1080. He came from a noble family, was endowed with a keen intelligence and an innate love of study. He attended famous schools of the time, such as those in his native city and in Rheims, France. He also came into personal contact with Abelard, the teacher who applied philosophy to theology in such an original way as to give rise to great perplexity and opposition. William also expressed his own reservations, pressing his friend Bernard to take a stance concerning Abelard. Responding to God's mysterious and irresistible call which is the vocation to the consecrated life, William entered the Benedictine Monastery of Saint-Nicasius in Rheims in 1113. A few years later he became abbot of the Monastery of Saint-Thierry in the Diocese of Rheims. In that period there was a widespread need for the purification and renewal of monastic life to make it authentically evangelical. William worked on doing this in his own monastery and in general in the Benedictine Order. However, he met with great resistance to his attempts at reform and thus, although his friend Bernard advised him against it, in 1135 he left the Benedictine abbey and exchanged his black habit for a white one in order to join the Cistercians of Signy. From that time, until his death in 1148, he devoted himself to prayerful contemplation of God's mysteries, ever the subject of his deepest desires, and to the composition of spiritual literature, important writings in the history of monastic theology.

One of his first works is entitled *De Natura et dignitate amoris* (*The nature and dignity of love*). In it William expressed one of his basic ideas that is also valid for us. The principal energy that moves the human soul, he said, is love. Human nature, in its deepest essence, consists in loving. Ultimately, a single task is entrusted to every human being: to

learn to like and to love, sincerely, authentically and freely. However, it is only from God's teaching that this task is learned and that the human being may reach the end for which he was created. Indeed, William wrote: "The art of arts is the art of love.... Love is inspired by the Creator of nature. Love is a force of the soul that leads it as by a natural weight to its own place and end" (*De Natura et dignitate amoris* 1 PL 184, 379). Learning to love is a long and demanding process that is structured by William in four stages, corresponding to the ages of the human being: childhood, youth, maturity and old-age. On this journey the person must impose upon himself an effective asceticism, firm self-control to eliminate every irregular affection, every capitulation to selfishness, and to unify his own life in God, the source, goal and force of love, until he reaches the summit of spiritual life which William calls "wisdom". At the end of this ascetic process, the person feels deep serenity and sweetness. All the human being's faculties intelligence, will, affection rest in God, known and loved in Christ.

In other works too, William speaks of this radical vocation to love for God which is the secret of a successful and happy life and which he describes as a ceaseless, growing desire, inspired by God himself in the human heart. In a meditation he says "that the object of this love is Love" with a capital "L", namely God. It is he who pours himself out into the hearts of those who love him and prepares them to receive him. "God gives himself until the person is sated and in such a way that the desire is never lacking. This impetus of love is the fulfilment of the human being" (*De Contemplando Deo* 6, *passim*, SC 61 bis, pp. 79–83). The considerable importance that William gives to the emotional dimension is striking. Basically, dear friends, our hearts are made of flesh and blood, and when we love God, who is Love itself, how can we fail to express in this relationship with the Lord our most human feelings, such as tenderness, sensitivity and delicacy? In becoming Man, the Lord himself wanted to love us with a heart of flesh!

Moreover, according to William, love has another important quality: it illuminates the mind and enables one to know God better and more profoundly and, in God, people and events. The knowledge that proceeds from the senses and the intelligence reduces but does not eliminate the distance between the subject and the object, between the "I" and the "you". Love, on the other hand, gives rise to attraction and communion, to the point that transformation and assimilation take place between the subject who loves and the beloved object. This reciprocity of affection and liking subsequently permits a far deeper knowledge than that which is brought by reason alone. A famous saying of William expresses it: "*Amor ipse intellectus est* love in itself is already the beginning of knowledge". Dear friends, let us ask ourselves: is not our life just like this? Is it not perhaps true that we only truly know *who* and *what* we love? Without a certain fondness one knows no one and nothing! And this applies first of all to the knowledge of God and his mysteries that exceed our mental capacity to understand: God is known if he is loved!

A synthesis of William of Saint-Thierry's thought is contained in a long letter addressed to the Carthusians of Mont-Dieu, whom he visited and wished to encourage and console. Already in 1690, the learned Benedictine Jean Mabillon, gave this letter a meaningful title: *Epistola Aurea* (*Golden Epistle*). In fact, the teachings on spiritual life that it contains are invaluable for all those who wish to increase in communion with God and in holiness. In this treatise, William proposes an itinerary in three stages. It is necessary, he says, to move on from the "animal" being to the "rational" one, in order to attain to the "spiritual". What does our author mean by these three terms? To start with, a person accepts the vision of life inspired by faith with an act of obedience and trust. Then, with a process of interiorization, in which the reason and the will play an important role, faith in Christ is received with profound conviction and one feels a harmonious correspondence between what is believed and what is hoped, and the most secret aspirations of the soul, our reason, our affections. One therefore arrives at the perfection of spiritual life when the realities of faith are a source of deep joy and real and satisfying communion with God. One lives only in love and for love. William based this process on a solid vision of the human being inspired by the ancient Greek Fathers, especially Origen who, with bold language, taught that the human being's vocation was to become like God who created him in his image and likeness. The image of God present in man impels him toward likeness, that is, toward an ever fuller identity between his own will and the divine will. One does not attain this perfection, which William calls "unity of spirit", by one's own efforts, even if they are sincere and generous, because something else is necessary. This perfection is reached through the action of the Holy Spirit who takes up his abode in the soul and purifies, absorbs and transforms into charity every impulse and desire of love that is present in the human being. "Then there is a further likeness to God", we read in the *Epistola Aurea*, "which is no longer called 'likeness' but 'unity of spirit', when the person becomes one with God, one in spirit, not only because of the unity of an identical desire but through being unable to desire anything else. In this way the human being deserves to become not God but what God is: man becomes through grace what God is by nature" (*Epistola Aurea* 262–263, SC 223, pp. 353–355).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, this author, whom we might describe as the "Singer of Charity, of Love", teaches us to make the basic decision in our lives which gives meaning and value to all our other decisions: to love God and, through love of him, to love our neighbour; only in this manner shall we be able to find true joy, an anticipation of eternal beatitude. Let us therefore learn from the Saints in order to learn to love authentically and totally, to set our being on this journey. Together with a young Saint, a Doctor of the Church, Thérèse of the Child Jesus, let us tell the Lord that we too want to live of love. And I conclude with a prayer precisely by this Saint: "You know I love you, Jesus Christ, my Own! Your Spirit's fire of love enkindles me. By loving you, I draw the Father here, down to my heart, to stay with me always. Blessed Trinity! You are my prisoner dear, of love, today.... To*

*live of love, 'tis without stint to give. And never count the cost, nor ask reward.... O Heart Divine, o'erflowing with tenderness, How swift I run, who all to You has given! Naught but your love I need, my life to bless" [To live of love].*

### **To special groups**

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including the priests from Scotland celebrating their ordination jubilees and the students and staff from St Mary's High School, Casino, Australia. May your Advent visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant Blessings!

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today is the 25th anniversary of the promulgation of the Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, which called attention to the importance of the Sacrament of Penance in the life of the Church. On this important anniversary I would like to remember certain extraordinary "apostles of the confessional", unflagging stewards of divine mercy: St John Mary Vianney, St Joseph Cafasso, St Leopold Mandic, St Pius of Pietrelcina. May their witness of faith and charity help you, dear *young people*, to steer clear of sin and to plan your future as a generous service to God and to your neighbour. May it help you, dear *sick people*, to experience in suffering the mercy of the Crucified Christ. And may it urge you, dear *newlyweds*, to create in your families an atmosphere of constant faith and mutual understanding. Lastly, may the example of these Saints, persevering and faithful ministers of divine forgiveness be for priests especially in this Year for Priests and for all Christians an invitation to trust always in the goodness of God, receiving and celebrating with trust the sacrament of Reconciliation.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*9 December 2009*

## **Rupert of Deutz**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today we become acquainted with another 12th-century Benedictine monk. His name is Rupert of Deutz, a city near Cologne, home to a famous monastery. Rupert himself speaks of his own life in one of his most important works entitled *The Glory and Honour of the Son of Man [De gloria et honore filii hominis super Matthaeum]*, which is a commentary on part of the Gospel according to Matthew. While still a boy he was received at the Benedictine Monastery of St Laurence at Liège as an "oblate", in accordance with the custom at that time of entrusting one of the sons to the monks for his education, intending to make him a gift to God. Rupert always loved monastic life. He quickly

learned Latin in order to study the Bible and to enjoy the liturgical celebrations. He distinguished himself for his moral rectitude, straight as a die, and his strong attachment to the See of St Peter.

Rupert's time was marked by disputes between the Papacy and the Empire, because of the so-called "Investiture Controversy" with which as I have mentioned in other Catecheses the Papacy wished to prevent the appointment of Bishops and the exercise of their jurisdiction from depending on the civil authorities who were certainly not guided by pastoral reasons but for the most part by political and financial considerations. Bishop Otbert of Liège resisted the Pope's directives and exiled Berengarius, Abbot of the Monastery of St Laurence, because of his fidelity to the Pontiff. It was in this monastery that Rupert lived. He did not hesitate to follow his Abbot into exile and only when Bishop Otbert returned to communion with the Pope did he return to Liège and agree to become a priest. Until that moment, in fact, he had avoided receiving ordination from a Bishop in dissent with the Pope. Rupert teaches us that when controversies arise in the Church the reference to the Petrine ministry guarantees fidelity to sound doctrine and is a source of serenity and inner freedom. After the dispute with Otbert Rupert was obliged to leave his monastery again twice. In 1116 his adversaries even wanted to take him to court. Although he was acquitted of every accusation, Rupert preferred to go for a while to Siegburg; but since on his return to the monastery in Liège the disputes had not yet ceased, he decided to settle definitively in Germany. In 1120 he was appointed Abbot of Deutz where, except for making a pilgrimage to Rome in 1124, he lived until 1129, the year of his death.

*A fertile writer, Rupert left numerous works, still today of great interest because he played an active part in various important theological discussions of his time. For example, he intervened with determination in the Eucharistic controversy, which in 1077 led to his condemnation by Berengarius of Tours. Berengarius had given a reductive interpretation of Christ's presence in the Sacrament of the Eucharist, describing it as merely symbolic. In the language of the Church the term "transubstantiation" was as yet unknown but Rupert, at times with daring words, made himself a staunch supporter of the Eucharistic reality and, especially in a work entitled De divinis officiis (On divine offices), purposefully asserted the continuity between the Body of the Incarnate Word of Christ and that present in the Eucharistic species of the bread and the wine. Dear Brothers and Sisters, it seems to me that at this point we must also think of our time; today too we are in danger of reappraising the Eucharistic reality, that is, of considering the Eucharist almost as a rite of communion, of socialization alone, forgetting all too easily that the Risen Christ is really present in the Eucharist with his Risen Body which is placed in our hands to draw us out of ourselves, to incorporate us into his immortal body and thereby lead us to new life. This great mystery that the Lord is present in his full reality in the Eucharistic species is a mystery to be adored and loved ever anew! I would like here to quote the words of the Catechism of the Catholic Church which bear the*

fruit of 2,000 years of meditation on the faith and theological reflection: “The mode of Christ’s presence under the Eucharistic species is unique and incomparable.... In the most blessed sacrament of the Eucharist “the Body and Blood, together with the soul and divinity, of our Lord Jesus Christ ... is truly, really, and substantially contained’.... It is a substantial presence by which Christ, God and man, makes himself wholly and entirely present ... by the Eucharistic species of the bread the wine” (cf. n. 1374). Rupert too contributed with his reflections to this precise formulation.

Another controversy in which the Abbot of Deutz was involved concerns the problem of the reconciliation of God’s goodness and omnipotence with the existence of evil. If God is omnipotent and good, how is it possible to explain the reality of evil? Rupert, in fact, reacted to the position assumed by the teachers of the theological school of Laon, who, with a series of philosophical arguments, distinguished in God’s will the “to approve” and the “to permit”, concluding that God permits evil without approving it and hence without desiring it. Rupert, on the other hand, renounces the use of philosophy, which he deems inadequate for addressing such a great problem, and remains simply faithful to the biblical narration. He starts with the goodness of God, with the truth that God is supremely good and cannot desire anything but good. Thus he identifies the origin of evil in the human being himself and in the erroneous use of human freedom. When Rupert addresses this topic he writes pages filled with religious inspiration to praise the Father’s infinite mercy, God’s patience with the sinful human being and his kindness to him.

Like other medieval theologians, Rupert too wondered why the Word of God, the Son of God, was made man. Some, many, answered by explaining the Incarnation of the Word by the urgent need to atone for human sin. Rupert, on the other hand, with a Christocentric vision of salvation history, broadens the perspective, and in a work entitled *The Glorification of the Trinity*, sustains the position that the Incarnation, the central event of the whole of history was planned from eternity, even independently of human sin, so that the whole creation might praise God the Father and love him as one family gathered round Christ, the Son of God. Then he saw in the pregnant woman of the Apocalypse the entire history of humanity which is oriented to Christ, just as conception is oriented to birth, a perspective that was to be developed by other thinkers and enhanced by contemporary theology, which says that the whole history of the world and of humanity is a conception oriented to the birth of Christ. Christ is always the centre of the exegetic explanations provided by Rupert in his commentaries on the Books of the Bible, to which he dedicated himself with great diligence and passion. Thus, he rediscovers a wonderful unity in all the events of the history of salvation, from the creation until the final consummation of time: “All Scripture”, he says, “is one book, which aspires to the same end (the divine Word); which comes from one God and was written by one Spirit” (*De glorificatione Trinitatis et procesione Sancti spiritus* I, V, PL 169, 18).

In the interpretation of the Bible, Rupert did not limit himself to repeating the teaching of the Fathers, but shows an originality of his own. For example, he is the first writer to have identified the bride in the Song of Songs with Mary Most Holy. His commentary on this book of Scripture has thus turned out to be a sort of Mariological *summa*, in which he presents Mary's privileges and excellent virtues. In one of the most inspired passages of his commentary Rupert writes: "O most beloved among the beloved, Virgin of virgins, what does your beloved Son so praise in you that the whole choir of angels exalts? What they praise is your simplicity, purity, innocence, doctrine, modesty, humility, integrity of mind and body, that is, your incorrupt virginity" (*In Canticum Canticorum* 4, 1–6, CCL 26, pp. 69–70). The Marian interpretation of Rupert's *Canticum* is a felicitous example of harmony between liturgy and theology. In fact, various passages of this Book of the Bible were already used in liturgical celebrations on Marian feasts.

Rupert, furthermore, was careful to insert his Mariological doctrine into that ecclesiological doctrine. That is to say, he saw in Mary Most Holy the holiest part of the whole Church. For this reason my venerable Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, in his Discourse for the closure of the third session of the Second Vatican Council, in solemnly pronouncing Mary Mother of the Church, even cited a proposal taken from Rupert's works, which describes Mary as *portio maxima*, *portio optima* the most sublime part, the very best part of the Church (cf. *In Apocalypsem* 1, 7, PL 169, 1043).

Dear friends, from these rapid allusions we realize that Rupert was a fervent theologian endowed with great depth. Like all the representatives of monastic theology, he was able to combine rational study of the mysteries of faith with prayer and contemplation, which he considered the summit of all knowledge of God. He himself sometimes speaks of his mystical experiences, such as when he confides his ineffable joy at having perceived the Lord's presence: "in that brief moment", he says, "I experienced how true what he himself says is. *Learn from me for I am meek and humble of heart*" (*De gloria et honore Filii hominis. Super Matthaicum* 12, PL 1168, 1601). We too, each one of us in our own way, can encounter the Lord Jesus who ceaselessly accompanies us on our way, makes himself present in the Eucharistic Bread and in his Word for our salvation.

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience. I greet especially the groups from South Korea, South Africa and the United States of America. As we prepare with joy to celebrate our Saviour's birth this Christmas, let us renew our commitment to bring the light of Christ to those we meet. May God bless you all!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception that we celebrated yesterday, reminds us of Mary's unique adherence to God's saving plan.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*16 December 2009*

## John of Salisbury

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today we shall become acquainted with John of Salisbury who belonged to one of the most important schools of philosophy and theology of the Middle Ages, that of the Cathedral of Chartres in France. Like the theologians of whom I have spoken in the past few weeks, John too helps us understand that faith, in harmony with the just aspirations of reason, impels thought toward the revealed truth in which is found the true good of the human being.

John was born in Salisbury, England, between 1100 and 1120. In reading his works, and especially the large collection of his letters, we learn about the most important events in his life. For about 12 years, from 1136 to 1148, he devoted himself to study, attending the best schools of his day where he heard the lectures of famous teachers. He went to Paris and then to Chartres, the environment that made the greatest impression on his formation and from which he assimilated his great cultural openness, his interest in speculative problems and his appreciation of literature. As often happened in that time, the most brilliant students were chosen by prelates and sovereigns to be their close collaborators. This also happened to John of Salisbury, who was introduced to Theobald, Archbishop of Canterbury the Primatial See of England by a great friend of his, Bernard of Clairvaux. Theobald was glad to welcome John among his clergy. For 11 years, from 1150 to 1161, John was the secretary and chaplain of the elderly Archbishop. With unflagging zeal he continued to devote himself to study; he carried out an intense diplomatic activity, going to Italy ten times for the explicit purpose of fostering relations between the Kingdom and Church of England and the Roman Pontiff. Among other things, the Pope in those years was Adrian IV, an Englishman who was a close friend of John of Salisbury. In the years following Adrian IV's death, in 1159, a situation of serious tension arose in England, between the Church and the Kingdom. In fact, King Henry II wished to impose his authority on the internal life of the Church, curtailing her freedom. This stance provoked John of Salisbury to react and, in particular, prompted the valiant resistance of St Thomas Becket, Theobald's successor on the episcopal throne of Canterbury, who for this reason was exiled to France. John of Salisbury accompanied



him and remained in his service, working ceaselessly for reconciliation. In 1170, when both John and Thomas Becket had returned to England, Thomas was attacked and murdered in his cathedral. He died a martyr and was immediately venerated as such by the people. John continued to serve faithfully the successor of Thomas as well, until he was appointed Bishop of Chartres where he lived from 1176 until 1180, the year of his death.

I would like to point out two of John of Salisbury's works that are considered his masterpieces, bearing elegant Greek titles: *Metalogicon* (In Defence of Logic), and *Policraticus* (The Man of Government). In the first of these works, not without that fine irony that is a feature of many scholars, he rejects the position of those who had a reductionist conception of culture, which they saw as empty eloquence and vain words. John, on the contrary, praises culture, authentic philosophy, that is, the encounter between rigorous thought and communication, effective words. He writes: "Indeed, just as eloquence that is not illuminated by reason is not only rash but blind, so wisdom that does not profit from the use of words is not only weak but in a certain way is mutilated. Indeed, although, at times, wisdom without words might serve to square the individual with his own conscience, it is of rare or little profit to society" (*Metalogicon*, 1, 1, PL 199, 327). This is a very timely teaching. Today, what John described as "eloquence", that is, the possibility of communicating with increasingly elaborate and widespread means, has increased enormously. Yet the need to communicate messages endowed with "wisdom", that is inspired by truth, goodness and beauty is more urgent than ever. This is a great responsibility that calls into question in particular the people who work in the multiform and complex world of culture, of communications, of the *media*. And this is a realm in which the Gospel can be proclaimed with missionary zeal.

In the *Metalogicon* John treats the problems of logic, in his day a subject of great interest, and asks himself a fundamental question: what can human reason know? To what point can it correspond with the aspiration that exists in every person, namely, to seek the truth? John of Salisbury adopts a moderate position, based on the teaching of certain treatises of Aristotle and Cicero. In his opinion human reason normally attains knowledge that is not indisputable but probable and arguable. Human knowledge this is his conclusion is imperfect, because it is subject to finiteness, to human limitations. Nevertheless it grows and is perfected, thanks to the experience and elaboration of correct and consistent reasoning, able to make connections between concepts and the reality, through discussion, exchanges and knowledge that is enriched from one generation to the next. Only in God is there perfect knowledge which is communicated to the human being, at least partially, by means of Revelation received in faith, which is why the knowledge of faith, theology, unfolds the potential of reason and makes it possible to advance with humility in the knowledge of God's mysteries.

The believer and the theologian who deepen the treasure of faith, also open themselves to a practical knowledge that guides our daily activity, in other words moral law and the exercise of the virtues. John of Salisbury writes: “God’s clemency has granted us his law, which establishes what it is useful for us to know and points out to us what it is legitimate for us to know of God and what it is right to investigate.... In this law, in fact, the will of God is explained and revealed so that each one of us may know what he needs to do” (*Metalogicon* 4, 41, PL 199, 944–945). According to John of Salisbury an immutable objective truth also exists, whose origin is in God, accessible to human reason and which concerns practical and social action. It is a natural law that must inspire human laws and political and religious authorities, so that they may promote the common good. This natural law is characterized by a property that John calls “equity”, that is, the attribution to each person of his own rights. From this stem precepts that are legitimate for all peoples, and in no way can they be abrogated. This is the central thesis of *Policraticus*, the treatise of philosophy and political theology in which John of Salisbury reflects on the conditions that render government leaders’ just and acceptable.

Whereas other arguments addressed in this work are linked to the historical circumstances in which it was composed, the theme of the relationship between natural law and a positive juridical order, mediated by equity, is still of great importance today. In our time, in fact, especially in some countries, we are witnessing a disturbing divergence between reason, whose task is to discover the ethical values linked to the dignity of the human person, and freedom, whose responsibility is to accept and promote them. Perhaps John of Salisbury would remind us today that the only laws in conformity with equity are those that protect the sacredness of human life and reject the licitness of abortion, euthanasia and bold genetic experimentation, those laws that respect the dignity of marriage between a man and a woman, that are inspired by a correct secularism of the State a secularism that always entails the safeguard of religious freedom and that pursue subsidiarity and solidarity at both the national and the international level. If this were not so, what John of Salisbury terms the “tyranny of princes”, or as we would say, “the dictatorship of relativism” would end by coming to power, a relativism, as I recalled a few years ago, “which does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one’s own ego and desires” (Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals, *Homily, Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff*, 18 April 2005).

In my most recent Encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, in addressing people of good will who strive to ensure that social and political action are never separated from the objective truth about man and his dignity, I wrote: “Truth, and the love which it reveals, cannot be produced: they can only be received as a gift. Their ultimate source is not, and cannot be, mankind, but only God, who is himself Truth and Love. This principle is extremely

important for society and for development, since neither can be a purely human product; the vocation to development on the part of individuals and peoples is not based simply on human choice, but is an intrinsic part of a plan that is prior to us and constitutes for all of us a duty to be freely accepted” (n. 52). We must seek and welcome this plan that precedes us, this truth of being, so that justice may be born, but we may find it and welcome it only with a heart, a will and a reason purified in the light of God.

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the student groups present today from England, Ireland and the United States. My cordial greeting also goes to the pilgrims from Kenya and Nigeria. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

I greet you, dear *young people*, dear *sick people* and dear *newlyweds*, with great affection. In this Season of Advent, the Lord tells us through the words of the Prophet Isaiah: “*Turn to me and be saved*” (45:22). Dear boys and girls who come from so many schools and parishes in Italy, make room in your hearts for Jesus who comes, to testify to his joy and his peace. Dear *sick people*, welcome the Lord in your lives to find in the encounter with him comfort and consolation. And you, dear *newlyweds*, make the Christmas message of love your family's rule of life.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*23 December 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

With the Christmas Novena which we are celebrating in these days the Church invites us to live intensely and profoundly the preparation for the Saviour's Birth, now at hand. The desire we all carry in our hearts is that in the midst of the frenzied activity of our day the forthcoming Feast of Christmas may give us serene and profound joy to make us tangibly feel the goodness of Our Lord and imbue us with new courage.

To understand better the meaning of the Lord's Birth I would like to make a brief allusion to the historical origins of this Solemnity. In fact, at the outset the Liturgical Year of the Church did not develop primarily from Christ's Birth but rather from faith in his Resurrection. Thus Christianity's most ancient Feast is not Christmas but Easter; the Christian faith is founded on Christ's Resurrection, which is at the root of the proclamation of the Gospel and gave birth to the Church. Therefore being Christian means living in a Paschal manner, letting ourselves be involved in the dynamism that originated in Baptism and leads to dying to sin in order to live with God (cf. Rom 6:4).

Hippolytus of Rome, in his commentary on the Book of the Prophet Daniel, written in about a.d. 204, was the first person to say clearly that Jesus was born on 25 December. Moreover, some exegetes note that the Feast of the Dedication of the Temple of Jerusalem, instituted by Judas Machabee in 164 b.c., was celebrated on that day. The coincidence of dates would consequently mean that with Jesus, who appeared as God's Light in the darkness, the consecration of the Temple, the Advent of God to this earth, was truly brought about.

For Christianity the Feast of Christmas acquired its definitive form in the fourth century when it replaced the Roman Feast of the *Sol invictus*, the invincible sun. This highlighted the fact that Christ's Birth was the victory of the true Light over the darkness of evil and sin. However, the special, intense spiritual atmosphere that surrounds Christmas developed in the Middle Ages, thanks to St Francis of Assisi who was profoundly in love with the man Jesus, God-with-us. The Saint's first biographer, Thomas of Celano, recounts in his *Vita Secunda* that St Francis "Over and above all the other Solemnities, celebrated with ineffable tenderness the Nativity of the Child Jesus, and called 'the Feast of Feasts' the day on which God, having become a tiny child, suckled at a human breast" (cf. *Fonti Francescane*, n. 199, p. 492). This particular devotion to the mystery of the Incarnation gave rise to the famous celebration of Christmas at Greccio. Francis probably drew the inspiration for this from his pilgrimage to the Holy Land and from the manger at St Mary Major in Rome. What motivated the *Poverello* of Assisi was the wish to experience as real, living and actual the humble grandeur of the event of the Child Jesus' Birth, and to communicate the joy of it to all.

In his first biography Thomas of Celano speaks of the night of the nativity scene at Greccio in a lively and moving way, making a crucial contribution to spreading the most beautiful Christmas tradition, that of the crib. Indeed, the night at Greccio restored to Christianity the intensity and beauty of the Feast of Christmas and taught the People of God to perceive its most authentic message, its special warmth, and to love and worship the humanity of Christ. This particular approach to Christmas gave the Christian faith a new dimension. Easter had focused attention on the power of God who triumphs over death, inaugurates new life and teaches us to hope in the world to come. St Francis with his crib highlighted the defenceless love of God, his humanity and his kindness; God manifested himself to humanity in the Incarnation of the Word to teach people a new way of living and loving.

Celano relates that on that Christmas night Francis was granted the grace of a marvellous vision. He saw lying in the manger a tiny Child who was awakened by Francis' presence. And Celano adds: "Nor did this vision differ from the events because, through the work of his grace which acted through his holy servant, Francis, the Child Jesus was revived in

the hearts of many who had forgotten him and was deeply impressed upon their loving memory” (cf. *Vita Prima, op. cit.*, n. 86, p. 307). This setting describes in great detail all that Francis’ living faith and love for Christ’s humanity imparted to the Christian celebration of Christmas: the discovery that God reveals himself in the tender limbs of the Infant Jesus. Thanks to St Francis, the Christian people were able to perceive that at Christmas God truly became the “Emmanuel”, the God-with-us from whom no barrier nor any distance can separate us. Thus, in that Child, God became close to each one of us, so close that we are able to speak intimately to him and engage in a trusting relationship of deep affection with him, just as we do with any newborn baby.

In that Child, in fact, God-Love is manifest: God comes without weapons, without force, because he does not want to conquer, so to speak, from the outside, but rather wants to be freely received by the human being. God makes himself a defenceless Child to overcome pride, violence and the human desire to possess. In Jesus God took on this poor, disarming condition to win us with love and lead us to our true identity. We must not forget that the most important title of Jesus Christ is, precisely, that of “Son”, Son of God; the divine dignity is indicated with a term that extends the reference to the humble condition of the manger in Bethlehem, although it corresponds uniquely to his divinity, which is the divinity of the “Son”.

His condition as a Child also points out to us how we may encounter God and enjoy his presence. It is in the light of Christmas that we may understand Jesus’ words: “Unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven” (Mt 18:3). Those who have not understood the mystery of Christmas, have not understood the crucial element of Christian life. Those who do not welcome Jesus with a child’s heart, cannot enter into the Kingdom of Heaven: this is what Francis wished to remind the Christians of his time and of all times, until today. Let us pray the Father to grant us that simplicity of heart which recognizes the Lord in the Child, just as Francis did in Greccio. Then what Thomas of Celano recounts referring to the experience of the shepherds on the Holy Night (cf. Lk 2:20) with regard to those who were present at the event in Greccio might happen to us: “each one went home full of ineffable joy” (cf. *Vita Prima, op. cit.*, n. 86, p. 479).

This is the wish that I formulate with affection for you, for your families and for all your loved ones. Happy Christmas to you all!

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, especially the groups from the Philippines and the United States. In these holy days, may

you and your families draw ever closer to the Lord and experience his heavenly gifts of love, joy and peace. Merry Christmas!

I would now like to greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. A few days before the Solemnity of Christmas may the love that God expressed to humanity in Christ's Birth increase in you, dear *young people*, the desire to serve the brethren generously. May it be for you, dear *sick people*, a source of serene comfort. May it inspire you, dear *newlyweds*, to consolidate your promise of love and reciprocal fidelity.

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

30 December 2009

## Peter Lombard

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At this last Audience of the year I would like to speak to you about Peter Lombard: he was a theologian who lived in the 12th century and enjoyed great fame because one of his works, entitled the *Sentences*, was used as a theological manual for many centuries.

So who was Peter Lombard? Although the information on his life is scarce it is possible to reconstruct the essential lines of his biography. He was born between the 11th and 12th centuries near Novara, in Northern Italy, in a region that once belonged to the Lombards. For this very reason he was nicknamed "the Lombard". He belonged to a modest family, as we may deduce from the letter of introduction that Bernard of Clairvaux wrote to Gilduin, Superior of the Abbey of Saint-Victor in Paris, asking him to give free accomodation to Peter who wanted to go to that city in order to study. In fact, even in the Middle Ages not only nobles or the rich might study and acquire important roles in ecclesial and social life but also people of humble origin such as, for example, Gregory vii, the Pope who stood up to the Emperor Henry vi, or Maurice of Sully, the Archbishop of Paris who commissioned the building of Notre-Dame and who was the son of a poor peasant.

Peter Lombard began his studies in Bologna and then went to Rheims and lastly to Paris. From 1140 he taught at the prestigious school of Notre-Dame. Esteemed and appreciated as a theologian, eight years later he was charged by Pope Eugene ii to examine the doctrine of Gilbert de la Porrée that was giving rise to numerous discussions because it was held to be not wholly orthodox. Having become a priest, he was appointed Bishop of Paris in 1159, a year before his death in 1160.

Like all theology teachers of his time, Peter also wrote discourses and commentaries on Sacred Scripture. His masterpiece, however, consists of the four Books of the *Sentences*.

This is a text which came into being for didactic purposes. According to the theological method in use in those times, it was necessary first of all to know, study and comment on the thought of the Fathers of the Church and of the other writers deemed authoritative. Peter therefore collected a very considerable amount of documentation, which consisted mainly of the teachings of the great Latin Fathers, especially St Augustine, and was open to the contribution of contemporary theologians. Among other things, he also used an encyclopedia of Greek theology which had only recently become known to the West: *The Orthodox faith*, composed by St John Damascene. The great merit of Peter Lombard is to have organized all the material that he had collected and chosen with care, in a systematic and harmonious framework. In fact one of the features of theology is to organize the patrimony of faith in a unitive and orderly way. Thus he distributed the sentences, that is, the Patristic sources on various arguments, in four books. In the first book he addresses God and the Trinitarian mystery; in the second, the work of the Creation, sin and Grace; in the third, the Mystery of the Incarnation and the work of Redemption with an extensive exposition on the virtues. The fourth book is dedicated to the sacraments and to the last realities, those of eternal life, or *Novissimi*. The overall view presented includes almost all the truths of the Catholic faith. The concise, clear vision and clear, orderly schematic and ever consistent presentation explain the extraordinary success of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*. They enabled students to learn reliably and gave the educators and teachers who used them plenty of room for acquiring deeper knowledge. A Franciscan theologian, Alexandre of Hales, of the next generation, introduced into the *Sentences* a division that facilitated their study and consultation. Even the greatest of the 13th-century theologians, Albert the Great, Bonaventure of Bagnoregio and Thomas Aquinas began their academic activity by commenting on the four books of Peter Lombard's *Sentences*, enriching them with their reflections. Lombard's text was the book in use at all schools of theology until the 16th century.

I would like to emphasize how the organic presentation of faith is an indispensable requirement. In fact, the individual truths of faith illuminate each other and, in their total and unitive vision appears the harmony of God's plan of salvation and the centrality of the Mystery of Christ. After the example of Peter Lombard, I invite all theologians and priests always to keep in mind the whole vision of the Christian doctrine, to counter today's risks of fragmentation and the debasement of the single truths. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, as well as the *Compendium* of this same Catechism, offer us exactly this full picture of Christian Revelation, to be accepted with faith and gratitude. However I would like to encourage the individual faithful and the Christian communities to make the most of these instruments to know and to deepen the content of our faith. It will thus appear to us as a marvellous symphony that speaks to us of God and of his love and asks of us firm adherence and an active response.

To get an idea of the interest that the reading of Peter Lombard's *Sentences* still inspires today I propose two examples. Inspired by St Augustine's Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Peter wonders why woman was created from man's rib and not from his head or his feet. And Peter explains: "She was formed neither as a dominator nor a slave of man but rather as his companion" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 3). Then, still on the basis of the Patristic teaching he adds: "The mystery of Christ and of the Church is represented in this act. Just as, in fact, woman was formed from Adam's rib while he slept, so the Church was born from the sacraments that began to flow from the side of Christ, asleep on the Cross, that is, from the blood and water with which we are redeemed from sin and cleansed of guilt" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 4). These are profound reflections that still apply today when the theology and spirituality of Christian marriage have considerably deepened the analogy with the spousal relationship of Christ and his Church.

In another passage in one of his principal works, Peter Lombard, treating the merits of Christ, asks himself: "Why, then does [Christ] wish to suffer and die, if his virtues were sufficient to obtain for himself all the merits?". His answer is incisive and effective: "For you, not for himself!". He then continues with another question and another answer, which seem to reproduce the discussions that went on during the lessons of medieval theology teachers: "And in what sense did he suffer and die for me? So that his Passion and his death might be an example and cause for you. An example of virtue and humility, a cause of glory and freedom; an example given by God, obedient unto death; a cause of your liberation and your beatitude" (*Sentences* 3, 18, 5).

Among the most important contributions offered by Peter Lombard to the history of theology, I would like to recall his treatise on the sacraments, of which he gave what I would call a definitive definition: "precisely what is a sign of God's grace and a visible form of invisible grace, in such a way that it bears its image and is its cause is called a sacrament in the proper sense" (4, 1, 4). With this definition Peter Lombard grasps the essence of the sacraments: they are a cause of grace, they are truly able to communicate divine life. Successive theologians never again departed from this vision and were also to use the distinction between the material and the formal element introduced by the "Master of the Sentences", as Peter Lombard was known. The material element is the tangible visible reality, the formal element consists of the words spoken by the minister. For a complete and valid celebration of the sacraments both are essential: matter, the reality with which the Lord visibly touches us and the word that conveys the spiritual significance. In Baptism, for example, the material element is the water that is poured on the head of the child and the formal element is the formula: "I baptize you in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit". Peter the Lombard, moreover, explained that the sacraments alone objectively transmit divine grace and they are seven: Baptism,



the Eucharist, Penance, the Unction of the sick, Orders and Matrimony (cf. *Sentences* 4, 2, 1).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, it is important to recognize how precious and indispensable for every Christian is the sacramental life in which the Lord transmits this matter in the community of the Church, and touches and transforms us. As the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, the sacraments are “powers that come forth from the Body of Christ, which is ever-living and life-giving. They are actions of the Holy Spirit” (n. 1116). In this Year for Priests which we are celebrating I urge priests, especially ministers in charge of souls, to have an intense sacramental life themselves in the first place in order to be of help to the faithful. May the celebration of the sacraments be impressed with dignity and decorum, encourage personal recollection and community participation, the sense of God’s presence and missionary zeal. The sacraments are the great treasure of the Church and it is the task of each one of us to celebrate them with spiritual profit. In them an ever amazing event touches our lives: Christ, through the visible signs, comes to us, purifies us, transforms us and makes us share in his divine friendship.*

Dear friends, we have come to the end of this year and to the threshold of the New Year. I hope that the friendship of Our Lord Jesus Christ will accompany you every day of this year that is about to begin. May Christ’s friendship be our light and guide, helping us to be people of peace, of his peace. Happy New Year to you all!

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to greet the pilgrimage groups from Ireland, Switzerland and the United States of America, and I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, I invoke the joy and peace of Jesus Christ, our Newborn Saviour!

I now greet the Italian-speaking pilgrims and, in particular, the *young people*, the *sick*, and the couples of *newlyweds*, expressing the wish that for all the new year will be peaceful and rich in every desired good.

Dear *young people*, especially you Scouts from Soviore, may you live the New Year as a precious gift, striving to build your lives in the light of the truth that shines out from the holy grotto of Bethlehem. May you *sick people* be heralds of the hidden riches of the mystery of suffering that in Christ became the event of Redemption. May you, *newlyweds*, be able to build a family that is truly a Church in miniature and that is always able to proclaim with its words and example the Good News brought by the Angels to human beings beloved by God.



# Saint Thomas Aquinas

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After several Catecheses on the priesthood and on my latest Journeys, today we return to our main theme: meditation on some of the great thinkers of the Middle Ages. We recently looked at the great figure of St Bonaventure, a Franciscan, and today I wish to speak of the one whom the Church calls the *Doctor communis* namely, St Thomas Aquinas. In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, recalled that “the Church has been justified in consistently proposing St Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology” (n. 43). It is not surprising that, after St Augustine, among the ecclesiastical writers mentioned in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* St Thomas is cited more than any other, at least 61 times! He was also called the *Doctor Angelicus*, perhaps because of his virtues and, in particular, the sublimity of his thought and the purity of his life.

Thomas was born between 1224 and 1225 in the castle that his wealthy noble family owned at Roccasecca near Aquino, not far from the famous Abbey of Montecassino where his parents sent him to receive the first elements of his education. A few years later he moved to Naples, the capital of the Kingdom of Sicily, where Frederick II had founded a prestigious university. Here the thinking of the Greek philosopher Aristotle was taught without the limitations imposed elsewhere. The young Thomas was introduced to it and immediately perceived its great value. However, it was above all in those years that he spent in Naples that his Dominican vocation was born. Thomas was in fact attracted by the ideal of the Order recently founded by St Dominic. However, when he was clothed in the Dominican habit his family opposed this decision and he was obliged to leave the convent and spend some time at home.

In 1245, by which time he had come of age, he was able to continue on the path of his response to God’s call. He was sent to Paris to study theology under the guidance of another Saint, Albert the Great, of whom I spoke not long ago. A true and deep friendship developed between Albert and Thomas. They learned to esteem and love each other to the point that Albert even wanted his disciple to follow him to Cologne, where he had been sent by the Superiors of the Order to found a theological *studium*. Thomas then once again came into contact with all Aristotle’s works and his Arab commentators that Albert described and explained.

In this period the culture of the Latin world was profoundly stimulated by the encounter with Aristotle’s works that had long remained unknown. They were writings on the nature of knowledge, on the natural sciences, on metaphysics, on the soul and on ethics and were full of information and intuitions that appeared valid and convincing. All this

formed an overall vision of the world that had been developed without and before Christ, and with pure reason, and seemed to impose itself on reason as “the” vision itself; accordingly seeing and knowing this philosophy had an incredible fascination for the young. Many accepted enthusiastically, indeed with a-critical enthusiasm, this enormous baggage of ancient knowledge that seemed to be able to renew culture advantageously and to open totally new horizons. Others, however, feared that Aristotle’s pagan thought might be in opposition to the Christian faith and refused to study it. Two cultures converged: the pre-Christian culture of Aristotle with its radical rationality and the classical Christian culture. Certain circles, moreover, were led to reject Aristotle by the presentation of this philosopher which had been made by the Arab commentators. Avicenna and Averroës. Indeed, it was they who had transmitted the Aristotelian philosophy to the Latin world. For example, these commentators had taught that human beings have no personal intelligence but that there is a single universal intelligence, a spiritual substance common to all, that works in all as “one”: hence, a depersonalization of man. Another disputable point passed on by the Arab commentators was that the world was eternal like God. This understandably unleashed never-ending disputes in the university and clerical worlds. Aristotelian philosophy was continuing to spread even among the populace.

Thomas Aquinas, at the school of Albert the Great, did something of fundamental importance for the history of philosophy and theology, I would say for the history of culture: he made a thorough study of Aristotle and his interpreters, obtaining for himself new Latin translations of the original Greek texts. Consequently he no longer relied solely on the Arab commentators but was able to read the original texts for himself. He commented on most of the Aristotelian opus, distinguishing between what was valid and was dubious or to be completely rejected, showing its consonance with the events of the Christian Revelation and drawing abundantly and perceptively from Aristotle’s thought in the explanation of the theological texts he was uniting. In short, Thomas Aquinas showed that a natural harmony exists between Christian faith and reason. And this was the great achievement of Thomas who, at that time of clashes between two cultures that time when it seemed that faith would have to give in to reason showed that they go hand in hand, that insofar as reason appeared incompatible with faith it was not reason, and so what appeared to be faith was not faith, since it was in opposition to true rationality; thus he created a new synthesis which formed the culture of the centuries to come.

Because of his excellent intellectual gifts Thomas was summoned to Paris to be professor of theology on the Dominican chair. Here he began his literary production which continued until his death and has something miraculous about it: he commented on Sacred Scripture because the professor of theology was above all an interpreter of Scripture; and he commented on the writings of Aristotle, powerful systematic works,

among which stands out his *Summa Theologiae*, treatises and discourses on various subjects. He was assisted in the composition of his writings by several secretaries, including his confrere, Reginald of Piperno, who followed him faithfully and to whom he was bound by a sincere brotherly friendship marked by great confidence and trust. This is a characteristic of Saints: they cultivate friendship because it is one of the noblest manifestations of the human heart and has something divine about it, just as Thomas himself explained in some of the *Quaestiones* of his *Summa Theologiae*. He writes in it: “it is evident that charity is the friendship of man for God” and for “all belonging to him” (Vol. II, q. 23, a. 1).

He did not stay long or permanently in Paris. In 1259 he took part in the General Chapter of the Dominicans in Valenciennes where he was a member of a commission that established the Order’s programme of studies. Then from 1261 to 1265, Thomas was in Orvieto. Pope Urban IV, who held him in high esteem, commissioned him to compose liturgical texts for the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, which we are celebrating tomorrow, established subsequent to the Eucharistic miracle of Bolsena. Thomas had an exquisitely Eucharistic soul. The most beautiful hymns that the Liturgy of the Church sings to celebrate the mystery of the Real Presence of the Body and Blood of the Lord in the Eucharist are attributed to his faith and his theological wisdom. From 1265 until 1268 Thomas lived in Rome where he probably directed a *Studium*, that is, a study house of his Order, and where he began writing his *Summa Theologiae* (cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *Tommaso d’Aquino. L’uomo e il teologo*, Casale Monf., 1994, pp. 118–184).

In 1269 Thomas was recalled to Paris for a second cycle of lectures. His students understandably were enthusiastic about his lessons. One of his former pupils declared that a vast multitude of students took Thomas’ courses, so many that the halls could barely accommodate them; and this student added, making a personal comment, that “listening to him brought him deep happiness”. Thomas’ interpretation of Aristotle was not accepted by all, but even his adversaries in the academic field, such as Godfrey of Fontaines, for example, admitted that the teaching of Friar Thomas was superior to others for its usefulness and value and served to correct that of all the other masters. Perhaps also in order to distance him from the lively discussions that were going on, his Superiors sent him once again to Naples to be available to King Charles I who was planning to reorganize university studies.

In addition to study and teaching, Thomas also dedicated himself to preaching to the people. And the people too came willingly to hear him. I would say that it is truly a great grace when theologians are able to speak to the faithful with simplicity and fervour. The ministry of preaching, moreover, helps theology scholars themselves to have a healthy pastoral realism and enriches their research with lively incentives.

The last months of Thomas' earthly life remain surrounded by a particular, I would say, mysterious atmosphere. In December 1273, he summoned his friend and secretary Reginald to inform him of his decision to discontinue all work because he had realized, during the celebration of Mass subsequent to a supernatural revelation, that everything he had written until then "was worthless". This is a mysterious episode that helps us to understand not only Thomas' personal humility, but also the fact that, however lofty and pure it may be, all we manage to think and say about the faith is infinitely exceeded by God's greatness and beauty which will be fully revealed to us in Heaven. A few months later, more and more absorbed in thoughtful meditation, Thomas died while on his way to Lyons to take part in the Ecumenical Council convoked by Pope Gregory X. He died in the Cistercian Abbey of Fossanova, after receiving the Viaticum with deeply devout sentiments.

The life and teaching of St Thomas Aquinas could be summed up in an episode passed down by his ancient biographers. While, as was his wont, the Saint was praying before the Crucifix in the early morning in the chapel of St Nicholas in Naples, Domenico da Caserta, the church sacristan, overheard a conversation. Thomas was anxiously asking whether what he had written on the mysteries of the Christian faith was correct. And the Crucified One answered him: "You have spoken well of me, Thomas. What is your reward to be?". And the answer Thomas gave him was what we too, friends and disciples of Jesus, always want to tell him: "Nothing but Yourself, Lord!" (*ibid.*, p. 320).

## **To Special Groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I send my greetings to those gathered during these days in Scotland for the centennial of the First Edinburgh Missionary Conference, which is now acknowledged to have given birth to the modern ecumenical movement. May we all renew our commitment to work humbly and patiently, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, to live again together our common apostolic heritage.

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*, with the wish that each one may always serve God joyfully and love his or her neighbour with an evangelical spirit.

I would now like to remind you that at 7: 00 p.m. tomorrow, the Solemnity of *Corpus Christi*, I shall be presiding at Mass outside the Basilica of St John Lateran and it will be followed by the traditional procession to St Mary Major. I invite everyone to take part in this celebration to express together faith in Christ, present in the Eucharist.

Lastly, dear friends, I ask you to accompany with your prayers the Pastoral Visit to Cyprus on which I shall be setting out the day after tomorrow, so that it may be rich in spiritual fruits for the beloved Christian communities in the Middle East.

## **APPEAL**

I am following with great trepidation the tragic events taking place close to the Gaza Strip. I feel the need to express my heartfelt sorrow for the victims of these most painful occurrences that disturb everyone who has at heart peace in the region. Once again I repeat with distress that violence does not settle controversies but rather increases their dramatic consequences and spawns further violence. I appeal to all who have political responsibilities, at both the local and international level, to seek constantly, through dialogue, just solutions in order to guarantee the peoples of the area better living conditions, in harmony and in serenity. I ask you to join me in praying for the victims, for their relatives and for all who are suffering. May the Lord support the efforts of those who never tire of working for reconciliation and Peace.

### **Video Message of the Holy Father to the Catholic Media Convention, New Orleans**

I send cordial greetings to the delegates gathered in New Orleans for this year's Catholic Media Convention.

The theme of your meeting, "*Spreading the Good News—Byte by Byte*", highlights the extraordinary potential of the new media to bring the message of Christ and the teaching of his Church to the attention of a wider public. If your mission is to be truly effective—if the words you proclaim are to touch hearts, engage people's freedom and change their lives—you must draw them into an encounter with persons and communities who witness to the grace of Christ by their faith and their lives. In this sense, it is my hope that your days together will renew and refresh your shared enthusiasm for the Gospel. Notwithstanding the many challenges you face, never forget the promise of Christ, "I am with you always, to the close of the age" (*Mt 28:20*).

Dear friends, with these few words of encouragement, to all of you gathered for the Convention I am pleased to impart my Apostolic Blessing.

*Saint Peter's Square*

*9 June 2010*

## **Saint Thomas Aquinas (2)**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to continue the presentation of St Thomas Aquinas, a theologian of such value that the study of his thought was explicitly recommended by the Second Vatican Council in two documents, the Decree *Optatam totius* on the Training of Priests,

and the Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*, which addresses Christian Education. Indeed, already in 1880 Pope Leo XIII, who held St Thomas in high esteem as a guide and encouraged Thomistic studies, chose to declare him Patron of Catholic Schools and Universities.

The main reason for this appreciation is not only explained by the content of his teaching but also by the method he used, especially his new synthesis and distinction between philosophy and theology. The Fathers of the Church were confronted by different philosophies of a Platonic type in which a complete vision of the world and of life was presented, including the subject of God and of religion. In comparison with these philosophies they themselves had worked out a complete vision of reality, starting with faith and using elements of Platonism to respond to the essential questions of men and women. They called this vision, based on biblical revelation and formulated with a correct Platonism in the light of faith: “our philosophy”. The word “philosophy” was not, therefore, an expression of a purely rational system and, as such, distinct from faith but rather indicated a comprehensive vision of reality, constructed in the light of faith but used and conceived of by reason; a vision that naturally exceeded the capacities proper to reason but as such also fulfilled it. For St Thomas the encounter with the pre-Christian philosophy of Aristotle (who died in about 322 b.c.) opened up a new perspective. Aristotelian philosophy was obviously a philosophy worked out without the knowledge of the Old and New Testaments, an explanation of the world without revelation through reason alone. And this consequent rationality was convincing. Thus the old form of the Fathers’ “our philosophy” no longer worked. The relationship between philosophy and theology, between faith and reason, needed to be rethought. A “philosophy” existed that was complete and convincing in itself, a rationality that preceded the faith, followed by “theology”, a form of thinking with the faith and in the faith. The pressing question was this: are the world of rationality, philosophy conceived of without Christ, and the world of faith compatible? Or are they mutually exclusive? Elements that affirmed the incompatibility of these two worlds were not lacking, but St Thomas was firmly convinced of their compatibility indeed that philosophy worked out without the knowledge of Christ was awaiting, as it were, the light of Jesus to be complete. This was the great “surprise” of St Thomas that determined the path he took as a thinker. Showing this independence of philosophy and theology and, at the same time, their reciprocal relationality was the historic mission of the great teacher. And thus it can be understood that in the 19th century, when the incompatibility of modern reason and faith was strongly declared, Pope Leo XIII pointed to St Thomas as a guide in the dialogue between them. In his theological work, St Thomas supposes and concretizes this relationality. Faith consolidates, integrates and illumines the heritage of truth that human reason acquires. The trust with which St Thomas endows these two instruments of knowledge



faith and reason may be traced back to the conviction that both stem from the one source of all truth, the divine *Logos*, which is active in both contexts, that of Creation and that of redemption.

Together with the agreement between reason and faith, we must recognize on the other hand that they avail themselves of different cognitive procedures. Reason receives a truth by virtue of its intrinsic evidence, mediated or unmediated; faith, on the contrary, accepts a truth on the basis of the authority of the Word of God that is revealed. St Thomas writes at the beginning of his *Summa Theologiae*: “We must bear in mind that there are two kinds of sciences. There are some which proceed from a principle known by the natural light of the intelligence, such as arithmetic and geometry and the like. There are some which proceed from principles known by the light of a higher science: thus the science of perspective proceeds from principles established by geometry, and music from principles established by arithmetic. So it is that sacred doctrine is a science, because it proceeds from principles established by the light of a higher science, namely, the science of God and the blessed” (Ia, q. 1, a.2).

This distinction guarantees the autonomy of both the human and the theological sciences. However, it is not equivalent to separation but, rather, implies a reciprocal and advantageous collaboration. Faith, in fact, protects reason from any temptation to distrust its own abilities, stimulates it to be open to ever broader horizons, keeps alive in it the search for foundations and, when reason itself is applied to the supernatural sphere of the relationship between God and man, faith enriches his work. According to St Thomas, for example, human reason can certainly reach the affirmation of the existence of one God, but only faith, which receives the divine Revelation, is able to draw from the mystery of the Love of the Triune God.

Moreover, it is not only faith that helps reason. Reason too, with its own means can do something important for faith, making it a threefold service which St Thomas sums up in the preface to his commentary on the *De Trinitate* of Boethius: “demonstrating those truths that are preambles of the faith; giving a clearer notion, by certain similitudes, of the truths of the faith; resisting those who speak against the faith, either by showing that their statements are false, or by showing that they are not necessarily true” (q. 2, a.3). The entire history of theology is basically the exercise of this task of the mind which shows the intelligibility of faith, its articulation and inner harmony, its reasonableness and its ability to further human good. The correctness of theological reasoning and its real cognitive meaning is based on the value of theological language which, in St Thomas’ opinion, is principally an analogical language. The distance between God, the Creator, and the being of his creatures is infinite; dissimilitude is ever greater than similitude (cf. DS 806). Nevertheless in the whole difference between Creator and creatures an analogy

exists between the created being and the being of the Creator, which enables us to speak about God with human words.

St Thomas not only based the doctrine of analogy on exquisitely philosophical argumentation but also on the fact that with the Revelation God himself spoke to us and therefore authorized us to speak of him. I consider it important to recall this doctrine. In fact, it helps us get the better of certain objections of contemporary atheism which denies that religious language is provided with an objective meaning and instead maintains that it has solely a subjective or merely emotional value. This objection derives from the fact that positivist thought is convinced that man does not know being but solely the functions of reality that can be experienced. With St Thomas and with the great philosophical tradition we are convinced that, in reality, man does not only know the functions, the object of the natural sciences, but also knows something of being itself for example, he knows the person, the You of the other, and not only the physical and biological aspect of his being.

In the light of this teaching of St Thomas theology says that however limited it may be, religious language is endowed with sense because we touch being like an arrow aimed at the reality it signifies. This fundamental agreement between human reason and Christian faith is recognized in another basic principle of Aquinas' thought. Divine Grace does not annihilate but presupposes and perfects human nature. The latter, in fact, even after sin, is not completely corrupt but wounded and weakened. Grace, lavished upon us by God and communicated through the Mystery of the Incarnate Word, is an absolutely free gift with which nature is healed, strengthened and assisted in pursuing the innate desire for happiness in the heart of every man and of every woman. All the faculties of the human being are purified, transformed and uplifted by divine Grace.

An important application of this relationship between nature and Grace is recognized in the moral theology of St Thomas Aquinas, which proves to be of great timeliness. At the centre of his teaching in this field, he places the new law which is the law of the Holy Spirit. With a profoundly evangelical gaze he insists on the fact that this law is the Grace of the Holy Spirit given to all who believe in Christ. The written and oral teaching of the doctrinal and moral truths transmitted by the Church is united to this Grace. St Thomas, emphasizing the fundamental role in moral life of the action of the Holy Spirit, of Grace, from which flow the theological and moral virtues, makes us understand that all Christians can attain the lofty perspectives of the "Sermon on the Mount", if they live an authentic relationship of faith in Christ, if they are open to the action of his Holy Spirit. However, Aquinas adds, "Although Grace is more efficacious than nature, yet nature is more essential to man, and therefore more enduring" (*Summa Theologiae*, Ia-IIae, q. 94, a. 6, ad 2), which is why, in the Christian moral perspective, there is a place for reason

which is capable of discerning natural moral law. Reason can recognize this by considering what it is good to do and what it is good to avoid in order to achieve that felicity which everyone has at heart, which also implies a responsibility towards others and, therefore, the search for the common good. In other words, the human, theological and moral virtues are rooted in human nature. Divine Grace accompanies, sustains and impels ethical commitment but, according to St Thomas, all human beings, believers and non-believers alike, are called to recognize the needs of human nature expressed in natural law and to draw inspiration from it in the formulation of positive laws, namely those issued by the civil and political authorities to regulate human coexistence.

When natural law and the responsibility it entails are denied this dramatically paves the way to ethical relativism at the individual level and to totalitarianism of the State at the political level. The defence of universal human rights and the affirmation of the absolute value of the person's dignity postulate a foundation. Does not natural law constitute this foundation, with the non-negotiable values that it indicates? Venerable John Paul II wrote in his Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* words that are still very up to date: "It is therefore urgently necessary, for the future of society and the development of a sound democracy, to rediscover those essential and innate human and moral values which flow from the very truth of the human being and express and safeguard the dignity of the person: values which no individual, no majority and no State can ever create, modify or destroy, but must only acknowledge, respect and promote" (n. 71).

To conclude, Thomas presents to us a broad and confident concept of human reason: *broad* because it is not limited to the spaces of the so-called "empirical-scientific" reason, but open to the whole being and thus also to the fundamental and inalienable questions of human life; and *confident* because human reason, especially if it accepts the inspirations of Christian faith, is a promoter of a civilization that recognizes the dignity of the person, the intangibility of his rights and the cogency of his or her duties. It is not surprising that the doctrine on the dignity of the person, fundamental for the recognition of the inviolability of human rights, developed in schools of thought that accepted the legacy of St Thomas Aquinas, who had a very lofty conception of the human creature. He defined it, with his rigorously philosophical language, as "what is most perfect to be found in all nature-that is, a subsistent individual of a rational nature" (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q. 29, a. 3).

The depth of St Thomas Aquinas' thought let us never forget it flows from his living faith and fervent piety, which he expressed in inspired prayers such as this one in which he asks God: "Grant me, O Lord my God, a mind to know you, a heart to seek you, wisdom to find you, conduct pleasing to you, faithful perseverance in waiting for you, and a hope of finally embracing you".

## To Special Groups

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially the many parish and student groups. I offer a warm welcome to all who have come from Hong Kong, Pakistan, the United Kingdom and the United States of America. Upon all of you I invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, may you always find in Christ present in the Eucharist the spiritual nourishment to advance on the path of holiness; may Christ be for you, dear *sick people*, a support and comfort in trial and in suffering; and for you, dear *newlyweds*, may the sacrament that has rooted you in Christ be the source that feeds your daily love.

*Paul VI Hall*

*23 June 2010*

## Saint Thomas Aquinas (3)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to complete, with a third instalment, my Catecheses on St Thomas Aquinas. Even more than 700 years after his death we can learn much from him. My Predecessor, Pope Paul VI, also said this, in a Discourse he gave at Fossanova on 14 September 1974 on the occasion of the seventh centenary of St Thomas' death. He asked himself: "Thomas, our Teacher, what lesson can you give us?". And he answered with these words: "trust in the truth of Catholic religious thought, as defended, expounded and offered by him to the capacities of the human mind" (*Address in honour of St Thomas Aquinas in the Basilica*, 14 September 1974; L'Osservatore Romano English edition, [ore], 26 September 1974, p. 4). In Aquino moreover, on that same day, again with reference to St Thomas, Paul VI said, "all of us who are faithful sons and daughters of the Church can and must be his disciples, at least to some extent!" (*Address to people in the Square at Aquino*, 14 September 1974; ORE, p. 5).

Let us too, therefore, learn from the teaching of St Thomas and from his masterpiece, the *Summa Theologiae*. It was left unfinished, yet it is a monumental work: it contains 512 questions and 2,669 articles. It consists of concentrated reasoning in which the human mind is applied to the mysteries of faith, with clarity and depth to the mysteries of faith, alternating questions with answers in which St Thomas deepens the teaching that comes from Sacred Scripture and from the Fathers of the Church, especially St Augustine. In this reflection, in meeting the true questions of his time, that are also often our own

questions, St Thomas, also by employing the method and thought of the ancient philosophers, and of Aristotle in particular, thus arrives at precise, lucid and pertinent formulations of the truths of faith in which truth is a gift of faith, shines out and becomes accessible to us, for our reflection. However, this effort of the human mind Aquinas reminds us with his own life is always illumined by prayer, by the light that comes from on high. Only those who live with God and with his mysteries can also understand what they say to us.

In the *Summa* of theology, St Thomas starts from the fact that God has three different ways of being and existing: God exists in himself, he is the beginning and end of all things, which is why all creatures proceed from him and depend on him: then God is present through his Grace in the life and activity of the Christian, of the saints; lastly, God is present in an altogether special way in the Person of Christ, here truly united to the man Jesus, and active in the Sacraments that derive from his work of redemption. Therefore, the structure of this monumental work (cf. Jean-Pierre Torrell, *La "Summa" di San Tommaso*, Milan 2003, pp. 29–75), a quest with “a theological vision” for the fullness of God (cf. *Summa Theologiae*, Ia q. 1, a. 7), is divided into three parts and is illustrated by the *Doctor Communis* himself St Thomas with these words: “Because the chief aim of sacred doctrine is to teach the knowledge of God, not only as he is in himself, but also as he is the beginning of things and their last end, and especially of rational creatures, as is clear from what has already been said, therefore, we shall treat: (1) Of God; (2) Of the rational creature’s advance towards God; (3) Of Christ, Who as man, is our way to God” (*ibid.*, I, q. 2). It is a circle: God in himself, who comes out of himself and takes us by the hand, in such a way that with Christ we return to God, we are united to God, and God will be all things to all people.

The First Part of the *Summa Theologiae* thus investigates God in himself, the mystery of the Trinity and of the creative activity of God. In this part we also find a profound reflection on the authentic reality of the human being, inasmuch as he has emerged from the creative hands of God as the fruit of his love. On the one hand we are dependent created beings, we do not come from ourselves; yet, on the other, we have a true autonomy so that we are not only something apparent as certain Platonic philosophers say but a reality desired by God as such and possessing an inherent value.

In the Second Part St Thomas considers man, impelled by Grace, in his aspiration to know and love God in order to be happy in time and in eternity. First of all the Author presents the theological principles of moral action, studying how, in the free choice of the human being to do good acts, reason, will and passions are integrated, to which is added the power given by God’s Grace through the virtues and the gifts of the Holy Spirit, as well as the help offered by moral law. Hence the human being is a dynamic

being who seeks himself, seeks to become himself, and, in this regard, seeks to do actions that build him up, that make him truly man; and here the moral law comes into it. Grace and reason itself, the will and the passions enter too. On this basis St Thomas describes the profile of the man who lives in accordance with the Spirit and thus becomes an image of God.

Here Aquinas pauses to study the three theological virtues faith, hope and charity followed by a critical examination of more than 50 moral virtues, organized around the four cardinal virtues prudence, justice, temperance and fortitude. He then ends with a reflection on the different vocations in the Church.

In the Third Part of the *Summa*, St Thomas studies the Mystery of Christ the way and the truth through which we can reach God the Father. In this section he writes almost unparalleled pages on the Mystery of Jesus' Incarnation and Passion, adding a broad treatise on the seven sacraments, for it is in them that the Divine Word Incarnate extends the benefits of the Incarnation for our salvation, for our journey of faith towards God and eternal life. He is, as it were, materially present with the realities of creation, and thus touches us in our inmost depths.

In speaking of the sacraments, St Thomas reflects in a special way on the Mystery of the Eucharist, for which he had such great devotion, the early biographers claim, that he would lean his head against the Tabernacle, as if to feel the throbbing of Jesus' divine and human heart. In one of his works, commenting on Scripture, St Thomas helps us to understand the excellence of the sacrament of the Eucharist, when he writes: "Since this [the Eucharist] is the sacrament of Our Lord's Passion, it contains in itself the Jesus Christ who suffered for us. Thus, whatever is an effect of Our Lord's Passion is also an effect of this sacrament. For this sacrament is nothing other than the application of Our Lord's Passion to us" (cf. *Commentary on John*, chapter 6, lecture 6, n. 963). We clearly understand why St Thomas and other Saints celebrated Holy Mass shedding tears of compassion for the Lord who gave himself as a sacrifice for us, tears of joy and gratitude.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, at the school of the Saints, let us fall in love with this sacrament! Let us participate in Holy Mass with recollection, to obtain its spiritual fruits, let us nourish ourselves with this Body and Blood of Our Lord, to be ceaselessly fed by divine Grace! Let us willingly and frequently linger in the company of the Blessed Sacrament in heart-to-heart conversation!*

All that St Thomas described with scientific rigour in his major theological works, such as, precisely, the *Summa Theologiae*, and the *Summa contra gentiles*, was also explained in his preaching, both to his students and to the faithful. In 1273, a year before he died, he preached throughout Lent in the Church of San Domenico Maggiore in Naples. The content of those sermons was gathered and preserved: they are the *Opuscoli* in which he

explains the *Apostles' Creed*, interprets the Prayer of the *Our Father*, explains the *Ten Commandments* and comments on the *Hail Mary*.

*The content of the Doctor Angelicus' preaching corresponds with virtually the whole structure of the Catechism of the Catholic Church. Actually, in catechesis and preaching, in a time like ours of renewed commitment to evangelization, these fundamental subjects should never be lacking: what we believe, and here is the Creed of the faith; what we pray, and here is the Our Father and the Hail Mary; and what we live, as we are taught by biblical Revelation, and here is the law of the love of God and neighbour and the Ten Commandments, as an explanation of this mandate of love.*

I would like to propose some simple, essential and convincing examples of the content of St Thomas' teaching. In his booklet on *The Apostles' Creed* he explains the value of faith. Through it, he says, the soul is united to God and produces, as it were, a shot of eternal life; life receives a reliable orientation and we overcome temptations with ease. To those who object that faith is foolishness because it leads to belief in something that does not come within the experience of the senses, St Thomas gives a very articulate answer and recalls that this is an inconsistent doubt, for human intelligence is limited and cannot know everything. Only if we were able to know all visible and invisible things perfectly would it be genuinely foolish to accept truths out of pure faith. Moreover, it is impossible to live, St Thomas observes, without trusting in the experience of others, wherever one's own knowledge falls short. It is thus reasonable to believe in God, who reveals himself, and to the testimony of the Apostles: they were few, simple and poor, grief-stricken by the Crucifixion of their Teacher. Yet many wise, noble and rich people converted very soon after hearing their preaching. In fact this is a miraculous phenomenon of history, to which it is far from easy to give a convincing answer other than that of the Apostle's encounter with the Risen Lord.

In commenting on the article of the Creed on the Incarnation of the divine Word St Thomas makes a few reflections. He says that the Christian faith is strengthened in considering the mystery of the Incarnation; hope is strengthened at the thought that the Son of God came among us, as one of us, to communicate his own divinity to human beings; charity is revived because there is no more obvious sign of God's love for us than the sight of the Creator of the universe making himself a creature, one of us. Finally, in contemplating the mystery of God's Incarnation, we feel kindled within us our desire to reach Christ in glory. Using a simple and effective comparison, St Thomas remarks: "If the brother of a king were to be far away, he would certainly long to live beside him. Well, Christ is a brother to us; we must therefore long for his company and become of one heart with him" (*Opuscoli teologico-spirituali*, Rome 1976, p. 64).

In presenting the prayer of the *Our Father*, St Thomas shows that it is perfect in itself, since it has all five of the characteristics that a well-made prayer must possess: trusting, calm abandonment; a fitting content because, St Thomas observes, “it is quite difficult to know exactly what it is appropriate and inappropriate to ask for, since choosing among our wishes puts us in difficulty” (*ibid.*, p. 120); and then an appropriate order of requests, the fervour of love and the sincerity of humility.

Like all the Saints, St Thomas had a great devotion to Our Lady. He described her with a wonderful title: *Triclinium totius Trinitatis; triclinium*, that is, a place where the Trinity finds rest since, because of the Incarnation, in no creature as in her do the three divine Persons dwell and feel delight and joy at dwelling in her soul full of Grace. Through her intercession we may obtain every help.

With a prayer that is traditionally attributed to St Thomas and that in any case reflects the elements of his profound Marian devotion we too say: “O most Blessed and sweet Virgin Mary, Mother of God ... I entrust to your merciful heart ... my entire life.... Obtain for me as well, O most sweet Lady, true charity with which from the depths of my heart I may love your most Holy Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, and, after him, love you above all other things ... and my neighbour, in God and for God”.

*To Special Groups:*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the numerous student groups present, and in a special way to those taking part in the programmes sponsored by the Foyer Unitas Lay Centre, the Anglican Centre of Rome and the Midwest Theological Forum. I also thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking visitors, especially those from Scotland, Norway, Sweden, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Singapore, the Bahamas and the United States of America, I invoke God’s abundant Blessings.

I now greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today is the liturgical Memorial of St Joseph Cafasso and the 150th anniversary of his death. May the example of this attractive figure of an exemplary priest, to which I want to devote the next Wednesday Catechesis, help you, dear *young people* to experience personally the liberating power of Christ’s love that profoundly renews human life; may it sustain you, dear *sick people*, in offering up your suffering for the conversion of those who are prisoners of evil; may it encourage you, dear *newlyweds*, to be a sign of God’s faithfulness, also with mutual forgiveness, motivated by love.

*Saint Peter’s Square*

30 June 2010



# Saint Joseph Cafasso

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We have just come to the end of the Year for Priests: a time of grace that has yielded and will yield precious fruits for the Church; an opportunity to remember in prayer all those who have responded to this particular calling. The Curé d’Ars and other holy priests have accompanied us on this journey as models and intercessors, true beacons in the history of the Church. Today, as I announced last I would like to recall another of them, who stands out from the group of “social saints” of Turin in the 19th century: it is St Joseph Cafasso.

It seems appropriate to remember him because exactly a week ago was the 150th anniversary of his death in the Piedmontese capital on 23 June 1860, when he was 49 years old. In addition, I would like to recall that on 1 November 1924, in approving the miracles for the canonization of St John Mary Vianney and publishing the Decree authorizing the beatification of Cafasso, Pius XI juxtaposed these two priestly figures with the following words: “Not without a special and beneficial disposition of Divine Goodness have we witnessed new stars rising on the horizon of the Catholic Church: the parish priest of Ars and the Venerable Servant of God, Joseph Cafasso. These two beautiful, beloved, providently timely figures must be presented today; one, the parish priest of Ars, as small and humble, poor and simple as he was glorious; and the other, a beautiful, great, complex and rich figure of a priest, the educator and formation teacher of priests, Venerable Joseph Cafasso”. These circumstances give us the opportunity to know the living and timely message that emerges from the life of this Saint. He was not a parish priest like the Curé d’Ars but was above all a formation teacher of parish and diocesan priests, indeed of holy priests such as St John Bosco. He did not found religious institutes like the other Piedmontese priests of the 19th century because his “foundation” was the “school of priestly life and holiness”, which he achieved with his example and teaching in the “Convitto Ecclesiastico di S. Francesco d’Assisi” [College—Residence for Clerics of St Francis of Assisi], in Turin.

Joseph Cafasso was born in Castelnuovo d’Asti, the same village in which St John Bosco was born, on 15 January 1811. He was the third of four children. The last, his sister Marianna, was to be the mother of Bl. Joseph Allamano, Founder of the Consolata Missionary Fathers and the Consolata Missionary Sisters. He was born in 19th-century Piedmont, marked by serious social problems but also by many Saints who strove to find remedies for them. These Saints were bound to each other by total love of Christ and by their profound charity for the poorest people. The grace of the Lord can spread and multiply the seeds of holiness! Cafasso completed his secondary school studies and the

two years of philosophy at the College of Chieri and, in 1839, went on to the theological seminary where he was ordained a priest in 1833. Four months later he entered what for him was to be the fundamental and only “stage” in his priestly life: the “Convitto Ecclesiastico di S. Francesco d’Assisi” in Turin. Having entered it to perfect himself in pastoral ministry, it was here that he brought to fruition his gifts as a spiritual director and his great spirit of charity. The “Convitto” was in fact not only a school of moral theology where young priests, who came mainly from the countryside, learned how to become confessors and how to preach but was also a true and proper school of priestly life, where priests were formed in the spirituality of St Ignatius of Loyola and in the moral and pastoral theology of the great holy Bishop St Alphonsus Mary de’ Liguori. The type of priest that Cafasso met at the “Convitto” and that he himself helped to strengthen especially as Rector was that of the true pastor with a rich inner life and profound zeal in pastoral care, faithful to prayer, committed to preaching and to catechesis, dedicated to the celebration of the Eucharist and to the ministry of Confession, after the model embodied by St Charles Borromeo and St Francis de Sales and promoted by the Council of Trent. A felicitous saying of St John Bosco sums up the meaning of educational work in that community: “at the ‘Convitto’ men learn to be priests”.

St Joseph Cafasso sought to bring this model into being in the formation of the young priests so that, in turn, they might become the formation teachers of other priests, religious and lay people, forming a special and effective chain. From his chair of moral theology he taught them to be good confessors and spiritual directors, concerned for the true spiritual good of people, motivated equally by a desire to make God’s mercy felt and, by an acute and lively sense of sin. Cafasso the teacher had three main virtues, as St John Bosco recalled: calmness, wisdom and prudence. For him the test of the lessons taught was the ministry of Confession, to which he himself devoted many hours of the day. Bishops, priests, religious, eminent laymen and women and simple people sought him. He was able to give them all the time they needed. He was also a wise spiritual counsellor to many who became Saints and founders of religious institutes. His teaching was never abstract, nor based exclusively on the books that were used in that period. Rather, it was born from the living experience of God’s mercy and the profound knowledge of the human soul that he acquired in the long hours he spent in the confessional and in spiritual direction: his was a real school of priestly life.

His secret was simple: to be a man of God; to do in small daily actions “what can result in the greater glory of God and the advantage of souls”. He loved the Lord without reserve, he was enlivened by a firmly-rooted faith, supported by profound and prolonged prayer and exercised in sincere charity to all. He was versed in moral theology but was likewise familiar with the situation and hearts of people, of whose good he took charge as the good pastor that he was. Those who had the grace to be close to him were transformed

into as many good pastors and sound confessors. He would point out clearly to all priests the holiness to achieve in their own pastoral ministry. Bl. Fr Clement Marchisio, Founder of the Daughters of St Joseph, declared: “You entered the ‘Convitto’ as a very mischievous, thoughtless youth, with no idea of what it meant to be a priest; and you came out entirely different, fully aware of the dignity of the priest”. How many priests were trained by him at the “Convitto”, and then accompanied by him spiritually! Among them as I have said emerges St John Bosco who had him as his spiritual director for a good 25 years, from 1835 to 1860: first as a seminarian, then as a priest and lastly as a Founder. In all the fundamental decisions of his life St John Bosco had St Joseph Cafasso to advise him, but in a very specific way: Cafasso never sought to form Don Bosco as a disciple “in his own image and likeness”, and Don Bosco did not copy Cafasso; he imitated Cafasso’s human and priestly virtues, certainly and described him as “a model of priestly life” but according to his own personal disposition and his own specific vocation; a sign of the wisdom of the spiritual teacher and of the intelligence of the disciple: the former did not impose himself on the latter but respected his personality and helped him to interpret God’s will for him. Dear friends, this is a valuable lesson for all who are involved in the formation and education of the young generations and also a strong reminder of how important it is to have a spiritual guide in one’s life, who helps one to understand what God expects of each of us. Our Saint declared with simplicity and depth: “All a person’s holiness, perfection and profit lies in doing God’s will perfectly.... Happy are we if we succeed in pouring out our heart into God’s, in uniting our desires and our will to his to the point that one heart and one will are formed: wanting what God wants, wanting in the way, in the time and in the circumstances that he desires and willing it all for no other reason than that God wills it”.

However, another element characterizes the ministry of our Saint: attention to the least and in particular to prisoners who in 19th-century Turin lived in inhumane and dehumanizing conditions. In this sensitive service too, which he carried out for more than 20 years, he was always a good, understanding and compassionate pastor: qualities perceived by the prisoners who ended up by being won over by his sincere love, whose origin lay in God himself. Cafasso’s simple presence did good: it reassured, it moved hearts hardened by the events of life and above all it enlightened and jolted indifferent consciences. In his early prison ministry he often had recourse to great sermons that managed to involve almost the entire population of the prison. As time passed, he gave priority to plain catechesis in conversation and in personal meetings. Respectful of each individual’s affairs, he addressed the important topics of Christian life, speaking of trust in God, of adherence to his will, of the usefulness of prayer and of the sacraments whose goal is Confession, the encounter with God who makes himself infinite mercy for us. Those condemned to death were the object of very special human and spiritual care. He

accompanied to the scaffold 57 of the men sentenced to death, having heard their confession and having administered the Eucharist to them. He accompanied them with deep love until the last breath of their earthly existence.

Joseph Cafasso died on 23 June 1860, after a life offered entirely to the Lord and spent for his neighbour. My Predecessor, the Venerable Servant of God Pope Pius XII, proclaimed him Patron of Italian prisons on 9 April 1948, and, with his Apostolic Exhortation *Menti Nostrae*, on 23 September 1950 held him up as a model to priests engaged in Confession and in spiritual direction.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, may St Joseph Cafasso's example serve as a reminder to all to hasten towards the perfection of Christian life, towards holiness. In particular, may this Saint remind priests of the importance of devoting time to the sacrament of Reconciliation and to spiritual direction, and to all the concern we should have for the most deprived. May we find help in the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary, to whom St Joseph Cafasso was very devoted and whom he called "Our beloved Mother, our consolation, our hope".*

### **To Special Groups**

Yesterday, on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, I conferred the Pallium upon thirty-eight Archbishops from throughout the world. I would now like to greet the English-speaking Archbishops present at today's Audience, together with their family members and the pilgrimage groups which accompanied them to the Tombs of the Apostles:

Archbishop Alex Thomas Kaliyanil of Bulawayo (Zimbabwe),

Archbishop Gerard Tlali Lerotholi of Maseru (Lesotho),

Archbishop Socrates Villegas of Lingayen-Dagupan (Philippines),

Archbishop Bernard Longley of Birmingham (England),

Archbishop Jerome Edward ListECKI of Milwaukee (USA),

Archbishop Stephen Brislin of Cape Town (South Africa),

Archbishop Dennis Schnurr of Cincinnati (USA),

Archbishop Francis Kallarakal of Verapoly (India),

Archbishop Hyginus Kim Hee-joong of Kwangju (Korea),

Archbishop Thomas Wenski of Miami (USA),

Archbishop Peter Smith of Southwark (England),

and Archbishop Matthias Kobena Nketsiah of Cape Coast (Ghana).

Dear Brothers, I ask the Lord to strengthen all of you in your witness to the apostolic faith and in generous service to the flocks entrusted to your care.

I also greet the many other English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience, especially the groups from England, Scotland, Ireland, Ghana, Palestine, the Philippines, South Korea, Canada and the United States of America. I thank the Schola Cantorum of Saint Peter's Cathedral, Belfast, for their praise of God in song. Upon all of you I invoke an abundance of joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

*Paul VI Hall*

7 July 2010

## John Duns Scotus

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This morning, after several Catecheses on various great theologians, I would like to present to you another important figure in the history of theology. He is Blessed John Duns Scotus, who lived at the end of the 13th century. An ancient epitaph on his tombstone sums up the geographical coordinates of his biography: “Scotland bore me, England received me, France taught me, Cologne in Germany holds me”. We cannot disregard this information, partly because we know very little about the life of Duns Scotus. He was probably born in 1266 in a village called, precisely, “Duns”, near Edinburgh. Attracted by the charism of St Francis of Assisi, he entered the Family of the Friars Minor and was ordained a priest in 1291. He was endowed with a brilliant mind and a tendency for speculation which earned him the traditional title of *Doctor subtilis*, “Subtle Doctor”. Duns Scotus was oriented to the study of philosophy and theology at the famous Universities of Oxford and of Paris. Having successfully completed his training, he embarked on teaching theology at the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge and then of Paris, beginning by commenting, like all the bachelors of theology of his time, on the *Sentences* of Peter Lombard. Indeed, Duns Scotus' main works are the mature fruit of these lessons and take the name of the places where he taught: *Ordinatio* (called in the past *Opus Oxoniense*—Oxford), *Reportatio Cantabrigiensis* (Cambridge), *Reportata Parisiensia* (Paris). One can add to these at least the *Quodlibeta* (or *Quaestiones quodlibetales*), a quite important work consisting of 21 questions on various theological subjects. Duns Scotus distanced himself from Paris, after a serious dispute broke out between King Philip IV the Fair and Pope Boniface VIII, rather than sign a document hostile to the Supreme Pontiff as the King requested of all religious, preferring voluntary exile. Thus he left the country, together with the Franciscan Friars, out of love for the See of Peter.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, this event invites us to remember how often in the history of the Church believers have met with hostility and even suffered persecution for their fidelity and devotion to Christ, to the Church and to the Pope. We all look with admiration at these Christians who teach us to treasure as a precious good faith in Christ and communion with the Successor of Peter, hence with the universal Church.*

However, friendly relations between the King of France and the Successor of Boniface VIII were soon restored and in 1305 Duns Scotus was able to return to Paris to lecture on theology with the title of *Magister regens* [regent master], now we would say “Professor”. Later his Superiors sent him to Cologne as Professor of the Franciscan *Studium* of Theology, but he died on 8 November 1308 when he was only 43 years old, leaving nevertheless a consistent opus.

Because of the fame of his holiness, his cult soon became widespread in the Franciscan Order and Venerable Pope John Paul II, wishing to confirm it, solemnly beatified him on 20 March 1993, describing him as the “minstrel of the Incarnate Word and defender of Mary’s Immaculate Conception” (*Solemn Vespers*, St Peter’s Basilica; *L’Osservatore Romano* [ore] English edition, n.3, 24 March 1993, p. 1). These words sum up the important contribution that Duns Scotus made to the history of theology.

First of all he meditated on the Mystery of the Incarnation and, unlike many Christian thinkers of the time, held that the Son of God would have been made man even if humanity had not sinned. He says in his “*Reportatio Parisiensis*”: “To think that God would have given up such a task had Adam not sinned would be quite unreasonable! I say, therefore, that the fall was not the cause of Christ’s predestination and that if no one had fallen, neither the angel nor man in this hypothesis Christ would still have been predestined in the same way” (in *III Sent.*, d. 7, 4). This perhaps somewhat surprising thought crystallized because, in the opinion of Duns Scotus the Incarnation of the Son of God, planned from all eternity by God the Father at the level of love is the fulfilment of creation and enables every creature, in Christ and through Christ, to be filled with grace and to praise and glorify God in eternity. Although Duns Scotus was aware that in fact, because of original sin, Christ redeemed us with his Passion, Death and Resurrection, he reaffirmed that the Incarnation is the greatest and most beautiful work of the entire history of salvation, that it is not conditioned by any contingent fact but is God’s original idea of ultimately uniting with himself the whole of creation, in the Person and Flesh of the Son.

As a faithful disciple of St Francis, Duns Scotus liked to contemplate and preach the Mystery of the saving Passion of Christ, as the expression of the loving will, of the immense love of God who reaches out with the greatest generosity, irradiating his goodness and love (cf. *Tractatus de primo principio*, c. 4). Moreover this love was not only

revealed on Calvary but also in the Most Blessed Eucharist, for which Duns Scotus had a very deep devotion and which he saw as the Sacrament of the Real Presence of Jesus and as the Sacrament of unity and communion that induces us to love each other and to love God, as the Supreme Good we have in common (cf. *Reportatio Parisiensis*, in *IV Sent.*, d. 8, q. 1, n. 3). As I wrote in my Letter for the International Congress in Cologne marking the seventh centenary of the death of Blessed Duns Scotus, citing the thought of our author: “just as this love, this charity, was at the origin of all things, so too our eternal happiness will be in love and charity alone: willing, or the loving will, is simply eternal life, blessed and perfect” (AAS 101 [2009], 5).

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, this strongly “Christocentric” theological vision opens us to contemplation, wonder and gratitude: Christ is the centre of history and of the cosmos, it is he who gives meaning, dignity and value to our lives! As Pope Paul vi proclaimed in Manila, I too would like to cry out to the world: [Christ] “reveals the invisible God, he is the firstborn of all creation, the foundation of everything created. He is the Teacher of mankind, and its Redeemer. He was born, he died and he rose again for us. He is the centre of history and of the world; he is the one who knows us and who loves us; he is the companion and the friend of our life.... I could never finish speaking about him” (Homily, Mass at Quezon Circle, Manila; 29 November 1970).*

Not only Christ’s role in the history of salvation but also that of Mary is the subject of the *Doctor subtilis*’ thought. In the times of Duns Scotus the majority of theologians countered with an objection that seemed insurmountable, the doctrine which holds that Mary Most Holy was exempt from original sin from the very first moment of her conception: in fact, at first sight the universality of the Redemption brought about by Christ might seem to be jeopardized by such a statement, as though Mary had had no need of Christ or his redemption. Therefore the theologians opposed this thesis. Thus, to enable people to understand this preservation from original sin Duns Scotus developed an argument that was later, in 1854, also to be used by Bl. Pope Pius IX when he solemnly defined the Dogma of the Immaculate Conception of Mary. And this argument is that of “preventive Redemption”, according to which the Immaculate Conception is the masterpiece of the Redemption brought about by Christ because the very power of his love and his mediation obtained that the Mother be preserved from original sin. Therefore Mary is totally redeemed by Christ, but already before her conception. Duns Scotus’ confreres, the Franciscans, accepted and spread this doctrine enthusiastically and other theologians, often with a solemn oath, strove to defend and perfect it.

In this regard I would like to highlight a fact that I consider relevant. Concerning the teaching on the Immaculate Conception, important theologians like Duns Scotus enriched what the People of God already spontaneously believed about the Blessed Virgin and expressed in acts of devotion, in the arts and in Christian life in general with the

specific contribution of their thought. Thus faith both in the Immaculate Conception and in the bodily Assumption of the Virgin was already present in the People of God, while theology had not yet found the key to interpreting it in the totality of the doctrine of the faith. The People of God therefore precede theologians and this is all thanks to that supernatural *sensus fidei*, namely, that capacity infused by the Holy Spirit that qualifies us to embrace the reality of the faith with humility of heart and mind. In this sense, the People of God is the “teacher that goes first” and must then be more deeply examined and intellectually accepted by theology. May theologians always be ready to listen to this source of faith and retain the humility and simplicity of children! I mentioned this a few months ago saying: “There have been great scholars, great experts, great theologians, teachers of faith who have taught us many things. They have gone into the details of Sacred Scripture ... but have been unable to see the mystery itself, its central nucleus.... The essential has remained hidden!... On the other hand, in our time there have also been “little ones” who have understood this mystery. Let us think of St Bernadette Soubirous; of St Thérèse of Lisieux, with her new interpretation of the Bible that is “non-scientific’ but goes to the heart of Sacred Scripture” (*Homily, Mass for the Members of the International Theological Commission*, Pauline Chapel, Vatican City, 1 December 2009).

Lastly, Duns Scotus has developed a point to which modernity is very sensitive. It is the topic of freedom and its relationship with the will and with the intellect. Our author underlines freedom as a fundamental quality of the will, introducing an approach that lays greater emphasis on the will. Unfortunately, in later authors, this line of thinking turned into a voluntarism, in contrast to the so-called “Augustinian and Thomist intellectualism”. For St Thomas Aquinas, who follows St Augustine, freedom cannot be considered an innate quality of the will, but, the fruit of the collaboration of the will and the mind. Indeed, an idea of innate and absolute freedom—as it evolved, precisely, after Duns Scotus—placed in the will that precedes the intellect, both in God and in man, risks leading to the idea of a God who would not even be bound to truth and good. The wish to save God’s absolute transcendence and diversity with such a radical and impenetrable accentuation of his will does not take into account that the God who revealed himself in Christ is the God “Logos”, who acted and acts full of love for us. Of course, as Duns Scotus affirms, love transcends knowledge and is capable of perceiving ever better than thought, but it is always the love of the God who is “Logos” (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address at the University of Regensburg*, 12 September 2006). In the human being too, the idea of absolute freedom, placed in the will, forgetting the connection with the truth, does not know that freedom itself must be liberated from the limits imposed on it by sin. All the same, the Scotist vision does not fall into these extremes: for Duns Scotus a free act is the result of the concurrence of intellect and will, and if he speaks of a “primacy” of the will, he argues this precisely because the will always follows the intellect.



In speaking to Roman seminarians last year I recalled that “Since the beginning and throughout all time but especially in the modern age freedom has been the great dream of humanity” (*Discourse at the Roman Major Seminary*, 20 February 2009). Indeed, in addition to our own daily experience, modern history actually teaches us that freedom is authentic and helps with building a truly human civilization only when it is reconciled with truth. If freedom is detached from truth, it becomes, tragically, a principle of the destruction of the human person’s inner harmony, a source of prevarication of the strongest and the violent and a cause of suffering and sorrow. Freedom, like all the faculties with which the human being is endowed, increases and is perfected, Duns Scotus says, when the human being is open to God, making the most of the disposition to listen to his voice: when we listen to divine Revelation, to the word of God in order to accept it, a message reaches us that fills our life with light and hope and we are truly free.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, Bl. Duns Scotus teaches us that in our life the essential is to believe that God is close to us and loves us in Jesus Christ, and therefore to cultivate a deep love for him and for his Church. We on earth are witnesses of this love. May Mary Most Holy help us to receive this infinite love of God which we will enjoy eternally to the full in Heaven, when our soul is at last united to God for ever in the Communion of Saints.*

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm welcome to the members of the General Chapter of the Congregation of Holy Cross, together with my prayerful good wishes for the spiritual fruitfulness of your deliberations. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, especially the groups from Wales, Ireland, the Philippines, Canada and the United States of America, I invoke God’s abundant Blessings.

Lastly, my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday was the liturgical Memorial of St Maria Goretti, virgin and martyr, a girl who, in spite of being very young, was able to show strength and courage against evil. I invoke her for you, dear *young people*, so that she may help you to choose good always, even when it is to your cost; for you, dear *sick people*, so that she may sustain you in bearing your daily suffering; and for you, dear *newlyweds*, so that your love may always be faithful and full of reciprocal respect.

*St. Peter’s Square*

*4 August 2010*

# Saint Tarcisus

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I would like to express my joy at being here with you today in this Square, where you have gathered festively for this General Audience, attended by such large numbers of the great European pilgrimage for altar servers! Dear boys and girls and young people, welcome to Rome! Since the vast majority of the altar servers present in the Square are German-speaking, I shall speak to them first of all in my mother tongue.

Dear altar servers, dear friends, dear German-speaking pilgrims, welcome to Rome! I greet cordially all of you and Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, Secretary of State. He is called “Tarcisio” like your Patron Saint. You have had the courtesy to invite him and he, who is called Tarcisius after the Saint, is happy to be able to be here among the world’s altar servers and the German altar servers. I greet my dear Brothers in the episcopate and in the Priesthood, and the Deacons who have wished to take part in this Audience. I warmly thank Bishop Martin Gächter, Auxiliary of Basel, President of “Coetus Internationalis Ministrantium”, for his greeting to me, for the important gift of the statue of St Tarcisius and for the scarf he has given me. It all reminds me of the time when I too was an altar boy. I also thank Bishop Gächter on your behalf for the great work he carries out among you. I likewise thank your co-workers and all who got together to make this joyful meeting possible. My gratitude also goes to the Swiss sponsors and to all who have worked in their various capacities to make the large statue of St Tarcisius a reality.

How many of you there are! While flying over St Peter’s Square in the helicopter I saw all the colours and the joy filling this Square! Thus not only do you create a festive atmosphere in the Square but you also fill my heart with joy! Thank you! The statue of St Tarcisius has come to us after a long pilgrimage. In September 2008 it was unveiled in Switzerland in the presence of 8.000 altar servers; some of you were certainly present. From Switzerland it travelled through Luxembourg on the way to Hungary. Let us greet it festively today, glad at being able to become better acquainted with this figure of the early Church. Later, as Bishop Gächter told us, the statue will be taken to the Catacombs of St Calixtus, where St Tarcisus was buried. The hope that I express to all is that this place, namely the Catacombs of St Calixtus, and this statue, may become a reference point for altar servers, boys and girls, and for all who wish to follow Jesus more closely through the priestly, religious or missionary life. May they all be able to look at this strong and courageous boy and renew their commitment to friendship with the Lord, to learn to live with him always, following the path he points out to us with his word and the witness of so many Saints and Martyrs whose brothers and sisters we have become through Baptism.

Who was St Tarcisius? We do not have much information about him. We are dealing with the early centuries of the Church's history or, to be more precise, with the third century. It is said that he was a boy who came regularly to the Catacombs of St Calixtus here in Rome and took his special Christian duties very seriously. He had great love for the Eucharist and various hints lead us to conclude that he was presumably an acolyte, that is, an altar server. Those were years in which the Emperor Valerian was harshly persecuting Christians who were forced to meet secretly in private houses or, at times, also in the Catacombs, to hear the word of God, to pray and to celebrate Holy Mass. Even the custom of taking the Eucharist to prisoners and the sick became increasingly dangerous. One day, when, as was his habit, the priest asked who was prepared to take the Eucharist to the other brothers and sisters who were waiting for it, young Tarcisius stood up and said: "send me!". This boy seemed too young for such a demanding service! "My youth", Tarcisius said, "will be the best shield for the Eucharist". Convinced, the priest entrusted to him the precious Bread, saying: "Tarcisius, remember that a heavenly treasure has been entrusted to your weak hands. Avoid crowded streets and do not forget that holy things must never be thrown to dogs nor pearls to pigs. Will you guard the Sacred Mysteries faithfully and safely?". "I would die", Tarcisio answered with determination, "rather than let go of them". As he went on his way he met some friends who approached him and asked him to join them. As pagans they became suspicious and insistent at his refusal and realized he was clasping something to his breast that he appeared to be protecting. They tried to prize it away from him, but in vain; the struggle became ever fiercer, especially when they realized that Tarcisius was a Christian; They kicked him, they threw stones at him, but he did not surrender. While Tarcisius was dying a Pretoria guard called Quadratus, who had also, secretly, become a Christian, carried him to the priest. Tarcisius was already dead when they arrived but was still clutching to his breast a small linen bag containing the Eucharist. He was buried straight away in the Catacombs of St Calixtus. Pope Damasus had an inscription carved on St Tarcisius' grave; it says that the boy died in 257. The Roman Martyrology fixed the date as 15 August and in the same Martyrology a beautiful oral tradition is also recorded. It claims that the Most Blessed Sacrament was not found on St Tarcisius' body, either in his hands or his clothing. It explains that the consecrated Host which the little Martyr had defended with his life, had become flesh of his flesh thereby forming, together with his body, a single immaculate Host offered to God.

Dear altar servers, St Tarcisius' testimony and this beautiful tradition teach us the deep love and great veneration that we must have for the Eucharist: it is a precious good, a treasure of incomparable value; it is the Bread of life, it is Jesus himself who becomes our nourishment, support and strength on our daily journey and on the open road that leads to eternal life; the Eucharist is the greatest gift that Jesus bequeathed to us.

I am addressing those of you who are present here and, through you, all the altar servers of the world! Serve Jesus present in the Eucharist generously. It is an important task that enables you to be particularly close to the Lord and to grow in true and profound friendship with him. Guard this friendship in your hearts jealously, like St Tarcisius, ready to commit yourselves, to fight and to give your lives so that Jesus may reach all peoples. May you too communicate to your peers the gift of this friendship with joy, with enthusiasm, without fear, so that they may feel that you know this Mystery, that is true and that you love it! Every time that you approach the altar, you have the good fortune to assist in God's great loving gesture as he continues to want to give himself to each one of us, to be close to us, to help us, to give us strength to live in the right way. With consecration, as you know, that little piece of bread becomes Christ's Body, that wine becomes Christ's Blood. You are lucky to be able to live this indescribable Mystery from close at hand! Do your task as altar servers with love, devotion and faithfulness; do not enter a church for the celebration with superficiality but rather, prepare yourselves inwardly for Holy Mass! Assisting your priests in service at the altar helps to make Jesus closer, so that people can understand, can realize better: he is here. You collaborate to make him more present in the world, in every day life, in the Church and everywhere. Dear friends! You lend Jesus your hands, your thoughts, your time. He will not fail to reward you, giving you true joy and enabling you to feel where the fullest happiness is. St Tarcisius has shown us that love can even bring us to give our life for an authentic good, for the true good, for the Lord.

Martyrdom will probably not be required of us, but Jesus asks of us fidelity in small things, inner recollection, inner participation, our faith and our efforts to keep this treasure present in every day life. He asks of us fidelity in daily tasks, a witness to his love, going to church through inner conviction and for the joy of his presence. Thus we can also make known to our friends that Jesus is alive. May St John Mary Vianney's intercession help us in this commitment. Today is the liturgical Memorial of this humble French Parish Priest who changed a small community and thus gave the world a new light. May the example of St Tarcisius and St John Mary Vianney impel us every day to love Jesus and to do his will, as did the Virgin Mary, faithful to her Son to the end. Thank you all once again! May God bless you in these days and I wish you a good journey home!

### **To special groups**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including the groups from Japan and the United States of America. A special greeting to the English-speaking altar servers present: by serving at Mass may you draw ever closer to Christ our Lord. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings.*

### **APPEAL**

My thoughts go to the peoples hit in this period by serious natural disasters that have caused a loss of human life, injuries and damage, leaving many people homeless. I am thinking in particular of the widespread fires in the Russian Federation and of the devastating floods in Pakistan and Afghanistan. I pray the Lord for the victims and I am spiritually close to all who are tried by these adversities. For them I ask God for relief in suffering and support in difficulty. I also hope that they will not lack the solidarity of all.

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

11 August 2010

## **The significance of martyrdom**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today in the Liturgy we commemorate St Clare of Assisi, Foundress of the Poor Clares, a luminous figure of whom I shall speak in one of the forthcoming Catecheses. But this week as I already mentioned at last Sunday's Angelus we are commemorating several holy Martyrs, from the early centuries of the Church such as St Lawrence, Deacon, St Pontianus, Pope, and St Hippolytus, Priest; and from the nearer past, such as St Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Edith Stein, Patroness of Europe, and St Maximilian Mary Kolbe. I would then like to reflect briefly on martyrdom, a form of total love for God.

On what is martyrdom founded? The answer is simple: on the death of Jesus, on his supreme sacrifice of love, consummated on the Cross, that we might have life (cf. Jn 10:10). Christ is the suffering servant mentioned by the Prophet Isaiah (cf. Is 52:13–15), who gave himself as a ransom for many (cf. Mt 20:28). He urges his disciples, each one of us, to take up his or her cross every day and follow him on the path of total love of God the Father and of humanity: “he who does not take his cross and follow me”, he tells us, “is not worthy of me. He who finds his life will lose it, and he who loses his life for my sake will find it” (Mt 10:38–39). It is the logic of the grain of wheat that dies in order to sprout and bring new life (cf. Jn 12:24). Jesus himself “is the grain of wheat which came from God, the divine grain that lets itself fall to the ground, that lets itself sink, be broken down in death and precisely by so doing germinates and can thus bear fruit in the immensity of the world” (Benedict XVI during his Visit to the Evangelical Lutheran Community at the “Christuskirche”, Rome, 14 March 2010). The martyr follows the Lord to the very end, freely accepting death for the salvation of the world in a supreme test of love and faith (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42).

Once again, where does the strength to face martyrdom come from? From deep and intimate union with Christ, because martyrdom and the vocation to martyrdom are not the result of human effort but the response to a project and call of God, they are a gift of

his grace that enables a person, out of love, to give his life for Christ and for the Church, hence for the world. If we read the lives of the Martyrs we are amazed at their calmness and courage in confronting suffering and death: God's power is fully expressed in weakness, in the poverty of those who entrust themselves to him and place their hope in him alone (cf. 2 Cor 12:9). Yet it is important to stress that God's grace does not suppress or suffocate the freedom of those who face martyrdom; on the contrary it enriches and exalts them: the Martyr is an exceedingly free person, free as regards power, as regards the world; a free person who in a single, definitive act gives God his whole life, and in a supreme act of faith, hope and charity, abandons himself into the hands of his Creator and Redeemer; he gives up his life in order to be associated totally with the Sacrifice of Christ on the Cross. In a word, martyrdom is a great act of love in response to God's immense love.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, as I said last Wednesday we are probably not called to martyrdom, but not one of us is excluded from the divine call to holiness, to attain the high standard of Christian living, and this entails taking up our daily cross. All of us, especially in our time when selfishness and individualism seem to prevail, must take on as a first and fundamental commitment the duty to grow every day in greater love for God and for our brothers and sisters, to transform our own lives and thereby transform the life of our world too. Through the intercession of the Saints and Martyrs let us ask the Lord to set our hearts on fire so that we may be able to love as he has loved each one of us.*

### **To special groups**

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims present today. I especially welcome the young altar servers from Malta and their families, and I thank them for their faithful service in Saint Peter's Basilica. I also greet the pilgrimage groups from Nigeria, Indonesia and the United States. In this month of August, when the Church commemorates so many martyrs, let us give thanks for all those who followed Christ to the end by offering their own lives in union with his sacrifice on the Cross. May their act of supreme love and surrender to God inspire us on the way of holiness and charity towards our brothers and sisters. Commending you and your families to their intercession, I cordially invoke upon you God's abundant Blessings.

And now we will sing the "Our Father" together in Latin.

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*18 August 2010*

# Saint Pius the Tenth

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to reflect on my Predecessor, St Pius X whose liturgical Memorial we shall be celebrating next Saturday and to underline certain features that may be useful to both Pastors and faithful also in our time.

Giuseppe Sarto, that was his name, was born into a peasant family in Riese, Treviso, in 1835. After studying at the Seminary in Padua he was ordained a priest when he was 23 years old. He was first curate in Tombolo, then parish priest at Salzano and then canon of the Cathedral of Treviso with the offices of episcopal chancellor and spiritual director of the Diocesan Seminary. In these years of rich and generous pastoral experience, the future Pontiff showed that deep love for Christ and for the Church, that humility and simplicity and great charity to the needy which characterized his entire life. In 1884 he was appointed Bishop of Mantua, and in 1893, Patriarch of Venice. On 4 August 1903, he was elected Pope, a ministry he hesitated to accept since he did not consider himself worthy of such a lofty office.

Pius X's Pontificate left an indelible mark on the Church's history and was distinguished by a considerable effort for reform that is summed up in his motto: *Instaurare Omnia in Christo*, "To renew all things in Christ". Indeed, his interventions involved various ecclesiastical contexts. From the outset he devoted himself to reorganizing the Roman Curia; he then began work on the Code of Canon Law which was promulgated by his Successor Benedict XV. He later promoted the revision of the studies and formation programme of future priests and founded various Regional Seminaries, equipped with good libraries and well-qualified teachers. Another important sector was that of the doctrinal formation of the People of God. Beginning in his years as parish priest, he himself had compiled a catechism and during his Episcopate in Mantua he worked to produce a single, if not universal catechism, at least in Italian. As an authentic Pastor he had understood that the situation in that period, due partly to the phenomenon of emigration, made necessary a catechism to which every member of the faithful might refer, independently of the place in which he lived and of his position. As Pontiff, he compiled a text of Christian doctrine for the Diocese of Rome that was later disseminated throughout Italy and the world. Because of its simple, clear, precise language and effective explanations, this "Pius X Catechism", as it was called, was a reliable guide to many in learning the truths of the faith.

Pius X paid considerable attention to the reform of the Liturgy and, in particular, of sacred music in order to lead the faithful to a life of more profound prayer and fuller participation in the Sacraments. In the Motu Proprio *Tra le Sollecitudini* (1903), the first

year of his Pontificate, he said that the true Christian spirit has its first and indispensable source in active participation in the sacrosanct mysteries and in the public and solemn prayer of the Church (cf. AAS 36[1903], 531). For this reason he recommended that the Sacraments be received often, encouraging the daily reception of Holy Communion and appropriately lowering the age when children receive their First Communion “to about seven”, the age “when a child begins to reason” (cf. S. Congr. de Sacramentis, Decretum *Quam Singulari*: AAS 2 [1910] 582).

Faithful to the task of strengthening his brethren in the faith, in confronting certain trends that were manifest in the theological context at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th centuries, Pius X intervened decisively, condemning “Modernism” to protect the faithful from erroneous concepts and to foster a scientific examination of the Revelation consonant with the Tradition of the Church. On 7 May 1909, with his Apostolic Letter *Vinea Electa*, he founded the Pontifical Biblical Institute. The last months of his life were overshadowed by the impending war. His appeal to Catholics of the world, launched on 2 August 1914 to express the bitter pain of the present hour, was the anguished plea of a father who sees his children taking sides against each other. He died shortly afterwards, on 20 August, and the fame of his holiness immediately began to spread among the Christian people.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, St Pius X teaches all of us that at the root of our apostolic action in the various fields in which we work there must always be close personal union with Christ, to cultivate and to develop, day after day. This is the essence of all his teaching, of all his pastoral commitment. Only if we are in love with the Lord shall we be able to bring people to God and open them to his merciful love and thereby open the world to God's mercy.*

### **To special groups**

*My Dear Brothers and Sisters, today we recall Pope St Pius X, whose feast we celebrate this coming Saturday. He left an indelible mark in very many aspects of the Church's life and activity, his overarching goal being to “renew all things in Christ” through our intimate personal union with our Saviour. By Pope St Pius' prayers, may we grow daily in love for Christ and help open others to his love. God's abundant Blessings upon you all!*

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. I ask all of you to devote ever more time to Christian formation in order to be faithful disciples of Christ, the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

### **Appeal for flood victims in Pakistan**

My thoughts go at this time to the beloved peoples of Pakistan, recently afflicted by a serious flood that has taken a heavy toll of life and left many families homeless.



As I entrust to God's merciful goodness all those who have been tragically lost, I express my spiritual closeness to their relatives and to everyone who is suffering because of this disaster. May these brothers and sisters of ours, so harshly tried, not lack our solidarity and the practical support of the International Community!

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*25 August 2010*

## **St Augustine**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

There are very dear people in the life of each one of us to whom we feel particularly close, some of whom are already in God's embrace while others still share with us the journey through life: they are our parents, relatives and teachers; they are the people to whom we have done good or from whom we have received good; they are people on whom we know we can count. Yet it is important also to have "travelling companions" on the journey of our Christian life. I am thinking of a Spiritual Director, a Confessor, of people with whom it is possible to share one's own faith experience, but I am also thinking of the Virgin Mary and the Saints. Everyone must have some Saint with whom he or she is on familiar terms, to feel close to with prayer and intercession but also to emulate. I would therefore like to ask you to become better acquainted with the Saints, starting with those you are called after, by reading their life and their writings. You may rest assured that they will become good guides in order to love the Lord even more and will contribute effective help for your human and Christian development.

As you know, I too am especially attached to certain Saints: among them in addition to St Joseph and St Benedict, whose names I bear is St Augustine whom I have had the great gift to know, so to speak, close at hand through study and prayer and who has become a good "travelling companion" in my life and my ministry. I would like to stress once again an important aspect of his human and Christian experience, which is also timely in our day, in which it seems, paradoxically, that relativism is the "truth" which must guide our thoughts, decisions and behaviour.

St Augustine was a man who never lived superficially; his thirst, his restless and constant thirst for the Truth is one of the basic characteristics of his existence; not however for "pseudo-truths", incapable of giving the heart lasting peace, but of that Truth that gives meaning to life and is the "dwelling-place" in which the heart finds serenity and joy. As we know, his was a far from easy journey: he thought he had found the Truth in prestige, in his career, in the possession of things, in the voices that promised him instant happiness; he committed faults, he experienced sorrows, he faced failures but he never

stopped, he was never content with what only gave him a glimmer of light. He was able to look into the depths of his being and realized, as he wrote in *Confessions*, that the Truth, the God whom he sought with his own efforts was closer to him than he himself, that God had always been beside him, had never abandoned him, was waiting to be able to enter his life once and for all (cf. III, 6, 11; X, 27, 38). As I said in a comment on the film made recently about his life, St Augustine, in his restless seeking realized that it was not he who had found the Truth but that the Truth, who is God, had come after him and found him. Romano Guardini, commenting on a passage in the third chapter of *Confessions* said: “St Augustine understood that God is the “glory that brings us to our knees, drink that quenches our thirst, treasure that gives happiness ... [he had] the pacifying certainty of those who have understood at last, but also the bliss of the love that knows: “this is everything and it is enough for me” (*Pensatori religiosi*, Brescia 2001, p. 177).

Again, in *Confessions*, in the ninth book, our Saint records a conversation with his mother, St Monica, whose Memorial is celebrated on Friday, the day after tomorrow. It is a very beautiful scene: he and his mother are at Ostia, at an inn, and from the window they see the sky and the sea, and they transcend the sky and the sea and for a moment touch God’s heart in the silence of created beings. And here a fundamental idea appears on the way towards the Truth: creatures must be silent, leaving space for the silence in which God can speak. This is still true in our day too. At times there is a sort of fear of silence, of recollection, of thinking of one’s own actions, of the profound meaning of one’s life. All too often people prefer to live only the fleeting moment, deceiving themselves that it will bring lasting happiness; they prefer to live superficially, without thinking, because it seems easier; they are afraid to seek the Truth or perhaps afraid that the Truth will find us, will take hold of us and change our life, as happened to St Augustine.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters, I would like to say to all of you and also to those who are passing through a difficult moment in their journey of faith, to those who take little part in the life of the Church or who live “as though God did not exist” not to be afraid of the Truth, never to interrupt the journey towards it and never to stop searching for the profound truth about yourselves and other things with the inner eye of the heart. God will not fail to provide Light to see by and Warmth to make the heart feel that he loves us and wants to be loved.*

May the intercession of the Virgin Mary, of St Augustine and of St Monica accompany us on this journey

### **To special groups**

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims, especially the young altar servers from Malta and their families, and the pilgrimage group from Japan. This Saturday the Church

celebrates the Feast of St Augustine, who found in Christ the fullness of that truth which brings authentic freedom and joy. May St Augustine and his mother, St Monica, accompany us with their prayers and draw us ever closer to the Lord.

Lastly my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*: I invite you all to find in Christ the reason for your hope.

*After greeting the faithful gathered in the courtyard, the Pope went to the window overlooking the square of Castel Gandolfo and addressed the following words in Italian to those who had been unable to find room in the courtyard.*

Dear Friends,

Thank you for your presence and enthusiasm. I wish you a good day, a good vacation and great joy during these hot days. May the Lord help you and go with you always. I give you my Blessing.

*Papal Summer Residence, Castel Gandolfo*

*1st September 2010*

## Saint Hildegard of Bingen

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In 1988, on the occasion of the Marian Year, Venerable John Paul II wrote an Apostolic Letter entitled *Mulieris Dignitatem* on the precious role that women have played and play in the life of the Church. “The Church”, one reads in it, “gives thanks for all the manifestations of the *feminine* ‘genius’ which have appeared in the course of history, in the midst of all peoples and nations; she gives thanks for all the charisms that the Holy Spirit distributes to women in the history of the People of God, for all the victories which she owes to their faith, hope and charity: she gives thanks for all the fruits of feminine holiness” (n. 31).

Various female figures stand out for the holiness of their lives and the wealth of their teaching even in those centuries of history that we usually call the Middle Ages. Today I would like to begin to present one of them to you: St Hildegard of Bingen, who lived in Germany in the 12th century. She was born in 1098, probably at Bermersheim, Rhineland, not far from Alzey, and died in 1179 at the age of 81, in spite of having always been in poor health. Hildegard belonged to a large noble family and her parents dedicated her to God from birth for his service. At the age of eight she was offered for the religious state (in accordance with the Rule of St Benedict, chapter 59), and, to ensure that she received an appropriate human and Christian formation, she was entrusted to

the care of the consecrated widow Uda of Gölklheim and then to Jutta of Spanheim who had taken the veil at the Benedictine Monastery of St Disibodenberg. A small cloistered women's monastery was developing there that followed the Rule of St Benedict. Hildegard was clothed by Bishop Otto of Bamberg and in 1136, upon the death of Mother Jutta who had become the community *magistra* (Prioress), the sisters chose Hildegard to succeed her. She fulfilled this office making the most of her gifts as a woman of culture and of lofty spirituality, capable of dealing competently with the organizational aspects of cloistered life. A few years later, partly because of the increasing number of young women who were knocking at the monastery door, Hildegard broke away from the dominating male monastery of St Disibodenburg with her community, taking it to Bingen, calling it after St Rupert and here she spent the rest of her days. Her manner of exercising the ministry of authority is an example for every religious community: she inspired holy emulation in the practice of good to such an extent that, as time was to tell, both the mother and her daughters competed in mutual esteem and in serving each other.

During the years when she was superior of the Monastery of St Disibodenberg, Hildegard began to dictate the mystical visions that she had been receiving for some time to the monk Volmar, her spiritual director, and to Richardis di Strade, her secretary, a sister of whom she was very fond. As always happens in the life of true mystics, Hildegard too wanted to put herself under the authority of wise people to discern the origin of her visions, fearing that they were the product of illusions and did not come from God. She thus turned to a person who was most highly esteemed in the Church in those times: St Bernard of Clairvaux, of whom I have already spoken in several Catecheses. He calmed and encouraged Hildegard. However, in 1147 she received a further, very important approval. Pope Eugene iii, who was presiding at a Synod in Trier, read a text dictated by Hildegard presented to him by Archbishop Henry of Mainz. The Pope authorized the mystic to write down her visions and to speak in public. From that moment Hildegard's spiritual prestige continued to grow so that her contemporaries called her the "Teutonic prophetess". This, dear friends, is the seal of an authentic experience of the Holy Spirit, the source of every charism: the person endowed with supernatural gifts never boasts of them, never flaunts them and, above all, shows complete obedience to the ecclesial authority. Every gift bestowed by the Holy Spirit, is in fact intended for the edification of the Church and the Church, through her Pastors, recognizes its authenticity.

I shall speak again next Wednesday about this great woman, this "prophetess" who also speaks with great timeliness to us today, with her courageous ability to discern the signs of the times, her love for creation, her medicine, her poetry, her music, which today has been reconstructed, her love for Christ and for his Church which was suffering in that

period too, wounded also in that time by the sins of both priests and lay people, and far better loved as the Body of Christ. Thus St Hildegard speaks to us; we shall speak of her again next Wednesday. Thank you for your attention.

### **To special groups**

I greet the English-speaking pilgrims, especially those from Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Japan and Sri Lanka. Our catechesis today deals with Saint Hildegard of Bingen, the great nun and mystic of the 12th century. One of the outstanding women of the Middle Ages, Hildegard used her spiritual gifts for the renewal of the Church and the spread of authentic Christian living. Hildegard reminds us of the contribution which women are called to make to the life of the Church in our own time. Trusting in her intercession, I cordially invoke upon all of you God's abundant blessings!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, in resuming your customary daily activities after the holidays, may you spread God's light with your witness in every environment. Dear *sick people*, may you find support in Jesus who continues his work of redemption in every human being's life. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you draw from Christ's love so that your love may be increasingly sound and lasting.

*Paul VI Hall*

*8 September 2010*

## **Saint Hildegard of Bingen (2)**

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to take up and continue my Reflection on St Hildegard of Bingen, an important female figure of the Middle Ages who was distinguished for her spiritual wisdom and the holiness of her life. Hildegard's mystical visions resemble those of the Old Testament prophets: expressing herself in the cultural and religious categories of her time, she interpreted the Sacred Scriptures in the light of God, applying them to the various circumstances of life. Thus all those who heard her felt the need to live a consistent and committed Christian lifestyle. In a letter to St Bernard the mystic from the Rhineland confesses: "The vision fascinates my whole being: I do not see with the eyes of the body but it appears to me in the spirit of the mysteries.... I recognize the deep meaning of what is expounded on in the Psalter, in the Gospels and in other books, which have been shown to me in the vision. This vision burns like a flame in my breast and in my soul and teaches me to understand the text profoundly" (*Epistolarium pars prima I-XC: CCCM 91*).

Hildegard's mystical visions have a rich theological content. They refer to the principal events of salvation history, and use a language for the most part poetic and symbolic. For example, in her best known work entitled *Scivias*, that is, "You know the ways" she sums up in 35 visions the events of the history of salvation from the creation of the world to the end of time. With the characteristic traits of feminine sensitivity, Hildegard develops at the very heart of her work the theme of the mysterious marriage between God and humanity that is brought about in the Incarnation. On the tree of the Cross take place the nuptials of the Son of God with the Church, his Bride, filled with grace and the ability to give new children to God, in the love of the Holy Spirit (cf. *Visio tertia: PL 197, 453c*).

From these brief references we already see that theology too can receive a special contribution from women because they are able to talk about God and the mysteries of faith using their own particular intelligence and sensitivity. I therefore encourage all those who carry out this service to do it with a profound ecclesial spirit, nourishing their own reflection with prayer and looking to the great riches, not yet fully explored, of the medieval mystic tradition, especially that represented by luminous models such as Hildegard of Bingen.

The Rhenish mystic is also the author of other writings, two of which are particularly important since, like *Scivias*, they record her mystical visions: they are the *Liber vitae meritorum* (Book of the merits of life) and the *Liber divinorum operum* (Book of the divine works), also called *De operatione Dei*. In the former she describes a unique and powerful vision of God who gives life to the cosmos with his power and his light. Hildegard stresses the deep relationship that exists between man and God and reminds us that the whole creation, of which man is the summit, receives life from the Trinity. The work is centred on the relationship between virtue and vice, which is why human beings must face the daily challenge of vice that distances them on their way towards God and of virtue that benefits them. The invitation is to distance themselves from evil in order to glorify God and, after a virtuous existence, enter the life that consists "wholly of joy". In her second work that many consider her masterpiece she once again describes creation in its relationship with God and the centrality of the human being, expressing a strong Christo-centrism with a biblical—Patristic flavour. The Saint, who presents five visions inspired by the Prologue of the Gospel according to St John, cites the words of the Son to the Father: "The whole task that you wanted and entrusted to me I have carried out successfully, and so here I am in you and you in me and we are one" (*Pars III, Visio X: PL 197, 1025a*).

Finally, in other writings Hildegard manifests the versatility of interests and cultural vivacity of the female monasteries of the Middle Ages, in a manner contrary to the prejudices which still weighed on that period. Hildegard took an interest in medicine and

in the natural sciences as well as in music, since she was endowed with artistic talent. Thus she composed hymns, antiphons and songs, gathered under the title: *Symphonia Harmoniae Caelestium Revelationum* (Symphony of the Harmony of Heavenly Revelations), that were performed joyously in her monasteries, spreading an atmosphere of tranquillity and that have also come down to us. For her, the entire creation is a symphony of the Holy Spirit who is in himself joy and jubilation.

The popularity that surrounded Hildegard impelled many people to seek her advice. It is for this reason that we have so many of her letters at our disposal. Many male and female monastic communities turned to her, as well as Bishops and Abbots. And many of her answers still apply for us. For instance, Hildegard wrote these words to a community of women religious: “The spiritual life must be tended with great dedication. At first the effort is burdensome because it demands the renunciation of caprices of the pleasures of the flesh and of other such things. But if she lets herself be enthralled by holiness a holy soul will find even contempt for the world sweet and lovable. All that is needed is to take care that the soul does not shrivel” (E. Gronau, *Hildegard. Vita di una donna profetica alle origini dell'età moderna*, Milan 1996, p. 402). And when the Emperor Frederic Barbarossa caused a schism in the Church by supporting at least three anti-popes against Alexander iii, the legitimate Pope, Hildegard did not hesitate, inspired by her visions, to remind him that even he, the Emperor, was subject to God’s judgement. With fearlessness, a feature of every prophet, she wrote to the Emperor these words as spoken by God: “You will be sorry for this wicked conduct of the godless who despise me! Listen, O King, if you wish to live! Otherwise my sword will pierce you!” (*ibid.*, p. 412).

With the spiritual authority with which she was endowed, in the last years of her life Hildegard set out on journeys, despite her advanced age and the uncomfortable conditions of travel, in order to speak to the people of God. They all listened willingly, even when she spoke severely: they considered her a messenger sent by God. She called above all the monastic communities and the clergy to a life in conformity with their vocation. In a special way Hildegard countered the movement of German *cátari* (Cathars). They *cátari* means literally “pure” advocated a radical reform of the Church, especially to combat the abuses of the clergy. She harshly reprimanded them for seeking to subvert the very nature of the Church, reminding them that a true renewal of the ecclesial community is obtained with a sincere spirit of repentance and a demanding process of conversion, rather than with a change of structures. This is a message that we should never forget. Let us always invoke the Holy Spirit, so that he may inspire in the Church holy and courageous women, like St Hildegard of Bingen, who, developing the gifts they have received from God, make their own special and valuable contribution to the spiritual development of our communities and of the Church in our time.

# Holiness

13 April 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At the General Audiences in the past two years we have been accompanied by the figures of so many saints: we have learned to know them more closely and to understand that the whole of the Church's history is marked by these men and women who with their faith, with their charity, and with their life have been beacons for so many generations, as they are for us too. The saints expressed in various ways the powerful and transforming presence of the Risen One. They let Jesus so totally overwhelm their life that they could say with St Paul "it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). Following their example, seeking their intercession, entering into communion with them, "brings us closer to Christ, so our companionship with the saints joins us to Christ, from whom as from their fountain and head issue every grace and the life of the People of God itself" (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 50).

At the end of this series of Catecheses, therefore, I would like to offer some thoughts on what holiness is. What does it mean to be holy? Who is called to be holy? We are often led to think that holiness is a goal reserved for a few elect. St Paul, instead, speaks of God's great plan and says: "even as he (God) chose us in him [Christ] before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him" (Eph 1:4). And he was speaking about all of us. At the centre of the divine plan is Christ in whom. God shows his Face, in accord with the favour of his will. The Mystery hidden in the centuries is revealed in its fullness in the Word made flesh. And Paul then says: "in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:19).

In Christ the living God made himself close, visible, audible and tangible so that each one might draw from his fullness of grace and truth (cf. Jn 1:14–16). Therefore, the whole of Christian life knows one supreme law, which St Paul expresses in a formula that recurs in all his holy writings: in Jesus Christ. Holiness, the fullness of Christian life, does not consist in carrying out extraordinary enterprises but in being united with Christ, in living his mysteries, in making our own his example, his thoughts, his behaviour. The measure of holiness stems from the stature that Christ achieves in us, in as much as with the power of the Holy Spirit, we model our whole life on his.



It is being conformed to Jesus, as St Paul says: “For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son” (Rom 8:29). And St Augustine exclaimed: “my life shall be a real life, being wholly filled by you” (*Confessions*, 10, XXVIII).

The Second Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, speaks with clarity of the universal call to holiness, saying that no one is excluded: “The forms and tasks of life are many but holiness is one—that sanctity which is cultivated by all who act under God’s Spirit and ... follow Christ, poor, humble and cross-bearing, that they may deserve to be partakers of his glory” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 41).

However, the question remains: how can we take the path to holiness, in order to respond to this call? Can I do this on my own initiative? The answer is clear. A holy life is not primarily the result of our efforts, of our actions, because it is God, the three times Holy (cf. Is 6:3) who sanctifies us, it is the Holy Spirit’s action that enlivens us from within, it is the very life of the Risen Christ that is communicated to us and that transforms us. To say so once again with the Second Vatican Council, “the followers of Christ, called by God not in virtue of their works but by his design and grace, and justified in the Lord Jesus, have been made sons of God in the baptism of faith and partakers of the divine nature, and so are truly sanctified. They must therefore hold onto and perfect in their lives that sanctification which they have received” (*ibid.*, n. 40).

Holiness, therefore, has its deepest root in the grace of baptism, in being grafted on to the Paschal Mystery of Christ, by which his Spirit is communicated to us, his very life as the Risen One. St Paul strongly emphasizes the transformation that baptismal grace brings about in man and he reaches the point of coining a new terminology, forged with the preposition “with”: *dead-with*, *buried-with*, *raised-with*, brought to *life-with*, with Christ; our destiny is indissolubly linked to his. “We were buried therefore with him by baptism” he writes, “into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead ... we too might walk in newness of life” (Rom 6:4). Yet God always respects our freedom and asks that we accept this gift and live the requirements it entails and he asks that we let ourselves be transformed by the action of the Holy Spirit, conforming our will to the will of God.

How can it happen that our manner of thinking and our actions become thinking and action with Christ and of Christ? What is the soul of holiness? Once again the Second Vatican Council explains; it tells us that Christian holiness is nothing other than charity lived to the full. “God is love, and he who abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him” (1 Jn 4:16). Now God has poured out his love in our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us (cf. Rom 5:5); therefore the first and most necessary gift is charity, by which we love God above all things and our neighbour through love of him. But if charity, like a good seed, is to grow and fructify in the soul, each of the faithful

must willingly hear the word of God and carry out his will with deeds, with the help of his grace. He must frequently receive the sacraments, chiefly the Eucharist, and take part in the holy liturgy; he must constantly apply himself to prayer, self-denial, active brotherly service and the exercise all the virtues. This is because love, as the bond of perfection and fullness of the law (cf. Col 3:14; Rom 13:10) governs, gives meaning to, and perfects all the means of sanctification” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 42).

Perhaps this language of the Second Vatican Council is a little too solemn for us, perhaps we should say things even more simply. What is the essential? The essential means never leaving a Sunday without an encounter with the Risen Christ in the Eucharist; this is not an additional burden but is light for the whole week. It means never beginning and never ending a day without at least a brief contact with God. And, on the path of our life it means following the “signposts” that God has communicated to us in the Ten Commandments, interpreted with Christ, which are merely the explanation of what love is in specific situations. It seems to me that this is the true simplicity and greatness of a life of holiness: the encounter with the Risen One on Sunday; contact with God at the beginning and at the end of the day; following, in decisions, the “signposts” that God has communicated to us, which are but forms of charity.

“Hence the true disciple of Christ is marked by love both of God and of neighbour” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 42). This is the true simplicity, greatness and depth of Christian life, of being holy. This is why St Augustine, in commenting on the fourth chapter of the First Letter of St John, could make a bold statement: “*Dilige et fac quod vis* [Love and do what you will]” And he continued: “If you keep silent, keep silent by love; if you speak, speak by love; if you correct, correct by love; if you pardon, pardon by love; let love be rooted in you, and from the root nothing but good can grow” (7, 8 pl 35). Those who are guided by love, who live charity to the full, are guided by God, because God is love. Hence these important words apply: “*Dilige et fac quod vis*”, “Love and do what you will”.

We might ask ourselves: can we, with our limitations, with our weaknesses, aim so high? During the Liturgical Year, the Church invites us to commemorate a host of saints, the ones, that is, who lived charity to the full, who knew how to love and follow Christ in their daily lives. They tell us that it is possible for everyone to take this road. In every epoch of the Church’s history, on every latitude of the world map, the saints belong to all the ages and to every state of life, they are actual faces of every people, language and nation. And they have very different characters.

Actually I must say that also for my personal faith many saints, not all, are true stars in the firmament of history. And I would like to add that for me not only a few great saints whom I love and whom I know well are “signposts”, but precisely also the simple saints,

that is, the good people I see in my life who will never be canonized. They are ordinary people, so to speak, without visible heroism but in their everyday goodness I see the truth of faith. This goodness, which they have developed in the faith of the Church, is for me the most reliable apology of Christianity and the sign of where the truth lies.

In the Communion of Saints, canonized and not canonized, which the Church lives thanks to Christ in all her members, we enjoy their presence and their company and cultivate the firm hope that we shall be able to imitate their journey and share one day in the same blessed life, eternal life.

Dear friends, how great and beautiful, as well as simple is the Christian vocation seen in this light! We are all called to holiness: it is the very measure of Christian living. Once again St Paul expresses it with great intensity when he writes: “grace was given to each of us according to the measure of Christ’s gift.... His gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:7, 11–13).

I would like to ask all to open themselves to the action of the Holy Spirit, who transforms our life, to be, we too, as small pieces in the great mosaic of holiness that God continues to create in history, so that the face of Christ may shine out in the fullness of its splendour. Let us not be afraid to aim high, for God’s heights; let us not be afraid that God will ask too much of us, but let ourselves be guided by his Word in every daily action, even when we feel poor, inadequate, sinners. It will be he who transforms us in accordance with his love. Many thanks.

# Christian Prayer

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## **Christian Prayer**

4 May 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to begin a new series of Catecheses. After the series on the Fathers of the Church, on the great theologians of the Middle Ages and on great women, I would now like to choose a topic that is dear to all our hearts: it is the theme of prayer, and especially Christian prayer, the prayer, that is, which Jesus taught and which the Church continues to teach us. It is in fact in Jesus that man becomes able to approach God in the depth and intimacy of the relationship of fatherhood and sonship. Together with the first disciples, let us now turn with humble trust to the Teacher and ask him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1).

In the upcoming Catechesis, in comparing Sacred Scripture, the great tradition of the Fathers of the Church, of the Teachers of spirituality and of the Liturgy, let us learn to live our relationship with the Lord, even more intensely as it were at a “school of prayer”.

We know well, in fact, that prayer should not be taken for granted. It is necessary to learn how to pray, as it were acquiring this art ever anew; even those who are very advanced in spiritual life always feel the need to learn from Jesus, to learn how to pray authentically. We receive the first lesson from the Lord by his example. The Gospels describe Jesus to us in intimate and constant conversation with the Father: it is a profound communion of the One who came into the world not to do his will but that of the Father who sent him for the salvation of man.

At this first Catechesis, as an introduction I would like to propose several examples of prayer in the ancient cultures, to show that practically always and everywhere they were addressed to God.

I shall start with ancient Egypt, as an example. Here a blind man, asking the divinity to restore his sight, testifies to something universally human. This is a pure and simple prayer of petition by someone who is suffering. This man prays: “My heart longs to see you.... You who made me see the darkness, create light for me, so that I may see you! Bend your beloved face over me” (A. Barucq—F. Daumas, *Hymnes et prières de l’Egypte ancienne*, Paris 1980). That I may see you; this is the essence of the prayer!

In the religions of Mesopotamia an arcane, paralyzing sense of guilt predominated, but which was not devoid of the hope of redemption and liberation on God’s part. We may thus appreciate this entreaty by a believer of those ancient cultures, formulated in these words: “O God who are indulgent even in the greatest sin, absolve me from my sin.... Look, O Lord at your tired servant and blow your breeze upon him: forgive him without delay. Alleviate your severe punishment. Freed from bonds, grant that I may breathe anew, break my chains, loosen the fetters that bind me” (M.-J. Seux, *Hymnes et Prières aux Dieux de Babylone et d’Assyrie*, Paris 1976). These are words that demonstrate how the

human being, in his search for God, had intuited, if vaguely, on the one hand his own guilt and on the other, aspects of divine mercy and goodness.

In the pagan religion of ancient Greece, a very significant development may be seen: prayers, while still invoking divine help to obtain heavenly favours in every circumstance of daily life and to receive material benefits, gradually became orientated to more disinterested requests, which enabled the believer to deepen his or her relationship with God and to become a better person.

For example, the great philosopher Plato records a prayer of his teacher, Socrates, held to be one of the founders of Western thought. This was Socrates' prayer: "Grant to me that I be made beautiful in my soul within, and that all external possessions be in harmony with my inner man. May I consider the wise man rich; and may I have such wealth as only the self-restrained man can bear or endure" (Plato, *Phaedrus*, English trans.: Loeb, Harold North Fowler). Rather than to possess plenty of money, he wanted above all to be beautiful within and wise.

In the Greek tragedies, sublime masterpieces of the literature of all time which still, after 25 centuries, are read, thought about and performed today, there is a content of prayer which expresses the desire to know God and to worship his majesty. One of these tragedies says: "O Earth's Upbearer, thou whose throne is Earth, Who'er thou be, O past our finding out, Zeus, be thou Nature's Law, or Mind of man, Thee I invoke; for, treading soundless paths, To Justice' goal thou bringest all mortal things" (Euripedes, *Trojan Women*, 884–886, English trans.: Loeb, Arthur S. Way). God remains somewhat nebulous, nevertheless man knows this unknown god and prays to the one who guides the ways of the world.

Also among the Romans who made up that great Empire in which Christianity first came into being and spread, prayer, even if it is associated with a utilitarian conception and fundamentally associated with the request for divine protection of the life of the civil community, sometimes begins with invocations that are wonderful for the fervour of personal devotion that is transformed into praise and thanksgiving. In the second century A.D., Apuleius, an author of Roman Africa, attested to this. In his writings he expresses his contemporaries' dissatisfaction with the traditional religion and the desire for a more authentic relationship with God. In his masterpiece, entitled *Metamorphoses*, a believer addresses these words to a goddess: "You are holy, you are in every epoch a saviour of the human species, you, in your generosity, always help mortals, offer to the wretch in travail the tender affection of a mother. Neither a day nor a night nor even a second pass without you filling it with your benefits" (Apuleius of Madaura, *Metamorphoses* ix, 25).

In the same period the Emperor Marcus Aurelius—who was also a philosopher who reflected on the human condition—affirmed the need to pray in order to establish a fruitful cooperation between divine action and human action. He wrote in his *Meditations*: “Who told you that the gods do not help us also in what depends on us? So begin to pray to them and you will see” (*Dictionnaire de Spiritualité* xii/2, col. 2213).

This advice of the Emperor philosopher was effectively put into practice by innumerable generations prior to Christ, thereby demonstrating that human life without prayer, which opens our existence to the mystery God, lacks sense and direction. Always expressed in every prayer, in fact, is the truth of the human creature who on the one hand experiences weakness and impoverishment, who therefore addresses his supplication to Heaven, and on the other is endowed with an extraordinary dignity, so that, in preparing to receive the divine Revelation, finds himself able to enter into communion with God.

Dear friends, in these examples of prayer of different epochs and civilizations emerge the human being's awareness of his creatural condition and of his dependence on Another superior to him and the source of every good. The human being of all times prays because he cannot fail to wonder about the meaning of his life, which remains obscure and discomfiting of it is not put in relations to the mystery of God and if his plan for the world.

Human life is a fabric woven of good and of evil, of undeserved suffering and of joy and beauty that spontaneously and irresistibly impel us to ask God for that light and that inner strength which support us on earth and reveal a hope beyond the boundaries of death.

The pagan religions remain an invocation which from the earth awaits a word from Heaven. One of the last great pagan philosophers, who lived fully in the Christian era, Proclus of Constantinople, gives a voice to this expectation, saying: “unknowable, no one contains you. All that we think belongs to you. Our evils and our good come from you, on you our every yearning depends, O Ineffable One, whom our souls feel present, raising to you a hymn of silence” (*Hymni*, ed. Vogt, Wiesbaden 1957, in *Preghiere dell'umanità*, *op. cit.*, p. 61).

In the examples of prayer of the various cultures which we have considered, we can see a testimony of the religious dimension and of the desire for God engraved on the heart of every human being, which receives fulfilment and full expression in the Old and in the New Testament. The Revelation, is in fact purifying and brings to its fullness man's



original yearning for God, offering to him, in prayer, the possibility of a deeper relationship with the heavenly Father.

At the beginning of our journey in the “school of prayer” let us now ask the Lord to illumine our minds and hearts so that the relationship with him in prayer may be ever more intense, affectionate and constant. Once again, let us say to him: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1).

## The person and prayer

11 May 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I wish to continue my reflection on how prayer and the sense of religion have been part of man throughout his history.

We live in an age in which the signs of secularism are glaringly obvious. God seems to have disappeared from the horizon of some people or to have become a reality that meets with indifference. Yet at the same time we see many signs of a reawakening of the religious sense, a rediscovery of the importance of God to the human being's life, a need for spirituality, for going beyond a purely horizontal and materialistic vision of human life.

A look at recent history reveals the failure of the predictions of those who, in the age of the Enlightenment, foretold the disappearance of religions and who exalted absolute reason, detached from faith, a reason that was to dispel the shadows of religious dogmatism and was to dissolve the “world of the sacred”, restoring to the human being freedom, dignity and autonomy from God. The experience of the past century, with the tragedy of the two World Wars, disrupted the progress that autonomous reason, man without God, seemed to have been able to guarantee.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “In the act of creation, God calls every being from nothingness into existence.... Even after losing through his sin his likeness to God, man remains an image of his Creator, and retains the desire for the one who calls him into existence. All religions bear witness to man's essential search for God” (n. 2566). We could say—as I explained in my last Catecheses—that there has been no great civilization, from the most distant epoch to our day, which has not been religious.

Man is religious by nature, he is *homo religiosus* just as he is *homo sapiens* and *homo faber*: “The desire for God” the *Catechism* says further, “is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God” (n. 27). The image of the Creator is impressed on his being and he feels the need to find light to give a response to the questions that concern the deep sense of reality; a response that he cannot find in himself, in progress, in empirical science.

The *homo religiosus* does not only appear in the sphere of antiquity, he passes through the whole of human history. In this regard, the rich terrain of human experience has seen the religious sense develop in various forms, in the attempt to respond to the desire for fullness and happiness. The “digital” man, like the cave man, seeks in the religious experience ways to overcome his finiteness and to guarantee his precarious adventure on earth. Moreover, life without a transcendent horizon would not have its full meaning and happiness, for which we all seek, is spontaneously projected towards the future in a tomorrow that has yet to come.

In the Declaration *Nostra Aetate* the Second Vatican Council stressed in summary form: “Men look to their different religions for an answer to the unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of men are the same today as in the ages past. What is man?—[who am I?—]—What is the meaning and purpose of life? What is upright behaviour, and what is sinful? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? What is judgement? What reward follows death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend?” (n. 1).

Man knows that, by himself, he cannot respond to his own fundamental need to understand. However much he is deluded and still deludes himself that he is self-sufficient, he experiences his own insufficiency. He needs to open himself to something more, to something or to someone that can give him what he lacks, he must come out of himself towards the One who is able to fill the breadth and depth of his desire.

Man bears within him a thirst for the infinite, a longing for eternity, a quest for beauty, a desire for love, a need for light and for truth which impel him towards the Absolute; man bears within him the desire for God. And man knows, in a certain way, that he can turn to God, he knows he can pray to him.

St Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest theologians of history, defines prayer as “an expression of man’s desire for God”. This attraction to God, which God himself has placed in man, is the soul of prayer, that then takes on a great many forms, in accordance

with the history, the time, the moment, the grace and even the sin of every person praying. Man's history has in fact known various forms of prayer, because he has developed different kinds of openness to the "Other" and to the Beyond, so that we may recognize prayer as an experience present in every religion and culture.

Indeed, dear brothers and sisters, as we saw last prayer is not linked to a specific context, but is written on the heart of every person and of every civilization. Of course, when we speak of prayer as an experience of the human being as such, of the *homo orans*, it is necessary to bear in mind that it is an inner attitude before being a series of practices and formulas, a manner of being in God's presence before performing acts of worship or speaking words.

Prayer is centred and rooted in the inmost depths of the person; it is therefore not easily decipherable and, for the same reason, can be subject to misunderstanding and mystification. In this sense too we can understand the expression: prayer is difficult. In fact, prayer is the place par excellence of free giving, of striving for the Invisible, the Unexpected and the Ineffable. Therefore, the experience of prayer is a challenge to everyone, a "grace" to invoke, a gift of the One to whom we turn.

In prayer, in every period of history, man considers himself and his situation before God, from God and in relation to God, and experiences being a creature in need of help, incapable of obtaining on his own the fulfilment of his life and his hope. The philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein mentioned that "prayer means feeling that the world's meaning is outside the world".

In the dynamic of this relationship with the one who gives meaning to existence, with God, prayer has one of its typical expressions in the gesture of kneeling. It is a gesture that has in itself a radical ambivalence. In fact, I can be forced to kneel—a condition of indigence and slavery—but I can also kneel spontaneously, declaring my limitations and therefore my being in need of Another. To him I declare I am weak, needy, "a sinner".

In the experience of prayer, the human creature expresses all his self-awareness, all that he succeeds in grasping of his own existence and, at the same time, he turns with his whole being to the One before whom he stands, directs his soul to that Mystery from which he expects the fulfilment of his deepest desires and help to overcome the neediness of his own life. In this turning to "Another", in directing himself "beyond" lies the essence of prayer, as an experience of a reality that overcomes the tangible and the contingent.

Yet only in God who reveals himself does man's seeking find complete fulfilment. The prayer that is openness and elevation of the heart to God, thus becomes a personal

relationship with him. And even if man forgets his Creator, the living, true God does not cease to call man first to the mysterious encounter of prayer.

As the *Catechism* says: “in prayer, the faithful God’s initiative of love always comes first; our own first step is always a response. As God gradually reveals himself and reveals man to himself, prayer appears as a reciprocal call, a covenant drama. Through words and actions, this drama engages the heart. It unfolds throughout the whole history of salvation” (n. 2567).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn to pause longer before God, who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, let us learn to recognize in silence, in our own hearts, his voice that calls us and leads us back to the depths of our existence, to the source of life, to the source of salvation, to enable us to go beyond the limitations of our life and to open ourselves to God’s dimension, to the relationship with him, which is Infinite Love. Many thanks.

## Biblical Path of Prayer

18 May 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the last two Catecheses we have reflected on prayer as a universal phenomenon which—although in different forms—is present in the cultures of all times.

Today instead I would like to start out on a biblical path on this topic which will guide us to deepening the dialogue of the Covenant between God and man, which enlivened the history of salvation to its culmination, to the definitive Word that is Jesus Christ.

This path will lead us to reflect on certain important texts and paradigmatic figures of the Old and New Testaments. It will be Abraham the great Patriarch, the father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:11–12, 16–17), to offer us a first example of prayer in the episode of intercession for the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah.

And I would also like to ask you to benefit from the journey we shall be making in the forthcoming catecheses to become more familiar with the Bible, which I hope you have in your homes and, during the week, to pause to read it and to meditate upon it in prayer, in order to know the marvellous history of the relationship between God and man, between God who communicates with us and man who responds, who prays.

The first text on which we shall reflect is in chapter 18 of the Book of Genesis. It is recounted that the evil of the inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorrah had reached the

height of depravity so as to require an intervention of God, an act of justice, that would prevent the evil from destroying those cities.

It is here that Abraham comes in, with his prayer of intercession. God decides to reveal to him what is about to happen and acquaints him with the gravity of the evil and its terrible consequences, because Abraham is his chosen one, chosen to become a great people and to bring the divine blessing to the whole world. His is a mission of salvation which must counter the sin that has invaded human reality; the Lord wishes to bring humanity back to faith, obedience and justice through Abraham. And now this friend of God seeing the reality and neediness of the world, prays for those who are about to be punished and begs that they be saved.

Abraham immediately postulates the problem in all its gravity and says to the Lord: “Will you indeed destroy the righteous with the wicked? Suppose there are fifty righteous within the city; will you then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it? Far be it from you to do such a thing, to slay the righteous with the wicked, so that the righteous fare as the wicked! Far be that from you! Shall not the Judge of all the earth do right?” (Gen 18:23–25).

Speaking these words with great courage, Abraham confronts God with the need to avoid a perfunctory form of justice: if the city is guilty it is right to condemn its crime and to inflict punishment, but—the great Patriarch affirms—it would be unjust to punish all the inhabitants indiscriminately. If there are innocent people in the city, they must not be treated as the guilty. God, who is a just judge, cannot act in this way, Abraham says rightly to God.

However, if we read the text more attentively we realize that Abraham’s request is even more pressing and more profound because he does not stop at asking for salvation for the innocent. Abraham asks forgiveness for the whole city and does so by appealing to God’s justice; indeed, he says to the Lord: “Will you then destroy the place and not spare it for the fifty righteous who are in it?” (v. 24b).

In this way he brings a new idea of justice into play: not the one that is limited to punishing the guilty, as men do, but a different, divine justice that seeks goodness and creates it through forgiveness that transforms the sinner, converts and saves him. With his prayer, therefore, Abraham does not invoke a merely compensatory form of justice but rather an intervention of salvation which, taking into account the innocent, also frees the wicked from guilt by forgiving them.

Abraham’s thought, which seems almost paradoxical, could be summed up like this: obviously it is not possible to treat the innocent as guilty, this would be unjust; it would

be necessary instead to treat the guilty as innocent, putting into practice a “superior” form of justice, offering them a possibility of salvation because, if evildoers accept God’s pardon and confess their sin, letting themselves be saved, they will no longer continue to do wicked deeds, they too will become righteous and will no longer deserve punishment.

It is this request for justice that Abraham expresses in his intercession, a request based on the certainty that the Lord is merciful. Abraham does not ask God for something contrary to his essence, he knocks at the door of God’s heart knowing what he truly desires.

Sodom, of course, is a large city, 50 upright people seem few, but are not the justice and forgiveness of God perhaps proof of the power of goodness, even if it seems smaller and weaker than evil? The destruction of Sodom must halt the evil present in the city, but Abraham knows that God has other ways and means to stem the spread of evil. It is forgiveness that interrupts the spiral of sin and Abraham, in his dialogue with God, appeals for exactly this. And when the Lord agrees to forgive the city if 50 upright people may be found in it, his prayer of intercession begins to reach the abysses of divine mercy.

Abraham—as we remember—gradually decreases the number of innocent people necessary for salvation: if 50 would not be enough, 45 might suffice, and so on down to 10, continuing his entreaty, which became almost bold in its insistence: “suppose 40 ... 30 ... 20 ... are found there” (cf. vv. 29, 30, 31, 32). The smaller the number becomes, the greater God’s mercy is shown to be. He patiently listens to the prayer, he hears it and repeats at each supplication: “I will spare ... I will not destroy ... I will not do it” (cf. vv. 26, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32).

Thus, through Abraham’s intercession, Sodom can be saved if there are even only 10 innocent people in it. This is the power of prayer. For through intercession, the prayer to God for the salvation of others, the desire for salvation which God nourishes for sinful man is demonstrated and expressed. Evil, in fact, cannot be accepted, it must be identified and destroyed through punishment: The destruction of Sodom had exactly this function.

Yet the Lord does not want the wicked to die, but rather that they convert and live (cf. Ez 18:23; 33:11); his desire is always to forgive, to save, to give life, to transform evil into good. Well, it is this divine desire itself which becomes in prayer the desire of the human being and is expressed through the words of intercession.

With his entreaty, Abraham is lending his voice and also his heart, to the divine will. God’s desire is for mercy and love as well as his wish to save; and this desire of God found in Abraham and in his prayer the possibility of being revealed concretely in human

history, in order to be present wherever there is a need for grace. By voicing this prayer, Abraham was giving a voice to what God wanted, which was not to destroy Sodom but to save it, to give life to the converted sinner.

This is what the Lord desires and his dialogue with Abraham is a prolonged and unequivocal demonstration of his merciful love. The need to find enough righteous people in the city decreases and in the end 10 were to be enough to save the entire population.

The reason why Abraham stops at 10 is not given in the text. Perhaps it is a figure that indicates a minimum community nucleus (still today, 10 people are the necessary *quorum* for public Jewish prayer). However, this is a small number, a tiny particle of goodness with which to start in order to save the rest from a great evil.

However, not even 10 just people were to be found in Sodom and Gomorrah so the cities were destroyed; a destruction paradoxically deemed necessary by the prayer of Abraham's intercession itself. Because that very prayer revealed the saving will of God: the Lord was prepared to forgive, he wanted to forgive but the cities were locked into a totalizing and paralyzing evil, without even a few innocents from whom to start in order to turn evil into good.

This the very path to salvation that Abraham too was asking for: being saved does not mean merely escaping punishment but being delivered from the evil that dwells within us. It is not punishment that must be eliminated but sin, the rejection of God and of love which already bears the punishment in itself.

The Prophet Jeremiah was to say to the rebellious people: "Your wickedness will chasten you, and your apostasy will reprove you. Know and see that it is evil and bitter for you to forsake the Lord your God" (Jer 2:19).

It is from this sorrow and bitterness that the Lord wishes to save man, liberating him from sin. Therefore, however, a transformation from within is necessary, some foothold of of goodness, a beginning from which to start out in order to change evil into good, hatred into love, revenge into forgiveness.

For this reason there must be righteous people in the city and Abraham continuously repeats: "suppose there are ...". "There": it is within the sick reality that there must be that seed of goodness which can heal and restore life. It is a word that is also addressed to us: so that in our cities the seed of goodness may be found; that we may do our utmost to ensure that there are not only 10 upright people, to make our cities truly live and survive

and to save ourselves from the inner bitterness which is the absence of God. And in the unhealthy situation of Sodom and Gomorrah that seed of goodness was not to be found.

Yet God's mercy in the history of his people extends further. If in order to save Sodom 10 righteous people were necessary, the Prophet Jeremiah was to say, on behalf of the Almighty, that only one upright person was necessary to save Jerusalem: "Run to and fro through the streets of Jerusalem, look and take note! Search her squares to see if you can find a man, one who does justice and seeks truth; that I may pardon her" (5:1).

The number dwindled further, God's goodness proved even greater. Nonetheless this did not yet suffice, the superabundant mercy of God did not find the response of goodness that he sought, and under the siege of the enemy Jerusalem fell.

It was to be necessary for God himself to become that one righteous person. And this is the mystery of the Incarnation: to guarantee a just person he himself becomes man. There will always be one righteous person because it is he. However, God himself must become that just man. The infinite and surprising divine love was to be fully manifest when the Son of God was to become man, the definitive Righteous One, the perfect Innocent who would bring salvation to the whole world by dying on the Cross, forgiving and interceding for those who "know not what they do" (Lk 23:34). Therefore the prayer of each one will find its answer, therefore our every intercession will be fully heard.

Dear brothers and sisters, the prayer of intercession of Abraham, our father in the faith, teaches us to open our hearts ever wider to God's superabundant mercy so that in daily prayer we may know how to desire the salvation of humanity and ask for it with perseverance and with trust in the Lord who is great in love. Many thanks.

## **Struggle in Prayer**

*25 May 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to reflect with you on a text from the Book of Genesis which recounts a rather curious incident in the narrative of the Patriarch Jacob. It is a passage that is not easy to interpret, but it is important for our life of faith and prayer; we are talking about the story of his struggle with God at the ford of the Jabbok, a portion of which we just heard.



As you will recall, Jacob had deprived his twin brother Esau of his birthright in exchange for a dish of lentils and then, by trickery, managed to receive the blessing from his father Isaac, now very elderly, taking advantage of the latter's blindness. Having fled from Esau's wrath, he took refuge with one of his relatives, Laban; he married, acquired some wealth, and was returning to his homeland, ready to face his brother having first put into place some prudent provisions. However, when everything was ready for this meeting, after having had those who were with him cross the ford of the stream that marked the boundary of Esau's territory, Jacob, who had remained behind alone, was suddenly set upon by an unknown man with whom he wrestled the whole night. This hand-to-hand combat, which we find described in chapter 32 of the Book of Genesis, became for him a singular experience of God.

Night is the favourable time for acting secretly, the best time, therefore, for Jacob to enter his brother's territory unseen, perhaps thinking to take Esau by surprise. It is he, however, who is surprised by an unforeseen attack, one for which he was unprepared. Having used his cleverness to try to escape a dangerous situation, he thought he had managed to have everything under control; instead he now finds himself forced to enter a mysterious struggle that catches him alone and gives him no opportunity to organize a proper defence. Unarmed, in the night, the Patriarch Jacob wrestles with someone. The text does not specify the identity of the aggressor; it uses a Hebrew word that indicates "a man" in a generic sense, "one, someone"; it is, therefore, a vague, indeterminate definition that purposely keeps the assailant shrouded in mystery. It is dark, Jacob does not manage to see his opponent clearly, and even for the reader, for us, he remains anonymous; someone is opposing the Patriarch, and this is the only certain data supplied by the narrator. Only at the end, when the wrestling is over and that "someone" will have disappeared, only then will Jacob name him and be able to say that he had wrestled with God.

The episode, therefore, takes place in darkness and it is difficult to ascertain not only the identity of Jacob's assailant, but also how the struggle is going. On reading the passage, it is rather difficult to determine which of the two contenders is gaining the upper hand; the verbs used often lack a specific subject, and the actions take place almost in a contradictory manner, so that when it looks as though one of the two is winning, the next action immediately denies that and shows the other to be the victor. At the beginning, in fact, Jacob seems to be the stronger and of his opponent, the text says, "he did not prevail over him" (v. 25); yet he strikes Jacob's hip at its socket, dislocating it. Thus one thinks that Jacob would have to give in, but instead it is his opponent who asks him to release him; and the Patriarch refuses, setting one condition: "I will not let you go, unless you bless me" (v. 27). The one who tricked his brother and robbed him of the blessing of the

firstborn now claims it from the stranger, thus perhaps beginning to perceive some kind of divine meaning, but without yet being able to recognize it for certain.

His rival, who seems to be held back and therefore defeated by Jacob, rather than giving in to the Patriarch's request, asks him his name: "What is your name?". And the Patriarch replies: "Jacob" (v. 28). Here the struggle takes an important turn. In fact, knowing someone's name implies a kind of power over that person because in the biblical mentality the name contains the most profound reality of the individual, it reveals the person's secret and destiny. Knowing one's name therefore means knowing the truth about the other person and this allows one to dominate him. When, therefore, in answer to the unknown person's request Jacob discloses his own name, he is placing himself in the hands of his opponent; it is a form of surrender, a total handing over of self to the other.

However, in this act of surrender paradoxically Jacob too emerges victorious because he receives a new name with the recognition of his victory by his adversary, who says to him: "You shall no longer be spoken of as Jacob, but as Israel, because you have contended with divine and human beings and have prevailed" (v. 29). "Jacob" was a name that recalled the Patriarch's problematic beginnings; in Hebrew, in fact, it recalls the term "heel" and takes the reader back to the time of Jacob's birth when, as he left his mother's womb, he held onto the heel of his twin brother (cf. Gen 25:26), almost prefiguring the unfair advantage he would take over his brother in adulthood; however the name Jacob also recalls the verb "to deceive, to supplant". Well, now, in the struggle in this act of surrender and submission, the Patriarch reveals his true identity as a deceiver, the one who supplants; however the other, who is God, transforms this negative reality into something positive: Jacob the deceiver becomes Israel, he is given a new name as a sign of a new identity. Here, too, the account maintains its deliberate duplicity because the more probable meaning of the name Israel is "God is strong, God is victorious".

Therefore Jacob has prevailed, he won—his adversary himself says so—but his new identity, which he has received from the adversary himself, affirms and bears witness to God's victory. And when Jacob in turn asks his opponent his name, the latter refuses to say it, but reveals himself in an unequivocal gesture, giving him the blessing. The blessing that the Patriarch had requested at the beginning of the struggle is now granted him. However, it is not a blessing obtained through deceit, but one given freely by God, which Jacob can receive because he is now alone, without protection, without cunning or tricks; he gives himself over unarmed, agrees to surrender and confesses the truth about himself. Therefore, at the end of the struggle, having received the blessing, the Patriarch can finally recognize the other, the God of blessings: Truly, he says, "I have seen God face to face, and yet my life is preserved" (v. 30), and now he can cross the ford, the bearer of a

new name but “conquered” by God and marked forever, limping because of the injury he received (v. 31).

Biblical exegetes give many interpretations to this passage; the scholars in particular recognize in it literary connotations and components of various genres, as well as references to some popular accounts. But when these elements are taken up by the authors of the Sacred texts and incorporated into the biblical narrative, they change their meaning and the text opens up to broader dimensions. For the believer the episode of the struggle at the Jabbok thus becomes a paradigm in which the people of Israel speak of their own origins and outline the features of a particular relationship between God and humanity. Therefore, as is also affirmed in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “from this account, the spiritual tradition of the Church has retained the symbol of prayer as a battle of faith and as the triumph of perseverance” (n. 2573). The Bible text speaks to us about a long night of seeking God, of the struggle to learn his name and see his face; it is the night of prayer that, with tenacity and perseverance, asks God for a blessing and a new name, a new reality that is the fruit of conversion and forgiveness.

For the believer Jacob’s night at the ford of the Jabbok thus becomes a reference point for understanding the relationship with God that finds in prayer its greatest expression. Prayer requires trust, nearness, almost a hand-to-hand contact that is symbolic not of a God who is an enemy, an adversary, but a Lord of blessing who always remains mysterious, who seems beyond reach. Therefore the author of the Sacred text uses the symbol of the struggle, which implies a strength of spirit, perseverance, tenacity in obtaining what is desired. And if the object of one’s desire is a relationship with God, his blessing and love, then the struggle cannot fail but ends in that self-giving to God, in recognition of one’s own weakness, which is overcome only by giving oneself over into God’s merciful hands.

Dear brothers and sisters, our entire lives are like this long night of struggle and prayer, spent in desiring and asking for God’s blessing, which cannot be grabbed or won through our own strength but must be received with humility from him as a gratuitous gift that ultimately allows us to recognize the Lord’s face. And when this happens, our entire reality changes; we receive a new name and God’s blessing. And, what is more: Jacob, who receives a new name, and becomes Israel, also gives a new name to the place where he wrestled with God, where he prayed; he renames it Penuel, which means: “The Face of God”. With this name he recognizes that this place is filled with the Lord’s presence, making that land sacred and thus leaving a memorial of that mysterious encounter with God. Whoever allows himself to be blessed by God, who abandons himself to God, who permits himself to be transformed by God, renders a blessing to the world. May the Lord help us to fight the good fight of the faith (cf. 1 Tim 6:12; 2 Tim 4:7) and to ask, in prayer,

for his blessing, that he may renew us in the expectation of beholding his Face. Thank you.

## Moses, man of prayer

1 June 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As we read the Old Testament we note one figure who stands out from among the others: Moses, precisely, as a man of prayer. Moses, the great prophet and leader at the time of the Exodus, carried out his role as mediator between God and Israel by making himself a messenger to the people of God's words and divine commands, by leading it towards the freedom of the Promised Land and by teaching the Israelites to live obeying God and trusting in him during their long sojourn in the desert. However, I would say also, and above all, by praying.

Moses prayed for the Pharaoh when God, with the plagues, was endeavouring to convert the Egyptians' hearts (cf. Ex 8–10); Moses asked the Lord to heal his sister Miriam, afflicted with leprosy (cf. Num 12:9–13); he interceded for the people which had rebelled fearful of what those who had spied out the land would report (cf. Num 14:1–19); he prayed when fire was about to burn down the camp (cf. Num 11:1–2), and when poisonous serpents decimated the people (cf. Num 21:4–9); he addressed the Lord and reacted by protesting when the burden of his mission became too heavy (cf. Num 11:10–15); he saw God and spoke “to him face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (cf. Ex 24:9–17; 7–23; 34:1–10, 28–35).

And on Sinai, even while the people were asking Aaron to make a golden calf, Moses prayed, explaining with symbols his own role as intercessor. The episode is recounted in chapter 32 of the Book of Exodus and there is a parallel account in chapter 9 of Deuteronomy.

It is this episode on which I would like to reflect in today's Catechesis and, in particular, on Moses' prayer which we find in the Exodus narrative. The people of Israel were at the foot of Sinai whereas Moses, on the mountain, was waiting for the gift of the Tables of the Law, fasting for 40 days and 40 nights (cf. Ex 24:18; Dt 9:9). The number 40 has a symbolic value and suggests the totality of the experience, whereas fasting indicates that life comes from God, that it is he who sustains it.

Indeed, the act of eating entails the assumption of the nourishment that keeps us going; hence fasting, giving up all food, in this case acquires a religious significance: it is a way of showing that man does not live by bread alone but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord (cf. Deut 8:3). By fasting Moses showed that he was awaiting the gift of the divine Law as a source of life: this Law reveals God's will and nourishes the human heart, bringing men and women to enter into a covenant with the Most High, who is the source of life, who is life itself.

Yet, while the Lord, on the mountain, was giving the Law to Moses, at the bottom of the mountain the people were violating it. Unable to endure waiting and the absence of their mediator, the Israelites turned to Aaron: "make us gods, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him" (Ex 32:11). Weary of the journey with an invisible God, now that Moses, their mediator, had disappeared, the people clamoured for an actual, tangible presence of the Lord, and in the calf of molten metal made by Aaron found a god made accessible, manageable and within human reach.

This is a constant temptation on the journey of faith: to avoid the divine mystery by constructing a comprehensible god who corresponds with one's own plans, one's own projects.

What happened on Sinai shows the sheer folly and deceptive vanity of this claim because, as Psalm 106[105] ironically affirms: "they exchanged the glory of God for the image of an ox that eats grass" (v. 20). So it was that the Lord reacted and ordered Moses to come down from the mountain, revealing to him what the people were doing and ending with these words: "now therefore let me alone, that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may consume them; but of you I will make a great nation" (Ex 32:10).

As he had to Abraham with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, now too God revealed to Moses what his intentions were, almost as though he did not want to act without Moses' consent (Am 3:7).

He said: "let ... my wrath ... burn hot". In fact these words "let ... my wrath burn hot" were spoken so that Moses might intervene and ask God not to do it, thereby revealing that what God always wants is salvation.

Just as for the two cities in Abraham's day, the punishment and destruction—in which God's anger is expressed as the rejection of evil—demonstrate the gravity of the sin committed; at the same time, the request of the intercessor is intended to show the Lord's desire for forgiveness. This is God's salvation which involves mercy, but at the same time also the denunciation of the truth of the sin, of the evil that exists, so that the

sinner, having recognized and rejected his sin, may let God forgive and transform him. In this way prayers of intercession make active in the corrupt reality of sinful man divine mercy which finds a voice in the entreaty of the person praying and is made present through him wherever there is a need for salvation.

Moses' supplication was wholly based on the Lord's fidelity and grace. He referred first to the history of redemption which God began by bringing Israel out of Egypt and then recalled the ancient promise made to the Fathers. The Lord brought about salvation by freeing his people from slavery in Egypt; so "why", Moses asked, "should the Egyptians say, 'With evil intent did he bring them forth, to slay them in the mountains, and to consume them from the face of the earth?'" (Ex 32:12).

Once the work of salvation has been begun it must be brought to completion; were God to let his people perish, this might be interpreted as a sign of God's inability to bring the project of salvation to completion. God cannot allow this: he is the good Lord who saves, the guarantor of life, he is the God of mercy and forgiveness, of deliverance from sin that kills.

Hence Moses appealed to God, to the interior life of God against the exterior judgement. But, Moses then argued with the Lord, were his Chosen People to perish, even though guilty, God might appear incapable of overcoming sin. And this he could not accept.

Moses had a concrete experience of the God of salvation; he was sent as a mediator of divine liberation and then, with his prayers; he made himself the interpreter of a twofold anxiety; he was worried about his people's future and at the same time he was also worried about the honour due to the Lord, about the truth of his name. In fact the intercessor wanted the People of Israel to be saved because this people was the flock which had been entrusted to him, but also because it was in this salvation that the true reality of God was manifest.

The prayer of intercession is permeated by love of the brethren and love of God, they are inseparable. Moses, the intercessor, is the man torn between two loves that overlap in prayer in a single desire for good.

Moses then appealed to God's faithfulness, reminding him of his promises: "Remember Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, your servants, to whom you swore by your own self, and said ... 'I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and all this land [of which I have spoken] I will give to your descendants, and they shall inherit it for ever'" (Ex 32:13). Moses recalls the founding story of the origins, of the Fathers of the people and of their being totally freely chosen, a choice in which God alone took the initiative. Not for their

own merits did they receive the promise, but because of God's free choice and his love (cf. Deut 10:15).

And Moses then asked the Lord to continue in fidelity his record of choosing and salvation, by forgiving his people. The intercessor did not ask for his people to be excused of their sin, he did not list any presumed merits, either the people's or his own, but appealed to God's bounty: a free God, total love, who does not cease to seek out those who have fallen away, who is always faithful to himself, who offers the sinner a chance to return to him and, through forgiveness, to become righteous and capable of fidelity. Moses asked God to show himself more powerful than sin and death, and with his prayer elicited this divine revelation of himself.

As a mediator of life, the intercessor showed solidarity with the people: anxious solely for the salvation that God himself desires, he gave up the prospect of it becoming a new people pleasing to the Lord. The sentence that God had addressed to him, "of you I will make a great nation", was not even taken into consideration by the "friend" of God, who, instead, was ready to take upon himself not only the guilt of his people, but also all its consequences.

When, after the destruction of the golden calf, he returned to the mountain to ask salvation for Israel once again, he was to say to the Lord: "But now, if you will, forgive their sin—and if not, blot me, I pray you, out of your book which you have written" (Ex 32:32).

With prayer, wanting what God wanted, the intercessor entered more and more deeply into knowledge of the Lord and of his mercy, and became capable of a love that extended even to the total gift of himself. In Moses, on the summit of the mountain face to face with God, who made himself an intercessor for his people and offered himself—"blot me out"—the Fathers of the Church saw a prefiguration of Christ who from the very top of the Cross was truly before God, not only as a friend but as Son. And not only did he offer himself—"blot me out"—but with his pierced heart he had himself blotted out, he himself became sin, as St Paul himself says, he took *upon himself* our sins to ensure *our* salvation. His intercession was not only solidarity but identification with us: he bears all of us in his Body. And thus his whole life as a man and as Son is a cry to God's heart, it is forgiveness, but forgiveness that transforms and renews.

I think we should meditate upon this reality. Christ stands before God and is praying for me. His prayer on the Cross is contemporary with all human beings, contemporary with me. He prays for me, he suffered and suffers for me, he identified himself with me, taking our body and the human soul. And he asks us to enter this identity of his, making

ourselves one body, one spirit with him because from the summit of the Cross he brought not new laws, tablets of stone, but himself, his Body and his Blood, as the New Covenant. Thus he brings us kinship with him, he makes us one body with him, identifies us with him. He invites us to enter into this identification, to be united with him in our wish to be one body, one spirit with him. Let us pray the Lord that this identification may transform and renew us, because forgiveness is renewal and transformation.

I would like to end this Catechesis with the Apostle Paul's words to the Christians of Rome: "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies; who is to condemn? It is Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?... neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God, [which is] in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:33–35, 38, 39).

## The prayer of Elijah

15 June 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The prophets, with their teaching and their preaching, had great importance in the religious history of ancient Israel. Among them the figure of Elijah stands out, impelled by God to bring the people to conversion. His name means "the Lord is my God", and his life develops in accordance with this name, entirely dedicated to kindling in the people gratitude to the Lord as the one God.

The Book of Sirach [Ecclesiastes] says of Elijah: "then the prophet Elijah arose like a fire, and his word burned like a torch" (Sir 48:1). With this flame Israel found its way back to God. In his ministry Elijah prayed; he called upon the Lord to restore to life the son of a widow who had given him hospitality (cf. 1 Kings 17:17–24), he cried out to God in his weariness and anguish while fleeing to the desert, for Queen Jezebel sought to kill him (cf. 1 Kings 19:1–4), however it was on Mount Carmel in particular that he showed his full power as an intercessor when, before all Israel, he prayed the Lord to show himself and to convert the people's hearts. This is the episode recounted in chapter 18 of the First Book of Kings, on which we are reflecting today.

It was in the kingdom of the north, in the ninth century before Christ at the time of King Ahab, at a moment when Israel had created for itself a situation of blatant syncretism.



Beside the Lord, the people worshipped Baal, the reassuring idol from which it was believed that the gift of rain came, and to which, was therefore attributed the power of making fields fertile and giving life to people and animals.

In spite of claiming to follow the Lord, an invisible and mysterious God, the people were also seeking security in a comprehensible and predictable god from whom they believed they could obtain fruitfulness and prosperity in exchange for sacrifices. Israel was capitulating to the seduction of idolatry, the continuous temptation of believers, deluding itself that it could “serve two masters” (cf. Mt 6:24; Lk 16:13) and facilitate the impracticable routes of faith in the Almighty even by putting its faith in a powerless god, fashioned by men.

It was exactly in order to unmask the deceptive foolishness of this attitude that Elijah gathered the People of Israel on Mount Carmel and confronted it with the need to make a decision: “If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him” (1 Kings 18:21) And the prophet, a herald of God’s love, did not abandon his people as they faced this decision; rather, he helped it by pointing out a sign that would reveal the truth. Both he and the prophets of Baal were to prepare a sacrifice and pray and the true God would reveal himself, responding with fire that would burn the offering. Thus began the confrontation between the prophet Elijah and the followers of Baal, which was in fact between the Lord of Israel, the God of salvation and of life, and the mute idol with no substance which could do nothing, neither good nor evil (cf. Jer 10:5). And so the confrontation also began between two completely different approaches to God and to prayer.

The prophets of Baal, in fact, cried aloud, worked themselves up, danced and leaped about and falling into a state of ecstasy, even going so far as to cut themselves, “with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them” (1 Kings 18:28). They had recourse to themselves in order to call on their god, trusting to their own devices to provoke his answer. In this way the idol’s deceptive reality was revealed: it was thought up by human beings as something that could be used, that could be managed with their own efforts, to which they could gain access through their own strength and their own vital force. Worship of an idol, instead of opening the human heart to Otherness, to a liberating relationship that permits the person to emerge from the narrow space of his own selfishness to enter the dimensions of love and of reciprocal giving, shuts the person into the exclusive and desperate circle of self-seeking. And the deception is such that in worshipping an idol people find themselves forced to extreme actions, in the vain attempt to subject it to their own will. For this reason the prophets of Baal went so far as to hurt themselves, to wound their bodies, in a dramatically ironic action: in order to get

an answer, a sign of life out of their god, they covered themselves with blood, symbolically covering themselves with death.

Elijah's prayerful attitude was entirely different. He asked the people to draw close, thereby involving it in his action and his supplication. The purpose of the challenge he addressed to the prophets of Baal was to restore to God the people which had strayed, following idols; therefore he wanted Israel to be united with him, to become a participator in and a protagonist of his prayer and of everything that was happening. Then the prophet built an altar, using, as the text says, "twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying: 'Israel shall be your name' " (v. 31). Those stones represented the whole of Israel and are the tangible memorial of the story of the choice, predilection and salvation of which the people had been the object. The liturgical gesture of Elijah had crucial importance; the altar was a sacred place that indicated the Lord's presence, but those stones of which it was made represented the people which now, through the prophet's mediation was symbolically placed before God, it had become an "altar", a place of offering and sacrifice.

Yet it was necessary for the symbol to become reality, for Israel to recognize the true God and to rediscover its own identity as the Lord's People. Elijah therefore asked God to show himself, and those twelve stones that were to remind Israel of its truth also served to remind the Lord of his fidelity, for which the prophet appealed in prayer. The words of his invocation are full of meaning and faith: "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back" (vv. 36–37). Elijah turned to the Lord, calling him the God of the Fathers, thus implicitly calling to mind the divine promises and the story of the choosing and Covenant that bound the Lord indissolubly to his people. The involvement of God in human history is such that his name was inseparably connected with that of the patriarchs and the prophet spoke that holy Name so that God might remember and show himself to be faithful, but also so that Israel might feel called by name and rediscover its faithfulness. In fact the divine title spoken by Elijah seems somewhat surprising. Instead of using the customary formula, "God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob", he used a less known title: "God of Abraham, Isaac and Israel". The replacement of the name "Jacob" by "Israel" calls to mind Jacob's struggle at the ford of the Jabbok, with the change of name to which the narrator explicitly refers (cf. Gen 32:31) and of which I spoke in one of the recent catecheses. The substitution acquires a pregnant meaning in Elijah's invocation. The prophet is praying for the people of the kingdom of the north which was called, precisely, Israel, as distinct from Judah, which indicated the kingdom of the south. And now, this people, which seemed to have

forgotten its own origins and privileged relationship with the Lord, heard itself called by name while the name of God, God of the Patriarch and God of the People, was spoken: “O Lord, God ... of Israel, let it be known today that you are God in Israel”.

The people for which Elijah prayed was faced with its own truth, and the prophet asked that the truth of the Lord might also be shown and that he intervene to convert Israel, detaching it from the deception of idolatry and thereby bringing it to salvation. His request was that the people might finally realize and know in fullness, who truly is its God, and make a decisive choice to follow him alone, the true God. For only in this way is God recognized for what he is, Absolute and Transcendent, ruling out the possibility of setting him beside other gods, which would deny that he was absolute and relativize him. This is the faith that makes Israel the People of God; it is the faith proclaimed by the well known text of the *Shema' Israel*: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and you shall love, the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might” (Dt 6:4–5). The believer must respond to the Absolute of God with an absolute, total love that binds his whole life, his strength, his heart. And it was for the very heart of his people that the prophet, with his prayers, was imploring conversion: “that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back” (1 Kings 18:37). Elijah, with his intercession, asked of God what God himself wanted to do, to show himself in all his mercy, faithful to his reality as the Lord of life who forgives, converts and transforms.

And this is what happened: “then the fire of the Lord fell, and consumed the burnt offering, and the wood, and the stones, and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces; and they said, ‘The Lord he is God; the Lord, he is God’ ” (vv. 38–39). Fire, the element both necessary and terrible, associated with the divine manifestations of the burning bush and of Sinai, then served to mark the love of God that responds to prayer and was revealed to his people. Baal, the mute and powerless God, had not responded to the invocations of his prophets; the Lord on the other hand, responded, and unequivocally, not only by burning the sacrifice but even by drying up all the water that had been poured round the altar. Israel could no longer have doubts; divine mercy came to meet its weakness, its doubts, its lack of faith. Now Baal, a vain idol, was vanquished, and the people which had seemed to be lost, rediscovered the path of truth and rediscovered itself.

Dear brothers and sisters, what does this history of the past tell us? What is the present of this history? First of all the priority of the first Commandment is called into question: worship God alone. Whenever God disappears, man falls into the slavery of idolatry, as the totalitarian regimes demonstrated in our time, and as the various forms of nihilism that make man dependent on idols, on idolatry, also demonstrate; they enslave him.

Secondly, the primary aim of prayer is conversion, the flame of God that transforms our heart and enables us to see God and so to live in accordance with God and live for others. And the third point. The Fathers tell us that this history of a prophet is prophetic too if, they say, it foreshadows the future, the future Christ; it is a step on the journey towards Christ. And they tell us that here we see God's true fire: the love that guided the Lord even to the cross, to the total gift of himself. True worship of God, therefore, is giving oneself to God and to men and women, true worship is love. And true worship of God does not destroy but renews, transforms. Of course, the fire of God, the fire of love burns, transforms, purifies, but in this very way does not destroy but rather creates the truth of our being, recreates our heart. And thus, truly alive through the grace of the fire of the Holy Spirit, of love of God, we are worshippers in spirit and in truth. Many thanks.

## **The Book of Prayer**

*22 June 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In recent catecheses we have reflected on some of the Old Testament figures who are particularly significant for our reflection on prayer. I have talked about Abraham, who interceded for foreign cities, about Jacob, who in his nocturnal struggle received the blessing, about Moses, who invoked forgiveness for his people and about Elijah, who prayed for the conversion of Israel.

With today's catechesis I would like to begin a new stretch of the journey: instead of commenting on specific episodes of people praying, we shall enter "the book of prayer" par excellence, the Book of Psalms. In the forthcoming catecheses we shall read and meditate on several of the most beautiful Psalms that are dearest to the Church's tradition of prayer. Today I would like to introduce them by talking about the Book of Psalms as a whole.

The Psalter appears as a "formularly" of prayers, a collection of 150 Psalms which the Biblical Tradition offers the people of believers so that they become their and our prayer, our way of speaking and of relating to God. This Book expresses the entire human experience with its multiple facets and the whole range of sentiments that accompany human existence.

In the Psalms are expressed and interwoven with joy and suffering, the longing for God and the perception of our own unworthiness, happiness and the feeling of abandonment, trust in God and sorrowful loneliness, fullness of life and fear of death. The whole reality

of the believer converges in these prayers. The People of Israel first and then the Church adopted them as a privileged mediation in relations with the one God and an appropriate response to God's self revelation in history.

Since the Psalms are prayers they are expressions of the heart and of faith with which everyone can identify and in which that experience of special closeness to God—to which every human being is called—is communicated. Moreover the whole complexity of human life is distilled in the complexity of the different literary forms of the various Psalms: hymns, laments, individual entreaties and collective supplications, hymns of thanksgiving, penitential psalms, sapiential psalms and the other genres that are to be found in these poetic compositions.

Despite this multiplicity of expression, two great areas that sum up the prayer of the Psalter may be identified: supplication, connected to lamentation, and praise. These are two related dimensions that are almost inseparable since supplication is motivated by the certainty that God will respond, thus opening a person to praise and thanksgiving; and praise and thanksgiving stem from the experience of salvation received; this implies the need for help which the supplication expresses.

In his supplication the person praying bewails and describes his situation of anguish, danger or despair or, as in the penitential Psalms, he confesses his guilt, his sin, asking forgiveness. He discloses his needy state to the Lord, confident that he will be heard and this involves the recognition of God as good, as desirous of goodness and as one who "loves the living" (cf. Wis 11:26), ready to help, to save and to forgive. In this way, for example, the Psalmist in Psalm 31[30] prays: "In you, O Lord, do I seek refuge; let me never be put to shame ... take me out of the net which is hidden for me, for you are my refuge" (vv. 2, 5). In the lamentation, therefore, something like praise, which is foretold in the hope of divine intervention, can already emerge, and it becomes explicit when divine salvation becomes a reality.

Likewise in the Psalms of thanksgiving and praise, recalling the gift received or contemplating the greatness of God's mercy, we also recognize our own smallness and the need to be saved which is at the root of supplication. In this way we confess to God our condition as creatures, inevitably marked by death, yet bearing a radical desire for life. The Psalmist therefore exclaims in Psalm 86 [85]: "I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart, and I will glorify your name for ever. For great is your steadfast love toward me; you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol" (vv. 12–13). In the prayer of the Psalms, supplication and praise are interwoven in this manner and fused in a single hymn that celebrates the eternal grace of the Lord who stoops down to our frailty.

It was precisely in order to permit the people of believers to join in this hymn that the Psalter was given to Israel and to the Church. Indeed the Psalms teach how to pray. In them, the word of God becomes a word of prayer—and they are the words of the inspired Psalmist—which also becomes the word of the person who prays the Psalms.

This is the beauty and the special characteristic of this Book of the Bible: the prayers it contains, unlike other prayers we find in Sacred Scripture, are not inserted in a narrative plot that specifies their meaning and role. The Psalms are given to the believer exactly as the text of prayers whose sole purpose is to become the prayer of the person who assimilates them and addresses them to God. Since they are a word of God, anyone who prays the Psalms speaks to God using the very words that God has given to us, addresses him with the words that he himself has given us. So it is that in praying the Psalms we learn to pray. They are a school of prayer.

Something similar happens when a child begins to speak, namely, he learns how to express his own feelings, emotions, and needs with words that do not belong to him innately but that he learns from his parents and from those who surround him. What the child wishes to express is his own experience, but his means of expression comes from others; and little by little he makes them his own, the words received from his parents become his words and through these words he also learns a way of thinking and feeling, he gains access to a whole world of concepts and in it develops and grows, and relates to reality, to people and to God. In the end his parents' language has become his language, he speaks with words he has received from others but which have now become his own.

This is what happens with the prayer of the Psalms. They are given to us so that we may learn to address God, to communicate with him, to speak to him of ourselves with his words, to find a language for the encounter with God. And through those words, it will also be possible to know and to accept the criteria of his action, to draw closer to the mystery of his thoughts and ways (cf. Is 55:8–9), so as to grow constantly in faith and in love.

Just as our words are not only words but teach us a real and conceptual world, so too these prayers teach us the heart of God, for which reason not only can we speak to God but we can learn who God is and, in learning how to speak to him, we learn to be a human being, to be ourselves.

In this regard the title which the Jewish tradition has given to the Psalter is significant. It is called *tehillim*, a Hebrew word which means “praise”, from the etymological root that we find in the expression “Alleluia”, that is, literally “praised be the Lord”. This book of prayers, therefore, although it is so multiform and complex with its different literary

genres and its structure alternating between praise and supplication, is ultimately a book of praise which teaches us to give thanks, to celebrate the greatness of God's gift, to recognize the beauty of his works and to glorify his holy Name. This is the most appropriate response to the Lord's self manifestation and to the experience of his goodness.

By teaching us to pray, the Psalms teach us that even in desolation, even in sorrow, God's presence endures, it is a source of wonder and of solace; we can weep, implore, intercede and complain, but in the awareness that we are walking toward the light, where praise can be definitive. As Psalm 36[35] teaches us: "with you is the fountain of life; in your light do we see light" (Ps 36[35]:10).

However, in addition to this general title of the book, the Jewish tradition has given many Psalms specific names, attributing most of them to King David. A figure of outstanding human and theological depth, David was a complex figure who went through the most varied fundamental experiences of life. When he was young he was a shepherd of his father's flock, then passing through chequered and at times dramatic vicissitudes, he became King of Israel and pastor of the People of God. A man of peace, he fought many wars; unflagging and tenacious in his quest for God, he betrayed God's love and this is characteristic: he always remained a seeker of God even though he sinned frequently and seriously. As a humble penitent he received the divine pardon, accepted the divine punishment and accepted a destiny marked by suffering. Thus David with all his weaknesses was a king "after the heart of God" (cf. 1 Sam 13:14), that is, a passionate man of prayer, a man who knew what it meant to implore and to praise. The connection of the Psalms with this outstanding King of Israel is therefore important because he is a messianic figure, an Anointed One of the Lord, in whom, in a certain way, the mystery of Christ is foreshadowed.

Equally important and meaningful are the manner and frequency with which the words of the Psalms are taken up in the New Testament, assuming and accentuating the prophetic value suggested by the connection of the Psalter with the messianic figure of David. In the Lord Jesus, who in his earthly life prayed with the Psalms, they were definitively fulfilled and revealed their fullest and most profound meaning.

The prayers of the Psalter with which we speak to God, speak to us of him, speak to us of the Son, an image of the invisible God (Col 1:15), which fully reveals to us the Father's Face. Christians, therefore, in praying the Psalms pray to the Father in Christ and with Christ, assuming those hymns in a new perspective which has in the paschal mystery the ultimate key to its interpretation. The horizon of the person praying thus opens to

unexpected realities, every Psalm acquires a new light in Christ and the Psalter can shine out in its full infinite richness.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us therefore take this holy book in our hands, let us allow God to teach us to turn to him, let us make the Psalter a guide which helps and accompanies us daily on the path of prayer. And let us too ask, as did Jesus' disciples, "Lord, teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1), opening our hearts to receive the Teacher's prayer, in which all prayers are brought to completion. Thus, made sons in the Son, we shall be able to speak to God calling him "Our Father". Many thanks.

## Small Books of the Bible

*3 August 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am very glad to see you here in the square at Castel Gandolfo and to resume the audiences after the interval in July. I would like to continue with the subject we have embarked on, that is, a "school of prayer", and today, in a slightly different way and without straying from this theme, I would also like to mention certain spiritual and concrete aspects which seem to me useful, not only for those who—in one part of the world—are spending their summer holidays like us, but also for all who are involved in daily work.

When we have a break from our activities, especially in the holidays, we often take up a book we want to read. It is on this very aspect that I would first like to reflect today.

Each one of us needs time and space for recollection, meditation and calmness.... Thanks be to God that this is so! In fact, this need tells us that we are not made for work alone, but also to think, to reflect or even simply to follow with our minds and our hearts a tale, a story in which to immerse ourselves, in a certain sense "to lose ourselves" to find ourselves subsequently enriched.

Of course, many of these books to read, which we take in our hands during our vacation are at best an escape, and this is normal. Yet various people, particularly if they have more time in which to take a break and to relax, devote themselves to something more demanding.

I would therefore like to make a suggestion: why not discover some of the books of the Bible which are not commonly well known? Or those from which we heard certain



passages in the liturgy but which we never read in their entirety? Indeed, many Christians never read the Bible and have a very limited and superficial knowledge of it. The Bible, as the name says, is a collection of books, a small “library” that came into being in the course of a millennium.

Some of these “small books” of which it is composed are almost unknown to the majority, even people who are good Christians.

Some are very short, such as the Book of Tobit, a tale that contains a lofty sense of family and marriage; or the Book of Esther, in which the Jewish Queen saves her people from extermination with her faith and prayer; or the Book of Ruth, a stranger who meets God and experiences his providence, which is even shorter. These little books can be read in an hour. More demanding and true masterpieces are the Book of Job, which faces the great problem of innocent suffering; Ecclesiastes is striking because of the disconcerting modernity with which it calls into question the meaning of life and of the world; and the Song of Songs, a wonderful symbolic poem of human love. As you see, these are all books of the Old Testament. And what about the New? The New Testament is of course better known and its literary genres are less diversified. Yet the beauty of reading a Gospel at one sitting must be discovered, just as I also recommend the Acts of the Apostles, or one of the Letters.

To conclude, dear friends, today I would like to suggest that you keep the Holy Bible within reach, during the summer period or in your breaks, in order to enjoy it in a new way by reading some of its books straight through, those that are less known and also the most famous, such as the Gospels, but without putting them down.

By so doing moments of relaxation can become in addition to a cultural enrichment also an enrichment of the spirit which is capable of fostering the knowledge of God and dialogue with him, prayer. And this seems to be a splendid holiday occupation: to take a book of the Bible in order to have a little relaxation and at the same time to enter the great realm of the word of God and to deepen our contact with the Eternal One, as the very purpose of the free time that the Lord gives us.

## **“Oasis” of the spirit**

*10 August 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In every age, men and women who have consecrated their lives to God in prayer—like monks and nuns—have founded their communities in particularly beautiful places: in

the countryside, on hilltops, in mountain valleys, on the shores of lakes or of the sea and even on small islands. These places combine two very important elements for contemplative life: the beauty of creation, which evokes the beauty of the Creator, and silence, which is guaranteed by living far from cities and the great thoroughfares of the media.

Silence is the environmental condition most conducive to contemplation, to listening to God and to meditation. The very fact of enjoying silence and letting ourselves be “filled”, so to speak, with silence, disposes us to prayer.

The great prophet Elijah on Mount Horeb—that is, Sinai—experienced a strong squall, then an earthquake and finally flashes of fire, but he did not recognize God’s voice in them; instead, he recognized it in a light breeze (cf. 1 Kings 19:11–13).

God speaks in silence, but we must know how to listen. This is why monasteries are oases in which God speaks to humanity; and in them we find the cloister, a symbolic place because it is an enclosed space yet open to Heaven.

Tomorrow, dear friends, we shall commemorate St Clare of Assisi. Therefore, I would like to recall one such “oasis” of the spirit that is particularly dear to the Franciscan family and to all Christians: the little convent of St Damian, situated just beneath the city of Assisi, among the olive groves that slope down towards Santa Maria degli Angeli [St Mary of the Angels]. It was beside this little church, which Francis restored after his conversion, that Clare and her first companions established their community, living on prayer and humble tasks. They were called the “Poor Sisters” and their “form of life” was the same as that of the Friars Minor: “To observe the Holy Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ” (*Rule of St Clare*, 1, 2), preserving the union of reciprocal charity (cf. *ibid.*, X, 7) and observing in particular the poverty and humility of Jesus and of his Most Holy Mother (cf. *ibid.*, XII, 13).

The silence and beauty of the place in which the monastic community dwells—a simple and austere beauty—are like a reflection of the spiritual harmony which the community itself seeks to create. The world, particularly Europe, is spangled with these oases of the spirit, some very ancient, others recent, yet others have been restored by new communities. Looking at things from a spiritual perspective, these places of the spirit are the backbone of the world! It is no accident that many people, especially in their breaks, visit these places and spend several days here: the soul too, thanks be to God, has its needs!

Let us therefore remember St Clare. But let us also remember other saints who remind us of the importance of turning our gaze to the “things of heaven”, as did St Edith Stein,

Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, Carmelite, co-Patroness of Europe, whom we celebrated yesterday. And today, 10 August, we cannot forget St Lawrence, deacon and martyr, with special congratulations to the Romans who have always venerated him as one of their Patrons. Lastly, let us turn our gaze to the Virgin Mary, that she may teach us to love silence and prayer.

## Meditation

17 August 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

We are still in the light of the Feast of the Assumption, which—as I said—is a Feast of hope. Mary has arrived in Heaven and this is our destination: we can all reach Heaven. The question is: how? Mary has arrived there. It is she—the Gospel says—“who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45).

Thus Mary believed, she entrusted herself to God, bent her will to the will of the Lord and so was truly on the most direct road, the road to Heaven. Believing, entrusting oneself to the Lord and complying with his will: this is the essential approach.

Today I do not want to talk about this whole journey of faith; I want to speak of only one small aspect of the life of prayer—which is life in contact with God—namely, meditation. And what is meditation? It means “remembering” all that God has done and not forgetting his many great benefits (cf. Ps 103[102]:2b).

We often see only the negative things; we must also keep in mind all that is positive, the gifts that God has made us; we must be attentive to the positive signs that come from God and must remember them. Let us therefore speak of a type of prayer which in the Christian tradition is known as “mental prayer”. We are usually familiar with vocal prayer.

The heart and the mind must of course take part in this prayer. However we are speaking today of a meditation that does not consist of words but rather is a way of making contact with the heart of God in our mind. And here Mary is a very real model. Luke the Evangelist repeated several times that Mary, “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (2:19; cf. 2:51b). As a good custodian, she does not forget, she was attentive to all that the Lord told her and did for her, and she meditated, in other words she considered various things, pondering them in her heart.

Therefore, she who “believed” in the announcement of the Angel and made herself the means of enabling the eternal Word of the Most High to become incarnate also welcomed in her heart the wonderful miracle of that human-divine birth; she meditated on it and paused to reflect on what God was working within her, in order to welcome the divine will in her life and respond to it. The mystery of the Incarnation of the Son of God and of Mary’s motherhood is of such magnitude that it requires interiorization; it is not only something physical which God brought about within her, but is something that demanded interiorization on the part of Mary who endeavours to deepen her understanding of it, to interpret its meaning, to comprehend its consequences and implications.

Thus, day after day, in the silence of ordinary life, Mary continued to treasure in her heart the sequence of marvellous events that she witnessed until the supreme test of the Cross and the glory of the Resurrection. Mary lived her life to the full, her daily duties, her role as a mother, but she knew how to reserve an inner space to reflect on the word and will of God, on what was occurring within her and on the mysteries of the life of her Son.

In our time we are taken up with so many activities and duties, worries and problems: we often tend to fill all of the spaces of the day, without leaving a moment to pause and reflect and to nourish our spiritual life, contact with God.

Mary teaches us how necessary it is to find in our busy day, moments for silent recollection, to meditate on what the Lord wants to teach us, on how he is present and active in the world and in our life: to be able to stop for a moment and meditate. St Augustine compares meditation on the mysteries of God to the assimilation of food and uses a verb that recurs throughout the Christian tradition, “to ruminate”; that is, the mysteries of God should continually resonate within us so that they become familiar to us, guide our lives and nourish us, as does the food we need to sustain us.

St Bonaventure, moreover, with reference to the words of Sacred Scripture, says that “they should always be ruminated upon so as to be able to gaze on them with ardent application of the soul,” (*Coll. In Hex*, ed. Quaracchi 1934, p. 218). To meditate, therefore, means to create within us a situation of recollection, of inner silence, in order to reflect upon and assimilate the mysteries of our faith and what God is working within us; and not merely on the things that come and go.

We may undertake this “rumination” in various ways: for example, by taking a brief passage of Sacred Scripture, especially the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles or the Letters of the Apostles, or a passage from a spiritual author that brings us closer and makes the

reality of God more present in our day; or we can even, ask our confessor or spiritual director to recommend something to us.

By reading and reflecting on what we have read, dwelling on it, trying to understand what it is saying to me, what it says today, to open our spirit to what the Lord wants to tell us and teach us. The Holy Rosary is also a prayer of meditation: in repeating the Hail Mary we are asked to think about and reflect on the Mystery which we have just proclaimed. But we can also reflect on some intense spiritual experience, or on words that stayed with us when we were taking part in the Sunday Eucharist. So, you see, there are many ways to meditate and thereby to make contact with God and to approach God; and in this way, to be journeying on towards Heaven.

Dear friends, making time for God regularly is a fundamental element for spiritual growth; it will be the Lord himself who gives us the taste for his mysteries, his words, his presence and action, for feeling how beautiful it is when God speaks with us; he will enable us to understand more deeply what he expects of me. This, ultimately, is the very aim of meditation: to entrust ourselves increasingly to the hands of God, with trust and love, certain that in the end it is only by doing his will that we are truly happy.

## Art and Prayer

31 August 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this period I have recalled several times the need for every Christian, in the midst of the many occupations that fill our days, to find time for God and for prayer. The Lord himself gives us many opportunities to remember him. Today I would like to reflect briefly on one of these channels that can lead to God and can also be of help in the encounter with him. It is the way of artistic expression, part of that “*via pulchritudinis*”—the “way of beauty”, of which I have spoken several times and whose deepest meaning must be recovered by men and women today.

It may have happened on some occasion that you paused before a sculpture, a picture, a few verses of a poem or a piece of music that you found deeply moving, that gave you a sense of joy, a clear perception, that is, that what you beheld was not only matter, a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, a collection of letters or an accumulation of sounds, but something greater, something that “speaks”, that can touch the heart, communicate a message, uplift the mind.

A work of art is a product of the creative capacity of the human being who in questioning visible reality, seeks to discover its deep meaning and to communicate it through the language of forms, colour and sound. Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible, it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite.

Indeed it resembles a door open on to the infinite, on to a beauty and a truth that go beyond the daily routine. And a work of art can open the eyes of the mind and of the heart, impelling us upward.

However some artistic expressions are real highways to God, the supreme Beauty; indeed, they help us to grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith. We can see an example of this when we visit a Gothic cathedral: we are enraptured by the vertical lines that soar skywards and uplift our gaze and our spirit, while at the same time we feel small yet long for fullness....

Or when we enter a Romanesque church we are spontaneously prompted to meditate and to pray. We perceive that these splendid buildings contain, as it were, the faith of generations. Or when we listen to a piece of sacred music that plucks at our heartstrings, our mind, as it were, expands and turns naturally to God.

I remember a concert of music by Johann Sebastian Bach in Munich, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. At the end of the last passage, one of the *Cantatas*, I felt, not by reasoning but in the depths of my heart, that what I had heard had communicated truth to me, the truth of the supreme composer, and impelled me to thank God. The Lutheran bishop of Munich was next to me and I said to him spontaneously: "in hearing this one understands: it is true; such strong faith is true, as well as the beauty that irresistibly expresses the presence of God's truth".

Yet how many pictures or frescos, fruits of the artist's faith, in their form, in their colour, in their light, urge us to think of God and foster within us the desire to draw from the source of all beauty. What Marc Chagall, a great artist, wrote, remains profoundly true: that for centuries painters have dipped their paintbrush in that coloured alphabet which is the Bible. Thus how often artistic expression can bring us to remember God, to help us to pray or even to convert our heart!

Paul Claudel, a famous French poet, playwright and diplomat, precisely while he was listening in the Cathedral of Notre Dame to the singing of the *Magnificat* during Christmas Mass in 1886, had a tangible experience of God's presence. He had not entered the church for reasons of faith but rather in order to seek arguments against Christians and instead God's grace worked actively in his heart.

Dear friends, I ask you to rediscover the importance of this path also for prayer, for our living relationship with God. Towns and villages throughout the world contain treasures of art that express faith and beckon to us to return to our relationship with God. May the visits to places filled with art, then, not only be opportunities for cultural enrichment—that too—but may they become above all moments of grace, incentives to strengthen our bond and our dialogue with the Lord so that—in switching from simple external reality to the more profound reality it expresses—we may pause to contemplate the ray of beauty that strikes us to the quick, that almost “wounds” us, and that invites us to rise toward God.

I end with a prayer from a Psalm, Psalm 27[26]: “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and contemplate his temple” (v. 4).

Let us hope that the Lord will help us to contemplate his beauty, both in nature and in works of art, so that we, moved by the light that shines from his face, may be a light for our neighbour. Many thanks.

## **Psalm 3: “Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!”**

*7 September 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today we are resuming the Audiences in St Peter’s Square and the “school of prayer” which we attend together during these Wednesday Gatecheses. I would like to begin by meditating on several Psalms, which, as I said last June, constitute the “prayer book” par excellence. The first Psalm I shall consider is a Psalm of lamentation and supplication, imbued with deep trust, in which the certainty of God’s presence forms the basis of the prayer that springs from the condition of extreme peril in which the person praying finds himself.

It is Psalm 3, which Jewish tradition ascribes to David at the moment when he fled from his son Absalom (cf. v. 1): this was one of the most dramatic and anguishing episodes in the King’s life, when his son usurped his royal throne and forced him to flee from Jerusalem for his life (cf. 2 Sam 15ff).

Thus David’s plight and anxiety serve as a background to this prayer and, helping us to understand it by presenting a typical situation in which such a Psalm may be recited.

Every man and woman can recognize in the Psalmist's cry those feelings of sorrow, bitter regret and yet at the same time trust in God, who, as the Bible tells us, had accompanied David on the flight from his city. The Psalm opens with an invocation to the Lord:

"O Lord, how many are my foes! Many are rising against me; many are saying of me, 'There is no help for him in God'" (vv. 2–3).

The praying man's description of the situation is therefore marked by intensely dramatic tones. The idea of "multitude" is conveyed with the triple use of "many"—three words that in the original text are different terms with the same Hebrew root so as to give further emphasis to the enormity of the danger—in a repetitive manner, as it were, hammering it in. This insistence on the large number of his enemies serves to express the Psalmist's perception of the absolute disproportion between him and his persecutors, which justifies and establishes the urgency of his plea for help; his oppressors are numerous, they get the upper hand, whereas the man praying is alone and defenceless, at the mercy of his assailants.

Yet the first word the Psalmist says is "Lord"; his cry opens with a call to God. A multitude threatens him and rises against him, generating fear that magnifies the threat, making it appear greater and even more terrifying; but the praying person does not let this vision of death prevail, he keeps intact his relationship with the God of life and turns to him first in search of help.

However his enemies attempt to break this bond with God and to injure their victim's faith. They insinuate that the Lord cannot intervene, they say that not even God can save him. Hence the attack is not only physical but involves the spiritual dimension too: "there is no help for him in God", they say, targeting the central principle of the Psalmist's mind.

This is the extreme temptation to which the believer is subjected, the temptation to lose faith, to lose trust in God's closeness. The righteous pass the final test, remain steadfast in faith, in the certainty of the truth and in full trust in God; in this way they find life and truth. It seems to me that here the Psalm touches us very personally: beset by many problems we are tempted to think that perhaps God does not save me, that he does not know me, perhaps he is not able to; the temptation to lose faith is our enemy's ultimate attack and if we are to find God, if we are to find life, we must resist it.

Thus in our Psalm the person praying is called to respond with faith to the attacks of the wicked: his foes—as I said—deny that God can help him; yet he invokes God, he calls him by name, "Lord", and then turns to him with an emphatic "thou/you" that expresses a solid, sturdy relationship and implies the certainty of the divine response:



“But you, O Lord are a shield about me, my glory, and the lifter of my head. I cry aloud to the Lord, and he answers me from his holy hill” (vv. 4–5).

The vision of the enemies then disappears, they have not triumphed because the one who believes in God is sure that God is his friend. Only the “thou/you” of God is left. Now only One opposes the “many”, but this One is far greater, far more powerful, than many adversaries.

The Lord is help, defence and salvation; as a shield he protects the person who entrusts himself to him and enables him to lift his head in the gesture of triumph and victory. Man is no longer alone, his foes are not invincible as they had seemed, for the Lord hears the cry of the oppressed and answers from the place of his presence, from his holy hill.

The human being cries out in anguish, in danger, in pain; the human being calls for help and God answers. In this interweaving of the human cry and the divine response we find the dialectic of prayer and the key to reading the entire history of salvation. The cry expresses the need for help and appeals to the other’s faithfulness; crying out means making an act of faith in God’s closeness and in his willingness to listen.

Prayer expresses the certainty of a divine presence already experienced and believed in, that is fully expressed in God’s salvific answers. This is important: that in our prayer the certainty of God’s presence be given importance and be made present. Thus the Psalmist, who feels besieged by death, professes his faith in the God of life who, as a shield, surrounds him with an invulnerable protection; the one who believed he was as good as lost can raise his head because the Lord saves him; the praying person, threatened and mocked, is in glory, because God is his glory.

The divine response that hears his prayer totally reassures the Psalmist; even his fear is no more and his cry is soothed in peace, in deep inner tranquility. “I lie down and sleep; I wake again, for the Lord sustains me. I am not afraid of ten thousands of people who have set themselves against me round about” (vv. 6–7).

The praying person, even in peril, in the midst of battle, can sleep serenely in an unequivocal attitude of trusting abandonment. His foes have pitched camp around him, they are numerous, they besiege him, they rise up against him, taunting and trying to make him fall; instead he lies down and sleeps, calm and serene, sure of God’s presence. And, on reawakening he finds God still beside him, as a custodian who does not fall asleep (cf. Ps 121[120]:3–4), who sustains him, who holds his hand, who never abandons him.

The fear of death is vanquished by the presence of One who never dies. And even the night that is peopled by atavistic fears, the sorrowful night of solitude and anguished waiting is now transformed: what evoked death became the presence of the Eternal One.

The enemy's visible, massive, impressive attack is countered by the invisible presence of God with all his invincible power. And it is to him that the Psalmist, after his trusting words, once again addresses the prayer: "Arise, O Lord! Deliver me, O my God!" (v. 8a). His assailants "are rising" (cf. v. 2) against their victim; instead the One who will "arise" is the Lord and it will be to defeat them. God will deliver him, answering his cry. Thus the Psalm ends with the vision of liberation from the peril that kills, and from the temptation that can cause us to perish.

After addressing his plea to the Lord to arise and deliver him, the praying person describes the divine victory: the enemies—who with their unjust and cruel oppression are the symbol of all that opposes God and his plan of salvation—are defeated.

Struck on the mouth, they will no longer attack with their destructive violence and will be unable to instil evil and doubt in God's presence and action. Their senseless and blasphemous talk is denied once and for all and is reduced to silence by the Lord's saving intervention (cf. v. 8bc). In this way the Psalmist can conclude his prayer with a sentence with liturgical connotations that celebrates the God of life in gratitude and praise: "Deliverance belongs to the Lord; your blessing be upon your people" (v. 9).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 3 has presented us with a supplication full of trust and consolation. In praying this Psalm, we can make our own the sentiments of the Psalmist, a figure of the righteous person persecuted, who finds his fulfilment in Jesus.

In sorrow, in danger, in the bitterness of misunderstanding and offence the words of the Psalm open our hearts to the comforting certainty of faith. God is always close—even in difficulties, in problems, in the darkness of life—he listens and saves in his own way.

However it is necessary to recognize his presence and accept his ways, as did David in his humiliating flight from his son, Absalom; as did the just man who is persecuted in the Book of Wisdom and, ultimately and completely, as did the Lord Jesus on Golgotha. And when, in the eyes of the wicked, God does not seem to intervene and the Son dies, it is then that the true glory and the definitive realization of salvation is manifest to all believers.

May the Lord give us faith, may he come to our aid in our weakness and make us capable of believing and praying in every anxiety, in the sorrowful nights of doubt and the long

days of sorrow, abandoning ourselves with trust to him, who is our “shield” and our “glory”. Many thanks.

## **Psalm 22 (21): “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”**

*14 September 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Catechesis today I would like to apply myself to a Psalm with strong Christological implications which continually surface in accounts of Jesus' passion, with its twofold dimension of humiliation and glory, of death and life. It is Psalm 22 according to the Hebrew tradition and Psalm 21 according to the Graeco-Latin tradition, a heartfelt, moving prayer with a human density and theological richness that make it one of the most frequently prayed and studied Psalms in the entire Psalter. It is a long poetic composition and we shall reflect in particular on its first part, centred on the lament, in order to examine in depth certain important dimensions of the prayer of supplication to God.

This Psalm presents the figure of an innocent man, persecuted and surrounded by adversaries who clamour for his death; and he turns to God with a sorrowful lament which, in the certainty of his faith, opens mysteriously to praise. The anguishing reality of the present and the consoling memory of the past alternate in his prayer in an agonized awareness of his own desperate situation in which, however, he does not want to give up hope. His initial cry is an appeal addressed to a God who appears remote, who does not answer and seems to have abandoned him: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me, from the words of my groaning? O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest” (vv. 3–4).

God is silent and this silence pierces the soul of the person praying, who ceaselessly calls but receives no answer. Day and night succeed one another in an unflagging quest for a word, for help that does not come, God seems so distant, so forgetful, so absent. The prayer asks to be heard, to be answered, it begs for contact, seeks a relationship that can give comfort and salvation. But if God fails to respond, the cry of help is lost in the void and loneliness becomes unbearable.

Yet, in his cry, the praying man of our Psalm calls the Lord “my” God at least three times, in an extreme act of trust and faith. In spite of all appearances, the Psalmist cannot

believe that his link with the Lord is totally broken and while he asks the reason for a presumed incomprehensible abandonment, he says that “his” God cannot forsake him.

As is well known, the initial cry of the Psalm, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”, is recorded by the Gospels of Matthew and Mark as the cry uttered by Jesus dying on the Cross (cf. Mt 27:46, Mk 15:34). It expresses all the desolation of the Messiah, Son of God, who is facing the drama of death, a reality totally opposed to the Lord of life. Forsaken by almost all his followers, betrayed and denied by the disciples, surrounded by people who insult him, Jesus is under the crushing weight of a mission that was to pass through humiliation and annihilation. This is why he cried out to the Father, and his suffering took up the sorrowful words of the Psalm. But his is not a desperate cry, nor was that of the Psalmist who, in his supplication, takes a tormented path which nevertheless opens out at last into a perspective of praise, into trust in the divine victory.

And since in the Jewish custom citing the beginning of a Psalm implied a reference to the whole poem, although Jesus’ anguished prayer retains its burden of unspeakable suffering, it unfolds to the certainty of glory. “Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?”, the Risen Christ was to say to the disciples at Emmaus (Lk 24:26). In his passion, in obedience to the Father, the Lord Jesus passes through abandonment and death to reach life and to give it to all believers.

This initial cry of supplication in our Psalm 22[21] is followed in sorrowful contrast by the memory of the past, “In you our fathers trusted; they trusted, and you did deliver them. To you they cried, and were saved; in you they trusted, and were not disappointed” (vv. 5–6).

The God who appears today to be so remote to the Psalmist, is nonetheless the merciful Lord whom Israel experienced throughout its history. The People to whom the praying person belongs is the object of God’s love and can witness to his fidelity to him. Starting with the Patriarchs, then in Egypt and on the long pilgrimage through the wilderness, in the stay in the promised land in contact with aggressive and hostile peoples, to the night of the exile, the whole of biblical history is a history of a cry for help on the part of the People and of saving answers on the part of God.

And the Psalmist refers to the steadfast faith of his ancestors who “trusted”—this word is repeated three times—without ever being disappointed. Then, however, it seems that this chain of trusting invocations and divine answers has been broken; the Psalmist’s situation seems to deny the entire history of salvation, making the present reality even more painful.

God, however, cannot deny himself so here the prayer returns to describing the distressing plight of the praying person, to induce the Lord to have pity on him and to intervene, as he always had done in the past. The Psalmist describes himself as “a worm, and no man”, scorned by men, and despised by the people” (v. 7). He was mocked, people made grimaces at him, (cf. v. 8), and wounded in his faith itself. “He committed his cause to the Lord; let him deliver him, let him rescue him, for he delights in him!” (v. 9), they said.

Under the jeering blows of irony and contempt, it almost seems as though the persecuted man loses his own human features, like the suffering servant outlined in the Book of Isaiah (cf. 52:14; 53:2b–3). And like the oppressed righteous man in the Book of Wisdom (cf. 2:12–20), like Jesus on Calvary (cf. Mt 27:39–43), the Psalmist saw his own relationship with the Lord called into question in the cruel and sarcastic emphasis of what is causing him to suffer: God’s silence, his apparent absence. And yet God was present with an indisputable tenderness in the life of the person praying. The Psalmist reminds the Lord of this: “Yet you are he who took me from the womb; you did keep me safe upon my mother’s breasts. Upon you was I cast from my birth” (vv. 10–11a).

The Lord is the God of life who brings the newborn child into the world and cares for him with a father’s affection. And though the memory of God’s fidelity in the history of the people has first been recalled, the praying person now re-evokes his own personal history of relations with the Lord, going back to the particularly significant moment of the beginning of his life. And here, despite the desolation of the present, the Psalmist recognizes a closeness and a divine love so radical that he can now exclaim, in a confession full of faith and generating hope: “and since my mother bore me you have been my God” (v. 11b).

The lament then becomes a heartfelt plea: “Be not far from me, for trouble is near and there is none to help” (v. 12). The only closeness that the Psalmist can perceive and that fills him with fear was that of his enemies. It is therefore necessary for God to make himself close and to help him, because enemies surround the praying man, they encircle him and were like strong bulls, like ravening and roaring lions (cf. vv. 13–14). Anguish alters his perception of the danger, magnifying it. The adversaries seem invincible, they become ferocious, dangerous animals, while the Psalmist is like a small worm, powerless and defenceless.

Yet these images used in the Psalm also serve to describe that when man becomes brutal and attacks his brother, something brutal within him takes the upper hand, he seems to lose any human likeness; violence always has something bestial about it and only God’s saving intervention can restore humanity to human beings.

Now, it seems to the Psalmist, the object of so much ferocious aggression, that he no longer has any way out and death begins to take possession of him: “I am poured out like water, and all my bones are out of joint ... my strength is dried up like a potsherd, and my tongue cleaves to my jaws ... they divide my garments among them, and for my raiment they cast lots” (vv. 15, 16, 19).

The disintegration of the body of the condemned man is described with the dramatic images that we encounter in the accounts of Christ’s passion, the unbearable parching thirst that torments the dying man that is echoed in Jesus’ request “I thirst” (cf. Jn 19:28), until we reach the definitive act of his tormentors, who, like the soldiers at the foot of the cross divide the clothes of the victim whom they consider already dead (cf. Mt 27:35; Mk 15:24; Lk 23:34; Jn 19:23–24).

Here then, impelling, once again comes the request for help: “But you, O Lord, be not far off! O you my help, hasten to my aid!... Save me” (vv. 20; 22a). This is a cry that opens the Heavens, because it proclaims a faith, a certainty that goes beyond all doubt, all darkness and all desolation. And the lament is transformed, it gives way to praise in the acceptance of salvation: “He has heard ... I will tell of your name to my brethren; in the midst of the congregation I will praise you” (vv. 22c–23).

In this way the Psalm opens to thanksgiving, to the great final hymn that sweeps up the whole people, the Lord’s faithful, the liturgical assembly, the generations to come (cf. vv. 24–31). The Lord went to the rescue, he saved the poor man and showed his merciful face. Death and life are interwoven in an inseparable mystery and life triumphs, the God of salvation shows himself to be the undisputed Lord whom all the ends of the earth will praise and before whom all the families of the nations will bow down. It is the victory of faith which can transform death into the gift of life, the abyss of sorrow into a source of hope.

Dear brothers and sisters, this Psalm has taken us to Golgotha, to the foot of the cross of Jesus, to relive his passion and to share the fruitful joy of the resurrection. Let us therefore allow ourselves to be invaded by the light of the paschal mystery even in God’s apparent absence, even in God’s silence, and, like the disciples of Emmaus, let us learn to discern the true reality beyond appearances, recognizing humiliation itself as the way to exaltation, and the cross as the full manifestation of life in earth. Thus, replacing in God the Father all our trust and hope, in every anxiety we will be able to pray to him with faith, and our cry of help will be transformed into a hymn of praise. Many thanks.

# Psalm 23

5 October 2011

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Turning to the Lord in prayer implies a radical act of trust, in the awareness that one is entrusting oneself to God who is good, “merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (Ex 34:6–7; Ps 86[85]:15; cf. Joel 2:13; Jon 4:2; Ps 103 [102]:8; 145[144]:8; Neh 9:17). For this reason I would like to reflect with you today on a Psalm that is totally imbued with trust, in which the Psalmist expresses his serene certainty that he is guided and protected, safe from every danger, because the Lord is his Shepherd. It is Psalm 23 [22, according to the Greco-Latin numbering], a text familiar to all and loved by all.

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want”: the beautiful prayer begins with these words, evoking the nomadic environment of sheep-farming and the experience of familiarity between the shepherd and the sheep that make up his little flock. The image calls to mind an atmosphere of trust, intimacy and tenderness: the shepherd knows each one of his sheep and calls them by name; and they follow him because they recognize him and trust in him (cf. Jn 10:2–4).

He tends them, looks after them as precious possessions, ready to defend them, to guarantee their well-being and enable them to live a peaceful life. They can lack nothing as long as the shepherd is with them. The Psalmist refers to this experience by calling God his shepherd and letting God lead him to safe pastures: “He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake” (Ps 23[22]:2–3).

The vision that unfolds before our eyes is that of green pastures and springs of clear water, oases of peace to which the shepherd leads his flock, symbols of the places of life towards which the Lord leads the Psalmist, who feels like the sheep lying on the grass beside a stream, resting rather than in a state of tension or alarm, peaceful and trusting, because it is a safe place, the water is fresh and the shepherd is watching over them.

And let us not forget here that the scene elicited by the Psalm is set in a land that is largely desert, on which the scorching sun beats down, where the Middle-Eastern semi-nomad shepherd lives with his flock in the parched steppes that surround the villages. Nevertheless the shepherd knows where to find grass and fresh water, essential to life, he can lead the way to oases in which the soul is “restored” and where it is possible to recover strength and new energy to start out afresh on the journey.

As the Psalmist says, God guides him to “green pastures” and “still waters”, where everything is superabundant, everything is given in plenty. If the Lord is the Shepherd, even in the desert, a desolate place of death, the certainty of a radical presence of life is not absent, so that he is able to say “I shall not want”. Indeed, the shepherd has at heart the good of his flock, he adapts his own pace and needs to those of his sheep, he walks and lives with them, leading them on paths “of righteousness”, that is, suitable for them, paying attention to their needs and not to his own. The safety of his sheep is a priority for him and he complies with this in leading his flock.

Dear brothers and sisters, if we follow the “Good Shepherd”—no matter how difficult, tortuous or long the pathways of our life may seem, even through spiritual deserts without water and under the scorching sun of rationalism—with the guidance of Christ the Good Shepherd, we too, like the Psalmist, may be sure that we are walking on “paths of righteousness” and that the Lord is leading us, is ever close to us and that we “shall lack nothing”. For this reason the Psalmist can declare his calm assurance without doubt or fear: “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I fear no evil; for you are with me; your rod and your staff they comfort me” (v. 4).

Those who walk with the Lord even in the dark valleys of suffering, doubt and all the human problems, feel safe. You are with me: this is our certainty, this is what supports us. The darkness of the night frightens us with its shifting shadows, with the difficulty of distinguishing dangers, with its silence taut with strange sounds. If the flock moves after sunset when visibility fades, it is normal for the sheep to be restless, there is the risk of stumbling or even of straying and getting lost, and there is also the fear of possible assailants lurking in the darkness.

To speak of the “dark” valley, the Psalmist uses a Hebrew phrase that calls to mind the shadows of death, which is why the valley to be passed through is a place of anguish, terrible threats, the danger of death. Yet the person praying walks on in safety undaunted since he knows that the Lord is with him. “You are with me” is a proclamation of steadfast faith and sums up the radical experience of faith; God’s closeness transforms the reality, the dark valley loses all danger, it is emptied of every threat. Now the flock can walk in tranquillity, accompanied by the familiar rhythmical beat of the staff on the ground, marking the shepherd’s reassuring presence.

This comforting image ends the first part of the Psalm, and gives way to a different scene. We are still in the desert, where the shepherd lives with his flock, but we are now set before his tent which opens to offer us hospitality. “You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil, my cup overflows” (v. 5).



The Lord is now presented as the One who welcomes the person praying with signs of generous hospitality, full of attention. The divine host lays the food on the “table”, a term which in Hebrew means, in its primitive sense, the animal skin that was spread out on the ground and on which the food for the common meal was set out. It is a gesture of sharing, not only of food but also of life in an offering of communion and friendship that create bonds and express solidarity. Then there is the munificent gift of scented oil poured on the head, which with its fragrance brings relief from the scorching of the desert sun, refreshes and calms the skin and gladdens the spirit.

Lastly, the cup overflowing with its exquisite wine, shared with superabundant generosity, adds a note of festivity. Food, oil and wine are gifts that bring life and give joy, because they go beyond what is strictly necessary and express the free giving and abundance of love. Psalm 104[103] proclaims: “You cause the grass to grow for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate, that he may bring forth food from the earth, and wine to gladden the heart of man, oil to make his face shine, and bread to strengthen man’s heart” (vv. 14–15).

The Psalmist becomes the object of much attention for which reason he sees himself as a wayfarer who finds shelter in a hospitable tent, whereas his enemies have to stop and watch, unable to intervene, since the one whom they considered their prey has been led to safety and has become a sacred guest who cannot be touched. And the Psalmist is us, if we truly are believers in communion with Christ. When God opens his tent to us to receive us, nothing can harm us. Then when the traveller sets out afresh, the divine protection is extended and accompanies him on his journey: “Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life; and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for ever” (Ps 23[22]:6).

The goodness and faithfulness of God continue to escort the Psalmist who comes out of the tent and resumes his journey. But it is a journey that acquires new meaning and becomes a pilgrimage to the Temple of the Lord, the holy place in which the praying person wants to “dwell” for ever and to which he also wants to “return”. The Hebrew verb used here has the meaning of “to return” but with a small vowel change can be understood as “to dwell”. Moreover, this is how it is rendered by the ancient versions and by the majority of the modern translations. Both meanings may be retained: to return and dwell in the Temple as every Israelite desires, and to dwell near God, close to him and to goodness. This is what every believer yearns and longs for: truly to be able to live where God is, close to him. Following the Shepherd leads to God’s house, this is the destination of every journey, the longed for oasis in the desert, the tent of shelter in escaping from enemies, a place of peace where God’s kindness and faithful love may be felt, day after day, in the serene joy of time without end.

With their richness and depth the images of this Psalm have accompanied the whole of the history and religious experience of the People of Israel and accompany Christians. The figure of the shepherd, in particular, calls to mind the original time of the Exodus, the long journey through the desert, as a flock under the guidance of the divine Shepherd (cf. Is 63:11–14; Ps 78:20–21; 78:52–54). And in the Promised Land, the king had the task of tending the Lord’s flock, like David, the shepherd chosen by God and a figure of the Messiah (cf. 2 Sam 5:1–2; 7:8 Ps 78[77]:70–72).

Then after the Babylonian Exile, as it were in a new Exodus (cf. Is 40:3–5, 9–11; 43:16–21), Israel was brought back to its homeland like a lost sheep found and led by God to luxuriant pastures and resting places (cf. Ezek 34:11–16, 23–31). However, it is in the Lord Jesus that all the evocative power of our Psalm reaches completeness, finds the fullness of its meaning: Jesus is the “Good Shepherd” who goes in search of lost sheep, who knows his sheep and lays down his life for them (cf. Mt 18:12–14; Lk 15:4–7; Jn 10:2–4, 11–18). He is the way, the right path that leads us to life (cf. Jn 14:6), the light that illuminates the dark valley and overcomes all our fears (cf. Jn 1:9; 8:12; 9:5; 12:46).

He is the generous host who welcomes us and rescues us from our enemies, preparing for us the table of his body and his blood (cf. Mt 26:26–29; Mk 14:22–25); Lk 22:19–20) and the definitive table of the messianic banquet in Heaven (cf. Lk 14:15ff; Rev 3:20; 19:9). He is the Royal Shepherd, king in docility and in forgiveness, enthroned on the glorious wood of the cross (cf. Jn 3:13–15; 12:32; 17:4–5).

Dear brothers and sisters, Psalm 23 invites us to renew our trust in God, abandoning ourselves totally in his hands. Let us therefore ask with faith that the Lord also grant us on the difficult ways of our time that we always walk on his paths as a docile and obedient flock, and that he welcome us to his house, to his table, and lead us to “still waters” so that, in accepting the gift of his Spirit, we may quench our thirst at his sources, springs of the living water “welling up to eternal life” (Jn 4:14; cf. 7:37–39). Many thanks.

## Psalm 126

*12 October 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now turn to Psalm 126. This Psalm is a joyful prayer of thanksgiving for God’s fidelity to his promises in bringing about Israel’s return from the Babylonian Exile: “The Lord has done great things for us, and we rejoiced” (v. 3). A similar spirit of joy and thanksgiving should mark our own prayer as we

recall the care which God has shown to us in the events of our lives, even those which seem dark and bitter. The Psalmist implores God to continue to grant Israel his saving help: “May those who sow in tears, reap with shouts of joy” (v. 5). This imagery of the seed which silently grows to maturity reminds us that God’s salvation is at once a gift already received and the object of our hope, a promise whose fulfilment remains in the future. Jesus will use this same imagery to express the passage from death to life, from darkness to light, which must take place in the lives of all who put their faith in him and share in his paschal mystery (cf. *Jn* 12:24). As we pray this Psalm, may we echo the song of the Virgin Mary by rejoicing in the great things which the Almighty has done for us (cf. *Lk* 1:49) and by awaiting in hope the fulfilment of God’s promises.

## **The Great Hallel Psalm 136 (135)**

*19 October 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to meditate with you on a Psalm that sums up the entire history of salvation recorded in the Old Testament. It is a great hymn of praise that celebrates the Lord in the multiple, repeated expressions of his goodness throughout human history: it is Psalm 136 or 135 according to the Greco-Latin tradition.

A solemn prayer of thanksgiving, known as the “Great Hallel”, this Psalm is traditionally sung at the end of the Jewish Passover meal and was probably also prayed by Jesus at the Last Supper celebrated with his disciples. In fact, the annotation of the Evangelists, “and when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (cf. *Mt* 26:30; *Mk* 14:26), would seem to allude to it.

The horizon of praise thus appears to illumine the difficult path to Golgotha. The whole of Psalm 136 unfolds in the form of a litany, marked by the antiphonal refrain: “for his steadfast love endures for ever”. The many wonders God has worked in human history and his continuous intervention on behalf of his people are listed in the composition. Furthermore, to every proclamation of the Lord’s saving action the antiphon responds with the basic impetus of praise.

The eternal love of God, is a love which, in accordance with the Hebrew term used, suggestive of fidelity, mercy, kindness, grace and tenderness, is the unifying motif of the entire Psalm. The refrain always takes the same form, whereas the regular paradigmatic manifestations of God’s love change: creation, liberation through the Exodus, the gift of land, the Lord’s provident and constant help for his people and for every created being.

After a triple invitation to give thanks to God as sovereign (vv. 1–3), the Lord is celebrated as the One who works “great wonders” (v. 4), the first of which is the Creation: the heavens, the earth, the heavenly bodies (vv. 5–9). The created world is not merely a scenario into which God’s saving action is inserted rather is the very beginning of that marvellous action. With the Creation, the Lord shows himself in all his goodness and beauty, he commits himself to life, revealing a desire for goodness which gives rise to every other action of salvation.

And in our Psalm, re-echoing the first chapter of Genesis, the principal elements of the created world are summed up, with special insistence on the heavenly bodies, the sun, the moon and the stars, magnificent created things that govern the day and the night. Nothing is said here of the creation of human beings but they are ever present; the sun and the moon are for them—for men and women—so as to structure human time, setting it in relation to the Creator, especially by denoting the liturgical seasons. And it is precisely the Feast of Easter that is immediately evoked, when, passing to God’s manifestation of himself in history, the great event of the exodus, freedom from slavery in Egypt begins, whose most significant elements are outlined:

The liberation from Egypt begins with the plague of killing the Egyptian firstborn, the Exodus from Egypt, the crossing of the Red Sea, the journey through the desert to the entry into the Promised Land (vv. 10–20). This is the very first moment of Israel’s history; God intervened powerfully to lead his people to freedom; through Moses, his envoy, he asserted himself before Pharaoh, revealing himself in his full grandeur and at last broke down the resistance of the Egyptians with the terrible plague of the death of the firstborn. Israel could thus leave the country of slavery taking with it the gold of its oppressors (cf. Ex 12:35–36) and “defiantly” (Ex 14:8), in the exulting sign of victory.

At the Red Sea too the Lord acted with merciful power. Before an Israel so terrified by the sight of the Egyptians in pursuit as to regret its departure from Egypt (cf. Ex 14:10–12), God, as our Psalm says, “divided the Red Sea in sunder ... and made the people of Israel pass through the midst of it ... but overthrew Pharaoh and his host” (136:13–15). The image of the Red Sea “divided” into two seems to call to mind the idea of the sea as a great monster hacked into two and thereby rendered harmless. The might of the Lord overcomes the danger of the forces of nature and of these soldiers deployed in battle array by men: the sea, which seemed to bar the way of the People of God, let Israel cross on dry ground and then swept over the Egyptians, submerging them. Thus the full salvific force of the Lord’s “mighty hand, and an outstretched arm” (cf. Deut 5:15; 7:19; 26:8) was demonstrated: the unjust oppressor was vanquished, engulfed by the waters, while the people of God “walked on dry ground through the sea”, continuing its journey to freedom.

Our Psalm now refers to this journey, recalling in one short phrase Israel's long pilgrimage toward the promised land: he "led his people through the wilderness, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (v. 16). These few words refer to a 40-year experience, a crucial period for Israel which in letting itself be guided by the Lord learned to live in faith, obedience and docility to God's law. These were difficult years, marked by hardship in the desert, but also happy years, trusting in the Lord with filial trust. It was the time of "youth", as the Prophet Jeremiah describes it in speaking to Israel in the Lord's name with words full of tenderness and nostalgia: "I remember the devotion of your youth, your love as a bride, how you followed me in the wilderness, in a land not sown" (Jer 2:2).

The Lord, like the shepherd of Psalm 23[22] whom we contemplated in a Catechesis, for 40 years guided, taught and cherished his people, leading it right to the promised land, also overcoming the resistance and hostility of enemy peoples that wished to block its way to salvation (cf. 136:17–20).

So as the "great wonders" that our Psalm lists unfold, we reach the moment of the conclusive gift, the fulfilment of the divine promise made to the Fathers: "gave their land as a heritage, for his steadfast love endures for ever; a heritage to Israel his servant, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (136:21–22). Then, in celebrating the Lord's eternal love, the gift of land was commemorated, a gift that the people were to receive but without ever taking possession of it, continuing to live in an attitude of grateful acknowledgment and gratitude.

Israel received the land it was to live in as "a heritage", a generic term which designates the possession of a good received from another person, a right of ownership which specifically refers to the paternal patrimony. One of God's prerogatives is "giving"; and now, at the end of the journey of the Exodus, Israel, the recipient of the gift, enters as a son or daughter the land of the promise now fulfilled. The time of wandering, of living in tents, of living a precarious life, is over.

It was then that the happy period of permanence began, of joy in building houses, of planting vineyards, of living in security (cf. Deut 8:7–13). Yet it was also the time of the temptation to idolatry, contamination with pagans, self-sufficiency that led to the Origin of the gift being forgotten.

Accordingly, the Psalmist mentions Israel's low estate and foes, a reality of death in which the Lord, once again reveals himself as Saviour: "He ... remembered us in our low estate, for his steadfast love endures for ever; and rescued us from our foes, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (136:23–24).

At this point a question arises: how can we make this Psalm our own prayer, how can we ourselves claim this Psalm as our own prayer? What is important is the Psalm's setting, for at the beginning and at the end is the Creation. Let us return to this point: the Creation as God's great gift by which we live and in which he reveals himself in his great goodness. Therefore, to think of the Creation as a gift of God is a common point for all of us.

The history of salvation then follows. We can of course say: this liberation from Egypt, the time in the desert, the entry into the Holy Land and all the other subsequent problems are very remote from us, they are not part of our own history. Yet we must be attentive to the fundamental structure of this prayer. The basic structure is that Israel remembers the Lord's goodness. In this history dark valleys, arduous journeys and death succeed one another but Israel recalls that God was good and can survive in this dark valley, in this valley of death, because it remembers. It remembers the Lord's goodness and his power; his mercy is effective for ever. And this is also important for us: to remember the Lord's goodness. Memory strongly sustains hope. Memory tells us: God exists, God is good, his mercy endures for ever. So it is that memory unfolds, even in the darkest day or time, showing the way towards the future. It represents "great lights" and is our guiding star. We too have good memories of the goodness, of God's merciful love that endures for ever.

Israel's history is a former memory for us, too, of how God revealed himself, how he created a people of his own. Then God became man, one of us: he lived with us, he suffered with us, he died for us. He stays with us in the Sacrament and in the Word. It is a history, a memory of God's goodness that assures us of his goodness: his love endures for ever. And then, in these 2,000 years of the Church's history there is always, again and again, the Lord's goodness. After the dark period of the Nazi and Communist persecution, God set us free, he showed that he is good, that he is powerful, that his mercy endures for ever. And, as in our common, collective history, this memory of God's goodness is present, it helps us and becomes for us a star of hope so that each one also has his or her personal story of salvation.

We must truly treasure this story, and in order to trust must keep ever present in our mind the memory of the great things he has also worked in my life: his mercy endures for ever. And if today I am immersed in the dark night, tomorrow he sets me free, for his mercy is eternal.

Let us return to the Psalm, because at the end it returns to the Creation. The Lord, it says, "gives food to all flesh, for his steadfast love endures for ever" (v. 25). The prayer of the

Psalm concludes with an invitation to praise: “Give thanks to the God of heaven, for his steadfast love endures for ever”.

The Lord is our good and provident Father, who gives his children their heritage and lavishes life-giving food upon all. God who created the heavens and the earth and the great heavenly bodies, who entered human history to bring all his children to salvation is the God who fills the universe with his presence of goodness, caring for life and providing bread.

The invisible power of the Creator and Lord of which the Psalm sings is revealed in the humble sign of the bread he gives us, with which he enables us to live. And so it is that this daily bread symbolizes and sums up the love of God as Father and opens us to the fulfilment of the New Testament, to that “Bread of Life”, the Eucharist, which accompanies us in our lives as believers, anticipating the definitive joy of the messianic banquet in Heaven.

Brothers and Sisters, the praise and blessing of Psalm 136[135], has made us review the most important stages in the history of salvation, to reach the Paschal Mystery in which God’s saving action reaches its culmination. Let us therefore celebrate with grateful joy the Creator, Saviour and faithful Father, who “so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (Jn 3:16). In the fullness of time, the Son of God became man to give life, for the salvation of each one of us, and gave himself as bread in the Eucharistic mystery to enable us to enter his Covenant which makes us his children. May both God’s merciful goodness and his sublime “steadfast love for ever” reach far afield.

I would therefore like to conclude this Catechesis by making my own the words that St John wrote in his First Letter and that we must always have in mind in our prayers: “See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are” (1 Jn 3:1). Many thanks.

## **Psalm 119 (118)**

*9 November 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In previous Catecheses we have meditated on several Psalms that are examples of typical forms of prayer: lamentation, trust and praise. In today’s Catechesis I would like to reflect on Psalm 119, according to the Hebrew tradition, Psalm 118 according to the Greco-Latin one.

It is a very special Psalm, unique of its kind. This is first of all because of its length. Indeed, it is composed of 176 verses divided into 22 stanzas of eight verses each. Moreover, its special feature is that it is an “acrostic in alphabetical order”, in other words it is structured in accordance with the Hebrew alphabet that consists of 22 letters. Each stanza begins with a letter of this alphabet and the first letter of the first word of each of the eight verses in the stanza begins with this letter. This is both original and indeed a demanding literary genre in which the author of the Psalm must have had to summon up all his skill.

However, what is most important for us is this Psalm’s central theme. In fact, it is an impressive, solemn canticle on the *Torah* of the Lord, that is, on his Law, a term which in its broadest and most comprehensive meaning should be understood as a teaching, an instruction, a rule of life. The *Torah* is a revelation, it is a word of God that challenges the human being and elicits his response of trusting obedience and generous love.

This Psalm is steeped in love for the word of God whose beauty, saving power and capacity for giving joy and life it celebrates; because the divine Law is not the heavy yoke of slavery but a liberating gift of grace that brings happiness. “I will delight in your statutes; I will not forget your word”, the Psalmist declares (v. 16), and then: “Lead me in the path of your commandments, for I delight in it” (v. 35). And further: “Oh, how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day” (v. 97).

The Law of the Lord, his word, is the centre of the praying person’s life; he finds comfort in it, he makes it the subject of meditation, he treasures it in his heart: “I have laid up your word in my heart, that I might not sin against you” (v. 11), and this is the secret of the Psalmist’s happiness; and then, again, “the godless besmear me with lies, but with my whole heart I keep your precepts” (v. 69).

The Psalmist’s faithfulness stems from listening to the word, from pondering on it in his inmost self, meditating on it and cherishing it, just as did Mary, who “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart”, the words that had been addressed to her and the marvellous events in which God revealed himself, asking her for the assent of her faith (cf. Lk 2:19, 51). And if the first verses of our Psalm begin by proclaiming “blessed” those “who walk in the law of the Lord” (v. 1b), and “who keep his testimonies” (v. 2a). It is once again the Virgin Mary who brings to completion the perfect figure of the believer, described by the Psalmist. It is she, in fact, who is the true “blessed”, proclaimed such by Elizabeth because “she ... believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord” (Lk 1:45). Moreover it was to her and to her faith that Jesus himself bore witness when he answered the woman who had cried: “Blessed is the womb that bore you”, with “Blessed rather are those who hear the word of God and keep it!” (Lk



11:27–28). Of course, Mary is blessed because she carried the Saviour in her womb, but especially because she accepted God’s announcement and because she was an attentive and loving custodian of his Word.

Psalm 119 is thus woven around this Word of life and blessedness. If its central theme is the “word” and “Law” of the Lord, next to these terms in almost all the verses such synonyms recur as “precepts”, “statutes”, “commandments”, “ordinances”, “promises”, “judgement”; and then so many verbs relating to them such as observe, keep, understand, learn, love, meditate and live.

The entire alphabet unfolds through the 22 stanzas of this Psalm and also the whole of the vocabulary of the believer’s trusting relationship with God; we find in it praise, thanksgiving and trust, but also supplication and lamentation. However they are always imbued with the certainty of divine grace and of the power of the word of God. Even the verses more heavily marked by grief and by a sense of darkness remain open to hope and are permeated by faith.

“My soul cleaves to the dust; revive me according to your word” (v. 25), the Psalmist trustingly prays. “I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, yet I have not forgotten your statutes” (v. 83), is his cry as a believer. His fidelity, even when it is put to the test, finds strength in the Lord’s word: “then shall I have an answer for those who taunt me, for I trust in your word” (v. 42), he says firmly; and even when he faces the anguishing prospect of death, the Lord’s commandments are his reference point and his hope of victory: “they have almost made an end of me on earth; but I have not forsaken your precepts” (v. 87).

The Law of the Lord, the object of the passionate love of the Psalmist as well as of every believer, is a source of life. The desire to understand it, to observe it and to direct the whole of one’s being by it is the characteristic of every righteous person who is faithful to the Lord, and who “on his law ... meditates day and night”, as Psalm 1 recites (v. 2). The law of God is a way to be kept “in the heart”, as the well known text of the *Shema* in Deuteronomy says: “Hear, O Israel: And these words which I command you this day shall be upon your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise” (6:4, 6–7).

The Law of God, at the centre of life, demands that the heart listen. It is a listening that does not consist of servile but rather of filial, trusting and aware obedience. Listening to the word is a personal encounter with the Lord of life, an encounter that must be expressed in concrete decisions and become a journey and a “sequela”. When Jesus is

asked what one should do to inherit eternal life he points to the way of observance of the Law but indicates what should be done to bring it to completion: “but you lack one thing; go, sell what you have, and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me! (Mk 10:21ff.). Fulfilment of the Law is the following of Jesus, travelling on the road that Jesus took, in the company of Jesus.

Psalm 119 thus brings us to the encounter with the Lord and orients us to the Gospel. There is a verse in it on which I would now like to reflect: it is verse 57: “the Lord is my portion; I promise to keep his words”. In other Psalms too the person praying affirms that the Lord is his “portion”, his inheritance: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup”, Psalm 16[15] says. “God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever” is the protestation of faith of the faithful person in Psalm 73 [72]: v. 26b, and again, in Psalm 142[141], the Psalmist cries to the Lord: “You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living” (v. 5b).

This term “portion” calls to mind the event of the division of the promised land between the tribes of Israel, when no piece of land was assigned to the Levites because their “portion” was the Lord himself. Two texts of the Pentateuch, using the term in question, are explicit in this regard, the Lord said to Aaron: “You shall have no inheritance in their land, neither shall you have any *portion* among them; I am your *portion* and your inheritance among the people of Israel”, as the Book of Numbers (18:20) declares and as Deuteronomy reaffirms “Therefore Levi has no *portion* or inheritance with his brothers; the Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him” (Deut 10:9; cf. Deut 18:2; Josh 13:33; Ezek 44:28).

The Priests, who belong to the tribe of Levi cannot be landowners in the land that God was to bequeath as a legacy to his people, thus bringing to completion the promise he had made to Abraham (cf. Gen 12:1–7). The ownership of land, a fundamental element for permanence and for survival, was a sign of blessing because it presupposed the possibility of building a house, of raising children, of cultivating the fields and of living on the produce of the earth.

Well, the Levites, mediators of the sacred and of the divine blessing, unlike the other Israelites could not own possessions, this external sign of blessing and source of subsistence. Totally dedicated to the Lord, they had to live on him alone, reliant on his provident love and on the generosity of their brethren without any other inheritance since God was their portion, God was the land that enabled them to live to the full.

The person praying in Psalm 119 then applies this reality to himself: “the Lord is my portion”. His love for God and for his word leads him to make the radical decision to have

the Lord as his one possession and also to treasure his words as a precious gift more valuable than any legacy or earthly possession. There are two different ways in which our verse may be translated and it could also be translated as “my portion Lord, as I have said, is to preserve your words”. The two translations are not contradictory but on the contrary complete each other: the Psalmist meant that his portion was the Lord but that preserving the divine words was also part of his inheritance, as he was to say later in v. 111: “your testimonies are my heritage for ever; yea, they are the joy of my heart”. This is the happiness of the Psalmist, like the Levites, he has been given the word of God as his portion, his inheritance.

Dear brothers and sisters, these verses are also of great importance for all of us. First of all for priests, who are called to live on the Lord and his word alone with no other means of security, with him as their one possession and as their only source of true life. In this light one understands the free choice of celibacy for the Kingdom of Heaven in order to rediscover it in its beauty and power.

Yet these verses are also important for all the faithful, the People of God that belong to him alone, “a kingdom and priests” for the Lord (cf. 1 Pet 2:9; Rev 1:6, 5:10), called to the radicalism of the Gospel, witnesses of the life brought by Christ, the new and definitive “High Priest” who gave himself as a sacrifice for the salvation of the world (cf. Heb 2:17; 4:14–16; 5:5–10; 9, 11ff.). The Lord and his word: these are our “land”, in which to live in communion and in joy.

Let us therefore permit the Lord to instil this love for his word in our hearts and to grant that we may always place him and his holy will at the centre of our life. Let us ask that our prayers and the whole of our life be illuminated by the word of God, the lamp to light our footsteps and a light on our path, as Psalm 119 (cf. 105) says, so that we may walk safely in the land of men. And may Mary, who generously welcomed the Word, be our guide and comfort, the polestar that indicates the way to happiness.

Then we too shall be able to rejoice in our prayers, like the praying person of Psalm 16, in the unexpected gifts of the Lord and in the undeserved legacy that fell to us: “The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup ... the lines have fallen for me in pleasant places; yea, I have a goodly heritage” (Ps 16:5, 6).

## **Psalm 110 (109)**

*16 November 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to end my catechesis on the prayer of the Book of Psalms by meditating on one of the most famous of the “royal Psalms”, a Psalm that Jesus himself cited and that the New Testament authors referred to extensively and interpreted as referring to the Messiah, to Christ. It is Psalm 110 according to the Hebrew tradition, 109 according to the Graeco-Latin one, a Psalm very dear to the ancient Church and to believers of all times. This prayer may at first have been linked to the enthronement of a Davidic king; yet its meaning exceeds the specific contingency of an historic event, opening to broader dimensions and thereby becoming a celebration of the victorious Messiah, glorified at God’s right hand.

The Psalm begins with a solemn declaration: “the Lord says to my lord ‘sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool’ ” (v. 1).

God himself enthrones the king in glory, seating him at his right, a sign of very great honour and of absolute privilege. The king is thus admitted to sharing in the divine kingship, of which he is mediator to the people. The king’s kingship is also brought into being in the victory over his adversaries whom God himself places at his feet. The victory over his enemies is the Lord’s, but the king is enabled to share in it and his triumph becomes a sign and testimony of divine power.

The royal glorification expressed at the beginning of the Psalm was adopted by the New Testament as a messianic prophecy. For this reason the verse is among those most frequently used by New Testament authors, either as an explicit quotation or as an allusion. With regard to the Messiah Jesus himself mentioned this verse in order to show that the Messiah, was greater than David, that he was David’s Lord (cf. Mt 22:41–45; Mk 12:35–37; Lk 20:41–44).

And Peter returned to it in his discourse at Pentecost, proclaiming that this enthronement of the king was brought about in the resurrection of Christ and that Christ was henceforth seated at the right hand of the Father, sharing in God’s kingship over the world (cf. Acts 2:29–35). Indeed, Christ is the enthroned Lord, the Son of Man seated at the right hand of God and coming on the clouds of heaven, as Jesus described himself during the trial before the Synedrin (cf. Mt 26:63–64; Mk 14:61–62; cf. also Lk 22:66–69).

He is the true King who, with the Resurrection, entered into glory at the right hand of the Father (Rom 8:34; Eph 2:5; Col 3:1; Heb 8:1; 12:2), was made superior to angels, and seated in heaven above every power with every adversary at his feet, until the time when the last enemy, death, to be defeated by him once and for all (cf. 1 Cor 15:24–26; Eph 1:20–23; Heb 1:3–4; 2:5–8; 10:12–13; 1 Pet 3:22).

And we immediately understand that this king, seated at the right hand of God, who shares in his kingship is not one of those who succeeded David, but is actually the new David, the Son of God who triumphed over death and truly shares in God's glory. He is our king, who also gives us eternal life.

Hence an indissoluble relationship exists between the king celebrated by our Psalm and God. The two of them govern together as one, so that the Psalmist can say that it is God himself who extends the sovereign's sceptre, giving him the task of ruling over his adversaries as verse 2 says: "The Lord sends forth from Zion your mighty sceptre. Rule in the midst of your foes!".

The exercise of power is an office that the king receives directly from the Lord, a responsibility which he must exercise in dependence and obedience, thereby becoming a sign, within the people, of God's powerful and provident presence. Dominion over his foes, glory and victory are gifts received that make the sovereign a mediator of the Lord's triumph over evil. He subjugates his enemies, transforming them, he wins them over with his love.

For this reason the king's greatness is celebrated in the following verse. In fact the interpretation of verse 3 presents some difficulty. In the original Hebrew text a reference was made to the mustering of the army to which the people generously responded, gathering round their sovereign on the day of his coronation. The Greek translation of The Septuagint that dates back to between the second and third centuries B.C. refers however to the divine sonship of the king, to his birth or begetting on the part of the Lord. This is the interpretation that has been chosen by the Church, which is why the verse reads like this: "Yours is princely power in the day of your birth, in holy splendour; before the daystar, like the dew, I have begotten you".

This divine oracle concerning the king would thus assert a divine procreation, steeped in splendour and mystery, a secret and inscrutable origin linked to the arcane beauty of dawn and to the miracle of dew that sparkles in the fields in the early morning light and makes them fertile. In this way, the figure of the king, indissolubly bound to the heavenly reality, who really comes from God is outlined, the Messiah who brings divine life to the people and is the mediator of holiness and salvation. Here too we see that all this is not achieved by the figure of a Davidic king but by the Lord Jesus Christ, who really comes from God; he is the light that brings divine life to the world.

The first stanza of the Psalm ends with this evocative and enigmatic image. It is followed by another oracle, which unfolds a new perspective along the lines of a priestly

dimension connected with kingship. Verse 4 says: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, ‘You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek”.

Melchizedek was the priest-king of Salem who had blessed Abraham and offered him bread and wine after the victorious military campaign the patriarch led to rescue his nephew Lot from the hands of enemies who had captured him (cf. Gen 14).

Royal and priestly power converge in the figure of Melchizedek. They are then proclaimed by the Lord in a declaration that promises eternity: the king celebrated in the Psalm will be a priest for ever, the mediator of the Lord’s presence among his people, the intermediary of the blessing that comes from God who, in liturgical action, responds to it with the human answer of blessing.

The Letter to the Hebrews makes an explicit reference to this verse (cf. 5:5–6, 10; 6:19–20) focusing on it the whole of chapter seven and developing its reflection on Christ’s priesthood. Jesus, as the Letter to the Hebrews tells us in the light of Psalm 110[109], is the true and definitive priest who brings to fulfilment and perfects the features of Melchizedek’s priesthood

Melchizedek, as the Letter to the Hebrews says, was “without father or mother or genealogy” (7:3a), hence not a priest according to the dynastic rules of Levitical priesthood. Consequently he “continues a priest for ever” (7:3c), a prefiguration of Christ, the perfect High Priest who “has become a priest, not according to a legal requirement concerning bodily descent but by the power of an indestructible life” (7:16).

In the Risen Lord Jesus who had ascended into Heaven where he is seated at the right hand of the Father the prophecy of our Psalm is fulfilled and the priesthood of Melchizedek is brought to completion. This is because, rendered absolute and eternal, it became a reality that never fades (cf. 7:24). And the offering of bread and wine made by Melchizedek in Abraham’s time is fulfilled in the Eucharistic action of Jesus who offers himself in the bread and in the wine and, having conquered death, brings life to all believers. Since he is an eternal priest, “holy, blameless, unstained” (7:26), as the Letter to the Hebrews states further, “he is able for all time to save those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (7:25).

After this divine pronouncement in verse 4, with its solemn oath, the scene of the Psalm changes and the poet, addressing the king directly, proclaims: “The Lord is at your right hand” (Psalm 110:5a). If in verse 1 it was the king who was seated at God’s right hand as a sign of supreme prestige and honour, the Lord now takes his place at the right of the sovereign to protect him with this shield in battle and save him from every peril. The king was safe, God is his champion and they fight together and defeat every evil.

Thus the last verses of the Psalm open with the vision of the triumphant sovereign. Supported by the Lord, having received both power and glory from him (cf. v. 2), he opposes his foes, crushing his adversaries and judging the nations. The scene is painted in strong colours to signify the drama of the battle and the totality of the royal victory. The sovereign, protected by the Lord, demolishes every obstacle and moves ahead safely to victory. He tells us: “yes, there is widespread evil in the world, there is an ongoing battle between good and evil and it seems as though evil were the stronger. No, the Lord is stronger, Christ, our true King and Priest, for he fights with all God’s power and in spite of all the things that make us doubt the positive outcome of history, Christ wins and good wins, love wins rather than hatred.

The evocative image that concludes our Psalm fits in here; it is also an enigmatic word: “He will drink from the brook by the way; therefore he will lift up his head” (v. 7).

The king’s figure stands out in the middle of the description of the battle. At a moment of respite and rest, he quenches his thirst at a stream, finding in it refreshment and fresh strength to continue on his triumphant way, holding his head high as a sign of definitive victory. It is clear that these deeply enigmatic words were a challenge for the Fathers of the Church because of the different interpretations they could be given.

Thus, for example, St Augustine said: this brook is the onward flow of the human being, of humanity, and Christ did not disdain to drink of this brook, becoming man; and so it was that on entering the humanity of the human being he lifted up his head and is now the Head of the mystical Body, he is our head, he is the definitive winner. (cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CIX, 20: PL36, 1462).

Dear friends, following the lines of the New Testament translation, the Church’s Tradition has held this Psalm in high esteem as one of the most important messianic texts. And the Fathers continued eminently to refer to it in a Christological key. The king of whom the Psalmist sang is definitively Christ, the Messiah who establishes the Kingdom of God and overcomes the powers of evil. He is the Word, begotten by the Father before every creature, before the dawn, the Son incarnate who died and rose and is seated in Heaven, the eternal priest who through the mystery of the bread and wine bestows forgiveness of sins and gives reconciliation with God, the king who lifts up his head, triumphing over death with his resurrection.

It would suffice to remember a passage, once again in St Augustine’s commentary on this Psalm, where he writes: “it was necessary to know the Only-Begotten Son of God who was about to come among men, to adopt man and to become a man by taking on his nature; he died, rose and ascended into Heaven, he is seated at the right hand of the

Father and fulfilled among the people all that he had promised.... All this, therefore, had to be prophesied, it had to be foretold, to be pointed out as destined to come about, so that by coming unexpectedly it would not give rise to fear but by having been foretold, would then be accepted with faith, joy and expectation. This Psalm fits into the context of these promises. It prophesies our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ in such reliable and explicit terms that we cannot have the slightest doubt that it is really Christ who is proclaimed in it” (cf. *Enarrationes in Psalmos* CIX, 3: PL 36, 1447).

The paschal event of Christ thus becomes the reality to which the Psalm invites us to look, to look at Christ to understand the meaning of true kingship, to live in service and in the gift of self, in a journey of obedience and love “to the end” (cf. Jn 13:1 and 19:30).

In praying with this Psalm let us therefore ask the Lord to enable us to proceed on his paths, in the following of Christ, the Messiah King, ready to climb with him the mount of the cross to attain glory with him, and to contemplate him seated at the right hand of the Father, a victorious king and a merciful priest who gives forgiveness and salvation to all men and women.

And we too, by the grace of God made “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (cf. 1 Pet 2:9), will be able to draw joyfully from the wells of salvation (cf. Is 12:3) and proclaim to the whole world the marvels of the One who “called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (cf. 1 Pt 2:9).

Dear friends, in these recent catecheses I wanted to present to you certain Psalms, precious prayers that we find in the Bible and that reflect the various situations of life and the various states of mind that we may have with regard to God. I would then like to renew to you all the invitation to pray with the Psalms, even becoming accustomed to using the Liturgy of the Hours of the Church, Lauds in the morning, Vespers in the evening, and Compline before retiring.

Our relationship with God cannot but be enriched with greater joy and trust in the daily journey towards him. Many thanks.

## **The prayer of Jesus**

*30 November 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*



In our previous Catecheses we have reflected on several examples of prayer in the Old Testament. Today I would like to begin to look at Jesus, at his prayer that flows through the whole of his life like a secret channel that waters existence, relationships and actions and guides them, with progressive firmness, to the total gift of self in accordance with the loving plan of God the Father. Jesus is also our Teacher in prayer, indeed he is our active and fraternal support on every occasion that we address the Father. Truly, “prayer”, as it is summed up in a heading in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, “is fully revealed and realized in Jesus” (nn. 541–547). Let us also look at him in our forthcoming Catecheses.

The prayer that followed the baptism in the River Jordan to which he submitted is an especially important moment on his journey. Luke the Evangelist noted that after receiving baptism from John the Baptist together with all the people he was praying a very personal, extended prayer. “When all the people were baptized, and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him” (Lk 3:21–22). The fact that he “was praying”, in conversation with the Father, illuminated the act he had carried out along with so many of his people who had flocked to the banks of the Jordan. By praying, he gave his action, baptism, an exclusively personal character.

The Baptist had launched a forceful appeal to live truly as “children to Abraham”, being converted to goodness and bearing fruit worthy of this change (cf. Lk 3:7–9). And a large number of Israelites had felt impelled to act, as Mark the Evangelist recalled, writing: “There went out to him [to John] all the country of Judea, and all the people of Jerusalem; and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins” (Mk 1:5).

The Baptist was bringing something really new: to undergo baptism was to mark a decisive turning point, leaving behind forms of conduct linked to sin and starting a new life.

Jesus too accepted this invitation, he joined the grey multitude of sinners waiting on the banks of the Jordan. However, a question also wells up in us, as it did in the early Christians: why did Jesus voluntarily submit to this baptism of penance and conversion? He had no sins to confess, he had not sinned, hence he was in no need of conversion. So what accounts for his action?

The Evangelist Matthew records the amazement of the Baptist who stated: “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” (Mt 3:14), and Jesus’ response: “Let it be so now; for thus it is fitting for us to fulfil all righteousness” (v. 15). The word “righteousness” in the biblical world means the acceptance of God’s will without reserve. Jesus showed his

closeness to that part of his people who, following the Baptist, recognized that it was not enough merely to consider themselves children of Abraham and wanted to do God's will, wanted to commit themselves to ensuring that their behaviour was a faithful response to the Covenant God had offered through Abraham.

Therefore by entering the River Jordan, Jesus, without sin, showed his solidarity with those who recognize their sins, who choose to repent and to change their lives; Jesus made it clear that being part of the People of God means entering into a perspective of newness of life, of life in accordance with God.

In this action Jesus anticipated the cross, he began his ministry by taking his place among sinners, by taking upon his shoulders the burden of the whole of humanity and by doing the Father's will. Recollected in prayer, Jesus showed his profound bond with the Father who is in Heaven, he experienced his fatherhood, understood the demanding beauty of his love and, in conversation with the Father, received the confirmation of his mission.

The words that resounded from Heaven (cf. Lk 3:22), anticipated a reference to the Paschal Mystery, the cross and the resurrection. The divine voice called him "my beloved Son", reevoking Isaac, the beloved son whom Abraham his father was prepared to sacrifice, in accordance with God's command (cf. Gen 22:1–14). Jesus was not only *the son of David*, of royal, messianic lineage, or *the Servant* with whom God was well pleased; he was also the *only begotten Son*, beloved, like Isaac, whom God the Father gave for the world's salvation.

At the moment when, through prayer, Jesus was experiencing the depth of his own sonship and God's fatherhood (cf. Lk 3:22b), the Holy Spirit, whom he was to pour out after being raised on the Cross (cf. Jn 1:32–34; 7:37–39), descended upon him (cf. Lk 3:22a) and guided him in his mission that he might illuminate the Church's action. In prayer, Jesus lived in uninterrupted contact with the Father in order to fulfil completely his plan of love for mankind.

Against the background of this extraordinary prayer Jesus lived his entire life in a family deeply tied to the religious tradition of the people of Israel. This is demonstrated by the references we find in the Gospels: his circumcision (cf. Lk 2:21), and his presentation in the temple (cf. Lk 2:22–24), as well as his education and training at Nazareth, in the holy house (cf. Lk 2:39–40 and 2:51–52).

This was "about thirty years" (Lk 3:23), a long period of hidden daily life, even though it included experiences of participation with the community in moments of religious expression, such as pilgrimages to Jerusalem (cf. Lk 2:41).

In recounting the episode of the 12-year-old Jesus in the temple, sitting among the teachers (cf. Lk 2:42–52), Luke the Evangelist makes us understand that Jesus, who was praying after his baptism in the Jordan, had a long-standing habit of intimate prayer to God the Father. This habit was rooted in the traditions, in the style of his family, and in his own crucial experiences within it.

The 12-year-old's answer to Mary and Joseph already suggests the divine Sonship which the heavenly voice expressed after his baptism: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" to do his bidding (Lk 2:49). Jesus did not begin to pray after emerging from the waters of the Jordan, but continued in his ongoing, customary relationship with the Father; and it was in this close union with the Father that he stepped out of the hidden life in Nazareth into his public ministry.

Jesus' teaching on prayer certainly derives from the approach to prayer that he acquired in his family but its deep, essential origins are found in his being the Son of God and in his unique relationship with God the Father.

*The Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* answers the question: "From whom did Jesus learn how to pray?" in this way, "Jesus, with his human heart, learned how to pray from his Mother and from the Jewish tradition. But his prayer sprang from a more secret source because he is the eternal Son of God who in his holy humanity offers his perfect filial prayer to his Father" (n. 541).

In the Gospel narrative, the settings of Jesus' prayer are always placed half-way between insertion into his people's tradition and the newness of a unique personal relationship with God. The "lonely place" (cf. Mk 1:35; Lk 5:16), to which he often withdrew, "the hills" he climbs in order to pray (cf. Lk 6:12; 9:28), "the night" that affords him solitude (cf. Mk 1:35; 6:46–47; Lk 6:12) recall moments in the process of God's revelation in the Old Testament, pointing out the continuity of his saving plan. Yet, at the same time, they mark moments of special importance for Jesus who fits consciously into this plan, completely faithful to the Father's will.

In our prayer too we must learn, increasingly, to enter this history of salvation of which Jesus is the summit, to renew before God our personal decision to open ourselves to his will, to ask him for the strength to conform our will to his will, throughout our life, in obedience to his design of love for us.

Jesus' prayer penetrates all the phases of his ministry and all his days. Difficulties do not obstruct it. The Gospels, on the contrary, allow us a glimpse of Jesus' habit of spending part of the night in prayer. Mark the Evangelist tells of one of these nights, after the tiring day of the multiplication of the loaves, and writes: "Immediately he made his

disciples get into the boat and go before him to the other side, to Bethsaida, while he dismissed the crowd. And after he had taken leave of them, he went into the hills to pray. And when evening came, the boat was out on the sea, and he was alone on the land” (Mk 6:45–47). When decisions became urgent and complicated his prayers grew longer and more intense. Just before he chose the Twelve Apostles, for example, Luke emphasizes the nocturnal duration of Jesus’ preparatory prayer: “In those days he went out into the hills to pray; and all night he continued in prayer to God. And when it was day, he called his disciples, and chose from them twelve, whom he named apostles: (Lk 6:12–13).

In looking at Jesus’ prayers, a question must arise within us: how do I pray? How do we pray? How much time do I give to my relationship with God? Are people today given sufficient education and formation in prayer? And who can teach it? In the Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini* I spoke of the importance of the prayerful reading of Sacred Scripture. In gathering what emerged at the Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, I placed a special emphasis on the specific form of *lectio divina*. Listening, meditating, and being silent before the Lord who speaks is an art which is learned by practising it with perseverance.

Prayer is of course a gift which nevertheless asks to be accepted; it is a work of God but demands commitment and continuity on our part. Above all continuity and constancy are important.

Jesus’ exemplary experience itself shows that his prayer, enlivened by the fatherhood of God and by communion with the Spirit, was deepened and prolonged in faithful practice, up to the Garden of Olives and to the Cross.

Today Christians are called to be witnesses of prayer precisely because our world is often closed to the divine horizon and to the hope that brings the encounter with God. In deep friendship with Jesus and living in him and with him the filial relationship with the Father, through our constant and faithful prayer we can open windows on God’s Heaven. Indeed, by taking the way of prayer, attaching no importance to human things, we can help others to take it. For Christian prayer too it is true that, in journeying on, new paths unfold.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us train ourselves in an intense relationship with God, with prayer that is not occasional but constant, full of faith, capable of illuminating our lives, as Jesus taught us. And let us ask him to enable us to communicate to people who are close to us, to those whom we meet on our way, the joy of the encounter with the Lord, Light for our existence. Many thanks.

# The “jewel” of the Cry of Exultation

7 December 2011

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Evangelists Matthew and Luke (cf. Mt 11:25–30 and Lk 10:21–22) have handed down to us a “jewel” of Jesus’ prayer that is often called the *Cry of Exultation* or the *Cry of Messianic Exultation*. It is a prayer of thanksgiving and praise, as we have heard. In the original Greek of the Gospels the word with which this jubilation begins and which expresses Jesus’ attitude in addressing the Father is *exomologoumai*, which is often translated with “I praise” (cf. Mt 11:25 and Lk 10:21). However, in the New Testament writings this term indicates mainly two things: the first is “to confess” fully—for example, John the Baptist asked those who went to him to be baptized *to recognize their every sin* (cf. Mt 3:6); the second thing is “*to be in agreement*”. Therefore, the words with which Jesus begins his prayer contain his *full recognition* of the Father’s action and at the same time, his being in *total, conscious and joyful agreement* with this way of acting, with the Father’s plan. The “Cry of Exultation” is the apex of a journey of prayer in which Jesus’ profound and close communion with the life of the Father in the Holy Spirit clearly emerges and his divine sonship is revealed.

Jesus addresses God by calling him “Father”. This word expresses Jesus’ awareness and certainty of being “the Son” in intimate and constant communion with him, and this is the central focus and source of every one of Jesus’ prayers. We see it clearly in the last part of the hymn which illuminates the entire text. Jesus said: “All things have been delivered to me by my Father; and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and any one to whom the Son chooses to reveal him” (Lk 10:22). Jesus was therefore affirming that only “the Son” truly knows the Father.

All the knowledge that people have of each other—we all experience this in our human relationships—entails involvement, a certain inner bond between the one who knows and the one who is known, at a more or less profound level: we cannot know anyone without a communion of being. In the *Cry of Exultation*—as in all his prayers—Jesus shows that true knowledge of God presupposes communion with him. Only by being in communion with the other can I begin to know him; and so it is with God: only if I am in true contact, if I am in communion with him, can I also know him. True knowledge, therefore, is reserved to the “Son”, the Only Begotten One who is in the bosom of the Father since eternity (cf. Jn 1:18), in perfect unity with him. The Son alone truly knows God, since he is in an intimate communion of being; only the Son can truly reveal who God is.

The name “Father” is followed by a second title, “Lord of heaven and earth”. With these words, Jesus sums up faith in creation and echoes the first words of Sacred Scripture: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1).

In praying, he recalls the great biblical narrative of the history of God’s love for man that begins with the act of creation. Jesus fits into this love story, he is its culmination and its fulfilment. Sacred Scripture is illumined through his experience of prayer and lives again in its fullest breadth: the proclamation of the mystery of God and the response of man transformed. Yet, through the expression: “Lord of heaven and earth”, we can also recognize that in Jesus, the Revealer of the Father, the possibility for man to reach God is reopened.

Let us now ask ourselves: to whom does the Son want to reveal God’s mysteries? At the beginning of the Hymn Jesus expresses his joy because the Father’s will is to keep these things hidden from the learned and the wise and to reveal them to little ones (cf. Lk 10:21). Thus in his prayer, Jesus manifests his communion with the Father’s decision to disclose his mysteries to the simple of heart: the Son’s will is one with the Father’s.

Divine revelation is not brought about in accordance with earthly logic, which holds that cultured and powerful people possess important knowledge and pass it on to simpler people, to little ones. God used a quite different approach: those to whom his communication was addressed were, precisely, “babes”. This is the Father’s will, and the Son shares it with him joyfully. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “His exclamation, ‘Yes, Father!’ expresses the depth of his heart, his adherence to the Father’s ‘good pleasure,’ echoing his mother’s ‘Fiat’ at the time of his conception and prefiguring what he will say to the Father in his agony. The whole prayer of Jesus is contained in this loving adherence of his human heart to the ‘mystery of the will’ of the Father (Eph 1:9)” (n. 2603).

The invocation that we address to God in the “Our Father” derives from this: “Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven”: together with Christ and in Christ we too ask to enter into harmony with the Father’s will, thereby also becoming his children. Thus Jesus, in this “Cry of Exultation”, expresses his will to involve in his own filial knowledge of God all those whom the Father wishes to become sharers in it; and those who welcome this gift are the “little ones”.

But what does “being little” and simple mean? What is the “littleness” that opens man to filial intimacy with God so as to receive his will? What must the fundamental attitude of our prayer be? Let us look at “The Sermon on the Mount”, in which Jesus says: “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt 5:8). It is purity of heart that permits us

to recognize the face of God in Jesus Christ; it is having a simple heart like the heart of a child, free from the presumption of those who withdraw into themselves, thinking they have no need of anyone, not even God.

It is also interesting to notice the occasion on which Jesus breaks into this hymn to the Father. In Matthew's Gospel narrative it is joyful because, in spite of opposition and rejection, there are "little ones" who accept his word and open themselves to the gift of faith in him. The "Cry of Exultation" is in fact preceded by the contrast between the praise of John the Baptist—one of the "little ones" who recognized God's action in Jesus Christ (cf. Mt 11:2–19)—and the reprimand for the disbelief of the lake cities "where most of his mighty works had been performed" (cf. Mt 11:20–24).

Hence Matthew saw the Exultation in relation to the words with which Jesus noted the effectiveness of his word and action: "Go and tell John what you hear and see: the blind receive their sight and the lame walk, lepers are cleansed and the deaf hear, and the dead are raised up, and the poor have good news of the Gospel preached to them. And blessed is he who takes no offence at me" (Mt 11:4–6).

St Luke also presented the Cry of Exultation in connection with a moment of development in the proclamation of the Gospel. Jesus sent out the "seventy-two" others (Luke 10:1) and they departed fearful of the possible failure of their mission. Luke also emphasized the rejection encountered in the cities where the Lord had preached and had worked miracles. Nonetheless the seventy-two disciples returned full of joy because their mission had met with success; they realized that human infirmities are overcome with the power of Jesus' word. Jesus shared their pleasure: "in that same hour", at that very moment, he rejoiced.

There are still two elements that I would like to underline. Luke the Evangelist introduces the prayer with the annotation: Jesus "rejoiced in the Holy Spirit" (Lk 10:21). Jesus rejoiced from the depths of his being, in what counted most: his unique communion of knowledge and love with the Father, the fullness of the Holy Spirit. By involving us in his sonship, Jesus invites us too to open ourselves to the light of the Holy Spirit, since—as the Apostle Paul affirms—"we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words ... according to the will of God" (Rom 8:26–27), and reveals the Father's love to us.

In Matthew's Gospel, following the *Cry of Exultation*, we find one of Jesus' most heartfelt appeals: "Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt 11:28). Jesus asks us to go to him, for he is true Wisdom, to him who is "gentle and lowly in heart". He offers us "his yoke", the way of the wisdom of the Gospel which is neither a

doctrine to be learned nor an ethical system but rather a Person to follow: he himself, the Only Begotten Son in perfect communion with the Father.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have experienced for a moment the wealth of this prayer of Jesus. With the gift of his Spirit we too can turn to God in prayer with the confidence of children, calling him by the name Father, “Abba”. However, we must have the heart of little ones, of the “poor in spirit” (Mt 5:3) in order to recognize that we are not self-sufficient, that we are unable to build our lives on our own but need God, that we need to encounter him, to listen to him, to speak to him. Prayer opens us to receiving the gift of God, his wisdom, which is Jesus himself, in order to do the Father’s will in our lives and thus to find rest in the hardships of our journey. Many thanks.

## **The prayer of Jesus linked to His miraculous healing action**

*14 December 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to reflect with you on the prayer of Jesus linked to his miraculous healing action. Various situations are presented in the Gospels in which Jesus prays while he contemplates the beneficial and healing work of God the Father who acts through him. This is a form of prayer which, once again, demonstrates his unique relationship of knowledge and communion with the Father, while Jesus lets himself be involved with deep human participation in the hardships of his friends, for example, those of Lazarus and his family or of the many poor and sick people to whom he seeks to give practical help.

A significant case is the healing of the deaf mute (cf. Mk 7:32–37). Mark the Evangelist’s account—that we have just heard—shows that Jesus’ healing action is connected with the intense relationship he had both with his neighbour—the sick man—and with the Father. The scene of the miracle is described carefully, in these words: “taking him aside from the multitude privately, he put his fingers into his ears, and he spat and touched his tongue; and looking up to heaven, he sighed, and said to him, ‘*Ephphatha*’, that is ‘Be opened’ ” (Mk 7:33–34).

Jesus wanted the healing to take place “aside from the multitude”. This does not seem to be due solely to the fact that the miracle must be kept hidden from people to prevent them from making any restrictive or distorted interpretation of the Person of Jesus. The decision to take the sick man aside ensures that at the moment of his healing Jesus and



the deaf mute are on their own, brought together in a unique relationship. With a single gesture the Lord touches the sick man's ears and tongue, that is, the specific sites of his infirmity. The intensity of Jesus' attention is also demonstrated in the unusual treatment that was part of the healing. He uses his fingers and even his saliva. And the fact that the Evangelist records the original word spoken by the Lord, *'Ephphatha'*, in other words, "be opened", highlights the unusual character of the scene.

The central point of this episode however is the fact that when Jesus, was about to work the healing, he directly sought his relationship with the Father. Indeed the account relates that "looking up to heaven, he sighed" (v. 34). Jesus' attention and treatment of the sick man are linked by a profound attitude of prayer addressed to God. Moreover, his sighing is described with a verb which, in the New Testament, indicates the aspiration to something good which is still lacking (cf. Rom 8:23).

Thus, as a whole, the narrative shows that it was his human involvement with the sick man that prompted Jesus to pray. His unique relationship with the Father and his identity as the Only Begotten Son surface once again. God's healing and beneficial action become present in him, through his Person. It is not by chance that the people's last remark after the miracle has been performed is reminiscent of the evaluation of the Creation at the beginning of the Book of Genesis: "He has done all things well" (Mk 7:37). Prayer clearly entered the healing action of Jesus as he looked up to heaven. The power that healed the deaf mute was certainly elicited by compassion for him but came from recourse to the Father. These two relationships interact: the human relationship of compassion with the man enters into the relationship with God, and thus becomes healing.

In the Johannine narrative of the raising of Lazarus this same dynamic is testified by an even greater proof (cf. Jn 11:1–44) Here too are interwoven, on the one hand, Jesus' bond with a friend and with his suffering and, on the other, his filial relationship with the Father. Jesus' human participation in Lazarus' case has some special features. His friendship with Lazarus is repeatedly mentioned throughout the account, as well as his relationship with Martha and Mary, the sisters of Lazarus. Jesus himself says: "our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep, but I go to awake him out of sleep" (Jn 11:11).

Jesus' sincere affection for his friend is also highlighted by Lazarus' sisters, as well as by the Jews (cf. Jn 11:3; 11:36). It is expressed in Jesus' deep distress at seeing the grief of Martha and Mary and of all Lazarus' friends and he finds relief by bursting into tears—so profoundly human—on approaching the tomb: "When Jesus saw her [Martha] weeping, and the Jews who came with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in spirit and

troubled; and he said, 'Where have you laid him?'. They said to him, 'Lord, come and see'. Jesus wept" (Jn 11:33–35).

This bond of friendship and Jesus' participation and distress at the sorrow of Lazarus' relatives and acquaintances, is connected throughout the narrative to a continuous, intense relationship with the Father. The event, from the outset, is interpreted by Jesus in relation to his own identity and mission and to the glorification that awaits him. In fact on hearing of Lazarus' illness he commented: "The illness is not unto death; it is for the glory of God, so that the Son of God may be glorified by means of it" (Jn 11:4).

Jesus also hears the news of his friend's death with deep human sadness but always with a clear reference to his relationship with God and with the mission that God has entrusted to him; he says: "Lazarus is dead; and for your sake I am glad that I was not there, so that you may believe" (Jn 11:14–15). The moment of Jesus' explicit prayer to the Father at the tomb was the natural outlet for all that had happened, which took place in the double key of his friendship with Lazarus and his filial relationship with God.

Here too, the two relationships go hand in hand. "And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, 'Father, I thank you that you have heard me'" (Jn 11:41): it was a *eucharist*. The sentence shows that Jesus did not cease, even for an instant, his prayer of petition for Lazarus' life. This prayer continued, indeed, it reinforced his ties with his friend and, at the same time strengthened Jesus' decision to remain in communion with the Father's will, with his plan of love in which Lazarus' illness and death were to be considered as a place for the manifestation of God's glory.

Dear brothers and sisters, in reading this account each one of us is called to understand that in our prayers of petition to the Lord we must not expect an immediate fulfilment of what we ask, of our own will. Rather, we must entrust ourselves to the Father's will, interpreting every event in the perspective of his glory, of his plan of love, which to our eyes is often mysterious. For this reason we too must join in our prayers, petitions, praise and thanksgiving, even when it seems to us that God is not responding to our real expectations.

Abandoning ourselves to God's love which always precedes and accompanies us is one of the basic attitudes for our dialogue with him. On Jesus' prayer in the account of the raising of Lazarus the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments: "Jesus' prayer, characterized by thanksgiving, reveals to us how to ask: before the gift is given, Jesus commits himself to the One who in giving gives himself. The Giver is more precious than the gift; he is the 'treasure'; in him abides his Son's heart; the gift is given 'as well' (cf. Mt 6:21, 33)" (n. 2604). To me this seems very important: before the gift is given, committing

ourselves to the One who gives. The Giver is more precious than the gift. For us too, therefore, over and above what God bestows on us when we call on him, the greatest gift that he can give us is his friendship, his presence and his love. He is the precious treasure to ask for and to preserve for ever.

The prayer that Jesus prays as the rock was rolled away from the entrance to Lazarus' tomb thus has a special and unexpected development. In fact, after thanking God the Father, he adds: "I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you sent me" (Jn 11:42). With his prayer Jesus wanted to lead people back to faith, to total trust in God and in his will. And he wanted to show that this God who so loved man and the world that he gave his Only Begotten Son (cf. Jn 3:16). He is the God of Life, the God who brings hope and can reverse humanly impossible situations. Therefore a believer's trusting prayer is a living testimony of God's presence in the world, of his concern for humankind, of his action with a view to bringing about his plan of salvation.

Jesus' two prayers on which we have meditated just now and which accompany the healing of the deaf mute and the raising of Lazarus, reveal that the deep connection between the love of God and love of one's neighbour must also come into our own prayer.

In Jesus, true God and true man, attention to others, especially if they are needy and suffering, compassion at the sight of the sorrow of a family who were his friends, led him to address the Father in that fundamental relationship which directed his entire life. However, the opposite is also true: communion with the Father, constant dialogue with him, spurred Jesus to be uniquely attentive to practical human situations so as to bring God's comfort and love to them. Human relationships lead us toward the relationship with God, and the relationship with God leads us back to our neighbour.

Dear brothers and sisters, our prayer opens the door to God who teaches us to come out of ourselves constantly, to make us capable of being close to others to bring them comfort, hope and light, especially at moments of trial. May the Lord grant us to be capable of increasingly more intense prayer, in order to strengthen our personal relationship with God the Father, to open our heart to the needs of those beside us and to feel the beauty of being "sons in the Son", together with a great many brothers and sisters. Many thanks.

## **The Prayer and the Holy Family of Nazareth**

*28 December 2011*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today's meeting is taking place in the atmosphere of Christmas, imbued with deep joy at the Birth of the Saviour. We have just celebrated this Mystery whose echo ripples through the Liturgy of all these days. It is a Mystery of Light that all people in every era can relive with faith and prayer. It is through prayer itself that we become capable of drawing close to God with intimacy and depth.

Therefore, bearing in mind the theme of prayer that I am developing in the Catecheses in this period, I would therefore like to invite you to reflect today on the way that prayer was part of the life of the Holy Family of Nazareth. Indeed, the house of Nazareth is a school of prayer where one learns to listen, meditate on and penetrate the profound meaning of the manifestation of the Son of God, following the example of Mary, Joseph and Jesus.

The Discourse of the Servant of God Paul VI during his Visit to Nazareth is memorable. The Pope said that at the school of the Holy Family we “understand why we must maintain a spiritual discipline, if we wish to follow the teaching of the Gospel and become disciples of Christ”. He added: “In the first place it teaches us silence. Oh! If only esteem for silence, a wonderful and indispensable spiritual atmosphere, could be reborn within us! Whereas we are deafened by the din, the noise and discordant voices in the frenetic, turbulent life of our time. O silence of Nazareth! Teach us to be steadfast in good thoughts, attentive to our inner life, ready to hear God’s hidden inspiration clearly and the exhortations of true teachers” (*Discourse in Nazareth*, 5 January 1964).

We can draw various ideas for prayer and for the relationship with God and with the Holy Family from the Gospel narratives of the infancy of Jesus. We can begin with the episode of the Presentation of Jesus in the Temple. St Luke tells how “when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses”, Mary and Joseph “brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord” (2:22). Like every Jewish family that observed the law, Jesus’ parents went to the Temple to consecrate their first-born son to God and to make the sacrificial offering. Motivated by their fidelity to the precepts of the Law, they set out from Bethlehem and went to Jerusalem with Jesus who was only 40 days old. Instead of a year-old lamb they presented the offering of simple families, namely, two turtle doves. The Holy Family’s pilgrimage was one of faith, of the offering of gifts—a symbol of prayer—and of the encounter with the Lord whom Mary and Joseph already perceived in their Son Jesus.

Mary was a peerless model of contemplation of Christ. The face of the Son belonged to her in a special way because he had been knit together in her womb and had taken a human likeness from her. No one has contemplated Jesus as diligently as Mary. The gaze

of her heart was already focused on him at the moment of the Annunciation, when she conceived him through the action of the Holy Spirit; in the following months she gradually became aware of his presence, until, on the day of his birth, her eyes could look with motherly tenderness upon the face of her son as she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in the manger.

Memories of Jesus, imprinted on her mind and on her heart, marked every instant of Mary's existence. She lived with her eyes fixed on Christ and cherished his every word. St Luke says: "Mary kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (2:19) and thus describes Mary's approach to the Mystery of the Incarnation which was to extend throughout her life: keeping these things, pondering on them in her heart. Luke is the Evangelist who acquaints us with Mary's heart, with her faith (cf. 1:45), her hope and her obedience (cf. 1:38) and, especially, with her interiority and prayer (cf. 1:46–56), her free adherence to Christ (cf. 1:55).

And all this proceeded from the gift of the Holy Spirit who overshadowed her (cf. 1:35), as he was to come down on the Apostles in accordance with Christ's promise (cf. Acts 1:8). This image of Mary which St Luke gives us presents Our Lady as a model for every believer who cherishes and compares Jesus' words with his actions, a comparison which is always progress in the knowledge of Jesus. After Bl. Pope John Paul II's example (cf. Apostolic Letter *Rosarium Virginis Mariae*) we can say that the prayer of the Rosary is modelled precisely on Mary, because it consists in contemplating the mysteries of Christ in spiritual union with the Mother of the Lord.

Mary's ability to live by God's gaze, is so to speak, contagious. The first to experience this was St Joseph. His humble and sincere love for his betrothed and his decision to join his life to Mary's attracted and introduced him, "a just man", (Mt 1:19), to a special intimacy with God. Indeed, with Mary and later, especially, with Jesus, he began a new way of relating to God, accepting him in his life, entering his project of salvation and doing his will. After trustfully complying with the Angel's instructions "Do not fear to take Mary your wife" (Mt 1:20)—he took Mary to him and shared his life with her; he truly gave the whole of himself to Mary and to Jesus and this led him to perfect his response to the vocation he had received.

As we know, the Gospel has not recorded any of Joseph's words: his is a silent and faithful, patient and hard-working presence. We may imagine that he too, like his wife and in close harmony with her, lived the years of Jesus' childhood and adolescence savouring, as it were, his presence in their family.

Joseph fulfilled every aspect of his paternal role. He must certainly have taught Jesus to pray, together with Mary. In particular Joseph himself must have taken Jesus to the Synagogue for the rites of the Sabbath, as well as to Jerusalem for the great feasts of the people of Israel. Joseph, in accordance with the Jewish tradition, would have led the prayers at home both every day—in the morning, in the evening, at meals—and on the principal religious feasts. In the rhythm of the days he spent at Nazareth, in the simple home and in Joseph’s workshop, Jesus learned to alternate prayer and work, as well as to offer God his labour in earning the bread the family needed.

And lastly, there is another episode that sees the Holy Family of Nazareth gathered together in an event of prayer. When Jesus was 12 years old, as we have heard, he went with his parents to the Temple of Jerusalem. This episode fits into the context of pilgrimage, as St Luke stresses: “His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the feast of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom” (2:41–42).

Pilgrimage is an expression of religious devotion that is nourished by and at the same time nourishes prayer. Here, it is the Passover pilgrimage, and the Evangelist points out to us that the family of Jesus made this pilgrimage every year in order to take part in the rites in the Holy City. Jewish families, like Christian families, pray in the intimacy of the home but they also pray together with the community, recognizing that they belong to the People of God, journeying on; and the pilgrimage expresses exactly this state of the People of God on the move. Easter is the centre and culmination of all this and involves both the family dimension and that of liturgical and public worship.

In the episode of the 12-year-old Jesus, the first words of Jesus are also recorded: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (2:49). After three days spent looking for him his parents found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions (cf. 2:46). His answer to the question of why he had done this to his father and mother was that he had only done what the Son should do, that is, to be with his Father.

Thus he showed who is the true Father, what is the true home, and that he had done nothing unusual or disobedient. He had stayed where the Son ought to be, that is, with the Father, and he stressed who his Father was.

The term “Father” therefore dominates the tone of this answer and the Christological mystery appears in its entirety. Hence, this word unlocks the mystery, it is the key to the Mystery of Christ, who is the Son, and also the key to our mystery as Christians who are sons and daughters in the Son. At the same time Jesus teaches us to be children by being

with the Father in prayer. The Christological mystery, the mystery of Christian existence, is closely linked to, founded on, prayer. Jesus was one day to teach his disciples to pray, telling them: when you pray say “Father”. And, naturally, do not just say the word say it with your life, learn to say it meaningfully with your life. “Father”; and in this way you will be true sons in the Son, true Christians.

It is important at this point, when Jesus was still fully integrated in the life of the Family of Nazareth, to note the resonance that hearing this word “Father” on Jesus’ lips must have had in the hearts of Mary and Joseph. It is also important to reveal, to emphasize, who the Father is, and, with his awareness, to hear this word on the lips of the Only-Begotten Son who, for this very reason, chose to stay on for three days in the Temple, which is the “Father’s house”.

We may imagine that from this time the life of the Holy Family must have been even fuller of prayer since from the heart of Jesus the boy—then an adolescent and a young man—this deep meaning of the relationship with God the Father would not cease to spread and to be echoed in the hearts of Mary and Joseph.

This episode shows us the real situation, the atmosphere of being with the Father. So it was that the Family of Nazareth became the first model of the Church in which, around the presence of Jesus and through his mediation, everyone experiences the filial relationship with God the Father which also transforms interpersonal, human relationships.

Dear friends, because of these different aspects that I have outlined briefly in the light of the Gospel, the Holy Family is the icon of the domestic Church, called to pray together. The family is the domestic Church and must be the first school of prayer. It is in the family that children, from the tenderest age, can learn to perceive the meaning of God, also thanks to the teaching and example of their parents: to live in an atmosphere marked by God’s presence. An authentically Christian education cannot dispense with the experience of prayer. If one does not learn how to pray in the family it will later be difficult to bridge this gap. And so I would like to address to you the invitation to pray together as a family at the school of the Holy Family of Nazareth and thereby really to become of one heart and soul, a true family.

# Last Supper Prayer

11 January 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

During our journey of reflection on Jesus' prayer as it is presented in the Gospels, I would like today to meditate on the particularly solemn moment of his prayer at the Last Supper.

The temporal and emotional background of the festive meal at which Jesus takes leave of his friends is the imminence of his death, which he feels is now at hand. For some time Jesus had been talking about his Passion and had also been seeking to involve his disciples increasingly in this prospect. The Gospel according to Mark tells that from the time when he set out for Jerusalem, in the villages of distant Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had begun "to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk 8:31).

In addition, in the very days when he was preparing to say goodbye to the disciples, the life of the people was marked by the imminence of the Passover, that is, the commemoration of Israel's liberation from Egypt. This liberation, lived in the past and expected in the present and in the future, is experienced again in family celebrations of the Passover. The Last Supper fits into this context, but with a basic innovation.

Jesus looks at his Passion, death and Resurrection with full awareness. He wishes to spend with his disciples this Supper, that has a quite special character and is different from other meals; it is his Supper, in which he gives something entirely new: himself. In this way Jesus celebrates his Pasch, anticipating his Cross and his Resurrection.

This new element is highlighted for us in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John, who does not describe it as the Passover meal for the very reason that Jesus was intending to inaugurate something new, to celebrate his Pasch, which is of course linked to the events of the Exodus. Moreover, according to



John, Jesus died on the cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

What then is the key to this Supper? It is in the gestures of breaking bread, of distributing it to his followers and of sharing the cup of wine, with the words that accompany them, and in the context of prayer in which they belong; it is the institution of the Eucharist, it is the great prayer of Jesus and of the Church. However, let us now take a closer look.

First of all, the New Testament traditions of the Institution of the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:23–25; Lk 22:14–20; Mk 14:22–25; Mt 26:26–29), point to the prayer that introduces Jesus’ acts and words over the bread and over the wine, by using two parallel and complementary verbs. Paul and Luke speak of *eucaristia*/thanksgiving: “And he took bread, and when *he had given thanks* he broke it and gave it to them” (Lk 22:19).

Mark and Matthew, however, emphasize instead the aspect of *eulogia*/blessing: “he took bread, and *blessed*, and broke it, and gave it to them” (Mk 14:22). Both these Greek terms, *eucaristeîn* and *eulogeîn*, refer to the Hebrew *berakha*, that is, the great prayer of thanksgiving and blessing of Israel’s tradition which inaugurated the important feasts.

The two different Greek words indicate the two intrinsic and complementary orientations of this prayer. *Berakha*, in fact, means primarily thanksgiving and praise for the gift received that rise to God: at the Last Supper of Jesus, it is a matter of bread—made from the wheat that God causes to sprout and grow in the earth—and wine, produced from the fruit that ripens on the vine.

This prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is raised to God returns as a blessing that comes down from God upon the gift and enriches it. Thanking and praising God thus become blessing and the offering given to God returns to man blessed by the Almighty. The words of the Institution of the Eucharist fit into this context of prayer; in them the praise and blessing of the *berakha* become the blessing and transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Before the words of the Institution come the actions: the breaking of the bread and the offering of the wine. The one who breaks the bread and passes the cup is first of all the head of the family who welcomes his relatives at table; but these gestures are also those of hospitality, of the welcome in convivial communion of the stranger who does not belong to the house.

These very gestures, in the Supper with which Jesus takes leave of his followers, acquire a completely new depth. He gives a visible sign of the welcome to the banquet in which God gives himself. Jesus offers and communicates himself in the bread and in the wine.

But how can all this happen? How can Jesus give himself at that moment? Jesus knows that his life is about to be taken from him in the torture of the cross, the capital punishment of slaves, which Cicero described as *mors turpissima crucis* [a most cruel and disgraceful death].

With the gift of the bread and of the wine that he offers at the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates his death and his Resurrection, bringing about what he had said in his Good Shepherd Discourse: “I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father” (Jn 10:17–18).

He therefore offers in anticipation the life that will be taken from him and in this way transforms his violent death into a free act of giving himself for others and to others. The violence he suffered is transformed into an active, free and redemptive sacrifice.

Once again, in prayer, begun in accordance with the ritual forms of the Biblical tradition, Jesus shows his identity and his determination to fulfil his mission of total love to the very end, and of offering in obedience to the Father’s will. The profound originality of the gift of himself to his followers, through the Eucharistic memorial, is the culmination of the prayer that distinguishes his farewell supper with his own.

In contemplating Jesus’ actions and words on that night, we see clearly that it is in this close and constant relationship with the Father that he carries out his act

of bequeathing to his followers and to each one of us the sacrament of love, the “*Sacramentum caritatis*”.

The words: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24, 25), ring out twice in the Upper Room. With the gift of himself he celebrates his Pasch, becoming the true Lamb that brings the whole of the ancient worship to fulfilment. For this reason St Paul, speaking to the Christians of Corinth, says: “Christ [our Pasch], our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival ... with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7–8).

Luke the Evangelist has retained a further precious element of the events of the Last Supper that enables us to see the moving depth of Jesus’ prayer for his own on that night: his attention to each one. Starting with the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, Jesus arrives at the Eucharistic gift, the gift of himself, and, while he is giving the crucial sacramental reality, he addresses Peter.

At the end of the meal, he says: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22:31–32).

Jesus’ prayer, when his disciples were about to be put to the test, helps them to overcome their weakness in their effort to understand that the way of God passes through the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection, anticipated in the offering of the bread and the wine. The Eucharist is the food of pilgrims that also becomes strength for those who are weary, worn-out and bewildered. And the prayer was specially for Peter, so that once he had turned again he might strengthen his brethren in the faith.

Luke the Evangelist recalls that it was the very gaze of Jesus in seeking Peter’s face at the moment when he had just denied him three times which gave him the strength to continue following in his footsteps: “And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord” (Lk 22:60–61).

Dear brothers and sisters, by participating in the Eucharist, we experience in an extraordinary manner the prayer that Jesus prayed and prays ceaselessly for

every person so that the evil which we all encounter in life may not get the upper hand and that the transforming power of Christ's death and Resurrection may act within us.

In the Eucharist the Church responds to Jesus' commandment: "Do this in remembrance of me" (Lk 22:19; cf. 1 Cor 11:24–26); she repeats the prayer of thanksgiving and praise and, with it, the words of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Our Eucharists are: being attracted at this moment of prayer, being united ever anew to Jesus' prayer. From the outset, the Church has understood the words of consecration as part of the *prayer prayed together to Jesus*; as a central part of the praise filled with gratitude, through which the fruits of the earth and the work of man come to us anew, given by God as the Body and Blood of Jesus, as the self-giving of God himself in his Son's self-emptying love (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, Part Two, p. 128). Participating in the Eucharist, nourishing ourselves with the Flesh and Blood of the Son of God, we join our prayers to that of the Paschal Lamb on his supreme night, so that our life may not be lost despite our weakness and our unfaithfulness, but be transformed.

Dear friends, let us ask the Lord that after being duly prepared, also with the sacrament of Penance, our participation in his Eucharist, indispensable to Christian life, may always be the highest point in all our prayer. Let us ask that we too, profoundly united in his offering to the Father, may transform our own crosses into a free and responsible sacrifice of love for God and for our brethren. Many thanks.

## **The Priestly Prayer of Jesus**

*25 January 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In today's Catechesis let us focus our attention on the prayer that Jesus raises to the Father in the "Hour" of his exaltation and glorification (cf. Jn 17:1–26). As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: "Christian Tradition rightly calls this prayer the 'priestly' prayer of Jesus. It is the prayer of our High Priest, inseparable from

his sacrifice, from his “passing over” (Passover) to the Father to whom he is wholly ‘consecrated’ ” (n. 2747).

The extreme richness of Jesus’ prayer can be understood especially if we set it against the backdrop of the Jewish feast of expiation, *Yom Kippur*. On that day the High Priest makes expiation first for himself and then for the category of priests, and, lastly, for the whole community of the people. The purpose is to restore to the People of Israel, after a year’s transgressions, the awareness of their reconciliation with God, the awareness that they are the Chosen People, a “holy people”, among the other peoples. The prayer of Jesus, presented in Chapter 17 of the Gospel according to John, returns to the structure of this feast. On that night Jesus addresses the Father at the moment when he is offering himself. He, priest and victim, prays for himself, for the Apostles and for all those who will believe in him and for the Church of all the time (cf. Jn 17:20).

The prayer that Jesus prays for himself is the request for his glorification, for his “exaltation” in his “Hour”. In fact, it is more than a prayer of petition, more than the declaration of his full willingness to enter, freely and generously, into the plan of God the Father, which is fulfilled in his being consigned and in his death and resurrection. This “Hour” began with Judas’ betrayal (cf. 13:31) and was to end in the ascension of the Risen Jesus to the Father (Jn 20:17).

Jesus comments on Judas’ departure from the Upper Room with these words: “Now is the Son of man glorified, and in him God is glorified” (Jn 13:31). It is not by chance that he begins his priestly prayer saying: “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you” (Jn 17:1).

The glorification that Jesus asks for himself as High Priest, is the entry into full obedience to the Father, an obedience that leads to his fullest filial condition: “And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory which I had with you before the world was made” (Jn 17:5). This readiness and this request are the first act of the new priesthood of Jesus, which is a total gift of himself on the Cross and on the Cross itself—the supreme act of love—he is glorified because love is the true glory, the divine glory.

The second moment of this prayer is the intercession that Jesus makes for the disciples who have been with him. They are those of whom Jesus can say to the

Father: “I have manifested your name to the men whom you gave me out of the world; yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word” (Jn 17:6). This “manifesting God’s name to men” is the fulfilment of a new presence of the Father among the people, for humanity. This “manifesting” is not only a *word*, but is *reality* in Jesus; God is with us, and so his name—his presence with us, his being one of us—is “fulfilled”. This manifestation is thus realized in the Incarnation of the Word. In Jesus God enters human flesh, he becomes close in a new and unique way. And this presence culminates in the sacrifice that Jesus makes in his Pasch of death and Resurrection.

At the centre of this prayer of intercession and of expiation in favour of the disciples is the request for *consecration*; Jesus says to the Father: “They are not of the world, even as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth. As you did send me into the world, so I have sent them into the world. And for their sake I consecrate myself, that they also may be consecrated in truth” (Jn 17:16–19).

I ask: what does “consecrate” mean in this case? First of all it must be said that really only God is “consecrated” or “holy”. “To consecrate” therefore means “to transfer” a reality—a person or a thing—to become the property of God. And two complementary aspects are present in this: on the one hand, removing them from ordinary things, segregating, “setting them apart” from the context of personal human life so that they may be totally given to God; and on the other, this segregation, this transfer into God’s sphere, has the very meaning of “sending”, of mission: precisely because he or she is given to God, the reality, the consecrated person, exists “for” others, is given to others. Giving to God means no longer existing for oneself, but for everyone. Whoever, like Jesus, is segregated from the world and set apart for God with a view to a task is for this very reason, fully available to all. For the disciples the task will be to continue Jesus’ mission, to be given to God and thereby to be on mission for all. The Risen One, appearing to his disciples on Easter evening, was to say to them: “Peace be with you. As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn 20:21).

The third part of this priestly prayer extends to the end of time. In it Jesus turns to the Father in order to intercede for all those who will be brought to the faith through the mission inaugurated by the Apostles and continued in history: “I do

not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their world”. Jesus prays for the Church of all time, he also prays for us (Jn 17:20).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* comments: “Jesus fulfilled the work of the Father completely; his prayer, like his sacrifice, extends until the end of time. The prayer of this hour fills the end-times and carries them toward their consummation” (n. 2749).

The central request of the priestly prayer of Jesus dedicated to his disciples of all epochs is that of the future unity of those who will believe in him. This unity is not a worldly product. It comes exclusively from the divine unity and reaches us from the Father, through the Son and in the Holy Spirit. Jesus invokes a gift that comes from Heaven and has its effect—real and perceptible—on earth. He prays “that they may all be one; even as you, Father are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” (Jn 17:21).

Christian unity, on the one hand, is a secret reality that is in the heart of believers. But, at the same time, it must appear with full clarity in history, it must appear so that the world may believe, it has a very practical and concrete purpose, it must appear so that all may really be one. The unity of future disciples, in being united with Jesus—whom the Father sent into the world—is also the original source of the efficacy of the Christian mission in the world.

“We can say that the founding of the Church takes place” in the priestly prayer of Jesus ... In this very place, in the act of the Last Supper, Jesus creates the Church. “For what else is the Church, if not the community of disciples who through faith in Jesus Christ as the one sent by the Father”, receives his unity and is involved in Jesus’ mission to save the world, leading it to knowledge of God? Here we really find a true definition of the Church. “The Church is born from Jesus’ prayer. But this prayer is more than words; it is the act by which he ‘sanctifies’ himself, that is to say, he ‘sacrifices’ himself for the life of the world” (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth*, II, p. 101).

Jesus prays that his disciples may be one. By virtue of this unity, received and preserved, the Church can walk “in the world” without being “of the world” (cf. Jn 17:16) and can live the mission entrusted to her so that the world may believe in the Son and in the Father who sent him. Therefore the Church becomes the place

in which the mission of Christ itself continues: to lead the “world” out of man’s alienation from God and out of himself, out of sin, so that it may return to being the world of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, we have grasped a few elements of the great richness of the priestly prayer of Jesus, which I invite you to read and to meditate on so that it may guide us in dialogue with the Lord and teach us to pray. Let us too, therefore, in our prayers, ask God to help us to enter, more fully, into the design he has for each one of us. Let us ask him to be “consecrated” to him, to belong to him more and more, to be able to love others more and more, those who are near and far; let us ask him to be able always to open our prayer to the dimensions of the world, not closing it to the request for help with our problems but remembering our neighbour before the Lord, learning the beauty of interceding for others; let us ask him for the gift of visible unity among all believers in Christ—we have invoked it forcefully in this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity—let us pray to be ever ready to answer anyone who asks us to account for the hope that is in us (cf. 1 Pt 3:15).

## **Prayer at Gethsemane**

*1 February 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to talk about Jesus’ prayer in the Garden of Olives at Gethsemane. The scenario of the Gospel narrative of this prayer is particularly significant. Jesus sets out for the Mount of Olives after the Last Supper while he is praying together with his disciples. The Evangelist Mark says: “when they had sung a hymn, they went out to the Mount of Olives” (Mk 14:26).

This is probably an allusion to singing one of the *Hallel* Psalms, with which thanks are given to God for the liberation of the People from slavery and his help is asked for the ever new difficulties and threats of the present. The walk to Gethsemane is punctuated by Jesus’ remarks that convey a sense of his impending death and proclaim the imminent dispersion of the disciples.



Having reached the grove on the Mount of Olives, that night too Jesus prepares for personal prayer. However, this time something new happens: it seems that he does not want to be left alone. Jesus would often withdraw from the crowd and from the disciples themselves “to a lonely place” (Mk 1:35) or he would go up “into the hills”, St Mark says (cf. Mk 6:46). Instead at Gethsemane he invites Peter, James and John to stay closer to him. They are the disciples he called upon to be with him on the Mount of the Transfiguration (cf. Mk 9:2–13). This closeness of the three during his prayer in Gethsemane is important. On that night too Jesus was going to pray to the Father “apart”, for his relationship with the Father is quite unique: It is the relationship of the Only-Begotten Son. Indeed, one might say that especially on that night no one could really have come close to the Son, who presented himself to the Father with his absolutely unique and exclusive identity.

Yet, although Jesus arrives “alone” at the place in which he was to stop and pray, he wants at least three disciples to be near him, to be in a closer relationship with him. This is a spacial closeness, a plea for solidarity at the moment in which he feels death approaching, but above all it is closeness in prayer, in a certain way to express harmony with him at the moment when he is preparing to do the Father’s will to the very end; and it is an invitation to every disciple to follow him on the Way of Cross.

Mark the Evangelist recounts: “he took with him Peter and James and John, and began to be greatly distressed and troubled. And he said to them ‘*My soul is very sorrowful*, even to death; remain here, and watch” (14:33–34).

In the words he addresses to the three, Jesus once again expresses himself in the language of the Psalms: “*My soul is very sorrowful*”, an expression borrowed from Psalm 43 (cf. Ps 43[42]:5). The firm determination “unto death” thus calls to mind a situation lived by many of those sent by God in the Old Testament and which is expressed in their prayers. Indeed, following the mission entrusted to them frequently means encountering hostility, rejection and persecution.

Moses is dramatically aware of the trial he is undergoing while guiding the people through the desert and says to God: “I am not able to carry all this people alone, the burden is too heavy for me. If you will deal thus with me, rather kill me

at once, kill me if I have found favour in your sight, that I may not see my wretchedness” (cf. Num 11:14–15).

Elijah too finds doing his duty to God and to his People difficult. The first Book of Kings recounts: “he himself went a day’s journey into the wilderness, and came and sat under a broom tree; and he asked that he might die, saying, ‘It is enough; now, O Lord, take away my life; for I am no better than my fathers’ ” (19:4).

What Jesus says to the three disciples whom he wants near him during his prayer at Gethsemane shows that he feels fear and anguish in that “Hour”, experiencing his last profound loneliness precisely while God’s plan is being brought about. Moreover Jesus’ fear and anguish sums up the full horror of man in the face of his own death, the certainty that it is inescapable and a perception of the burden of evil that touches our lives.

After the invitation to stay with him to watch and pray which he addresses to the three, Jesus speaks to the Father “alone”. Mark the Evangelist tells us that “going a little farther, he fell on the ground and prayed that, if it were possible, the hour might pass from him” (14:35). Jesus fell prostrate on the ground: a position of prayer that expresses obedience to the Father and abandonment in him with complete trust. This gesture is repeated at the beginning of the celebration of the Passion, on Good Friday, as well as in monastic profession and in the ordination of deacons, priests and bishops in order to express, in prayer, corporally too, complete entrustment to God, trust in him. Jesus then asks the Father, if this be possible, to obtain that this hour pass from him. It is not only man’s fear and anguish in the face of death, but is the devastation of the Son of God who perceives the terrible mass of evil that he must take upon himself to overcome it, to deprive it of power.

Dear friends, in prayer we too should be able to lay before God our labours, the suffering of certain situations, of certain days, the daily commitment to following him, to being Christian, and also the weight of the evil that we see within ourselves and around us, so that he may give us hope and make us feel his closeness and give us a little light on the path of life.

Jesus continues his prayer: “*Abba*, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36). In this

invocation there are three revealing passages. At the beginning we have the double use the word with which Jesus addresses God: “*Abba!* Father!” (Mk 14:36a). We know well that the Aramaic word *Abbà* is the term that children use to address their father and hence that it expresses Jesus’ relationship with God, a relationship of tenderness, affection, trust and abandonment.

The second element is found in the central part of the invocation: awareness of the Father’s omnipotence: “all things are possible to you”, which introduces a request in which, once again, the drama of Jesus’ human will appears as he faces death and evil: “remove this cup from me!”.

However, there is the third expression in Jesus’ prayer, and it is the crucial one, in which the human will adheres to the divine will without reserve. In fact, Jesus ends by saying forcefully: “yet not what I will but what you will” (Mk 14:36c). In the unity of the divine person of the Son, the human will finds its complete fulfilment in the total abandonment of the I to the You of the Father, called *Abba*.

St Maximus the Confessor says that ever since the moment of the creation of man and woman, the human will has been oriented to the divine will and that it is precisely in the “yes” to God that the human will is fully free and finds its fulfilment. Unfortunately, because of sin, this “yes” to God is transformed into opposition: Adam and Eve thought that the “no” to God was the crowning point of freedom, of being fully themselves.

On the Mount of Olives, Jesus brings the human will back to the unreserved “yes” to God; in him the natural will is fully integrated in the orientation that the Divine Person gives it. Jesus lives his life in accordance with the centre of his Person: his being the Son of God. His human will is drawn into the I of the Son who abandons himself totally to the Father. Thus Jesus tells us that it is only by conforming our own will to the divine one that human beings attain their true height, that they become “divine”; only by coming out of ourselves, only in the “yes” to God, is Adam’s desire—and the desire of us all—to be completely free. It is what Jesus brings about at Gethsemane: in transferring the human will into the divine will the true man is born and we are redeemed.

The *Compendium of the Catholic Church* teaches concisely: “The prayer of Jesus during his agony in the Garden of Gethsemane and his last words on the Cross

reveal the depth of his filial prayer. Jesus brings to completion the loving plan of the Father and takes upon himself all the anguish of humanity and all the petitions and intercessions of the history of salvation. He presents them to the Father who accepts them and answers them beyond all hope by raising his Son from the dead” (n. 543). Truly “nowhere else in Sacred Scripture do we gain so deep an insight into the inner mystery of Jesus as in the prayer on the Mount of Olives (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, 2011, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, p. 157).

Dear brothers and sisters, every day in the prayer of the *Our Father* we ask the Lord: “thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Mt 6:10). In other words we recognize that there is a will of God with us and for us, a will of God for our life that must become every day, increasingly, the reference of our willing and of our being; we recognize moreover that “heaven” is where God’s will is done and where the “earth” becomes “heaven”, a place where love, goodness, truth and divine beauty are present, only if, on earth, God’s will is done.

In Jesus’ prayer to the Father on that terrible and marvellous night in Gethsemane, the “earth” became “heaven”; the “earth” of his human will, shaken by fear and anguish, was taken up by his divine will in such a way that God’s will was done on earth. And this is also important in our own prayers: we must learn to entrust ourselves more to divine Providence, to ask God for the strength to come out of ourselves to renew our “yes” to him, to say to him “thy will be done”, so as to conform our will to his. It is a prayer we must pray every day because it is not always easy to entrust ourselves to God’s will, repeating the “yes” of Jesus, the “yes” of Mary.

The Gospel accounts of Gethsemane regretfully show that the three disciples, chosen by Jesus to be close to him, were unable to watch with him, sharing in his prayer, in his adherence to the Father and they were overcome by sleep. Dear friends, let us ask the Lord to enable us to keep watch with him in prayer, to follow the will of God every day even if he speaks of the Cross, to live in ever greater intimacy with the Lord, in order to bring a little bit of God’s “heaven” to this “earth”. Many thanks.

## **Prayer of the dying Jesus**

*8 February 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to reflect with you on the prayer of Jesus when death was imminent, pausing to think about everything St Mark and St Matthew tell us. The two Evangelists record the prayer of the dying Jesus not only in Greek, in which their accounts are written but, because of the importance of these words, also in a mixture of Hebrew and Aramaic. In this way they have passed down not only the content but also the sound that this prayer had on Jesus' lips: let us really listen to Jesus' words as they were. At the same time, the Evangelists describe to us the attitude of those present at the crucifixion who did not understand—or did not want to understand—this prayer.

St Mark wrote, as we have heard: “when the sixth hour had come, there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour. And at the ninth hour Jesus cried with a loud voice, ‘*Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?*’” which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’” (15:33–34). In the structure of the account, the prayer, Jesus' cry, is raised at the end of the three hours of darkness that shrouded all the earth from midday until three o'clock in the afternoon. These three hours of darkness are in turn the continuation of a previous span of time, also of three hours, that began with the crucifixion of Jesus.

The Evangelist Mark, in fact, tells us that “it was the third hour, when they crucified him” (15:25). All the times given in the narrative, Jesus' six hours on the Cross are divided into two parts of equal length.

The mockery of various groups which displays their scepticism and confirms their disbelief fits into the first three hours, from nine o'clock in the morning until midday. St Mark writes: “Those who passed by derided him” (15:29); “So also the chief priests mocked him to one another with the scribes” (15:31); “those who were crucified with him also reviled him” (15:32). In the following three hours, from midday until “the ninth hour” [three o'clock in the afternoon], the Evangelist spoke only of the darkness that had come down over the entire earth; only darkness fills the whole scene without any references to people's movements or words. While Jesus is drawing ever closer to death, there is nothing but darkness that covers “the whole land”.

The cosmos also takes part in this event: the darkness envelops people and things, but even at this moment of darkness God is present, he does not abandon them. In the biblical tradition darkness has an ambivalent meaning: it is a sign of the presence and action of evil, but also of a mysterious presence and action of God who can triumph over every shadow.

In the Book of Exodus, for example, we read “The Lord said to Moses: “Lo, I am coming to you in a thick cloud” (19:9); and, further: “the people stood afar off, while Moses drew near to the thick darkness where God was” (20:21). And in his discourses in Deuteronomy, Moses recounts: “And you came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom” (4:11); you “heard the voice out of the midst of the darkness, while the mountain was burning with fire” (5:23). In the scene of the crucifixion of Jesus the darkness engulfs the earth and the Son of God immerses himself in the shadows of death in order to bring life, with his act of love.

Returning to St Mark’s narrative, in the face of the insults of various categories of people, in the face of the pall of darkness that shrouds everything, at the moment when he faces death, Jesus, with the cry of his prayer, shows that with the burden of suffering and death in which there seems to be abandonment, the absence of God, Jesus is utterly certain of the closeness of the Father who approves this supreme act of love, the total gift of himself, although the voice from on high is not heard, as it was on other occasions.

In reading the Gospels we realize that in other important passages on his earthly existence Jesus had also seen the explanatory voice of God associated with the signs of the Father’s presence and approval of his journey of love.

Thus in the event that follows the Baptism in the Jordan, at the opening of the heavens, the words of the Father had been heard: “Thou art my beloved Son, with thee I am well pleased” (Mk 1:11). Then in the Transfiguration, the sign of the cloud was accompanied with these words: “this is my beloved Son; listen to him” (Mk 9:7). Instead, at the approach of the death of the Crucified One, silence falls, no voice is heard but the Father’s loving gaze is fixed on his Son’s gift of love.

However, what is the meaning of Jesus' prayer, of the cry he addresses to the Father: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?": doubt about his mission, about the Father's presence? Might there not be in this prayer the knowledge that he had been forsaken? The words that Jesus addresses to the Father are the beginning of Psalm 22[21], in which the Psalmist expresses to God his being torn between feeling forsaken and the certain knowledge of God's presence in his People's midst. He, the Psalmist, prays: "O my God, I cry by day, but you do not answer; and by night, but find no rest. Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel" (vv. 3–4). The Psalmist speaks of this "cry" in order to express the full suffering of his prayer to God, seemingly absent: in the moment of anguish his prayer becomes a cry.

This also happens in our relationship with the Lord: when we face the most difficult and painful situations, when it seems that God does not hear, we must not be afraid to entrust the whole weight of our overburdened hearts to him, we must not fear to cry out to him in our suffering, we must be convinced that God is close, even if he seems silent.

Repeating from the Cross the first words of Psalm 22[21] "*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani?*"—"My God my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mt 27:46); uttering the words of the Psalm, Jesus prays at the moment of his ultimate rejection by men, at the moment of abandonment; yet he prays, with the Psalm, in the awareness of God's presence, even in that hour when he is feeling the human drama of death.

However a question arises within us: how is it possible that such a powerful God does not intervene to save his Son from this terrible trial? It is important to understand that Jesus' prayer is not the cry of one who meets death with despair, nor is it the cry of one who knows he has been forsaken. At this moment Jesus makes his own the whole of Psalm 22[21], the Psalm of the suffering People of Israel. In this way he takes upon himself not only the sin of his people, but also that of all men and women who are suffering from the oppression of evil and, at the same time, he places all this before God's own heart, in the certainty that his cry will be heard in the Resurrection: "The cry of extreme anguish is at the same time the certainty of an answer from God, the certainty of salvation—not only for

Jesus himself, but for ‘many’ ” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, pp. 213–214 Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2011).

In this prayer of Jesus are contained his extreme trust and his abandonment into God’s hands, even when God seems absent, even when he seems to be silent, complying with a plan incomprehensible to us. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “in the redeeming love that always united him to the Father, he assumed us in the state of our waywardness of sin, to the point that he could say in our name from the cross: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ” (n. 603). His is a suffering in communion with us and for us, which derives from love and already bears within it redemption, the victory of love.

The bystanders at the foot of the Cross of Jesus fail to understand, thinking that his cry is a supplication addressed to Elijah. In the scene they seek to assuage his thirst in order to prolong his life and to find out whether Elijah will truly come to his aid, but with a loud cry Jesus’ earthly life comes to an end, as well as their wish.

At the supreme moment, Jesus gives vent to his heart’s grief, but at the same time makes clear the meaning of the Father’s presence and his consent to the Father’s plan of salvation of humanity.

We too have to face ever anew the “today” of suffering of God’s silence—we express it so often in our prayers—but we also find ourselves facing the “today” of the Resurrection, of the response of God who took upon himself our sufferings, to carry them together with us and to give us the firm hope that they will be overcome (cf. Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, nn. 35–40).

Dear friends, let us lay our daily crosses before God in our prayers, in the certainty that he is present and hears us. Jesus’ cry reminds us that in prayer we must surmount the barriers of our “ego” and our problems and open ourselves to the needs and suffering of others.

May the prayer of Jesus dying on the Cross teach us to pray lovingly for our many brothers and sisters who are oppressed by the weight of daily life, who are living through difficult moments, who are in pain, who have no word of comfort; let us



place all this before God's heart, so that they too may feel the love of God who never abandons us. Many thanks.

## Prayer on the Cross

15 February 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At our school of prayer last Wednesday I spoke of Jesus' prayer on the Cross, taken from Psalm 22[21]: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?". I would now like to continue to meditate on the prayer of Jesus on the Cross in the imminence of death. Today, I would like to reflect on the account we find in St Luke's Gospel. The Evangelist has passed down to us three words spoken by Jesus on the Cross, two of which—the first and the third—are prayers explicitly addressed to the Father. The second, instead, consists of the promise made to the so-called "good thief", crucified with him; indeed, in response to the thief's entreaty, Jesus reassures him: "Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

Thus in Luke's narrative the two prayers that the dying Jesus addresses to the Father and his openness to the supplication addressed to him by the repentant sinner are evocatively interwoven. Jesus calls on the Father and at the same time listens to the prayer of this man who is often called *latro poenitens*, "the repentant thief".

Let us reflect on these three prayers of Jesus. He prays the first one immediately after being nailed to the Cross, while the soldiers are dividing his garments between them as a wretched reward for their service. In a certain sense the process of the Crucifixion ends with this action. St Luke writes: "When they came to the place which is called The Skull, there they crucified him, and the criminals, one on the right and one on the left. And Jesus said, 'Father, forgive them; for they know not what they do'. And they cast lots and to divide his garments" (23:33–34).

The first prayer that Jesus addresses to the Father is a prayer of intercession; he asks for forgiveness for his executioners. By so doing, Jesus is doing in person

what he had taught in the Sermon on the Mount when he said: “I say to you that hear, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Lk 6:27); and he had also promised to those who are able to forgive: “your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High” (v. 35). Now, from the Cross he not only pardons his executioners but he addresses the Father directly, interceding for them.

Jesus’ attitude finds a moving “imitation” in the account of the stoning of St Stephen, the first martyr. Indeed Stephen, now nearing his end, “knelt down and cried with a loud voice, ‘Lord, do not hold this sin against them’. And when he had said this, he fell asleep” (Acts 7:60): these were his last words. The comparison between Jesus’ prayer for forgiveness and that of the protomartyr is significant. St Stephen turns to the Risen Lord and requests that his killing—an action described clearly by the words “this sin”—not be held against those who stoned him.

Jesus on the Cross addresses the Father and not only asks forgiveness for those who crucify him but also offers an interpretation of what is happening. According to what he says, in fact, the men who are crucifying him “know not what they do” (Lk 23:34). He therefore postulates ignorance, “not knowing”, as a reason for his request for the Father’s forgiveness, because it leaves the door open to conversion, as, moreover, happens in the words that the centurion was to speak at Jesus’ death: “Certainly this man was innocent” (v. 47), he was the Son of God. “It remains a source of comfort for all times and for all people that both in the case of those who genuinely did not know (his executioners) and in the case of those who did know (the people who condemned him), the Lord makes ignorance the motive for his plea for forgiveness: he sees it as a door that can open us to conversion” (*Jesus of Nazareth*, II, [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011], p. 208).

The second word spoken by Jesus on the Cross recorded by St Luke is a word of hope, it is his answer to the prayer of one of the two men crucified with him. The good thief comes to his senses before Jesus and repents, he realizes he is facing the Son of God who makes the very Face of God visible, and begs him; “Jesus, remember me when you come in your kingly power” (v. 42). The Lord’s answer to this prayer goes far beyond the request: in fact he says: “Truly, I say to you, today

you will be with me in Paradise” (v. 43). Jesus knows that he is entering into direct communion with the Father and reopening to man the way to God’s paradise. Thus, with this response, he gives the firm hope that God’s goodness can also touch us, even at the very last moment of life, and that sincere prayer, even after a wrong life, encounters the open arms of the good Father who awaits the return of his son.

However, let us consider the last words of Jesus dying. The Evangelists tells us: “it was now about the sixth hour, and there was darkness over the whole land until the ninth hour, while the sun’s light failed; and the curtain of the temple was torn in two. Then Jesus, crying with a loud voice, said, ‘Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!’ . And having said this he breathed his last” (vv. 44–46).

Certain aspects of this narrative differ from the scene as described in Mark and in Matthew. The three hours of darkness in Mark are not described, whereas in Matthew they are linked with a series of different apocalyptic events such as the quaking of the earth, the opening of the tombs, the dead who are raised (cf. Mt 27:51–53). In Luke, the hours of darkness are caused by the eclipse of the sun, but the veil of the temple is torn at that moment. In this way Luke’s account presents two signs, in a certain way parallel, in the heavens and in the temple. The heavens lose their light, the earth sinks while in the temple, a place of God’s presence, the curtain that protects the sanctuary is rent in two. Jesus’ death is characterized explicitly as a cosmic and a liturgical event; in particular, it marks the beginning of a new form of worship, in a temple not built by men because it is the very Body of Jesus who died and rose which gathers peoples together and unites them in the sacrament of his Body and his Blood.

At this moment of suffering Jesus’ prayer, “Father into your hands I commit my spirit”, is a loud cry of supreme and total entrustment to God. This prayer expresses the full awareness that he had not been abandoned. The initial invocation—“Father”—recalls his first declaration as a 12-year-old boy. At that time he had stayed for three days in the Temple of Jerusalem, whose veil was now torn in two. And when his parents had told him of their anxiety, he had answered: “How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Lk 2:49).

From the beginning to the end, what fully determines Jesus' feelings, words and actions, is his unique relationship with the Father. On the Cross he lives to the full, in love, this filial relationship he has with God which gives life to his prayer.

The words spoken by Jesus after his invocation, "Father", borrow a sentence from Psalm 31[30]: "into your hand I commit my spirit" (Ps 31[30]:6). Yet these words are not a mere citation but rather express a firm decision: Jesus "delivers" himself to the Father in an act of total abandonment. These words are a prayer of "entrustment" total trust in God's love. Jesus' prayer as he faces death is dramatic as it is for every human being but, at the same time, it is imbued with that deep calmness that is born from trust in the Father and from the desire to commend oneself totally to him.

In Gethsemane, when he had begun his final struggle and his most intense prayer and was about to be "delivered into the hands of men" (Lk 9:44), his sweat had become "like great drops of blood falling down upon the ground" (Lk 22:44). Nevertheless his heart was fully obedient to the Father's will, and because of this "an angel from heaven" came to strengthen him (cf. Lk 22:42–43). Now, in his last moments, Jesus turns to the Father, telling him into whose hands he really commits his whole life.

Before starting out on his journey towards Jerusalem, Jesus had insisted to his disciples: "Let these words sink into your ears; for the Son of man is to be delivered into the hands of men" (Lk 9:44).

Now that life is about to depart from him, he seals his last decision in prayer: Jesus let himself be delivered "into the hands of men", but it is into the hands of the Father that he places his spirit; thus—as the Evangelist John affirms—all was finished, the supreme act of love was carried to the end, to the limit and beyond the limit.

Dear brothers and sisters, the words of Jesus on the Cross at the last moments of his earthly life offer us demanding instructions for our prayers, but they also open us to serene trust and firm hope. Jesus, who asks the Father to forgive those who are crucifying him, invites us to take the difficult step of also praying for those who wrong us, who have injured us, ever able to forgive, so that God's light may illuminate their hearts; and he invites us to live in our prayers the same

attitude of mercy and love with which God treats us; “forgive us our trespasses and forgive those who trespass against us”, we say every day in the Lord’s prayer.

At the same time, Jesus, who at the supreme moment of death entrusts himself totally to the hands of God the Father, communicates to us the certainty that, however harsh the trial, however difficult the problems, however acute the suffering may be, we shall never fall from God’s hands, those hands that created us, that sustain us and that accompany us on our way through life, because they are guided by an infinite and faithful love. Many thanks.

## Prayer of Silence

7 March 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the preceding series of Catecheses I have spoken of Jesus’ prayer and I would not like to conclude this reflection without briefly considering the topic of Jesus’ silence, so important in his relationship with God.

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I spoke of the role that silence plays in Jesus’ life, especially on Golgotha: “here we find ourselves before ‘the word of the cross’ (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). The word is muted; it becomes mortal silence, for it has ‘spoken’ exhaustively, holding back nothing of what it had to tell us” (n. 12). Before this silence of the Cross, St Maximus the Confessor puts this phrase on the lips of the Mother of God: “Wordless is the Word of the Father, who made every creature which speaks, lifeless are the eyes of the one at whose word and whose nod all living things move!” (*Life of Mary*, n. 89: *Testi mariani del primo millennio*, 2, Rome, 1989, p. 253).

The Cross of Christ does not only demonstrate Jesus’ silence as his last word to the Father but reveals that God also *speaks* through *silence*: “the silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the Incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father. He

commended himself to him at the moment of passage, through death, to eternal life: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk 23:46)” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, n. 21).

Jesus’ experience on the cross profoundly reveals the situation of the person praying and the culmination of his prayer: having heard and recognized the word of God, we must also come to terms with the silence of God, an important expression of the same divine Word.

The dynamic of words and silence which marks Jesus’ prayer throughout his earthly existence, especially on the cross, also touches our own prayer life in two directions.

The first is the one that concerns the acceptance of the word of God. Inward and outward silence are necessary if we are to be able to hear this word. And in our time this point is particularly difficult for us. In fact, ours is an era that does not encourage recollection; indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that people are frightened of being cut off, even for an instant, from the torrent of words and images that mark and fill the day.

It was for this reason that in the above mentioned Exhortation *Verbum Domini* I recalled our need to learn the value of silence: “Rediscovering the centrality of God’s word in the life of the Church also means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence” (n. 66). This principle—that without silence one does not hear, does not listen, does not receive a word—applies especially to personal prayer as well as to our liturgies: to facilitate authentic listening, they must also be rich in moments of silence and of non-verbal reception.

St Augustine’s observation is still valid: *Verbo crescente, verba deficiunt* “when the word of God increases, the words of men fail” (cf. *Sermo* 288, 5: pl 38, 1307; *Sermo* 120, 2: pl 38, 677). The Gospels often present Jesus, especially at times of crucial decisions, withdrawing to lonely places, away from the crowds and even from the disciples in order to pray in silence and to live his filial relationship with God. Silence can carve out an inner space in our very depths to enable God to dwell

there, so that his word will remain within us and love for him take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life. Hence the first direction: relearning silence, openness to listening, which opens us to the other, to the word of God.

However, there is also a second important connection between silence and prayer. Indeed it is not only our silence that disposes us to listen to the word of God; in our prayers we often find we are confronted by God's silence, we feel, as if we were, let down, it seems to us that God neither listens nor responds. Yet God's silence, as happened to Jesus, does not indicate his absence. Christians know well that the Lord is present and listens, even in the darkness of pain, rejection and loneliness.

Jesus reassures his disciples and each one of us that God is well acquainted with our needs at every moment of our life. He teaches the disciples: "In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him" (Mt 6:7–8): an attentive, silent and open heart is more important than many words. God knows us in our inmost depths, better than we ourselves, and loves us; and knowing this must suffice.

In the Bible Job's experience is particularly significant in this regard. In a short time this man lost everything: relatives, possessions, friends and health. It truly seems that God's attitude to him was one of abandonment, of total silence. Yet in his relationship with God, Job speaks to God, cries out to God; in his prayers, in spite of all, he keeps his faith intact, and in the end, discovers the value of his experience and of God's silence. And thus he can finally conclude, addressing the Creator: "I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you" (Job 42:5): almost all of us know God only through hearsay and the more open we are to his silence and to our own silence, the more we truly begin to know him.

This total trust that opens us to the profound encounter with God developed in silence. St Francis Xavier prayed to the Lord saying: I do not love you because you can give me paradise or condemn me to hell, but because you are my God. I love you because You are You.

As we reach the end of the reflections on Jesus' prayer, certain teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* spring to mind: "The drama of prayer is fully

revealed to us in the Word who became flesh and dwells among us. To seek to understand his prayer through what his witnesses proclaim to us in the Gospel is to approach the holy Lord Jesus as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray, in order to know how he hears our prayer” (n. 2598).

So, how does Jesus teach us to pray? We find a clear answer in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Jesus teaches us to pray not only with the *Our Father*—certainly the high point of his instruction on how to pray—“but also when he prays. In this way he teaches us, in addition to the content, the dispositions necessary for every true prayer: purity of heart that seeks the Kingdom and forgives enemies, bold and filial faith that goes beyond what we feel and understand, and watchfulness that protects the disciple from temptation” (n. 544).

In going through the Gospels we have seen that concerning our prayers the Lord is conversation partner, friend, witness and teacher. The newness of our dialogue with God is revealed in Jesus: the filial prayer that the Father expects of his children. And we learn from Jesus that constant prayer helps us to interpret our life, make our decisions, recognize and accept our vocation, discover the talents that God has given us and do his will daily, the only way to fulfil our life.

Jesus’ prayer points out to us, all too often concerned with operational efficacy and the practical results we achieve, that we need to pause, to experience moments of intimacy with God, “detaching ourselves” from the everyday commotion in order to listen, to go to the “root” that sustains and nourishes life.

One of the most beautiful moments of Jesus’ prayer is precisely when—in order to deal with the illnesses, hardships and limitations of those who are conversing with him—he turns to the Father in prayer and thereby teaches those around him where to seek the source of hope and salvation.

I have already recalled as a moving example Jesus’ prayer at the tomb of Lazarus. The Evangelist John recounts: “So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that



they may believe that you sent me'. When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, 'Lazarus, come out' ” (Jn 11:41–43).

However Jesus reaches the most profound depths in prayer to the Father at the moment of his Passion and his death when he says the extreme “yes” to God’s plan and shows how the human will finds its fulfilment precisely in full adherence to the divine will rather than in opposition to it.

In Jesus’ prayer, in his cry to the Father on the cross, are summed up “all the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history.... Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion the drama of prayer in the economy of creation and salvation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church* n. 2606).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us trustingly ask the Lord to grant that we live the journey of our filial prayer learning daily from the Only-Begotten Son, who became man for our sake, what should be our way of addressing God.

St Paul’s words on Christian life in general also apply to our prayers: “I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39).

## Prayer of Mary

14 March 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In our continuing catechesis on Christian prayer, we now begin a new chapter on prayer in the *Acts of the Apostles* and the *Letters of Saint Paul*. Today I wish to speak of the figure of Mary, who with the Apostles in the Upper Room prayerfully awaits the gift of the Holy Spirit. In all the events of her life, from the Annunciation through the Cross to Pentecost, Mary is presented by Saint Luke as a woman of recollected prayer and meditation on the mystery of God’s saving plan in Christ. In the Upper Room, we see Mary’s privileged place in the Church,

of which she is the “exemplar and outstanding model in faith and charity” (*Lumen Gentium*, 53). As Mother of God and Mother of the Church, Mary prays in and with the Church at every decisive moment of salvation history. Let us entrust to her every moment of our own lives, and let her teach us the need for prayer, so that in loving union with her Son we may implore the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and the spread of the Gospel to all the ends of the earth.

## The little Pentecost

18 April 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

After the great celebrations let us now return to the Catecheses on Prayer. At the Audience before Holy Week we reflected on the figure of the Blessed Virgin Mary and her prayerful presence among the Apostles while they were waiting for the descent of the Holy Spirit. The Church took her first steps in an atmosphere of prayer. Pentecost is not an isolated episode because the Holy Spirit’s presence and action never cease to guide and encourage the Christian community as it journeys on.

Indeed, in addition to recounting the event of the great outpouring in the Upper Room which occurred 50 days after Easter (cf. Acts 2:1–13), St Luke mentions in the Acts of the Apostles other extraordinary occasions on which the Holy Spirit burst in and which recur in the Church’s history. And today I would like to reflect on what has been defined as the “little Pentecost”, which took place at the height of a difficult phase in the life of the nascent Church.

The Acts of the Apostles tell that after the healing of a paralytic at the Temple of Jerusalem (cf. Acts 3:1–10), Peter and John were arrested (cf. Acts 4:1) for proclaiming Jesus’ Resurrection to all the people (cf. Acts 3:11–26). They were released after a hasty trial, joined their brethren and told them what they had been obliged to undergo on account of the witness they had born to Jesus, the Risen One. At that moment, Luke says, “they lifted their voices together to God” (Acts 4:24). Here St Luke records the Church’s most extensive prayer in the New Testament, at the end of which, as we have heard, “the place in which they were

gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness” (Acts 4:31).

Before reflecting on this beautiful prayer let us take note of an important basic attitude: when the first Christian community is confronted by dangers, difficulties and threats it does not attempt to work out how to react, find strategies, defend itself or what measures to adopt; rather, when it is put to the test, the community starts to pray and makes contact with God.

And what are the features of this prayer? It is a unanimous, concordant prayer of the entire community which reacts to persecution because of Jesus. In the original Greek St Luke uses the word “*homothumadon*”—“all these with one accord”, “in agreement”, a term that appears in other parts of the Acts of the Apostles to emphasize this persevering, harmonious prayer (cf. Acts 1:14; 2:46).

This harmony was the fundamental element of the first community and must always be fundamental to the Church. Thus it was not only the prayer prayed by Peter and John, who were in danger, but the prayer of the entire community since what the two Apostles were experiencing did not concern them alone but the whole of the Church.

In facing the persecution it suffered for the cause of Jesus, not only was the community neither frightened nor divided but it was also deeply united in prayer, as one person, to invoke the Lord. I would say that this is the first miracle which is worked when because of their faith believers are put to the test. Their unity, rather than being jeopardized is strengthened because it is sustained by steadfast prayer. The Church must not fear the persecutions which she has been subjected to throughout her history but must always trust, like Jesus at Gethsemane, in the presence, help and power of God, invoked in prayer.

Let us take a further step: what does the Christian community ask God at this moment of trial? It does not ask for the safety of life in the face of persecution, nor that the Lord get even with those who imprisoned Peter and John; it asks only that it be granted “to speak [his] word with all boldness” (Acts 4:29); in other words it prays that it may not lose the courage of faith, the courage to proclaim faith. First, however, it seeks to understand in depth what has occurred, to

interpret events in the light of faith and it does so precisely through the word of God which enables us to decipher the reality of the world.

In the prayer it raises to the Lord the community begins by recording and invoking God's omnipotence and immensity: "Sovereign Lord, who did make the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them" (Acts 4:24). It is the invocation to the Creator: we know that all things come from him, that all things are in his hands. It is knowledge of this which gives us certainty and courage: everything comes from him, everything is in his hands.

The prayer then goes on to recognize how God acted in the past—so it begins with the creation and continues through history—how he was close to his people, showing himself to be a God concerned with man who did not withdraw, who did not abandon man, his creature; and here Psalm 2 is explicitly cited. It is in this light that the difficult situation the Church was going through at the time should be read.

Psalm 2 celebrates the enthronement of the King of Judaea, but refers prophetically to the Coming of the Messiah, against whom human rebellion, persecution and abuse can do nothing: "Why do the nations conspire, and the people plot in vain? The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against his Anointed?" (Ps 2:1–2; cf. Acts 4:25).

The Psalm about the Messiah already stated this prophetically, and this uprising of the powerful against God's power is characteristic throughout history. It is precisely by reading Sacred Scripture, which is the word of God, that the community can say to God in prayer: "truly in this city there were gathered together against your holy servant Jesus, whom you did anoint, ... to do whatever your hand and your plan had predestined to take place" (Acts 4:27).

What happened is interpreted in the light of Christ, which is also the key to understanding persecution; and the Cross, which is always the key to the Resurrection. The opposition to Jesus, his passion and his death are reinterpreted through Psalm 2, as the actuation of God the Father's project for the world's salvation. And here we also find the meaning of the experience of persecution that the first Christian community was living through. This first

community is not a mere association but a community that lives in Christ so what happens to it is part of God's plan. Just as it happened to Jesus, the disciples also meet with opposition, misunderstanding and persecution. In prayer, meditation on Sacred Scripture in the light of Christ's mystery helps us to interpret the reality present within the history of salvation which God works in the world, always in his own way.

This is precisely why the request to God that the first Christian community of Jerusalem formulated in a prayer does not ask to be protected or to be spared trials and hardship. It is not a prayer for success but only to be able to proclaim the word of God with "*parresia*", that is, with boldness, freedom and courage (cf. Acts 4:29).

Then there is the additional request that this proclamation may be guided by God's hand so that healing, signs and wonders may be performed, (cf. Acts 4:30), in other words that God's goodness may be visible as a power that transforms reality, that changes peoples' hearts, minds and lives and brings the radical newness of the Gospel.

At the end of the prayer, St Luke notes, "the place in which they were gathered together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke the word of God with boldness" (Acts 4:31). The place shook, that is, faith has the power to transform the earth and the world. The same Spirit who spoke through Psalm 2 in the prayer of the Church bursts into the house and fills the hearts of all those who have invoked the Lord. This is the fruit of the unanimous prayer that the Christian community raises to God: the outpouring of the Spirit, a gift of the Risen One that sustains and guides the free and courageous proclamation of God's Word, which impels the disciples of the Lord to go out fearlessly to take the Good News to the ends of the world.

We too, dear brothers and sisters must be able to ponder the events of our daily life in prayer, in order to seek their deep meaning. And like the first Christian community let us too let ourselves be illuminated by the word of God, through meditation on Sacred Scripture, we can learn to see that God is present in our life, present also and especially in difficult moments and that all things—even those that are incomprehensible—are part of a superior plan of love in which the

final victory over evil, over sin and over death is truly that of goodness, of grace, of life and of God.

Just as prayer helped the first Christian community, prayer also helps us to interpret our personal and collective history in the most just and faithful perspective, that of God. And let us too renew our request for the gift of the Holy Spirit, that warms hearts and enlightens minds, in order to recognize how the Lord hears our prayers, in accordance with his will of love and not with our own ideas.

Guided by the Spirit of Jesus Christ, we will be able to live with serenity, courage and joy every situation in life and with St Paul boast: “we rejoice in our sufferings, knowing that suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope”, that hope that “does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured” into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom 5:3–5). Many thanks.

## **Ministry of Charity**

*25 April 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In our last Catechesis I explained that from the outset the Church has had to face unexpected situations on her journey, new issues and emergencies to which she has sought to respond in the light of faith, letting herself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Today I would like to pause to reflect on another of these situations, on a serious problem that the first Christian community of Jerusalem was obliged to face and to solve, as St Luke tells us in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, concerning pastoral charity to lonely people and those in need of assistance and help.

This is not a secondary matter for the Church and at that time risked creating divisions in the Church; the number of disciples, in fact continued to increase, but the Greek-speaking began to complain about those who spoke Hebrew because their widows were left out of the daily distribution (cf. Acts 6:1). To face this urgent matter which concerned a fundamental aspect of community life,

namely, charity to the weak, the poor and the defenceless, and justice, the Apostles summoned the entire group of disciples. In that moment of pastoral emergency the Apostles' discernment stands out. They were facing the primary need to proclaim God's word in accordance with the Lord's mandate but—even if this was a priority of the Church—they considered with equal gravity the duty of charity and justice, that is, the duty to help widows and poor people and, in response to the commandment of Jesus: love one another as I have loved you (cf. Jn 15:12, 17), to provide lovingly for their brothers and sisters in need.

So it was that difficulties arose in the two activities that must coexist in the Church—the proclamation of the word, the primacy of God and concrete charity, justice—and it was necessary to find a solution so that there would be room for both, for their necessary relationship. The Apostles' reflection is very clear, they say, as we heard: “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:2–4).

Two points stand out: first, since that moment a ministry of charity has existed in the Church. The Church must not only proclaim the word but must also put the word—which is charity and truth—into practice. And, the second point: these men must not only enjoy a good reputation but also they must be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom; in other words they cannot merely be organizers who know what “to do”, but must “act” in a spirit of faith with God's enlightenment, with wisdom of heart. Hence their role—although it is above all a practical one—has nonetheless also a spiritual function. Charity and justice are not only social but also spiritual actions, accomplished in the light of the Holy Spirit.

We can thus say that the Apostles confronted this situation with great responsibility. They took the following decision: seven men were chosen; the Apostles prayed the Holy Spirit to grant them strength and then laid their hands on the seven so that they might dedicate themselves in a special way to this ministry of charity. Thus in the life of the Church, the first steps she took, in a certain way, reflected what had happened in Jesus' public life at Martha and

Mary's house in Bethany. Martha was completely taken up with the service of hospitality to offer to Jesus and his disciples; Mary, on the contrary, devoted herself to listening to the Lord's word (cf. Lk 10:38–42). In neither case were the moments of prayer and of listening to God, and daily activity, the exercise of charity in opposition. Jesus' reminder, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41–42) and, likewise, the Apostles' reflection: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4), show the priority we must give to God. I do not wish here to enter into the interpretation of this Martha-Mary passage. In any case activity undertaken to help one's neighbor, "the other", is not to be condemned, but it is essential to stress the need for it to be imbued also with the spirit of contemplation. Moreover, St Augustine says that this reality of Mary is a vision of our situation from heaven, so on earth we can never possess it completely but a little anticipation must be present in all our activities. Contemplation of God must also be present. We must not lose ourselves in pure activism but always let ourselves also be penetrated in our activities by the light of the word of God and thereby learn true charity, true service to others, which does not need many things—it certainly needs the necessary things—but needs above all our heartfelt affection and the light of God.

In commenting on the episode of Martha and Mary St Ambrose urges his faithful and us too: "Let us too seek to have what cannot be taken from us, dedicating diligent, not distracted attention to the Lord's word. The seeds of the heavenly word are blown away, if they are sown along the roadside. May the wish to know be an incentive to you too, as it was to Mary, this is the greatest and most perfect act". And he added that "attention to the ministry must not distract from knowledge of the heavenly word" through prayer (*Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, VII, 85 PL 15, 1720).

Saints have therefore experienced a profound unity of life between prayer and action, between total love for God and love for their brethren. St Bernard, who is a model of harmony between contemplation and hard work, in his book *De consideratione*, addressed to Pope Innocent II to offer him some reflections on his ministry, insists precisely on the importance of inner recollection, of prayer to defend oneself from the dangers of being hyper-active, whatever our condition



and whatever the task to be carried out. St Bernard says that all too often too much work and a frenetic life-style end by hardening the heart and causing the spirit to suffer (cf. II, 3).

His words are a precious reminder to us today, used as we are to evaluating everything with the criterion of productivity and efficiency. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us of the importance—without a doubt a true and proper ministry is created—of devotion to daily activities which should be carried out with responsibility and dedication and also our need for God, for his guidance, for his light which gives us strength and hope. Without daily prayer lived with fidelity, our acts are empty, they lose their profound soul, and are reduced to being mere activism which in the end leaves us dissatisfied. There is a beautiful invocation of the Christian tradition to be recited before any other activity which says: “*Actiones nostras, quæsumus, Domine, aspirando præveni et adiuvando prosequere, ut cuncta nostra oratio et operatio a te semper incipiat, et per te coepta finiatur*”; that is, “Inspire our actions, Lord, and accompany them with your help, so that our every word and action may always begin and end in you”. Every step in our life, every action, of the Church too, must be taken before God, in the light of his word.

In last Wednesday’s Catechesis I emphasized the unanimous prayer of the first Christian community in times of trial and explained how in prayer itself, in meditation on Sacred Scripture, it was able to understand the events that were happening. When prayer is nourished by the word of God we can see reality with new eyes, with the eyes of faith and the Lord, who speaks to the mind and the heart, gives new light to the journey at every moment and in every situation. We believe in the power of the Word of God and of prayer. Even the difficulties that the Church was encountering as she faced the problem of service to the poor, the issue of charity, was overcome in prayer, in the light of God, of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles did not limit themselves to ratifying the choice of Stephen and the other men but “they prayed and laid their hands upon them” (Acts 6:6). The Evangelist was once again to recall these gestures on the occasion of the election of Paul and Barnabas, where we read: “after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off” (Acts 13:3). He confirms again that the practical service of charity is a spiritual service. Both these realities must go hand in hand.

With the act of the laying on of hands, the Apostles conferred a special ministry on seven men so that they might be granted the corresponding grace. The emphasis on prayer—“after praying”—they say, is important because it highlights the gesture’s spiritual dimension; it is not merely a question of conferring an office as happens in a public organization, but is an ecclesial event in which the Holy Spirit appropriates seven men chosen by the Church, consecrating them in the Truth that is Jesus Christ: he is the silent protagonist, present during the imposition of hands so that the chosen ones may be transformed by his power and sanctified in order to face the practical challenges, the pastoral challenges. And the emphasis on prayer also reminds us that the response to the Lord’s choice and the allocation of every ministry in the Church stems solely from a close relationship with God, nurtured daily.

Dear brothers and sisters, the pastoral problem that induced the Apostles to choose and to lay their hands on seven men charged with the service of charity, so that they themselves might be able to devote themselves to prayer and to preaching the word, also indicates to us the primacy of prayer and of the word of God which, however, then result in pastoral action. For pastors, this is the first and most valuable form of service for the flock entrusted to them. If the lungs of prayer and of the word of God do not nourish the breath of our spiritual life, we risk being overwhelmed by countless everyday things: prayer is the breath of the soul and of life. And there is another precious reminder that I would like to underscore: in the relationships with God, in listening to his word, in dialogue with God, even when we may be in the silence of a church or of our room, we are united in the Lord to a great many brothers and sisters in faith, like an ensemble of musical instruments which, in spite of their individuality, raise to God one great symphony of intercession, of thanksgiving and praise. Many thanks!

## **Prayer of St Stephen**

*2 May 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In our recent Catecheses we have seen how through personal and community prayer the interpretation of and meditation on Sacred Scripture open us to

listening to God who speaks to us and instils light in us so that we may understand the present.

Today, I would like to talk about the testimony and prayer of the Church's first martyr, St Stephen, one of the seven men chosen to carry out the service of charity for the needy. At the moment of his martyrdom, recounted in the Acts of the Apostles, the fruitful relationship between the Word of God and prayer is once again demonstrated.

Stephen is brought before the council, before the Sanhedrin, where he is accused of declaring that "this Jesus of Nazareth will destroy this place, [the Temple] and will change the customs which Moses delivered to us" (Acts 6:14). During his public life Jesus had effectively foretold the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem: you will "destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up" (Jn 2:19). But, as the Evangelist John remarked, "he spoke of the temple of his body. When therefore he was raised from the dead, his disciples remembered that he had said this; and they believed the Scripture and the word which Jesus had spoken" (Jn 2:21–22).

Stephen's speech to the council, the longest in the Acts of the Apostles, develops on this very prophecy of Jesus who is the new Temple, inaugurates the new worship and, with his immolation on the Cross, replaces the ancient sacrifices. Stephen wishes to demonstrate how unfounded is the accusation leveled against him of subverting the Mosaic law and describes his view of salvation history and of the covenant between God and man. In this way he reinterprets the whole of the biblical narrative, the itinerary contained in Sacred Scripture, in order to show that it leads to the "place", of the definitive presence of God that is Jesus Christ, and in particular his Passion, death and Resurrection. In this perspective Stephen also interprets his being a disciple of Jesus, following him even to martyrdom. Meditation on Sacred Scripture thus enables him to understand his mission, his life, his present. Stephen is guided in this by the light of the Holy Spirit and by his close relationship with the Lord, so that the members of the Sanhedrin saw that his face was "like the face of an angel" (Acts 6:15). This sign of divine assistance is reminiscent of Moses' face which shone after his encounter with God when he came down from Mount Sinai (cf. Ex 34:29–35; 2 Cor 3:7–8).

In his discourse Stephen starts with the call of Abraham, a pilgrim bound for the land pointed out to him by God which he possessed only at the level of a promise. He then speaks of Joseph, sold by his brothers but helped and liberated by God, and continues with Moses, who becomes an instrument of God in order to set his people free but also and several times comes up against his own people's rejection. In these events narrated in Sacred Scripture to which Stephen demonstrates he listens religiously, God always emerges, who never tires of reaching out to man in spite of frequently meeting with obstinate opposition. And this happens in the past, in the present and in the future. So it is that throughout the Old Testament he sees the prefiguration of the life of Jesus himself, the Son of God made flesh who—like the ancient Fathers—encounters obstacles, rejection and death. Stephen then refers to Joshua, David and Solomon, whom he mentions in relation to the building of the Temple of Jerusalem, and ends with the word of the Prophet Isaiah (66:1–2): “Heaven is my throne, and earth my footstool. What house will you build for me, says the Lord, or what is the place of my rest? Did not my hand make all these things?” (Acts 7:49–50). In his meditation on God's action in salvation history, by highlighting the perennial temptation to reject God and his action, he affirms that Jesus is the Righteous One foretold by the prophets; God himself has made himself uniquely and definitively present in him: Jesus is the “place” of true worship. Stephen does not deny the importance of the Temple for a certain period, but stresses that “the Most High does not dwell in houses made with hands” (Acts 7:48).

The new, true temple in which God dwells is his Son, who has taken human flesh; it is the humanity of Christ, the Risen One, who gathers the peoples together and unites them in the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood. The description of the temple as “not made by human hands” is also found in the theology of St Paul and in the Letter to the Hebrews; the Body of Jesus which he assumed in order to offer himself as a sacrificial victim for the expiation of sins, is the new temple of God, the place of the presence of the living God; in him, God and man, God and the world are truly in touch: Jesus takes upon himself all the sins of humanity in order to bring it into the love of God and to “consummate” it in this love. Drawing close to the Cross, entering into communion with Christ, means entering this transformation. And this means coming into contact with God, entering the true temple.

Stephen's life and words are suddenly cut short by the stoning, but his martyrdom itself is the fulfilment of his life and message: he becomes one with Christ. Thus his meditation on God's action in history, on the divine word which in Jesus found complete fulfilment, becomes participation in the very prayer on the Cross. Indeed, before dying, Stephen cries out: "Lord Jesus, receive my spirit" (Acts 7:59), making his own the words of Psalm 31[30]:6 and repeating Jesus' last words on Calvary: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit" (Lk 23:46). Lastly, like Jesus, he cries out with a loud voice facing those who were stoning him: "Lord, do not hold this sin against them" (Acts 7:60). Let us note that if on the one hand Stephen's prayer echoes Jesus', on the other it is addressed to someone else, for the entreaty is to the Lord himself, namely, to Jesus whom he contemplates in glory at the right hand of the Father: "Behold, I see the heavens opened, and the Son of man standing at the right hand of God" (v. 55).

Dear brothers and sisters, St Stephen's witness gives us several instructions for our prayers and for our lives. Let us ask ourselves: where did this first Christian martyr find the strength to face his persecutors and to go so far as to give himself? The answer is simple: from his relationship with God, from his communion with Christ, from meditation on the history of salvation, from perceiving God's action which reached its crowning point in Jesus Christ. Our prayers, too, must be nourished by listening to the word of God, in communion with Jesus and his Church.

A second element: St Stephen sees the figure and mission of Jesus foretold in the history of the loving relationship between God and man. He—the Son of God—is the temple that is not "made with hands" in which the presence of God the Father became so close as to enter our human flesh to bring us to God, to open the gates of heaven. Our prayer, therefore, must be the contemplation of Jesus at the right hand of God, of Jesus as the Lord of our, or my, daily life. In him, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we too can address God and be truly in touch with God, with the faith and abandonment of children who turn to a Father who loves them infinitely. Thank you.

## **Peter in Prison**

9 May 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to touch upon the last episode in the life of St Peter recorded in the Acts of the Apostles, his imprisonment by order of Herod Agrippa, and his release through the marvelous intervention of the Angel of the Lord on the eve of his trial in Jerusalem (cf. Acts 12:1–17).

The narrative is once again marked by the prayer of the Church. St Luke writes: “So Peter was kept in prison; but earnest prayer for him was made to God by the church” (Acts 12:5). And, after having miraculously left the prison, on the occasion of his visit to Mary’s house, the mother of John also called Mark, it tells us “many were gathered together and were praying” (Acts 12:12). Between these two important observations that illustrate the attitude of the Christian community in the face of danger and persecution, is recounted the detainment and release of Peter, during the entire night. The strength of the unceasing prayer of the Church rises to God and the Lord listens and performs an unheard of and unexpected deliverance, sending his Angel.

The account reminds us of the great elements during Israel’s deliverance from captivity in Egypt, the Hebrew Passover. As happened in that major event, here also, the Angel of the Lord performs the primary action that frees Peter. And the actions of the Apostle—who is asked to rise quickly, put on his belt and gird his loins—repeating those of the Chosen People on the night of their deliverance through God’s intervention, when they were invited to eat the lamb quickly with their belts fastened, sandals on their feet, and their staffs in their hands, ready to leave the country (cf. Ex 12:11). Thus, Peter could exclaim: “Now I am sure that the Lord has sent his Angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod” (Acts 12:11). The Angel does not only recall the deliverance of Israel from Egypt, but also the Resurrection of Christ. Recounted in the Acts of the Apostles: “and behold, an Angel of the Lord appeared, and a light shone in the cell; and he struck Peter on the side and woke him” (Acts 12:7). The light that fills the prison cell, the same action to awaken the Apostle, refers to the liberating light of the Passover of the Lord that triumphs over the darkness of night and evil. Finally, the invitation to “Wrap your mantle around you and follow me” (Acts 12:8) echoes the words of the initial call of Jesus in our hearts (cf. Mk 1:17), repeated after the Resurrection on Lake Tiberias, where on two occasions the Lord says to Peter, “Follow me” (Jn

21:19, 22). It is a pressing call to follow him. Only by coming out of ourselves to walk with the Lord and by doing his will can we live in true freedom.

I would also like to highlight another aspect of Peter's attitude in prison. In fact, we note that while the Christian community is praying earnestly from him, Peter "was sleeping" (Acts 12:6). In a critical situation of serious danger, it is an attitude that might seem strange, but instead denotes tranquility and faith. He trusts God. He knows he is surrounded by the solidarity and prayers of his own people and completely abandons himself into the hands of the Lord. So it must be with our prayer, assiduous, in solidarity with others, fully trusting that God knows us in our depths and takes care of us to the point that Jesus says "even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore" (Mt 10:30–31). Peter lives through that night of imprisonment and release from prison as a moment of his discipleship with the Lord who overcomes the darkness of night and frees him from the chains of slavery and the threat of death. His is a miraculous release, marked by various accurately described steps, guided by the Angel, despite the monitoring of the guards, through the first and second guard posts, up to the iron doors to exit to the city, with the door opening by itself in front of them (cf. Acts 12:10). Peter and the Angel of the Lord make their way together down a stretch of the street until, coming back to himself, the Apostle realizes that the Lord really freed him and, after having reflected on the matter, went to the house of Mary the mother of Mark where many disciples were gathered in prayer. Once again the community's response to difficulty and danger is to trust in God, strengthening the relationship with Him.

Here it seems useful to recall another difficult situation that the early Christian community experienced. St James speaks of it in his Letter. It is a community in crisis, in difficulty, not so much because of persecution, but because of the jealousies and contentions within it (cf. Jas 3:14–16). The Apostle wonders about the reason for this situation. He finds two primary motives. The first is that they let themselves be carried away by their emotions, by the dictates of their own interests, by selfishness (cf. Jas 4:1–2a). The second is the lack of prayer—"you do not ask" (Jas 4:2b)—or a kind of a prayer that cannot qualify as such—"You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, to spend it on your passions" (Jas 4:3). This situation would change, according to St James, if the community all spoke together with God, truly praying assiduously and unanimously. In fact,

even talking about God runs the risk of losing inner strength and the testimony dries up if they are not animated, sustained and accompanied by prayer, by continuity of a living dialogue with the Lord. An important reminder also for us and our communities, both the small ones like the family and the bigger ones like the parish, the diocese and the entire Church. And it makes me think that they prayed in this community of St James, but prayed wrongly, solely for their own passions. We must always learn again how to pray properly, truly pray, moving towards God and not towards our own good.

Instead, the community that is concerned about Peter's imprisonment is a community that truly prays the entire night, deeply united. And it is overwhelming joy that fills the hearts of all when the Apostle unexpectedly knocks at the door. It is joy and amazement in light of the actions of the God who listens. Thus, from the Church arises the prayer for Peter and to the Church he returns to tell "how the Lord had brought him out of the prison" (Acts 12:17). In that Church where he is set as a rock (cf. Mt 16:18), Peter recounts his "Passover" of liberation. He experiences true freedom in following Jesus. He is enveloped in the radiant light of the Resurrection and can therefore testify to the point of martyrdom that the Lord is Risen and "sent his Angel and rescued me from the hand of Herod" (Acts 12:11). The martyrdom he was to suffer in Rome will definitively unite him with Christ, who had told him: when you are old, another will take you where you do not want to go, to show by what kind of death he was to glorify God (cf. Jn 21:18–19).

Dear brothers and sisters, the episode of the liberation of Peter as told by Luke tells us that the Church, each of us, goes through the night of trial. But it is unceasing vigilance in prayer that sustains us. I too, from the first moment of my election as the Successor of St Peter, have always felt supported by your prayer, by the prayers of the Church, especially in moments of great difficulty. My heartfelt thanks. With constant and faithful prayer the Lord releases us from the chains, guides us through every night of imprisonment that can gnaw at our hearts. He gives us the peace of heart to face the difficulties of life, persecution, opposition and even rejection. Peter's experience shows us the power of prayer. And the Apostle, though in chains, feels calm in the certainty of never being alone. The community is praying for him. The Lord is near him. He indeed knows that Christ's "power is made perfect in weakness" (2 Cor 12:9). Constant



and unanimous prayer is also a precious tool to overcome any trial that may arise on life's journey, because it is being deeply united to God that allows us also to be united to others. Thank you.

## **Prayer in St Paul**

*16 May 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In recent catecheses we reflected on prayer in the Acts of the Apostles, today I would like to begin to speak about prayer in the Letters of St Paul, the Apostle to the Gentiles. First of all, I would like to note that it is by no accident that his Letters open and close with expressions of prayer: at the beginning thanksgiving and praise, and at the end the hope that the grace of God may guide the path of the community to whom the Letter is addressed. Between the opening formula: "I thank my God through Jesus Christ" (Rom 1:8), and his final wish: "The grace of the Lord Jesus be with you all" (1 Cor 16:23), the Apostle's letters unfold. St Paul's prayer is one which manifests itself in a great many ways that move from thanksgiving to blessing, from praise to petitions and intercessions, from hymns to supplication. He uses a variety of expressions which demonstrate how prayer concerns and penetrates every one of life's situations, whether they be personal or of the communities, whom he is addressing.

One element that the Apostle would have us understand is that prayer should not be seen simply as a good deed done by us to God, our own action. It is, above all, a gift, the fruit of the living presence, the life-giving presence of the Father and of Jesus Christ in us. In the Letter to the Romans, he writes: "Likewise the Spirit helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words" (8:26). And we know how true it is when the Apostle says: "we do not know how to pray as we ought". We want to pray, but God is far, we do not have the words, the language, to speak with God, not even the thought. We can only open ourselves, set our time at the disposal of God, waiting for him to help us enter into true dialogue. The Apostle says: this very lack of words, this absence of words, even the desire to enter into contact with God is a prayer that the Holy Spirit not only

understands, but carries, interprets, to God. It is precisely our weakness which becomes, through the Holy Spirit, true prayer, true contact with God. The Holy Spirit is almost the interpreter who makes God and us ourselves understand what we want to say.

In prayer we experience, more so than in other dimensions of life, our weakness, our poverty, our being created, because we stand before the omnipotence and the transcendence of God. And the more we progress in listening to and dialoguing with God, for prayer becomes the daily breathe of our soul, the more we perceive the meaning of our limits, not just before the concrete situations of every day but in our relationship with the Lord too. Growing within us is the need to trust, to trust ever more in him; we understand that “we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26). And it is the Holy Spirit who helps us in our incapacity, who illuminates our minds and warms our hearts, guiding us to turn to God. For St Paul prayer is above all the work of the Spirit in our humanity, taking charge of our weakness and transforming us from men attached to the material world into spiritual men. In the First Letter to the Corinthians he writes: “Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit which is from God, that we might understand the gifts bestowed on us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who possess the Spirit” (2:12–13). With his dwelling in our human frailty, the Holy Spirit changes us, intercedes for us, leads us toward the heights of God (cf. Rom 8:26).

With this presence of the Holy Spirit our union with Christ is realized, for it is the Spirit of the Son of God in whom we are made children. St Paul speaks of the Spirit of Christ (cf. Rom 8:9), and not only the Spirit of God. Clearly: if Christ is the Son of God, his spirit is also the Spirit of God, and thus if the Spirit of God, the Spirit of Christ, had already become very close to us in the Son of God and the Son of man, the Spirit of God too becomes human spirit and touches us; we can enter into the communion of the Spirit.

It was as if he had said that not only God the Father was made visible in the Incarnation of the Son, but also the Spirit of God is manifest in the life and action of Jesus, of Jesus Christ who lived, was crucified, died and rose again. The Apostle reminds us that “No one can say ‘Jesus is Lord’ except by the Holy Spirit”

(1 Cor 12:3). Therefore, the Spirit directs our heart towards Jesus Christ, in such a way that “it is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us” (cf. Gal 2:20). In his *De sacramentis*, reflecting on the Eucharist, St Ambrose says: “Whoever is drunk of the Spirit is rooted in Christ” (5, 3, 12: *PL* 16, 450).

And now I would like to underline three consequences in Christian life when we let work within us not the spirit of the world but the Spirit of Christ as the interior principle of our entire action.

First, with prayer animated by the Spirit we are enabled to abandon and overcome every form of fear and slavery, living the authentic freedom of the children of God. Without prayer which every day nourishes our being in Christ, in an intimacy which progressively grows, we find ourselves in the state described by St Paul in his Letter to the Romans: we do not do the good we want, but the evil we do not want (cf. Rom 7:19). And this is the expression of the alienation of human beings, of the destruction of our freedom, the circumstances of our being because of original sin: we want the good that we do not do and we do what we do not want to do: evil. The Apostle wants to make us understand that it is not primarily our will that frees us from these conditions, nor even the law, but the Holy Spirit. And since “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom” (2 Cor 3:17), in prayer we experience the freedom given by the Spirit: an authentic freedom, which is freedom from evil and sin for the good and for life, for God. The freedom of the Spirit, St Paul continues, is never identified with licentiousness, nor with the possibility to choose evil, but rather with “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self control” (Gal 5:22). This is true freedom: actually to be able to follow our desire for good, for true joy, for communion with God and to be free from the oppression of circumstances that pull us in other directions.

A second consequence occurs in our life when we let work within us the Spirit of Christ and when the very relationship with God becomes so profound that no other reality or situation affects it. We understand that with prayer we are not liberated from trials and suffering, but we can live through them in union with Christ, with his suffering, in the hope of also participating in his glory (cf. Rom 8:17). Many times, in our prayer, we ask God to be freed from physical and spiritual evil, and we do it with great trust. However, often we have the

impression of not being heard and we may well feel discouraged and fail to persevere. In reality, there is no human cry that is not heard by God and it is precisely in constant and faithful prayer that we comprehend with St Paul that “the sufferings of this present time are not worth comparing with the glory that is to be revealed to us” (Rom 8:18). Prayer does not exempt us from trial and suffering, indeed—St Paul says—we “groan inwardly as we wait for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23). He says that prayer does not exempt us from suffering but prayer does permit us to live through it and face it with a new strength, with the confidence of Jesus, who—according to the Letter to the Hebrews—“In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him [God] who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear” (5:7). The answer of God the Father to the Son, to his loud cries and tears, was not freedom from suffering, from the cross, from death, but a much greater fulfillment, an answer much more profound; through the cross and death God responded with the Resurrection of the Son, with new life. Prayer animated by the Holy Spirit leads us too to live every day a journey of life with its trials and sufferings, with the fullness of hope, with trust in God who answers us as he answered the Son.

And, the third, the prayer of the believer opens also to the dimensions of humanity and of all creation, in the expectation that “creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God” (Rom 8:19). This means that prayer, sustained by the Spirit of Christ speaking in the depths of each one of us, does not stay closed in on itself. It is never just prayer for me, but opens itself to sharing the suffering of our time, of others. It becomes intercession for others, and like this deliverance from me, a channel of hope for all creation, the expression of that love of God that is poured into our hearts through the Spirit whom he has given to us (cf. Rom 5:5). And precisely this is a sign of true prayer, which does not end in us, but opens itself to others and like this delivers me, and thus helps in the redemption of the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, St Paul teaches us that in our prayer we must open ourselves to the presence of the Holy Spirit, who prays in us with sighs too deep for words, to lead us to adhere to God with all our heart and with all our being. The Spirit of Christ becomes the strength of our “weak” prayers, the light of our “darkened” prayer, the fire of our “barren” prayer, giving us true inner freedom,

teaching us to live facing the trials of existence, in the certainty of not being alone, opening us to the horizons of humanity and of creation which “has been groaning in travail” (Rom 8:22). Thank you.

## **Prayer to the Father**

*23 May 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last Wednesday I explained what St Paul says about the Holy Spirit being the great master of prayer who teaches us to address God with the affectionate words that children use, calling him: “Abba, Father”. This is what Jesus did; even in the most dramatic moment of his earthly life he never lost his trust in the Father and always called on him with the intimacy of the beloved Son. In Gethsemane, when he feels the anguish of his approaching death, his prayer is: “Abba, Father, all things are possible to you; remove this cup from me; yet not what I will, but what you will” (Mk 14:36).

Since the very first steps on her journey the Church has taken up this invocation and made it her own, especially in the prayer of the “Our Father”, in which we say every day: “Our Father ... Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven! (Mt 6:9–10).

We find it twice in the Letters of St Paul. The Apostle, as we have just heard, addresses these words to the Galatians: “And because you are sons, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, ‘Abba! Father!’” (Gal 4:6). And, at the centre of that hymn to the Holy Spirit which is the eighth chapter of the Letter to the Romans, St Paul declares: “For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry: ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself ...” (Rom 8:15).

Christianity is not a religion of fear but of trust and of love for the Father who loves us. Both these crucial affirmations speak to us of the sending forth and reception of the Holy Spirit, the gift of the Risen One which makes us sons in Christ, the Only-Begotten Son, and places us in a filial relationship with God, a relationship of deep trust, like that of children; a filial relationship like that of Jesus, even though its origin and quality are different. Jesus is the eternal Son of

God who took flesh; we instead become sons in him, in time, through faith and through the sacraments of Baptism and Confirmation. Thanks to these two sacraments we are immersed in the Paschal Mystery of Christ. The Holy Spirit is the precious and necessary gift that makes us children of God, that brings about that adoption as sons to which all human beings are called because, as the divine blessing in the Letter to the Ephesians explains, God, in Christ, “chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him. He destined us in love to be his [adopted] sons through Jesus Christ” (Eph 1:4).

Perhaps people today fail to perceive the beauty, greatness and profound consolation contained in the word “father” with which we can turn to God in prayer because today the father figure is often not sufficiently present and all too often is not sufficiently positive in daily life. The father’s absence, the problem of a father who is not present in a child’s life, is a serious problem of our time. It therefore becomes difficult to understand what it means to say that God is really our Father. From Jesus himself, from his filial relationship with God, we can learn what “father” really means and what is the true nature of the Father who is in heaven.

Critics of religion have said that speaking of the “Father”, of God, is a projection of our ancestors in heaven. But the opposite is true: in the Gospel Christ shows us who is the father and as he is a true father we can understand true fatherhood and even learn true fatherhood. Let us think of Jesus’ words in the Sermon on the Mount where he says: “But I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:44–45). It is the very love of Jesus, the Only-Begotten Son—who goes even to the point of giving himself on the Cross—that reveals to us the true nature of the Father: he is Love and in our prayers as children we too enter this circuit of love, the love of God that purifies our desires, our attitudes marked by closure, self-sufficiency, and the typical selfishness of the former man.

We could therefore say that God in being Father has two dimensions. First of all God is our Father because he is our Creator. Each one of us, each man and each woman, is a miracle of God, is wanted by him and is personally known by him. When it says in the Book of Genesis that the human being is created in the image

of God (cf. 1:27), it tries to express this precise reality: God is our Father, for him we are not anonymous, impersonal beings but have a name. And a phrase in the Psalms always moves me when I pray. “Your hands have made and fashioned me”, says the Psalmist (Ps 119[118]:73). In this beautiful image each one of us can express his personal relationship with God. “Your hands have fashioned me. You thought of me and created and wanted me”.

Nonetheless this is still not enough. The Spirit of Christ opens us to a second dimension of God’s fatherhood, beyond creation, since Jesus is the “Son” in the full sense of “one in being with the Father”, as we profess in the Creed. Becoming a human being like us, with his Incarnation, death and Resurrection, Jesus in his turn accepts us in his humanity and even in his being Son, so that we too may enter into his specific belonging to God. Of course, our being children of God does not have the fullness of Jesus. We must increasingly become so throughout the journey of our Christian existence, developing in the following of Christ and in communion with him so as to enter ever more intimately into the relationship of love with God the Father which sustains our life.

It is this fundamental reality that is disclosed to us when we open ourselves to the Holy Spirit and he makes us turn to God saying “Abba!”, Father. We have truly preceded creation, entering into adoption with Jesus; united, we are really in God and are his children in a new way, in a new dimension.

Now I would like to return to St Paul’s two passages on this action of the Holy Spirit in our prayers on which we are reflecting. Here too are two passages that correspond with each other but contain a different nuance. In the Letter to the Galatians, in fact, the Apostle says that the Spirit cries: “Abba! Father!” in us. In the Letter to the Romans he says that it is we who cry: “Abba! Father!”. And St Paul wants to make us understand that Christian prayer is never one way, never happens in one direction from us to God, it is never merely “an action of ours” but, rather, is the expression of a reciprocal relationship in which God is the first to act; it is the Holy Spirit who cries in us and we are able to cry because the impetus comes from the Holy Spirit.

We would not be able to pray were the desire for God, for being children of God, not engraved in the depths of our heart. Since he came into existence *homo sapiens* has always been in search of God and endeavours to speak with God

because God has engraved himself in our hearts. The first initiative therefore comes from God and with Baptism, once again God acts in us, the Holy Spirit acts in us; he is the prime initiator of prayer so that we may really converse with God and say “Abba” to God. Hence his presence opens our prayers and our lives, it opens on to the horizons of the Trinity and of the Church.

We realize in addition—this is the second point—that the prayer of the Spirit of Christ in us and ours in him is not solely an individual act but an act of the entire Church. In praying our heart is opened, not only do we enter into communion with God but actually with all the children of God, because we are one body. When we address the Father in our inner room in silence and in recollection we are never alone. Those who speak to God are not alone. We are within the great prayer of the Church, we are part of a great symphony that the Christian community in all the parts of the earth and in all epochs, raises to God. Naturally, the musicians and instruments differ—and this is an element of enrichment—but the melody of praise is one and in harmony. Every time, then, that we shout or say: “Abba! Father!” it is the Church, the whole communion of people in prayer that supports our invocation and our invocation is an invocation of the Church.

This is also reflected in the wealth of charisms and of the ministries and tasks that we carry out in the community. St Paul writes to the Christians of Corinth: “There are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of working, but it is the same God who inspires them all in everyone” (1 Cor 12:4–6).

Prayer guided by the Holy Spirit, who makes us say: “Abba! Father!” with Christ and in Christ, inserts us into the great mosaic of the family of God in which each one has a place and an important role, in profound unity with the whole.

One last remark: we also learn to cry “Abba! Father!” with Mary, Mother of the Son of God. The consummation of the fullness of time, of which St Paul speaks in his Letter to the Galatians (cf. 4:4) is brought about at the moment when Mary said “yes”, the moment of her full adherence to God’s will: “Behold, I am the handmaid of the Lord” (Lk 1:38).



Dear brothers and sisters, let us learn to savour in our prayers the beauty of being friends, indeed children of God, of being able to call on him with the trust that a child has for the parents who love him. Let us open our prayers to the action of the Holy Spirit so that he may cry to God in us: “Abba! Father!”, and so that our prayers may transform and constantly convert our way of thinking and our action to bring us ever more closely into line with Jesus Christ, the Only-Begotten Son of God. Many thanks.

## **The yes of God**

*30 May 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this series of Catecheses we are meditating on prayer in the Letters of St Paul and we are endeavouring to see Christian prayer as a true and personal encounter with God the Father, in Christ, and through the Holy Spirit. At this meeting today the faithful “yes” of God and the trusting “amen” of believers enter into dialogue and I would like to emphasize this dynamic by reflecting on the Second Letter to the Corinthians. St Paul sends this passionate Letter to a Church which has called his apostolate into question on several occasions and opens his heart so that those to whom he is writing may be reassured of his fidelity to Christ and to the Gospel. This Second Letter to the Corinthians begins with one of the most exalted prayers of blessing in the New Testament. It says “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God” (2 Cor 1:3–4).

Indeed Paul lived amidst great trials, he had to pass through much difficulty and affliction but he never gave in to discouragement. He was sustained by the grace and closeness of the Lord Jesus Christ, for whom he had become an apostle and a witness, putting his whole life into Jesus’ hands. For this very reason Paul begins this Letter with a prayer of blessing and thanksgiving to God, since in his life as an Apostle of Christ he never, not even for a single moment, felt deprived of the support of the merciful Father, the God of all comfort.

His suffering was appalling, as he says in this very Letter, but in all these situations, when it seemed that there was no way out, he received consolation and comfort from God. He was also persecuted for proclaiming Christ and even thrown into prison, but he always felt inwardly free, enlivened by Christ's presence and keen to proclaim the word of hope of the Gospel.

So it was that he wrote from prison to Timothy, his faithful collaborator. In chains, he wrote, "the word of God is not fettered. Therefore I endure everything for the [God's] sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation which in Christ Jesus goes with eternal glory" (2 Tim 2:9b–10). In suffering for Christ, he experiences God's consolation. He writes: "For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too" (2 Cor 1:5).

So, in the prayer of blessing that introduces the Second Letter to the Corinthians, the theme of affliction stands out next to the theme of consolation. This should not be understood merely as comfort but especially as an encouragement and an exhortation not to let oneself be overcome by trials and tribulations. The invitation is to live every situation united to Christ, who takes upon his shoulders the whole burden of the world's suffering and sin in order to bring light, hope and redemption.

So it is that Jesus makes us capable in our turn of consoling those experiencing every sort of affliction. Profound union with Christ in prayer and trust in his presence, lead to the readiness to share in the suffering and troubles of our brethren. St Paul writes: "Who is weak, and am I not weak? Who is made to fall, and am I not indignant?" (cf. 2 Cor 11:29). This sharing is not born simply from kindness, nor solely from human generosity or an altruistic spirit; rather, it stems from the consolation of the Lord, from the steadfast support of the "transcendent power [that] belongs to God and not to us" (2 Cor 4:7).

Dear brothers and sisters, our life and our journey are frequently marked by difficulty, misunderstanding and suffering. We all know it. In a faithful relationship with the Lord, in constant, daily prayer, we too can feel tangibly the consolation that comes from God. And this strengthens our faith, because it enables us to have an actual experience of God's "yes" to man, to us, to me, in Christ. It makes us feel the fidelity of his love which even extended to the gift of his Son on the Cross. St Paul says, "for the Son of God, Jesus Christ, whom we

preached among you, Silvanus and Timothy and I, was not Yes and No; but in him it is always Yes. For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God” (2 Cor 1:19–20). The “yes” of God is not halved, it is not somewhere between “yes” and “no”, but is a sound and simple “yes”. And we respond to this “yes” with our own “yes”, with our “amen”, and so we are sure of the “yes” of God.

Faith is not primarily a human action but rather a freely given gift of God which is rooted in his faithfulness, in his “yes”, which makes us understand how to live our life, loving him and our brethren. The whole history of salvation is a gradual revelation of this faithfulness of God, in spite of our infidelity and negation, in the certainty that “the gifts and the call of God are irrevocable!”, as the Apostle declares in his Letter to the Romans (11:29).

Dear brothers and sisters, God’s way of acting—very different from ours—gives us comfort, strength and hope because God does not withdraw his “yes”. In the face of stressful human relations, even in the family, we often fail to persevere in freely given love which demands commitment and sacrifice. Instead, God does not grow tired of us; he never wearies of being patient with us and, with his immense mercy, always leads the way and reaches out to us first: his “yes” is absolutely reliable.

In the event of the Crucifixion he offers us the measure of his love which does not count the cost and knows no bounds. St Paul writes in his Letter to Titus: “the goodness and loving kindness of God our Saviour appeared” (Tit 3:4). And because this “yes” is renewed every day, “it is God who ... has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor 1:21b–22).

Indeed, it is the Holy Spirit who makes God’s “yes” in Jesus Christ constantly present and alive and creates in our hearts the desire to follow him so as to enter totally into his love, one day, when we will receive a dwelling-place in heaven not built by human hands. There is no one who has not been touched and called into question by this faithful love, which is also capable of waiting even for all those who continue to respond with the “no” of rejection or of the hardening of their hearts. God waits for us, he always seeks us out, he wants to welcome us into communion with him to give to each one of us fullness of life, hope and peace.

The Church's "amen" is grafted onto God's faithful "yes" which resonates in every action of the Liturgy. "Amen" is the answer of faith that always concludes our personal and community prayers and expresses our "yes" to God's project. We often respond to prayers with our "amen" out of habit, without grasping its deep meaning.

The word derives from *'aman*, which in Hebrew and in Aramaic means "to make permanent", "to consolidate" and, consequently, "to be certain", "to tell the truth". If we look at Sacred Scripture we see that this "amen" is said at the end of the Psalms of blessing and praise, such as, for example, Psalm 41[40] "But you have upheld me because of my integrity, and set me in your presence for ever. Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, from everlasting to everlasting! Amen and Amen" (vv. 12–13).

Or else it expresses adherence to God at the moment when the People of Israel return full of joy from the Babylonian Exile and say their "yes", their "amen" to God and to his Law. In the Book of Nehemiah it is told that after this return, "Ezra opened the book [of the Law] in the sight of all the people; for he was above all the people; and when he opened it all the people stood. And Ezra blessed the Lord, the great God; and all the people answered, 'Amen, Amen', lifting up their hands" (Neh 8:5–6).

From the outset, therefore, the "amen" of the Jewish liturgy became the "amen" of the first Christian communities. Indeed the Book of the Christian liturgy par excellence, the Revelation to John begins with the "amen" of the Church: "To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (Rev 1:5b–6). This is what it says in the first chapter of the Book of Revelation. And the same Book ends with the invocation "Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!" (Rev 22:20).

Dear friends, prayer is the encounter with a living Person to listen to and with whom to converse; it is the meeting with God that renews his unshakeable fidelity, his "yes" to man, to each one of us, to give us his consolation in the storms of life and to enable us to live, united to him, a life full of joy and goodness, which will find fulfilment in eternal life.

In our prayers we are called to say “yes” to God, to respond with this “amen” of adherence, of faithfulness to him throughout our life. We can never achieve this faithfulness by our own efforts; it is not only the fruit of our daily striving; it comes from God and is founded on the “yes” of Christ who said: my food is to do the will of the Father (cf. Jn 4:34).

It is into this “yes” that we must enter, into this “yes” of Christ, into adherence to God’s will, in order to reach the point of saying with St Paul that it is not we who live but Christ himself who lives in us. Then the “amen” of our personal and community prayers will envelop and transform the whole of our life into a life of God’s consolation, a life immersed in eternal and steadfast love. Thank you.

## **Prayer as Oases of Peace**

*13 June 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The daily encounter with the Lord and regular acceptance of the Sacraments enable us to open our mind and heart to his presence, his words and his action. Prayer is not only the breath of the soul but, to make use of a metaphor, it is also the oasis of peace from which we can draw the water that nourishes our spiritual life and transforms our existence. God draws us towards him, offering us enlightenment and consolation, and enabling us to scale the mountain of holiness so that we may be ever closer to him.

This is the personal experience to which St Paul refers in Chapter 12 of his Second Letter to the Corinthians on which I wish to reflect today. In the face of those who contested the legitimacy of his apostolate he does not actually list the communities he has founded, the kilometres he has covered; he does not limit himself to recalling the difficulty and opposition he confronted in order to proclaim the Gospel; he points to his relationship with the Lord, a relationship so intense as also to be marked by moments of ecstasy, of profound contemplation (cf. 2 Cor 12:1); hence he does not boast of his achievements, his strength or his activities and successes, but rather of what God has worked in and through him.

Indeed with great modesty he tells of the moment when he lived the special experience of being caught up to heaven by God. He recalls that 14 years before he sent the Letter he “was caught up to the third heaven” (v. 2). With the language and ways of someone who is telling something that cannot be told, St Paul also speaks of that event in the third person. He says that a man was caught up into God’s “garden”, into Paradise. The Apostle’s contemplation is so profound and so intense that he does not even remember the content of the revelation he received; yet he clearly remembers the date and the circumstances in which the Lord grasped him in such a complete way and attracted him to himself, just as he had on the road to Damascus at the time of his conversion (cf. Phil 3:12).

St Paul continues, saying that precisely to prevent pride from going to his head in the greatness of the revelations he had received, he has been given a “thorn” (2 Cor 12:7), an affliction, and insistently begs the Risen One to free him of the messenger of Satan, of this painful thorn in the flesh. Three times, he says, he beseeched the Lord to remove this trial. And it is in this situation that in deep contemplation of God, in which “he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter” (v. 4), he receives an answer to his entreaty. The Risen One addresses to him clear and reassuring words: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness” (v. 9).

Paul’s commentary on these words may leave us amazed, but it shows that he understood what it means to truly be an apostle of the Gospel. In fact he exclaims: “I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong” (vv. 9b–10), in other words he does not boast of his own actions but of the activity of Christ who acts precisely through his weakness.

Let us reflect a little longer on this event that occurred during the years in which St Paul lived in silence and contemplation, before he began to travel in the West to proclaim Christ, because this attitude of profound humility and trust before God’s manifestation of himself is also fundamental to our prayer and to our life, to our relationship with God and to our weaknesses.

First of all, what are the weaknesses that the Apostle is talking about? What is this “thorn” in the flesh? We do not know and he does not tell us but his attitude enables us to realize that every difficulty in following Christ and witnessing to his Gospel may be overcome by opening oneself with trust to the Lord’s action. St Paul is well aware that he is an “unworthy servant” (Lk 17:10)—it is not he who has done great things, it is the Lord—an “earthen vessel” (2 Cor 4:7), in which God places the riches and power of his Grace. In this moment of concentrated contemplative prayer, St Paul understands clearly how to face and how to live every event, especially suffering, difficulty and persecution. The power of God, who does not abandon us or leave us on our own but becomes our support and strength, is revealed at the very moment when we experience our own weakness.

Of course, Paul would have preferred to be freed from this “thorn”, from this affliction; but God says: “No, you are in need of it. You will have sufficient grace to resist it and to do what must be done. This also applies to us. The Lord does not free us from evils, but helps us to mature in sufferings, difficulties and persecutions. Faith, therefore, tells us that if we abide in God, “though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day”, in trials (cf. v. 16).

The Apostle communicates to the Christians of Corinth and to us too that “this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (v. 17). In fact, humanly speaking the burden of his difficulties was not light, it was very heavy; but in comparison with God’s love, with the greatness of being loved by God, it appears light, in the knowledge that the quantity of glory will be boundless. Therefore, to the extent that our union with the Lord increases and that our prayers become intense, we also go to the essential and understand that it is not the power of our own means, our virtues, our skills that brings about the Kingdom of God but that it is God who works miracles precisely through our weakness, our inadequacy for the task. We must therefore have the humility not to trust merely in ourselves, but to work, with the Lord’s help, in the Lord’s vineyard, entrusting ourselves to him as fragile “earthen vessels”.

St Paul refers to two particular revelations that radically changed his life. The first—as we know—is the overwhelming question on the road to Damascus:

“Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4), a question that led him to discover and encounter Christ, alive and present, and to hear his call to be an apostle of the Gospel.

The second revelation consists of the words the Lord addressed to him in the experience of contemplative prayer on which we are reflecting: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. Faith alone, trust in the action of God, in the goodness of God who does not abandon us, is the guarantee that we are not working in vain. Thus the Lord’s Grace was the power that accompanied St Paul in his immense efforts to spread the Gospel and his heart entered the Heart of Christ, becoming able to lead others towards the One who died and rose for us.

In prayer, therefore, let us open our soul to the Lord so that he may come and inhabit our weakness, transforming it into power for the Gospel. Moreover the Greek verb with which Paul describes this dwelling of the Lord in his frail humanity is also rich in meaning; he uses *episkenoō*, which we may convey with “pitching his tent”. The Lord continues to pitch his tent in us, among us: he is the Mystery of the Incarnation. The divine Word himself, who came to dwell in our humanity, who wishes to dwell in us, to put up his tent in us to illuminate and transform our life and the world.

The intense contemplation of God experienced by St Paul recalls that of the disciples on Mount Tabor when, seeing Jesus transfigured and shining with light, Peter said to him, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Mk 9:5). “He did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid”, St Mark adds (v. 6).

Contemplating the Lord is at the same time both fascinating and awe-inspiring: fascinating because he draws us to him and enraptures our hearts by uplifting them, carrying them to his heights where we experience the peace and beauty of his love; awe-inspiring because he lays bare our human weakness, our inadequacy, the effort to triumph over the Evil One who endangers our life, that thorn embedded also in our flesh. In prayer, in the daily contemplation of the Lord, we receive the strength of God’s love and feel that St Paul’s words to the Christians of Rome are true, when he wrote: “For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come,



nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38–39).

In a world in which we risk relying solely on the efficiency and power of human means, we are called to rediscover and to witness to the power of God which is communicated in prayer, with which every day we grow in conforming our life to that of Christ, who—as Paul says—“was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God” (2 Cor 13:4).

Dear friends, in the past century Albert Schweitzer, a Protestant theologian who won the Nobel Peace Prize, said: “Paul is a mystic and nothing but a mystic”, that is, a man truly in love with Christ and so united to him that he could say: Christ lives in me. The mysticism of St Paul is not only founded on the exceptional events he lived through, but also on his daily and intense relationship with the Lord who always sustained him with his Grace.

Mysticism did not distance him from reality, on the contrary it gave him the strength to live each day for Christ and to build the Church to the ends of the world of that time. Union with God does not distance us from the world but gives us the strength to remain really in the world, to do what must be done in the world.

Thus in our life of prayer as well we can perhaps have moments of special intensity in which we feel the Lord’s presence is more vivid, especially in situations of aridity, of difficulty, of suffering, of an apparent absence of God. Only if we are grasped by Christ’s love will we be equal to facing every adversity, convinced, like Paul, that we can do all things in the One who gives us strength (cf. Phil 4:13). Therefore, the more room we make for prayer the more we will see our life transformed and enlivened by the tangible power of God’s love.

This is what happened, for example, to Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta who found in contemplation of Jesus and even also in long periods of aridity the ultimate reason and incredible strength to recognize him in the poor and abandoned, in spite of her fragility. Contemplation of Christ in our life does not alienate us—as I have already said—from reality. Rather it enables us to share even more in human events, because the Lord, in attracting us to him through prayer, enables

us to make ourselves present and close to every brother and sister in his love.  
Many thanks.

## Prayer of Blessing

20 June 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Our prayers are very often requests for help in a time of need. Moreover, this is normal for men and women because we need help, we need others, we need God. Thus it is normal for us to ask God something, to seek help from him; and we must bear in mind that the prayer the Lord taught us, the “Our Father”, is a prayer of petition. With this prayer the Lord teaches us the priorities of our prayer and cleanses and purifies our desires and in this way he cleanses and purifies our hearts. Therefore even though it is in itself normal that we should ask for something in prayer, it should not be exclusively so.

There is also cause for thanksgiving and if we pay a little attention we see that we receive very many good things from God. He is so good to us that it is right and necessary to say “thank you”. And our prayer should also be a prayer of praise: if our hearts are open in spite of all the problems we also see the beauty of his creation, the goodness that is revealed in his creation. Therefore we must not only ask but also praise and give thanks, only in this way is our prayer complete. In his Letters St Paul does not only speak of prayer; he also refers to prayers and of course prayers of petition as well, but prayers of praise and blessing for all that God has worked and continues to work in humanity’s history.

And today I would like to reflect on the First Chapter of the Letter to the Ephesians that begins, precisely, with a prayer which is a hymn of blessing, an expression of gratitude, of joy. St Paul blesses God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, because in him he has made us “know the mystery of his will” (Eph 1:9). There truly is a reason to express gratitude if God enables us to know all that is hidden: his will with us, for us; “the mystery of his will”. “*Mysterion*” or “Mystery”: a term that recurs frequently in Sacred Scripture and in the Liturgy.

I do not want to enter into philology here, but in the common language it indicates what it is impossible to know, a reality we are unable to grasp with our own intellect. The hymn that opens the Letter to the Ephesians takes us by the hand and leads us toward a more profound meaning of this term and of the reality that it points out to us. “Mystery”, for believers, is not so much the unknown as rather the merciful will of God, his plan of love which was fully revealed in Jesus Christ and offers us the possibility “to comprehend with all the saints what is the breadth and the length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ” (Eph 3:18–19). The “unknown mystery” of God is revealed, it is that God loves us and has loved us from the beginning, from eternity.

Let us therefore reflect a little on this solemn and profound prayer. “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (Eph 1:3). St Paul uses the verb “*euloghein*”, which more often translates the Hebrew term “*barak*”; it is praising, glorifying and thanking God the Father as the source of the goods of salvation, like the One who “has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places”.

The Apostle thanks and praises, but he also reflects on the reasons that spur the human being to offer this praise, this thanksgiving, presenting the fundamental elements of the divine plan and its stages. First of all we must bless God the Father because, St Paul writes, “he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him” (v. 4). What makes us holy and blameless is love. God called us to existence, to holiness. And this choice even precedes the foundation of the world. We have always been in his plan and in his mind. With the Prophet Jeremiah we too can say that he knew us before he formed us in our mother’s womb (cf. Jer 1:5); and in knowing us he loved us. The vocation to holiness, that is, to communion with God belongs to an eternal design of this God, a design that extends through history and includes all the men and women of the world, because it is a universal appeal. God excludes no one, his plan is solely of love. St John Chrysostom says: God himself “rendered us holy but then we must continue to be holy. A holy man is he who is a partaker of faith” (*Homilies on the Letter to the Ephesians*, 1, 1, 4).

Paul continues, “he destined us in love to be his sons through Jesus Christ”, to be incorporated in his Only-Begotten Son. The Apostle underlines the

gratuitousness of this marvellous plan of God for humanity. God did not choose us because we are good, but because he is good. And antiquity had a phrase to say on goodness: *bonum est diffusivum sui*; goodness is communicated, it spreads. And thus, since God is goodness, he is the communication of goodness, he wishes to communicate; he creates because he wants to communicate his goodness to us and to make us good and holy.

At the heart of the prayer of blessing, the Apostle illustrates the way in which the Father's plan of salvation is brought about in Christ, in his beloved Son. He writes: "in him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph 1:7). The sacrifice of the Cross of Christ is the unique and unrepeatable event with which the Father showed his love for us in a luminous way, not only in words but in practice. God is so real and his love is so real that he enters into history, he becomes a man to feel what it is, how it is to live in this created world, and he accepts the path of suffering of the Passion and even suffers death. God's love is so real that he does not only participate in our being but also in our suffering and our dying. The sacrifice of the Cross ensures that we become "God's property" because the Blood of Christ has redeemed us from sin, cleanses us from evil, removes us from the slavery of sin and death. St Paul invites us to consider the depths of God's love that transforms history, that transformed his very life from being a persecutor of Christians to being an unflagging apostle of the Gospel. Here once again the reassuring words of the Letter to the Romans resound: "If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, will he not also give us all things with him?... For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:31–32; 38–39). We must integrate this certainty—God is for us and no creature can separate us from him because his love is stronger—in our being, in our awareness as Christians.

Lastly, the divine blessing ends with the mention of the Holy Spirit who has been poured out into our hearts; the Paraclete whom we have received as a promised seal: "who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it, to the praise of his glory" (Eph 1:14). Redemption is not yet finished—as we know—

but will reach its fulfilment when those whom God has ransomed are totally saved. We are still on the path of redemption, whose essential reality has been given with the death and Resurrection of Jesus. We are on our way towards definitive redemption, towards the full liberation of God's children. And the Holy Spirit is the certainty that God will bring his plan of salvation to completion, when he will bring back to Christ, the only head, of all "things in heaven and things on earth" (Eph 1:10). St John Chrysostom comments on this point: "God has chosen us for faith and has impressed in us the seal of the inheritance of future glory" (*Homilies on the Letter to the Ephesians*, 2, 11–14). We must accept that the journey of redemption is also our journey, because God wants free creatures who freely say "yes"; but it is above all and first of all his journey. We are in his hands and to walk on the way disclosed by him is now our freedom. Let us walk on this path of redemption, together with Christ and understand that redemption is brought about.

The vision which St Paul presents to us in this great prayer of blessing has led us to contemplate the action of the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity: the Father who chose us before the creation of the world, who thought of us and created us; the Son who redeemed us through his Blood and the Holy Spirit, the pledge of our redemption and of our future glory. In constant prayer, in our daily relationship with God, let us learn, as St Paul did, to perceive ever more clearly the signs of his plan and his action: in the beauty of the Creator that emerges from his creatures (cf. Eph 3:9), as St Francis of Assisi sings: "*Laudato sie mi' Signore, cum tutte le Tue creature*" (ff 263).

It is important to be attentive at this very moment, also in the holiday period, to the beauty of creation and to see God's face shining out in this beauty. The saints showed clearly in their lives what God's power can do in human weakness. And he can also do it in us. In the whole of the history of salvation, in which God has made himself close to us and patiently waits for us to take our time. He understands our infidelities, he encourages our commitment and guides us.

We learn in prayer to see the signs of this merciful plan in the Church's journey. Thus we may grow in the love of God, opening the door so that the Blessed Trinity may come and dwell within us, may illuminate, warm and guide our lives. "If a man loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and

we will come to him and make our home with him” (Jn 14:23), Jesus said, promising the disciples the gift of the Holy Spirit who was to teach them all things. St Irenaeus once said that in the Incarnation the Holy Spirit became accustomed to being in man. In prayer we must become accustomed to being with God. It is very important, that we learn to be with God and thereby see how beautiful it is to be with him, who is the redemption.

Dear friends, when prayer nourishes our spiritual lives we become capable of preserving what St Paul calls “the mystery of faith” with a pure conscience (cf. 11 Tim 3:9). Prayer as a way of “accustoming” oneself to being with God brings into being men and women who are not motivated by selfishness, by the desire to possess or by the thirst for power, but by gratuitousness, by the desire to love, by the thirst to serve, in other words who are motivated by God; and only in this way is it possible to bring light to the darkness of the world.

I would like to end this Catechesis with the epilogue of the Letter to the Romans. With St Paul, let us too glorify God for he has expressed himself entirely to us in Jesus Christ and has given us the Consoler, the Spirit of truth. St Paul writes at the end of his Letter to the Romans: “to him who is able to strengthen you according to my Gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith—to the only wise God be glory for ever more through Jesus Christ! Amen” (16:25–27).

## **Carmen Christo**

*27 June 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Just as we saw over the past Wednesdays, our prayer is composed of silence and words, of singing and of gestures that involve the whole person: from the mouth to the mind, from the heart to the entire body. We find this characteristic in Jewish prayer, especially in the Psalms. Today I would like to speak of one of the most ancient songs or hymns of the Christian tradition which St Paul presents to

us in the Letter to the Philippians. In a certain sense this is his spiritual testament. Indeed, it is a Letter that the Apostle dictated while he was in prison, perhaps in Rome. He must have felt that his death was close at hand, for he says that his life will be offered as a libation (cf. Phil 2:17).

In spite of this situation of grave danger to his physical safety, throughout this text St Paul expresses his joy in being a disciple of Christ, of being able to go to meet him even to the point of seeing death not as a loss but rather as a gain. In the last chapter of the Letter, there is a pressing invitation to joy, a fundamental characteristic of being Christian and of our prayer. St Paul writes: “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4). But how is it possible to rejoice in the face of a death sentence whose execution is now imminent? From where, or better, from whom did St Paul draw the serenity, strength and courage to go forward to meet martyrdom and the out-pouring of his blood?

We find the answer in the middle of the Letter to the Philippians, in what the Christian tradition calls the *carmen Christo*, the hymn to Christ, or, more commonly, the “Christological hymn”; it is a hymn in which all the attention is focused on the “mind” of Christ, that is, on his way of thinking and on his practical approach to life.

This prayer begins with an exhortation: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). These sentiments are presented in the following verses: love, generosity, humility, obedience to God, the gift of self. It is not only or not merely a matter of following Jesus’ example, as something moral, but of involving one’s whole life in his way of thinking and acting. Prayer must lead Christians to knowledge and union in ever deeper love with the Lord, if they are to be able to think, act and love like him, in him and for him. Putting this into practice, learning the sentiments of Jesus, is the way of Christian life.

I would now like to reflect briefly on several elements of this concentrated hymn which sum up the entire divine and human itinerary of the Son of God and englobe the whole of human history: from being in the form of God to the Incarnation, to death on the Cross and to exaltation in the Father’s glory, the behaviour of Adam, of man, is also implicit from the start.

This hymn to Christ begins with his being “*en morphē tou Theou*” the Greek text says, that is, with being “in the form of God” or, rather, in the condition of God. Jesus, true God and true man, does not live his “being as God” in order to triumph or to impose his supremacy, he does not see it as a possession, a privilege or a treasure, to be jealously guarded.

On the contrary, he “stripped” himself, he emptied himself, the Greek text says, taking the “*morphē doulos*”, the “form of a slave”, human reality marked by suffering, poverty and death; he assumed the likeness of men in all things save sin, so as to behave as a servant totally dedicated to serving others.

In this regard Eusebius of Caesarea said:—in the fourth century—“he took upon himself the labours of the suffering members, and made our sicknesses his and suffered on our account all our woes and labours by the laws of love, in conformity with his great love for humanity” (*Demonstratio Evangelica* [*Proof of the Gospel*], 10, 1, 22).

St Paul continues, delineating the “historical” background in which Jesus’ humbling of himself took place: “he humbled himself and became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8). The Son of God truly became man and completed a journey of total obedience and fidelity to the Father’s will, even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of his life. Furthermore the Apostle specifies: “unto death, even death on a cross” On the Cross Jesus Christ attained the greatest degree of humiliation, because crucifixion was the penalty kept for slaves and not for free men: “*mors turpissima crucis*”, Cicero wrote (cf. *In Verrem*, V, 64, 165).

Through the Cross of Christ man is redeemed and Adam’s experience is reversed. Adam, created in the image and likeness of God, claimed to be like God through his own effort, to put himself in God’s place and in this way lost the original dignity that had been given to him. Jesus, instead, was “in the form of God” but humbled himself, immersed himself in the human condition, in total faithfulness to the Father, in order to redeem the Adam who is in us and restore to man the dignity he had lost. The Fathers emphasize that he made himself obedient, restoring to human nature, through his own humanity and obedience, what had been lost through Adam’s disobedience.



In prayer, in the relationship with God, we open our mind, our heart and our will to the action of the Holy Spirit to enter into this dynamic of life, as St Cyril of Alexandria—whose feast we are celebrating today—tells us: “the work of the Spirit seeks to transform us by grace into a perfect copy of his humbling” (*Festal Letter*, 10, 4).

Human logic, instead, often seeks self-fulfilment in power, in domination, in forceful means. Man still wants to build the Tower of Babel with his own efforts, to reach God’s heights by himself, to be like God. The Incarnation and the Cross remind us that complete fulfilment lies in conforming our human will to the will of the Father, in emptying ourselves of our selfishness, to fill ourselves with God’s love, with his charity, and thereby become capable of truly loving others.

Man does not find himself by remaining closed in on himself, by affirming himself. Man finds himself only by coming out of himself; only if we come out of ourselves do we find ourselves. And if Adam wanted to imitate God, this was not a bad thing in itself but he had the wrong idea of God. God is not someone who only wants greatness. God is love which was already given in the Trinity and was then given in the Creation. And imitating God means coming out of oneself, giving oneself in love.

In the second part of this “Christological hymn” of the Letter to the Philippians, the subject changes; it is no longer Christ but God the Father. St Paul stresses that it is precisely out of obedience to the Father’s will that “God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name” (Phil 2:9).

The one who humbled himself profoundly, taking the condition of a slave, is exalted, lifted up above all things by the Father, who gives him the name “*Kyrios*”, “Lord”, the supreme dignity and lordship. Indeed it is before this new name which is the very name of God in the Old Testament, “every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (vv. 10–11).

The Jesus who is exalted and the Jesus of the Last Supper who lays aside his garments and girds himself with a towel, who bends down to wash the Apostles’ feet and asks them: “Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher

and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:12–14). It is important to remember this always, in our prayers and in our life. "The ascent to God occurs precisely in the descent of humble service, in the descent of love, for love is God's essence, and is thus the power that truly purifies man and enables him to perceive God and to see him" (English edition: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, p. 95).

The hymn in the Letter to the Philippians offers us important instructions for our prayers. The first is the invocation "Lord", addressed to Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father: he is the one Lord of our life, among so many "dominant" people who desire to direct and guide it. For this reason it is necessary to have a scale of values in which the primacy is God's, in order to affirm, with St Paul: "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). The encounter with the Risen One made the Apostle realize that he is the one treasure for which it is worth expending one's life.

The second instruction is prostration, that "every knee shall bow", on earth and in heaven. This is reminiscent of words of the Prophet Isaiah, where he points to the worship that all creatures owe to God (cf. 45:23). Genuflection or kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament exactly expresses the attitude of adoration in God's presence and also with the body. Hence the importance of not doing this action out of habit or hastily but rather with profound awareness. When we kneel before the Lord, we profess our faith in him, we recognize that he is the one Lord of our life.

Dear brothers and sisters, in our prayers let us fix our gaze on the Crucified One, let us pause more often in adoration before the Eucharist to let our life enter the love of God who humbly lowered himself in order to lift us up to him. At the beginning of the Catechesis we asked ourselves how St Paul could rejoice when he was facing the imminent risk of martyrdom and out-pouring his blood.

This was only possible because the Apostle never lifted his gaze from Christ, to the point that he became like him in death, in the hope that "I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:11). As St Francis said before the Crucifix, let us too say: "Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and

give me true faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command” Amen (cf. *Prayer before the Crucifix at San Damiano*: ff, [276]).

## St Alphonsus Mary Liguori

1 August 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today is the Liturgical Memorial of St Alphonsus Mary Liguori, Bishop and Doctor of the Church, Founder of the Congregation of the Most Holy Redeemer—the Redemptorists—and patron saint of moral theology scholars and confessors. St Alphonsus is one of the most popular saints of the 18th century because of his simple, immediate style and his teaching on the sacrament of Penance. In a period of great rigorism, a product of the Jansenist influence, he recommended that confessors administer this sacrament expressing the joyful embrace of God the Father, who in his infinite mercy never tires of welcoming the repentant son.

Today’s Memorial offers us the opportunity to reflect on St Alphonsus’ teaching on prayer which is particularly valuable and full of spiritual inspiration. His Treatise on *The Great Means of Prayer*, which he considered the most useful of all his writings, dates back to the year 1759. Indeed, he describes prayer as “a necessary and certain means of obtaining salvation, and all the graces that we require for that object” (*Introduction*). This sentence sums up the way St Alphonsus understood prayer.

First of all, by saying that it is a means, he reminds us of the goal to be reached. God created us out of love in order to be able to give us life in its fullness; but this goal, this life in fullness, has as it were become distant because of sin—we all know it—and only God’s grace can make it accessible. To explain this basic truth and to make people understand with immediacy how real the risk of “being lost” is for human beings, St Alphonsus coined a famous, very elementary maxim which says: “Those who pray will be saved and those who do not will be damned!”. Commenting on this lapidary sentence, he added, “In conclusion, to save one’s soul without prayer is most difficult, and even (as we have seen)

impossible ... But by praying our salvation is made secure, and very easy” (II, Conclusion). And he says further: “if we do not pray, we have no excuse, because the grace of prayer is given to everyone ... if we are not saved, the whole fault will be ours; and we shall have our own failure to answer for, because we did not pray” (*ibid.*).

By saying, then, that prayer is a necessary means, St Alphonsus wanted us to understand that in no situation of life can we do without prayer, especially in times of trial and difficulty. We must always knock at the door of the Lord confidently, knowing that he cares for all his children, for us. For this reason we are asked not to be afraid to turn to him and to present our requests to him with trust, in the certainty of receiving what we need.

Dear friends, this is the main question: what is really necessary in my life? I answer with St Alphonsus: “Health and all the graces that we need” (*ibid.*). He means of course not only the health of the body, but first of all that of the soul, which Jesus gives us. More than anything else we need his liberating presence which makes us truly fully human and hence fills our existence with joy. And it is only through prayer that we can receive him and his grace, which, by enlightening us in every situation, helps us to discern true good and by strengthening us also makes our will effective, that is, renders it capable of doing what we know is good. We often recognize what is good but are unable to do it. With prayer we succeed in doing it. The disciple of the Lord knows he is always exposed to temptation and does not fail to ask God’s help in prayer in order to resist it.

St Alphonsus very interestingly cites the example of St Philip Neri who “the very moment when he awoke in the morning, said to God: ‘Lord, keep Thy hands over Philip this day; for if not, Philip will betray Thee’ ” (III, 3). What a great realist! He asks God to keep his hands upon him. We too, aware of our weakness, must humbly seek God’s help, relying on his boundless mercy. St Alphonsus says in another passage: “We are so poor that we have nothing; but if we pray we are no longer poor. If we are poor, God is rich” (II, 4). And, following in St Augustine’s wake, he invites all Christians not to be afraid to obtain from God, through prayer, the power they do not possess that is necessary in order to do good, in the

certainly that the Lord will not refuse his help to whoever prays to him with humility (cf. III, 3).

Dear friends, St Alphonsus reminds us that the relationship with God is essential in our life. Without the relationship with God, the fundamental relationship is absent. The relationship with God is brought into being in conversation with God, in daily personal prayer and with participation in the sacraments. This relationship is thus able to grow within us, as can the divine presence that directs us on our way, illuminates it and makes it safe and peaceful even amidst difficulties and perils. Many thanks.

## **Memorial of St Dominic Guzmán**

*8 August 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today the Church celebrates the Memorial of St Dominic Guzmán, Priest and Founder of the Order of Preachers, known as the Dominicans. In a previous Catechesis I have already illustrated this distinguished figure and his fundamental contribution to the renewal of the Church in his time. Today, I would like to shed light on one of the essential aspects of his spirituality: his life of prayer. St Dominic was a man of prayer. In love with God, he had no other aspiration than the salvation of souls, especially those who had fallen into the net of the heresies of his time; a follower of Christ, he radically embodied the three evangelical counsels by combining the witness of a life of poverty with the proclamation of the Word. Under the Holy Spirit's guidance he made headway on the path of Christian perfection. At every moment prayer was the power that renewed his apostolic work and made it ever more fruitful.

Blessed Jordan of Saxony († 1237), his successor as head of the Order, wrote: "During the day, no one was friendlier than he ... conversely, at night no one watched in prayer more diligently than he. He dedicated the day to his neighbour, but gave the night to God" (P. Filippini, *San Domenico visto dai suoi contemporanei*, Bologna 1982, p. 133). In St Dominic we can see an example of harmonious integration between contemplation of the divine mysteries and apostolic work. According to the testimonies of people close to him, "he always

spoke with God and of God". This observation points to his profound communion with the Lord and, at the same time, to his constant commitment to lead others to this communion with God. He left no writings on prayer, but the Dominican tradition has collected and handed down his living experience in a work called: *The Nine Ways of Prayer of St Dominic*. This book was compiled by a Dominican friar between 1260 and 1288; it helps us to understand something of the Saint's interior life and also helps us, with all the differences, to learn something of how to pray.

There are, then, nine ways to pray, according to St Dominic, and each one—always before Jesus Crucified—expresses a deeply penetrating physical and spiritual approach that fosters recollection and zeal. The first seven ways follow an ascending order, like the steps on a path, toward intimate communion with God, with the Trinity: St Dominic prayed standing bowed to express humility, lying prostrate on the ground to ask forgiveness for his sins, kneeling in penance to share in the Lord's suffering, his arms wide open, gazing at the Crucifix to contemplate Supreme Love, looking heavenwards feeling drawn to God's world.

Thus there are three positions: standing, kneeling, lying prostrate on the ground; but with the gaze ever directed to our Crucified Lord. However the last two positions, on which I would like to reflect briefly, correspond to two of the Saint's customary devotional practices. First, personal meditation, in which prayer acquires an even more intimate, fervent and soothing dimension. After reciting the Liturgy of the Hours and after celebrating Mass, St Dominic prolonged his conversation with God without setting any time limit. Sitting quietly, he would pause in recollection in an inner attitude of listening, while reading a book or gazing at the Crucifix. He experienced these moments of closeness to God so intensely that his reactions of joy or of tears were outwardly visible. In this way, through meditation, he absorbed the reality of the faith. Witnesses recounted that at times he entered a kind of ecstasy with his face transfigured, but that immediately afterwards he would humbly resume his daily work, recharged by the power that comes from on High.

Then come his prayers while travelling from one convent to another. He would recite Lauds, Midday Prayer and Vespers with his companions, and, passing through the valleys and across the hills he would contemplate the beauty of

creation. A hymn of praise and thanksgiving to God for his many gifts would well up from his heart, and above all for the greatest wonder: the redemptive work of Christ.

Dear friends, St Dominic reminds us that prayer, personal contact with God is at the root of the witness to faith which every Christian must bear at home, at work, in social commitments and even in moments of relaxation; only this real relationship with God gives us the strength to live through every event with intensity, especially the moments of greatest anguish. This Saint also reminds us of the importance of physical positions in our prayer. Kneeling, standing before the Lord, fixing our gaze on the Crucifix, silent recollection—these are not of secondary importance but help us to put our whole selves inwardly in touch with God. I would like to recall once again the need, for our spiritual life, to find time everyday for quiet prayer; we must make this time for ourselves, especially during the holidays, to have a little time to talk with God. It will also be a way to help those who are close to us enter into the radiant light of God's presence which brings the peace and love we all need. Thank you.

## **Martyrdom of St John the Baptist**

*29 August 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This last Wednesday of the month of August is the liturgical Memorial of the martyrdom of St John the Baptist, the Precursor of Jesus. In the Roman Calendar, he is the only saint whose birth and death, through martyrdom, are celebrated on the same day (in his case, 24 June). Today's Memorial commemoration dates back to the dedication of a crypt in Sebaste, Samaria, where his head had already been venerated since the middle of the fourth century. The devotion later extended to Jerusalem, both in the Churches of the East and in Rome, with the title of the Beheading of St John the Baptist. In the Roman Martyrology reference is made to a second discovery of the precious relic, translated for the occasion to the Church of San Silvestro in Campo Marzio, Rome.

These small historical references help us to understand how ancient and deeply-rooted is the veneration of John the Baptist. His role in relation to Jesus stands out clearly in the Gospels. St Luke in particular recounts his birth, his life in the wilderness and his preaching, while in today's Gospel St Mark tells us of his dramatic death. John the Baptist began his preaching under the Emperor Tiberius in about 27–28 A.D., and the unambiguous invitation he addressed to the people, who flocked to listen to him, was to prepare the way to welcome the Lord, to straighten the crooked paths of their lives through a radical conversion of heart (cf. Lk 3:4).

However, John the Baptist did not limit himself to teaching repentance or conversion. Instead, in recognizing Jesus as the “Lamb of God” who came to take away the sin of the world (Jn 1:29), he had the profound humility to hold up Jesus as the One sent by God, drawing back so that he might take the lead, and be heard and followed. As his last act the Baptist witnessed with his blood to faithfulness to God's commandments, without giving in or withdrawing, carrying out his mission to the very end. In the 9th century the Venerable Bede says in one of his Homilies: “St John gave his life for [Christ]. He was not ordered to deny Jesus Christ, but was ordered to keep silent about the truth” (cf. *Homily 23*: CCL 122, 354). And he did not keep silent about the truth and thus died for Christ who is the Truth. Precisely for love of the truth he did not stoop to compromises and did not fear to address strong words to anyone who had strayed from God's path.

We see this great figure, this force in the Passion, in resistance to the powerful. We wonder: what gave birth to this life, to this interiority so strong, so upright, so consistent, spent so totally for God in preparing the way for Jesus? The answer is simple: it was born from the relationship with God, from prayer, which was the thread that guided him throughout his existence. John was the divine gift for which his parents Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for so many years (cf. Lk 1:13); a great gift, humanly impossible to hope for, because they were both advanced in years and Elizabeth was barren (cf. Lk 1:7); yet nothing is impossible to God (cf. Lk 1:36). The announcement of this birth happened precisely in the place of prayer, in the temple of Jerusalem, indeed it happened when Zechariah had the great privilege of entering the holiest place in the temple to offer incense to the Lord (cf. Lk 1:8–20). John the Baptist's birth was also marked by prayer: the



*Benedictus*, the hymn of joy, praise and thanksgiving which Zechariah raises to the Lord and which we recite every morning in Lauds, exalts God's action in history and prophetically indicates the mission of their son John: to go before the Son of God made flesh to prepare his ways (cf. Lk 1:67–79).

The entire existence of the Forerunner of Jesus was nourished by his relationship with God, particularly the period he spent in desert regions (cf. Lk 1:80). The desert regions are places of temptation but also where man acquires a sense of his own poverty because once deprived of material support and security, he understands that the only steadfast reference point is God himself. John the Baptist, however, is not only a man of prayer, in permanent contact with God, but also a guide in this relationship. The Evangelist Luke, recalling the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples, the *Our Father*, notes that the request was formulated by the disciples in these words: “Lord, teach us to pray, just as John taught his own disciples” (cf. Lk 11:1).

Dear brothers and sisters, celebrating the martyrdom of St John the Baptist reminds us too, Christians of this time, that with love for Christ, for his words and for the Truth, we cannot stoop to compromises. The Truth is Truth; there are no compromises. Christian life demands, so to speak, the “martyrdom” of daily fidelity to the Gospel, the courage, that is, to let Christ grow within us and let him be the One who guides our thought and our actions. However, this can happen in our life only if we have a solid relationship with God. Prayer is not time wasted, it does not take away time from our activities, even apostolic activities, but exactly the opposite is true: only if we are able to have a faithful, constant and trusting life of prayer will God himself give us the ability and strength to live happily and serenely, to surmount difficulties and to witness courageously to him. St John the Baptist, intercede for us, that we may be ever able to preserve the primacy of God in our life. Thank you.

# Prayer in the first part of the Book of Revelation (Rev.

**1:4–3:22)**

*5 September 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, after the holiday break, we resume the Audiences at the Vatican, continuing with the “school of prayer”, which I am sharing with you in these Wednesday Catecheses.

Today I would like to talk to you about a prayer in the Book of Revelation, which, as you know, is the last one in the New Testament. It is a complex book, but one containing great richness. It puts us in touch with the vital, vibrant prayer of the Christian assembly, gathered “on the Lord’s day” (Rev 1:10): indeed, the text unfolds into this basic premise.

A speaker presents to the assembly a message which the Lord has entrusted to the Evangelist John. The reader and the assembly are, so to speak, the two protagonists of the book’s development; right from the start a festive greeting is addressed to them: “blessed is he who reads aloud the words of the prophecy, and blessed are those who hear” (1:3). A symphony of prayer wells up from the ongoing dialogue between them and develops with a great variety of forms until it reaches its conclusion. On hearing the speaker deliver the message, on hearing and observing the assembly’s reaction, their prayer tends to become our own.

The first part of Revelation (1:4–3:22), presents three successive stages in the attitude of the assembly which is praying. The first stage (1:4–8) consists of a dialogue which—the only one in the New Testament—takes place between the assembly that has just gathered and the reader, who greets it with a blessing: “Grace to you and peace” (1:4). The speaker continues, emphasizing the provenance of this greeting: it comes from the Trinity: from the Father, from the Holy Spirit, from Jesus Christ, involved together in carrying ahead the creative and saving plan for humanity. The assembly listens and when it hears Jesus Christ named it jumps for joy, as it were, and responds enthusiastically, raising the following prayer of praise: “To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him

be glory and dominion for ever and ever. Amen” (1:5b–6). The assembly, steeped in Christ’s love, feels set free from the bonds of sin and proclaims itself the “kingdom” of Jesus Christ, which belongs totally to him.

It recognizes the great mission which has been entrusted to it through Baptism: to bring God’s presence to the world. And, looking once again directly at Jesus and with mounting enthusiasm, it ends this celebration of praise, recognizing his “glory and dominion” that will save humanity. The final “amen” concludes the hymn of praise to Christ. These first four verses are already full of instructions for us; they tell us that our prayer must first and foremost consist in listening to God who speaks to us. Submerged by torrents of words, we are not very used to listening, or, especially, being receptive by creating silence, either within ourselves or outside us, so as to be able to pay attention to what God wants to tell us. These verses also teach us that our prayers, especially if they are only prayers of petition, must first of all praise God for his love, for the gift of Jesus Christ who brought us strength, hope and salvation.

A further intervention of the speaker then refers to the assembly, held by Christ’s love, the commitment to accept his presence in its own life. He says: “Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, every one who pierced him; and all tribes of the earth will wail on account of him” (1:7a). After being lifted up to heaven on “a cloud”, the symbol of transcendence (cf. Acts 1:9), Jesus Christ will return, just as he was taken up into heaven (cf. Acts 1:11b). Then all the peoples will recognize him and, as St John predicts in the fourth Gospel, “they shall look on him whom they have pierced” (19:37). They will remember their sins, the cause of his crucifixion and, like those who witnessed it directly on Calvary, will beat their breasts (cf. Lk 23:48), asking him to forgive them so as to follow him in life and thus to prepare full communion with him after his final Coming. The assembly reflects on this message and says: “Even so. Amen” (Rev 1:7b). The assembly’s “even so” expresses its full acquiescence with of all that has been said to them and they ask that it may truly become reality. It is the prayer of the assembly which meditates on the love of God in its supreme manifestation on the Cross and asks to live consistently as disciples of Christ. And there is God’s answer: “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the One who is, who was and who is to come, the Almighty” (1:8). God, who reveals himself as the beginning and the end of history, accepts the assembly’s request and takes it to heart. He was, is and

will be present and active in his love in the future, as he was in the past, until the final destination is reached. This is God's promise. And here we find another important element: constant prayer reawakens within us the sense of the Lord's presence in our life and in history. His is a presence that sustains us, guides us and gives us great hope, even amidst the darkness of certain human events; furthermore, every prayer, even prayer in the most radical solitude, is never isolation of oneself and is never sterile: rather, it is the life blood of an ever more committed and consistent Christian life.

The second stage in the assembly's prayer (1:9–22) examines in greater depth the relationship with Jesus Christ: the Lord makes himself seen, he speaks, acts, and the community, ever closer to him, listens, reacts and understands. In the message presented by the speaker St John recounts his personal experience of an encounter with Christ: he was on the Island of Patmos, on account of the “word of God and of the testimony of Jesus” (1:9), and it was the “Lord's day” (1:10a), Sunday, on which the Resurrection is celebrated. And St John was “in the Spirit” (1:10a). The Holy Spirit permeated him and renewed him, expanding his ability to receive Jesus who asks him to write. The prayer of the assembly which is listening, gradually takes on a contemplative attitude, punctuated by the verb “to see”, “to look”. that is, it contemplates what the speaker suggests, interiorizing it and making it its own.

John hears “a loud voice like a trumpet” (1:10b). The voice orders him to send a message “to the seven churches” (1:11), which are located in Asia Minor and, through them, to all the Churches of all times, together with their Pastors. The words “voice ... like a trumpet”, taken from the Book of Exodus (cf. 20:18), recall God's self-manifestation to Moses on Mount Sinai and indicate the voice of God who speaks from his heaven, from his transcendence. Here the voice is attributed to the Risen Jesus Christ, who speaks to the assembly in prayer from the glory of the Father, with the voice of God. Turning “to see the voice” (1:12), John sees seven golden lampstands and in the midst of the lampstands one like a son of man” (1:12–13), a term particularly dear to John which means Jesus himself. The golden lampstands, with their candles lit, mean the Church of every time, in an attitude of prayer in the Liturgy: the Risen Jesus, the “Son of man” is among them and, clad in the vestments of the high priest of the Old Testament, carries out the priestly role of mediator with the Father. A dazzling

manifestation of the Risen Christ, with characteristics proper to God—that recur in the Old Testament—follows in John’s symbolic message.

He describes “hair white as white wool, white as snow” (1:14), a symbol of God’s eternity (cf. Dan 7:14) and of the Resurrection. Fire is a second symbol which, in the Old Testament, often refers to God, to indicate two of his properties. The first of these is the jealous intensity of his love which motivates his Covenant with man (cf. Deut 4:24). And it is this same burning intensity of love that is perceived in the gaze of the Risen Jesus: “his eyes were like a flame of fire” (Rev 1:14a). The second property is the uncontainable capacity for overcoming evil, like a “devouring fire” (Deut 9:3). Likewise Jesus’ “feet”, as he walked on to face and destroy evil, are compared to “burnished bronze” (Rev 1:15). Then Jesus Christ’s voice, “like the sound of many waters” (1:15c), has the impressive roar of “the glory of the God of Israel” moving towards Jerusalem, of whom the Prophet Ezekiel speaks (cf. 43:2). Three other symbolic elements follow. They show all that the Risen Jesus is doing for his Church: he holds her firmly in his right hand—an extremely important image: Jesus holds the Church in his hand—he speaks to her with the penetrating force of a sharp sword and shows her the splendour of his divinity: “His face was like the sun shining in full strength” (Rev 1:16). John is so struck by this wondrous experience of the Risen One that he faints and falls as though dead.

After this experience of revelation, the Apostle has before him the Lord Jesus who speaks to him, reassures him, lays his hand on his head, reveals his identity as the Risen Crucified One and entrusts to him the task of passing on his message to the Churches (cf. Rev 1:17–18). This God was just so beautiful that John fainted before him, falling as though dead. He is the friend of life and places his hand on the Apostle’s head. And this is how it will be for us, we are friends of Jesus. Then the revelation of the Risen God, of the Risen Christ, will not be terrible but will be an encounter with the friend. The assembly too, experiences with John the wonderful moment of light before the Lord but is combined with the experience of the daily encounter with Jesus, perceiving the riches of the contact with the Lord, who fills every space in existence.

In the third and last stage of the first part of the Apocalypse (Rev 2–3), the speaker proposes to the assembly a seven-fold message in which Jesus speaks in

the first person. Addressed to the Seven churches located in Asia Minor around Ephesus, Jesus' discourse starts with the specific situation of each Church and then extends to the churches of every era. Jesus immediately enters into the situation in which each Church lives, highlighting the patches of light and shade and addressing to the church a pressing invitation: "Repent" (2:5, 16; 3:19c); "hold fast what you have" (3:11); "do the works you did at first" (2:5); be zealous and repent" (3:19b)... If these words of Jesus are listened to with faith, they immediately begin to take effect. The Church in prayer, on receiving the Word of the Lord, is transformed. All the Churches must listen attentively to the Lord, opening themselves to the Spirit as Jesus asks insistently, repeating this order seven times: "He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches" (2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22). The assembly listens to the message, receiving an incentive for repentance, conversion, perseverance, growth in love and guidance on the journey.

Dear friends, the Book of Revelation presents to us a community gathered in prayer because it is precisely in prayer that we become ever more aware of Jesus' presence with us and in us. The more and the better we pray, with constancy, with intensity, the more like him we shall be, and he will truly enter into our life and guide it, bestowing upon us joy and peace. And the more we know, love and follow Jesus, the more we will feel the need to pause in prayer with him, receiving serenity, hope and strength in our life. Thank you for your attention.

## **Prayer in the second part of the Book of Revelation**

**(Rev. 4:1–22:21)**

*12 September 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last Wednesday I talked about prayer in the first part of the Book of Revelation. Today let us move on to the second part of the Book. While in the first part prayer is oriented to the Church's inner life, in the second part attention is focused on the whole world; in fact, the Church, on her pilgrimage through history, is part of it in accordance with God's plan. The assembly, which by listening to John's message as it is presented by the speaker has rediscovered its task of cooperating in the development of the Kingdom of God as "priests of God

and of Christ” (Rev 20:6; cf. 1:5; 5:10), opens itself to the world of man. And here emerge two ways of living, in a shared dialectic relationship. We might define the first as the “system of Christ”, to which the assembly is happy to belong, and the second, as the “earthly system of anti-Kingdom and anti-Covenant, brought into being by the Evil One”, who, by deceiving men and women, wishes to create a world that is the opposite of the one willed by Christ and by God (cf. Pontifical Biblical Commission, *Bibbia e Morale. Radici bibliche dell'agire cristiano*, 70). Consequently the assembly must be able to read in depth the history it is living, learning to discern events with faith in order to cooperate, with its action, in spreading the Kingdom of God. And this work of interpretation and discernment in addition to action is linked to prayer.

First of all, after the insistent appeal of Christ who says seven times in the first part of the Book of Revelation: “He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the Churches” (Rev 2:7, 11, 17, 29; 3:6, 13, 22), the assembly is invited to come up to heaven to see reality with God’s eyes; and here we rediscover three symbols, key reference points for interpreting history: the throne of God, the Lamb and the scroll (cf. Rev 4:1–5:14).

The first symbol is the throne, on which a figure is seated whom John does not describe because it is beyond the scope of any human representation. John can only hint at the sense of beauty and joy he feels in its presence. This mysterious figure is God, almighty God who did not stay closed in his heaven but made himself close to man, entering into a Covenant with him; in a mysterious but real way God makes his voice, symbolized by thunder and lightening, heard in history. There are various elements that appear around God’s throne, such as the 24 elders and four living creatures who ceaselessly praise the one Lord of history. Thus the first symbol is the throne.

The second symbol is the scroll, which contains God’s plan for events and for people; it is hermetically sealed by seven seals and no one can read it. In the face of this human inability to scrutinize God’s design, John feels a deep sadness that causes him to weep. Yet there is a remedy to man’s bewilderment before the mystery of history; someone is able to open the scroll and to enlighten him.

And here the third symbol appears: Christ, the Lamb immolated in the sacrifice of the Cross but who is standing, which is a sign of his Resurrection. And it is the

Lamb himself, Christ who died and is Risen, who breaks open the seals one by one and reveals God's plan, the profound meaning of history.

What do these symbols mean? They remind us of the way to take to be able to interpret the events of history and of our own life. By raising our gaze to God's Heaven, in a constant relationship with Christ, opening our hearts and minds to him in personal and community prayer, we learn to see things in a new light and to perceive their truest meaning. Prayer is, as it were, an open window that enables us to keep our gaze turned to God, not only to remember the destination towards which we are bound but also to let God's will illuminate our earthly pilgrimage and help us live it with intensity and commitment.

How does the Lord guide the Christian community to a deeper interpretation of history? First of all by asking it to consider the present that we are living in realistically. The Lamb then opens the first four seals of the scroll, and the Church sees the world in which it is inserted, a world in which there are various negative elements. There are the wicked deeds of men and women, such as acts of violence that stem from the desire to possess, to dominate each other, even to the point of self-destruction (the second seal); or injustice, because people fail to respect the laws that they have given themselves (the third seal). To these are added the evils that human beings must suffer, such as death, hunger and pestilence (the fourth seal).

In the face of these all too often dramatic situations the ecclesial community is asked never to lose hope, to believe firmly that the apparent omnipotence of the Evil One comes up against the real almightiness which is God's. And the first seal which the Lamb breaks open contains this very message. John recounts: "And I saw, and behold, a white horse, and its rider had a bow; and a crown was given to him, and he went out conquering and to conquer" (Rev 6:2). God's power that cannot only offset evil but can actually overcome it, entered human history. The colour white refers to the Resurrection: God made himself so close that he came down into the darkness of death to illuminate it with the splendour of his divine life; he took the evil of the world upon his own shoulders to purify it with the fire of his love.

How can we develop in this Christian interpretation of reality? The Book of Revelation tells us that prayer nourishes this vision of light and of deep hope in



each one of us and in our communities: it invites us not to let ourselves be overcome by evil, but to overcome evil with good, to look at the Crucified and Risen Christ who associates us with his victory. The Church lives in history, she does not withdraw into herself but courageously continues on her journey through difficulty and suffering, forcefully asserting that in the end evil does not overcome good, that darkness does not conceal God's splendour. This is an important point for us; as Christians we can never be pessimistic; we know well that on our journey through life we often encounter violence, falsehood, hatred and persecution, but this does not discourage us. Prayer teaches us above all to see God's signs, his presence and his action, indeed, to be lights of goodness ourselves, spreading hope and showing that the victory is God's.

This prospect leads to raising thanksgiving and praise to God and to the Lamb: the 24 elders and four living beings sing together the "new song" which celebrates the work of Christ the Lamb, who will "make all things new" (Rev 21:5). However, this renewal is first of all a gift to be requested. And here we find another element that must characterize prayer: to pray to the Lord insistently that his Kingdom come, that the human heart be docile to the lordship of God and that it be his will that guides both our life and the life of the world.

In the vision of the Book of Revelation this prayer of petition is portrayed by an important detail: "the 24 elders" and "the four living beings" hold in their hands, together with the harp that accompanies their singing, "golden bowls full of incense" (5:8a) which, as is explained "are the prayers of the saints" (5:8b), namely, of those who have already reached God but also of all of us who are journeying on. And we see that in front of God's throne an angel is holding a golden censer in his hand into which he continues to put grains of incense, that is our prayer, whose sweet fragrance is offered together with the prayers that rise to God (cf. Rev 8:1-4). It is a symbolism that tells us how all our prayers—with every possible limitation, effort, poverty, dryness and imperfection they may have—are so to speak purified and reach God's heart. In other words we can be sure that there is no such thing as superfluous or useless prayers; no prayer is wasted. And prayers are answered, even if the answer is sometimes mysterious, for God is Love and infinite Mercy. "The angel", John writes, "took the censer and filled it with fire from the altar and threw it on the earth; and there were peals of thunder, loud noises, flashes of lightning and an earthquake" (Rev 8:5). This

image means that God is not indifferent to our entreaties, he intervenes and makes his power felt and his voice heard on the earth, he causes the system of the Evil One to tremble and collapse. Often when confronting evil we have the feeling that we are powerless, but our prayers themselves are the first and most effective response we can give and they strengthen our daily commitment to spread goodness. God's might makes our weakness fruitful (cf. Rom 8:26–27).

I would like to conclude by referring to the closing dialogue (cf. Rev 22:6–21). Jesus repeats several times: “Behold, I am coming soon” (Rev 22:7, 12). This affirmation does not only indicate the future prospect at the end of time but also that of the present: Jesus comes, he makes his dwelling place in those who believe in him and receive him. Thus, guided by the Holy Spirit, the assembly repeats to Jesus a pressing invitation to make himself ever closer: “come” (Rev 22:17a). It is like the “Bride” (22:17) who ardently longs for the fullness of the nuptials. The invocation recurs for the third time: “Amen. Come, Lord Jesus” (22:20b); and the speaker concludes with words which demonstrate the meaning of this presence: “The grace of the Lord Jesus be with all” (22:21).

The Book of Revelation, despite the complexity of its symbols, involves us in an extremely rich prayer, which is why we too listen, praise, give thanks, contemplate the Lord and ask him for forgiveness. Its structure as a great liturgical prayer of the community is also a strong appeal to recognize the extraordinary, transforming power of the Eucharist. I would particularly like to extend a pressing invitation to be faithful to Sunday Mass on the Lord's Day, Sunday, the true centre of the week! The wealth of prayer in the Book of Revelation is reminiscent of a diamond which has a fascinating series of facets but whose value depends on the purity of its one, central core. Likewise the evocative forms of prayer we encounter in the Book of Revelation make the unique, inexpressible preciousness of Jesus Christ shine out. Thank you.

## **The Liturgy and Prayer**

*26 September 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

In these months we have journeyed in the light of the word of God so as to learn to pray ever more authentically, looking at several important Old Testament figures, at the Psalms, at the Letters of St Paul and at the Book of Revelation, but, especially, at the unique and fundamental experience of Jesus in his relationship with the heavenly Father. In fact, only in Christ can a person be united to God with the depth and intimacy of a child in his relationship with a father who loves him, only in Christ can we address God in all truth, calling him affectionately, “Abba! Father!”. Like the Apostles, we too have repeated in these past few weeks and repeat to Jesus today: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1).

Furthermore, to learn to live more intensely our personal relationship with God, we have learned to invoke the Holy Spirit, the first gift of the Risen One to believers, because it is he who “helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26), St Paul says, and we know how right he is.

At this point, after a long series of Catecheses on prayer in Scripture, we can ask ourselves; how can I let myself be formed by the Holy Spirit and thereby become able to enter into the atmosphere of God, of prayer with God? What is this school in which he teaches me to pray, comes to help me in my attempts to speak to God correctly? The first school of prayer—as we have seen in these weeks—is the Word of God, Sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture is an ongoing dialogue between God and man, a progressive dialogue in which God shows himself ever closer, in which we can become ever better acquainted with his face, his voice, his being; and man learns to accept to know God and to talk to God. Therefore, in these weeks, in reading Sacred Scripture we have sought to learn from Scripture, from this ongoing dialogue, how we may enter into contact with God.

However there is yet another precious “place”, another precious “source” for developing in prayer, a source of living water that is very closely related to the previous one. I am referring to the liturgy, which is a privileged context in which God speaks to each one of us, here and now, and awaits our answer.

What is the liturgy? If we open the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*—ever an invaluable and, I would say, indispensable aid—we can read that the word “liturgy” originally meant: a “service in the name of/on behalf of the people” (n. 1069). If Christian theology made use of this word of the Greek world, it obviously did so thinking of the new People of God born from Christ who opened

his arms on the Cross to unite human beings in the peace of the one God. A “service on behalf of the people”, a people which did not exist on its own, but was formed through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the People of God does not exist through ties of kinship, place or country. Rather it is always born from the action of the Son of God and from the communion with the Father that he obtains for us.

The *Catechism* also indicates that “in Christian tradition (the word ‘liturgy’) means the participation of the People of God ‘in the work of God’ ” (n. 1069), because the People of God as such exists only through God’s action.

The actual development of the Second Vatican Council reminds us of this. It began its work 50 years ago with the discussion of the draft on the Sacred Liturgy, which was then solemnly promulgated on 4 December 1963, the first text that the Council approved. That the Document on the Liturgy was the first document to be promulgated by the conciliar assembly was considered by some to have happened by chance.

Among the many projects, the text on the Sacred Liturgy seems to have been the least controversial. For this very reason it could serve as a sort of exercise in learning conciliar methodology. However, there is no doubt that what at first sight might seem a coincidence, also turned out to be the best decision, on the basis of the hierarchy of the subjects and of the most important duties of the Church. In fact, by starting with the theme of the “liturgy”, the Council shed very clear light on the primacy of God and his indisputable priority. God in the very first place: this itself explains to us the Council’s decision to start with the liturgy. Wherever the gaze on God is not conclusive, everything else loses its orientation. The fundamental criterion for the liturgy is its orientation to God, enabling us to take part in his action itself.

However, we might ask ourselves: what is this work of God in which we are called to take part? The answer that the Council’s Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy gives us is apparently twofold. In n. 5 it points out, in fact, that the works of God are his actions in history which bring us salvation and which culminated in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ; but in n. 7, the same Constitution defines the celebration of the liturgy as an “action of Christ”. In fact these two meanings are inseparably linked. If we ask ourselves who saves the world and

man, the only answer is: Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ, the Crucified and Risen One. And where does the Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ that brings salvation become real for us, for me, today? The answer is: in Christ's action through the Church, in the liturgy, and, especially, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which makes present the sacrificial offering of the Son of God who has redeemed us; in the sacrament of Reconciliation, in which one moves from the death of sin to new life; and in the other sacramental acts that sanctify us (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5). Thus the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ is the centre of the liturgical theology of the Council.

Let us take another step forward and ask ourselves: how does the enactment of Christ's Paschal Mystery become possible? Twenty-five years after the Constitution *Sacrosanctum Concilium* Blessed Pope John Paul II, wrote: "In order to reenact his Paschal Mystery, Christ is ever present in his Church, especially in liturgical celebrations. Hence the Liturgy is the privileged place for the encounter of Christians with God and the One whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17:3)" (*Vicesimus quintus annus*, n. 7). Along the same lines we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "sacramental celebration is a meeting of God's children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit; this meeting takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words" (n. 1153). Therefore the first requirement for a good liturgical celebration is that there should be prayer and a conversation with God, first of all listening and consequently a response. St Benedict, speaking in his *Rule* of prayer in the Psalms, pointed out to his monks: *mens concordet voci*, "the mind must be in accord with the voice". The Saint teaches that in the prayers of the Psalms words must precede our thought. It does not usually happen like this because we have to think and then what we have thought is converted into words. Here, instead, in the liturgy, the opposite is true, words come first. God has given us the word and the sacred liturgy offers us words; we must enter into the words, into their meaning and receive them within us, we must attune ourselves to these words; in this way we become children of God, we become like God. As *Sacrosanctum Concilium* recalls, "in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain" (n. 11). A fundamental, primary element of the dialogue with God in the liturgy is the agreement between what we say with our lips and what we carry in our hearts. By entering

into the words of the great history of prayer, we ourselves are conformed to the spirit of these words and are enabled to speak to God.

In line with this I would just like to mention one of the moments during the liturgy itself; it calls us and helps us to find this harmonization, this conformation of ourselves to what we hear, say and do in the celebration of the liturgy. I am referring to the invitation that the celebrant expresses before the Eucharistic Prayer: “*Sursum corda*”, let us lift up our hearts above the confusion of our apprehensions, our desires, our narrowness, our distraction. Our hearts, our innermost selves, must open in docility to the word of God and must be recollected in the Church’s prayer, to receive her guidance to God from the very words that we hear and say. The eyes of the heart must be turned to the Lord, who is in our midst: this is a fundamental disposition.

Whenever we live out the liturgy with this basic approach, our hearts are, as it were, removed from the force of gravity which has pulled them downwards and are inwardly uplifted, towards the truth, towards love, towards God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “in the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays. The spiritual writers sometimes compare the heart to an altar” (n. 2655): *altare Dei est cor nostrum*.

Dear friends, we celebrate and live the liturgy well only if we remain in a prayerful attitude, and not if we want “to do something”, to make ourselves seen or to act, but if we direct our hearts to God and remain in a prayerful attitude, uniting ourselves with the Mystery of Christ and with his conversation as Son with the Father. God himself teaches us to pray, St Paul says (cf. Rom 8:26). He himself gave us the appropriate words with which to address him, words that we find in the Psalter, in the great orations of the sacred liturgy and in the Eucharistic celebration itself. Let us pray the Lord to be every day more aware of the fact that the liturgy is an action of God and of man; prayer that wells up from the Holy Spirit and from us, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the Son of God made man (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2564). Many thanks.

# The Mass and Prayer

3 October 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In last week's Catechesis I began talking about one of the special sources of Christian prayer: the sacred liturgy which, as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states, is "a participation in Christ's own prayer addressed to the Father in the Holy Spirit. In the liturgy, all Christian prayer finds its source and goal" (n. 1073). Today I would like us to ask ourselves: in my life, do I leave enough room for prayer and, above all, what place in my relationship with God does liturgical prayer, especially Holy Mass occupy, as participation in the common prayer of the Body of Christ which is the Church?

In answering this question we must remember first of all that prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit (cf. *ibid.*, 2565). Therefore the life of prayer consists in being habitually in God's presence and being aware of it, in living in a relationship with God as we live our customary relationships in life, with our dearest relatives, with true friends; indeed the relationship with the Lord is the relationship that gives light to all our other relationships. This communion of life with the Triune God is possible because through Baptism we have been incorporated into Christ, we have begun to be one with him (cf. Rom 6:5).

In fact, only through Christ can we converse with God the Father as children, otherwise it is not possible, but in communion with the Son we can also say, as he did, "Abba". In communion with Christ we can know God as our true Father (cf. Mt 11:27). For this reason Christian prayer consists in looking constantly at Christ and in an ever new way, speaking to him, being with him in silence, listening to him, acting and suffering with him. The Christian rediscovers his true identity in Christ, "the first-born of all creation" in whom "all things hold together" (cf. Col 1:15ff.). In identifying with him, in being one with him, I rediscover my personal identity as a true son or daughter who looks to God as to a Father full of love.

But let us not forget: it is in the Church that we discover Christ, that we know him as a living Person. She is “his Body”. This corporeity can be understood on the basis of the biblical words about man and about woman: the two will be one flesh (cf. Gen 2:24; Eph 5:30ff.; 1 Cor 6:16f.). The indissoluble bond between Christ and the Church, through the unifying power of love, does not cancel the “you” and the “I” but on the contrary raises them to their highest unity. Finding one’s identity in Christ means reaching communion with him, that does not wipe me out but raises me to the loftiest dignity, that of a child of God in Christ: “The love-story between God and man consists in the very fact that this communion of will increases in a communion of thought and sentiment, and thus our will and God’s will increasingly coincide” (Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 17). Praying means raising oneself to God’s heights, through a necessary, gradual transformation of our being.

Thus, by participating in the liturgy we make our own the language of Mother Church, we learn to speak in her and for her. Of course, as I have already said, this happens gradually, little by little. I must immerse myself ever more deeply in the words of the Church with my prayer, with my life, with my suffering, with my joy, and with my thought. It is a process that transforms us.

I therefore think that these reflections enable us to answer the question we asked ourselves at the outset: how do I learn to pray, how do I develop in my prayer? Looking at the example which Jesus taught us, the *Pater Noster* [*Our Father*], we see that the first word [in Latin] is “Father” and the second is “our”. Thus the answer is clear, I learn to pray, I nourish my prayer by addressing God as Father and praying-with-others, praying with the Church, accepting the gift of his words which gradually become familiar to me and full of meaning. The dialogue that God establishes with each one of us, and we with him in prayer, always includes a “with”; it is impossible to pray to God in an individualistic manner. In liturgical prayer, especially the Eucharist and—formed by the liturgy—in every prayer, we do not only speak as individuals but on the contrary enter into the “we” of the Church that prays. And we must transform our “I”, entering into this “we”.

I would like to recall another important aspect. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* we read: “In the *liturgy of the New Covenant* every liturgical action,



especially the celebration of the Eucharist and the sacraments, is an encounter between Christ and the Church” (n. 1097). Therefore it is the “total Christ”, the whole Community, the Body of Christ united with her Head, that is celebrating. Thus the liturgy is not a sort of “self-manifestation” of a community; it means instead coming out of merely “being ourselves”, being closed in on ourselves, and having access to the great banquet, entering into the great living community in which God himself nourishes us. The liturgy implies universality and this universal character must enter ever anew into the awareness of all. The Christian liturgy is the worship of the universal temple which is the Risen Christ, whose arms are outstretched on the Cross to draw everyone into the embrace of God’s eternal love. It is the worship of a wide open heaven. It is never solely the event of a single community with its place in time and space. It is important that every Christian feel and be truly integrated into this universal “we” which provides the “I”, the basis and refuge of the “I”, in the Body of Christ which is the Church.

In this we must bear in mind and accept the logic of God’s Incarnation: he made himself close, present, entering into history and into human nature, making himself one of us. And this presence continues in the Church, his Body. So, the Liturgy is not the memory of past events, but is the living presence of the Paschal Mystery of Christ who transcends and unites times and places. If in the celebration the centrality of Christ did not emerge, we would not have Christian liturgy, totally dependent on the Lord and sustained by his creative presence. God acts through Christ and we can act only through and in him. The conviction must grow within us every day that the liturgy is not our or my “doing” but rather is an action of God in us and with us.

It is not, therefore, the individual—priest or member of the faithful—or the group celebrating the liturgy, but the liturgy is primarily God’s action through the Church which has her own history, her rich tradition and her creativity. This universality and fundamental openness, which is proper to the whole of the liturgy, is one of the reasons why it cannot be conceived of or modified by the individual community or by experts, but must be faithful to the forms of the universal Church.

The entire Church is always present even in the liturgy of the smallest community. For this reason there are no “strangers” in the liturgical community.

In every liturgical celebration the whole Church takes part, heaven and earth, God and men. The Christian liturgy, even if it is celebrated in a place and in a concrete space and expresses the “yes” of a specific community, is by its nature catholic, it comes from all and leads to all, in unity with the Pope, with the Bishops and with believers of all epochs and all places. The more a celebration is enlivened by awareness of this, the more fruitfully will the authentic meaning of the liturgy be made present.

Dear friends, the Church becomes visible in many ways: in charitable action, in mission projects, in the personal apostolate that every Christian must carry out in his own walk of life. However the place in which she is fully experienced as Church is in the liturgy; it is the act in which we believe that God enters our reality and we can encounter him, we can touch him. It is the act in which we come into contact with God: he comes to us and we are illuminated by him. For this reason, when in reflections on the liturgy we focus our attention exclusively on how to make it attractive, interesting and beautiful, we risk forgetting the essential: the liturgy is celebrated for God and not for ourselves; it is his work; he is the subject; and we must open ourselves to him and let ourselves be guided by him and by his Body which is the Church.

Let us ask the Lord to learn every day to live the sacred liturgy, especially the Eucharistic Celebration, praying in the “we” of the Church, which directs her gaze not upon herself, but to God, and feeling part of the living Church of all places and of all epochs. Thank you.

# The Year of Faith

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## **The Year of Faith & the Council**

10 October 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

This is the eve of the day on which we shall be celebrating the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council and the beginning of the

*Year of Faith.* With this Catechesis I would like, with a few brief thoughts, to start reflecting on the important Church event which the Council was and which I witnessed directly. It lies before us like a great fresco, so to speak, painted with the great multiplicity and variety of its elements under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. And as if we were standing in front of a large picture, still today we continue to perceive the extraordinary wealth of that moment of grace, to discover in it particular scenes, fragments and pieces of the mosaic.

On the threshold of the third millennium Blessed John Paul II wrote: “I feel more than ever in duty bound to point to the Council as the great grace bestowed on the Church in the 20th century: there we find a sure compass by which to take our bearings in the century now beginning” (Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 57). I think this is an eloquent image. The Second Vatican Council Documents, to which we must return, freeing them from a mass of publications which instead of making them known have often concealed them, are a compass in our time too that permits the Barque of the Church to put out into the deep in the midst of storms or on calm and peaceful waves, to sail safely and to reach her destination.

I remember that period well: I was a young professor of fundamental theology at the University of Bonn and it was Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne—my human and priestly reference point—who took me with him to Rome as his theological consultant; I was then also appointed a Council peritus. It was a unique experience for me: after all the excitement and enthusiasm of the preparations, I could see a living Church—almost 3,000 Council Fathers under the leadership of the Successor of the Apostle Peter—which set herself to learn at the school of the Holy Spirit, the true driving force of the Council. Only rarely in history has it been possible, as it was then, almost “to touch”, to feel tangibly the universality of the Church at a moment of the great fulfilment of her mission to take the Gospel in every epoch to the ends of the earth. In these days, if you look at the pictures of the opening of this great assembly, on television or via the other means of communication, you too will be able to discern the joy, hope and encouragement that participation in this event of light, which shines to this day, gave to us all.

In the history of the Church, as I think you know, various Councils preceded Vatican II. These great ecclesial assemblies were usually convoked to define fundamental elements of faith, above all to correct errors which endangered it. Let us think of the Council of Nicea, held in 325 to oppose the Arian heresy and to reassert clearly the divinity of the Only-Begotten Son of God the Father; or of the Council of Ephesus, in 431, that defined Mary as the Mother of God; of the Council of Chalcedon, in 451, that affirmed the one Person of Christ in two natures, the divine nature and the human. To come a little closer to us, we must mention the Council of Trent in the 16th century that clarified essential points of Catholic doctrine in the face of the Protestant Reformation; or the First Vatican Council that began to reflect on various topics but—because it was interrupted by the occupation of Rome in September 1870—only had time to produce two documents, one on knowledge of God, the revelation, faith and the relationship with reason, and the other on the primacy of the Pope and on his infallibility.

If we look at the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, we see that in that stretch of the Church's journey there were no particular errors of faith to correct or condemn, nor were there any specific questions of doctrine or discipline to explain. It is thus possible to understand the surprise of the small group of cardinals in the Chapter Hall of the Benedictine monastery of St Paul Outside-the-Walls when, on 25 January 1959, Blessed John XXIII, announced the Diocesan Synod for Rome and the Council for the universal Church. The first question that arose in the preparation of this great event was, precisely, how to begin it and what specific task to attribute to it. Blessed John XXIII issued a general instruction, in his opening Discourse on 11 October 50 years ago: faith had to speak in a "renewed" and more incisive way—because the world was rapidly changing—but all the while keeping its perennial content intact, without concessions or compromises. The Pope wished the Church to reflect on her faith, on the truth that guides her. However, this serious, in-depth reflection on faith, was to delineate in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern epoch, between Christianity and certain essential elements of modern thought, not in order to be conformed to it but to present to this world of ours, that is tending to drift away from God, the requirement of the Gospel in its full greatness and purity (cf. *Discourse to the Roman Curia for the Exchange of Christmas Greetings*, 22 December 2005).

The Servant of God Paul VI expressed this well in his homily at the end of the last Council session—on 7 December 1965—using extraordinarily modern words, when he said that to appreciate this event properly: “it is necessary to remember the time in which it was realized”. In fact, the Pope said “it took place at a time which everyone admits is orientated toward the conquest of the kingdom of earth rather than of that of heaven; a time in which forgetfulness of God has become habitual, and seems, quite wrongly, to be prompted by the progress of science; a time in which the fundamental act of the human person, more conscious now of himself and of his freedom, tends to pronounce in favour of his own absolute autonomy, in emancipation from every transcendent law; a time in which secularism seems the legitimate consequence of modern thought and the highest wisdom in the temporal ordering of society... It was at such a time as this that our Council was held to the honour of God, in the name of Christ and under the impulse of the Spirit”.

This is what Paul VI said. And he ended by identifying the key point of the Council, God, who “is—and more, he is real, he lives, a personal, provident God, infinitely good; and not only good in himself, but also immeasurably good to us. He is recognized as our Creator, our truth, our happiness; so much so that the effort to look on him, and to centre our heart in him which we call contemplation, is the highest, the most perfect act of the human spirit, the act which even today can and must be at the apex of all human activity from which human beings receive their dignity” (cf. AAS 58 [1966], 52–53).

We see that the era in which we live continues to be marked by forgetting and being deaf to God. I think, therefore, that we should learn the simplest and most fundamental lesson of the Council: namely, that Christianity in its essence consists of faith in God which is Trinitarian Love, and in a personal and community encounter with Christ who orients and gives meaning to life. Everything else flows from this. What is as important today as it was for the Council Fathers is that we see—once again, and clearly—that God is present, concerns us and responds to us. And when, instead, man lacks faith in God, the essential collapses because man loses his profound dignity and what makes his humanity great enough to withstand any form of reductionism. The Council reminds us that the Church in all her members, has the task, the mandate of

transmitting God's word of love which saves, so that we may hear and welcome the divine call which contains in itself our eternal beatitude.

Looking in this light at the riches contained in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, I would like to mention only the four Constitutions, as it were, the four cardinal points of the compass that can direct us. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* points out to us that in the Church at the beginning there is worship, there is God, there is the centrality of the mystery of Christ's presence. And the Church, the Body of Christ and the pilgrim people in time, has the glorification of God as her fundamental task, as the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* explains. The third document I want to mention is the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*: the living Word of God convokes the Church and never fails to enliven her as she journeys on through history. And the way in which the Church brings to the whole world the light she has received from God so that he may be glorified is the basic theme of the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*.

The Second Vatican Council is a strong appeal to us to rediscover every day the beauty of our faith, to know it deeply for a more intense relationship with the Lord, in order to live our Christian vocation to the full. May the Virgin Mary, Mother of Christ and of the whole Church, help us to achieve and to bring to completion what the Council Fathers, motivated by the Holy Spirit, pondered in their hearts: the desire that all might know the Gospel and encounter the Lord Jesus as the Way, the Truth, and the Life. Many thanks.

## Introduction

17 October 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today I would like to introduce the new series of Catecheses that will develop throughout the *Year of Faith* that has just begun and will interrupt—during this period—the series on the school of prayer. I announced this special Year in the Apostolic Letter *Porta Fidei*, precisely so that the Church might renew the enthusiasm of believing in Jesus Christ the one Saviour of the world, revive the

joy of walking on the path he pointed out to us and bear a tangible witness to the transforming power of faith.

The 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council is an important opportunity to return to God, to deepen our faith and live it more courageously, and to strengthen our belonging to the Church, “teacher of humanity”. It is through the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and works of charity that she guides us to meeting and knowing Christ, true God and true man. This is not an encounter with an idea or with a project of life, but with a living Person who transforms our innermost selves, revealing to us our true identity as children of God.

The encounter with Christ renews our human relationships, directing them, from day to day, to greater solidarity and brotherhood in the logic of love. Having faith in the Lord is not something that solely involves our intelligence, the area of intellectual knowledge; rather, it is a change that involves our life, our whole self: feelings, heart, intelligence, will, corporeity, emotions and human relationships. With faith everything truly changes, in us and for us, and our future destiny is clearly revealed, the truth of our vocation in history, the meaning of life, the pleasure of being pilgrims bound for the heavenly Homeland.

However—let us ask ourselves—is faith truly the transforming force in our life, in my life? Or is it merely one of the elements that are part of existence, without being the crucial one that involves it totally? With the Catecheses of this *Year of Faith* let us make a journey to reinforce or rediscover the joy of faith, in the knowledge that it is not something extraneous, detached from daily life, but is its soul. Faith in a God who is love, who makes himself close to man by incarnating himself and by giving himself on the Cross, who saves us and opens the doors of Heaven to us once again, clearly indicates that man’s fullness consists solely in love.

This must be unequivocally reasserted today, when the cultural transformations under way frequently display so many forms of barbarity, passed off as “conquests of civilization”. Faith affirms that there is no true humanity except in the places, actions, times and forms in which the human being is motivated by the love that comes from God. It is expressed as a gift and reveals itself in



relationships full of love, compassion, attention and disinterested service to others. Wherever there is domination, possession, exploitation and the taking advantage of the other for selfish reasons wherever there is the arrogance of the ego withdrawn into the self, the human being is impoverished, debased and disfigured. The Christian faith, active in charity and strong in hope, does not limit but rather humanizes life, indeed, makes it fully human.

Faith means taking this transforming message to heart in our life, receiving the revelation of God who makes us know that he exists, how he acts and what his plans for us are. Of course, the mystery of God always remains beyond our conception and reason, our rites and our prayers. Yet, through his revelation, God actually communicates himself to us, recounts himself and makes himself accessible. And we are enabled to listen to his Word and to receive his truth. This, then, is the wonder of faith: God, in his love, creates within us—through the action of the Holy Spirit—the appropriate conditions for us to recognize his Word. God himself, in his desire to show himself, to come into contact with us, to make himself present in our history, enables us to listen to and receive him. St Paul expresses it with joy and gratitude in these words: “And we also thank God constantly for this, that when you received the word of God which you heard from us, you accepted it not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, which is at work in you believers” (1 Thess 2:13).

God has revealed himself with words and works throughout a long history of friendship with mankind which culminated in the Incarnation of the Son of God and in the Mystery of his death and Resurrection. God not only revealed himself in the history of a people, he not only spoke through the Prophets but he also crossed the threshold of his Heaven to enter our planet as a man, so that we might meet him and listen to him. And the proclamation of the Gospel of salvation spread from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth. The Church, born from Christ’s side, became the messenger of a new and solid hope: Jesus of Nazareth Crucified and Risen, the Saviour of the world who is seated at the right hand of the Father and is the judge of the living and the dead. This is the kerygma the central, explosive proclamation of faith. However the problem of the “rule of faith” has been posed from the outset, in other words the problem of believers’ faithfulness to the truth of the Gospel, which to be firmly anchored, to the saving truth about God and man that must be preserved and passed down. St Paul

wrote: “I preached to you the Gospel, which you received, in which you stand, by which you are saved, if you hold it fast—unless you believed in vain” (1 Cor 15:2).

But where can we find the essential formula of faith? Where can we find the truths that have been faithfully passed down to us and that constitute the light for our daily life? The answer is simple. In the Creed, in the Profession of Faith or Symbol of Faith, we are reconnected with the original event of the Person and history of Jesus of Nazareth; what the Apostle to the Gentiles said to the Christians of Corinth happens: “I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures; that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day, in accordance with the Scriptures” (1 Cor 15:3–5).

Today too the Creed needs to be better known, understood and prayed. It is important above all that the Creed be, so to speak, “recognized”. Indeed, knowing might be merely an intellectual operation, whereas “recognizing” means the need to discover the deep bond between the truth we profess in the Creed and our daily existence, so that these truths may truly and in practice be—as they have always been—light for our steps through life, water that irrigates the parched stretches on our path, life that gets the better of some arid areas of life today. The moral life of Christians is grafted on the Creed, on which it is founded and by which it is justified.

It is not by chance that Blessed John Paul II wanted the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, a reliable norm for teaching the faith and a dependable source for a renewed catechesis, to be based on the Creed. It was a question of confirming and preserving this central core of the truths of the faith and of rendering it in a language that would be more comprehensible to the people of our time, to us. It is a duty of the Church to transmit the faith, to communicate the Gospel, so that the Christian truths may be a light in the new cultural transformations and that Christians may be able to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pet 3:15). Today we are living in a society in constant movement, one that has changed radically, even in comparison with the recent past.

The processes of secularization and a widespread nihilistic mentality in which all is relative have deeply marked the common mindset. Thus life is often lived frivolously, with no clear ideals or well-founded hopes, and within fluid and

temporary social ties. Above all the new generations are not taught the truth nor the profound meaning of existence that surmounts the contingent situation, nor permanent affections and trust. Relativism leads, on the contrary, to having no reference points, suspicion and volubility break up human relations, while life is lived in brief experiments without the assumption of responsibility.

If individualism and relativism seem to dominate the minds of many of our contemporaries, it cannot be said that believers are completely immune to these dangers, with which we are confronted in the transmission of the faith. The investigation promoted on all the continents through the celebration of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization, has highlighted some of them: a faith lived passively and privately, the rejection of education in the faith, the gap between life and faith.

Christians often do not even know the central core of their own Catholic faith, the Creed, so that they leave room for a certain syncretism and religious relativism, blurring the truths to believe in as well as the salvific uniqueness of Christianity. The risk of fabricating, as it were, a “do-it-yourself” religion is not so far off today. Instead we must return to God, to the God of Jesus Christ, we must rediscover the Gospel message and make it enter our consciences and our daily life more deeply.

In the Catecheses of this *Year of Faith* I would like to offer some help for achieving this journey for taking up and deepening knowledge of the central truths of our faith, concerning God, man, the Church, about the whole social and cosmic reality, by meditating and reflecting on the affirmations of the Creed. And I would like it to be clear that this content or truth of faith (*fides quae*) bears directly our life; it asks for a conversion of life that gives life to a new way of believing in God (*fides qua*). Knowing God, meeting him, deepening our knowledge of the features of his face is vital for our life so that he may enter into the profound dynamics of the human being.

May the journey we shall be making this year enable us all to grow in faith, in love of Christ, so that in our daily decisions and actions we may learn to live the good and beautiful life of the Gospel. Many thanks.

# What is faith?

24 October 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last with the beginning of the *Year of Faith*, I started a new series of catecheses on faith. And today I would like to reflect with you on a fundamental question: What is faith? Does faith still make sense in a world in which science and technology have unfolded horizons unthinkable until a short time ago? What does believing mean today? In fact, in our time we need a renewed education in the faith that includes, of course, knowledge of its truths and of the history of salvation, but that is born above all from a true encounter with God in Jesus Christ, from loving him, from trusting him, so that the whole of our life becomes involved.

Today, together with so many signs of goodness a certain spiritual desert is also developing around us. At times we get sort of feeling, from certain events we have news of every day, that the world is not moving towards the building of a more brotherly and peaceful community; the very ideas of progress and wellbeing have shadows too. Despite the greatness of scientific discoveries and technological triumphs, human beings today do not seem to have become truly any freer or more human; so many forms of exploitation, manipulation, violence, abuse and injustice endure.... A certain kind of culture, moreover, has taught people to move solely within the horizon of things, of the feasible, to believe only in what they can see and touch with their own hands. Yet the number of those who feel bewildered is also growing, and search to go beyond a merely horizontal view of reality they are prepared to believe in everything and nothing.

In this context certain fundamental questions reemerge that are far weightier than they seem at first sight. What is life's meaning? Is there a future for humanity, for us and for the generations to come? In which direction should we orient our free decisions for a good and successful outcome in life? What awaits us beyond the threshold of death?

From these irrepressible questions it becomes clear how the world of planning, of precise calculation and of experimentation, in a word the knowledge of science, although important for human life is not enough on its own. We do not

only need bread, we need love, meaning and hope, a sound foundation, a solid terrain that helps us to live with an authentic meaning even in times of crisis, in darkness, in difficulty, and with our daily problems. Faith gives us precisely this: it is a confident entrustment to a “You”, who is God, who gives me a different certitude, but no less solid than that which comes from precise calculation or from science. Faith is not a mere intellectual assent of the human person to specific truths about God; it is an act with which I entrust myself freely to a God who is Father and who loves me; it is adherence to a “You” who gives me hope and trust.

Of course, this adherence to God is not without content; with it we are aware that God has shown himself to us in Christ, he has made us see his face and has made himself really close to each one of us. Indeed, God has revealed that his love for man, for each one of us, is boundless: on the Cross, Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God made man, shows us in the clearest possible way how far this love reaches, even to the gift of himself, even to the supreme sacrifice. With the mystery of Christ’s death and Resurrection, God plumbs to the depths of our humanity to bring it back to him, to uplift it to his heights. Faith is believing in this love of God that is never lacking in the face of human wickedness, in the face of evil and death, but is capable of transforming every kind of slavery, giving us the possibility of salvation. Having faith, then, is meeting this “You”, God, who supports me and grants me the promise of an indestructible love that not only aspires to eternity but gives it; it means entrusting myself to God with the attitude of a child, who knows well that all his difficulties, all his problems are understood in the “you” of his mother. And this possibility of salvation through faith is a gift that God offers all men and women. I think we should meditate more often—in our daily life, marked by problems and at times by dramatic situations—on the fact that believing in a Christian manner means my trusting abandonment to the profound meaning that sustains me and the world, that meaning that we are unable to give to each other but can only receive as a gift, and that is the foundation on which we can live without fear. And we must be able to proclaim this liberating and reassuring certainty of faith with words and show it by living our life as Christians.

However, we see around us every day that many remain indifferent or refuse to accept this proclamation. At the end of Mark’s Gospel we heard harsh words

from the Risen One who says: “He who believes and is baptized will be saved; but he who does not believe will be condemned” (Mk 16:16), loses himself. I would like to invite you to reflect on this.

Trust in the action of the Holy Spirit must always impel us to go and preach the Gospel, to the courageous witness of faith; but, in addition to the possibility of making a positive response to the gift of faith, there is also the risk of rejecting the Gospel, of not accepting the vital encounter with Christ. St Augustine was already posing this problem in one of his commentaries on the Parable of the Sower. “We speak”, he said, “we cast the seed, we scatter the seed. There are those who deride us, those who reproach us, those who mock at us. If we fear them we have nothing left to sow and on the day of reaping we will be left without a harvest. Therefore may the seed in the good soil sprout” (*Discourse on Christian Discipline*, 13, 14: PL 40, 677–678). Rejection, therefore, cannot discourage us. As Christians we are evidence of this fertile ground. Our faith, even with our limitations, shows that good soil exists, where the seed of the Word of God produces abundant fruits of justice, peace and love, of new humanity, of salvation. And the whole history of the Church, with all the problems, also shows that good soil exists, that the good seed exists and bears fruit.

Yet, let us ask ourselves: where can man find that openness of heart and mind to believe in God who made himself visible in Jesus Christ who died and Rose, to receive God’s salvation so that Christ and his Gospel might be the guide and the light of our existence? The answer: we can believe in God because he comes close to us and touches us, because the Holy Spirit, a gift of the Risen One, enables us to receive the living God. Thus faith is first of all a supernatural gift, a gift of God.

The Second Vatican Council says: “Before this faith can be exercised, man must have the grace of God to move and assist him; he must have the interior help of the Holy Spirit, who moves the heart and converts it to God, who opens the eyes of the mind and ‘makes it easy for all to accept and believe the truth’ ” (Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, n. 5).

Our journey starts from Baptism, the sacrament that gives us the Holy Spirit, making us become children of God in Christ, and marks our entry into the

community of faith, into the Church: one does not believe by oneself, without the prior intervention of the grace of the Holy Spirit, one does not believe alone, but together with one's brethren. As from Baptism every believer is called to new life, and to make this confession of faith his or her own, together with the brethren.

Faith is a gift of God, but it is also a profoundly free and human act. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says so clearly: "Believing is possible only by grace and the interior help of the Holy Spirit. But it is no less true that believing is an authentically human act ... contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason" (n. 154). Indeed, it involves them and uplifts them in a gamble for life that is like an exodus, that is, a coming out of ourselves, from our own certainties, from our own mental framework, to entrust ourselves to the action of God who points out to us his way to achieve true freedom, our human identity, true joy of the heart, peace with everyone. Believing means entrusting oneself in full freedom and joyfully to God's providential plan for history, as did the Patriarch Abraham, as did Mary of Nazareth. Faith, then, is an assent with which our mind and our heart say their "yes" to God, confessing that Jesus is Lord. And this "yes" transforms life, unfolds the path toward fullness of meaning, thereby making it new, rich in joy and trustworthy hope.

Dear friends, our time needs Christians who have been grasped by Christ, who grow in faith through their familiarity with Sacred Scripture and the sacraments. People who are, as it were, an open book that tells of the experience of new life in the Spirit, of the presence of that God who supports us on our way and opens us to everlasting life. Many thanks.

## **Faith and Community**

*31 October 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Let us continue on our journey of meditations on the Catholic faith. Last week I showed how faith is a gift, because it is God who takes the initiative and comes to meet us, and like this the faith is an answer by which we receive him as the permanent foundation of our life. It is a gift that changes our existence, because

it makes us enter into Jesus' own vision, which works in us and opens us to love for God and for others.

Today I would like to take another step in our reflection, starting once more with a few questions: Does faith have a solely personal, individual nature? Does it concern only myself? Do I live my faith alone? Of course, the act of faith is an eminently personal act; it happens in the deepest part of us and signals a change in direction through personal conversion. It is my life that changes, that is given a new direction. In the Rite of Baptism, at the moment of the promises, the celebrant asks for a profession of the Catholic faith and formulates three questions: Do you believe in God the Father Almighty? Do you believe in Jesus Christ his only Son? Do you believe in the Holy Spirit? In ancient times these questions were addressed to the person who was to receive Baptism before being immersed three times in water. And today, too, the answer is one and the same: "I do". But this faith of mine is not the result of my own solitary reflection, it is not the product of my thought, it is the fruit of a relationship, a dialogue, in which there is a listener, a receiver and a respondent; it is communication with Jesus that draws me out of the "I" enclosed in myself to open me to the love of God, the Father. It is like a rebirth in which I am united not only to Jesus, but also to all those who have walked and are walking on the same path; and this new birth, that begins with Baptism, continues for the rest of my life. I cannot build my personal faith in a private dialogue with Jesus, because faith is given to me by God through a community of believers that is the Church and projects me into the multitude of believers, into a kind of communion that is not only sociological but rooted in the eternal love of God who is in himself the communion of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, it is Trinitarian Love. Our faith is truly personal, only if it is also communal: it can be my faith only if it dwells in and moves with the "we" of the Church, only if it is our faith, the common faith of the one Church.

On Sunday, in the Holy Mass, reciting the "Creed", we speak in the first person, but we confess as one the one faith of the Church. That "I believe" said individually joins a vast chorus across time and space, in which each person contributes, so to speak, to the harmonious poliphany in faith. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* sums this up in a clear way: thus, "believing" is an act of the Church. The Church's faith precedes, engenders, supports and nourishes our



faith. The Church is the Mother of all believers. “‘No one can have God as his Father, who does not have the Church as his Mother’ (St Cyprian)” (n. 181). Therefore, the faith is born in the Church, leads to her and lives in her. This is important to remember.

At the start of the Christian adventure, when the Holy Spirit descends with power upon the disciples, on the day of Pentecost—as we read in the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 2:1–13)—the early Church receives the power to begin the mission entrusted to her by the Risen Lord: to spread the Gospel to every corner of the earth, the Good News of the Kingdom of God, and thus to lead every human person to the encounter with Him, to the faith that saves. The Apostles overcome every fear in proclaiming what they had heard, seen, personally experienced with Jesus. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they start to speak in tongues, openly announcing the mystery of which they were witnesses. In the Acts of the Apostles, we are told then of the great discourse that Peter gives on the day of Pentecost. He begins with a passage from the Prophet Joel (3:1–5), referring to Jesus, and proclaiming the central nucleus of the Christian faith: The One who had benefited all, who was attested to by God with mighty works, wonders and signs, who was nailed to the Cross and killed, but God raised him from the dead, making him Lord and Christ. With Him we have come into the ultimate salvation foretold by the Prophets and whoever invokes his name will be saved (cf. Acts 2:17–24). Listening to these words of Peter, many, who felt called personally, repented of their sins and were baptized receiving the gift of the Holy Spirit (cf. Acts 2:37–41). And so began the journey of the Church, the community that bears this proclamation through time and space, the community that is the People of God founded on the New Covenant thanks to the Blood of Christ. Her members do not belong to a particular social or ethnic group, but are men and women of every nation and culture. It is a “catholic” people, a people who speaks in tongues, universally open to welcoming all, beyond all boundaries, breaking down every barrier. St Paul says: “Here there cannot be Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free man, but Christ is all, and in all” (Col 3:11).

The Church, therefore, from the beginning is the place of faith, the place for the transmission of the faith, the place in which, through Baptism, we are immersed in the Pascal Mystery of the Death and Resurrection of Christ, who frees us from

the slavery of sin, gives us the freedom of children and introduces us into communion with the Trinitarian God. At the same time, we are immersed in communion with other brothers and sisters of the faith, with the entire Body of Christ, brought out of our isolation. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council reminds us: “God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals without any mutual bonds but by making them into a single people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness” (cf. Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 9). Referring back again to the Rite of Baptism, we note that, at the end of the promises in which we voice our renunciation of evil and we repeat “I believe” to the truths of the faith, the celebrant declares: “This is our faith. This is the faith of the Church. We are proud to profess it, in Christ Jesus our Lord”. The faith is a theological virtue, given by God, but transmitted by the Church throughout history. St Paul himself, writing to the Corinthians, affirms he has communicated to them the Gospel that he too had received (cf. 1 Cor 15:3).

There is an unbroken chain in the life of the Church, in the proclamation of the Word of God, of the celebration of the Sacraments, that has come down to us and that we call Tradition. It gives us the guarantee that what we believe is the original message of Christ, preached by the Apostles. The nucleus of the primordial proclamation is the death and the Resurrection of the Lord, from which stems the entire patrimony of the faith. The Council says: “The apostolic preaching, which is expressed in a special way in the inspired books, was to be preserved by a continuous line of succession until the end of time” (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 8). In this way, if Sacred Scripture contains the Word of God, the Tradition of the Church preserves it and faithfully transmits it, so that the men and women of every age might have access to its vast resources and be enriched by its treasures of grace. Thus, the Church, “in her doctrine, life and worship, perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes” (*ibid.*).

Lastly, I would like, to emphasize that it is in the ecclesial community that personal faith grows and matures. It is interesting to observe how in the New Testament the word “saints” designates Christians as a whole, and certainly not all would have qualified to be declared saints by the Church. What is meant, then, by this term? The fact that whoever had and lived the faith in Christ Risen

were call to become a point of reference for all others, setting them in this way in contact with the Person and the Message of Jesus, who reveals the face of the Living God. And this holds true also for us: a Christian who lets himself be guided and gradually shaped by the faith of the Church, in spite of his weaknesses, his limitations and his difficulties, becomes like a window open to the light of the living God, receiving this light and transmitting it to the world. Blessed John Paul II in his Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* declared that “missionary activity renews the Church, revitalizes faith and Christian identity, and offers fresh enthusiasm and new incentive. Faith is strengthened when it is given to others” (n. 2).

Today’s widespread tendency to relegate faith to the private sphere thus, contradicts its very nature. We need the Church in order to confirm our faith and in order to experience the gifts of God: his Word, the Sacraments, the support of grace and the witness of love. Like this, our “I” can be perceived in the “we” of the Church and, at the same time, be the recipient and the protagonist of an overwhelming event: experiencing communion with God, that is the foundation of communion among men. In a world in which individualism seems to rule personal relationships, making them ever more fragile, the faith calls us to be the People of God, to be Church, bearers of the love and communion of God for all mankind (cf. Pastoral Constitution *Guadium et Spes*, n. 1). Thank you for your attention.

## The desire for God

7 November 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The journey of reflection that we are making together during this *Year of Faith* leads us to meditate today on a fascinating aspect of the human and the Christian experience: man carries within himself a mysterious desire for God. In a very significant way, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* opens precisely with the following consideration: “The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for” (n. 27).

A statement like this, that even today in many cultural contexts seems quite acceptable, even obvious, might, however, be taken as a provocation in the West's secularized culture. Many of our contemporaries might actually object that they have no such desire for God. For large sectors of society he is no longer the one longed for or desired but rather a reality that leaves them indifferent, one on which there is no need even to comment. In reality, what we have defined as "the desire for God" has not entirely disappeared and it still appears today, in many ways, in the heart of man. Human desire always tends to certain concrete goods, often anything but spiritual, and yet it has to face the question of what is truly "the" good, and thus is confronted with something other than itself, something man cannot build but he is called to recognize. What can really satisfy man's desire?

In my first Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I sought to analyze how such dynamism can be found in the experience of human love, an experience that in our age is more easily perceived as a moment of ecstasy, of leaving oneself, like a place in which man feels overcome by a desire that surpasses him. Through love, a man and a woman experience in a new way, thanks to each other, the greatness and beauty of life and of what is real. If what is experienced is not a mere illusion, if I truly want the good of the other as a means for my own good, then I must be willing not to be self-centred, to place myself at the other's service, even to the point of self-denial. The answer to the question on the meaning of the experience of love then passes through the purification and healing of the will, required in loving the other. We must cultivate, encourage, and also correct ourselves, so that this good can truly be loved.

Thus the initial ecstasy becomes a pilgrimage, "an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God" (Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 6). Through this journey one will be able to deepen gradually one's knowledge of that love, initially experienced. And the mystery that it represents will become more and more defined: in fact, not even the beloved is capable of satisfying the desire that dwells in the human heart. In fact, the more authentic one's love for the other is, the more it reveals the question of its origin and its destiny, of the possibility that it may endure for ever. Therefore, the human experience of love has in itself a dynamism that refers beyond the self, it

is the experience of a good that leads to being drawn out and finding oneself before the mystery that encompasses the whole of existence.

One could make similar observation about other human experiences as well, such as friendship, encountering beauty, loving knowledge: every good experienced by man projects him toward the mystery that surrounds the human being; every desire that springs up in the human heart echoes a fundamental desire that is never fully satisfied. Undoubtedly by such a deep desire, hidden, even enigmatic, one cannot arrive directly at faith. Men and women, after all, know well what does not satisfy them, but they cannot imagine or define what the happiness they long for in their hearts would be like. One cannot know God based on human desire alone. From this point of view he remains a mystery: man is the seeker of the Absolute, seeking with small and hesitant steps. And yet, already the experience of desire, of a “restless heart” as St Augustine called it, is very meaningful. It tells us that man is, deep down, a religious being (cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 28), a “beggar of God”. We can say with the words of Pascal: “Man infinitely surpasses man” (*Pensées*, ed. Chevalier 438; ed. Brunschvicg 434). Eyes recognize things when they are illuminated. From this comes a desire to know the light itself, what makes the things of the world shine and with them ignites the sense of beauty.

We must therefore maintain that it is possible also in this age, seemingly so blocked to the transcendent dimension, to begin a journey toward the true religious meaning of life, that shows how the gift of faith is not senseless, is not irrational. It would be very useful, to that end, to foster a kind of pedagogy of desire, both for the journey of one who does not yet believe and for the one who has already received the gift of faith. It should be a pedagogy that covers at least two aspects. In the first place, to discover or rediscover the taste of the authentic joy of life. Not all satisfactions have the same effect on us: some leave a positive after-taste, able to calm the soul and make us more active and generous. Others, however, after the initial delight, seem to disappoint the expectations that they had awakened and sometimes leave behind them a sense of bitterness, dissatisfaction or emptiness. Instilling in someone from a young age the taste for true joy, in every area of life—family, friendship, solidarity with those who suffer, self-renunciation for the sake of the other, love of knowledge, art, the beauty of nature—all this means exercising the inner taste and producing

antibodies that can fight the trivialization and the dulling widespread today. Adults too need to rediscover this joy, to desire authenticity, to purify themselves of the mediocrity that might infest them. It will then become easier to drop or reject everything that although attractive proves to be, in fact, insipid, a source of indifference and not of freedom. And this will bring out that desire for God of which we are speaking.

A second aspect that goes hand in hand with the preceding one is never to be content with what you have achieved. It is precisely the truest joy that unleashes in us the healthy restlessness that leads us to be more demanding—to want a higher good, a deeper good—and at the same time to perceive ever more clearly that no finite thing can fill our heart. In this way we will learn to strive, unarmed, for the good that we cannot build or attain by our own power; and we will learn to not be discouraged by the difficulty or the obstacles that come from our sin.

In this regard, we must not forget that the dynamism of desire is always open to redemption. Even when it strays from the path, when it follows artificial paradises and seems to lose the capacity of yearning for the true good. Even in the abyss of sin, that ember is never fully extinguished in man. It allows him to recognize the true good, to savour it, and thus to start out again on a path of ascent; God, by the gift of his grace, never denies man his help. We all, moreover, need to set out on the path of purification and healing of desire. We are pilgrims, heading for the heavenly homeland, toward that full and eternal good that nothing will be able to take away from us. This is not, then, about suffocating the longing that dwells in the heart of man, but about freeing it, so that it can reach its true height. When in desire one opens the window to God, this is already a sign of the presence of faith in the soul, faith that is a grace of God. St Augustine always says: “so God, by deferring our hope, stretched our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious” (*Commentary on the First Letter of John*, 4, 6: PL 35, 2009).

On this pilgrimage, let us feel like brothers and sisters of all men, travelling companions even of those who do not believe, of those who are seeking, of those who are sincerely wondering about the dynamism of their own aspiration for the true and the good. Let us pray, in this *Year of Faith*, that God may show his face to all those who seek him with a sincere heart. Thank you.

# The ways that lead to knowledge of God

14 November 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Last Wednesday we reflected on the desire for God that human beings carry deep within them. Today I would like to continue to examine this aspect, meditating briefly with you on some of the ways to attain knowledge of God. I wish to recall, however, that God's initiative always precedes every human initiative and on our journey towards him too it is he who first illuminates us, who directs and guides us, ever respecting our inner freedom. It is always he who admits us to intimacy with him, revealing himself and giving us the grace to be able to accept this revelation in faith. Let us never forget St Augustine's experience: it is not we who possess the Truth after having sought it, but the Truth that seeks us out and possesses us.

Nonetheless there are ways that can open the human heart to knowledge of God, there are signs that lead to God. Of course, we often risk being dazzled by the glare of worldliness that makes us less able to follow these paths and to read these signs. Yet God never tires of seeking us, he is faithful to the human being whom he created and redeemed, he stays close to us in our life because he loves us. This is a certainty that must accompany us every day, even if a certain widespread mentality makes it harder for the Church and for Christians to communicate to every creature the joy of the Gospel and to lead everyone to the encounter with Jesus, the one Saviour of the world.

However, this is our mission. It is the mission of the Church and every believer must carry it out joyously, feeling it his own, through an existence truly enlivened by faith, marked by charity, by service to God and to others, and that can radiate hope. This mission shines out above all in the holiness to which we are all called.

Today—as we know—faith, which is all too often not properly understood and contested or rejected, encounters no lack of difficulties and trials. St Peter said to his Christians: “Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:15). In the past, in the West, in a society deemed Christian, faith was the

context in which people acted; the reference and adherence to God were part of daily life for the majority. Rather, it was the person who did not believe who had to justify his or her own incredulity. In our world the situation has changed and, increasingly, it is believers who must be able to account for their faith. In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* Blessed John Paul II stressed that faith is also put to the test in our day, riddled with subtle and captious forms of atheism, both theoretical and practical (cf. nn. 46–47). Ever since the Enlightenment the criticism of religion has been gathering momentum; history has also come to be marked by the presence of atheistic systems in which God was seen as a mere projection of the human mind, an illusion and the product of a society already misled by so many alienating factors. Moreover the past century experienced a strong process of secularization under the banner of the absolute autonomy of the human being, considered as the measure and architect of reality, but impoverished by being created “in the image and likeness of God”. A particularly dangerous phenomenon for faith has arisen in our times: indeed a form of atheism exists which we define, precisely, as “practical”, in which the truths of faith or religious rites are not denied but are merely deemed irrelevant to daily life, detached from life, pointless. So it is that people often believe in God in a superficial manner, and live “as though God did not exist” (*etsi Deus non daretur*). In the end, however, this way of life proves even more destructive because it leads to indifference to faith and to the question of God.

In fact human beings, separated from God, are reduced to a single dimension—the horizontal—and this reductionism itself is one of the fundamental causes of the various forms of totalitarianism that have had tragic consequences in the past century, as well as of the crisis of values that we see in the current situation. By obscuring the reference to God the ethical horizon has also been obscured, to leave room for relativism and for an ambiguous conception of freedom which, instead of being liberating, ends by binding human beings to idols. The temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness before his public ministry vividly symbolize which “idols” entice human beings when they do not go beyond themselves. Were God to lose his centrality man would lose his rightful place, he would no longer fit into creation, into relations with others. What ancient wisdom evokes with the myth of Prometheus has not faded: man thinks he himself can become a “god”, master of life and death.



With this picture before her, the Church, faithful to Christ's mandate, never ceases to affirm the truth about man and about his destiny. The Second Vatican Council affirms it concisely: "The dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and unless he entrusts himself to his Creator" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19).

What answers, therefore, is faith required to give, "with gentleness and reverence" to atheism, to scepticism, to indifference to the vertical dimension, in order that the people of our time may continue to ponder on the existence of God and take paths that lead to him? I want to point out several paths that derive both from natural reflection and from the power of faith itself. I would like to sum them up very briefly in three words: the world, man, faith.

The first word: the world. St Augustine, who spent much of his life seeking the Truth and was grasped by the Truth, wrote a very beautiful and famous passage in which he said: "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky ... question all these realities. All respond: 'See, we are beautiful'. Their beauty is a profession [*confessio*]. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One [*Pulcher*] who is not subject to change?" (*Sermo* 241, 2: pl 38, 1134).

I think we should recover—and enable people today to recover—our capacity for contemplating creation, its beauty and its structure. The world is not a shapeless mass of magma, but the better we know it and the better we discover its marvellous mechanisms the more clearly we can see a plan, we see that there is a creative intelligence. Albert Einstein said that in natural law is revealed "an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection" (*The World As I See It*, 1949). Consequently a first path that leads to the discovery of God is an attentive contemplation of creation.

The second word: man. Again, St Augustine was to write a famous sentence in which he says that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself (cf. *Confessions* III, 6, 11).

Hence he formulates the invitation, “do not go outside yourself, return to yourself: the truth is higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self” (*De Vera Religione*, 39, 72). This is another aspect that we risk losing in the noisy and dispersive world in which we live: the ability to pause and look deeply into ourselves and to reinterpret the thirst for the infinite that we bear within us, that impels us to go further and to refer to the One who can quench it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “with his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God’s existence” (n. 33).

The third word: faith. We must not forget, especially in the situation of our time, that the life of faith is a path which leads to the knowledge of and encounter with God. Those who believe are united to God and open to his grace, to the power of his love. Thus their existence becomes a witness, not of themselves but of the Risen One, and their faith does not hesitate to shine out in daily life, open to dialogue that expresses deep friendship for the journey of every human being and can bring hope to people in need of redemption, happiness, a future. Faith, in fact, is an encounter with God who speaks and works in history and converts our daily life, transforming within us mentalities, value judgements, decisions and practical actions. Faith is not an illusion, a flight of fancy, a refuge or sentimentalism; rather it is total involvement in the whole of life and is the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News that can set the whole of the person free. A Christian and a community that are active and faithful to the plan of God who loved us first, are privileged paths for those immersed in indifference or in doubt about their life and action. However, this asks each and every one to make their testimony of faith ever more transparent, purifying their life so that it may be in conformity with Christ. Many people today have a limited idea of the Christian faith, because they identify it with a mere system of beliefs and values rather than with the truth of a God who revealed himself in history, anxious to communicate with human beings in a tête-à-tête, in a relationship of love with them. In fact, at the root of every doctrine or value is the event of the encounter

between man and God in Jesus Christ. Christianity, before being a moral or an ethic, is the event of love, it is the acceptance of the Person of Jesus. For this reason the Christian and Christian communities must first look and make others look to Christ, the true Way that leads to God.

## **The reasonableness of faith in God**

*21 November 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Let us proceed in this Year of Faith bearing in our hearts the hope of finding all the joy there is in believing and of rediscovering the enthusiasm of communicating the truths of the faith to all. These truths are not a simple message about God, a particular piece of information on him. On the contrary they express the event of God's encounter with human beings, a salvific and liberating encounter which fulfils the deepest aspirations of the human heart, the yearning for peace, brotherhood and love. Faith leads to the discovery that the meeting with God enhances, perfects and exalts all that is true, good and beautiful that exists in man. So it happens that while God reveals himself and lets himself be known, man comes to realize who God is and in knowing him, discovers himself, his true origin, his destiny, the greatness and dignity of human life.

Faith makes possible authentic knowledge about God which involves the whole human person: it is a "sapere", that is, a knowledge which gives life a savour, a new taste, a joyful way of being in the world. Faith is expressed in the gift of self for others, in brotherhood which creates solidarity, the ability to love, overcoming the loneliness that brings sadness. Thus this knowledge of God through faith is not only intellectual but also vital. It is the knowledge of God-Love, thanks to his own love. The love of God, moreover, makes us see, opens our eyes, enables us to know the whole of reality, in addition to the narrow views of individualism and subjectivism that confuse consciences. Knowledge of God is therefore an experience of faith and at the same time entails an intellectual and moral development; moved in our depths by the Spirit of Jesus within us, we go beyond the horizons of our own selfishness and open ourselves to the true values of existence.

Today, in this catechesis, I would like to reflect on the reasonableness of faith in God. The Catholic Tradition, from the outset, rejected the so-called “fideism”, which is the desire to believe against reason. *Credo quia absurdum* (I believe because it is absurd) is not a formula that interprets the Catholic faith. Indeed God is not absurd, if anything he is a mystery. The mystery, in its turn, is not irrational but is a superabundance of sense, of meaning, of truth. If, looking at the mystery, reason sees darkness, it is not because there is no light in the mystery, but rather because there is too much of it. Just as when humans raise their eyes to look at the sun, they are blinded; but who would say that the sun is not bright or, indeed, the fount of light? Faith permits us to look at the “sun”, God, because it is the acceptance of his revelation in history and, so to speak, the true reception of God’s mystery, recognizing the great miracle. God came close to man, he offered himself so that man might know him, stooping to the creatural limitations of human reason (cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*, n. 13). At the same time, God, with his grace, illuminates reason, unfolds new horizons before it, boundless and infinite. For this reason faith is an incentive to seek always, never to stop and never to be content in the inexhaustible search for truth and reality. The prejudice of certain modern thinkers, who hold that human reason would be as it were blocked by the dogmas of faith, is false.

Exactly the opposite is true, as the great teachers of the Catholic Tradition have shown. St Augustine, before his conversion sought the Truth with great restlessness through all the philosophies he had at his disposal, finding them all unsatisfactory. His demanding, rational search, was a meaningful pedagogy for him for the encounter with the Truth of Christ. When he says: “I believe, in order to understand, and I understand the better to believe” (*Discourse* 43, 9: PL 38, 258), it is as if he were recounting his own life experience. Intellect and faith are not foreign or antagonistic to the divine Revelation but are both conditions for understanding its meaning, for receiving its authentic message, for approaching the threshold of the mystery. St Augustine, together with so many other Christian authors, is a witness of a faith that is practised with reason, that thinks and invites thought. On this same track St Anselm was to say in his *Proslogion* that the Catholic faith is a *fides quaerens intellectum*, where the quest for understanding is an act inherent to believing. It was to be St Thomas Aquinas in particular—strong in this tradition—who challenged the reason of the

philosophers, showing how much new and fertile rational vitality comes from human thought grafted on to the principles and truths of the Christian faith.

The Catholic faith is therefore reasonable and fosters trust in human reason as well. The First Vatican Council, in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*, said that reason is able to know with certainty that God exists through the Creation, whereas the possibility of knowing “easily, with complete certainty and without error” (DS 3005) the truths that concern God in the light of grace, belongs to faith alone. The knowledge of faith, moreover, is not in opposition to right reason. Blessed Pope John Paul II, in fact, in his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, sums it up in these words: “human reason is neither annulled nor debased in assenting to the contents of faith, which are in any case attained by way of free and informed choice” (n. 43).

In the irresistible desire for truth, only a harmonious relationship between faith and reason is the right road that leads to God and to the person’s complete fulfilment. This doctrine is easily recognizable throughout the New Testament. St Paul, in writing to the Christians of Corinth, maintains, as we have heard: “Jews demand signs and Greeks seek wisdom, but we preach Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and folly to Gentiles” (1 Cor 1:22–23). God in fact did not save the world with an act of power, but through the humiliation of his Only-Begotten Son. Measured in human parameters, the unusual ways of God clash with the demands of Greek wisdom. And yet, the Cross of Christ has a reason of its own which St Paul calls: *ho logos tou staurou* “the word of the cross” (1 Cor 1:18). Here the term *logos* means both the word and reason and, if it alludes to the word, it is because it expresses verbally what reason works out.

Hence Paul does not see the Cross as an irrational event, but as a saving factor that possesses its own reasonableness, recognizable in the light of faith. At the same time he has such trust in human reason, that he is surprised that many people, in spite of seeing the works brought about by God, persist in refusing to believe in him. In his Letter to the Romans St Paul says: “ever since the creation of the world his invisible nature, namely, his eternal power and deity, has been clearly perceived in the things that have been made” (1:20).

St Peter likewise also urges the Christians of the diaspora to worship: “in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defence to any

one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (1 Pt 3:15). In an atmosphere of persecution and with a pressing need to bear witness to faith, we believers are asked to justify with well-grounded reasons their adherence to the word of the Gospel, to account for the reason for our hope.

The virtual relationship between science and faith is also founded on these premises concerning the fertile connection between understanding and believing. Scientific research leads to the knowledge of ever new truths about man and about the cosmos, as we see it. The true good of humanity, accessible in faith, unfolds the horizons within which the process of its discovery must move. Consequently research, for example, at the service of life and which aims to eliminate disease, should be encouraged. Also important are investigations that aim to discover the secrets of our planet and of the universe, in the awareness that the human being is not in charge of creation to exploit it foolishly but to preserve it and make it inhabitable. Thus faith, lived truly, does not come into conflict with science but, rather, cooperates with it, offering the basic criteria to promote the good of all and asking it to give up only those endeavours which—in opposition to God’s original plan—produce effects that are detrimental to the human being. For this reason too it is reasonable to believe: if science is a precious ally of faith for understanding God’s plan for the universe, faith, remaining faithful to this very plan, permits scientific progress always to be achieved for the good and truth of man.

This is why it is crucial for human beings to be open to faith and to know God and his plan of salvation in Jesus Christ. In the Gospel a new humanism is inaugurated, an authentic “grammar” of the human being and of the whole of reality. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: “God’s truth is his wisdom, which commands the whole created order and governs the world. God, who alone ‘made heaven and earth’ (Ps 115:15), can alone impart true knowledge of every created thing in relation to himself” (n. 216).

Let us trust, therefore, that our commitment to evangelization may help to restore a new centrality to the Gospel in the life of untold men and women of our time. And let us pray that all may rediscover in Christ the meaning of existence and the foundation of true freedom: without God, in fact, men and women lose themselves. The testimonies of those who have preceded us and dedicated their

lives to the Gospel confirm this for ever. It is reasonable to believe, and the whole of our existence is at stake. It is worth expending oneself for Christ, he alone satisfies the desires for truth and goodness that are rooted in every human being's soul: now, in time that passes, and in the never ending day of blessed Eternity.

## How to speak about God?

*28 November 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The important question we ask ourselves today is: how can we talk about God in our time? How can we communicate the Gospel so as to open roads to his saving truth in our contemporaries' hearts—that are all too often closed—and minds—that are at times distracted by the many dazzling lights of society? Jesus, the Evangelists tell us, asked himself about this as he proclaimed the kingdom of God: “With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it?” (Mk 4:30).

How can we talk about God today? The first answer is that we can talk about God because he has talked to us; so the first condition for speaking of God is listening to all that God himself has said. God has spoken to us! God is therefore not a distant hypothesis concerning the world's origin; he is not a mathematical intelligence far from us. God takes an interest in us, he loves us, he has entered personally into the reality of our history, he has communicated himself, even to the point of taking flesh. Thus God is a reality of our life, he is so great that he has time for us too, he takes an interest in us. In Jesus of Nazareth we encounter the face of God, who came down from his heaven to immerse himself in the human world, in our world, and to teach “the art of living”, the road to happiness; to set us free from sin and make us children of God (cf. Eph 1:5; Rom 8:14). Jesus came to save us and to show us the good life of the Gospel.

Talking about God means first of all expressing clearly what God we must bring to the men and women of our time: not an abstract God, a hypothesis, but a real God, a God who exists, who has entered history and is present in history; the God of Jesus Christ as an answer to the fundamental question of the meaning of life

and of how we should live. Consequently speaking of God demands familiarity with Jesus and his Gospel, it implies that we have a real, personal knowledge of God and a strong passion for his plan of salvation without succumbing to the temptation of success, but following God's own method. God's method is that of humility—God makes himself one of us—his method is brought about through the Incarnation in the simple house of Nazareth; through the Grotto of Bethlehem; through the Parable of the Mustard Seed.

We must not fear the humility of taking little steps, but trust in the leaven that penetrates the dough and slowly causes it to rise (cf. Mt 13:33). In talking about God, in the work of evangelization, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we must recover simplicity, we must return to the essence of the proclamation: the Good News of a God who is real and effective, a God who is concerned about us, a God-Love who makes himself close to us in Jesus Christ, until the Cross, and who in the Resurrection gives us hope and opens us to a life that has no end, eternal life, true life. St Paul, that exceptional communicator, gives us a lesson that goes straight to the heart of the problem of faith: “how to speak of God” with great simplicity.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians he writes: “When I came to you, brethren, I did not come proclaiming to you the testimony of God in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified” (2:1–2).

The first real fact, therefore, is that Paul does not speak of a philosophy that he developed, he does not speak of ideas that he found elsewhere or invented, but of a reality of his life, he speaks of the God who entered his life, he speaks of a real God who is alive, who spoke with him and will speak with us, he speaks of the Crucified and Risen Christ.

The second real fact is that Paul does not seek himself, he does not want to make a fan club for himself, he does not wish to go down in history as the head of a school of great knowledge, he is not self-seeking; rather, St Paul proclaims Christ and wants to gain people for the true and real God. Paul's wish is to speak of and preach the One who entered his life and who is true life, who won him over on the road to Damascus. Therefore, talking about God means making room for the One who enables us to know him, who reveals his face of love to us; it means



emptying ourselves of our own ego, offering it to Christ, in the awareness that it is not we who can win over others for God, but that we must expect God to send them, we must entreat God for them. Talking about God therefore stems from listening, from our knowledge of God which is brought about through familiarity with him, through the life of prayer and in accordance with the Commandments.

Communicating faith, for St Paul, did not mean putting himself forward, but rather saying openly and publicly what he had seen and heard in his encounter with Christ, what he had experienced in his life that was transformed by that encounter: it meant putting forward Jesus whom he felt present within him and who became the true orientation of his existence, to make it clear to all that Jesus is necessary to the world and crucial to every person's freedom. The Apostle is not satisfied with proclaiming words but expends his whole life in the great work of faith. To speak of God, we must leave him room, trusting that he will act in our weakness: we must make room for him without fear but with simplicity and joy, in the deep conviction that the more we put him at the centre rather than ourselves, the more fruitful our communication will be. And this is also true for Christian communities: they are called to show the transforming action of God's grace, by overcoming individualism, closure, selfishness, indifference, by living out God's love in their daily relations. Let us ask ourselves whether our communities really are like this. To be so, we must, always and truly proclaim Christ and not ourselves.

At this point we should ask ourselves: how did Jesus communicate? Jesus, in his oneness, speaks of his Father—*Abba*—and of the Kingdom of God, his gaze full of compassion for the hardships and difficulties of human life. He speaks with great realism and, I would say, that the essential feature of Jesus' proclamation is that it makes clear that our life and the world are worthy of God. Jesus shows that in the world and in Creation God's face shines out and he shows us that God is present in the daily events of our life. Both in the parables on nature, the mustard seed and the field with various seeds, and in our own life—let us think of the parable of the Prodigal Son, of Lazarus and of other parables of Jesus. From the Gospels we see that Jesus takes an interest in every human situation that he encounters, he immerses himself in the reality of the men and women of his time, with complete trust in the Father's help. And that in this history, although hidden, God is really present and if we are attentive we can encounter

him. And the disciples, who live with Jesus, the crowds who meet him, see his reaction to the most disparate problems, they see how he speaks, how he behaves; in him they see the action of the Holy Spirit, the action of God. In him proclamation and life are interwoven: Jesus acts and teaches, always starting from a close relationship with God the Father. This style becomes an essential indication for us as Christians: our way of living in faith and charity becomes a way of speaking of God today, because it shows, through a life lived in Christ, the credibility and realism of what we say with words, which are not solely words but reveal the reality, the true reality. And in this we must take care to perceive the signs of the times in our epoch, namely, to identify the potentials, aspirations and obstacles we encounter in today's culture and in particular the wish for authenticity, the yearning for transcendence, and concern to safeguard Creation and to communicate fearlessly the response that faith in God offers.

The Year of Faith is an opportunity for us to discover, our imaginations fired by the Holy Spirit, new paths to take on a personal and community level so that the power of the Gospel may become wisdom of life and an orientation for existence everywhere.

In our time too, the family, the first school for communicating the faith to the new generations, is a privileged place in which to talk about God. The Second Vatican Council speaks of parents as the first messengers of God (cf. Dogmatic Constitution, Decree *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11; *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 11). Parents are called to rediscover their mission, assuming responsibility in educating, in opening the consciences of their little ones to love of God as a fundamental service to their life and in being the first catechists and teachers of the faith for their children. And in this task *watchfulness* is of the utmost importance. It means being able to take favourable opportunities to introduce the topic of faith in the family and to develop a critical reflection with regard to the many forms of conditioning to which children are subjected.

The parents' attention includes their sensitivity in perceiving the possible religious questions latent in their children's minds, at times obvious but at other times hidden. Then, *joy*: the communication of faith must always have joyful tones. It is the Easter joy that does not stay silent or conceal the realities of pain, of suffering, of effort, of difficulty, of incomprehension and of death itself, but

that can offer criteria for interpreting all things in the perspective of Christian hope. The good life of the Gospel is precisely this new perception, this capacity to see God with one's own eyes in every situation. It is important to help all the members of the family understand that faith is not a burden but a source of profound joy, that it is perceiving God's action, recognizing the presence of goodness that does not make a sound; and it offers precious guidance for living life well. Lastly, the *capacity for listening and for dialogue*: the family must be a milieu in which we learn to be together, to settle disagreements in conversation with each other, which consists in listening and speaking, in mutual understanding and love, so as to be a sign for each other of God's merciful love.

So it is that talking about God means making people realize through our speech and example, that God is no rival in our existence but rather is its true guarantor, who guarantees the greatness of the human person. Thus we return to the beginning: speaking of God is communicating what is essential, forcefully and simply, through our words and through our life: the God of Jesus Christ, that God who showed us a love so great that he took flesh, died and rose again for us: that God who asks us to follow him and to let ourselves be transformed by his immense love in order to renew our life and our relationships; that God who has given us the Church, so that we may walk together and, through the word and the sacraments, renew the entire city of men and women, so that it may become a City of God.

## **God reveals his “benevolent purpose”**

*5 December 2012*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

At the beginning of his Letter to the Christians of Ephesus (cf. 1:3–14), the Apostle Paul raised a prayer of blessing to God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which leads us to experience the Season of Advent, in the context of the Year of Faith. The theme of this hymn of praise is God's plan for man, described in terms full of joy, wonder and thanksgiving, according to his “benevolent purpose” (cf. v. 9), of mercy and love.

Why does the Apostle raise this blessing to God from the depths of his heart? It is because he sees God's action in the perspective of salvation which culminated in

the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Jesus, and contemplates how the heavenly Father chose us even before the world's creation, to be his adoptive sons, in his Only-Begotten Son, Jesus Christ (cf. Rom 8:14f. Gal 4:4f). We had always existed in God's mind in a great plan that God cherished within him and decided to implement and to reveal in "the fullness of time" (cf. Eph 1:10). St Paul makes us understand, therefore, how the whole of creation and, in particular, men and women, are not the result of chance but are part of a benevolent purpose of the eternal reason of God who brings the world into being with the creative and redemptive power of his word. This first affirmation reminds us that our vocation is not merely to exist in the world, to be inserted into a history, nor is it solely to be creatures of God. It is something more: it is being chosen by God, even before the world's creation, in the Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore in him we have existed, so to speak, for ever. God contemplates us in Christ, as his adoptive sons. God's "purpose" which the Apostle also describes as a plan "of love" (Eph 1:5) is described as "the mystery" of his divine will (v. 9), hidden and now revealed in the Person of Christ and in his work. The divine initiative comes before every human response: it is a freely given gift of his love that envelops and transforms us.

But what is the ultimate purpose of this mysterious design? What is the essence of God's will? It is, St Paul tells us, "to unite all things in him [Christ], the Head" (v. 10). In these words we find one of the central formulas of the New Testament that makes us understand the plan of God, his design of love for the whole of humanity, a formula which, in the second century, St Irenaeus of Lyons established as the core of his Christology: to "recapitulate" the whole of reality in Christ. Perhaps some of you may remember the formula used by Pope St Pius X for the consecration of the world to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: "*Instaurare omnia in Christo*", a formula that refers to the Pauline expression and was also the motto of this holy Pope. However the Apostle speaks more precisely of the recapitulation of the universe in Christ. This means that in the great plan of creation and of history, Christ stands as the focus of the entire journey of the world, as the structural support of all things, and attracts to himself the entire reality in order to overcome dispersion and limitation and lead all things to the fullness desired by God (cf. Eph 1:23).

This “benevolent purpose” was not, so to speak, left in the silence of God, in his heavenly heights. Rather, God made it known by entering into a relationship with human beings to whom he did not reveal just something, but indeed himself. He did not merely communicate an array of truths, but communicated himself to us, even to the point of becoming one of us, of taking flesh. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council says in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*: “It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself [not only something of himself but himself] and to make known the mystery of his will. His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature” (n. 2). God does not only say something, but communicates himself, draws us into his divine nature so that we may be integrated into it or divinized. God reveals his great plan of love by entering into a relationship with man, by coming so close to him that he makes himself man. The Council continues: “the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14–15), and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:37), in order to invite and receive them into his own company” (*ibid.*). With their own intelligence and abilities alone human beings would not have been able to achieve this most enlightening revelation of God’s love; it is God who has opened his heaven and lowered himself in order to guide men and women in his ineffable love.

St Paul writes further to the Christians of Corinth: “What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him’, God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God” (1 Cor 2:9–10). And St John Chrysostom, in a famous passage commenting on the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians, with these words asks that the faithful enjoy the full beauty of this “loving plan” of God revealed in Christ: “What do you lack yet? You are made immortal, you are made free, you are made a son, you are made righteous, you are made a brother, you are made a fellow-heir, you reign with Christ, you are glorified with Christ; all things are freely given you”, and, as it is written, “will he not also give us all things with him?” (Rom 8:32). Your First-fruits (cf. 1 Cor 15:20, 23) is adored by Angels.... What do you lack yet?” (pg 62, 11).

This communion in Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit, offered by God to all men and women with the light of Revelation, is not something that is

superimposed on our humanity; it is the fulfilment of our deepest aspirations, of that longing for the infinite and for fullness, which dwells in the depths of the human being and opens him or her to a happiness that is not fleeting or limited but eternal. Referring to God who reveals himself and speaks to us through the Scriptures to lead us to him, St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio says: “Holy Scripture ... its words are words of eternal life, and it is written not just so that we should believe, but specially so that we should possess eternal life in which we may see, and love, and have all our desires fulfilled” (*Breviloquium, Prologue; Opera Omnia V*, 201f.). Lastly, Blessed Pope John Paul II recalled that “Revelation has set within history a point of reference which cannot be ignored if the mystery of human life is to be known. Yet this knowledge refers back constantly to the mystery of God which the human mind cannot exhaust but can only receive and embrace in faith” (Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, n. 14).

Therefore, in this perspective, what is the act of faith? It is man’s answer to God’s Revelation that is made known and expresses his plan of love; to use an Augustinian expression it is letting oneself be grasped by the Truth that is God, a Truth that is Love. St Paul stresses that since God has revealed his mystery we owe him “the obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26; cf. 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5–6), by which attitude “man freely commits his entire self to God, making ‘the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals’, and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him” (Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*, n. 5). All this leads to a fundamental change in the way of relating to reality as a whole; everything appears in a new light so it is a true “conversion”, faith is a “change of mentality”. This is because God revealed himself in Christ and made his plan of love known, he takes hold of us, he draws us to him, he becomes the meaning that sustains life, the rock on which to find stability. In the Old Testament we find a concentrated saying on faith which God entrusted to the Prophet Isaiah so that he might communicate it to Ahaz, King of Judah. God says, “If you will not believe”—that is, if you are not faithful to God—“surely you shall not be established” (Is 7:9b). Thus there is a connection between *being* and *understanding* which clearly expresses that faith is welcoming in life God’s view of reality, it is letting God guide us with his words and sacraments in understanding what we should do, what journey we should make, how we should live. Yet at the same time it is, precisely, understanding according to God and seeing with his eyes that makes life sure, that enables us to “stand” rather than fall.

Dear friends, Advent, the liturgical Season that we have just begun and that prepares us for Holy Christmas, sets us before the luminous mystery of the coming of the Son of God, the great “benevolent purpose” with which he wishes to draw us to him, to enable us to live in full communion of joy and peace with him. Advent invites us once again, in the midst of so many difficulties, to renew the certainty that God is present: he entered the world, making himself man, a man like us, to fulfil his plan of love. And God asks that we too become a sign of his action in the world. Through our faith, our hope and our charity, he wants to enter the world ever anew and wants ever anew to make his light shine out in our dark night.

## The stages of the Revelation

12 December 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In our Catechesis last week I spoke of the Revelation of God as a communication he makes of himself and of his benevolent and loving purpose. This Revelation of God fits into human time and history: a history that becomes “the arena where we see what God does for humanity. God comes to us in the things we know best and can verify most easily, the things of our everyday routine, apart from which we cannot understand ourselves” (cf. John Paul II, Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, n. 12).

St Mark the Evangelist—as we have heard—records the very start of Jesus’ preaching in clear and concise words: “the time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand” (Mk 1:15). What illuminates and gives full meaning to the history of the world and of man begins to shine out in the Bethlehem Grotto; it is the Mystery which, in a little while, we shall be contemplating at Christmas: salvation, brought about in Jesus Christ. In Jesus of Nazareth God shows his face and asks man to choose to recognize and follow him. God’s revelation of himself in history in order to enter into a relationship of loving dialogue with man, gives new meaning to the whole human journey. History is not a mere succession of centuries, years or days, but the time span of a presence that gives full meaning and opens it to sound hope.

Where can we read the stages of this Revelation of God? Sacred Scripture is the best place for discovering the steps of this process, and, I would like—once again—to invite everyone, in this Year of Faith, to open the Bible more often, to hold, read and meditate on it and to pay greater attention to the Readings of Sunday Mass; all this is precious nourishment for our faith. In reading the Old Testament we can see how God intervenes in the history of the chosen people, the people with whom he made a covenant: these are not fleeting events that fade into oblivion. Rather, they become a “memory”, taken together they constitute the “history of salvation”, kept alive in the consciousness of the People of Israel through the celebration of the salvific events. Thus, in the Book of Exodus, the Lord instructs Moses to celebrate the Jewish Passover, the great event of the liberation from slavery in Egypt, with these words: “This day shall be for you a memorial day, and you shall keep it as a feast to the Lord; throughout your generations you shall observe it as an ordinance for ever” (12:14).

Commemorating what God has brought about becomes a sort of constant imperative for the whole People of Israel, so that the passing of time may be marked by the living memory of past events which, in this way, day after day, form history and live on.

In the Book of Deuteronomy Moses addresses the people saying: “Only take heed, and keep your soul diligently, lest you forget the things which your eyes have seen, and lest they depart from your heart all the days of your life; make them known to your children and your children’s children” (4:9).

Consequently he also tells us: “be careful not to forget the things that God has done for us”. Faith is nourished by the discovery and memory of the ever faithful God who guides history and constitutes the sound and permanent foundation on which to build our life. The Canticle of the *Magnificat*, which the Virgin Mary addresses to God, is a lofty example of this history of salvation, of this memory that makes and keeps God’s action present. Mary exalts God’s merciful action in the actual journey of his people, his fidelity to the promises of the covenant that he made to Abraham and his descendents; and all this is a living memory of the divine presence that is never absent (cf. Lk 1:46–55).

For Israel, the Exodus is the central historical event in which God reveals his powerful action. God sets the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt so that they



may return to the Promised Land and worship him as the one true Lord. Israel does not set out to be a people like others—so that it might have national independence—but also to serve God in worship and in life, to create a place for God where men and women are obedient to him, where God is present and worshipped in the world—and of course, not only among the Israelites—but to witness to him also among the other peoples.

The celebration of this event is to make him present here and now, so that God's action may not be lacking. He fulfilled his plan of liberation and continues to pursue it so that men and women may recognize and serve their Lord and respond to his action with faith and love.

So it was that God revealed himself not only in the primordial act of the Creation, but also by entering our history, the history of a small people which was neither the largest nor the strongest. And this self-revelation of God, which develops through history, culminates in Jesus Christ: God, the *Logos*, the creative Word who is the origin of the world, took on flesh in Jesus and in him showed the true face of God.

In Jesus every promise is fulfilled, the history of God with humanity culminates in him. When we read the account of the two disciples on their way to Emmaus which St Luke has written down for us, we become clearly aware of the fact that the Person of Christ illuminates the Old Testament, the whole history of salvation, and shows the great unitive design of the two Testaments, it shows the path to his oneness. Jesus, in fact, explains to the two bewildered and disappointed wayfarers that he is the fulfilment of every promise: “and beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them in all the scriptures the things concerning himself” (24:27). The Evangelist records the exclamation of the two disciples after they had recognized that their travelling companion was the Lord: “Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?” (v. 32).

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* summarizes the development of Divine Revelation (cf. nn. 54–64): From the very first the Lord invited men and women to intimate communion with himself and, even when through disobedience they lost his friendship, God did not abandon them to the power of death but time and again offered them covenants (cf. *Roman Missal*, Eucharistic Prayer IV).

The *Catechism* retraces God's journey with man from the Covenant with Noah after the flood, to the call to Abraham to leave his land to be made the father of a multitude of peoples. God forms his People Israel in the event of the Exodus, in the Covenant of Sinai and in the gift, through Moses, of the Law, in order to be recognized and served as the one living and true God. With the prophets, God forms his People in the hope of salvation.

We know—through Isaiah—of the “second Exodus”, the return of the People from the Babylonian Captivity to their own land, its refoundation; at the same time, however, many were dispersed and in this way began the universality of this faith. In the end, not only a King, David, a son of David, was awaited, but a “Son of man”, the salvation of all peoples. Encounters between cultures took place, first with Babylon and Syria, then also with the Greek multitude. Thus we see how God's path broadens, how it unfolds increasingly towards the Mystery of Christ, King of the Universe. In Christ the Revelation in its fullness, God's benevolent purpose, is brought about at last: he makes himself one of us.

I have reflected on remembering God's action in human history to show the stages of this great plan of love, witnessed in the Old and New Testaments. It is a single plan of salvation, addressed to the whole of humanity, gradually revealed and realized through the power of God, in which God always reacts to man's responses and finds the new beginnings of a covenant when man strays.

This is fundamental in the journey of faith. We are in the liturgical season of Advent which prepares us for Holy Christmas. As we all know, “advent” means “coming”, “presence”, and in ancient times it meant, precisely, the arrival of the king or emperor in a specific province. For Christians the word means a marvellous and overwhelming reality: God himself has crossed the threshold of his heaven and has lowered himself to man; he has made a covenant with him, entering the history of a people; he is a king who came down to this poor province which is the earth, and made a gift to us of his visit, taking our flesh and becoming a man like us. Advent invites us to retrace the journey of this presence and reminds us over and over again that God did not take himself away from the world, he is not absent, he has not left us to ourselves, but comes to meet our needs in various ways that we must learn to discern. And we too, with our faith, our hope and our charity, are called every day to perceive this presence

and to witness to it in the world that is often superficial and distracted, and to make the light that illuminated the Grotto of Bethlehem shine out. Thank you.

## Mary and Advent

19 December 2012

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The Virgin Mary has a special place in the journey of Advent as the One who, in a unique way, awaited the fulfilment of God's promises, welcoming Jesus the Son of God in faith and in the flesh and with full obedience to the divine will. Today, I wish to ponder briefly with you on Mary's faith, starting from the great mystery of the Annunciation.

*"Chaire kecharitomene, ho Kyrios meta sou"*, "Hail, [rejoice] full of grace, the Lord is with you" (Lk 1:28). These are the words—recorded by Luke the Evangelist—with which the Archangel Gabriel addresses Mary. At first sight the term *chaire* "rejoice", seems an ordinary greeting, typical in the Greek world, but if this word is interpreted against the background of the biblical tradition it acquires a far deeper meaning. The same term occurs four times in the Greek version of the Old Testament and always as a proclamation of joy in the coming of the Messiah (cf. Zeph 3:14, Joel 2:21; Zech 9:9; Lam 4:21).

The Angel's greeting to Mary is therefore an invitation to joy, deep joy. It announces an end to the sadness that exists in the world because of life's limitations, suffering, death, wickedness, in all that seems to block out the light of the divine goodness. It is a greeting that marks the beginning of the Gospel, the Good News.

But why is Mary invited to rejoice in this way? The answer is to be found in the second part of the greeting: "The Lord is with you". Here too, if we are to understand correctly the meaning of these words we must turn to the Old Testament. In the Book of Zephaniah, we find these words "Sing aloud, O daughter of Zion.... The King of Israel, the Lord, is in your midst.... The Lord, your God, in your midst, a warrior who gives victory" (3:14–17).

In these words a twofold promise is made to Israel, to the daughter of Zion: God will come as a saviour and will pitch his tent in his people's midst, in the womb of the daughter of Zion. This promise is fulfilled to the letter in the dialogue between the Angel and Mary. Mary is identified with the people espoused by God, she is truly the daughter of Zion in person; in her the expectation of the definitive coming of God is fulfilled, in her the Living God makes his dwelling place.

In the greeting of the Angel Mary is called "full of grace". In Greek, the term "grace", *charis*, has the same linguistic root as the word "joy". In this term too the source of Mary's exultation is further clarified: her joy comes from grace, that is, from being in communion with God, from having such a vital connection with him, from being the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, totally fashioned by God's action. Mary is the creature who opened the door to her Creator in a special way, placing herself in his hands without reserve. She lived entirely *from* and *in* her relationship with the Lord; she was disposed to listen, alert to recognizing the signs of God in the journey of his people; she was integrated into a history of faith and hope in God's promises with which the fabric of her life was woven. And she submitted freely to the word received, to the divine will in the obedience of faith.

The Evangelist Luke tells Mary's story by aligning it closely to the history of Abraham. Just as the great Patriarch is the father of believers who responded to God's call to leave the land in which he lived, to leave behind all that guaranteed his security in order to start out on the journey to an unknown land, assured only in the divine promise, so Mary trusts implicitly in the word that the messenger of God has announced to her, and becomes the model and Mother of all believers.

I would like to emphasize another important point: the opening of the soul to God and to his action in faith also includes an element of obscurity. The relationship of human beings with God does not delete the distance between Creator and creature, it does not eliminate what the Apostle Paul said before the depth of God's wisdom: "How unsearchable are his judgements and how inscrutable his ways!" (Rom 11:33).

Yet those who—like Mary—open themselves totally to God, come to accept the divine will, even though it is mysterious, although it often does not correspond

with their own wishes, and is a sword that pierces their soul, as the elderly Simeon would say prophetically to Mary when Jesus was presented in the Temple (cf. Lk 2:35). Abraham's journey of faith included the moment of joy in the gift of his son Isaac, but also the period of darkness, when he had to climb Mount Moriah to execute a paradoxical order: God was asking him to sacrifice the son he had just given him. On the mountain, the Angel told him: "Do not lay your hand on the lad or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me" (Gen 22:12). Abraham's full trust in the God who is faithful to his promises did not fail, even when his word was mysterious and difficult, almost impossible to accept. So it is with Mary. Her faith experienced the joy of the Annunciation, but also passed through the gloom of the crucifixion of the Son to be able to reach the light of the Resurrection.

It is exactly the same on the journey of faith of each one of us: we encounter patches of light, but we also encounter stretches in which God seems absent, when his silence weighs on our hearts and his will does not correspond with ours, with our inclination to do as we like. However, the more we open ourselves to God, welcome the gift of faith and put our whole trust in him—like Abraham, like Mary—the more capable he will make us, with his presence, of living every situation of life in peace and assured of his faithfulness and his love. However, this means coming out of ourselves and our own projects so that the word of God may be the lamp that guides our thoughts and actions.

I would like once again to ponder on an aspect that surfaces in the infancy narratives of Jesus recounted by St Luke. Mary and Joseph take their Son to Jerusalem, to the Temple, to present him to the Lord and to consecrate him as required by Mosaic Law: "Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord" (cf. Lk 2:22–24). The Holy Family's action acquires an even more profound meaning if we interpret it in the light of the evangelical knowledge of the 12-year-old Jesus. After three days of searching he was found in the Temple in conversation with the teachers. The deeply anxious words of Mary and Joseph: "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been looking for you anxiously", are in conformity with Jesus' mysterious answer: "How is it that you sought me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Lk 2:48–

49). The significance lies in the Father's property, "in my Father's house", as a son is.

Mary is obliged to renew the profound faith with which she said "yes" at the Annunciation; she must accept that it is the true and proper Father of Jesus who has precedence; she must be able to leave the Son she has brought forth free to follow his mission. And Mary's "yes" to God's will, in the obedience of faith, is repeated throughout her life, until the most difficult moment, that of the Cross.

Confronting all this, we may ask ourselves: how was Mary able to journey on beside her Son with such a strong faith, even in darkness, without losing her full trust in the action of God? Mary assumes a fundamental approach in facing what happens in her life. At the Annunciation, on hearing the Angel's words she is distressed—it is the fear a person feels when moved by God's closeness—but it is not the attitude of someone who is afraid of what God might ask. Mary reflects, she ponders on the meaning of this greeting (cf. Lk 1:29). The Greek word used in the Gospel to define this "reflection", "*dielogizeto*", calls to mind the etymology of the word "dialogue".

This means that Mary enters into a deep conversation with the Word of God that has been announced to her, she does not consider it superficially but meditates on it, lets it sink into her mind and her heart so as to understand what the Lord wants of her, the meaning of the announcement.

We find another hint of Mary's inner attitude to God's action—again in the Gospel according to St Luke—at the time of Jesus' birth, after the adoration of the shepherds. Luke affirms that Mary "kept all these things, pondering them in her heart" (Lk 2:19). In Greek the term is *syballon*, we could say that she "kept together", "pieced together" in her heart all the events that were happening to her; she placed every individual element, every word, every event, within the whole and confronted it, cherished it, recognizing that it all came from the will of God.

Mary does not stop at a first superficial understanding of what is happening in her life, but can look in depth, she lets herself be called into question by events, digests them, discerns them, and attains the understanding that only faith can provide. It is the profound humility of the obedient faith of Mary, who welcomes

within her even what she does not understand in God's action, leaving it to God to open her mind and heart. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfilment of what was spoken to her from the Lord" (Lk 1:45), her kinswoman Elizabeth exclaims. It is exactly because of this faith that all generations will call her blessed.

Dear friends, the Solemnity of the Nativity of the Lord which we shall soon be celebrating invites us to practise this same humility and obedience of faith. The glory of God is not expressed in the triumph and power of a king, it does not shine out in a famous city or a sumptuous palace, but makes its abode in a virgin's womb and is revealed in the poverty of a child. In our lives too, the almightiness of God acts with the force—often in silence—of truth and love. Thus faith tells us that in the end the defenceless power of that Child triumphs over the clamour of worldly powers. Many thanks!

## **The Nativity of the Lord**

*2 January 2013*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Once again the Nativity of the Lord illuminates the gloom that often envelops our world and our hearts and with its light brings hope and joy. Where does this light come from? From the Bethlehem Grotto where the shepherds found "Mary and Joseph, and the babe, lying in a manger" (Lk 2:16). Another, deeper question arises before this Holy Family: how can that tiny, frail Child have brought into the world a newness so radical that it changed the course of history? Is there not perhaps something mysterious about his origins which goes beyond that grotto?

The question of Jesus' origins recurs over and over again. It is the same question that the Procurator Pontius Pilate asked during the trial: "where are you from?" (Jn 19:9). Yet his origins were quite clear. In John's Gospel when the Lord says: "I am the bread which came down from heaven", the Jews reacted, murmuring: "is not this Jesus, the son of Joseph, whose father and mother we know? How does he now say, 'I have come down from heaven?'" (Jn 6:41, 42).

Moreover, a little later the citizens of Jerusalem strongly opposed Jesus' messianic claim, asserting that "where this man comes from" was well known;

and that “when the Christ appears, no one will know where he comes from” (Jn 7:27). Jesus himself points out how inadequate their claim to know his origins is and by so doing he already offers a clue to knowing where he came from: “I have not come of my own accord; he who sent me is true, and him you do not know” (Jn 7:28). Jesus was of course a native of Nazareth, he was born in Bethlehem; but what is known of his true origins?

In the four Gospels, the answer is clear as to where Jesus “comes from”. His true origins are in the Father, God; he comes totally from him [God], but in a different way from that of any of God’s prophets or messengers who preceded him. This origin in the mystery of God, “whom no one knows” is already contained in the infancy narratives in the Gospels of Matthew and Luke that we are reading during this Christmastide. The Angel Gabriel proclaimed: “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy, the Son of God” (Lk 1:35).

We repeat these words every time we recite the *Creed*, the Profession of Faith: “*Et incarnatus est de Spiritu Sancto, ex Maria Virgine*”, “and by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”. At this sentence we kneel, for the veil that concealed God is lifted, as it were, and his unfathomable and inaccessible mystery touches us: God becomes the Emmanuel, “God-with-us”. When we hear the Masses written by the great composers of sacred music—I am thinking, for example, of Mozart’s Coronation Mass—we immediately notice how they pause on this phrase in a special way, as if they were trying to express in the universal language of music what words cannot convey: the great mystery of God who took flesh, who was made man.

If we consider carefully the words: “by the Holy Spirit [he] was incarnate of the Virgin Mary”, we notice that they include four active subjects. The Holy Spirit and Mary are mentioned explicitly, but “he”, namely, the Son, who took flesh in the Virgin’s womb, is implicit. In the Profession of Faith, the *Creed*, Jesus is described with several epithets: “Lord ... Christ, Only-Begotten Son of God ... God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God ... consubstantial with the Father” (*Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed*). We can therefore see that “he” refers to another person, the Father. Consequently the first subject of this sentence is the Father who, with the Son and the Holy Spirit, is the one God.



This affirmation of the *Creed* does not concern God's eternal being but, rather, speaks to us of an action in which the three divine Persons take part and which is brought about "*ex Maria Virgine*". Without Mary God's entry into the history of humanity would not have achieved its purpose, and what is central to our Profession of Faith would not have taken place: God is a "God-with-us". Thus Mary belongs irrevocably to our faith in God who acts, who enters history. She makes her whole person available, she "agrees" to become God's dwelling place.

Sometimes, on our journey and in our life of faith, we can sense our poverty, our inadequacy in the face of the witness we must offer to the world. However God chose, precisely, a humble woman, in an unknown village, in one of the most distant provinces of the great Roman Empire. We must always trust in God, even in the face of the most gruelling difficulties, renewing our faith in his presence and action in our history, just as in Mary's. Nothing is impossible to God! With him our existence always journeys on safe ground and is open to a future of firm hope.

In professing in the *Creed*: "by the Holy Spirit was incarnate of the Virgin Mary", we affirm that the Holy Spirit, as the power of the Most High God, mysteriously brought about in the Virgin Mary the conception of the Son of God. The Evangelist Luke recorded the Archangel Gabriel's words: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you" (1:35).

Two references are obvious: the first is to the moment of the Creation. At the beginning of the Book of Genesis we read that "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters" (1:2); this is the Creator Spirit who gave life to all things and to the human being. What is brought about in Mary, through the action of this same divine Spirit, is a new creation: God, who called forth being from nothing, by the Incarnation gives life to a new beginning of humanity. The Fathers of the Church sometimes speak of Christ as the new Adam in order to emphasize that the new creation began with the birth of the Son of God in the Virgin Mary's womb. This makes us think about how faith also brings us a newness so strong that it produces a second birth. Indeed, at the beginning of our life as Christians there is Baptism, which causes us to be reborn as children of God and makes us share in the filial relationship that Jesus has with the Father. And I would like to point out that Baptism is *received*, we "are baptized"—

it is passive—because no one can become a son of God on his own. It is a gift that is freely given. St Paul recalls this adoptive sonship of Christians in a central passage of his Letter to the Romans, where he writes: “all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God. For you did not receive the spirit of slavery to fall back into fear, but you have received the spirit of sonship. When we cry, ‘Abba! Father!’ it is the Spirit himself bearing witness with our spirit that we are children of God” (Rom 8:14–16), not slaves. Only if we open ourselves to God’s action, like Mary, only if we entrust our life to the Lord as to a friend whom we totally trust, will everything change, will our whole life acquire a new meaning, a new aspect: that of children with a father who loves us and never deserts us.

We have spoken of two elements: the first was the Spirit moving on the surface of the waters, the Creator Spirit: there is another element in the words of the Annunciation. The Angel said to Mary: “The power of the Most High will overshadow you”. This is an re-evocation of the holy cloud that, during the Exodus, halted over the tent of meeting, over the Ark of the Covenant that the People of Israel were carrying with them and that indicated God’s presence (cf. Ex 40:34–38).

Mary, therefore, is the new holy tent, the new ark of the covenant: with her “yes” to the Archangel’s words, God received a dwelling place in this world, the One whom the universe cannot contain took up his abode in a Virgin’s womb.

Let us therefore return to the initial question, the one about Jesus’ origins that is summed up by Pilate’s question: “where are you from?”. What Jesus’ true origins are is clear from our reflections, from the very beginning of the Gospels: he is the Only-Begotten Son of the Father, he comes from God. We have before us the great and overwhelming mystery which we are celebrating in this Christmas season. The Son of God, through the work of the Holy Spirit, was incarnate in the womb of the Virgin Mary. This is an announcement that rings out ever new and in itself brings hope and joy to our hearts because, every time, it gives us the certainty that even though we often feel weak, poor and incapable in the face of the difficulties and evil in the world, God’s power is always active and works miracles through weakness itself. His grace is our strength (cf. 2 Cor 12:9–10). Many thanks.

# He became a man

9 January 2013

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this Christmas season let us reflect once again on the great mystery of God who came down from heaven to enter our flesh. In Jesus God was incarnate, he became a man like us and in this way opened for us the road to his heavenly Kingdom, to full communion with him.

In these days the term the “Incarnation” of God has rung out several times in our churches, expressing the reality we celebrate at Holy Christmas: the Son of God was made man, as we say in the *Creed*. But what does this word, so central to the Christian faith, mean? Incarnation derives from the Latin *incarnatio*. St Ignatius of Antioch—at the end of the first century—and, especially, St Irenaeus used this term in reflecting on the Prologue to the Gospel according to St John, in particular in the sentence “the Word became flesh” (Jn 1:14). Here the word “flesh”, according to the Hebrew usage, indicates man in his whole self, the whole man, but in particular in the dimension of his transience and his temporality, his poverty and his contingency. This was in order to tell us that the salvation brought by God, who became man in Jesus of Nazareth, affects man in his material reality and in whatever situation he may be. God assumed the human condition to heal it from all that separates it from him, to enable us to call him, in his Only-Begotten Son, by the name of “Abba, Father”, and truly to be children of God.

St Irenaeus stated: “For this is why the Word became man, and the Son of God became the Son of man: so that man, by entering into communion with the Word and thus receiving divine sonship, might become a son of God” (*Adversus Haereses*, 3, 19, 1: PG 7, 939; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 460).

“The Word was made flesh” is one of those truths to which we have grown so accustomed that the greatness of the event it expresses barely makes an impression on us. Effectively, in this Christmastide in which these words often recur in the Liturgy, we at times pay more attention to the external aspects, to the “colours” of the celebration rather than to the heart of the great Christian

newness that we are celebrating: something that utterly defeats the imagination, that God alone could bring about and into which we can only enter with faith.

The *Logos*, who is with God, is the *Logos* who is God, the Creator of the world (cf. Jn 1:1) through whom all things were created (cf. 1:3) and who has accompanied men and women through history with his light (cf. 1:4–5; 1:9), became one among many and made his dwelling among us, becoming one of us (cf. 2:14).

The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council said: “The Son of God ... worked with human hands, he thought with a human mind. He acted with a human will, and with a human heart he loved. Born of the Virgin Mary, he has truly been made one of us, like to us in all things except sin” (Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22). Thus it is important to recover our wonder at the mystery, to let ourselves be enveloped by the grandeur of this event: God, the true God, Creator of all, walked our roads as a man, entering human time to communicate his own life to us (cf. 1 Jn 1:1–4). And he did not do so with the splendour of a sovereign who dominates the world with his power, but with the humility of a child.

I would like to stress a second element. At holy Christmas we generally exchange a few gifts with the people closest to us. At times this may be a conventional gesture, but it usually expresses affection; it is a sign of love and esteem. In the Prayer over the Offerings at the Vigil Mass of the Solemnity of Christmas the Church prays: “may the oblation of this day’s feast be pleasing to you, O Lord, we pray, that through this most holy exchange we may be found in the likeness of Christ in whom our nature is united to you. Who lives and reigns for ever”.

The idea of giving is therefore at the heart of the liturgy and makes us aware of the original gift of Christmas: on that Holy Night, in taking flesh God wanted to make a gift of himself to men and women, he gave himself for us; God made his Only Son a gift for us, he took on our humanity to give his divinity to us. This is the great gift. In our giving too it does not matter whether or not a gift is expensive; those who cannot manage to give a little of themselves always give too little. Indeed, at times we even seek to substitute money or material things for our hearts and the commitment to giving ourselves.

The mystery of the Incarnation shows that God did not do this: he did not give some thing but he gave himself in his Only-Begotten Son. We find here our

model for the giving so that our relationships, especially those that are most important, may be guided by giving love freely.

I would like to offer a third thought: the event of the Incarnation, of God who became man, like us, shows us the daring realism of divine love. God's action, in fact was not limited to words. On the contrary we might say that he was not content with speaking, but entered into our history, taking upon himself the effort and burden of human life. The Son of God truly became a man. He was born of the Virgin Mary in a specific time and place, in Bethlehem during the reign of the Emperor Augustus, under the Governor Quirinius (cf. Lk 2:1–2); he grew up in a family, he had friends, he formed a group of disciples, he instructed the Apostles to continue his mission and ended the course of his earthly life on the Cross. The way God acted gives us a strong incentive to question ourselves on the reality of our faith, which must not be limited to the sphere of sentiment, of the emotions; rather, it must enter into the practicality of our existence, that is, it must touch our everyday life and give it practical guidance. God did not stop at words, but showed us how to live, sharing in our own experience, except for sin.

The *Catechism of St Pius X*, which some of us studied as children answers with simple brevity the question “What must we do to live according to the will of God?": “to live according to the will of God, we must believe the truths that he has revealed and obey his commandments with the help of his grace, which is obtained through the sacraments and through prayer”. Faith has a fundamental aspect that does not only involve our mind and heart but also our whole life.

I suggest one last element for you to think about. St John says that the Word, the *Logos*, was with God in the beginning and that everything was done through the Word and nothing that exists was done without him (cf. Jn 1:1–13). The Evangelist is clearly alluding to the Creation narrative in the first chapters of the Book of Genesis, and reinterprets it in the light of Christ. This is a fundamental criterion in the Christian interpretation of the Bible: The Old and New Testaments should always be read together and, starting with the New, the deepest meaning of the Old Testament is also revealed. That same Word, who has always existed with God, who is God himself and through whom and for whom all things were created (cf. Col 1:16–17), became man: the eternal and

infinite God immersed himself in human finiteness, in his creature, to bring back man and the whole of creation to himself.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “the first creation finds its meaning and its summit in the new creation in Christ, the splendour of which surpasses that of the first creation” (n. 349). The Fathers of the Church compared Jesus to Adam, even to the point of calling him “the second Adam”, or the definitive Adam, the perfect image of God. With the Incarnation of the Son of God a new creation was brought about that gave the complete answer to the question “who is man?”. God’s plan for the human being was fully manifest in Jesus alone. He is the definitive man according to God’s will.

The Second Vatican Council reasserted this forcefully: “In reality it is only in the mystery of the Word made flesh that the mystery of man truly becomes clear... Christ the new Adam ... fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his most high calling”. (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 22; cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 359). In that Child, the Son of God contemplated at Christmas, we can recognize the true face not only of God but also of the human being; and only by opening ourselves to his grace and seeking to follow him every day do we fulfil God’s plan for us, for each one of us.

Dear friends, in this period let us meditate on the great and marvellous richness of the Mystery of the Incarnation, to permit the Lord to illuminate us and to change us, more and more, into an image of his Son made man for us.

## Revelation and Incarnation

16 January 2013

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council states that the intimate truth of the whole Revelation of God shines forth for us “in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (n. 2). The Old Testament tells us that after the Creation—in spite of original sin, in spite of man’s arrogance in wishing to put himself in his Creator’s place—God once again offers us the possibility of his friendship, especially through the Covenant with Abraham and the journey of a small people, the

People of Israel. He did not choose this people with the criteria of earthly power but simply out of love. It was a choice that remains a mystery and reveals the style of God who calls some, not in order to exclude the others, but so that they may serve as a bridge that leads to him. A choice is always a choice for the other. In the history of the People of Israel we can retrace the stages of a long journey during which God made himself known, revealed himself, and entered history with words and actions. In order to do this he used mediators, such as Moses, the Prophets and the Judges, who communicated his will to the people, reminding them of the requirement of faithfulness to the Covenant and keeping alive their expectation of the complete and definitive fulfilment of the divine promises.

At Holy Christmas we contemplated the realization of these very promises: the Revelation of God reaching its culmination, its fullness. In Jesus of Nazareth God really visited his people, he visited humanity in a manner that surpassed every expectation: he sent his Only-Begotten Son: God himself became man. Jesus does not tell us something about God, he does not merely speak of the Father but is the Revelation of God, because he is God and thus reveals the face of God. In the Prologue to his Gospel St John wrote: “no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

I would like to dwell on the phrase: “reveals God’s face”. In this regard St John, in his Gospel, records for us a significant event that we have just heard. When he was approaching the Passion, Jesus reassured his disciples, asking them not to be afraid and to have faith; he then begins a conversation with them in which he talks about God the Father (cf. Jn 14:2–9). At a certain point the Apostle Philip asked Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (Jn 14:8). Philip was very practical and prosaic, he even said what we ourselves would like to say: “we want to see him, show us the Father”, he asks to “see” the Father, to see his face. Jesus’ answer is a reply not only to Philip but also to us and it ushers us into the heart of Christological faith; the Lord affirmed: “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). These words sum up the newness of the New Testament, that newness which appeared in the Bethlehem Grotto: God can be seen, God has shown his face, he is visible in Jesus Christ.

The theme of the “quest for God’s face”, the desire to know this face, the desire to see God as he is, is clearly present throughout the Old Testament, to the extent that the Hebrew term *pānîm*, which means “face”, recurs 400 times, and refers to God 100 times. One hundred times it refers to God: to the wish to see God’s face is expressed 100 times. Yet the Jewish religion absolutely forbids images, for God cannot be portrayed as, on the contrary, he was portrayed by the neighbouring peoples who worshipped idols; therefore with this prohibition of images the Old Testament seems totally to exclude any “seeing” from worship and from devotion. Yet what did seeking God’s face mean to the devout Israelite, who knew that there could be no depiction of it? The question is important: there was a wish on the one hand to say that God cannot be reduced to an object, like an image that can be held in the hand, nor can anything be put in God’s place; on the other, it was affirmed that God has a face—meaning he is a “you” who can enter into a relationship—and who has not withdrawn into his heavenly dwelling place, looking down at humanity from on high. God is certainly above all things, but he addresses us, he listens to us, he sees us, he speaks to us, he makes a covenant, he is capable of love. The history of salvation is the history of God with humanity, it is the history of this relationship of God who gradually reveals himself to man, who makes himself, his face, known.

At the very beginning of the year, on 1 January, we heard in the liturgy the most beautiful prayer of blessing upon the people: “May the Lord Bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace (Num 6:24–26). The splendour of the divine face is the source of life, it is what makes it possible to see reality; the light of his face is guidance for life. In the Old Testament there is a figure with whom the theme of “the face of God” is connected in a special way: Moses. The man whom God chose to set his people free from slavery in Egypt, giving him the Law of the Covenant and leading him to the Promised Land. Well, in Chapter 33 of the Book of Exodus it says that Moses had a close and confidential relationship with God: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend” (v. 11). By virtue of this trust, Moses was able to ask God: “show me your glory”, and God’s response was clear: “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name”.... But he said “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.... There is a place by me.... You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (vv. 18–23). Thus on the one



hand there was the face-to-face conversation as between friends, but on the other, the impossibility in this life of seeing the face of God which remained hidden; sight is restricted. The Fathers said that these words, “you shall see my back”, meant you can only follow Christ and in following him you see the mystery of God from behind; God can be followed by seeing his back.

Something completely new happened, however, with the Incarnation. The search for God’s face was given an unimaginable turning-point, because this time this face could be seen: it is the face of Jesus, of the Son of God who became man. In him the process of the Revelation of God, which began with Abraham’s call, finds fulfilment in the One who is the fullness of this Revelation, because he is the Son of God, he is both “the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 2), the content of Revelation and the Revealer coincide in him. Jesus shows us God’s face and makes God’s name known to us. In the Priestly Prayer at the Last Supper he says to the Father: “I have manifested your name to the men ... I made known to them your name” (cf. Jn 17:6; 6:26). The phrase: “name of God”, means God as the One who is present among men and women. God had revealed his name to Moses by the burning bush, that is, he had made it possible to call on him, had given a tangible sign of his “being” among human beings. All this found fulfilment and completion in Jesus: he inaugurated God’s presence in history in a new way, because whoever sees him, sees the Father, as he said to Philip (cf. Jn 14:9). Christianity, St Bernard said, is the “religion of God’s word”; yet “not a written and mute word, but an incarnate and living” (*Homilia Super Missus Est*, 4, 11: pl 183, 86b). In the patristic and medieval tradition a special formula is used to express this reality: it says that Jesus is the *Verbum abbreviatum* (cf. Rom 9:28, with a reference to Is 10:23), the abbreviated Word, the short and essential Word of the Father who has told us all about him. In Jesus the whole Word is present.

In Jesus too the mediation between God and man attains fulfilment. In the Old Testament there is an array of figures who carried out this role, in particular Moses, the deliverer, the guide, the “mediator” of the Covenant, as he is defined in the New Testament (cf. Gal 3:19; Acts 7:35; Jn 1:17). Jesus, true God and true man, is not simply one of the mediators between God and man but rather “the mediator” of the new and eternal Covenant (cf. Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24); “for there is one God”, Paul says, “and there is one *mediator* between God and men, the man

Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5 cf. Gal 3:19–20). In him we see and encounter the Father; in him we can call upon God with the name of “Abba, Father”; in him we are given salvation.

The desire to know God truly, that is, to see God’s face, is innate in every human being, even in atheists. And perhaps we unconsciously have this wish simply to see who he is, what he is, who he is for us. However this desire is fulfilled in following Christ, in this way we see his back and, in the end, we see God too as a friend, in Christ’s face we see his face. The important thing is that we not only follow Christ in our needy moments or when we find a slot in our daily occupations, but in our life as such. The whole of our life must be oriented to meeting Jesus Christ, to loving him; and, in our life we must allocate a central place to loving our neighbour, that love which, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, in the weak and in the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us through listening to his word, in an inner conversation with him, in entering this word so that we truly meet him, and of course, in the Mystery of the Eucharist. In the Gospel of St Luke the passage about the two disciples of Emmaus recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread is important; prepared by the journey with him, by the invitation to stay with them that they had addressed to him and by the conversation that made their hearts burn within them, in the end they saw Jesus. For us too the Eucharist is the great school in which we learn to see God’s face, we enter into a close relationship with him; and at the same time we learn to turn our gaze to the final moment of history when he will satisfy us with the light of his face. On earth when we are walking towards this fullness, in the joyful expectation that the Kingdom of God will really be brought about. Thank you.

## **“I believe in God”**

*23 January 2013*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this Year of Faith, today I would like to begin to reflect with you on the “Creed”, that is, on the solemn profession of faith that accompanies our life as believers. The opening words of the “Creed” are: “I believe in God”. It is a fundamental affirmation, seemingly simple in its essence, but it opens on to the

infinite world of the relationship with the Lord and with his mystery. Believing in God entails adherence to him, the acceptance of his word and joyful obedience to his revelation. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Faith is a personal act—the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself” (n. 166). The ability to say one believes in God is therefore both a gift—God reveals himself, he comes to meet us—and a commitment, it is divine grace and human responsibility in an experience of conversation with God who, out of love, “addresses men as his friends” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2) speaks to us, so that, in faith and with faith, we are able to enter into communion with him.

Where can we listen to God and to his word? Sacred Scripture, in which the word of God becomes audible to us and nourishes our life as “friends” of God, is fundamental. The entire Bible narrates God’s revelation of himself to humanity. The entire Bible speaks of faith and teaches us faith by narrating a history in which God carries out his plan of redemption and makes himself close to people, through an array of shining figures who believe in him and entrust themselves to him, to the fullness of revelation in the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews that we have just heard is very beautiful in this regard. Here faith is discussed and light is shed on the great biblical figures who lived it, becoming models for all believers. In the first verse the text says: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The eyes of faith are thus able to see the invisible and the believer’s heart can hope beyond all hope, exactly like Abraham, of whom Paul says in the Letter to the Romans: “in hope he believed against hope” (4:18).

And it is on Abraham himself that I wish to reflect and to focus our attention, since he is the first great figure and reference for speaking of faith in God: Abraham the great patriarch, an exemplary model, father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:11–12). The Letter to the Hebrews presents it in this way: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents like Isaac and Jacob had, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has sound foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (11:8–10).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is referring here to the call of Abraham, recounted in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. What did God ask of this patriarch? He asked him to set out, leave his own country to journey to the land that he would show him: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1).

How would we have responded to such an invitation? In fact it meant setting out with no directions, no knowledge of where God would lead him; it was a journey that demanded radical obedience and trust, to which faith alone gives access. Yet the dark unknown—to which Abraham had to go—was lit by the light of a promise; God added to his order a reassuring word that unfolded to Abraham a future, life in fullness: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great ... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen 12:2, 3).

In Sacred Scripture, the blessing is primarily linked to the gift of life that comes from God and is revealed first of all in fertility, in a life that is multiplied, passing from one generation to the next. And also linked to the blessing is the experience of the possession of a land, a permanent place in which to live and to develop in freedom and safety, fearing God and building a society of people faithful to the Covenant, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Ex 19:6).

Therefore in the divine plan Abraham was destined to become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:5; cf. Rom 4:17–18), and to enter a new land in which to dwell. Yet Sarah, his wife, was barren, she was unable to bear children; and the land to which God was leading him was far from the land of his birth, it was already inhabited by other peoples and would never really belong to him. The biblical narrator emphasizes this, although with great discretion. When Abraham arrives in the place of God’s promise: “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen 12:6). The land that God gave Abraham did not belong to him, he was a foreigner and would always remain such, with all that this implies: having no ambition to possess, ever aware of his poverty, seeing everything as a gift. This is also the spiritual condition of those who agree to follow the Lord, who decide to set out in response to his call, under the banner of his invisible but powerful blessing. And Abraham, “father of believers”, accepted this call in faith. St Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans: “in hope he believed against hope, that

he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, ‘so shall your descendants be’. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a 100 years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah’s womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised” (Rom 4:18–21).

Faith led Abraham to take a paradoxical path. He was blessed but without the visible signs of blessing: he received the promise that he would become a great people, but with a life marked by the barrenness of his wife Sarah; he was led to a new homeland but had to live there as a foreigner; and the only land he was permitted to possess was a lot in which to bury Sarah (cf. Gen 23:1–20) Abraham was blessed because in faith he was able to discern the divine blessing, going beyond appearances and trusting in God’s presence even when God’s paths seemed mysterious to him.

What does this mean to us? When we affirm “I believe in God”, we are saying, like Abraham, “I trust in you, I entrust myself to you, O Lord”, but not as to Someone to turn to solely in times of difficulty or to whom to devote a few moments of the day or week. Saying “I believe in God” means founding my life on him, letting his Word guide it every day, in practical decisions, without fear of losing some part of myself. When, in the Rite of Baptism, the question is asked three times: “Do you believe?”—in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit—the holy Catholic Church and the other truths of the faith, the triple response is in the singular: “I do”, because it is my own life that with the gift of faith must be given a turning point, it is my life that must change, that must be converted. Every time we take part in a Baptism we should ask ourselves how we ourselves live daily the great gift of faith.

Abraham the believer teaches us faith and, as a stranger on this earth, points out to us the true homeland. Faith makes us pilgrims on earth, integrated into the world and into history, but bound for the heavenly homeland. Believing in God thus makes us harbingers of values that often do not coincide with the fashion and opinion of the moment. It requires us to adopt criteria and assume forms of conduct that are not part of the common mindset. Christians must not be afraid

to go “against the current” in order to live their faith, resisting the temptation to “conform”. In many of our societies God has become the “great absent One” and many idols have supplanted him, multiform idols, especially possession and the autonomous “I”. And even the major and positive breakthroughs of science and technology have instilled in people an illusion of omnipotence and self-sufficiency, and an increasing egotism which has created many imbalances in interpersonal relations and social behaviour.

Nevertheless the thirst for God (cf. Ps 63[62]:1–2) has not been quenched and the Gospel message continues to resonate in the words and deeds of numerous men and women of faith. Abraham, the father of believers, continues to be a father of many children who agree to walk in his footsteps and set out in obedience to the divine call, trusting in the benevolent presence of the Lord and receiving his blessing in order to become themselves a blessing for all. It is the blessed world of faith to which we are all called, in order to walk fearlessly, following the Lord Jesus Christ. And at times it is a difficult journey that also undergoes trial and death, but that opens to life in a radical transformation of reality that only the eyes of faith can perceive and enjoy to the full.

Affirming “I believe in God” impels us, therefore, to set out, to come out of ourselves, exactly as Abraham did, to bring to the daily situation in which we live the certainty that comes to us from faith: namely, the certainty of God’s presence in history today too; a presence that brings life and salvation and opens us to a future with him for a fullness of life that will know no end.

## **I believe in God: the almighty Father**

*30 January 2013*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In last Wednesday’s Catechesis we reflected on the opening words of the *Creed*: “I believe in one God”. But the profession of faith specifies this affirmation: God is the almighty Father, Creator of heaven and earth. Thus I would like to reflect with you now on the first and fundamental definition of God which the *Creed* presents to us: he is Father.

It is not always easy today to talk about fatherhood, especially in the Western world. Families are broken, the workplace is ever more absorbing, families worry and often struggle to make ends meet and the distracting invasion of the media invades our daily life: these are some of the many factors that can stand in the way of a calm and constructive relationship between father and child. At times communication becomes difficult, trust is lacking and the relationship with the father figure can become problematic; moreover, in this way even imagining God as a father becomes problematic without credible models of reference. It is not easy for those who have experienced an excessively authoritarian and inflexible father or one who was indifferent and lacking in affection, or even absent, to think serenely of God and to entrust themselves to him with confidence.

Yet the revelation in the Bible helps us to overcome these difficulties by speaking to us of a God who shows us what it really means to be “father”; and it is the Gospel, especially, which reveals to us this face of God as a Father who loves, even to the point of giving his own Son for humanity’s salvation. The reference to the father figure thus helps us to understand something of the love of God, which is nevertheless infinitely greater, more faithful, and more total than the love of any man.

“What man of you”, Jesus asks in order to show the disciples the Father’s face, “will give his son a stone if he asks for bread? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him!” (Mt 7:9–11; cf. Lk 11:11–13). God is our Father because he blessed us and chose us before the creation of the world (cf. Eph 1:3–6), he has really made us his children in Jesus (cf. 1 Jn 3:1). And as Father, God accompanies our lives with love, giving us his Word, his teaching, his grace and his Spirit.

As Jesus revealed—he is the Father who feeds the birds of the air that neither sow nor reap, and arrays the flowers of the field in marvellous colours, in robes more beautiful than those of Solomon himself (cf. Mt 6:26–32; Lk 12:24–28); and we, Jesus added, are worth far more than the flowers and the birds of the air! And if he is so good that he “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” Mt 5:45), we shall always be able, without fear

and with total confidence, to entrust ourselves to his forgiveness as Father whenever we err. God is a good Father who welcomes and embraces his lost but repentant son (cf. Lk 15:11ff.), who gives freely to those who ask him (cf. Mt 18:19; Mk 11:24; Jn 16:23), and offers the bread of heaven and the living water that wells up to eternal life (cf. Jn 6:32, 51, 58).

Thus, although the person praying in Psalm 27 [26] is surrounded by enemies and assailed by evildoers and slanderers, while seeking the Lord's help he invokes him. The witness he bears is full of faith, as he states: "My father and my mother have forsaken me, but the Lord will take me up" (v. 10).

God is a Father who never abandons his children, a loving Father who supports, helps, welcomes, pardons and saves with a faithfulness that surpasses by far that of men and women, opening onto dimensions of eternity. "For his steadfast love endures for ever", as Psalm 136 [135] repeats in every verse, as in a litany, retracing the history of salvation. The love of God the Father never fails, he does not tire of us; it is a love that gives to the end, even to the sacrifice of his Son. Faith gives us this certainty which becomes a firm rock in the construction of our life: we can face all the moments of difficulty and danger, the experience of the darkness of despair in times of crisis and suffering, sustained by our trust that God does not forsake us and is always close in order to save us and lead us to eternal life.

It is in the Lord Jesus that the benevolent face of the Father, who is in heaven, is fully revealed. It is in knowing him that we may also know the Father (cf. Jn 8:19; 14:7). It is in seeing him that we can see the Father, because he is in the Father and the Father is in him (cf. Jn 14:9, 11). He is "the image of the invisible God" and as the hymn of the Letter to the Colossians describes him, he is: "the first-born of all creation ... the first-born from the dead", "in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" and the reconciliation of all things, "whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross" (Col 1:13–20).

Faith in God the Father asks for belief in the Son, under the action of the Spirit, recognizing in the Cross that saves the definitive revelation of divine love. God is our Father, giving us his Son; God is our Father, pardoning our sin and bringing us to joy in everlasting life; God is our Father, giving us the Spirit that makes us sons and enables us to call him, in truth "Abba, Father!" (cf. Rom 8:15). It is for



this reason that Jesus, teaching us to pray, invites us to say “Our Father” (Mt 6:9–13; cf. Lk 11:2–4).

Consequently God’s fatherhood is infinite love, tenderness that bends over us, frail children, in need of everything. Psalm 103 [102], the great hymn of divine mercy, proclaims: “As a father pities his children, so the Lord pities those who fear him. For he knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust” (vv. 13–14). It is our smallness, our frail human nature that becomes an appeal to the Lord’s mercy, that he may show his greatness and tenderness as a Father, helping, forgiving us and saving us.

And God responded to our plea by sending his Son who died and rose for us; he entered our frailty and did what man on his own could never have done: as an innocent lamb he took upon himself the sin of the world and reopened our path to communion with God, making us true children of God. It is there, in the Paschal Mystery, that the definitive face of the Father is revealed in its full splendour. And it is there, on the glorious Cross, that God’s omnipotence as the “almighty Father” is fully manifested.

However, let us ask ourselves: how is it possible to think of an omnipotent God while looking at the Cross of Christ? At this power of evil which went so far as to kill the Son of God? Naturally, what we would like would be a divine mightiness that fitted our own mindset and wishes: an “omnipotent” God who solves problems, who intervenes to prevent us from encountering difficulties, who overcomes adverse powers, changes the course of events and eliminates suffering. Thus today various theologians say that God cannot be omnipotent, for otherwise there would not be so much suffering, so much evil in the world. In fact, in the face of evil and suffering, for many, for us, it becomes problematic, difficult, to believe in a God who is Father and to believe that he is omnipotent; some seek refuge in idols, succumbing to the temptation to seek an answer in a presumed “magic” omnipotence and its illusory promises.

Nevertheless faith in almighty God impels us to have a very different approach: to learn to know that God’s thought is different from our own, that God’s ways are different from ours (cf. Is 55:8) and that his omnipotence is also different. It is not expressed as an automatic or arbitrary force but is marked by a loving and paternal freedom. In fact by creating free creatures, by giving us freedom, God

renounced some of his power, allowing for the power of our freedom. Thus he loves and respects the free response of love to his call. As Father, God wishes us to become his children and to live as such in his Son, in communion, in full familiarity with him. His omnipotence is not expressed in violence, it is not expressed in the destruction of every adverse power as we might like; rather it is expressed in love, in mercy, in forgiveness, in accepting our freedom and in the tireless call for conversion of heart, in an attitude only seemingly weak—God seems weak if we think of Jesus Christ who prays, who lets himself be killed. This apparently weak attitude consists of patience, meekness and love, it shows that this is the real way to be powerful! This is God's power! And this power will win! The sage of the Book of Wisdom addressed God in these words: “For you are merciful to all, for you can do all things, and you overlook men's sins, that they may repent. For you love all things that exist.... You spare all things, for they are yours, O Lord who loves the living” (11:23–24a, 26).

Only those who are truly powerful can tolerate evil and show compassion; only those who are truly powerful can fully exercise the force of love. And God, to whom all things belong because all things were made by him, shows his power by loving everything and everyone, patiently waiting for the conversion of us human beings, whom he wants to be his children.

God waits for our conversion. God's omnipotent love knows no bounds, to the extent that he “did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all” (Rom 8:32). The omnipotence of love is not that of worldly power, but is that of the total gift, and Jesus, the Son of God reveals to the world the true omnipotence of the Father by giving his life for us sinners.

This is the true, authentic and perfect divine power: to respond to evil not with evil but with good, to insults with forgiveness, to homicidal hatred with life-giving love. Thus evil is truly vanquished because it is cleansed by God's love; thus death is defeated once and for all because it is transformed into a gift of life. God the Father raises the Son: death, the great enemy (cf. 1 Cor 15:26), is engulfed and deprived of its sting (cf. 1 Cor 15:54–55), and we, delivered from sin, can have access to our reality as children of God.

Therefore, when we say “I believe in God the Father almighty”, we express our faith in the power of the love of God who, in his Son who died and was raised,

triumphs over hatred, evil and sin and unfolds before us the path to eternal life, as children who want to dwell for ever in their “Father’s House”. Saying “I believe in one God the Father almighty”, in his power, in his way of being Father, is always an act of faith, of conversion, of the transformation of our thought, of the whole of our affection, of the whole of our way of life.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us ask the Lord to sustain our faith, to help us find true faith and to give us the strength to proclaim the crucified and risen Christ and to witness to him in love of God and of neighbour. And may God grant that we accept the gift of our sonship, in order to live in fullness the reality of the Creed, in trusting abandonment to the love of the Father and to his merciful omnipotence which is the true omnipotence and saves.

## **Maker of Heaven and Earth**

*6 February 2013*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

The *Creed* which begins by describing God as “the Father Almighty”, the topic of our meditation last week, then adds that he is “Maker of heaven and earth”, and thus takes up the affirmation with which the Bible begins. Indeed the first verse of Sacred Scripture reads: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth” (Gen 1:1). God is the origin of all things and his omnipotence as a loving Father unfolds in the beauty of the creation.

In creation, God manifested himself as Father, since he is the origin of life, and in creating he shows his omnipotence. And Sacred Scripture uses very evocative images of it. (cf. Is 40:12; 45:18; 48:13; Ps 104:2, 5; 135:7; Prov 8:27–29; Job 38–39). As a good and powerful Father he takes care of what he has created with unflinching love and faithfulness, as the Psalms say over and over again (cf. Ps 57:11; 108:5; 36:6). So it is that creation becomes a place in which to know and recognize the Lord’s omnipotence and goodness, as well as an appeal to our faith as believers that we proclaim God as Creator.

“By faith”, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews wrote, “we understand that the world was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was made out of

things which do not appear” (11:3). Faith thus implies the ability to recognize the invisible, by identifying its traces in the visible world. Believers can read the great book of nature and understand its language (cf Ps 19:2–5); but the word of revelation that awakens faith is necessary if man is to become fully aware of the reality of God as Creator and Father. The Book of Sacred Scripture says that human intelligence can find the clue to understanding the world in the light of faith.

With the solemn presentation of the divine work of creation that unfolded over seven days, the first chapter of Genesis in particular occupies a special place. God brought the creation to completion in six days and on the seventh, the sabbath, he did not do anything, but rested: a day of freedom for all, a day of communion with God. Thus, with this image the Book of Genesis tells us that God’s first thought was to find a love that would correspond to his love.

Then his second thought was to create a material world in which to place this love, these creatures who respond to him in freedom. This structure therefore results in the text being marked by certain meaningful repetitions. For example, the sentence “God saw that it was good”, is repeated six times (vv. 4, 10, 12, 18, 21, 25) and to conclude, the seventh time, after the creation of man: “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good” (v. 31). Everything that God creates is beautiful and good, steeped in wisdom and love; God’s creative action brings order, instils harmony and bestows beauty.

In the narrative of Genesis, therefore, it becomes clear that the Lord created with his word: ten times we read in the text the phrase: “God said” (vv. 3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24, 26, 28, 29). It is the Word, the *Logos* of God who is at the origin of the reality of the world, and saying: “God said”, it was so, emphasizes the effective power of the divine Word. This is what the Psalmist sings: “by the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth ... for he spoke, and it came to be, he commanded and it stood forth” (33[32]:6, 9). Life springs forth, the world exists, because all things obey the divine Word.

However our question today is: in the age of science and technology does speaking of creation still make sense? How should we understand the narratives in Genesis? The Bible does not intend to be a natural science manual; rather, it wishes to make the authentic and profound truth of things understood. The

fundamental truth that the accounts of Genesis reveal to us is that the world is not a collection of forces that clash with each other; it has its origin and its permanence in the *Logos*, in God's eternal Reason which continues to sustain the universe.

A plan of the world exists which is conceived by this Reason, by the Creator Spirit. To believe that this is the foundation of all things illuminates every aspect of existence and gives us the courage to face the adventure of life with trust and hope. Therefore, Scripture tells us that the origin of being, of the world, our own origin is not in the irrational or in need, but rather in reason and love and freedom. Consequently, there is this alternative: either the priority of the irrational, of necessity, or the priority of reason, of freedom, of love. We believe in the latter hypothesis.

However, I would also like to say a word about the summit of all creation: man and woman, the human being, the only being "able to know and love his creator" (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 12). Looking up at the heavens the Psalmist wondered: "when I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have established; what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?" (Ps 8:3-4).

The human being, lovingly created by God, is indeed tiny in comparison with the immensity of the universe. At times, as we look with fascination at the enormous expanses of the firmament, we too perceive our limitations. Human beings are inhabited by this paradox: our smallness and our transcendence exist side by side with the greatness of what God's eternal love wanted for us.

The accounts of the Creation in the Book of Genesis also usher us in to this mysterious environment, helping us to become acquainted with God's plan for man. They affirm, first of all, that God formed man of dust from the ground (cf. Gen 2:7). This means that we are not God, we did not make ourselves, we are earth; yet it also means that we come from the good earth through the work of the good Creator.

In addition there is another fundamental reality: *all* human beings are dust, over and above the distinctions made by culture and by history, over and above every social difference; we are one humanity modelled with God's one earth.

Then there is a second element: the human being came into existence because God breathed the breath of life into the body he had formed from earth (cf. Gen 2:7). The human being is made in God's image and likeness (cf. Gen 1:26–27). For this reason we all bear within us the life-giving breath of God and every human life—the Bible tells us—is under God's special protection. This is the most profound reason for the inviolability of human dignity against every attempt to evaluate the person according to utilitarian and power-based criteria. To be in the image and likeness of God indicates that man is not closed in himself but has in God an essential reference point.

In the first Chapters of the Book of Genesis we find two important images: the garden, with the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and the serpent (cf. 2:15–17; 3:1–5). The garden tells us that the reality in which God has placed the human being is not a wild forest but a place that protects, nurtures and sustains; and human beings must not consider the world as a property to be looted and exploited but as a gift of the Creator, a sign of his saving will, a gift to be cultivated and safeguarded, to increase and to develop with respect and in harmony, following its rhythms and logic in accordance with God's plan (cf. Gen 2:8–15).

Then the serpent is a symbol that comes from the Oriental fertility cults that fascinated Israel and were a constant temptation to abandon the mysterious covenant with God. In this light Sacred Scripture presents the temptation of Adam and Eve as the core of temptation and sin. What, in fact, did the serpent say? He did not deny God but insinuated a subtle question: “Did God say, ‘you shall not eat of any tree of the garden?’” (Gen 3:1). This is how the serpent awoke in them the suspicion that the covenant with God was nothing but a chain that bound them, that deprived them of freedom and of the most beautiful and precious things of life. Their temptation became the temptation to build by themselves the world in which to live, to refuse to accept the limitations of being creatures, the limitations of good and evil, of morality; they saw their dependence on the love of God the Creator as a burden of which to free

themselves. This is always the essence of temptation. But when the relationship with God is falsified, with a lie, putting ourselves in his place, all other relationships are altered. The other then becomes a rival, a threat. Straight after succumbing to the temptation, Adam turned on Eve (cf. Gen 3:12); the two conceal themselves from the sight of that God with whom they had been conversing as friends (cf. 3:8–10); the world is no longer the garden in which to live in harmony, but a place to exploit, riddled with hidden snares (cf 3:14–19); envy and hatred for others entered man’s heart. An example of this is Cain who kills his own brother Abel (cf. 4:3–9).

Actually, in opposing their Creator people go against themselves, deny their origin and consequently their truth; and evil, with its painful chain of sorrow and death, enters the world. Moreover, all that God had created was good, indeed, very good, but after man had opted freely for falsehood rather than truth, evil entered the world.

I would like to highlight a final teaching in the accounts of the Creation; sin begets sin and all the sins of history are interconnected. This aspect impels us to speak of what is called “original sin”. What is the meaning of this reality that is not easy to understand? I would just like to suggest a few points. First of all we must consider that no human being is closed in on himself, no one can live solely for himself and by himself; we receive life from the other and not only at the moment of our birth but every day. Being human is a relationship: I am myself only in the “you” and through the “you”, in the relationship of love with the “you” of God and the “you” of others. Well, sin is the distortion or destruction of the relationship with God, this is its essence: it ruins the relationship with God, the fundamental relationship, by putting ourselves in God’s place.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states that with the first sin man “chose himself over and against God, against the requirements of his creaturely status and therefore against his own good” (n. 398). Once the fundamental relationship is spoilt, the other relational poles are also jeopardized or destroyed: sin ruins relationships, thus it ruins everything, because we are relational. Now, if the relationship structure is disordered from the outset, every human being comes into a world marked by this relational distortion, comes into a world disturbed by sin, by which he or she is marked personally; the initial sin tarnishes and

wounds human nature (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 404–406). And by himself, on his own, man is unable to extricate himself from this situation, on his own he cannot redeem himself; only the Creator himself can right relationships. Only if he from who we distanced ourselves comes to us and lovingly holds out his hand can proper relationships be restored. This happens through Jesus Christ, who goes in exactly the opposite direction to Adam, as is described by the hymn in the second chapter of St Paul's Letter to the Philippians (2:5–11): whereas Adam did not acknowledge his creatural being and wanted to put himself in God's place, Jesus, the Son of God, was in a perfect filial relationship with the Father, he emptied himself and became the servant, he took the path of love, humbling himself even to death on a cross, to set right our relations with God. The Cross of Christ thus became the new tree of life.

Dear brothers and sisters, living out faith means recognizing God's greatness and accepting our smallness, our condition as creatures, letting the Lord fill us with his love and thus develop our true greatness. Evil, with its load of sorrows and sufferings, is a mystery illuminated by the light of faith which gives us the certainty that we can be freed from it: the certainty that it is good to be a human being.

13 February 2013

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As you know, I have decided—thank you for your kindness—to renounce the ministry which the Lord entrusted to me on 19 April 2005. I have done this in full freedom for the good of the Church, after much prayer and having examined my conscience before God, knowing full well the seriousness of this act, but also realizing that I am no longer able to carry out the Petrine ministry with the strength which it demands. I am strengthened and reassured by the certainty that the Church is Christ's, who will never leave her without his guidance and care. I thank all of you for the love and for the prayers with which you have accompanied me. Thank you; in these days which have not been easy for me, I



have felt almost physically the power of prayer—your prayers—which the love of the Church has given me. Continue to pray for me, for the Church and for the future Pope. The Lord will guide us.

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are beginning the liturgical Season of Lent, 40 days that prepare us for the celebration of Holy Easter; it is a time of special commitment during our spiritual journey. The number 40 recurs in Sacred Scripture on various occasions. It calls to mind in particular, as we know, the 40 years during which the People of Israel wandered through the wilderness; a long period of formation in order to become the People of God, but also a long period in which the temptation to be unfaithful to their Covenant with the Lord was ever present. Forty was also the number of days that it took Elijah to reach God's mountain, Mount Horeb; and this was likewise the period that Jesus spent in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry and where he was tempted by the devil. In today's Catechesis, I would like to reflect on this very moment in the Lord's earthly life which we shall be reading in the Gospel next Sunday.

First of all, the wilderness to which Jesus withdrew is the place of silence and poverty, where man is deprived of material support and faces the fundamental existential questions; where he is driven to the essential and for this very reason can more easily encounter God. However the wilderness is also the place of death because there is no water, nor even life, and it is the place of solitude where man feels temptation more acutely. Jesus went into the wilderness and was subjected there to the temptation to stray from the path marked out for him by the Father so as to follow other easier and more worldly paths (cf. Lk 4:1–13). He thus took on our temptations, burdened himself with our wretchedness in order to defeat the Evil One and open a path to God for us, a pathway of conversion.

Reflecting on the temptations to which Jesus was subjected in the wilderness invites each one of us to answer a fundamental question: What really counts in my life? In the first temptation the devil proposes to Jesus that he turn a stone into bread to appease his hunger. Jesus retorts that man lives on bread *as well*, but that he does not live on bread *alone*. Without a response to his hunger for truth, to his hunger for God, man cannot be saved (cf. vv. 3–4).

In the second temptation the devil proposes the way of power to Jesus. He takes him up and offers him dominion over the whole world; but this is not God's way. Jesus is very clear that it is not worldly power that saves the world, but the power of the Cross, of humility and of love (cf. vv. 5–8).

In the third temptation the devil suggests to Jesus that he throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem and have himself saved by God through his angels, that is, that he do something sensational to put God himself to the test; but the answer is that God is not an object on which to impose conditions of our own making; he is the Lord of all (cf. vv. 9–12).

What is the essence of the three temptations to which Jesus is subjected? It is the proposal to exploit God, to use him for one's own interests, for one's own glory and for one's own success. And therefore, essentially to put oneself in God's place, removing him from one's own existence and making him seem superfluous. Each one of us must therefore ask him- or herself: what place does God have in my life? Is he the Lord or am I?

Overcoming the temptation to subject God to oneself and one's own interests, or to put him in a corner and be converted to the correct order of priorities, giving God first place, is a journey that each and every Christian must make over and over again. "Repent" is an invitation we shall often hear in Lent, it means following Jesus in such a way that his Gospel is a practical guide for life; it means letting God transform us, in order to stop thinking that we are the only ones to build our existence. It means recognizing that we are creatures, that we depend on God, on his love, and that only by "losing" our life in him can we gain it.

This requires us to make our decisions in the light of the Word of God. Today it is no longer possible to be Christian as a mere consequence of living in a society that has Christian roots: even those who are born into a Christian family and receive a religious education must every day renew their decision to be Christian, that is, to give God first place in the face of the temptations that a secularized culture constantly suggests to them and in the face of the critical opinion of many of their contemporaries.

The trials to which society today subjects Christians are indeed numerous and affect their personal and social life. It is far from easy to be faithful to Christian

marriage, to practice mercy in daily life, to make room for prayer and inner silence; it is far from easy to oppose publicly the decisions that many take for granted, such as abortion in the case of unwanted pregnancy, euthanasia in the case of serious illness and embryo selection in order to prevent hereditary diseases. The temptation to set faith aside is always present and conversion becomes a response to God that must be strengthened several times in life.

As an example and an incentive we have important conversions such as that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, or of St Augustine; yet, in our epoch of the eclipse of the sense of the sacred, God's grace is at work and works marvels in the life of so many people. The Lord never tires of knocking at man's door in social and cultural milieus that seem engulfed in secularization.

This is how it was for the Russian Orthodox Pavel Florenskij. Following an agnostic upbringing, so thorough that he felt really hostile to the religious teaching imparted at school, Florenskij the scientist found himself exclaiming: "No, it is impossible to live without God", and entirely changed his life, even to the point of becoming a monk.

I am also thinking of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch girl of Jewish origin who died in Auschwitz. At first far from God, she discovered him looking deep within her and she wrote: "There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again" (*Diaries*, 97). In her disrupted, restless life she found God in the very midst of the great tragedy of the 20th century: the Shoah. This frail and dissatisfied young woman, transfigured by faith, became a woman full of love and inner peace who was able to declare: "I live in constant intimacy with God".

The ability to oppose the ideological enticements of her time in order to choose the search for truth and to open herself to the discovery of faith was witnessed by another woman of our time, the American Dorothy Day. She confessed openly in her autobiography to having succumbed to the temptation to solve everything with politics, adhering to the Marxist proposal: "I wanted to be with the protesters, go to jail, write, influence others and leave my dreams to the world. How much ambition and how much searching for myself in all this!". The journey towards faith in such a secularized environment was particularly

difficult, but Grace acts nevertheless, as she pointed out: “It is certain that I felt the need to go to church more often, to kneel, to bow my head in prayer. A blind instinct, one might say, because I was not conscious of praying. But I went, I slipped into the atmosphere of prayer ...”. God guided her to a conscious adherence to the Church, in a life dedicated to the underprivileged.

In our time there are many conversions, understood as a return of those who, after a Christian, though superficial upbringing, distanced themselves from the faith for years, only later to rediscover Christ and his Gospel. In the Book of Revelation we read: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (3:20). Our inner self must prepare to be visited by God and for this very reason must not let itself be invaded by illusions, appearances and material things.

In this season of Lent, in the Year of Faith, let us renew our commitment to the journey of conversion, to overcome the tendency to withdraw into ourselves and instead, to make room for God, seeing daily reality with his eyes. The alternative between being closed into our own egotism and openness to the love of God and of others, we might say, corresponds to the alternative of the temptations of Jesus: an alternative, that is, between human power and love of the Cross, between redemption seen in material wellbeing alone, and redemption as a work of God to which we should give primacy in life.

Being converted means not shutting ourselves into the quest for our own success, our own prestige, our own status, but rather ensuring that every day, in the small things, truth, faith in God and love become the most important thing of all.

## **Final Audience**

*27 February 2013*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I offer a warm and affectionate greeting to the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors who have joined me for this, my last General Audience. Like Saint Paul,

whose words we heard earlier, my heart is filled with thanksgiving to God who ever watches over his Church and her growth in faith and love, and I embrace all of you with joy and gratitude.

During this *Year of Faith*, we have been called to renew our joyful trust in the Lord's presence in our lives and in the life of the Church. I am personally grateful for his unfailing love and guidance in the eight years since I accepted his call to serve as the Successor of Peter. I am also deeply grateful for the understanding, support and prayers of so many of you, not only here in Rome, but also throughout the world.

The decision I have made, after much prayer, is the fruit of a serene trust in God's will and a deep love of Christ's Church. I will continue to accompany the Church with my prayers, and I ask each of you to pray for me and for the new Pope. In union with Mary and all the saints, let us entrust ourselves in faith and hope to God, who continues to watch over our lives and to guide the journey of the Church and our world along the paths of history.

I commend all of you, with great affection, to his loving care, asking him to strengthen you in the hope which opens our hearts to the fullness of life that he alone can give. To you and your families, I impart my blessing.

Thank you!

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