



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 15 February 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

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.

To special groups:

I welcome the priests taking part in the Institute for Continuing Theological Education at the Pontifical North American College. My greeting also goes to the pilgrims from the Archdiocese of Toronto, as well as to the many diocesan, parish and school groups present at today’s Audience, especially the students of Our Lady’s High School in Motherwell, Scotland. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, including those from England, Ireland, Norway and the United States, I cordially invoke God’s blessings!

I address a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. Welcome! In particular I greet you, faithful of the diocese of Pozzuoli, accompanied by your Pastor, Bishop Gennaro Pascarella, and, while I thank you for the witness of your faith, I express the hope that your parish communities and the various ecclesial institutions may always be places of spiritual formation and authentic brotherhood.

I greet Cardinal Stanisław Rylko, and the other authorities with the Delegation which has come to present to me the reproduction of the Holy Door of St Peter’s Basilica that will be displayed in the

Bl. John Paul II Museum in Wadowice.

I greet with affection the representatives of the Italian National Association of Large Families. In today's social context, family nucleuses with many children bear witness to faith, courage and optimism, because without children there can be no future! I hope that appropriate social and legal legislation will be further encouraged in order to protect and sustain the larger families, because these families constitute a treasure and a hope for the entire country.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Yesterday we celebrated the Feast of Sts Cyril and Methodius, who were the first to disseminate the faith among the Slav peoples. May their testimony help you too to be apostles of the Gospel, to be a leaven of authentic renewal in your own personal, family and social life.

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