



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*

*Wednesday, 18 April 2012*

[[Video](#)]

*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.

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#### **To special groups:**

I offer a warm welcome to the General Chapter of the Brothers of Saint Gabriel. I also greet the group from the Faculty of Canon Law of Saint Paul's University in Ottawa, Canada. I thank the choirs for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, including those from England, Ireland, Finland, South Africa, Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Trinidad, Canada and the United States, I invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Lord.

I would like to express my heart-felt thanks to you for your congratulations on the seventh anniversary of my election and on my birthday. I ask you always to sustain me with your prayers so that with the help of the Holy Spirit I may persevere in my service to Christ and to the Church.

My thoughts now turn to the *sick*, to the *newlyweds* and to the *young people* who are present, and especially to the many students from various regions. Dear *children* and *young people*, Christ repeats to you too, as he did to the first disciples, “Peace be with you! As the Father has sent me,

even so I send you” (Jn 20:21). Respond to these words with joy and with love! For you, dear *sick people*, may Christ’s Resurrection be an inexhaustible source of comfort and hope. And may you, dear *newlyweds*, be witnesses of the Risen One with your conjugal love.

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