



The Holy See

OPENING OF THE 11th ORDINARY GENERAL ASSEMBLY
OF THE SYNOD OF BISHOPS

CELEBRATION OF THE HOUR OF TERCE

REFLECTION OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Synod Hall

Monday, 3 October 2005

Dear Brothers,

This text of the Hour of Terce today involves five imperatives and one promise. Let us try to understand a little better what the Apostle intends to tell us with these words.

The first imperative is very frequently found in St Paul's Letters; indeed, it might well be called the "cantus firmus" of his thought: "gaudete".

Yet in a life as tormented as his own, a life filled with persecutions, hunger and all kinds of suffering, a key phrase was always present: "be glad".

Here the question arises: is it possible to command happiness? Joy, we would like to say, comes or does not come, but cannot be imposed as a duty. And here it is helpful for us to think of the best-known text on joy in the Pauline Letters, that of "Gaudete Sunday" in the heart of the Advent Liturgy: "Gaudete, iterum dico gaudete quia Dominus prope est". Here we understand the reason why Paul, in all his sufferings, in all his trials, could only tell others to "rejoice"; he could say this because joy was present within him: "Gaudete, Dominus enim prope est".

If the loved one, the love, the greatest gift of my life, is close to me; if I can be convinced that the person who loves me is beside me even in troubling situations, in the depths of my heart dwells a

joy that is greater than all suffering.

The Apostle could say "be happy" because the Lord is close to each one of us. Thus, this imperative is actually an invitation to feel the presence of the Lord close to us. It is a means of awakening an awareness of the Lord's presence. The Apostle wants to make us perceive this hidden but very real presence of the Lord close to each one of us. To each one of us the words of the Book of Revelation apply: I am knocking at your door; hear me, let me in.

Thus, it is also an invitation to be sensitive to this presence of the Lord who is knocking at my door. We must not be deaf to him, because the ears of our heart are so full of the din of the world that we cannot hear this silent presence that is knocking at our door.

Let us at the same time consider whether we really are prepared to open the doors of our heart; or perhaps this heart is crammed with so many other things that there is no room in it for the Lord, and for the time being we have no time for him. Thus, insensitive, dead to his presence, distracted by other things, we fail to hear the essential: the Lord, knocking at the door; he is close to us, hence, true joy, which is more powerful than all the sorrows of the world or of our lives, is at hand.

Consequently, in the context of this first imperative, let us pray: "Lord, make us sensitive to your presence, help us to hear you, not to be deaf to you, help us to keep our hearts free, open to you".

The second imperative "perfecti estote", as we read in the Latin text, seems to coincide with the words that sum up the Sermon on the Mount: "perfecti estote sicut Pater vester caelestis perfectus est". These words invite us to be what we are: images of God, beings created in relation to the Lord, "mirrors" where the Lord's light is reflected.

Not to live Christianity according to the letter, not to understand Sacred Scripture according to the letter is often difficult, historically disputable; but we must go beyond the letter, our present reality, towards the Lord who speaks to us and hence, to union with God.

However, if we see the Greek text, we find another verb, "katartizesthe", and this word means to restore or repair an instrument, to make it function properly again. The most frequent example for the Apostles was mending a fishing net that was no longer in proper condition, that had so many holes in it that it could no longer be used; they had to repair the net so it could once again be used for fishing, restored to its perfect state as a tool for this trade.

Another example: music can no longer be played properly on a stringed instrument with a broken string.

So in this imperative our soul is like an apostolic net but one that is frequently of little use because our own intentions have made a tear in it; or it is like a musical instrument that unfortunately has

several broken strings, so that God's music which should echo in the depths of our soul can no longer ring out. We must repair this instrument, be familiar with its broken parts, the destruction, the negligence, the omissions, and seek to make it perfect and complete so that it will serve the purpose for which the Lord created it.

So it is that this imperative can also be an invitation to the regular examination of conscience, to see how this instrument of mine is going, to what point it has been neglected or is no longer in working order, in the attempt to make it function properly again. It is also an invitation to have recourse to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, where God himself repairs the instrument and restores us to integrity, perfection and functionality, so that in this soul praise of God may once again ring out.

Then comes "exortamini invicem". Fraternal correction is a work of mercy. None of us sees himself or his shortcomings clearly. It is therefore an act of love to complement one another, to help one another see each other better, and correct each other.

I think that one of the very functions of collegiality is to help one another, also in the sense of the previous imperative, to know the shortcomings that we ourselves do not want to see - "*ab occultis meis munda me*", the Psalm says - to help one another to open ourselves and to see these things. Of course, this great work of mercy, helping one another so that each of us can truly rediscover his own integrity and functionality as an instrument of God, demands great humility and love.

Only if it comes from a humble heart that does not rank itself above others, that does not consider itself better than others but only a humble instrument to offer reciprocal help; only if we feel this true and deep humility, if we feel that these words come from common love, from the collegial affection in which we want to serve God together, can we help one another in this regard with a great act of love.

Here too the Greek text adds some nuances. The Greek word is "paracaleisthe"; it is the same root as the word "Paracletos, paraclesis", to comfort. It does not only mean to correct but also to comfort, to share the other's sufferings, to help him in his difficulties. And this also seems to me a great act of true collegial affection.

In the many problematic situations that emerge today in our pastoral work, some people truly feel somewhat desperate, they do not see how to advance. At that moment, they need comfort, they need someone to be with them in their inner loneliness and do the work of the Holy Spirit, the Consoler: to give courage, to support us, assisted by the Holy Spirit himself who is the great Paraclete, the Comforter, our Advocate who helps us. Therefore, it is an invitation to make ourselves "ad invicem" the work of the Holy Spirit, the Paraclete.

"Idem sapite": behind the Latin word we can detect the word "taste". Have the same taste for

things, have the same fundamental outlook on reality, with all the differences that are not only legitimate but also necessary; but have "eundem saporem", the same sensibility. The Greek text says "froneite", "the same". In other words, have essentially the same way of thinking.

How can we essentially have a common way of thinking that helps us to guide the Holy Church together unless we share together in the faith, which has not been invented by any one of us but is the faith of the Church, the common foundation which supports us, and on which we stand and work?

Thus, it is an invitation to integrate ourselves anew in this common thinking, in this faith that precedes us. "Ne respicias peccata nostra sed fidem Ecclesiae tuae": what the Lord seeks within us is the faith of the Church and also the forgiveness of sins. We must have this common faith. We can and must live this faith, each in his or her own way but always knowing that this faith precedes us. And we must communicate our common faith to everyone else.

This element is already leading us on to the last imperative that gives us profound peace with each other.

At this point we can also think of "touto froneite" in another text of the Letter to the Philippians, at the beginning of the great hymn about the Lord, in which the Apostle tells us: "Your attitude must be that of Christ" (Phil 2: 5), you must enter into the "fronesis", the "fronein", the thinking of Christ. We will then be able to share together in the Church's faith, because with this faith we enter into the Lord's thoughts and sentiments, to think together with Christ.

This is the last exhortation in the Apostle's recommendation: think with Christ's thoughts. And we can do so by reading Sacred Scripture in which Christ's thoughts are the Word, they speak to us. In this sense we must practise "Lectio divina", we must grasp Christ's way of thinking in the Scriptures, we must learn to think with Christ, to think Christ's thoughts and thus feel Christ's sentiments, to be able to convey Christ's thinking to others.

And thus, the last imperative: "pacem habete", "eirhneute", is almost a summation of the four previous imperatives, being in union with God who is our peace, with Christ who said: "pacem dabo vobis". We are in inner peace, because being in Christ's thought unifies our being. The problems, the differences of our soul are united, they are united to the original, to the One we are images of with the thought of Christ. So it is that inner peace is born, and only if we are grounded in deep inner peace can we also be men and women of peace in the world and for others.

Here the question arises: is this promise conditioned by the imperatives? That is, is this God of peace with us only if we can achieve the imperatives? What is the relationship between imperative and promise?

I would say that it is bilateral; in other words, the promise precedes the imperatives and makes it possible to achieve them and to follow up this achievement. That is, before everything we ourselves do, the God of love and peace opened himself to us, he was with us. In Revelation, which began in the Old Testament, God came to meet us with his love and his peace.

And finally, in the Incarnation, he became God-with-us, Emmanuel. This God of peace became flesh with our flesh, blood with our blood. He is a man with us and embraces the whole human being. And in the Crucifixion and his descent to death he became totally one with us, he precedes us with his love, he embraces first of all our action. And this is our great consolation. God goes before us.

He has already done all things. He has given us peace, forgiveness and love. He is with us. And only because he is with us, because we have received his grace in Baptism, in Confirmation the Holy Spirit, in the Sacrament of Orders we received his mission, can we ourselves now cooperate with his presence that goes before us. All our action, of which the five imperatives speak, consists in cooperation and collaboration with the God of peace who is with us.

But on the other hand, it applies to the extent in which we truly enter into this presence which he has given us, into this gift already present in our being. His presence among us, his being with us, grows naturally.

And let us pray to the Lord that he will teach us to collaborate with his grace which precedes us, so that he may truly be with us for ever. Amen!

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