



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS AND THE CLERGY
OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME
ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Hall of Blessings

Thursday, 26 February 2009

Fr Gianpiero Palmieri: *Holy Father, I am the parish priest of San Frumenzio ai Prati Fiscali. I would like to ask you a question about the Christian community's mission to evangelize today, and in particular, the role and formation priests have in this regard. In the face of the task of evangelization, we sometimes feel unprepared and inadequate. From both the cultural and the human perspectives, at times we fail to grasp the fundamental currents positive or wanting of contemporary thought. We risk being too narrow minded, incapable of a wise understanding of the hearts of people today. Is not the proclamation of salvation in Jesus also the proclamation of the new man Jesus, the Son of God, in whom our poor humanity is redeemed, authenticated, and transformed by God? So, my question is this: Do you share these thoughts? In our Christian communities so many people are wounded. Where and how can we help others to come to know Jesus? And also, how can we priests build within us a beautiful and fruitful humanity? Thank you, Your Holiness!*

The Holy Father: Thank you! Dear brothers, first of all I would like to express my great joy at being with you, the parish priests of Rome: my parish priests, we are a family. The Cardinal Vicar has rightly mentioned that this is a moment of spiritual rest. I too am grateful that I can begin Lent with a moment of spiritual rest, a spiritual breathing space, in contact with you. He also said that we have come together so that you can tell me of your experiences, your struggles and also your successes and joys. It is not an oracle who stands before you to whom you ask questions. We are having a family conversation. And for me, it is very important to become acquainted here, through you, with parish life, with your experiences of the word of God in the context of today's world. I too wish to learn, drawing close to the realities from which anyone in the Apostolic Palace is a little too

removed. This also limits my answers. You live in direct contact, day after day, with today's world. I have contact with the world in different, but also very helpful, ways. For example, I have just had the *ad limina* visit of the Bishops of Nigeria. Through the Bishops I could visualize feel the joys and suffering the life of the Church in this important country of Africa the largest, with 140 million inhabitants, and a large number of Catholics. And this obviously gives me spiritual calmness, because it is a Church like we see in the Acts of the Apostles. A Church in which there is the fresh joy of having found Christ, of having found the Messiah of God. A Church which lives and grows every day. The people are joyful at finding Christ; they have vocations and thus have *fidei donum* priests in various of the world's countries. To see not just a weary Church, as is often found in Europe, but also a youthful Church, full of the joy of the Holy Spirit, is certainly spiritually refreshing. However alongside all these universal experiences, it is also important for me to see my own Diocese, the difficulties and all the other realities that are experienced in this Diocese.

In this sense, essentially, I agree with you: it is not enough to preach or to carry out pastoral work with the precious knowledge acquired in the study of theology. This is important and fundamental but it must be assimilated: from academic knowledge, which we have learned and upon which we have reflected, within a personal vision of life, in order then to reach out to other people. In this regard I would say that while on the one hand it is important to make the great word of faith concrete, by our personal experience of faith, in time spent with parishioners, it is also important not to lose its simplicity. Obviously, great words of our tradition such as "expiatory sacrifice", "redemption of the sacrifice of Christ", "original sin" are today almost incomprehensible. We cannot simply work with lofty formulas, though true, without placing them within the context of today's world. Through study, and what our theology teachers and our personal experience with God tell us, we must concretize and express these great words in such a way that they form part of the proclamation of God to the people of today.

On the other hand, we must not shroud the simplicity of the word of God with commentaries so dense that they distance us. I remember a friend who, after hearing sermons that included long anthropological reflections intended to lead us to the Gospel, used to say: "I am not interested in these approaches, I want to understand what the Gospel says!". I often think that instead of longwinded preambles, it would be better to say, as I used to: "We do not like this Gospel, we are opposed to what the Lord says! But what exactly is it trying to say?". If I say with sincerity that at first glance I do not agree, we have already awakened attention. It is obvious that, as a man of today, I would like to understand what the Lord is saying. Thus without taking a long circuitous route we can reach the heart of the word. And we must also bear in mind, free of oversimplifications, that the Twelve Apostles were fishermen, tradesmen, from the province of Galilee. They had no special training, no knowledge of the great Greek and Latin world. Yet they went to every part of the Empire and even beyond the Empire, as far as India, and proclaimed Christ with simplicity and with the power of the clarity of what is true. It is important, in my view, not to lose the simplicity of the truth. God exists. God is not a distant, hypothetical being. Rather, God is close; he has spoken to us, he has spoken to me. And thus we simply say what he is and how

our understanding of him can and must be naturally explained and developed. Let us not lose sight of the fact that we are not proposing reflections; we do not propose a philosophy, rather we propose the simple proclamation of God who has acted. And he works within me, too.

Now to the question of the cultural contextualization which is absolutely necessary in our case that of Rome, I would say that the first thing that can help is our personal experience. We are not living on the moon! I am a man of this time if I live my faith sincerely in the culture of today with the mass media of today, with dialogue, with the realities of the economy, etc if I myself take my own experience seriously, and seek to adapt to this reality. In this way we are on the way to making ourselves understood by others. St Bernard of Clairvaux said in his book *De Consideratione*, for his student, Pope Eugene: contemplate drinking from your own well, that is, from your own humanity. If you are sincere with yourself and begin to realize what faith is for yourself, from your human experience now, drinking from your own well as St Bernard put it, then you will also be able to say to others what needs to be said. And in this regard I think it is important to be truly attentive to today's world but also to the Lord within: to be a man of this time and at the same time a believer of Christ, who in himself transforms the eternal message into a current message for today.

Who knows the men and women of today better than the parish priest? The rectory is not in the world; rather it is in the parish. And people often come here to the parish priest, usually openly, with no pretext other than suffering, sickness, death or family matters. And they come to the confessional stripped of any veneer, with their very being. No other "profession", it seems to me, gives this possibility of knowing the person as he is, in his humanity, rather than in the role he plays in society. In this sense, we can truly study the person in his core, beyond roles, and learn ourselves what it is to be human, what it is to be in the school of Christ. To this end, it is absolutely important to come to understand the human being, the human being of today, in ourselves and with others, but also always listening attentively to the Lord and accepting in myself the seed of the word, so that it may become leaven within me and become communicable to others.

Fr Fabio Rosini: I am the parish priest of Santa Francesca Romana all'Ardeatino. Faced with the current process of secularization and its obvious social and existential impact, we have opportunely received through your Magisterium an exhortation concerning the urgent need for the first evangelization, for pastoral zeal in evangelization or re-evangelization, and for the adoption of a missionary outlook. We have realized how important the transformation of ordinary pastoral activity is, no longer content with caring only for that portion of believers who persevere in Christian life but, more decisively and more systematically, caring also for the many sheep who are lost or bewildered. Many priests of Rome have tried different approaches to respond to this urgent objective need to "re-found" or even "found" the faith. Experiences of first evangelization are increasing and the results are very encouraging. But what ought to be the indispensable criteria for this urgent evangelizing action? What, in your view, are the elements that guarantee that one does not rush in vain into the pastoral demands of proclaiming Christ to our generation? I humbly ask

you to point out to us, with your prudent discernment, the parameters to respect and to observe in order to carry out an evangelizing mission that is genuinely Catholic and bears fruit in the Church.

The Holy Father: I am glad to hear that this first evangelization is happening and that it goes beyond the confines of the faithful community, beyond the parish, in search of the so-called "lost sheep"; and that an effort is being made today to reach out to those who live without Christ, or who have forgotten Christ, in order to proclaim the Gospel to them. And I am glad to hear not only that this is being done but also that satisfying and numerically significant results are being achieved. Clearly, you are able to speak to those people whose faith has withered or in whom it was never present.

I can give no recipes for this practical work because the paths to follow differ according to the people, their professions, and the particular situation. The catechism points out what is essential to proclaim. However, it is those who are familiar with the particular situations who must read the signs, who must find a method for opening hearts and inviting people to set out with the Lord and with the Church.

You speak of criteria of discernment to avoid rushing in vain. I would like to say first of all that both parts are important. The community of the faithful is a precious thing and we must not underestimate even noticing the many who are distant the positive and beautiful reality constituted by these faithful, who say "yes" to the Lord in the Church, who seek to live the faith, who try to walk in the Lord's footsteps. We must help these members of the faithful, as we have already noted, to see the presence of faith, to understand that it is not something just of the past but shows the way today, teaches us how to live as human beings. It is very important that they truly find in their parish priest a pastor who loves them and helps them to hear the word of God today; to understand that it is a word for them, and not only for people of the past or of the future. It is important that he help them progress in their sacramental life, in the experience of prayer, in listening to the word of God and in the life of justice and charity, because Christians must be leaven in our society with its many problems, dangers and much corruption.

In this way, I believe that communities of the faithful can also play a missionary role "without words", if they truly live a righteous life. In this way they witness how it is possible to live worthily, following the paths pointed out by the Lord. Our society needs precisely such communities, capable of living justice today, not only for themselves but also for others: people who know how to live, as we heard today in the First Reading. This reading opens saying: "Choose life". It is easy to say "yes". But then it continues: "Your life is God". Thus, choosing life is choosing the option for life, which is the option for God. If there are individuals or communities who make this choice of life completely and who show others that the life they have chosen is truly life, they are bearing a very valuable witness.

And so I come to a second reflection. For proclamation we need two elements: the word and

witness. As we know from the Lord himself, we need the word that says what he has told us, that makes the truth of God appear, the presence of God in Christ, the path that unfolds before us. Therefore it is a question of evangelization in the present, as you said, which expresses the words of the past in the world of our experience today. It is absolutely indispensable, fundamental, to give credibility to this word through witness so that it does not only appear as a lofty philosophy or a fine utopia, but as reality, a reality with which it is possible to live, but this is not all: a reality that is life-giving. In this regard I consider that the witness of the community of the faithful, as a background to the word, to the proclamation, is of the utmost importance. With the word we must open up avenues to experience faith for those who are seeking God. This is what the ancient Church did with the catechumenate; it was not only catechesis, something doctrinal; it was also a place for a gradual experience of the life of faith in which the word is opened up, and understood when interpreted through life experiences, made concrete by life.

So, I think that together with the word, the presence of a hospitable place of faith, a place in which one has a progressive experience of faith, is also important. And here I see one of the tasks of the parish: offering hospitality to those who have no experience of normal parish life. We must not be a circle closed in on ourselves. We have our customs but still we must be open and endeavour to create "vestibules", that is, places which will draw others closer. Someone who comes from afar cannot immediately enter parish life, which already has its own practices. For such a person everything is novel, far removed from his own life. Therefore, with the help of the word, we must seek to create what the early Church created with the catechumenates: spaces in which one begins to live the word, to follow the word, to make it understandable and realistic, corresponding to forms of actual experience. In this sense I think that what you noted is very important, that is, the need to associate the word with the witness of a just life, being for others, opening oneself to the poor, to the needy, and also to the rich who need to have their hearts opened, to feel someone knocking at their hearts. So, it is a question of different avenues, according to the situation.

I would say, little can be said in theory but practical experience will show us the paths to follow. And naturally, we must be within the great communion of the Church an ever important criterion to follow even if perhaps still a little distant. In other words, one needs to be in communion with the Bishop, with the Pope, and hence in communion with the great past and the great future of the Church. In fact, being in the Catholic Church does not imply only being part of a great journey that precedes us. It also means looking with great openness to the future, a future that only unfolds in this manner. We could continue speaking about its components, but on another occasion.

Fr Giuseppe Forlai: *Holy Father, I am parochial vicar at St John Chrysostom parish, in the northern sector of our diocese. Difficulties in education, of which you have authoritatively spoken, Your Holiness, include, as we all know, difficulties with the educators, specifically, I believe, in two aspects. Firstly, I feel it is necessary that the length of stay of the educator-priest be given more consideration. The second aspect: I believe that the fundamental "game" of pastoral care of youth is played on the cultural front; culture understood as emotive-relational ability and the mastery of*

the words that concepts contain. Young people without this culture can become the poor of the future, at risk of emotional breakdown or crisis in the workplace. That young people come to our after school catechesis and recreation centres to spend some of their free time does not suffice. I would like these oratories or centres to become communities of people who come up with the right questions to guide young people to a religious sense. And this should give rise to a serious reflection on the collaboration between these centres and religion teachers. Your Holiness, please give us an authoritative word on these two aspects of the challenges facing educators: the necessary length of appointment and the urgent need for priest-teachers who are adequately prepared culturally. Thank you.

The Holy Father: Let us commence with the second point: it is broader and in a certain sense easier. Of course, an after-school centre where only games were played and refreshments provided would be absolutely superfluous. The point of an after-school catechetical and recreation centre must be cultural, human and Christian formation for a mature personality. About this we are entirely in agreement. It seems to me, that currently we are experiencing a cultural impoverishment. So many things are known, but without a heart, without an interior connection, because a communal vision of the world is lacking. For this reason a cultural solution inspired by the faith of the Church, and by knowledge of God, is absolutely essential. I would say that this is precisely the role of such a centre, that one not only finds possibilities there for one's leisure time but above all for an integral human formation that completes the personality.

Therefore, of course, the priest as an educator must himself have received a good training and must fit into today's culture, and be deeply cultured if he is to help young people to enter a culture inspired by faith. I would naturally add that in the end, the central point of orientation in every culture is God, God present in Christ. We see today that there are people with very great knowledge but lacking an inner orientation. Thus knowledge can also be dangerous because without a profound ethical orientation it leaves the individual to his own devices, and hence without the necessary indicators to become truly human. In this regard, the core of all cultural training, which is so necessary, must undoubtedly be faith: to know the face of God, revealed in Christ, and thus to have the fundamental point of reference for the rest of culture, which would otherwise become disoriented and disorienting. A culture without a personal knowledge of God and without a knowledge of the face of God in Christ is a culture that could be destructive, because it would have no knowledge of the necessary ethical bearings. In this regard, I think, we really have a profound cultural and human mission, which opens people to all the wealth of the culture of our time but also provides the criterion, the discernment to test what is true culture and what might become anti-culture.

The first question is far more difficult for me the question is also addressed to His Eminence that is, the length of appointment of young priests so as to ensure that young people receive direction. There is no doubt that a personal relationship with the educator is important and demands a certain amount of time so that he and the young people may get used to each other. In this sense I

agree that the priest, a reference point for youth, cannot change every day or else this focus would be lost.

Yet the young priest must also have different experiences in different cultural settings, so that he ends up with the necessary cultural background to be, as a parish priest, a long-term reference point in the parish. I would also say that the measure of time in a young person's life is different than in an adult's. The three years from the age of 16 to 19 are at least as long and important as the years between 40 and 50. It is exactly in this period, in fact, that the personality is formed: it is an inner journey of great importance, of great existential growth. Thus I would say that three years for an assistant priest is a good time for training a generation of young people; and in this way he can also become acquainted with other contexts, learn about other situations in other parishes and thus enrich his human skills. And, this is not too short a time to have a certain continuity, an educational process of experience in common, of learning to be a human person. Moreover, as I said, three years when one is young is a crucial and very long period, because within this time the future personality is really formed. I therefore think that both needs can be reconciled: on the one hand, the young priest can have different experiences to enrich his own human experience; and on the other, the need to be with young people for a certain length of time, to be able to introduce them into life, to teach them to be human people, is recognized. Here I am thinking of the compatibility of the two aspects: different experiences for a young priest, and continuity in the guidance of young people to direct them in life. But I do not know what the Cardinal Vicar will tell us about this.

The Cardinal Vicar Agostino Vallini: Holy Father, of course I agree with these two needs, the balance between the two needs. It seems to me, with the little that I have been able to learn, that in Rome a certain stability of young priests in parishes for at least a few years has been preserved, with a few exceptions. There can always be exceptions. However, a difficulty sometimes stems from serious needs or particular situations, especially in the relations between the parish priest and the parochial vicar and here I am touching a raw nerve and also from the scarcity of young priests. As I was also able to tell you when you received me in Audience, one of the serious problems in our Diocese is precisely the number of vocations to the priesthood. I am personally convinced that the Lord calls and continues to call. Perhaps we must also do more. Rome can and will produce vocations, I am sure. But many facets impinge on this complex matter. I believe of course that a certain stability has been guaranteed, and I too will act along the lines that the Holy Father has pointed out to us to the best of my ability.

Fr Giampiero Ialongo: *Your Holiness, I am one of the many parish priests who exercises his ministry on the outskirts of Rome. I work at Torre Angela, bordering on Torbellamonaca, Borghesiana, Borgata Finocchio, Colle Prenestino. These suburbs, like so many others, are often forgotten and neglected. And perhaps, more than the other districts of our city, our suburbs feel the hardship that the international financial crisis is having on the life of many families. We carry out many initiatives that primarily aim to listen, but then also to provide material, aid to those who turn to us without distinction of race, culture or religion. Nevertheless, we are realizing increasingly*

that we are facing a real crisis. The food parcels we prepare, articles of clothing, and occasional financial aid to pay bills or the rent can indeed be a help but not, I believe, a solution. I am convinced that as Church we should question ourselves more on what we can do, and even more on the causes that have led to this widespread crisis. We must have the courage to denounce a radically unjust economic and financial system. And I do not think, in the face of these inequalities introduced by this system, that merely a little optimism will suffice. What is needed is an authoritative word, an unbiased word, that will help Christians as you have already said in some way, Holy Father, to manage with evangelical wisdom and responsibility the goods that God has given, and has given for everyone and not only for a few. I should like to hear you speak on this subject again. Thank you, Your Holiness!

The Holy Father: First of all I would like to thank the Cardinal Vicar for his words of trust: Rome can provide more candidates for the Lord's harvest. Above all else we must pray to the Lord of the harvest, and also do our part to encourage young men to say "yes" to the Lord. And of course, young priests themselves are called to set an example to the young people of today showing that it is good to work for the Lord. In this way we are full of hope. Let us pray to the Lord and do our part.

Now, for this question which touches the raw nerve of the problems we are facing. I would distinguish between two levels. The first is the level of the macroeconomy which through its functioning reaches every citizen, all of whom feel the effects of a faulty structure. Naturally, it is the Church's duty to denounce this. As you know, for quite some while we have been preparing an Encyclical on these matters. I see now how difficult it is to speak with competence on this subject. If we do not deal competently with the matter, it will not be credible. On the other hand, it is also necessary to speak with great ethical awareness, created and awakened, so to speak, by a conscience formed by the Gospel. Hence it is necessary to expose the fundamental errors, the basic mistakes, now being shown up by the collapse of important American banks. In the end, it is a question of human avarice in the form of sin or as the Letter to the Colossians says, avarice as idolatry. We must condemn this idolatry which stands against the true God, as well as the falsification of the image of God with another God, "*mammona*". We must do so courageously and concretely, for lofty moralizing does not help if it is not substantiated by knowledge of the facts, which also helps one understand what it is possible to do in practice to gradually change the situation. And, of course, to do this will require the understanding of this truth and the good will of all.

Here we come to the crux: does original sin really exist? If it did not exist we could simply appeal to lucid reason, with arguments accessible and indisputable by all, and to the good will that exists in everyone. In this way we could make good headway and reform humanity. But it is not like this: reason including our own is obscured, we notice this every day. For selfishness, the root of avarice, lies in wanting above everything only for myself, in being concerned for the world only as far as it serves me. It exists in all of us. It clouds reason which can be very learned, the finest

scientific arguments, yet still obscured by false premises. In this way we can move along with great intelligence, bounding ahead, but on the wrong road. The will too, as the Fathers say, is distorted, it is not simply inclined to do good, but can seek above all else itself or its own interests. To find the way of reason, of true reason, is therefore already something far from easy, and is developed only with difficulty in dialogue. Without the light of faith that penetrates the shadows of original sin, reason cannot progress. But faith itself then comes up against the resistance of our will. The latter does not want to take the path of self-denial and a correction of the individual will in favour of the other rather than for ourselves.

I would say, therefore, that these errors should be addressed with reasonable and reasoned arguments, not with high moralizing but with concrete reasons that are understandable by economics today. The condemnation of these errors is important; it has always been a part of the Church's mandate. We know that in response to the new situation created by industrialization, the social doctrine of the Church, starting with Leo XIII, has sought to address these matters not just by denouncing them, because that does not suffice but also by showing the difficult paths along which, step by step, the assent of reason and the assent of the will are called for, together with the correction of one's conscience, and a readiness to deny oneself, in order then to collaborate with what is the true aim of human life, of the human family.

That said, the Church always has the task of being watchful, of seeking with the best resources she has to understand the logic of the economy, to enter into its reasoning and to illuminate this line of reasoning with the faith which sets us free from the selfishness of original sin. It is the duty of the Church to enter into this discernment process, this reasoning, and to make herself heard, at the various national and international levels, in order to help and to correct. This is not an easy task because so many individual interests and national groups oppose any radical rectification. Perhaps this sounds pessimistic, but to me it seems realistic: as long as there is original sin we will never attain radical and total correction. Nevertheless, we must do all we can at least for provisional solutions, sufficient to allow humanity to live and to block the domination of selfishness, when presented under pretexts of science, and national and international economics.

This is the first level. The other is to be realists, to ensure that the great aims of macrosociology are not achieved in microsociology macrosociology in microsociology without the conversion of hearts. Without just individuals there will be no justice. We must recognize this. Therefore, education in justice is a priority goal, we might even say, "the" priority. St Paul says that justification is the effect of Christ's work. This is not an abstract concept, regarding sins that no longer concern us, but refers precisely to integral justice. God alone can give us this, but he gives it to us only with our cooperation at various levels, at all levels possible.

Justice cannot be created in the world solely through good economic models, necessary though they are. Justice is achieved only if there are upright people. And there cannot be just people without the humble, daily work of conversion of hearts, of creating justice in hearts. This is the only

way to extend corrective justice. For this reason the work of the parish priest is so fundamental, not only for the parish but also for humanity, for if there are no upright people, as I said, justice will remain theoretical. Good structures cannot be established if they are opposed by people's selfishness, technically competent though they may well be.

This work of ours humble and conducted day in day out is fundamental if we are to achieve the great goals of humanity. We must work together at all levels. The universal Church must denounce, but also suggest what might be done and how it can be done. Bishops' Conferences and individual Bishops must act. And everyone must teach justice. I think that still today Abraham's dialogue with God is true and realistic (Gn 18: 22-33), when Abraham says will you indeed destroy the city? Perhaps there are fifty righteous people, perhaps ten? And ten of the righteous are enough to ensure the city's survival. Now, if ten righteous people are lacking, notwithstanding all the economic teaching, society will not survive. Therefore we must do what is necessary to educate and to provide at least ten just people, but if possible far more. And it is precisely through our evangelization that we ensure that there are numerous righteous people and that justice may be present in the world.

In effect, the two levels are inseparable. If, on the one hand, we do not proclaim macrojustice, microjustice fails to grow. On the other hand, if we do not do the very humble work of microjustice, macrojustice will not grow either. And as I said in my first Encyclical, despite all the systems that can spread in the world, in addition to the justice that we seek, charity always remains necessary. Opening hearts to justice and charity is educating in faith, it is guiding people to God.

Fr Marco Valentini: Holy Father, I am the vicar at the parish of Sant'Ambrogio. When I was in formation I did not understand, as I do today, the importance of the liturgy. I now ask myself what would charity be without the liturgy and whether, without it, our faith would be reduced to a moral code, an idea, a doctrine or an event of the past, and if we priests might not seem to be teachers or counsellors rather than mystagogues who introduce people into the mystery. Thus I come to the question. Without taking anything from the human, philosophical or psychological formation in universities and seminaries, I would like to understand whether our specificity requires a better liturgical formation or whether the present procedure and structure of studies already sufficiently satisfy the Constitution Sacrosanctum Concilium n. 16, where it says that the liturgy should be counted as one of the necessary and most important, principal subjects whose theological, historical, spiritual, pastoral and legal aspects should be taught and that the teachers of other subjects should take care that the connections between these and the liturgy are clear.

The Holy Father: If I have understood correctly, the question is: within our many-faceted, multi-dimensional pastoral work, what is the space and place for liturgical training and the reality of celebrating the mystery? This is also a question about the unity of our proclamation and our pastoral work, which has so many dimensions. We must seek the unifying point to ensure that our numerous activities may together constitute the work of a pastor. If I have properly understood,

you are of the opinion that the unifying point which creates the synthesis of all the dimensions of our work and our faith could be, precisely, the celebration of the mysteries and therefore the mystagogy which teaches us to celebrate.

To me, it is important that the sacraments, the Eucharistic celebration of the sacraments, not be something, as it were, out of place alongside more contemporary studies such as education in morals or economics things that we have already mentioned. It can easily happen that the sacraments remain somewhat isolated in a more pragmatic context and become a reality not fully integrated into the totality of our humanity. Thank you for the question, because really what we must teach is how to be human. We must teach this great art: how to be a human being. As we have seen, this requires many things: from the important denouncement of original sin found among the roots of our economy and branching into numerous aspects of our lives, to practical guides to justice and the evangelization of non-believers. The mysteries, however, are not something exotic in the cosmos of more practical realities. Mystery is the heart from which our power comes and to which we return to find this centre. For this reason I believe that catechesis that we might call mystagogical is very important. Mystagogical also means realistic, referring to our life as people of today. If it is true that the human being's "measuring stick" for what is just and what is not lies not within but without, in God, it is important that this God is not distant but recognizable, concrete, and that he enter our life and truly be a friend with whom we can speak and who can speak with us. We must learn to celebrate the Eucharist, to learn to know intimately Jesus Christ the God with the human face and really come into contact with him. We must learn to listen to him and learn to let him enter into us. Sacramental Communion is precisely this interpenetration between two persons. I do not take a piece of bread or meat, I take or open my heart so that the Risen One may enter the context of my being, so that he may be within me and not only outside me. In this way he speaks within me and transforms my being, giving me the meaning of justice, the dynamism of justice and zeal for the Gospel.

This celebration, at which God not only comes close to us but also enters the very fabric of our existence, is fundamental to being able truly to live with God and for God and to carry the light of God in this world. Let us not go into too many details here. However, it is always important that sacramental catechesis be an existential catechesis. Naturally, while accepting and learning more and more about the aspect of mystery where words and reasoning leave off it is also completely realistic, because it brings me to God and God to me. And it brings me to the other because the other receives the same Christ. Therefore if the same Christ is in him and in me, the two of us are no longer separate individuals. Here emerges the doctrine of the Body of Christ, because we are all incorporated if we receive worthily the Eucharist in the same Christ. Therefore our neighbour is truly near: no longer are we two separate "selves" but we are united in the same "self" of Christ. In other words, Eucharistic and sacramental catechesis must really reach the heart of our existence. It must be an education that opens us to God's voice, that lets us be opened so that the original sin of selfishness may be broken, that in the depths of our existence we may become open, in order to also become truly just. In this regard I think we must always learn the liturgy better not as

something exotic but as the heart of our Christian being which while not easily accessible to one who is distant is, in fact, exactly that openness to the other, to the world. We must all work together to celebrate the Eucharist ever more profoundly: not only as a rite, but as an existential process that touches me in the very depths of my being, more than any other thing, and changes me, transforms me. And in transforming me, it also begins the transformation of the world that the Lord desires and for which he wants to make us his instruments.

Fr Lucio Maria Zappatore: *Holy Father, I am a Carmelite, a parish priest of Santa Maria Regina Mundi at Torrespaccata.*

*Last Sunday, during the Angelus concerning the Petrine ministry, you spoke of the singular and specific ministry of the Bishop of Rome who presides over the whole assembly of charity. I ask you to continue this reflection, extending it to the universal Church: what is the particular charism of the Church of Rome, and what are the characteristics that make her, through a mysterious gift of Providence, unique in the world? What does having as her Bishop the Pastor of the universal Church imply for her mission, especially today? Not that we want to know our privileges it was once said: *Parochus in urbe, episcopus in orbe* rather, we would like to know how to live this charism, this gift of living as priests in Rome, and what is expected of us Roman parish priests. In a few days you will be visiting the Campidoglio [Capitol] to meet the civil authorities of Rome and will speak of the material problems of our city: today we ask you to speak to us of the spiritual problems of Rome and of her Church. And, as regards your visit to the Campidoglio, allow me to dedicate to you the following sonnet in the Roman dialect, hoping that you might enjoy listening to it. (Proceeds to recite sonnet).*

The Holy Father: Thank you. We have heard the Roman heart speak, a poetic heart. It is very beautiful to hear something in the Roman dialect and to learn that poetry is deeply rooted in the Roman heart. Perhaps this is a natural privilege that the Lord has granted Romans. It is a natural charism that precedes the charisms of the Church.

Your question, if I have understood it correctly, consists of two parts. First of all, what, in practice, is the responsibility of the Bishop of Rome today? But then you justly extend the Petrine privilege to the entire Church of Rome this is also how it was considered in the ancient Church and ask what the obligations of the Church of Rome are in response to this vocation of hers.

It is not necessary to develop here the doctrine of primacy, which you all know very well. What is important is that we reflect on the fact that the Successor of Peter, the ministry of Peter, truly guarantees the universality of the Church: this transcendence over forms of nationalism and other barriers that exist in humanity today, in order to be truly one Church in the diversity and richness of a multitude of cultures.

We see that other ecclesial communities too, other Churches, feel the need for a unifying point in

order not to lapse into nationalism, into identification with a specific culture in order to be really open, all things to all people, and to be almost constrained to open up towards everyone else. I think this is the fundamental ministry of the Successor of Peter: to guarantee this catholicity that implies multiplicity, diversity, richness of cultures and respect for diversity. At the same time, it excludes absolutization and unites everyone obliging all to open themselves, to let go of the absolutizing of their own experiences in order to find themselves in the unity of God's family which the Lord desired, and which the Successor of Peter guarantees, as unity within diversity.

Naturally the Church of the Successor of Peter together with her Bishop must carry this weight, this joy of the gift of her responsibility. Indeed, in the Book of Revelation the Bishop appears as an angel of his Church, that is, a little like the embodiment of his Church, to which the Church herself must answer. Therefore the Church of Rome, together with the Successor of Peter and as his particular Church, must guarantee this universality, this openness, this responsibility for the transcendence of love, this presiding in love which excludes any form of particularism. The Successor of Peter must also guarantee fidelity to the Word of the Lord, to the gift of faith, which we have not invented but which is truly a gift that could only come from God himself. This is and always will be the duty, but also the privilege, of the Church of Rome: against trends, against particularism, against the absolutization of only some aspects, against heresies which are always the absolutization of a single aspect. It is also her duty to guarantee universality and fidelity to the whole, to the richness of her faith, of her path through history that is always open to the future. Together with this witness and faith and universality, naturally she must give an example of charity.

This is what St Ignatius tells us when, in somewhat enigmatic words, he identifies the sacrament of the Eucharist with the action of loving others. And this, to return to the previous point, is very important: that is, this identification with the Eucharist which is *agape*, charity, the presence of charity that is given in Christ. There must always be charity, the sign and cause of charity in being open to others, giving of the self to others, this responsibility towards the needy, the poor, the forgotten. This is a great responsibility.

Presiding at the Eucharist is followed by presiding in charity, to which only the community itself can bear witness. I think this is the great task, the great question for the Church of Rome: truly to be an example and a starting point of charity. In this sense it is a bulwark of charity.

In the presbyterate of Rome we come from all the continents, we are of all races, all philosophies and all cultures. I am glad that the presbyterate of Rome itself expresses universality: in the unity of this little local Church, the universal Church is present. It is more difficult and more demanding to be true models of witness, of charity, of being among others with our Lord. We can only pray the Lord to help us in individual parishes, in individual communities, so that together we may be truly faithful to this gift, to this mandate to preside in charity.

Fr Guillermo M. Cassone: *Holy Father I come from the community of the Schnöstatt Fathers in Rome, parochial vicar at Santi Patroni d'Italia, San Francesco e Santa Caterina, in Trastevere.*

After the Synod on the Word of God, reflecting on Propositio n. 55, "Maria Mater Dei et Mater fidei", I wondered how to improve the relationship between the Word of God and Marian piety, both in priestly spiritual life and in pastoral action. Two images help me: the Annunciation for listening, and the Visitation for preaching. I would like to ask you, Your Holiness, to enlighten us on this topic with your teaching. I thank you for this gift.

The Holy Father: It seems to me that you have also provided the answer to your question. Mary really is the woman of listening: we see it in her encounter with the Angel and we see it again in every episode of her life, from the Wedding at Cana, to the Cross and to the day of Pentecost, when she was in the midst of the Apostles precisely to receive the Spirit. She is the symbol of openness, of the Church that awaits the coming of the Holy Spirit.

In the moment of the Annunciation, we can already detect an attitude of listening true listening, a listening that becomes interiorized, which does not simply say "yes" but assimilates the word, grasps the word and follows it with true obedience, as if it were an interiorized word, that is, as if it had become a word in me and for me, almost a form of my life. I find this very beautiful: to see this active listening, that is, a listening that attracts the word in such a way that it enters and becomes a word within me, reflecting on it and accepting it in the depths of my heart. Thus the word becomes an incarnation.

We see it in the *Magnificat*. We know that it is a fabric woven from Old Testament words. We see that Mary is truly a woman of listening, that she knew Scripture in her heart. She did not only know a few texts, but she identified with the word to the extent that the Old Testament words were summed up in a hymn forming within her heart and on her lips. We see that her life was really penetrated by the word. She had entered into the word, assimilating it, and it became life within her, and it was thus transformed into words of praise and a proclamation of God's greatness.

I believe St Luke, referring to Mary, says at least three times, perhaps four, that she assimilated and conserved the words of Scripture in her heart. For the Fathers she was the model of the Church, the model of the believer who cherishes the word, who carries the word within and not only reads it but interprets it with the intellect, to discern what it meant at that time and what the philological questions are. All this is interesting and important, but it is more important to hear the word that should be conserved and that becomes a word within me, becomes life and the presence of the Lord within me. So, the connection between Mariology and the theology of the word is important. The Synod Fathers also spoke of this and we shall speak of it in the Post-Synodal Document.

It is obvious: The Madonna is a word of listening a silent word, but also a word of praise and of

proclamation because in listening to the word, it becomes flesh again and thus a presence of God's greatness.

Fr Pietro Riggi: *Holy Father, I am a Salesian working in the Don Bosco Boys Town. I wanted to ask you the following: the Second Vatican Council brought many important renewals to the Church, but it did not abolish what already existed. It seems to me that some priests and theologians would like to pass off as the spirit of the Council some ideas which have nothing to do with it. One example is indulgences; there is a Manual of Indulgences published by the Apostolic Penitentiary. Through indulgences one can draw on the treasures of the Church and relieve the sufferings of souls in Purgatory, but many priests no longer mention this. Similarly, a manual of the blessings exists that provides for the blessing of persons, households and offices, objects and meals. But some priests consider them pre-conciliar and send away the faithful who are asking for what they are entitled to. The first Fridays of the month were not abolished by the Second Vatican Council, but many priests no longer speak of them. Today there is a general aversion to all these practices because they are seen as antiquated and harmful, whereas I consider that these Christian prayers and practices are up to date and important and feel they should be properly explained to the People of God in a balanced way and in the light of the truth that shines from the Second Vatican Council. I also wanted to ask you this: speaking of Fatima, you once said there is a link between Fatima and Akita, Japan's weeping Virgin. Both Paul VI and John Paul II celebrated a solemn Mass in Fatima and used the same passage from Sacred Scripture: Revelation 12, about a woman adorned with the sun, fighting a decisive battle with the ancient serpent, the devil, Satan. Is there an affinity between Fatima and Revelation 12?*

The Holy Father: These are matters about which the Council did not speak but which it presumed as realities in the Church. They live in the Church and are developing. This is not the moment to bring up the vast subject of indulgences. Paul VI reordered the topic and gave us guidelines for understanding it. I would say that it is simply an exchange of gifts, that is, all the good that exists in the Church is there for everyone. With the "key" of indulgences we can enter into this communion of the Church's goods. Protestants are opposed to this, claiming that the only treasure is Christ. But for me the marvellous thing is that Christ who is really more than sufficient in his infinite love, in his divinity and humanity wished to add our poverty to all that he had done. He does not consider us solely as objects of his mercy, but also makes us subjects of mercy and love together with him, almost as though even if not quantitatively, at least in the sense of mystery he wished to add to the great treasure of the Body of Christ. He wanted to be the Head with the Body. And he wanted the mystery of his Redemption to be completed with the Body. Jesus wanted to have the Church as his Body, in which all the richness of what he did is realized. It is precisely from this mystery that a *tesaurus ecclesiae* came into existence and that the Body, like the Head, gives so much and that we can receive so much from each other and give so much to each other.

And this is also true for other things you mention. For instance, the Fridays of the Sacred Heart: this is a very beautiful devotion in the Church. These are not necessary practices, but they have

developed through the richness of meditation on the mystery. Thus, the Lord offers us these possibilities in the Church. I do not think this is the moment to go into all the details. Everyone can basically understand what is more or less important; but no one should scorn these riches, developed down the centuries as an offering, a kind of multiplication of the lights of the Church. Christ's light is unique. It appears in all its hues and offers knowledge of the wealth of his gift, the interaction between Head and Body, the interaction among the members, so that we may truly be together a living organism in which each one gives to all and all give to the Lord, who gave us his entire self.

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