



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS OF THE ROME DIOCESE

"LECTIO DIVINA" GIVEN BY HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Hall of Blessings

Thursday, 10 March 2011

Your Eminence,

Your Excellencies and Dear Brothers,

It gives me great joy to be with you — the Clergy of Rome — every year at the beginning of Lent and to start out with you on the Church's journey to Easter.

I would like to thank you, your Eminence, for the beautiful words you offered me and to thank all of you for the work you do for this Church of Rome, which — according to St Ignatius — presides in charity and must also always be exemplary in her faith. Let us do all we can together to ensure that this Church of Rome measures up to her vocation and that we may be faithful workers in this "Vineyard of the Lord".

We have listened to the passage from the Acts of the Apostles (20:17-38) in which St Paul speaks to the priests of Ephesus, deliberately recounted by St Luke as a testament of the Apostle, as a discourse not only intended for the priests of Ephesus but for priests in every epoch. St Paul does not only speak to those who were present in that place, he truly speaks to us. Let us, therefore, endeavour to understand a little of what he is saying to us at this moment.

I start with: "You yourselves know how I lived among you all the time" (v. 18); and about his behaviour during all this time, St Paul says at the end that he "did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears" (v. 31). This means that for the whole of this period he was a herald, a messenger and an ambassador of Christ to them; he was a priest to them. In a certain sense it could be said that he was a worker priest because — as he also says in this passage —

he worked with his hands as a tentmaker so as not to be a financial burden to them but to be free, and to leave them free.

Yet although he did manual work, he was nevertheless a priest for the whole of the period, he constantly advised them throughout this time. In other words, even though he was not always physically available to preach, his heart and soul were very present for them; he was steeped in the word of God and in his mission.

This seems to me to be a very important point; we cannot be part-time priests, we are priests for ever, with the whole of our soul, with the whole of our heart. This being with Christ and being an ambassador for Christ, this being for others, is a mission that penetrates our being and must ever more deeply penetrate the totality of our being.

Then St Paul says: "I have served the Lord with all humility" (v. 19). "Served": a key word of the entire Gospel. Christ himself says: I did not come to dominate but to serve (*cf.* Mt 20:28). He is the Servant of God and Paul and the Apostles continue to be "servants"; they are not masters of faith but servants of your joy, St Paul says in the Second letter to the Corinthians (*cf.* 1: 24).

"Serving", must also be decisive for us: we are servants. And serving means not doing what I propose for myself which would be what I should like best; serving means letting myself take on the Lord's burden, the Lord's yoke; serving means not being swayed by my own preferences, my priorities, but letting myself truly be "taken on in service" for others.

This means that we too must often do things that do not immediately seem spiritual and do not always correspond with our own choices. All of us, from the Pope to the lowliest parochial vicar, have to do administrative work, temporal work; yet we do it as a service, as part of what the Lord imposes on us in the Church and we do what the Church tells us and expects of us.

This practical aspect of service is important: that it is not we who choose what to do, but we are servants of Christ in the Church. We work as the Church tells us, where the Church calls us, and we try to be precisely this: servants who do not do their own will, but the will of the Lord. Let us truly be in the Church ambassadors for Christ and servants of the Gospel.

I have "[served] the Lord with all humility". "Humility" is also a key word of the Gospel, of the whole of the New Testament. In humility, the Lord goes before us. In his Letter to the Philippians St Paul reminds us that Christ, who was above all of us, was truly divine in the glory of God, he humbled himself, he lowered himself lowly, becoming a man and accepting all the frailty of being human, obedient to the very end, even unto the Cross (*cf.* 2:5-8).

Humility does not mean false modesty — we are grateful for the gifts the Lord has given us — yet it indicates our awareness that anything we can do is a gift of God, it is given for the Kingdom of

God. We work with this “humility”, with this desire not to be noticed. We do seek praise, we do not want to attract attention, it does not matter to us what may be said of us in the newspapers or elsewhere; what matters is what God says. This is true humility, not to appear before men and women but to be in God’s presence, to work humbly for God and thus really to serve humanity and men and women.

“I did not shrink from declaring to you anything that was profitable, and teaching you in public” (Acts 20:20).

After a few more sentences St Paul returns to this point and says: “I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole counsel of God” (v. 27). This is important; the Apostle did not preach an “à la carte” Christianity to suit his own inclinations, he did not preach a Gospel to suit his own favourite theological ideas; he did not shrink from the commitment to proclaiming the whole of God’s will, even an inconvenient will and even topics of which he was personally not so enamoured.

It is our mission to proclaim the whole of God’s will, in its totality and ultimate simplicity. But it is important that we teach and preach — as St Paul says here — and really propose the will of God in its entirety. And I think that if the contemporary world is curious to know everything, even we ourselves must be more curious to know God’s: what could be more interesting, more important, more essential for us than knowing God’s wishes, knowing God’s will and God’s face?

This inner curiosity should also be our own curiosity to know God’s will better, more fully. We must therefore respond and reawaken this curiosity in others: truly to know the whole will of God, in order to become thoroughly acquainted with God’s will, hence to know how we can and should live and to recognize what is the path of our life.

Thus we must make known and understood — as far as we are able — the content of the Church’s Creed, from the Creation until the Lord’s return, until the new world. Doctrine, liturgy, morals, prayer — the four parts of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — indicate this totality of God’s will.

And it is also important if we are not to get lost in detail, not to give the idea that Christianity is an immense packet of things to learn. Ultimately, it is simple: God revealed himself in Christ. But to enter this simplicity — I believe in God who shows himself in Christ and I want to see and do his will — has meaning and, according to the situation, we enter more or less into details; but it is essential to make the ultimate simplicity of faith understood.

Believing in God as he revealed himself in Christ also constitutes the inner richness of this faith, the answers it gives to our questions; even answers which in the first instance we do not like but which are nevertheless the path of life, the true path. To the extent that we accept these things even if they are not quite to our liking, we can understand, or begin to understand that this really is

the truth. And the truth is beautiful. God's will is good, it is goodness itself.

Then the Apostle says: "I did not shrink from... teaching you in public and from house to house, testifying both to Jews and to Greeks of repentance to God and of faith in our Lord Jesus Christ" (vv. 20-21).

The essential is summed up here: conversion to God, faith in Jesus. Let us however linger over the word "conversion" which is the central word or one of the central words of the New Testament. It is interesting here — in order to know the dimensions of this word — to be attentive to the various biblical terms: in Hebrew "*šub*" means "changing one's course", beginning a new direction of life; in Greek "*metanoia*" means "changing one's way of thinking"; in Latin "*poenitentia*", "my own action to let myself be transformed"; in Italian "conversione", which coincides better with the Hebrew term "new direction of life".

Perhaps we can see in a special way the reason for the word of the New Testament, the Greek word "*metanoia*", "change in the way of thinking". At first the thought seems typically Greek, but going more deeply into it we see that it really expresses the essential of what other languages also say: a change of mind, in other words a real change in our perception of reality. Since we are born in original sin, for us "reality" means the tangible things, money, my position, the everyday things we see in the news on television: this is reality. And spiritual things appear a little "behind" reality. "*Metanoia*", a change from the way of thinking, means inverting this impression.

Neither material things, nor money, nor buildings, nor any of the things I can possess constitute the essential, or reality. The reality of realities is God. This invisible reality, seemingly far from us, is the reality. Learning this and thus changing the direction of our thinking, to truly assess how the real, which must orient all things is God, it is the words, the word of God. This is the criterion, God, the criterion of all that I do. This really is conversion if my concept of reality is changed, if my thought is changed. And this must subsequently penetrate each individual aspect of my life: in my judgement of every single thing to take as my criterion what God says about it.

This is the essential, not what I gain for myself, not the advantage or disadvantage to myself that would result from it, but the true reality, to orient ourselves to this reality. It seems to me that in Lent, which is the journey of conversion, every year we should once again apply this change in our conception of reality: namely, that God is reality. Christ is reality and is the criterion of how I act and how I think. To practise this new orientation of our life.

Hence also the Latin word "*poenitentia*", which appears to us a little too external and perhaps a form of activism, becomes real: to exercise this means to exercise my self-control, to let myself be transformed, with my whole life, by the Word of God, by the new thought that comes from the Lord and shows me the true reality.

Thus it is not only a matter of thought, of the mind, but is a question of the totality of my being, of my vision of reality. This change in thinking, which is conversion, touches my heart and unites the mind and the heart, and puts an end to this separation between the mind and the heart. It integrates my personality into my heart that is opened by God and opens to God.

Thus I find the way, thought becomes faith, that is, having trust in the Lord an entrustment of myself in the Lord, living with him and taking his path in a true following of Christ. Then St Paul continues: "I am going to Jerusalem, bound in the Spirit, not knowing what shall befall me there; except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and afflictions await me. But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the Gospel of the grace of God" (vv. 22-24).

St Paul knows that this journey to Jerusalem will probably cost him his life: it will be a journey towards martyrdom. Here we must bear in mind the reason for his journey. He was going to Jerusalem to give to this community, to the Church of Jerusalem the sum for the poor that he had collected in the world of the Gentiles. Hence it was a charitable journey, but that was not all. This was an expression of the recognition of the unity of the Church between Jews and Gentiles; it was a formal recognition of the primacy of Jerusalem in that time, of the primacy of the first Apostles, a recognition of the unity and universality of the Church.

In this regard, the journey had both ecclesiological and Christological significance. For to this recognition, this visible expression of the Church's oneness and universality was of such importance to him which might also involve martyrdom.

The unity of the Church deserves martyrdom. Thus he said, "I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may accomplish my course and the ministry" (v. 24).

Biological survival alone, St Paul says, is not the priority for me; for me the priority is to carry out my ministry; my priority is being with Christ; living with Christ is true life. Even if he loses this biological life, he does not lose true life.

Instead, if he were to lose communion with Christ in order to preserve his biological life, he would have lost *life* itself, the essence of his being.

This too seems to me important: to have the right priorities. Of course, we must take care of our health, we must work reasonably, but we must also know that the ultimate value is being in communion with Christ; living our service and perfecting it brings us to the finish line. Perhaps we can linger for a moment over this expression, "if only I may accomplish my course".

The Apostle wants to be a servant of Jesus to the very end, an ambassador of Jesus for the

Gospel of God. This is important, that even in old age, even if we are getting on in years, we do not lose our enthusiasm, our joy of being called by the Lord.

I would say it is easy, in a certain sense, at the beginning of the priestly journey, to be full of zeal, of hope, of courage, of activity, but can easily be followed, once we see how things are going, how the world always stays the same, how the ministry becomes burdensome, by a loss of some of that enthusiasm.

Let us always return to the word of God, to prayer, to communion with Christ in the Sacrament — this intimacy with Christ — and let ourselves renew our spiritual youth, renew our zeal, the joy of being able to go to the end with Christ, to “accomplish [our] course”, never without the enthusiasm of being called by Christ to this important service, to the Gospel of God’s Grace.

And this is important. We have spoken of humility, of this will of God that can be hard. Ultimately, the title of the whole Gospel of God’s Grace is “Gospel” and “Good News”, that God knows us, that God loves me and that the Gospel, what God ultimately wills, is Grace.

Let us remember that the course of the Gospel begins in Nazareth, in Mary’s room, with the words “Hail Mary”. In Greek, however, it is “*Chaire kecharitomene*” “Rejoice because you are in Grace!”.

And these words continue to be the guiding thread. The Gospel is an invitation to joy so that we may be in Grace, and God’s final word is “Grace”.

Then comes the passage on his imminent martyrdom. Here there is a very important sentence on which I would like to meditate with you briefly. “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own Blood” (v. 28).

I start with the words “take heed”. A few days ago I gave the Catechesis on St Peter Canisius, an apostle of Germany at the time of the Reformation and a word of this Saint has stayed in my mind, a word that for him was a cry of anguish in his time of history. He said: “You see, Peter is asleep, Judas is awake”. This is something that gives us food for thought: the sleepiness of the good. Pope Pius xi said: “it is not the negative forces that are the great problem of our time, but rather the somnolence of the good”.

“Take heed”. If we meditate on this we recall that the Lord in the Garden of Olives said twice to his Apostles: “Watch!”, and they slept. “Watch”, he says to us; let us try not to fall asleep in this season but to be really ready for the will of God and for the presence of his Word, of his Kingdom.

“Take heed to yourselves” (v. 28): this too is a word to the priests of all times. A well-intentioned activism exists but in which a person forgets his own soul, his own spiritual life, his own being with

Christ.

In the Breviary Reading for his liturgical Memorial, St Charles Borromeo tells us every year anew: you cannot be a good servant to others if you neglect your soul. “Watch over yourselves”. Let us also be attentive to our spiritual life, to our being with Christ. As I have often said, prayer and meditation on the Word of God is not time wasted for the care of souls, but is the condition for us to be able to be really in touch with the Lord, and thus to speak of the Lord to others from experience. “Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord” (v. 28).

Here two words are important. In the first place: “the Holy Spirit has made you”; in other words the priesthood is not a reality in which one finds an occupation, a useful, beautiful profession one likes and chooses for oneself. No! We are constituted by the Holy Spirit. God alone can make us priests, God alone can choose his priests and, if we are chosen, we are chosen by him. Here the sacramental character of the presbyterate and of the priesthood appears clearly. It is not a profession that must be carried out because someone has to run things, someone has to preach. It is not something we do, simply. It is election by the Holy Spirit and in this will of the Holy Spirit, the will of God, we live and ceaselessly seek to let the Holy Spirit, the Lord himself, take us by the hand.

Secondly, “made you guardians, to feed the Church of the Lord”. Here the word which in the Italian tradition is “*custodi*” [editor’s note: in the rsv Bible “guardians”], is “*episkopos*” in Greek. St Paul was speaking to priests, but here he calls them “*episkopoi*”. We may say that in the evolving situations in the Church the two ministries had not yet become clearly separate, they were still, evidently, the one priesthood of Christ and they, the priests, were also “*episkopoi*”.

The word “presbyter” comes above all from the Jewish tradition in which the system of “elders”, of “presbyters”, was in force, whereas the word “*episcopos*” was created — or discovered — in the milieu of the Church of pagans and crept into the language of the Roman administration. “*Episkopoi*” were those who supervised, who had administrative responsibility in the supervision of the procedure of things. Christians chose this word in the pagan-Christian sector to express the office of the presbyter, of the priest, but of course this immediately changed the word’s meaning.

The word “*episkopoi*” was immediately identified with the word “shepherds” [pastors], in other words supervising is “*pascolare*” [tending], doing the work of the pastor or shepherd. In fact this immediately became “*poimainein*”, “tending” God’s Church; it is considered in the sense of this responsibility for others, of this love for God’s flock. And let us not forget that in the ancient East, “shepherd” was the title of kings: they were the pastors of the flock, which was the people.

Later, the King-Christ transformed this concept — being a true king — from within. He is the Shepherd who made himself a Lamb, the Shepherd who had himself killed for others, to defend

them against the wolf; the Shepherd whose first meaning is to love this flock and thus give life to it, to nourish and protect it. Perhaps these are the two central concepts for this office of “shepherd”: to nourish by making the Word of God known, not only with words but by testifying to it for God’s will. and to protect it with prayer, with the full commitment of one’s life. Pastors, the other meaning which the Fathers saw in the Christian word “*episkopoi*” is: someone who supervises not as a bureaucrat but as one who sees from God’s viewpoint, who walks towards the heights of God and in the light of God sees this small community of the Church.

This is also important for a pastor of the Church, for a priest, an “*episkopos*” who sees from the viewpoint of God, who tries to see from on high with God’s criterion, not according to his own preferences, but rather as God judges; to see from God’s heights and thus loving with God and through God.

“Made guardians to feed the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own Blood” (v. 28). Here we find a central word on the Church. The Church is not an organization that was formed gradually; the Church was born from the Cross. The Son acquired the Church on the Cross and not only the Church of that moment, but the Church of all the epochs. He acquired with his Blood this portion of the people, of the world, for God. And this, it seems to me, should make us think. Christ, God, created the Church, the new Eve, with his Blood. Thus he loves us and loved us and this is true at every moment. And this must also enable us to understand that the Church is a gift; being happy that we are called to the Church of God; feeling joy in belonging to the Church.

Of course, there are also always negative and difficult aspects, but basically this must remain: it is a very beautiful gift that I can live out in the Church of God, in the Church that the Lord purchased with his Blood. Being called to know truly the face of God, to know his will, to know his Grace, to know this supreme love, this Grace that guides us and takes us by the hand.

Happiness in being Church, joy in being Church. I think we must relearn this. The fear of triumphalism has perhaps caused us to forget a little that it is beautiful to be in the Church and that this is not triumphalism but humility, being grateful for the gift of the Lord.

It immediately follows that this Church is also not only a gift of God and divine, but also very human: “fierce wolves will come” (v. 29). The Church is constantly threatened, there is always the danger, the opposition of the devil who does not accept the presence this new People of God in humanity, or that God should be present in a living community. Thus we should not be surprised that there are always difficulties, that there are always tares in the Church’s field.

It has always been so, and always will be. But we must be conscious, with joy, that truth is stronger than falsehood, love is stronger than hatred, God is stronger than all the forces in opposition to him. And with this joy, with this interior certitude, let us go on our way *inter consolationes Dei et persecutiones mundi*, as the Second Vatican Council says (*cf.* Dogmatic

Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8). Among the consolations of God and the persecutions of the world.

And now for the second last paragraph. At this point I would not like to go into any further detail: in the end an important element of the Church appears: being Christian.

“In all things I have shown you that by so toiling one must help the weak, remembering the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive’ ” (cf. v.35). The preferential option for the poor, love for the weak, is fundamental to the Church, it is fundamental to the service of each one of us: being very lovingly attentive to the weak, even if we do not like them, if they are difficult. But they expect our charity, our love, and God expects this love of ours. In common with Christ we are called to go to the help of those who are weak, with our love, with our events.

Finally, the last paragraph. “And when he had spoken thus, he knelt down and prayed with them all” (v. 36). At the end the discourse becomes a prayer and Paul falls to his knees. St Luke reminds us that the Lord in the Garden of Olives also prayed on his knees and tells us that St Stephen too, at the moment of his martyrdom, knelt to pray. Praying on one’s knees means adoring God’s greatness in our weakness, grateful that the Lord loves us, precisely in our weakness.

Behind this appear the words of St Paul in the Letter to the Philippians, which is the Christological transformation of words of the Prophet Isaiah. Isaiah says, in chapter 45, that the whole world, the heavens, the earth and all that is under the earth, will kneel before the God of Israel (cf. Is 45:23).

And St Paul follows this through. Christ came down from Heaven to the Cross, the ultimate obedience. And at this moment what the Prophet said is brought about: before the Crucified Christ every knee should bow: the entire cosmos, in Heaven, on earth and under the earth (cf. Phil 2:10-11). He is really the expression of the true grandeur of God. The humility of God and his love unto the Cross show us that he is God. Let us kneel before him in adoration. Kneeling is no longer an expression of servitude, but rather of the freedom that God’s love gives us, the joy of being redeemed, of standing together, with Heaven and earth, with the entire cosmos, to worship Christ, to be united to Christ and thus to be redeemed.

St Paul’s discourse ends in prayer. Our own speeches must also end in prayer. Let us pray the Lord that he may help us to be increasingly imbued with his word, increasingly witnesses and not only teachers, to be increasingly priests, pastors [shepherds], “*episkopoi*”, that is, those who see with God and carry out the service of God’s Gospel, the service of the Gospel of Grace.

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