



The Holy See

ECCLESIAL CONVENTION OF THE DIOCESES OF ROME

"LECTIO DIVINA" OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Basilica of Saint John Lateran

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[Video]

*Your Eminence,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

It gives me great joy to be here in the Cathedral of Rome with the representatives of my diocese and I warmly thank the Cardinal Vicar for his kind words.

We have already heard that the Lord's last words to his disciples on this earth were: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit" (cf. Mt 28:19). Make disciples and baptize them. Why is it not enough for disciples to know Jesus' teaching, to know the Christian values? Why is it necessary to be baptized? This is the topic of our reflection, in order to understand the reality and depth of the Sacrament of Baptism.

A first door opens if we read these words of the Lord carefully. The choice of the word "*in* the name of the Father" in the Greek text is very important: the Lord says "*eis*" and not "*en*", that is, not "*in* the name" of the Trinity — as when we say that a vice-prefect speaks "on behalf" of the prefect, an ambassador speaks "on behalf" of the government: no. It says: "*eis to onoma*", that is, an immersion in the name of the Trinity, a being inserted in the name of the Trinity, an interpenetration of being in God and of our being, a being immersed in God the Trinity, Father, Son and Holy Spirit; just as it is in marriage, for example. Two people become one flesh, they

become a new and unique reality with a new and unique name.

The Lord helped us to understand this reality ever better in his conversation on the Resurrection with the Sadducees. The five Books of Moses were the only ones that the Sadducees recognized in the canon of the Old Testament and there is no mention in them of the Resurrection; so they denied it. The Lord shows the reality of the Resurrection precisely by these five Books and says: “Have you not read what was said to you by God, ‘I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?’” (cf. Mt 22:31-32). God therefore takes these three and in his very name they become *the* name of God. To understand who this God is it is necessary to see these figures who became the name of God, a name of God, who are immersed in God. In this way we see that anyone who is in the name of God, who is immersed in God, is alive, because God — the Lord says — is not a God of the dead but of the living, and if he is the God of the latter, he is a God of the living.

The living are alive because they are in our memory, in God’s life. And this happens to us in being baptized: we come to be inserted in the name of God, so that we belong to this name and his name becomes our name and we too, with our witness — like the three in the Old Testament — can be witnesses of God, a sign of who this God is, a name of this God.

Consequently, being baptized means being united to God; in a unique, new existence we belong to God, we are immersed in God himself. Thinking of this, we can immediately see several consequences.

The first is that God is no longer very distant from us, he is not a reality to dispute — whether he exists or not — but we are in God and God is in us. The priority, the centrality of God in our life is a first consequence of Baptism. The answer to the question “Does God exist?” is: “He exists and is with us; he centres in our life this closeness to God, this being in God himself, who is not a distant star but the environment of my life”. This would be the first consequence and we must therefore tell ourselves that we should take this presence of God into account and truly live in his presence.

A second consequence of what I have said is that we do not make ourselves Christian. Becoming Christian is not something that follows a decision of mine: “herewith I make myself a Christian”. Of course, my decision is also necessary, but first of all it is an action of God with me: it is not I who make myself Christian. I am taken on by God, taken in hand by God and thus, by saying “yes” to God’s action I become Christian. Becoming Christians, in a certain sense is *passive*; I do not make myself Christian but God makes me his man, God takes me in hand and puts my life in a new dimension. Likewise I do not make myself live but life is given to me; I am not born because I have made myself a human being, but I am born because I have been granted to be human. Therefore my Christian being has also been granted to me, it is in the *passive* for me, which becomes *active* in our, in my life. And this fact of being in the passive, of not making ourselves Christian but of being made Christian by God, already to some extent involves the mystery of the Cross: only by dying to my selfishness, by coming out of myself, can I be Christian.

A third element which opens up immediately in this vision is that naturally, being immersed in God I am of course united to my brothers and sisters, because all the others are in God and if I am taken out of my isolation, if I am immersed in God, I am immersed in communion with the others. To be baptized is never a solitary act by “me”; it is always, necessarily, being united with all the others, being in unity and solidarity with the whole Body of Christ, with the whole community of his brothers and sisters. This event which is Baptism inserts me in community, breaks my isolation. We must bear this in mind in our being Christian.

And finally, let us return to Christ’s words to the Sadducees: God is “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob” (cf. Mt 22:32). Hence the latter are not dead; if they are of God they are alive. This means that with Baptism, with immersion in the name of God, we too are already immersed in immortal life, we are alive for ever. In other words Baptism is a first stage in resurrection: immersed in God, we are already immersed in the indestructible life, our resurrection begins. Just as Abraham, Isaac and Jacob being the “name of God” are alive, so we, inserted in the name of God, are alive in immortal life. Baptism is the first step of resurrection, entry into the indestructible life of God.

Thus, in a first moment, with the baptismal formula of St Matthew, with Christ’s last word, we have already had a glimpse of the essential of Baptism. Let us now take a look at the sacramental rite, so that we may understand even more precisely what Baptism is.

This rite, like the rite of almost all the sacraments, is made up of two elements: matter — water — and the word. This is very important. Christianity is not something purely spiritual, something only subjective, emotional, of the will, of ideas; it is a cosmic reality. God is the Creator of all matter, matter enters Christianity, and it is only in this great context of matter and spirit together that we are Christians. It is therefore very important that matter be part of our faith, that the body be part of our faith; faith is not purely spiritual, but this is how God inserts us into the whole reality of the cosmos and transforms the cosmos, draws it to himself.

Moreover with this material element — water — not only does a basic element of the cosmos enter, a fundamental matter created by God, but also the entire symbolism of religions, because in all religions water has something to say. The journey of religions, this quest for God in different ways — even if they are mistaken, but always seeking God — is assumed in the sacrament. The other religions, with their journey to God, are present and are assumed, and thus the world is summed up; the whole search for God that is expressed in the symbols of religions, and especially — of course — in the symbolism of the Old Testament which in this way becomes present, with all its experiences of salvation and of God’s goodness. We shall come back to this point.

The other element is the word. This word is presented in three elements: renunciations, promises and invocations. It is consequently important that these words not be only words but also a path of life. In them a decision is made, in these words the whole process of our Baptism is present —

both pre-baptismal and post-baptismal; hence, with these words and also with symbols, Baptism extends to the whole of our life. This reality of the promises, of the renunciations, of the invocations is a reality that endures throughout our life since we are constantly on a baptismal journey, on a catechumenal journey, through these words and through the realization of these words.

The Sacrament of Baptism is not an act that lasts an hour. Rather it is a reality of our whole life, a journey of our whole life. In fact, behind it is also the doctrine of the two ways that was fundamental in early Christianity: a way to which we say “no” and a way to which we say “yes”.

Let us begin with the first part: the renunciations. There are three and I shall take the second one first: “Do you reject the glamour of evil, and refuse to be mastered by sin?”. What is this glamour of evil?

In the early Church, and for centuries to come the words here were: “Dost thou ... renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world?”, and we know today what was intended with these words: “the pomp of the devil”. Above all, the pomp of the devil meant the great bloody spectacles in which cruelty became amusement, in which killing men became something to be watched: a show, the life and death of a man. These bloody spectacles, this amusement of evil is the “pomp of the devil”, in which he appears with seeming beauty but in fact, with all his cruelty. However, beyond this immediate meaning of the phrase “pomp of the devil”, there was a wish to speak of a type of culture, a *way of life*, in which it is not truth but appearances that count; truth is not sought but effect, sensation. And, under the pretext of truth, men were actually destroyed, there was a desire to destroy and people wished to create themselves alone as victorious.

This renunciation was therefore very real: it was the rejection of a type of culture that is an anti-culture, against Christ and against God. The option was against a culture that, in St John’s Gospel is called “*kosmos houtos*”, “this world”. With “this world”, John and Jesus are not of course referring to God’s creation or to man as such, but to a certain creature that is dominant and imposes itself as if *this* were the world, and as if this were the way of life imposed.

I now leave each one of you to reflect on this “pomp of the devil” on this culture to which we say “no”. In fact, being baptized means, essentially, being emancipated, being freed from this culture. Today too we know a type of culture in which truth does not count; even if apparently people wish to have the whole truth appear, only the sensation counts, and the spirit of calumny and destruction. It is a culture that does not seek goodness, whose moralism is in reality a mask to confuse people, to create confusion and destruction. We say “no” to this culture, in which falsehood is presented in the guise of truth and information, against this culture that seeks only well-being and denies God. Moreover, from so many Psalms we are familiar with this opposition of a culture which seems untouchable by all the evils of the world, puts self above everyone, above

God, whereas it is in fact a culture of evil, a dominion of evil.

Thus the decision of Baptism, of this part of the catechumenal journey which lasts throughout our life, is precisely this “no”, said and acted upon again and again every day, even with sacrifices that are the price of opposing the culture prevalent in many places, even though it is imposed as if it were the world, this world. It is not true. And there are also many people who really desire the truth.

Consequently we switch to the first renunciation: “Do you reject sin so as to live in the freedom of God’s children?”. Today freedom and Christian life, the observance of God’s commandments, go in opposite directions; being Christian is like a form of slavery; freedom is being emancipated from the Christian faith, emancipated — all things considered — from God. To many people the word “sin” seems almost ridiculous, because they say: “How can that be! We cannot offend God! God is so great, what does it matter to God if I make a small mistake? We cannot offend God, his concern for us is too great for us to offend him”.

This seems true but it is not true. God made himself vulnerable. In the crucified Christ we see that God is vulnerability, God’s love is his caring for man, God’s love means that our first concern must not be to hurt or destroy his love, not to do anything against his love for otherwise we also live against ourselves and against our freedom. And, in reality, this seeming liberty in emancipation from God immediately becomes a slavery of the many dictatorships of the time, that require guidance if they are to be deemed worthy of the time.

And lastly: “Do you reject Satan?”. This tells us that there is a “yes” to God and a “no” to the power of the Evil One who coordinates all these activities and wishes to set himself up as a god of this world, as St John says further. However, he is not God, he is only the adversary and we do not submit to his power; we say “no”, because we say “yes”, a fundamental “yes”, the “yes” of love and of truth. These three renunciations were accompanied in the ancient Baptismal rite by three immersions: immersion in water as symbol of death, of a “no” which is really the death of one type of life and resurrection to another life. We shall return to this.

Then the confession in three questions: “Do you believe in God the Father almighty, creator of heaven and earth? In Christ...?” and, lastly, “in the Holy Spirit and the Church?”

This formula, these three parts, were developed from the Lord’s words “baptize in the name of the Father, of the Son and of the Holy Spirit”; these words are put into practice and deepened: what it means to say *Father*, what it means to say *Son* and what it means to believe in being baptized in the *Holy Spirit*, in other words the whole of God’s action in history, in the Church, in the Communion of Saints.

Thus the positive formula of Baptism is also a dialogue: it is not merely a formula. The profession

of faith above all is not something to be understood, something intellectual, something to be memorized — this too of course — it also touches our mind, it especially touches our life.

And to me this seems very important. It is not an intellectual thing, a pure formula. It is a dialogue of God with us, an action of God with us, it is a response of ours, it is a journey. The truth of Christ may be understood only if his journey is understood. Only if we accept Christ as the way do we really set out on the way of Christ and can understand the truth of Christ. Truth that is not lived does not open; only truth lived, truth accepted as a way of life, as a path, also opens as truth in its full riches and depth. This formula is thus a way, it is an expression of our conversion, of an action of God. And we really want to keep in mind throughout our life that we are in communion on our journey with God, with Christ. And so we are in communion with truth: in living the truth, the truth becomes life and in living this life we also find the truth.

Let us now move on to the material element: water. It is very important to see the two meanings of water. Water calls to mind the sea, especially the Red Sea, death in the Red Sea. The sea represents the power of death, the need to die in order to arrive at a new life. To me this seems very important. Baptism is not merely a ceremony, a ritual introduced long ago, nor is it solely a cleansing, a cosmetic operation. It is far more than a cleansing: it is death and life, it is death of a sort of existence and rebirth, resurrection to new life. This is the depth of being Christian: not only is it something that is added, but it is a new birth.

After crossing the Red Sea we are renewed. In this way, in all the Old Testament experiences, for Christians the sea becomes a symbol of the Cross. For it is only through death, a radical renunciation in which one dies to a certain type of life, that there can be a rebirth and there can truly be new life.

This is a part of the symbolism of water: it symbolizes — especially in the immersions of antiquity — the Red Sea, death, the Cross. It is only from the Cross that new life is attained and this occurs every day. Without this ceaselessly renewed death, we cannot renew the true vitality of the new life of Christ

The other symbol is that of the source. Water is the origin of all life; in addition to the symbolism of death, it also has the symbolism of the new life. Every life also comes from water, from the water that flows from Christ as the true new life that accompanies us to eternity.

In the end the question — only a small word — concerning Baptism for children remains. Is it right to have it administered to children or would it be more necessary to make the catechumenal way first in order to arrive at a truly fulfilled Baptism? And the other question that is always asked is: “But can we impose on an infant the religion he should or not live? Shouldn’t we leave this decision to the child?”.

These questions show that we no longer see the new life, the true life in the Christian faith but we see a choice among others, even a burden that should not be imposed on an individual without his or her consent. The reality is different. Life itself is given to us without our being able to choose whether or not we wish to live; no one is asked “do you want to be born or not?”. Life itself necessarily comes to us without our previous consent, it is thus given to us and we cannot decide in advance “‘yes’ or ‘no’, I want or I do not want to live”. And, in reality, the real question is: “Is it right to give life in this world without having received an assent — do you want to live or not? Can one really anticipate life, give life without the individual having had the possibility to decide?”.

I would say: it is possible and right only if, with life, we can also guarantee that life, with all the problems of the world, is good, that it is good to live, that there is a guarantee that this life be good, be protected by God and be a real gift. Only the anticipation of its meaning justifies the anticipation of life. And because of this Baptism as a guarantee of God's goodness, as an anticipation of the meaning, of the “yes” of God who protects this life, also justifies the anticipation of life. Hence, the Baptism of children is not against freedom; it is truly necessary to give it in order to justify the gift of life — that would otherwise be questionable. Only the life that is in God's hands, in Christ's hands, immersed in the name of the Trinitarian God, is certainly a good that can be given without scruples. Thus we are grateful to God who has given us this gift, who has given us himself. And our challenge is to live this gift, to really live, in a post-baptismal journey, the renunciations of the “yes”, to live always in the great “yes” of God, and so to live well. Thank you.