



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CLERGY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Hall of Blessings

Thursday, 2 March 2006

I am going to speak straightaway, for otherwise, if I wait until the end of all the interventions, my monologue will become too long.

I would first like to express my joy at being here with you, dear Priests of Rome. It is a true joy to see so many good pastors at the service of the "Good Shepherd" here, in the first See of Christianity, in the Church which "presides in charity" and must be a model for other local Churches. Thank you for your service!

We have the shining example of Fr Andrea, who shows us what it means to "be" a priest to the very end: dying for Christ during a moment of prayer, thereby witnessing on the one hand to the interiority of his own life with Christ, and on the other, to his own witness for people at a truly "panpheral" point in the world, surrounded by hatred and the fanaticism of others. It is a witness that inspires everyone to follow Christ, to give one's life for others and thus to find Life.

1. Holy Father, we are meeting you at this Lenten gathering for the first time. I want to remember the beloved Servant of God John Paul II. In the words you spoke at his funeral I saw a sign of continuity between you and your beloved Predecessor: "We can be sure that our beloved Pope is standing today at the window of the Father's House, that he sees us and blesses us". This thought inspires a sonnet written in Roman dialect that I have dedicated to you: "A window on high in Heaven".

With regard to the first intervention, I first of all say a big "thank you" for this marvellous poem! There are also poets and artists in the Church of Rome, in the presbyterate of Rome, and I will

have the possibility of further meditating upon and interiorizing these beautiful words, mindful that this "window" is always "open". Perhaps this is an opportunity to recall the fundamental legacy of the great Pope John Paul II in order to continue to increasingly assimilate this legacy.

Yesterday, we began Lent. Today's Liturgy gives us a profound idea of the essential significance of Lent: it is a guide for our life.

It therefore seems to me - I speak with reference to Pope John Paul II - that we should insist a little on today's First Reading. Moses' great discourse, on the threshold of the Holy Land after the 40-year pilgrimage in the desert, sums up the whole of the Torah, the whole of the Law. Here we find the essential, not only for the Jewish people but also for us. This essential is the Word of God: "I have set before you life and death, blessing and curse; therefore, choose life" (Dt 30: 19).

These fundamental words of Lent are also the fundamental words of the legacy of our great Pope John Paul II: "choose life". This is our priestly vocation: to choose life ourselves and to help others to choose life. It is a matter of renewing in Lent our own, so to speak, "fundamental option", the option for life.

But the question immediately arises: how can we choose life, how should we do this?

Reflecting upon this, I remembered that the great defection from Christianity which has occurred in the West in the past 100 years was precisely in the name of the option for life. It was said - I am thinking of Nietzsche but also of so many others - that Christianity is an option opposed to life. With the Cross, with all the Commandments, with all the "nos" that it proposes to us, some have said that it closes the door to life.

But we, we want to have life and we choose, we opt, ultimately, for life, freeing ourselves by the Cross, freeing ourselves by all these Commandments, by all these "nos". We want to have life in abundance, nothing but life.

Here, the words of today's Gospel immediately come to mind: "Whoever would save his life will lose it; and whoever loses his life for my sake, he will save it" (Lk 9: 24). This is the paradox we must first be aware of in opting for life. It is not by arrogating life to ourselves but only by giving life, not by having life and holding on to it but by giving it, that we can find it. This is the ultimate meaning of the Cross: not to seek life for oneself, but to give one's own life.

Thus, the New and Old Testaments go together. In the First Reading from Deuteronomy God's response is: "I command you this day, by loving the Lord your God, by walking in his ways, and by keeping his commandments and his statutes and his ordinances, then you shall live" (Dt 30: 16). At first sight we may not like this, but it is the way: the option for life and the option for God are identical. The Lord says so in St John's Gospel: "This is eternal life, that they know you" (Jn 17: 3). Human life is a relationship. It is only in a relationship, and not closed in on ourselves, that we can have life. And the fundamental relationship is the relationship with the Creator, or else other

relations are fragile. Hence, it is essential to choose God. A world empty of God, a world that has forgotten God, loses life and relapses into a culture of death.

Choosing life, taking the option for life, therefore, means first and foremost choosing the option of a relationship with God. However, the question immediately arises: with which God? Here, once again, the Gospel helps us: with the God who showed us his face in Christ, the God who overcame hatred on the Cross, that is, in love to the very end. Thus, by choosing this God, we choose life.

Pope John Paul II gave us the great Encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*. In it we can clearly see - it is, as it were, a portrait of the problems of today's culture, hopes and dangers - that a society which forgets God, excludes God, precisely in order to have life, falls into a culture of death.

Precisely in order to have life, a "no" is said to the child, because it takes some part of my life away from me; a "no" is said to the future, in order to have the whole of the present; a "no" is said to unborn life as well as to suffering life that is approaching death. What seems to be a culture of life becomes the anticulture of death, where God is absent, where that God who does not ordain hatred but overcomes hatred is absent. Here we truly opt for life.

Consequently, everything is connected: the deepest option for the Crucified Christ with the most complete option for life, from the very first moment until the very last.

To me this also seems in some way the nucleus of our pastoral care: to help people make the true choice for life, to renew their relationship with God as the relationship which gives us life and shows us the way to life. And thus, to love Christ anew, who from being the most unknown Being whom we did not reach and who remained enigmatic, became a known God, a God with a human face, a God who is love.

Let us keep this fundamental point for life before us and consider that this programme contains the whole Gospel, the Old and the New Testaments, that centre on Christ. Lent should be for us a time to renew our knowledge of God, our friendship with Jesus, to be able to guide others in a convincing way to opt for life, which is above all the option for God. It must be clear to us that in choosing Christ, we have not chosen to deny life, but have really chosen life in abundance.

The Christian option is basically very simple: it is the option to say "yes" to life. But this "yes" only takes place with a God who is known, with a God with a human face. It takes place by following this God in the communion of love. What I have said so far is intended as a way of renewing our remembrance of the great Pope John Paul II.

2. As a parish priest, I ask you for a few words of joyful encouragement for mothers. In memory of our mothers, Your Holiness, for their faith and spiritual strength that can be seen in the human and

Christian upbringing that they gave to us, help us talk to the mothers of all the boys and girls who attend catechism classes and are often distracted. Say a few words that we can pass on to them, saying: "This is what the Pope says to you".

We come to the second intervention, which was so nice, about mothers. I would say that I cannot communicate important programmes just now, words that you could say to mothers. Simply tell them: the Pope thanks you! He thanks you because you have given life, because you want to help this life that is developing and thereby to build a human world, contributing to a human future. And it is not only by giving biological life that you do so, but by communicating the heart of life, making Jesus known, introducing your children to knowledge of Jesus and friendship with Jesus. This is the foundation of every catechesis.

Therefore, one must thank mothers above all because they have had the courage to give life. And we must ask mothers to complete their gift by giving friendship with Jesus.

3. The Blessed Sacrament is exposed for adoration 24 hours a day in St Anastasia on the Palatine. The faithful take turns in making Perpetual Adoration. My suggestion is that there should be Perpetual Adoration of the Eucharist in each one of the five sectors of the Diocese of Rome.

The third intervention was by the Rector of St Anastasia's Church. Here, perhaps I can say in parentheses that the Church of St Anastasia was already dear to me even before I saw it because it was the titular church of our Cardinal de Faulhaber. He always let us know that he had a church in Rome, St Anastasia's. We always met with this community for the second Mass of Christmas, dedicated to the "statio" of St Anastasia.

Historians say that it was at St Anastasia's that the Pope had to visit the Byzantine Governor and that it was there that he had his seat. The church also reminds us of the saint, and hence, of the "Anastasis". At Christmas we also think of the Resurrection.

I did not know and I am glad to have been told about it, that the church is now a place of "Perpetual Adoration"; thus, it is a focal point in Rome of the life of faith. I confidently place in the hands of the Cardinal Vicar this proposal to create five places of Perpetual Adoration in the five sectors of the Diocese of Rome.

I only want to say: thanks be to God that after the Council, after a period in which the sense of Eucharistic Adoration was somewhat lacking, the joy of this adoration was reborn everywhere in the Church, as we saw and heard at the Synod on the Eucharist. Of course, the conciliar Constitution on the Liturgy enabled us to discover to the full the riches of the Eucharist in which the Lord's testament is accomplished: he gives himself to us and we respond by giving ourselves to him.

We have now rediscovered, however, that without adoration as an act consequent to Communion

received, this centre which the Lord gave to us, that is, the possibility of celebrating his sacrifice and thus of entering into a sacramental, almost corporeal, communion with him, loses its depth as well as its human richness.

Adoration means entering the depths of our hearts in communion with the Lord, who makes himself bodily present in the Eucharist. In the monstrance, he always entrusts himself to us and asks us to be united with his Presence, with his risen Body.

4. You are a "teacher" who guides thought in a "fully human" faith. We never fail to be moved by your words, by the harmony in which each point finds its mark, in lively synthesis, especially in a time as fragmented as ours. How can we help lay people grasp this synthesis of harmony, this catholicity of faith?

We now come to the fourth question. If I have understood it correctly, but I am not sure if I have, it was: "How do we acquire a living faith, a truly Catholic faith, a faith that is practical, lively and effective?".

Faith, ultimately, is a gift. Consequently, the first condition is to let ourselves be given something, not to be self-sufficient or do everything by ourselves - because we cannot -, but to open ourselves in the awareness that the Lord truly gives.

It seems to me that this gesture of openness is also the first gesture of prayer: being open to the Lord's presence and to his gift. This is also the first step in receiving something that we do not have, that we cannot have with the intention of acquiring it all on our own.

We must make this gesture of openness, of prayer - give me faith, Lord! - with our whole being. We must enter into this willingness to accept the gift and let ourselves, our thoughts, our affections and our will, be completely immersed in this gift.

Here, I think it is very important to stress one essential point: no one believes purely on his own. We always believe in and with the Church. The Creed is always a shared act, it means letting ourselves be incorporated into a communion of progress, life, words and thought.

We do not "have" faith, in the sense that it is primarily God who gives it to us. Nor do we "have" it either, in the sense that it must not be invented by us. We must let ourselves fall, so to speak, into the communion of faith, of the Church. Believing is in itself a Catholic act. It is participation in this great certainty, which is present in the Church as a living subject.

Only in this way can we also understand Sacred Scripture in the diversity of an interpretation that develops for thousands of years. It is a Scripture because it is an element, an expression of the unique subject - the People of God -, which on its pilgrimage is always the same subject. Of

course, it is a subject that does not speak of itself, but is created by God - the classical expression is "inspired" -, a subject that receives, then translates and communicates this word. This synergy is very important.

We know that the Koran, according to the Islamic faith, is a word given verbally by God without human mediation. The Prophet is not involved. He only wrote it down and passed it on. It is the pure Word of God.

Whereas for us, God enters into communion with us, he allows us to cooperate, he creates this subject and in this subject his word grows and develops. This human part is essential and also gives us the possibility of seeing how the individual words really become God's Word only in the unity of Scripture as a whole in the living subject of the People of God.

Therefore, the first element is the gift of God; the second is the sharing in faith of the pilgrim people, the communication in the Holy Church, which for her part receives the Word of God which is the Body of Christ, brought to life by the living Word, the divine Logos.

Day after day, we must deepen our communion with the Holy Church and thus, with the Word of God. They are not two opposite things, so that I can say: I am pro-Church or I am pro-God's Word. Only when we are united in the Church, do we belong to the Church, do we become members of the Church, do we live by the Word of God which is the life-giving force of the Church. And those who live by the Word of God can only live it because it is alive and vital in the living Church.

5. Eugenio Pacelli was born in Rome on 2 March 1876 and on 2 March 1939, was elected Pope and took the name of Pius XII. This great Pope is shrouded in silence, and we are deeply indebted to this Pontiff, who also had great love for Germany. We all truly hope he will soon be raised to the honour of the altars.

The fifth intervention was on Pius XII. Thank you for your intervention. He was the Pope of my youth. We all venerated him. As was rightly said, he deeply loved the German People; he also defended them in the great catastrophe after the War. And I must add that before he was Nuncio in Berlin he was Nuncio in Munich, because at the outset there was no Papal Representation in Berlin. He was also really close to us.

This seems to me the opportunity to express gratitude to all the great Popes of the last century. The century began with St Pius X, then Benedict XV, Pius XI, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, John Paul I, John Paul II.

I believe that this is a special gift in such a difficult century with two World Wars and two destructive ideologies: Fascism-Nazism and Communism. It was in this very century, which was opposed to the faith of the Church, that the Lord gave us a series of great Popes, hence, a

spiritual inheritance that I would say historically strengthened the truth of the Primacy of the Successor of Peter.

6. The Diocese of Rome is seeking the best way and a new approach to respond to the needs of today's families. Families must be given fresh vitality, they must be made the subject rather than the object of pastoral care. In our time, the family is threatened by relativism and indifference. Parents, engaged couples and children must be assisted with catechesis and continuous guidance; they need priests expert in humanity who understand peoples' needs. Married couples must be encouraged to revive the grace of the sacraments.

The next intervention dedicated to the family was made by the parish priest of St Sylvia. Here, I cannot but fully agree. Furthermore, during the *ad limina* visits I always speak to Bishops about the family, threatened throughout the world in various ways.

The family is threatened in Africa because it is difficult to find the way from "traditional marriage" to "religious marriage", because there is a fear of finality.

Whereas in the West the fear of the child is caused by the fear of losing some part of life, in Africa it is the opposite. Until it is certain that the wife will also bear children, no one dares to enter marriage definitively. Therefore, the number of religious marriages remains relatively small, and even many "good" Christians with an excellent desire to be Christians do not take this final step.

Marriage is also threatened in Latin America, for other reasons, and is badly threatened, as we know, in the West. So it is all the more necessary for us as Church to help families, which are the fundamental cell of every healthy society.

Only in families, therefore, is it possible to create a communion of generations in which the memory of the past lives on in the present and is open to the future. Thus, life truly continues and progresses. Real progress is impossible without this continuity of life, and once again, it is impossible without the religious element. Without trust in God, without trust in Christ who in addition gives us the ability to believe and to live, the family cannot survive.

We see this today. Only faith in Christ and only sharing the faith of the Church saves the family; and on the other hand, only if the family is saved can the Church also survive. For the time being, I do not have an effective recipe for this, but it seems to me that we should always bear it in mind.

We must therefore do all that favours the family: family circles, family catechesis, and we must teach prayer in the family. This seems to me to be very important: wherever people pray together the Lord makes himself present with that power which can also dissolve "sclerosis" of the heart, that hardness of heart which, according to the Lord, is the real reason for divorce.

Nothing else, only the Lord's presence, helps us to truly relive what the Creator wanted at the outset and which the Redeemer renewed. Teach family prayer and thus invite people to pray with the Church and then seek all the other ways.

7. Hearing of a mother and some women Religious who have helped priests through a crisis prompts me to ask: why should not women also have a hand in governing the Church? Women often function charismatically, with prayer, or on a practical level, like St Catherine of Siena who obtained the Popes' return to Rome. It would be right to promote the role of women in institutions too, since their viewpoint, which is different from that of men, could help priests in decision-making.

I now reply to the parochial vicar of St Jerome's - I see that he is still very young - who tells us how much women do in the Church and for priests themselves.

I can stress that in the First Canon, the Roman Canon, the special prayer for priests: "*Nobis quoque peccatoribus*", always makes a deep impression on me. Here, in this realistic humility of priests, precisely as sinners, we pray to the Lord to help us to be his servants. In this prayer for the priest, precisely only in this prayer, seven women appear who surround the priest. They show themselves to be the believing women who help us on our way. Each one of us has certainly had this experience.

Thus, the Church has a great debt of gratitude to women. And you have correctly emphasized that at a charismatic level, women do so much, I would dare to say, for the government of the Church, starting with women Religious, with the Sisters of the great Fathers of the Church such as St Ambrose, to the great women of the Middle Ages - St Hildegard, St Catherine of Siena, then St Teresa of Avila - and lastly, Mother Teresa. I would say that this charismatic sector is undoubtedly distinguished by the ministerial sector in the strict sense of the term, but it is a true and deep participation in the government of the Church.

How could we imagine the government of the Church without this contribution, which sometimes becomes very visible, such as when St Hildegard criticized the Bishops or when St Bridget offered recommendations and St Catherine of Siena obtained the return of the Popes to Rome? It has always been a crucial factor without which the Church cannot survive.

However, you rightly say: we also want to see women more visibly in the government of the Church. We can say that the issue is this: the priestly ministry of the Lord, as we know, is reserved to men, since the priestly ministry is government in the deep sense, which, in short, means it is the Sacrament [of Orders] that governs the Church.

This is the crucial point. It is not the man who does something, but the priest governs, faithful to his mission, in the sense that it is the Sacrament, that is, through the Sacrament it is Christ himself

who governs, both through the Eucharist and in the other Sacraments, and thus Christ always presides.

However, it is right to ask whether in ministerial service - despite the fact that here Sacrament and charism are the two ways in which the Church fulfils herself - it might be possible to make more room, to give more offices of responsibility to women.

8. I am responsible for the rehabilitation of the victims of religious sects. I am grateful to you, Your Holiness, for your frequent denunciation of the harm they cause. Many simple people are unable to discover their tricks without help, like unfortunate travellers on the infamous road from Jerusalem to Jericho. Your Holiness, do you not think it is urgently necessary today to train Good Samaritans? Would not such preparation be good in the seminaries and in specific courses held at the university level and in the permanent formation of the clergy responsible for the care of souls?

I did not quite understand the words of the eighth intervention. I more or less understood that today, "humanity" on the way from Jerusalem to Jericho falls among robbers. The Good Samaritan offers assistance with the Lord's mercy.

We can only emphasize that in the end, it is man who fell and who falls again and again into the hands of robbers, and it is Christ who heals us. We must and can help him, both in the service of love and in the service of faith, which is also a ministry of love.

9. The Feast of the Holy Patrons of my parish, the Holy Martyrs of Uganda, is celebrated on 3 June. I praise God for this pastoral experience. May more people join in prayer in and for Africa.

Then, the Martyrs of Uganda. Thank you for your contribution. You remind us of the African Continent, which is the great hope of the Church.

In recent months I have received the majority of the African Bishops on their *ad limina* visits. I found it very edifying and comforting to see Bishops of a high theological and cultural standard. They are zealous Bishops, truly enlivened by the joy of faith. We know that this Church is in good hands, but that she still suffers because the nations are not yet formed.

In Europe it was precisely through Christianity that, in addition to the ethnic groups that existed, the great bodies of nations, the great languages were formed, and thus communion of cultures and places of peace, although later, these great areas of peace, in opposition to one another, created a new sort of war that had previously not existed.

However, in many parts of Africa we still have this situation where there are above all dominant ethnic groups. The colonial power then imposed boundaries within which nations now have to develop. But there is still the difficulty of finding oneself in a great mass and of discovering, in addition to the ethnic groups, the unity of democratic government as well as the possibility of

opposing forms of colonial abuse that continue. Africa still continues to be the object of abuse by the great powers, and many conflicts would not have taken this form if the interests of these great powers had not been behind them.

Thus, I have also seen how, in all this confusion, the Church with her Catholic unity is the great factor that unites in dispersion. In many situations, especially now, after the great war in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the Church has remained the one reality which functions and makes life continue, which provides the necessary assistance, guarantees coexistence and helps to find the possibility of creating one great solution.

In this sense, in these situations, the Church also carries out a service that replaces the political level, giving the possibility of living together and of rebuilding communion after destruction and of rebuilding, after the outburst of hatred, the spirit of reconciliation. Many people have told me that precisely in these situations, the Sacrament of Penance is of great importance as a force of reconciliation and must also be administered with this in view.

In a word, I wanted to say that Africa is a Continent of great hope, of great faith, of moving ecclesial realities, of zealous priests and Bishops. But it has always been a Continent which, after the destruction we brought to it from Europe, needs our brotherly help. And this cannot but be born from faith that also creates universal love, over and above human divisions.

This is our great responsibility in this epoch. Europe has exported its ideologies, its interests, but has also exported, with the mission, the factor of healing. Today, we are especially responsible for having a zealous faith that is communicated, that wants to help others, that is aware that giving faith does not mean introducing an alienating power but means giving the true gift that human beings need precisely in order to be creatures of love.

10. I see with concern the situation in Rome, especially the plight of young people and adolescents "on the fringe of humanity", many of whom do not go to church. I believe that priests, lay people and Religious should be closer to our faithful, especially youth, and we should put our charisms at the service of catechesis.

A last point was touched on by the Carmelite parochial vicar of St Teresa of Avila who has rightly revealed his worries to us.

A simple and superficial optimism which does not discern the great threats to youth, children and families today would certainly be erroneous. We must perceive with great realism these threats that come into being wherever God is absent. We must be more and more aware of our responsibility so that God will be present and thus, the hope and the ability to walk confidently towards the future.

11. Adolescents are victims of today's "desert of love" and suffer appallingly from lack of love. They suffer from the fear of being lonely and misunderstood. Some priests also feel "inwardly dislocated". How can we be experts in "agape", in the fullness of love, in order to be able to make the total gift of ourselves to help them?

I will now continue, starting with the Pontifical Academy. We can tangibly feel today all that you said about the problem of adolescents, their loneliness and their being misunderstood by adults. It is interesting that these young people who seek closeness in discotheques are actually suffering from great loneliness and, of course, also from misunderstanding.

This seems to me, in a certain sense, an expression of the fact that parents, as has been said, are largely absent from the formation of the family. And mothers too are obliged to work outside the home. Communion between them is very fragile.

Each family member lives in a world of his or her own: they are isolated in their thoughts and feelings, which are not united. The great problem of this time - in which each person, desiring to have life for himself, loses it because he is isolated and isolates the other from him - is to rediscover the deep communion which in the end can only stem from a foundation that is common to all souls, from the divine presence that unites all of us.

I think that the condition for this is to overcome loneliness and misunderstanding, because the latter also results from the fact that thought today is fragmented. Each one seeks his own way of thinking and living and there is no communication in a profound vision of life. Young people feel exposed to new horizons which previous generations do not share; therefore, continuity in the vision of the world is absent, caught up as it is in an ever more rapid succession of new inventions.

In 10 years changes have taken place which previously never occurred in 100 years. In this way worlds are really separated. I am thinking of my youth and of the "ingenuousness", if you will, in which we lived, in a society that was totally agricultural in comparison with contemporary society. We see that the world is changing at an ever faster pace, so that also with these changes it is fragmented. Therefore, at a moment of renewal and change, the element of stability becomes even more important.

I remember when the conciliar Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* was discussed. On the one hand, there was a recognition of the new, of newness, the "yes" of the Church to the new epoch with its innovations, its "no" to the romanticism of the past, a proper and necessary "no".

However, the Fathers - proof of this is also in the text - also said that in spite of this, in spite of the necessary willingness to move forward and even leave behind other things that were dear to us, there is something that does not change, because it is the human being himself, his being as a creature.

Man is not completely historical. The absolutizing of historicism, in the sense that man is only and always a creature, the product of a certain period, is not true. His nature as a creature exists, and it is precisely this that gives us the possibility to live through change and to retain our identity.

This is not an instant response to what we should do, but it seems to me that the first step should be to obtain the diagnosis. Moreover, why should this loneliness exist in a society that appears to be a society of the masses? Why should there be this lack of understanding in a society where everyone is seeking to understand one another, where communication is everything and where the transparency of all things to all people is the supreme law?

The answer lies in the fact that we see the change in our own world and do not sufficiently live that element which binds us all together, the element of our nature as creatures which becomes accessible and becomes reality in a certain history: the history of Christ, who is not against our nature as creatures but restores all that the Creator desired, as the Lord says about marriage.

Christianity precisely emphasizes history and religion as a historical event, an event in history starting with Abraham. Then, as a historical faith, after opening the door to modernity with its sense of progress and by constantly moving ahead, Christianity is at the same time a faith based on the Creator who reveals himself and makes himself present in a history to which he gives continuity, hence, communicability between souls.

Here too, therefore, I think that a faith lived in depth which is fully open to today but also fully open to God, combines the two things: respect for otherness and newness and the continuity of our being, communicability between people and between times.

The other point was: how can we live life as a gift? This is a question that we ask now, especially in Lent. We want to renew the option for life, which is, as I have said, an option not to possess ourselves but to give ourselves.

It seems to me that we can only do so by means of an ongoing conversation with the Lord and a conversation with one another. Also with "*correctio fraterna*", it is necessary to develop the gift of one's self more and more in the face of an ever insufficient capacity to live.

But, it seems to me that we must also unite both things. On the one hand, we must accept our inadequacy with humility, accept this "I" that is never perfect but always reaches for the Lord in order to arrive at communion with the Lord and with all people. This humility in accepting our own limitations is also very important.

Only in this way, on the other hand, can we also grow, develop and pray to the Lord that he will help us not to tire along the way, also accepting humbly that we will never be perfect and accepting imperfections, especially in others. By accepting our own imperfections we can more

easily accept those of others, allowing ourselves to be formed and reformed ever anew by the Lord.

12. *Holy Father, I bring you the greetings of my confreres who work in secular hospitals, of the sick and of health-care workers. We ask you for a word of encouragement to help everyone be salt, light and leaven in the health-care sector.*

Now for hospitals. Thank you for the greeting from the hospitals. I did not know of the mindset that sees a priest carrying out his ministry in a hospital because he did something wrong.... I always thought that service to the sick and the suffering was a primary service of the priest, because the Lord came above all to be with the sick. He came to share our suffering and to heal us.

On the occasion of the *ad limina* visits of the African Bishops I always say that the two pillars of our work are education - that is, the formation of the human being which involves so many dimensions, such as education, learning, professionalism, the in-depth education of the person - and healing. The fundamental, essential service of the Church is therefore that of healing. All this is done precisely in the African countries: the Church offers healing. She presents people who help the sick, help them to recover in body and soul.

It seems to me, therefore, that we should see the Lord himself as our model of the priesthood in order to heal, help, assist and accompany people on their way towards recovery. This is fundamental to the Church's commitment; it is a fundamental form of love and consequently, a fundamental expression of faith. Thus, it is also the central point in the priesthood.

13. *Last September I had the joy of taking part in an ecumenical meeting hosted by the Orthodox Patriarchate of Athens. It was a deeply enriching dialogue. I believe the clergy should avoid a conflictual attitude and establish a frank and serene dialogue with everyone.*

Then, I respond to the parochial vicar of Holy Patrons of Italy Parish who has spoken to us of the dialogue with the Orthodox and of ecumenical dialogue in general.

In today's world situation, we see that dialogue at all levels is fundamental. It is even more important for Christians not to be closed in on themselves but open.

Precisely in relations with the Orthodox I see that personal relationships are fundamental. In doctrine, we are largely united on all the fundamental matters, but it is in doctrine that it seems very difficult to make any headway. But drawing close to one another in communion, in our common experience of the life of faith, is the way to recognize one another as children of God and disciples of Christ.

And this is my experience of at least 40 or almost 50 years. This is an experience of common

discipleship, that we actually live in the same faith, in the same Apostolic Succession, with the same sacraments and therefore also with the great tradition of prayer; this diversity and multiplicity of religious cultures, of the culture of faith, is beautiful.

To have this experience is fundamental, and it perhaps seems to me that the convinced opposition to ecumenism of some, of a part of the monks of Mount Athos, stems also from the lack of a visible, tangible experience that the other also belongs to the same Christ, to the same communion with Christ in the Eucharist.

So this is very important: we must tolerate the separation that exists. St Paul says that divisions are necessary for a certain time and that the Lord knows why: to test us, to train us, to develop us, to make us more humble. But at the same time, we are obliged to move towards unity, and moving towards unity is already a form of unity.

14. Your Encyclical Deus Caritas Est has deeply enlightened me, especially Part II on pastoral charity, since it invites us to practice charity directly, not to wait for the poor to come to us but to reach out to them and do something concrete for them. However, priests find it very difficult to pass on the faith to the younger generations. Sometimes we feel somewhat let down by a young parochial vicar, yet we went to the same seminary and are only a few years older. Are we expecting too much, or is there something lacking in our formation?

Let us now turn to the spiritual director of the Seminary. The first problem was the difficulty of pastoral charity. We live it on the one hand, but on the other, I would also like to say: courage. The Church gives many thanks to God, in Africa but also in Rome and in Europe! She does so much and so many people are grateful to her, both in the area of the pastoral care of the sick and in the pastoral care of the poor and abandoned. Let us continue courageously to seek to find the best paths together.

The other point was focused on the fact that priestly formation even between close generations seems to be a little different for many people, and this complicates the common commitment to the transmission of faith. I noted this when I was Archbishop of Munich.

When we entered the seminary, we all had a common Catholic spirituality that was more or less mature. Let us say that we had a spiritual foundation in common. Seminarians now come from very different spiritual experiences. I observed at my seminary that they live on different "islands" of spirituality that had difficulties communicating.

Let us thank the Lord especially because he has given so many new impulses to the Church and also so many new forms of spiritual life, of the discovery of the riches of the faith. It is necessary above all not to neglect the common Catholic spirituality which is expressed in the Liturgy and in the great Tradition of faith. This seems to me to be very important. This point is also important with

regard to the Council.

We need not, as I said to the Roman Curia before Christmas, live the hermeneutic of discontinuity, but rather the hermeneutic of renewal, which is the spirituality of continuity, of going ahead in continuity. This seems to me to be very important also as regards the Liturgy. Let me take a concrete example that came to me this very day with today's brief meditation.

The "Statio" of today, the Thursday after Ash Wednesday, is St George. Corresponding to this soldier-saint, there were once two readings on two holy soldiers.

The first spoke of King Hezekiah, who was ill and condemned to death and who prayed to the Lord, weeping: "Give me a little more life!". And the Lord was good and granted him another 17 years of life. Hence, a beautiful healing and a soldier who could once again conduct his activities. The second is the Gospel that tells us of the official of Capernaum with his sick servant. We thus have two motives: that of the healing and that of the "militia" of Christ, of the great fight.

Now, in today's liturgy, we have two totally different Readings. We have the one from Deuteronomy: "Choose life", and the Gospel: "Take up your cross and follow Christ", which means it is not necessary to seek your own life but to give life, and this is one interpretation of what "choosing life" means.

I must say that I have always loved the Liturgy. I was truly in love with the Church's Lenten journey, with these "stational churches" and the readings linked to these churches: a geography of faith that becomes a spiritual geography of the pilgrimage with the Lord. And I was somewhat unhappy at the fact that they had taken from us this connection between the "station" and the Readings.

Today, I see that these very Readings are most beautiful and express the Lenten programme: choosing life, that is, renewing the "yes" of Baptism, which is precisely, a choice of life. In this regard there is an intimate continuity, and it seems to me that we must learn from this that it is only a fraction between discontinuity and continuity.

We must accept newness but also love continuity, and we must see the Council in this perspective of continuity. This will also help us in mediating between the generations in their way of communicating the faith.

15. There is a great lack of hope in the world today and widespread secularism. Believing in the Church and with the Church means responding to it, seeking the only thing necessary [love], as you pointed out in the Encyclical Deus Caritas Est. Contemplation is the only way to understand and love others, a simple way to being more Christian.

Lastly, the priest of the Vicariate of Rome ended with a word that I perfectly make my own so that with it we can conclude: becoming simpler. This seems to me to be a very beautiful programme. Let us seek to put it into practice and thus we will be more open to the Lord and to people.

Thank you!

© Copyright 2006 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana