



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Wednesday, 15 February 2006

On Wednesday, 15 February, prior to giving his Catechesis in the Paul VI Audience Hall, the Holy Father spoke to students from various parts of Italy and to the members of the Congregation of St John.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet you all with affection, dear students from various parts of Italy. I particularly greet the students and teachers of the *Schools of Ostia Lido*, of the *Institute of the Sacred Heart* in Caserta and of Rome's *St Dorothy Institute*.

Dear friends, you certainly have heard that my first Encyclical has recently been published. Its title is *Deus Caritas Est*. In it I wanted to recall that God's love is the source and motive of our true joy. I ask each one of you to understand ever better and to accept this Love, which changes life and makes you credible witnesses of the Gospel. You will thus become true friends of Jesus and his faithful apostles.

We must make the tenderness of God's Heart felt, especially by the weakest and neediest people; and do not forget that in spreading divine love, each one of us makes a contribution to building a more just and supportive world.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am glad to greet the members and friends of the Congregation of St John, accompanied by the Priors General and Fr Marie-Dominique Philippe, on the occasion of its 30th anniversary. May your pilgrimage be a time of renewal. And may you take care to verify your experience in order to draw from it all that it teaches, and to carry out an ever deeper discernment of the vocations that present themselves and the missions to which you are called, in trusting collaboration with the Pastors of the local Churches. May the Lord lead you to grow in holiness with the help of Mary and of his beloved disciple.

Let us end our meeting by reciting the prayer of the *Our Father*.

Magnificat

"My soul glorifies the Lord"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

1. We have now arrived at the final destination of the long journey begun exactly five years ago in Spring 2001, by my beloved Predecessor, the unforgettable Pope John Paul II. In his Catecheses, the great Pope wanted to cover the whole sequence of the Psalms and Canticles that constitute the fundamental prayerful fabric of the Liturgy of Lauds and Vespers. Having now reached the end of this pilgrimage through the texts, similar to a stroll in a garden filled with flowers of praise, invocation, prayer and contemplation, let us now make room for that *Canticle* which seals in spirit every celebration of Vespers: the *Magnificat* (Lk 1: 46-55).

It is a canticle that reveals in filigree the spirituality of the biblical *anawim*, that is, of those faithful who not only recognize themselves as "poor" in the detachment from all idolatry of riches and power, but also in the profound humility of a heart emptied of the temptation to pride and open to the bursting in of the divine saving grace. Indeed, the whole *Magnificat*, which we have just heard the Sistine Chapel Choir sing, is marked by this "humility", in Greek *tapeinosis*, which indicates a situation of material humility and poverty.

2. The first part of the Marian canticle (cf. Lk 1: 46-50) is a sort of solo voice that rises to Heaven to reach the Lord. The constant resonance of the first person should be noted: "My soul... my spirit... my Saviour... has done great things for me... [they] will call me blessed...". So it is that the soul of the prayer is the celebration of the divine grace which has burst into the heart and life of Mary, making her Mother of the Lord. We hear the Virgin's own voice speaking of her Saviour who has done great things in her soul and body.

The intimate structure of her prayerful canticle, therefore, is praise, thanksgiving and grateful joy.

But this personal witness is neither solitary nor intimistic, purely individualistic, because the Virgin Mother is aware that she has a mission to fulfil for humanity and her experience fits into the history of salvation.

She can thus say: "And his mercy is on those who fear him from generation to generation" (v. 50). With this praise of the Lord, Our Lady gives a voice to all redeemed creatures, who find in her "fiat", and thus in the figure of Jesus, born of the Virgin, the mercy of God.

3. It is at this point that the second poetic and spiritual part of the *Magnificat* unfolds (cf. vv. 51-55). It has a more choral tone, almost as if the voices of the whole community of the faithful were associated with Mary's voice, celebrating God's amazing decision.

In the original Greek of Luke's Gospel, we have seven aorist verbs that indicate the same number of actions which the Lord carries out repeatedly in history: "He has shown strength... he has scattered the proud... he has put down the mighty... he has exalted those of low degree... he has filled the hungry with good things... the rich he has sent empty away... he has helped... Israel".

In these seven divine acts, the "style" that inspires the behaviour of the Lord of history stands out: he takes the part of the lowly. His plan is one that is often hidden beneath the opaque context of human events that see "the proud, the mighty and the rich" triumph.

Yet his secret strength is destined in the end to be revealed, to show who God's true favourites are: "Those who fear him", faithful to his words: "those of low degree", "the hungry", "his servant Israel"; in other words, the community of the People of God who, like Mary, consist of people who are "poor", pure and simple of heart. It is that "little flock" which is told not to fear, for the Lord has been pleased to give it his Kingdom (cf. Lk 12: 32). And this Canticle invites us to join the tiny flock and the true members of the People of God in purity and simplicity of heart, in God's love.

4. Let us therefore accept the invitation that St Ambrose, the great Doctor of the Church, addresses to us in his commentary on the text of the *Magnificat*: "May Mary's soul be in each one to magnify the Lord, may Mary's spirit be in each one to rejoice in God; if, according to the flesh, the Mother of Christ is one alone, according to the faith all souls bring forth Christ; each, in fact, welcomes the Word of God within.... Mary's soul magnifies the Lord and her spirit rejoices in God because, consecrated in soul and spirit to the Father and to the Son, she adores with devout affection one God, from whom come all things and only one Lord, by virtue of whom all things exist" (*Exposition of the Holy Gospel according to Saint Luke, 2: 26-27: SAEMO, XI, Milan-Rome, 1978, p. 169*).

In this marvellous commentary on the *Magnificat* by St Ambrose, I am always especially moved by the surprising words: "If, according to the flesh the Mother of Christ is one alone, according to the faith all souls bring forth Christ: indeed, each one intimately welcomes the Word of God". Thus,

interpreting Our Lady's very words, the Holy Doctor invites us to ensure that the Lord can find a dwelling place in our own souls and lives. Not only must we carry him in our hearts, but we must bring him to the world, so that we too can bring forth Christ for our epoch. Let us pray the Lord to help us praise him with Mary's spirit and soul, and to bring Christ back to our world.

To special groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am happy to offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience. I extend particular greetings to the groups from England, Ireland, Denmark, Norway and the United States of America. May your time in Rome strengthen your faith and renew your love for the Lord and his Blessed Mother. May God bless you all!

I now offer a cordial welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. I first address an affectionate thought to the Maestro, Mons. Giuseppe Liberto and the Sistine Chapel Choir, present today at the end of the series of Catecheses commenting on the Psalms and Canticles that make up the Liturgy of the Hours. They sang the *Magnificat* for us superbly.

Dear friends, I would like to express to you my grateful appreciation for your service during the liturgical celebrations at which the Successor of Peter presides; I am especially grateful to you for having enlivened the General Audiences with song. Thank you for everything.

I then greet you, dear Bishops who are taking part in the 30th Congress organized by the Focolare Movement, and I encourage you to increasingly deepen the authentic spirituality of communion that must distinguish the priestly and episcopal ministry.

I also greet you, participants in the General Chapter of the Oblates of St Joseph, and I hope that you and your Religious Family will persevere generously in your service to Christ and to the Church, following faithfully in the footsteps of the Founder, Bl. Bishop Joseph Marelli.

Lastly, I greet the *sick people* and the *newly-weds*. Yesterday, we celebrated the Feast of Sts Cyril and Methodius, Apostles to the Slavs and the first to spread the faith among the Slav Peoples. May their witness also help you to be apostles of the Gospel and a leaven of authentic renewal in your personal, family and social life.

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