



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 2 August 2006

Special catechesis for the European Pilgrimage of Altar Servers

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Thank you for your welcome! I greet you all with great affection. After an interval, due to my stay in the Aosta Valley, today I am resuming the General Audiences. And I am starting with a truly special Audience, because I have the joy of welcoming the large European Pilgrimage of Altar Servers. Dear boys and girls and young people, welcome! Since most of the Altar Servers who have gathered in this Square today are German-speaking, I will first address them in my mother-tongue.

Dear Altar Servers,

I am pleased that my first Audience after my holiday in the Alps is with you Altar Servers, and I greet each one of you with affection. I thank your Pastor, Auxiliary Bishop Martin Gächter of Basle, for the words with which, as President of *Coetus Internationalis Ministrantium*, he introduced the Audience, and I am grateful for the scarf, thanks to which I am once again an altar boy. In 1935, more than 70 years ago, I began as an altar boy; consequently, it has been a long journey on this path.

I cordially greet Cardinal Christoph Schönborn who celebrated Holy Mass for you yesterday, and the many Bishops and priests who have come from Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Hungary.

I would like to offer you, dear Altar Servers - briefly, since it is hot - a message that can accompany you throughout your life and your service in the Church.

I would therefore like to resume the subject I have been addressing at the Catecheses in recent months. Perhaps some of you know that at the Wednesday General Audiences I am presenting the figures of the Apostles. First came Simon, whom the Lord called Peter, his brother Andrew, then another pair of brothers, St James known as "the Greater", the first martyr among the Apostles, and John the theologian and Evangelist, then James called "the Lesser".

I am planning to continue my presentation of the individual Apostles at the next Audiences, in which the Church, so to speak, becomes personal.

Today, however, we are reflecting on a common subject: on what kind of people the Apostles were.

In short, we might say that they were "friends" of Jesus. This is what he himself called them at the Last Supper, saying to them: "no longer do I call you servants... but... friends" (Jn 15: 15).

They were, and were able to be, apostles and witnesses of Christ because they were close to him. They were united to him by a bond of love, brought to life by the Holy Spirit.

In this perspective, we can understand the theme of your pilgrimage: "*Spiritus vivificat*". It is the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, who gives life. It is he who gives life to your relationship with Jesus, in such a way that it becomes not only exterior: "we know that he existed and that he is present in the Sacrament", but he makes it become an intimate, profound and truly personal friendship which can give meaning to each one of your lives. And since you know him and know him in friendship, you will be able to witness to him and take him to others.

Today, seeing you here before me in St Peter's Square, I think of the Apostles and I hear Jesus' voice saying to you: I do not call you servants but friends; abide in my love and you will bear an abundance of fruit (cf. Jn 15: 9, 16).

I ask you to listen to this voice! Christ did not only say this 2,000 years ago; he is alive and saying it to you now. Listen to his voice with great openness; he has something to say to each one. Perhaps he is saying to some of you: "I want you to serve me in a special way as a priest, thus becoming my witness, being my friend and introducing others into this friendship".

Listen faithfully, therefore, to Jesus' voice. Each person's vocation is different, but Christ wants to make friends with everyone, just as he did with Simon, whom he called Peter, with Andrew, James, John and the other Apostles.

He has given you his word and continues to give it to you, so that you may know the truth, know how things truly are for human beings, and thus, so that you know how one ought to live in the right way, how one ought to face life so that it may become true. Thus, each of you, in your own way, will be able to be his disciples and apostles.

Dear Altar Servers, you are, in fact, already apostles of Jesus! When you take part in the Liturgy by carrying out your altar service, you offer a witness to all. Your absorption, the devotion that wells up from your heart and is expressed in gestures, in song, in the responses: if you do it correctly and not absent-mindedly, then in a certain way your witness is one that moves people.

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the bond of friendship with Jesus. You are very close to Jesus in the Eucharist, and this is the most important sign of his friendship for each one of us. Do not forget it.

This is why I am asking you not to take this gift for granted so that it does not become a sort of habit, knowing how it works and doing it automatically; rather, discover every day anew that something important happens, that the living God is among us and that you can be close to him and help him so that his mystery is celebrated and reaches people.

If you do not give into habit, if you put your innermost self into carrying out your service, then you will truly be his apostles and bear fruits of goodness and service in every context of your life: in the family, at school, in your free time.

Take to one and all that love which you receive in the Liturgy, especially to places where you realize that they lack love, where they do not receive goodness, where they suffer and are lonely.

With the power of the Holy Spirit, try to take Jesus to those very people who are outcast, who are not very popular or have problems. With the power of the Holy Spirit, it is precisely there that you must take Jesus.

In this way, the Bread you see broken upon the altar will be shared and multiplied even more, and you, like the Twelve Apostles, will help Jesus distribute it to the people of today in their different walks of life.

So it is, dear Altar Servers, that my last words to you are: May you always be friends and apostles of Jesus Christ!

And I now move on to the other languages....

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims here today, including the groups from Scotland and Ireland, Asia, Norway and the United States. A special greeting to the English-speaking Altar Servers present: by serving at Mass, may you come ever closer to Christ our Lord. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant Blessings.

I now address a special greeting to the *sick* and the *newly-weds* who are present today. May Christ's love always be for you, dear *sick people*, a source of comfort and peace; and may it help you, dear *newly-weds*, to make your union stronger and deeper every day.

APPEAL FOR PEACE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Lastly, I invite everyone to continue to pray for the beloved and tormented region of the Middle East.

Our eyes are filled with chilling images of the mangled corpses of so many people, especially children - I am thinking in particular of Cana, in Lebanon.

I would like to repeat that nothing can justify the shedding of innocent blood, wherever it may occur!

With my heart full of grief, I renew once again a pressing appeal for the immediate cessation of all hostilities and all violence, as I urge the international community and those who are more directly involved in this tragedy to create the conditions for a definitive political solution to the crisis that can pass on to the generations to come a more peaceful and secure future.

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