



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Saint Peter's Square*  
*Wednesday, 14 April 2010*

***Munus docendi***

*Dear Friends,*

In this Easter Season that brings us to Pentecost and also ushers us into the celebrations for the closure of the [Year for Priests](#), scheduled for this coming 9-11 June, I am eager to devote a few more reflections to the topic of the ordained Ministry, elaborating on the fruitful realities of the priest's configuration to Christ the Head in the exercise of the *tria munera* that he receives: namely, the three offices of teaching, sanctifying and governing.

In order to understand what it means for the priest to act *in persona Christi Capitis* in the person of Christ the Head and to realize what consequences derive from the duty of representing the Lord, especially in the exercise of these three offices, it is necessary first of all to explain what "representation" means. The priest represents Christ. What is implied by "representing" someone? In ordinary language it usually means being delegated by someone to be present in his place, to speak and act in his stead because the person he represents is absent from the practical action. Let us ask ourselves: does the priest represent the Lord in this way? The answer is no, because in the Church Christ is never absent, the Church is his living Body and he is the Head of the Church, present and active within her. Christ is never absent, on the contrary he is present in a way that is untrammelled by space and time through the event of the Resurrection that we contemplate in a special way in this Easter Season.

Therefore the priest, who acts *in persona Christi Capitis* and representing the Lord, never acts in the name of someone who is absent but, rather, in the very Person of the Risen Christ, who makes himself present with his truly effective action. He really acts today and brings about what the priest would be incapable of: the consecration of the wine and the bread so that they may really be the Lord's presence, the absolution of sins. The Lord makes his own action present in the person who carries out these gestures. These three duties of the priest which Tradition has identified in the Lord's different words about mission: teaching, sanctifying and governing in their difference and in their deep unity are a specification of this effective representation. In fact, they are the three actions of the Risen Christ, the same that he teaches today, in the Church and in the world. Thereby he creates faith, gathers together his people, creates the presence of truth and really builds the communion of the universal Church; and sanctifies and guides.

The first duty of which I wish to speak today is the *munus docendi*, that is, the task of teaching. Today, in the midst of the educational emergency, the *munus docendi* of the Church, exercised concretely through the ministry of each priest, is particularly important. We are very confused about the fundamental choices in our life and question what the world is, where it comes from, where we are going, what we must do in order to do good, how we should live and what the truly pertinent values are. Regarding all this, there are numerous contrasting philosophies that come into being and disappear, creating confusion about the fundamental decisions on how to live; because collectively we no longer know from what and for what we have been made and where we are going. In this context the words of the Lord who took pity on the throng because the people were like sheep without a shepherd came true (cf. Mk 6: 34). The Lord had noticed this when he saw the thousands of people following him in the desert because, in the diversity of the currents of that time, they no longer knew what the true meaning of Scripture was, what God was saying. The Lord, moved by compassion, interpreted God's word, he himself is the Word of God, and thus provided an orientation. This is the function *in persona Christi* of the priest: making present, in the confusion and bewilderment of our times, the light of God's Word, the light that is Christ himself in this our world. Therefore the priest does not teach his own ideas, a philosophy that he himself has invented, that he has discovered or likes; the priest does not speak of himself, he does not speak for himself, to attract admirers, perhaps, or create a party of his own; he does not say his own thing, his own inventions but, in the medley of all the philosophies, the priest teaches in the name of Christ present, he proposes the truth that is Christ himself, his word and his way of living and of moving ahead. What Christ said of himself applies to the priest: "My teaching is not mine" (Jn 7: 16); Christ, that is, does not propose himself but, as the Son he is the voice, the Word of the Father. The priest too must always speak and act in this way: "My teaching is not mine, I do not spread my own ideas or what I like, but I am the mouthpiece and heart of Christ and I make present this one, shared teaching that has created the universal Church and creates eternal life".

This fact, namely that the priest does not invent, does not create or proclaim his own ideas, since the teaching he announces is not his own but Christ's does not mean, however, that he is neutral, as if he were a spokesman reading a text that he does not, perhaps, make his own. In this case

to the model of Christ who said: "I do not come from myself and I do not live for myself but I come from the Father and live for the Father" applies. Therefore, in this profound identification, Christ's teaching is that of the Father and he himself is one with the Father. The priest who proclaims Christ's word, the faith of the Church, and not his own ideas, must also say: "I do not live by myself and for myself, but I live with Christ and by Christ and therefore all that Christ said to us becomes my word even if it is not mine". The priest's life must be identified with Christ and, in this manner, the word that is not his own becomes, nevertheless, a profoundly personal word. On this topic St Augustine, speaking of priests said: "And as for us, what are we? Ministers (of Christ), his servants; for what we distribute to you is not ours but we take it from his store. And we too live of it, because we are servants like you" (*Sermo 229/E*, 4).

The teaching that the priest is called to offer, the truth of the faith, must be internalized and lived in an intense personal and spiritual process so that the priest really enters into a profound inner communion with Christ himself. The priest believes, accepts and seeks to live, first of all as his own, all that the Lord taught and that the Church has passed on in that process of identification with his own ministry of which St John Mary Vianney is an exemplary witness (cf. *Letter for the inauguration of the Year for Priests*). "For in charity itself we are all listening to him, who is our One Master in heaven" (*En. in Ps 131: 1, 7*).

Consequently the priest's voice may often seem to be "the voice of one crying in the wilderness" (Mk 1: 3), but his prophetic power consists precisely in this: in never being conformist, in never conforming to any dominant culture or mindset but, rather, in showing the one newness that can bring about an authentic and profound renewal of the human being, that is, that Christ is the Living One, he is the close God, the God who works in the life and for the life of the world and gives us the truth, the way to live.

In the careful preparation of Sunday preaching, without excluding weekday preaching, in imparting catechetical formation in schools, in academic institutions and, in a special way, through that unwritten book which is his own life, the priest is always an "educator", he teaches; yet not with the presumption of one who imposes his own truth but on the contrary with the humble, glad certainty of someone who has encountered the Truth, who has been grasped and transformed by it, hence cannot but proclaim it. In fact, no one can choose the priesthood on his own, it is not a means of obtaining security in life or achieving a social position: no one can give it to him nor can he seek it by himself. The priesthood is the response to the Lord's call, to his will, in order to become a herald of his truth, not a personal truth but of his truth.

Dear brother priests, the Christian people ask to hear from our teachings the genuine ecclesial doctrine, through which they can renew their encounter with Christ who gives joy, peace and salvation. In this regard Sacred Scripture, the writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* are indispensable reference points in the exercise of the *munus docendi*, so essential for conversion, the development of faith and the salvation of

humankind. "Priestly ordination... means... to be immersed in the Truth" (*Homily at the Chrism Mass*, Holy Thursday, 9 April 2009), that Truth which is not merely a concept or a collection of ideas to be assimilated and passed on but, rather, is the Person of Christ with whom, for whom and in whom to live and thus, necessarily, the timeliness and comprehensibility of the proclamation are also born. Only this knowledge of a Truth that became a Person in the Incarnation of the Son justifies the missionary mandate: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (Mk 16: 15). Only if it is the Truth is it intended for every creature, it is not the imposition of some thing but openness of heart to what the creature has been created for.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the Lord has entrusted a great task to priests: to be heralds of his word, of the Truth that saves; to be his voice in the world to bring what serves the true good of souls and the authentic path of faith (cf. 1 Cor 6: 12). May St John Mary Vianney be an example to all priests. He was a man of great wisdom and heroic fortitude in resisting the cultural and social pressures of his time in order to lead souls to God: simplicity, fidelity and immediacy were the essential features of his preaching, the transparency of his faith and of his holiness. The Christian People was edified by him and as happens for genuine teachers in every epoch recognized in him the light of the Truth. In him it recognized, ultimately, what should always be recognizable in a priest: the voice of the Good Shepherd.

## To Special Groups

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Finland, Norway, Sweden, Korea, Canada and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Christ!

Lastly, I address the *young people*, the *sick*, and the *newlyweds*. May the joy of the Risen Lord inspire fresh ardour in your lives, dear *young people*, so that you may be faithful disciples; may it be an encouragement to you, dear *sick people*, so that you may courageously face every trial and suffering; may it sustain your mutual love, dear *newlyweds*, so that in your home the peace of Christ may always prevail.

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## Appeal for China

My thoughts turn to China and to the people hit by a severe earthquake that has claimed a heavy

toll of human life, causing injuries and immense damage. I pray for the victims and I am spiritually close to the people tried by such a serious disaster; I implore for them from God relief in their suffering and courage in such adversity. I hope that they will not be left without the solidarity of all.

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