



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 5 May 2010

Munus sanctificandi

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Sunday, on my [Pastoral Visit to Turin](#), I had the joy of pausing in prayer before the Holy Shroud, joining the more than two million pilgrims who have been able to contemplate it during the solemn Exposition of these days. That sacred Cloth can nourish and foster faith and reinvigorate Christian devotion because it is an incentive to go to the Face of Christ, to the Body of the Crucified and Risen Christ, to contemplate the Paschal Mystery, the heart of the Christian Message. We, dear Brothers and Sisters, are living members of the Body of the Risen Christ, alive and active in history (cf. Rom 12: 5), each one in accordance with the role, that is, the task the Lord has wished to entrust to each one of us. Today, in this *Catechesis*, I would like to return to the specific tasks of priests, which tradition claims are essentially three: teaching, sanctifying and governing. In one of our previous Catecheses I spoke on the first of these three duties: teaching, the proclamation of the truth, the proclamation of God revealed in Christ or, in other words the prophetic task of putting the person in touch with the truth, of helping him to know the essential of his life, of reality itself.

Today I would like to reflect with you briefly on the priest's second duty, that of sanctifying people, above all through the sacraments and the worship of the Church. Here we must ask ourselves first of all: what does the word "Holy" mean? The answer is: "Holy" is God's specific quality of being,

namely, absolute truth, goodness, love, beauty pure light. Thus sanctifying a person means putting him or her in touch with God, with this being light, truth, pure love. It is obvious that such contact transforms the person. The ancients had this firm conviction: no one can see God without dying instantly. The power of truth and light is too great! If the human being touches this absolute current, he cannot survive. On the other hand there is also the conviction: without a minimal contact with God man cannot live. Truth, goodness and love are fundamental conditions of his being. The question is: how can man find that contact with God, which is fundamental, without dying overpowered by the greatness of his divine being? The Church's faith tells us that God himself creates this contact that gradually transforms us into true images of God.

Thus we have once again arrived at the priest's task of "sanctifying". No man on his own, relying on his own power, can put another in touch with God. An essential part of the priest's grace is the gift, the task of creating this contact. This is achieved in the proclamation of God's word in which his light comes to meet us. It is achieved in a particularly concentrated manner in the Sacraments. Immersion in the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ takes place in Baptism, is reinforced in Confirmation and Reconciliation and is nourished by the Eucharist, a sacrament that builds the Church as the People of God, Body of Christ, Temple of the Holy Spirit (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Gregis*, n. 32). Thus it is Christ himself who makes us holy, that is, who draws us into God's sphere. However, as an act of his infinite mercy, he calls some "to be" with him (cf. Mk 3: 14) and to become, through the Sacrament of Orders, despite their human poverty, sharers in his own priesthood, ministers of this sanctification, stewards of his mysteries, "bridges" to the encounter with him and of his mediation between God and man and between man and God (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5).

In recent decades there have been tendencies that aim to give precedence, in the priest's identity and mission, to the dimension of proclamation, detaching it from that of sanctification; it is often said that it would be necessary to go beyond a merely sacramental pastoral ministry. Yet, is it possible to exercise the priestly ministry authentically by "going beyond" the sacramental ministry? What exactly does it mean for priests to evangelize, in what does the professed "primacy of proclamation" consist? As the Gospels report, Jesus says that the proclamation of the Kingdom of God is the goal of his mission; this proclamation, however, is not only a "discourse" but at the same time includes his action; the signs and miracles that Jesus works show that the Kingdom comes as a present reality and in the end coincides with his very Person, with his gift of himself, as we heard today in the Gospel Reading. And the same applies for the ordained ministry: he, the priest, represents Christ, the One sent by the Father, he continues his mission, through the "word" and the "sacrament", in this totality of body and soul, of sign and word. Referring to priests in a letter to Bishop Honoratus of Thiabe, St Augustine says: "Let those, therefore, who are servants of Christ, his ministers in word and sacrament, do what he has commanded or permitted" (Letter 228, 2). It is necessary to reflect on whether, in some cases, having underestimated the faithful exercise of the *munus sanctificandi* might not have represented a weakening of faith itself in the salvific efficacy of the sacraments, and ultimately in the actual action of Christ and of his Spirit,

through the Church, in the world.

Who, therefore, saves the world and man? The only answer we can give is: Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ, Crucified and Risen. And where is the Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ that brings about salvation? In Christ's action through the Church, and in particular in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which makes the redemptive sacrificial offering of the Son of God present in the sacrament of Reconciliation in which from the death of sin one returns to new life, and in every other sacramental act of sanctification (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 5). It is therefore important to encourage an appropriate catechesis to help the faithful understand the value of the sacraments; but it is likewise necessary, after the example of the Holy Curé d'Ars, to be available, generous and attentive in giving the brothers and sisters the treasures of grace that God has placed in our hands, and of which we are not the "masters" but rather caretakers and stewards. Especially in this time of ours, in which, on the one hand it seems that faith is weakening, and, on the other, a profound need and a widespread quest for spirituality are emerging, it is essential that every priest remember that in his mission the missionary proclamation and worship and the sacraments are never separate and encourage a healthy sacramental ministry, to form the People of God and to help it experience to the full the Liturgy, the Church's worship and the sacraments as freely given gifts of God, free and effective gestures of his saving action.

As I recalled in the Holy Chrism Mass this year: "At the centre of the Church's worship is the notion of 'sacrament'. This means that it is not primarily we who act, but God comes first to meet us through his action, he looks upon us and he leads us to himself... God touches us through material things... that he takes up into his service, making them instruments of the encounter between us and himself" (*Chrism Mass*, 1 April 2010). The truth according to which in the Sacrament "it is not primarily we who act" (*ibid.*), also concerns and must concern priestly awareness: each priest knows well that he is an instrument necessary to God's saving action but also that he is always only an instrument. This awareness must make priests humble and generous in the administration of the Sacraments, in respect of the canonical norms, but also in the deep conviction that their mission is to ensure that all people, united to Christ, may offer themselves to God as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to him (cf. Rom 12: 1). St John Mary Vianney, once again, is exemplary with regard to the *munus sanctificandi* and the correct interpretation of the sacramental ministry; one day, to a man who was saying that he had no faith and wished to ask him about it, the parish priest answered: "Oh! My friend, you are not really speaking to the right person, I do not know how to reason... but if you need some comfort, sit there... (and he pointed to the ever present stool in the confessional) and believe me, many others have sat there before you and have had nothing to regret" (cf. Monnin, A., *Il Curato d'Ars, Vita di Gian-Battista-Maria Vianney*, Vol. I, Turin 1870, pp. 163-164).

Dear priests, experience the Liturgy and worship with joy and love: it is an action which the Risen One carries out with the power of the Holy Spirit in us, with us and for us. I would like to renew the invitation made recently to "return to the confessional as a place in which to celebrate the

Sacrament of Reconciliation, but also as a place in which "to dwell" more often, so that the faithful may find compassion, advice and comfort, feel that they are loved and understood by God and experience the presence of Divine Mercy beside the Real Presence in the Eucharist" (*Address to participants in the course on the Internal Forum organized by the Apostolic Penitentiary*, 11 March 2010). And I would also like to ask each priest to celebrate and to live intensely the Eucharist which is at the heart of the duty of sanctifying; it is Jesus who wants to be with us, to live in us, to give himself to us, to show us God's infinite mercy and tenderness; it is the one sacrifice of the love of Christ who makes himself present, who makes himself real among us and arrives at the throne of Grace, at God's presence... embraces humanity... and unites us with him (cf. *Discourse to the Parish Priests of the Diocese of Rome*, 18 February 2010). And the priest is called to be a minister of this great Mystery, in the Sacrament and in life. If "the great ecclesial tradition has rightly separated sacramental efficacy from the concrete existential situation of the individual priest and so the legitimate expectations of the faithful are appropriately safeguarded", this correct doctrinal explanation takes nothing "from the necessary, indeed indispensable aspiration to moral perfection that must dwell in every authentically priestly heart": there is also an example of faith and the testimony of holiness, that the People of God rightly expect from its Pastors (cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for the Clergy*, 16 March 2009). And it is in the celebration of the Holy Mysteries that the priest finds the root of his holiness (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, nn. 12-13).

Dear Friends, may you be aware of the great gift that priests are for the Church and for the world; through their ministry the Lord continues to save men, to make himself present, to sanctify. May you be able to thank God and above all be close to your priests with prayer and support, especially in difficulty, so that there may be more and more Pastors in accordance with the Heart of God. Many thanks.

To Special Groups

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I offer a cordial welcome to the English-speaking visitors and pilgrims present at today's Audience. My warm greetings go to the teachers and students of the Institute of St Joseph in Copenhagen. Upon all of you, including those from England, Scotland, Canada, Indonesia and the United States of America, I invoke Almighty God's Blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear young people, especially you students from Palermo, with your priest you witness to faith in Jesus Christ who calls you to build his Church together with your Pastors, each in accordance with his own responsibility. May you respond generously to his invitation. Dear *sick people*, you too are here today to make an act of faith and of ecclesial communion. If the daily burden of your sufferings is offered to Jesus Christ

Crucified, it gives you the possibility to cooperate in your own and the world's salvation. and also you, dear *newlyweds*, with your union you are called to be an expression of love that binds Christ to the Church. May you always be aware of the lofty mission to which you are bound by the Sacrament you have received.

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I send cordial greetings to all who will be taking part in the Congress on the Family in Jönköping, Sweden, later this month. Your message to the world is truly a message of joy, because God's gift to us of marriage and family life enables us to experience something of the infinite love that unites the three divine persons – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Human beings, made in the image and likeness of God, are made for love – indeed at the core of our being, we long to love and to be loved in return. Only God's love can fully satisfy our deepest needs, and yet through the love of husband and wife, the love of parents and children, the love of siblings for one another, we are offered a foretaste of the boundless love that awaits us in the life to come. Marriage is truly an instrument of salvation, not only for married people but for the whole of society. Like any truly worthwhile goal, it places demands upon us, it challenges us, it calls us to be prepared to sacrifice our own interests for the good of the other. It requires us to exercise tolerance and to offer forgiveness. It invites us to nurture and protect the gift of new life. Those of us fortunate enough to be born into a stable family discover there the first and most fundamental school for virtuous living and the qualities of good citizenship. I encourage all of you in your efforts to promote a proper understanding and appreciation of the inestimable good that marriage and family life offer to human society. May God bless all of you.

Appeal to participants in the UN Conference on nuclear weapons

On 3 May in New York, work began at the Eighth Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference. Progress toward a collaborative and secure nuclear disarmament is closely connected with the full and rapid fulfilment of the relevant international commitments. Peace, in fact, rests on trust and on respect for assumed obligations, not only on the balance of power. In this spirit, I encourage the initiatives that pursue a progressive disarmament and the creation of nuclear-free zones, with a view to their complete elimination from the planet. Finally, I appeal to all the participants in the meeting in New York to break away from the trends of the past and to patiently construct political and economic grounds for peace, in order to support integral human development and the authentic hopes of all Peoples.

