



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 7 March 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the preceding series of Catecheses I have spoken of Jesus' prayer and I would not like to conclude this reflection without briefly considering the topic of Jesus' silence, so important in his relationship with God.

In the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, I spoke of the role that silence plays in Jesus' life, especially on Golgotha: "here we find ourselves before 'the word of the cross' (cf. 1 Cor 1:18). The word is muted; it becomes mortal silence, for it has 'spoken' exhaustively, holding back nothing of what it had to tell us" (n. 12). Before this silence of the Cross, St Maximus the Confessor puts this phrase on the lips of the Mother of God: "Wordless is the Word of the Father, who made every creature which speaks, lifeless are the eyes of the one at whose word and whose nod all living things move!" (*Life of Mary*, n. 89: *Testi mariani del primo millennio*, 2, Rome, 1989, p. 253).

The Cross of Christ does not only demonstrate Jesus' silence as his last word to the Father but reveals that God also *speaks* through *silence*: "the silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the Incarnate Word. Hanging from the wood of the cross, he lamented the suffering caused by that silence: 'My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?' (Mk 15:34; Mt 27:46). Advancing in obedience to his very last breath, in the obscurity of death, Jesus called upon the Father. He commended himself to

him at the moment of passage, through death, to eternal life: ‘Father, into your hands I commend my spirit’ (Lk 23:46)” (Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Verbum Domini*, n. 21).

Jesus’ experience on the cross profoundly reveals the situation of the person praying and the culmination of his prayer: having heard and recognized the word of God, we must also come to terms with the silence of God, an important expression of the same divine Word.

The dynamic of words and silence which marks Jesus’ prayer throughout his earthly existence, especially on the cross, also touches our own prayer life in two directions.

The first is the one that concerns the acceptance of the word of God. Inward and outward silence are necessary if we are to be able to hear this word. And in our time this point is particularly difficult for us. In fact, ours is an era that does not encourage recollection; indeed, one sometimes gets the impression that people are frightened of being cut off, even for an instant, from the torrent of words and images that mark and fill the day.

It was for this reason that in the above mentioned Exhortation *Verbum Domini* I recalled our need to learn the value of silence: “Rediscovering the centrality of God’s word in the life of the Church also means rediscovering a sense of recollection and inner repose. The great patristic tradition teaches us that the mysteries of Christ all involve silence. Only in silence can the word of God find a home in us, as it did in Mary, woman of the word and, inseparably, woman of silence” (n. 66). This principle — that without silence one does not hear, does not listen, does not receive a word — applies especially to personal prayer as well as to our liturgies: to facilitate authentic listening, they must also be rich in moments of silence and of non-verbal reception.

St Augustine’s observation is still valid: *Verbo crescente, verba deficiunt* “when the word of God increases, the words of men fail” (cf. *Sermo* 288, 5: pl 38, 1307; *Sermo* 120, 2: pl 38, 677). The Gospels often present Jesus, especially at times of crucial decisions, withdrawing to lonely places, away from the crowds and even from the disciples in order to pray in silence and to live his filial relationship with God. Silence can carve out an inner space in our very depths to enable God to dwell there, so that his word will remain within us and love for him take root in our minds and hearts and inspire our life. Hence the first direction: relearning silence, openness to listening, which opens us to the other, to the word of God.

However, there is also a second important connection between silence and prayer. Indeed it is not only our silence that disposes us to listen to the word of God; in our prayers we often find we are confronted by God’s silence, we feel, as it were, let down, it seems to us that God neither listens nor responds. Yet God’s silence, as happened to Jesus, does not indicate his absence. Christians know well that the Lord is present and listens, even in the darkness of pain, rejection and loneliness.

Jesus reassures his disciples and each one of us that God is well acquainted with our needs at every moment of our life. He teaches the disciples: “In praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him” (Mt 6:7-8): an attentive, silent and open heart is more important than many words. God knows us in our inmost depths, better than we ourselves, and loves us; and knowing this must suffice.

In the Bible Job’s experience is particularly significant in this regard. In a short time this man lost everything: relatives, possessions, friends and health. It truly seems that God’s attitude to him was one of abandonment, of total silence. Yet in his relationship with God, Job speaks to God, cries out to God; in his prayers, in spite of all, he keeps his faith intact, and in the end, discovers the value of his experience and of God’s silence. And thus he can finally conclude, addressing the Creator: “I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you” (Job 42:5): almost all of us know God only through hearsay and the more open we are to his silence and to our own silence, the more we truly begin to know him.

This total trust that opens us to the profound encounter with God developed in silence. St Francis Xavier prayed to the Lord saying: I do not love you because you can give me paradise or condemn me to hell, but because you are my God. I love you because You are You.

As we reach the end of the reflections on Jesus’ prayer, certain teachings of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* spring to mind: “The drama of prayer is fully revealed to us in the Word who became flesh and dwells among us. To seek to understand his prayer through what his witnesses proclaim to us in the Gospel is to approach the holy Lord Jesus as Moses approached the burning bush: first to contemplate him in prayer, then to hear how he teaches us to pray, in order to know how he hears our prayer” (n. 2598).

So, how does Jesus teach us to pray? We find a clear answer in the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Jesus teaches us to pray not only with the *Our Father*” — certainly the high point of his instruction on how to pray — “but also when he prays. In this way he teaches us, in addition to the content, the dispositions necessary for every true prayer: purity of heart that seeks the Kingdom and forgives enemies, bold and filial faith that goes beyond what we feel and understand, and watchfulness that protects the disciple from temptation” (n. 544).

In going through the Gospels we have seen that concerning our prayers the Lord is conversation partner, friend, witness and teacher. The newness of our dialogue with God is revealed in Jesus: the filial prayer that the Father expects of his children. And we learn from Jesus that constant prayer helps us to interpret our life, make our decisions, recognize and accept our vocation, discover the talents that God has given us and do his will daily, the only way to fulfil our life.

Jesus’ prayer points out to us, all too often concerned with operational efficacy and the practical

results we achieve, that we need to pause, to experience moments of intimacy with God, “detaching ourselves” from the everyday commotion in order to listen, to go to the “root” that sustains and nourishes life.

One of the most beautiful moments of Jesus’ prayer is precisely when — in order to deal with the illnesses, hardships and limitations of those who are conversing with him — he turns to the Father in prayer and thereby teaches those around him where to seek the source of hope and salvation.

I have already recalled as a moving example Jesus’ prayer at the tomb of Lazarus. The Evangelist John recounts: “So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, ‘Father, I thank you that you have heard me. I knew that you hear me always, but I have said this on account of the people standing by, that they may believe that you sent me’. When he had said this, he cried with a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out’” (Jn 11:41-43).

However Jesus reaches the most profound depths in prayer to the Father at the moment of his Passion and his death when he says the extreme “yes” to God’s plan and shows how the human will finds its fulfilment precisely in full adherence to the divine will rather than in opposition to it.

In Jesus’ prayer, in his cry to the Father on the cross, are summed up “all the troubles, for all time, of humanity enslaved by sin and death, all the petitions and intercessions of salvation history.... Here the Father accepts them and, beyond all hope, answers them by raising his Son. Thus is fulfilled and brought to completion the drama of prayer in the economy of creation and salvation” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church n. 2606*).

Dear brothers and sisters, let us trustingly ask the Lord to grant that we live the journey of our filial prayer learning daily from the Only-Begotten Son, who became man for our sake, what should be our way of addressing God.

St Paul’s words on Christian life in general also apply to our prayers: “I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 8:38-39).

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Greeting of the Holy Father to the Armenian Synod:

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I would now like to greet, with brotherly affection, His Beatitude Nerses Bedros XIX Tarmouni, Patriarch of Cilicia for Armenian Catholics, and the Bishops gathered in Rome from various

continents for the celebration of the Synod. I express to them my sincere gratitude for fidelity to the patrimony of their venerable Christian tradition and to the Successor of the Apostle Peter, faithfulness which they have always maintained throughout the innumerable trials of history. I accompany the Synod's work with earnest prayer and with my Apostolic Blessing, hopeful that it will encourage ever greater communion and understanding among Pastors, so that they may guide the Armenian Catholics with renewed evangelical impetus on the path of a generous and joyful witness to Christ and to the Church. As I entrust the Armenian Synod to the motherly intercession of the Most Holy Mother of God, I extend my prayerful thought to the Regions of the Middle East, encouraging the Pastors and all the faithful to persevere with hope amid the grave suffering that afflicts these beloved peoples. May the Lord bless you. Thank you.

To special groups:

I welcome the many student groups present at today's Audience, including those from the United States Coast Guard Academy, the Catholic University of America, Saint Mary's Seminary and the Franciscan University of Steubenville. My greetings and prayerful good wishes also go to the participants in the Congress of the International Society of Plastic Regenerative Surgery. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, including those from England, Denmark and the United States, I invoke God's abundant blessings.

Lastly, my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. May the Lenten journey we are making lead you, dear *young people*, to maturity of faith in Christ; may it increase in you, dear *sick people*, hope in him, the One who always sustains us in trial; may he help you, dear *newlyweds*, to make your family life a mission of faithful and generous love.

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