



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 27 June 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Just as we saw over the past Wednesdays, our prayer is composed of silence and words, of singing and of gestures that involve the whole person: from the mouth to the mind, from the heart to the entire body. We find this characteristic in Jewish prayer, especially in the Psalms. Today I would like to speak of one of the most ancient songs or hymns of the Christian tradition which St Paul presents to us in the Letter to the Philippians. In a certain sense this is his spiritual testament. Indeed, it is a Letter that the Apostle dictated while he was in prison, perhaps in Rome. He must have felt that his death was close at hand, for he says that his life will be offered as a libation (cf. Phil 2:17).

In spite of this situation of grave danger to his physical safety, throughout this text St Paul expresses his joy in being a disciple of Christ, of being able to go to meet him even to the point of seeing death not as a loss but rather as a gain. In the last chapter of the Letter, there is a pressing invitation to joy, a fundamental characteristic of being Christian and of our prayer. St Paul writes: “rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice” (Phil 4:4). But how is it possible to rejoice in the face of a death sentence whose execution is now imminent? From where, or better, from whom did St Paul draw the serenity, strength and courage to go forward to meet martyrdom and the out-pouring of his blood?

We find the answer in the middle of the Letter to the Philippians, in what the Christian tradition

calls the *carmen Christo*, the hymn to Christ, or, more commonly, the “Christological hymn”; it is a hymn in which all the attention is focused on the “mind” of Christ, that is, on his way of thinking and on his practical approach to life.

This prayer begins with an exhortation: “Have this mind among yourselves, which was in Christ Jesus” (Phil 2:5). These sentiments are presented in the following verses: love, generosity, humility, obedience to God, the gift of self. It is not only or not merely a matter of following Jesus’ example, as something moral, but of involving one’s whole life in his way of thinking and acting. Prayer must lead Christians to knowledge and union in ever deeper love with the Lord, if they are to be able to think, act and love like him, in him and for him. Putting this into practice, learning the sentiments of Jesus, is the way of Christian life.

I would now like to reflect briefly on several elements of this concentrated hymn which sum up the entire divine and human itinerary of the Son of God and englobe the whole of human history: from being in the form of God to the Incarnation, to death on the Cross and to exaltation in the Father’s glory, the behaviour of Adam, of man, is also implicit from the start.

This hymn to Christ begins with his being “*en morphe tou Theou*” the Greek text says, that is, with being “in the form of God” or, rather, in the condition of God. Jesus, true God and true man, does not live his “being as God” in order to triumph or to impose his supremacy, he does not see it as a possession, a privilege or a treasure, to be jealously guarded.

On the contrary, he “stripped” himself, he emptied himself, the Greek text says, taking the “*morphe doulos*”, the “form of a slave”, human reality marked by suffering, poverty and death; he assumed the likeness of men in all things save sin, so as to behave as a servant totally dedicated to serving others.

In this regard Eusebius of Caesarea said: — in the fourth century — “he took upon himself the labours of the suffering members, and made our sicknesses his and suffered on our account all our woes and labours by the laws of love, in conformity with his great love for humanity” (*Demonstratio Evangelica [Proof of the Gospel]*, 10, 1, 22).

St Paul continues, delineating the “historical” background in which Jesus’ humbling of himself took place: “he humbled himself and became obedient unto death” (Phil 2:8). The Son of God truly became man and completed a journey of total obedience and fidelity to the Father’s will, even to the point of making the supreme sacrifice of his life. Furthermore the Apostle specifies: “unto death, even death on a cross” On the Cross Jesus Christ attained the greatest degree of humiliation, because crucifixion was the penalty kept for slaves and not for free men: “*mors turpissima crucis*”, Cicero wrote (cf. *In Verrem*, V, 64, 165).

Through the Cross of Christ man is redeemed and Adam’s experience is reversed. Adam, created

in the image and likeness of God, claimed to be like God through his own effort, to put himself in God's place and in this way lost the original dignity that had been given to him. Jesus, instead, was "in the form of God" but humbled himself, immersed himself in the human condition, in total faithfulness to the Father, in order to redeem the Adam who is in us and restore to man the dignity he had lost. The Fathers emphasize that he made himself obedient, restoring to human nature, through his own humanity and obedience, what had been lost through Adam's disobedience.

In prayer, in the relationship with God, we open our mind, our heart and our will to the action of the Holy Spirit to enter into this dynamic of life, as St Cyril of Alexandria — whose feast we are celebrating today — tells us: "the work of the Spirit seeks to transform us by grace into a perfect copy of his humbling" (*Festal Letter*, 10, 4).

Human logic, instead, often seeks self-fulfilment in power, in domination, in forceful means. Man still wants to build the Tower of Babel with his own efforts, to reach God's heights by himself, to be like God. The Incarnation and the Cross remind us that complete fulfilment lies in conforming our human will to the will of the Father, in emptying ourselves of our selfishness, to fill ourselves with God's love, with his charity, and thereby become capable of truly loving others.

Man does not find himself by remaining closed in on himself, by affirming himself. Man finds himself only by coming out of himself; only if we come out of ourselves do we find ourselves. And if Adam wanted to imitate God, this was not a bad thing in itself but he had the wrong idea of God. God is not someone who only wants greatness. God is love which was already given in the Trinity and was then given in the Creation. And imitating God means coming out of oneself, giving oneself in love.

In the second part of this "Christological hymn" of the Letter to the Philippians, the subject changes; it is no longer Christ but God the Father. St Paul stresses that it is precisely out of obedience to the Father's will that "God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name" (Phil 2:9).

The one who humbled himself profoundly, taking the condition of a slave, is exalted, lifted up above all things by the Father, who gives him the name "*Kyrios*", "Lord", the supreme dignity and lordship. Indeed it is before this new name which is the very name of God in the Old Testament, "every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (vv. 10-11).

The Jesus who is exalted and the Jesus of the Last Supper who lays aside his garments and girds himself with a towel, who bends down to wash the Apostles' feet and asks them: "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet" (Jn 13:12-14). It is important to remember this always, in our prayers and in our life. "The ascent to

God occurs precisely in the descent of humble service, in the descent of love, for love is God's essence, and is thus the power that truly purifies man and enables him to perceive God and to see him" (English edition: *Jesus of Nazareth*, Doubleday, New York, 2007, p. 95).

The hymn in the Letter to the Philippians offers us important instructions for our prayers. The first is the invocation "Lord", addressed to Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father: he is the one Lord of our life, among so many "dominant" people who desire to direct and guide it. For this reason it is necessary to have a scale of values in which the primacy is God's, in order to affirm, with St Paul: "I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord" (Phil 3:8). The encounter with the Risen One made the Apostle realize that he is the one treasure for which it is worth expending one's life.

The second instruction is prostration, that "every knee shall bow", on earth and in heaven. This is reminiscent of words of the Prophet Isaiah, where he points to the worship that all creatures owe to God (cf. 45:23). Genuflection or kneeling in prayer before the Blessed Sacrament exactly expresses the attitude of adoration in God's presence and also with the body. Hence the importance of not doing this action out of habit or hastily but rather with profound awareness. When we kneel before the Lord, we profess our faith in him, we recognize that he is the one Lord of our life.

Dear brothers and sisters, in our prayers let us fix our gaze on the Crucified One, let us pause more often in adoration before the Eucharist to let our life enter the love of God who humbly lowered himself in order to lift us up to him. At the beginning of the Catechesis we asked ourselves how St Paul could rejoice when he was facing the imminent risk of martyrdom and out-pouring his blood.

This was only possible because the Apostle never lifted his gaze from Christ, to the point that he became like him in death, in the hope that "I may attain the resurrection from the dead" (Phil 3:11). As St Francis said before the Crucifix, let us too say: "Most High, glorious God, enlighten the darkness of my heart and give me true faith, certain hope and perfect charity, sense and knowledge, Lord, that I may carry out Your holy and true command" Amen (cf. *Prayer before the Crucifix at San Damiano*: ff, [276]).

To special groups:

Dear brothers and sisters, I offer a warm welcome to the ecumenical delegation of Christian leaders from Korea. I greet the pilgrimage groups from Nigeria, South Africa and Swaziland. My greeting also goes to the many student groups present. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors, including those from England, Scotland, Wales, Ireland, Norway, Australia, the Bahamas and the United States of America, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly my thoughts go to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. We have now entered summer, for many people a period of holidays and rest. May it be for you, dear young people, an occasion for useful social and religious experiences; for you, dear newlyweds, an opportune period to develop your union and to deepen your mission in the Church and in society. I also hope that you, dear sick people, will not be without the closeness of your loved ones during these summer months.

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