



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 26 September 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

In these months we have journeyed in the light of the word of God so as to learn to pray ever more authentically, looking at several important Old Testament figures, at the Psalms, at the Letters of St Paul and at the Book of Revelation, but, especially, at the unique and fundamental experience of Jesus in his relationship with the heavenly Father. In fact, only in Christ can a person be united to God with the depth and intimacy of a child in his relationship with a father who loves him, only in Christ can we address God in all truth, calling him affectionately, “Abba! Father!”. Like the Apostles, we too have repeated in these past few weeks and repeat to Jesus today: “Lord, teach us to pray” (Lk 11:1).

Furthermore, to learn to live more intensely our personal relationship with God, we have learned to invoke the Holy Spirit, the first gift of the Risen One to believers, because it is he who “helps us in our weakness; for we do not know how to pray as we ought” (Rom 8:26), St Paul says, and we know how right he is.

At this point, after a long series of Catecheses on prayer in Scripture, we can ask ourselves; how can I let myself be formed by the Holy Spirit and thereby become able to enter into the atmosphere of God, of prayer with God? What is this school in which he teaches me to pray, comes to help me in my attempts to speak to God correctly? The first school of prayer — as we have seen in these weeks — is the Word of God, Sacred Scripture. Sacred Scripture is an

ongoing dialogue between God and man, a progressive dialogue in which God shows himself ever closer, in which we can become ever better acquainted with his face, his voice, his being; and man learns to accept to know God and to talk to God. Therefore, in these weeks, in reading Sacred Scripture we have sought to learn from Scripture, from this ongoing dialogue, how we may enter into contact with God.

However there is yet another precious “place”, another precious “source” for developing in prayer, a source of living water that is very closely related to the previous one. I am referring to the liturgy, which is a privileged context in which God speaks to each one of us, here and now, and awaits our answer.

What is the liturgy? If we open the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* — ever an invaluable and, I would say, indispensable aid — we can read that the word “liturgy” originally meant: a “service in the name of/on behalf of the people” (n. 1069). If Christian theology made use of this word of the Greek world, it obviously did so thinking of the new People of God born from Christ who opened his arms on the Cross to unite human beings in the peace of the one God. A “service on behalf of the people”, a people which did not exist on its own, but was formed through the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ. Indeed, the People of God does not exist through ties of kinship, place or country. Rather it is always born from the action of the Son of God and from the communion with the Father that he obtains for us.

The *Catechism* also indicates that “in Christian tradition (the word ‘liturgy’) means the participation of the People of God ‘in the work of God’” (n. 1069), because the People of God as such exists only through God’s action.

The actual development of the [Second Vatican Council](#) reminds us of this. It began its work 50 years ago with the discussion of the draft on the Sacred Liturgy, which was then solemnly promulgated on 4 December 1963, the first text that the Council approved. That the Document on the Liturgy was the first document to be promulgated by the conciliar assembly was considered by some to have happened by chance.

Among the many projects, the text on the Sacred Liturgy seems to have been the least controversial. For this very reason it could serve as a sort of exercise in learning conciliar methodology. However, there is no doubt that what at first sight might seem a coincidence, also turned out to be the best decision, on the basis of the hierarchy of the subjects and of the most important duties of the Church. In fact, by starting with the theme of the “liturgy”, the Council shed very clear light on the primacy of God and his indisputable priority. God in the very first place: this itself explains to us the Council’s decision to start with the liturgy. Wherever the gaze on God is not conclusive, everything else loses its orientation. The fundamental criterion for the liturgy is its orientation to God, enabling us to take part in his action itself.

However, we might ask ourselves: what is this work of God in which we are called to take part? The answer that the Council's [Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy](#) gives us is apparently twofold. In n. 5 it points out, in fact, that the works of God are his actions in history which bring us salvation and which culminated in the death and Resurrection of Jesus Christ; but in n. 7, the same Constitution defines the celebration of the liturgy as an "action of Christ". In fact these two meanings are inseparably linked. If we ask ourselves who saves the world and man, the only answer is: Jesus of Nazareth, Lord and Christ, the Crucified and Risen One. And where does the Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ that brings salvation become real for us, for me, today? The answer is: in Christ's action through the Church, in the liturgy, and, especially, in the sacrament of the Eucharist, which makes present the sacrificial offering of the Son of God who has redeemed us; in the sacrament of Reconciliation, in which one moves from the death of sin to new life; and in the other sacramental acts that sanctify us (cf. [Presbyterorum Ordinis](#), n. 5). Thus the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection of Christ is the centre of the liturgical theology of the Council.

Let us take another step forward and ask ourselves: how does the enactment of Christ's Paschal Mystery become possible? Twenty-five years after the Constitution [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#) [Blessed Pope John Paul II](#), wrote: "In order to reenact his Paschal Mystery, Christ is ever present in his Church, especially in liturgical celebrations. Hence the Liturgy is the privileged place for the encounter of Christians with God and the One whom he has sent, Jesus Christ (cf. Jn 17:3)" ([Vicesimus quintus annus](#), n. 7). Along the same lines we read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: "sacramental celebration is a meeting of God's children with their Father, in Christ and the Holy Spirit; this meeting takes the form of a dialogue, through actions and words" (n. 1153). Therefore the first requirement for a good liturgical celebration is that there should be prayer and a conversation with God, first of all listening and consequently a response. St Benedict, speaking in his *Rule* of prayer in the Psalms, pointed out to his monks: *mens concordet voci*, "the mind must be in accord with the voice". The Saint teaches that in the prayers of the Psalms words must precede our thought. It does not usually happen like this because we have to think and then what we have thought is converted into words. Here, instead, in the liturgy, the opposite is true, words come first. God has given us the word and the sacred liturgy offers us words; we must enter into the words, into their meaning and receive them within us, we must attune ourselves to these words; in this way we become children of God, we become like God. As [Sacrosanctum Concilium](#) recalls, "in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions, that their minds be attuned to their voices, and that they cooperate with heavenly grace lest they receive it in vain" (n. 11). A fundamental, primary element of the dialogue with God in the liturgy is the agreement between what we say with our lips and what we carry in our hearts. By entering into the words of the great history of prayer, we ourselves are conformed to the spirit of these words and are enabled to speak to God.

In line with this I would just like to mention one of the moments during the liturgy itself; it calls us and helps us to find this harmonization, this conformation of ourselves to what we hear, say and

do in the celebration of the liturgy. I am referring to the invitation that the celebrant expresses before the Eucharistic Prayer: “*Sursum corda*”, let us lift up our hearts above the confusion of our apprehensions, our desires, our narrowness, our distraction. Our hearts, our innermost selves, must open in docility to the word of God and must be recollected in the Church’s prayer, to receive her guidance to God from the very words that we hear and say. The eyes of the heart must be turned to the Lord, who is in our midst: this is a fundamental disposition.

Whenever we live out the liturgy with this basic approach, our hearts are, as it were, removed from the force of gravity which has pulled them downwards and are inwardly uplifted, towards the truth, towards love, towards God. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “in the sacramental liturgy of the Church, the mission of Christ and of the Holy Spirit proclaims, makes present, and communicates the mystery of salvation, which is continued in the heart that prays. The spiritual writers sometimes compare the heart to an altar” (n. 2655): *altare Dei est cor nostrum*.

Dear friends, we celebrate and live the liturgy well only if we remain in a prayerful attitude, and not if we want “to do something”, to make ourselves seen or to act, but if we direct our hearts to God and remain in a prayerful attitude, uniting ourselves with the Mystery of Christ and with his conversation as Son with the Father. God himself teaches us to pray, St Paul says (cf. Rom 8:26). He himself gave us the appropriate words with which to address him, words that we find in the Psalter, in the great orations of the sacred liturgy and in the Eucharistic celebration itself. Let us pray the Lord to be every day more aware of the fact that the liturgy is an action of God and of man; prayer that wells up from the Holy Spirit and from us, wholly directed to the Father, in union with the Son of God made man (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 2564). Many thanks.

To special groups:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims present, especially those from England, Scotland, Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Australia, India, Indonesia, Japan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Vietnam, Canada and the United States. Upon all of you, I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, a thought for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Today we are celebrating the Memorial of the Holy Doctors, Sts Cosmas and Damian. Dear *young people*, learn to heal every suffering of your brethren with affection and acceptance; dear *sick people*, the best treatment for every sickness is trust in God to whom we speak in prayer; and you, dear *newlyweds*, take care of each other on your journey in marriage.

