



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 13 February 2013*

[\[Video\]](#)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

As you know, I have decided – thank you for your kindness – to renounce the ministry which the Lord entrusted to me on [19 April 2005](#). I have done this in full freedom for the good of the Church, after much prayer and having examined my conscience before God, knowing full well the seriousness of this act, but also realizing that I am no longer able to carry out the Petrine ministry with the strength which it demands. I am strengthened and reassured by the certainty that the Church is Christ's, who will never leave her without his guidance and care. I thank all of you for the love and for the prayers with which you have accompanied me. Thank you; in these days which have not been easy for me, I have felt almost physically the power of prayer – your prayers – which the love of the Church has given me. Continue to pray for me, for the Church and for the future Pope. The Lord will guide us.

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*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, Ash Wednesday, we are beginning the [liturgical Season of Lent](#), 40 days that prepare us for the celebration of Holy Easter; it is a time of special commitment during our spiritual journey. The number 40 recurs in Sacred Scripture on various occasions. It calls to mind in particular, as we know, the 40 years during which the People of Israel wandered through the wilderness; a long period of formation in order to become the People of God, but also a long period in which the

temptation to be unfaithful to their Covenant with the Lord was ever present. Forty was also the number of days that it took Elijah to reach God's mountain, Mount Horeb; and this was likewise the period that Jesus spent in the wilderness before beginning his public ministry and where he was tempted by the devil. In today's Catechesis, I would like to reflect on this very moment in the Lord's earthly life which we shall be reading in the Gospel next Sunday.

First of all, the wilderness to which Jesus withdrew is the place of silence and poverty, where man is deprived of material support and faces the fundamental existential questions; where he is driven to the essential and for this very reason can more easily encounter God. However the wilderness is also the place of death because there is no water, nor even life, and it is the place of solitude where man feels temptation more acutely. Jesus went into the wilderness and was subjected there to the temptation to stray from the path marked out for him by the Father so as to follow other easier and more worldly paths (cf. Lk 4:1-13). He thus took on our temptations, burdened himself with our wretchedness in order to defeat the Evil One and open a path to God for us, a pathway of conversion.

Reflecting on the temptations to which Jesus was subjected in the wilderness invites each one of us to answer a fundamental question: What really counts in my life? In the first temptation the devil proposes to Jesus that he turn a stone into bread to appease his hunger. Jesus retorts that man lives on bread *as well*, but that he does not live on bread *alone*. Without a response to his hunger for truth, to his hunger for God, man cannot be saved (cf. vv. 3-4).

In the second temptation the devil proposes the way of power to Jesus. He takes him up and offers him dominion over the whole world; but this is not God's way. Jesus is very clear that it is not worldly power that saves the world, but the power of the Cross, of humility and of love (cf. vv. 5-8).

In the third temptation the devil suggests to Jesus that he throw himself down from the pinnacle of the Temple of Jerusalem and have himself saved by God through his angels, that is, that he do something sensational to put God himself to the test; but the answer is that God is not an object on which to impose conditions of our own making; he is the Lord of all (cf. vv. 9-12).

What is the essence of the three temptations to which Jesus is subjected? It is the proposal to exploit God, to use him for one's own interests, for one's own glory and for one's own success. And therefore, essentially to put oneself in God's place, removing him from one's own existence and making him seem superfluous. Each one of us must therefore ask him- or herself: what place does God have in my life? Is he the Lord or am I?

Overcoming the temptation to subject God to oneself and one's own interests, or to put him in a corner and be converted to the correct order of priorities, giving God first place, is a journey that each and every Christian must make over and over again. "Repent" is an invitation we shall often

hear in Lent, it means following Jesus in such a way that his Gospel is a practical guide for life; it means letting God transform us, in order to stop thinking that we are the only ones to build our existence. It means recognizing that we are creatures, that we depend on God, on his love, and that only by “losing” our life in him can we gain it.

This requires us to make our decisions in the light of the Word of God. Today it is no longer possible to be Christian as a mere consequence of living in a society that has Christian roots: even those who are born into a Christian family and receive a religious education must every day renew their decision to be Christian, that is, to give God first place in the face of the temptations that a secularized culture constantly suggests to them and in the face of the critical opinion of many of their contemporaries.

The trials to which society today subjects Christians are indeed numerous and affect their personal and social life. It is far from easy to be faithful to Christian marriage, to practice mercy in daily life, to make room for prayer and inner silence; it is far from easy to oppose publicly the decisions that many take for granted, such as abortion in the case of unwanted pregnancy, euthanasia in the case of serious illness and embryo selection in order to prevent hereditary diseases. The temptation to set faith aside is always present and conversion becomes a response to God that must be strengthened several times in life.

As an example and an incentive we have important conversions such as that of St Paul on the road to Damascus, or of St Augustine; yet, in our epoch of the eclipse of the sense of the sacred, God's grace is at work and works marvels in the life of so many people. The Lord never tires of knocking at man's door in social and cultural milieus that seem engulfed in secularization.

This is how it was for the Russian Orthodox Pavel Florenskij. Following an agnostic upbringing, so thorough that he felt really hostile to the religious teaching imparted at school, Florenskij the scientist found himself exclaiming: “No, it is impossible to live without God”, and entirely changed his life, even to the point of becoming a monk.

I am also thinking of Etty Hillesum, a young Dutch girl of Jewish origin who died in Auschwitz. At first far from God, she discovered him looking deep within her and she wrote: “There is a really deep well inside me. And in it dwells God. Sometimes I am there, too. But more often stones and grit block the well, and God is buried beneath. Then he must be dug out again” (*Diaries*, 97). In her disrupted, restless life she found God in the very midst of the great tragedy of the 20th century: the Shoah. This frail and dissatisfied young woman, transfigured by faith, became a woman full of love and inner peace who was able to declare: “I live in constant intimacy with God”.

The ability to oppose the ideological enticements of her time in order to choose the search for truth and to open herself to the discovery of faith was witnessed by another woman of our time, the American Dorothy Day. She confessed openly in her autobiography to having succumbed to the

temptation to solve everything with politics, adhering to the Marxist proposal: “I wanted to be with the protesters, go to jail, write, influence others and leave my dreams to the world. How much ambition and how much searching for myself in all this!”. The journey towards faith in such a secularized environment was particularly difficult, but Grace acts nevertheless, as she pointed out: “It is certain that I felt the need to go to church more often, to kneel, to bow my head in prayer. A blind instinct, one might say, because I was not conscious of praying. But I went, I slipped into the atmosphere of prayer...”. God guided her to a conscious adherence to the Church, in a life dedicated to the underprivileged.

In our time there are many conversions, understood as a return of those who, after a Christian, though superficial upbringing, distanced themselves from the faith for years, only later to rediscover Christ and his Gospel. In the Book of Revelation we read: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me” (3:20). Our inner self must prepare to be visited by God and for this very reason must not let itself be invaded by illusions, appearances and material things.

In this [season of Lent](#), in the [Year of Faith](#), let us renew our commitment to the journey of conversion, to overcome the tendency to withdraw into ourselves and instead, to make room for God, seeing daily reality with his eyes. The alternative between being closed into our own egotism and openness to the love of God and of others, we might say, corresponds to the alternative of the temptations of Jesus: an alternative, that is, between human power and love of the Cross, between redemption seen in material wellbeing alone, and redemption as a work of God to which we should give primacy in life.

Being converted means not shutting ourselves into the quest for our own success, our own prestige, our own status, but rather ensuring that every day, in the small things, truth, faith in God and love become the most important thing of all.

### **To special groups:**

I offer a warm welcome to all the English-speaking visitors present at today’s Audience, including those from England, Denmark and the United States. My particular greeting goes to the many student groups present. With prayers that this [Lenten season](#) will prove spiritually fruitful for you and your families, I invoke upon all of you God’s blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Tomorrow we shall be celebrating the Feast of Sts Cyril and Methodius, apostles and the first champions of the faith among the Slav peoples. May their witness help you too to be apostles of the Gospel and a leaven of authentic renewal in your personal, family and social life.

My thanks to you all.

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