



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE PARTICIPANTS IN THE CONVENTION
OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME***

Basilica of Saint John Lateran
Monday, 11 June 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

For the third consecutive year our diocesan Convention gives me the possibility of meeting and speaking to you all, addressing the theme on which the Church of Rome will be focusing in the coming pastoral year, in close continuity with the work carried out in the year now drawing to a close.

I greet with affection each one of you, Bishops, priests, deacons, men and women religious, lay people who generously take part in the Church's mission. I thank the Cardinal Vicar in particular for the words he has addressed to me on behalf of you all.

The theme of the Convention is "*Jesus is Lord: educating in the faith, in the 'sequela', in witnessing*": a theme that concerns us all because every disciple professes that Jesus is Lord and is called to grow in adherence to him, giving and receiving help from the great company of brothers and sisters in the faith.

Nevertheless, the verb "to educate", as part of the title of the Convention, suggests special attention to children, boys and girls and young people, and highlights the duty proper first of all to the family: thus, we are continuing the programme that has been a feature of the pastoral work of our Diocese in recent years.

It is important to start by reflecting on the first affirmation, which gives our Convention its tone and meaning: "Jesus is Lord". We find it in the solemn declaration that concludes Peter's discourse at Pentecost, in which the head of the Apostles said: "Let all the house of Israel therefore know

assuredly that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified" (Acts 2: 36). The conclusion of the great hymn to Christ contained in Paul's Letter to the Philippians is similar: "every tongue [should] confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" (2: 11).

Again, in the final salutation of his First Letter to the Corinthians, St Paul exclaimed: "If any one has no love for the Lord, let him be accursed. *Maranà tha*: Our Lord, come!" (I Cor 16: 22), thereby handing on to us the very ancient Aramaic invocation of Jesus as Lord.

Various other citations could be added: I am thinking of the 12th chapter of the same Letter to the Corinthians in which St Paul says: "No one can say "Jesus is Lord" except by the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 12: 3).

Thus, the Apostle declares that this is the fundamental confession of the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit. We might think also of the 10th chapter of the Letter to the Romans where the Apostle says, "if you confess with your lips that Jesus is Lord" (Rom 10: 9), thus reminding the Christians of Rome that these words, "Jesus is Lord", form the common confession of the Church, the sure foundation of the Church's entire life.

The whole confession of the Apostolic Creed, of the Nicene Creed, developed from these words. St Paul also says in another passage of his First Letter to the Corinthians: "Although there may be so-called gods in heaven or on earth..." - and we know that today too there are many so-called "gods" on earth - for us there is only "one God, the Father, from whom are all things and for whom we exist, and one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom are all things and through whom we exist" (I Cor 8: 5-6).

Thus, from the outset the disciples recognized the Risen Jesus as the One who is our brother in humanity but is also one with God; the One who, with his coming into the world and throughout his life, in his death and in his Resurrection, brought us God and in a new and unique way made God present in the world: the One, therefore, who gives meaning and hope to our life; in fact, it is in him that we encounter the true Face of God that we find what we really need in order to live.

Educating in the faith, in the *sequela*, and in witnessing means helping our brothers and sisters, or rather, helping one another to enter into a living relationship with Christ and with the Father. This has been from the start the fundamental task of the Church as the community of believers, disciples and friends of Jesus. The Church, the Body of Christ and Temple of the Holy Spirit, is that dependable company within which we have been brought forth and educated to become, in Christ, sons and heirs of God.

In the Church, we receive the Spirit through whom "we cry, "Abba! Father!" (cf. Rom 8: 14-17). We have just heard in St Augustine's homily that God is not remote, that he has become the "Way"

and the "Way" himself has come to us. He said: "Stand up, you idler, and start walking!". Starting to walk means moving along the path that is Christ himself, in the company of believers; it means while walking, helping one another to become truly friends of Jesus Christ and children of God.

Daily experience tells us - as we all know - that precisely in our day educating in the faith is no easy undertaking. Today, in fact, every educational task seems more and more arduous and precarious. Consequently, there is talk of a great "educational emergency", of the increasing difficulty encountered in transmitting the basic values of life and correct behaviour to the new generations, a difficulty that involves both schools and families and, one might say, any other body with educational aims.

We may add that this is an inevitable emergency: in a society, in a culture, which all too often make relativism its creed - relativism has become a sort of dogma - in such a society the light of truth is missing; indeed, it is considered dangerous and "authoritarian" to speak of truth, and the end result is doubt about the goodness of life - is it good to be a person? is it good to be alive? - and in the validity of the relationships and commitments in which it consists.

So how would it be possible to suggest to children and to pass on from generation to generation something sound and dependable, rules of life, an authentic meaning and convincing objectives for human existence both as an individual and as a community?

For this reason, education tends to be broadly reduced to the transmission of specific abilities or capacities for doing, while people endeavour to satisfy the desire for happiness of the new generations by showering them with consumer goods and transitory gratification. Thus, both parents and teachers are easily tempted to abdicate their educational duties and even no longer to understand what their role, or rather, the mission entrusted to them, is.

Yet, in this way we are not offering to young people, to the young generations, what it is our duty to pass on to them. Moreover, we owe them the true values which give life a foundation.

However, this situation obviously fails to satisfy; it cannot satisfy because it ignores the essential aim of education which is the formation of a person to enable him or her to live to the full and to make his or her own contribution to the common good. However, on many sides the demand for authentic education and the rediscovery of the need for educators who are truly such is increasing.

Parents, concerned and often worried about their children's future, are asking for it, many teachers who are going through the sad experience of the deterioration of their schools are asking for it, society overall is asking for it, in Italy as in many other nations, because it sees the educational crisis cast doubt on the very foundations of coexistence.

In a similar context, the Church's commitment to providing education in the faith, in discipleship

and in witnessing to the Lord Jesus is more than ever acquiring the value of a contribution to extracting the society in which we live from the educational crisis that afflicts it, clamping down on distrust and on that strange "self hatred" that seems to have become a hallmark of our civilization.

However, none of this diminishes the difficulties we encounter in leading children, adolescents and young people to meet Jesus Christ and to establish a lasting and profound relationship with him. Yet precisely this is the crucial challenge for the future of the faith, of the Church and of Christianity, and it is therefore an essential priority of our pastoral work: to bring close to Christ and to the Father the new generation that lives in a world largely distant from God.

Dear brothers and sisters, we must always be aware that we cannot carry out such a task with our own strength but only with the power of the Spirit. We need enlightenment and grace that come from God and act within hearts and consciences. For education and Christian formation, therefore, it is above all prayer and our personal friendship with Jesus that are crucial: only those who know and love Jesus Christ can introduce their brothers and sisters into a living relationship with him. Indeed, moved by this need, I thought: it would be helpful to write a book on Jesus to make him known.

Let us never forget the words of Jesus: "I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide" (Jn 15: 15-16).

Our communities will thus be able to work fruitfully and to teach the faith and discipleship of Christ while being in themselves authentic "schools" of prayer (cf. Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, n. 33), where the primacy of God is lived.

Furthermore, it is education and especially Christian education which shapes life based on God who is love (cf. I Jn 4: 8, 16), and has need of that closeness which is proper to love. Especially today, when isolation and loneliness are a widespread condition to which noise and group conformity is no real remedy, personal guidance becomes essential, giving those who are growing up the assurance that they are loved, understood and listened to.

In practice, this guidance must make tangible the fact that our faith is not something of the past, that it can be lived today and that in living it we really find our good. Thus, boys and girls and young people may be helped to free themselves from common prejudices and will realize that the Christian way of life is possible and reasonable, indeed, is by far the most reasonable.

The entire Christian community, with all its many branches and components, is challenged by the important task of leading the new generations to the encounter with Christ: on this terrain, therefore, we must express and manifest particularly clearly our communion with the Lord and with one another, as well as our willingness and readiness to work together to "build a network", to

achieve with an open and sincere mind every useful form of synergy, starting with the precious contribution of those women and men who have consecrated their lives to adoring God and interceding for their brethren.

However, it is very obvious that in educating and forming people in the faith the family has its own fundamental role and primary responsibility. Parents, in fact, are those through whom the child at the start of life has the first and crucial experience of love, of a love which is actually not only human but also a reflection of God's love for him.

Therefore, the Christian family, the small "domestic Church", and the larger family of the Church must take care to develop the closest collaboration, especially with regard to the education of children (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11).

Everything that has matured in the three years in which our diocesan pastoral ministry has devoted special attention to the family should not only be implemented but also further increased.

For example, the attempts to involve parents and even godparents more closely, before and after Baptism, in order to help them understand and put into practice their mission as educators in the faith have already produced appreciable results and deserve to be continued and to become the common heritage of each parish. The same applies for the participation of families in catechesis and in the entire process of the Christian initiation of children and adolescents.

Of course, many families are unprepared for this task and there is no lack of families which - if they are not actually opposed to it - do not seem to be interested in the Christian education of their own children: the consequences of the crisis in so many marriages are making themselves felt here.

Yet, it is rare to meet parents who are wholly indifferent to the human and moral formation of their children and consequently unwilling to be assisted in an educational task which they perceive as ever more difficult.

Therefore, an area of commitment and service opens up for our parishes, oratories, youth communities and above all for Christian families themselves, called to be near other families to encourage and assist them in raising their children, thereby helping them to find the meaning and purpose of life as a married couple.

Let us now move on to other subjects concerning education in the faith.

As children gradually grow up, their inner desire for personal autonomy naturally increases. Especially in adolescence, this can easily lead to them taking a critical distance from their family. Here, the closeness which can be guaranteed by the priest, Religious, catechist or other educators

capable of making the friendly Face of the Church and love of Christ concrete for the young person, becomes particularly important.

If it is to produce positive effects that endure in time, our closeness must take into account that the education offered is a free encounter and that Christian education itself is formation in true freedom. Indeed, there is no real educational proposal, however respectful and loving it may be, which is not an incentive to making a decision, and the proposal of Christianity itself calls freedom profoundly into question, calling it to faith and conversion.

As I said at the Ecclesial Convention in Verona: "A true education must awaken the courage to make definitive decisions, which today are considered a mortifying bind to our freedom. In reality, they are indispensable for growth and in order to achieve something great in life, in particular, to cause love to mature in all its beauty: therefore, to give consistency and meaning to freedom itself" (*Address*, 19 October 2006; *L'Osservatore Romano* English edition, 25 October 2006, p. 9).

When they feel that their freedom is respected and taken seriously, adolescents and young people, despite their changeability and frailty, are not in fact unwilling to let themselves be challenged by demanding proposals: indeed, they often feel attracted and fascinated by them.

They also wish to show their generosity in adhering to the great, perennial values that constitute life's foundations. The authentic educator likewise takes seriously the intellectual curiosity which already exists in children and, as the years pass, is more consciously cultivated. Constantly exposed to, and often confused by, the multiplicity of information, and by the contrasting ideas and interpretations presented to them, young people today nevertheless still have a great inner need for truth. They are consequently open to Jesus Christ who, as Tertullian reminds us, "called himself truth, not custom" (*De virginibus velandis*, I, 1).

It is up to us to seek to respond to the question of truth, fearlessly juxtaposing the proposal of faith with the reason of our time. In this way we will help young people to broaden the horizons of their intelligence, to open themselves to the mystery of God, in whom is found life's meaning and direction, and to overcome the conditioning of a rationality which trusts only what can be the object of experiment and calculation. Thus, it is very important to develop what last year we called "the pastoral care of intelligence".

The task of education passes through freedom but also requires authority. Therefore, especially when it is a matter of educating in faith, the figure of the witness and the role of witnessing is central. A witness of Christ does not merely transmit information but is personally involved with the truth Christ proposes and, through the coherency of his own life, becomes a dependable reference point.

However, he does not refer to himself, but to Someone who is infinitely greater than he is, in whom

he has trusted and whose trustworthy goodness he has experienced. The authentic Christian educator is therefore a witness who finds his model in Jesus Christ, the witness of the Father who said nothing about himself but spoke as the Father had taught him (cf. Jn 8: 28). This relationship with Christ and with the Father is for each one of us, dear brothers and sisters, the fundamental condition for being effective educators in the faith.

Our Convention very rightly speaks of education not only in faith and discipleship but also in witnessing to the Lord Jesus. Bearing an active witness to Christ does not, therefore, concern only priests, women religious and lay people who as formation teachers have tasks in our communities, but children and young people themselves, and all who are educated in the faith.

Therefore, the awareness of being called to become witnesses of Christ is not a corollary, a consequence somehow external to Christian formation, such as, unfortunately, has often been thought and today too people continue to think. On the contrary, it is an intrinsic and essential dimension of education in the faith and discipleship, just as the Church is missionary by her very nature (cf. *Ad Gentes*, n. 2).

If children, through a gradual process from the beginning of their formation, are to achieve permanent formation as Christian adults, the desire to be and the conviction of being sharers in the Church's missionary vocation in all the situations and circumstances of life must take root in the believers' soul. Indeed, we cannot keep to ourselves the joy of the faith. We must spread it and pass it on, and thereby also strengthen it in our own hearts.

If faith is truly the joy of having discovered truth and love, we inevitably feel the desire to transmit it, to communicate it to others. The new evangelization to which our beloved Pope John Paul II called us passes mainly through this process.

A concrete experience that will increase in the youth of the parishes and of the various ecclesial groups the desire to witness to their own faith is the "Young People's Mission" which you are planning, after the success of the great "City Mission".

By educating in the faith, a very important task is entrusted to Catholic schools. Indeed, they must carry out their mission on the basis of an educational project which places the Gospel at the centre and keeps it as a decisive reference point for the person's formation and for the entire cultural programme.

In convinced synergy with families and with the Ecclesial Community, Catholic schools should therefore seek to foster that unity between faith, culture and life which is the fundamental goal of Christian education. State schools too can be sustained in their educational task in various ways by the presence of teachers who are believers - in the first place, but not exclusively, teachers of Catholic religion - and of students with a Christian formation, as well as by the collaboration of

many families and of the Christian community itself.

The healthy secularism of schools, like that of the other State institutions, does not in fact imply closure to Transcendence or a false neutrality with regard to those moral values which form the basis of an authentic formation of the person. A similar discourse naturally applies for universities and it is truly a good omen that university ministry in Rome has been able to develop in all the Athenaeums, among teachers as much as students, and that a fruitful collaboration has developed between the civil and Pontifical academic institutions.

Today, more than in the past, the education and formation of the person are influenced by the messages and general climate spread by the great means of communication and which are inspired by a mindset and culture marked by relativism, consumerism and a false and destructive exaltation, or rather, profanation, of the body and of sexuality.

Therefore, precisely because of the great "yes" that as believers in Christ we say to the man loved by God, we certainly cannot fail to take interest in the overall orientation of the society to which we belong, in the trends that motivate it and in the positive or negative influence that it exercises on the formation of the new generations.

The very presence of the community of believers, its educational and cultural commitment, the message of faith, trust and love it bears are in fact an invaluable service to the common good and especially to the children and youth who are being trained and prepared for life.

Dear brothers and sisters, there is one last point to which I would like to draw your attention: it is supremely important for the Church's mission and requires our commitment and first of all our prayer. I am referring to vocations to follow the Lord Jesus more closely in the ministerial priesthood and in the consecrated life.

In recent decades, the Diocese of Rome has been gladdened by the gift of many priestly ordinations which have made it possible to bridge the gap in the previous period, and also to meet the requests of many Sister Churches in need of clergy; but the most recent indications seem less favourable and prompt the whole of our diocesan community to renew to the Lord, with humility and trust, its request for labourers for his harvest (cf. Mt 9: 37-38; Lk 10: 2).

With delicacy and respect we must address a special but clear and courageous invitation to follow Jesus to those young men and women who appear to be the most attracted and fascinated by friendship with him. In this perspective, the Diocese will designate several new priests specifically to the care of vocations, but we know well that prayer and the overall quality of our Christian witness, the example of life set by priests and consecrated souls, the generosity of the people called and of the families they come from, are crucial in this area.

Dear brothers and sisters, I entrust to you these reflections as a contribution to the dialogue of these evenings, and to the work of the next pastoral year. May the Lord always give us the joy of believing in him, of growing in his friendship, of following him in the journey of life and of bearing witness to him in every situation, so that we may be able to pass on to those who will come after us the immense riches and beauty of faith in Jesus Christ. May my affection and my blessing accompany you in your work. Thank you for your attention!

© Copyright 2007 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana