



The Holy See

MEETING OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS OF THE ROME DIOCESE

LECTIO DIVINA

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Thursday, 23 February 2012*

[Video](#)

Dear Brothers,

Every year it gives me great joy to see my clergy, the clergy of Rome, at the beginning of Lent and it is splendid to see how numerous we are today. I was thinking that our group might almost be lost in this capacious hall, but I see we are a strong army of God and can enter with strength the necessary battles in our time to promote, to extend the Kingdom of God.

Yesterday we crossed the threshold of Lent, the annual renewal of our Baptism; let us, as it were, repeat our catechumenate, going back to the essence of our existence as baptized people, recovering it, returning to our being baptized and thereby incorporated into Christ. In this way we may also seek to guide our communities anew in this intimate communion with Christ's death and Resurrection to be ever more closely conformed to Christ, to become ever more truly Christian.

The passage we have heard from St Paul's Letter to the Ephesians (4:1-16) is one of the great ecclesial texts of the New Testament. It begins with the author's introduction of himself: "I [Paul] therefore, a prisoner for the Lord" (v. 1). The Greek word *desmios* means "bound": Paul, like a criminal, is in chains, a prisoner for Christ and so he begins to be in communion with Christ's Passion. This is the first element in the way he presents himself: he speaks as a prisoner in chains, he speaks of being in communion with Christ's Passion and is thus also in communion with Christ's Resurrection, with his new life. When we speak we must always speak of being in communion with his Passion and hence accept our own "passion", our own sufferings and trials. In this sense: they are truly proof of Christ's presence, proof that he is with us and that by being in

communion with his Passion we are journeying on towards newness of life, towards Resurrection.

Therefore “bound” is first a word of the theology of the Cross, of the necessary communion of every evangelizer, of every pastor with the supreme Pastor, who redeemed us by “giving himself”, suffering for our sake. Love is suffering, it is giving oneself, it is losing oneself and in this very way is fruitful. Yet, another aspect appears and shines through the external element of the chains, of freedom no longer present: namely, that the true chain which binds Paul to Christ is the bond of love. “A prisoner for love”: a love that gives freedom, a love that enables him to make Christ’s Message and Christ himself present. And for all of us too, this must be the ultimate chain that sets us free, bound to Christ by the chain of love. Thus we find freedom and the true path of life and, with Christ’s love, we can also guide to this love which is joy and freedom, the people entrusted to our care.

And then he says I “beg you” (Eph 4:1); to exhort is his task, but this is not a moralistic warning. I beg from communion with Christ. It is ultimately Christ himself who begs, who invites with the love of a father and a mother. “Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called” (v. 1); in other words the first element: we have been called. I am not anonymous or meaningless in the world: there is a call, there is a voice that has called me, a voice that I follow. And my life must penetrate ever more deeply into the development of the call, following this voice and thereby finding the true way and guiding others on this path.

I am “called... with a calling”. I would say that our first important call is Baptism, to be with Christ; the second important call is to be pastors in his service and we must listen ever more intently to this call so as to be able to call, or better, to help others too so that they may hear the voice of the Lord who calls. A cause of great suffering to the Church today in Europe and in the West is the lack of priestly vocations, but the Lord always calls; it is listening that is lacking. We have heard his voice and must also pay attention to the Lord’s voice on behalf of others, we must help make his call heard and thus ensure that it is accepted and that a path is opened to the vocation to be pastors with Christ.

St Paul goes back to this word “call” at the end of the first paragraph, and speaks of a vocation, a call that is to hope — the call itself is hope. In this way he demonstrates the dimensions of the call: it is not only individual, the call is already a dialogical phenomenon, a phenomenon in the “we”; in the “I and you” and in the “us”. “Called to the one hope”. In this way we see the dimensions of the call; they are three.

A call, ultimately, according to this text, to God. God is the aim; in the end we arrive simply in God and the whole of our journey is a journey towards God. However this journey to God is never isolated, it is never a journey solely in the “I”, but it is a journey towards the future, toward the renewal of the world, and a journey in the “we” of those called who call others, who enable them to hear this call. Therefore the call is always also a vocation in the Church. Being faithful to the Lord’s

call entails discovering this “we” in which and for which we are called, as well as journeying on together to attain the necessary virtues. The “call” involves ecclesiality, hence the vertical and horizontal dimensions which are inseparable from each other; it involves ecclesiality in the sense of letting ourselves be helped by the “we”, and building this “we” of the Church. In this regard, St Paul illustrates the call with this aim: one God alone but in this direction towards the future; hope is in the “we” of those who have hope, who love within hope with several virtues which constitute the very elements of journeying on together.

The first is “with all lowliness” (Eph 4:2). I would like to reflect a little longer on this because it is a virtue that does not appear on the list of pre-Christian virtues. It is a new virtue, the virtue of the “sequela” of Christ. Let us think of chapter two of the Letter to the Philippians: Christ, being equal to God, humbled himself and accepted the form of a servant, obedient even to the Cross (cf. Phil 2:6-8). This is the path of humility taken by the Son which we must imitate. Following Christ means entering into this journey of humility.

The Greek text says *tapeinophrosyne* (Eph 4:2): Let us not think boastfully of ourselves, let us keep things in proportion. Humility. The opposite of humility is pride, the root of all sin. The pride which is arrogance, which above all claims power, appearance, making a good impression on others, being someone or something, does not seek to please God but to please itself, likes being accepted by others and, let us say, being venerated by others.

The “self” is the centre of the world: it is a matter of my proud, all-knowing self. Being Christian means overcoming this original temptation which is also the core of original sin: being like God but without God; to be Christian is to be true, sincere and realistic. Humility is above all truth, living in truth, learning truth, learning that my smallness is actually greatness, because in this way I am important in the great web of God’s history with humanity. Precisely by recognizing that I am a thought of God, in the building of his world, and that I am irreplaceable, in this very way, in my littleness, and only in this way am I great. This is the beginning of being Christian: it is living truth. And only by living truth, the realism of my vocation for others, with others, in the Body of Christ do I live well.

Living against the truth is always living poorly. Let us live the truth! Let us learn this realism: not to want to appear, but to want to please God and do what God has conceived of for me, and thus also accept the other.

Acceptance of the other, who may perhaps be greater than I, implies this very realism and love of the truth; it implies accepting myself as “a thought of God” just as I am, with my limitations and, in this way my greatness. Accepting myself and accepting the other go hand in hand: only by accepting myself in the vast divine fabric, can I also accept others, who with me form the great symphony of the Church and of Creation. I think the small humiliations that we must contend with day after day are healthy, because they help each one to recognize his own truth and thus to be

free from pride that is opposed to the truth and cannot make me either happy or good.

By accepting and learning this, by learning to accept my position in the Church, my small service is great in God's eyes. And this humility itself, this realism, sets us free. If I am arrogant, if I am proud, I always want to please and if I fail to do so I am wretched, I am unhappy and must constantly seek this satisfaction. When on the contrary I am humble, I dispose of the freedom to oppose a prevalent opinion, with thoughts of others, because humility gives me the ability to do so, the freedom of truth. And thus, I would say, we pray the Lord to help us, to help us truly build the community of the Church; may she grow, may we grow in a broad vision of God, of the "we", and be members of the Body of Christ, thus belonging in unity to the Son of God.

The second virtue — but let us be briefer — is "gentleness", says the Italian translation (Eph 4:2), in Greek it is *praus*, that is, "meekness", "patience"; and this too is a Christological virtue like humility, that is following Christ on this way of humility. Thus *praus*, being meek, being patient, is following Christ who says: Come to me, I am gentle and lowly in heart (cf. Mt 11:29). This does not mean weakness. Christ can also be hard, if necessary, but always with a good heart, his goodness, his patience are always visible. In Sacred Scripture "the meek" is sometimes simply the name given to believers, to the little flock of the poor who, in every trial, remain humble and firm in communion with the Lord; seeking this meekness, which is the opposite of violence.

The third Beatitude. The Gospel according to St Matthew says "blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth" (Mt 5:5). It is not the violent who possess the earth, in the end it is the meek who remain. The great promise was made to them and so we must be truly sure of God's promise, of meekness that is stronger than violence. The contrast with violence is concealed in this term "meekness". Christians are not violent, they are against violence.

St Paul continues: "with patience" (Eph 4:2): God is patient. Despite our weaknesses and our sins, he begins with us over and over again. He forgives me, even though he knows that tomorrow I shall once again lapse into sin; he distributes his gifts, even though he knows that we are often inadequate stewards. God is patient and great-hearted, he entrusts his goodness to us. And this patience, this generosity, are once again part of following Christ.

Lastly, "forbearing one another in love" (Eph 4:2); it seems to me that this ability to accept others stems precisely from this humility. The otherness of others is always a burden. Why is the other different? But this diversity itself, this otherness, is necessary to the beauty of God's symphony. And, with the humility with which I recognize my own limitations, my own otherness in the exchange with others, the burden that I am for others, I must become capable not only of tolerating the other but lovingly find in his very otherness also the riches of his being, as well as of the ideas and creativity of God.

All this therefore serves as an ecclesial virtue for building up the Body of Christ, which is the Spirit

of Christ, so that it may once again become an example, a new Body, and grow. Then Paul actually says so, affirming that this whole variety of gifts, of temperaments, of being a person, serves to attain unity (cf. Eph 4:11-13).

All these virtues are also virtues of unity. For example, I find it highly significant that the first Letter after the New Testament, the *First Letter of Clement*, should be addressed to a community, the Corinthians, which was divided and was suffering from its division (cf. PG 1, 201-328). In this Letter, the very word “humility” is a key word: the Corinthians are divided because they lack humility and the absence of humility destroys unity. Humility is a fundamental virtue of unity. Thus only in this way does the unity of the Body of Christ grow and we become really united and receive the riches and beauty of unity. It is therefore logical that the list of these virtues, which are ecclesial and Christological and virtues of unity, should move towards explicit unity: “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” (Eph 4:5). One faith and one Baptism, as concrete realities of the Church which is under the one Lord.

Baptism and faith are inseparable. Baptism is the sacrament of faith and faith has a twofold aspect. It is a profoundly personal act: I know Christ, I encounter Christ and I put my trust in him. Let us think of the woman who touches the hem of his garment in the hope of being healed (cf. Mt 9:20-21); she entrusts herself totally and the Lord says: your faith has made you well (cf. Mt 9:22). He also says to the lepers, to the only one who turns back: your faith has made you well (cf. Lk 17:19). Thus faith is initially and especially a personal encounter, it is touching Christ’s garment, being touched by Christ, being in touch with Christ, to trust in Christ, to have and to find Christ’s love; and the key to truth, to universality, is Christ’s love.

Yet for this very reason, because it is the key to the universality of the one Lord, this faith is not only a personal act of trust, but an act that has a content. The *fides qua* demands the *fides quae*, the content of faith, and Baptism expresses this content: the Trinitarian formula is the essential element of the Christians’ creed. In itself it is a “yes” to Christ, and hence to the Trinitarian God, with this reality, with this content that unites me to this Lord, to this God, who has this Face: he lives as the Son of the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit and in the communion of the Body of Christ. This consequently seems to me to be very important: faith has a content and it is not sufficient, it is not an element of unification unless this content of the one faith is lived and professed.

Therefore “The Year of Faith”, the Year of Catechism — to be very practical — are linked inseparably. We shall renew the Council only by renewing the content — later summed up again — of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. A serious problem for the Church today is the lack of knowledge of the faith, “religious illiteracy”, as the Cardinals described this situation last Friday. “Religious illiteracy” and with this illiteracy we are unable to grow, unity is unable to grow. We ourselves must therefore recover this content, as a wealth of unity, not a packet of dogmas and orders but a unique reality which is revealed in its depths and beauty.

We must do our utmost for a catechetical renewal, so that the faith may be known and in this way God may be known, Christ may be known, the truth may be known, so that unity may develop in truth.

Then all these forms of unity converge in “one God and Father of us all”. All that is not humility, all that is not common faith, destroys unity, destroys hope and makes God’s Face invisible. God is One and Only. Monotheism was the great privilege of Israel, which recognized the one God and remains a constitutive element of the Christian faith. The Trinitarian God — as we know — is not three divinities but one God. And we see better what oneness means, oneness is unity of love. And therefore: precisely because he is a circle of love God is One and Only.

For Paul, as we have seen, God’s oneness is identified with our hope. Why? In what way? Because God’s oneness is hope, because this guarantees us that, in the end, there are no different powers, in the end there is no dualism between different and clashing powers, in the end there is no dragon’s head left which could be raised against God, the filth of evil and sin is no more.

In the end all that is left is light! God is the one and only God: there is no other power against him! We know that today, with the ever increasing evils we experience in the world, many doubt in God’s Almightyness; indeed, various theologians — even good ones — say that God cannot be Almighty because what we see in the world is incompatible with almighty. And in this way they wish to create a new apology, to excuse God and to “exculpate” God from these evils.

However this is not the right way, because if God is not Almighty, if other powers exist and endure he is not truly God and is not truly hope, because in the end there would be polytheism, in the end there would be fighting, the power of evil. God is Almighty, the one God. Of course, in history a limit has been set on his omnipotence, recognizing our freedom. However, in the end everything returns and no other power is left; this is the hope: that the light wins, that love wins! In the end the power of evil does not endure, only God endures! And thus we journey on in hope, walking towards the oneness of the one God, revealed to us by the Holy Spirit in the One Lord, Christ. Then from this great vision St Paul gives a few details, and says of Christ: “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men” (Eph 4:8).

The Apostle quotes Psalm 68[67], which describes poetically God’s ascent to the heights with the Ark of the Covenant, to the top of Mount Zion, toward the temple: God as the conqueror who overcomes others who are prisoners and, as a true conqueror, distributes gifts. Judaism saw in this an image of Moses who climbs Mount Sinai to receive on its summit God’s will, the Commandments, that were not deemed a burden but as it were the gift of knowing the Face of God, the will of God. Paul, in the end, sees here an image of the ascent of Christ who ascends after he has descended; he ascends and draws humanity towards God, he makes room for flesh and blood in God himself; he draws us towards the heights of his being Son and frees us from the

prison of sin, he sets us free because he is a conqueror. Being a conqueror, he gives gifts. And thus from the ascent of Christ we have reached the Church. The gifts are *charis* as such, grace: being in grace, in God's love. And then the charisms that concretize the *charis* in individual functions and missions: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers thereby to build up the Body of Christ (cf. Eph 4:11).

I would not like here to go into a detailed exegesis. What apostles and prophets mean has been widely discussed.... In any case, we can say that the Church is built on the foundations of apostolic faith which continues to be ever present: the Apostles, in apostolic succession, are present in the pastors, whom we are, by the grace of God and in spite of our poverty. And let us all be grateful to God who has wished to call us to be in the apostolic succession and continue to build up the Body of Christ.

Here an element that I think important appears: the ministries — the so-called “ministries” — they are called “gifts of Christ”, they are charisms; that is, this opposition does not exist: on the one hand the ministry, as a juridical component, on the other charisms, as a prophetic, lively and spiritual gift, as a presence of the Spirit and of his newness. No! The ministries themselves are a gift of the Risen One and are charisms, they are articulations of his grace; one cannot be a priest without being charismatic. It is a charism to be a priest.

It seems to me that we must bear this in mind. Being called to the priesthood, being called with a gift of the Lord, with a charism of the Lord. And thus, inspired by his Spirit, we must seek to live this charism of ours. I think it is only in this way that it is possible to understand that the Church in the West has bound inseparably priesthood and celibacy: being in an eschatological existence towards the ultimate destination of our hope, towards God.

This is precisely because the priesthood is a charism and must also be bound to a charism: were it not so, were it merely a juridical element, it would be absurd to impose a charism, which is a true charism; but if the priesthood itself is a charism it is normal that it should coexist with the charism, with the charismatic condition of eschatological life.

Let us pray the Lord that he help us to understand this increasingly, to live increasingly in the charism of the Holy Spirit and thus also to live this eschatological sign of fidelity to the One Lord, which is necessary precisely for our time, with the disintegration of marriage and the family which can only be pieced together in the light of this fidelity to the Lord's one call.

One last point. St Paul speaks of the growth of the perfect man, who reaches the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. We will no longer be children at the mercy of the waves, tossed to and fro and carried about by any wind of doctrine (cf. Eph 4:13-14). “Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him” (Eph 4:15). It is not possible to live in spiritual infancy, in an infantile faith: unfortunately, in this world of ours we see this infancy. Many have

made no further progress after the first catechesis; perhaps the nucleus has remained, or perhaps it too has been destroyed. And, moreover, they are on the waves of the world and nothing else; they cannot, as adults, with skill and with profound conviction, explain and make present the philosophy of faith — so to speak — the great wisdom, the rationality of faith which also opens the eyes of others, which actually opens eyes to what is good and true in the world. Adulthood in faith is lacking and what remains is infancy in faith.

Of course in recent decades we have also experienced another use of the term, “adult faith”. People speak of an “adult faith”, namely, emancipated from the Magisterium of the Church. As long as I am under the mother I am a child, I must emancipate myself; emancipated from the Magisterium, I have finally reached adulthood. But the result is not an adult faith, the result is dependence on the waves of the world, on the opinion of the world, on the dictatorship of the media, of the opinion which is in all minds and which all want. This is not true emancipation, emancipation from the communion of the Body of Christ!

On the contrary, it is falling under the dictatorship of the wind and waves of the world. True emancipation is, precisely, freeing oneself from this dictatorship, in the freedom of God’s children who believe together in the Body of Christ, with the Risen Christ, and thus see reality and are able to respond to the challenges of our time.

It seems to me that we must pray the Lord often to help us to be emancipated in this sense, free in this sense, with a really adult faith which sees, which enables others to see and can also help them arrive at true perfection, and at true adulthood, in communion with Christ.

In this context there is the beautiful expression, *aletheuein en te agape*, being true in charity, living the truth, being truth in charity. The two concepts go hand in hand. Today the concept of truth is somewhat under suspicion, because truth is combined with violence. Unfortunately in history there have also been episodes in which an effort was made to defend truth with violence. But the two are in opposition.

Truth is not imposed with other means than itself! Truth can only come through itself, through its own light. However, we stand in need of truth; without truth we do not know the true values and how could we order the *kosmos* of values? Without truth we are blind in the world, we have no path. The great gift of Christ is precisely that we see the Face of God and, even though we see it enigmatically, very insufficiently, we know its basis, the essential of truth in Christ, in his Body. And in knowing this truth, we also grow in charity, which is the legitimation of the truth and shows us that it is truth.

I would say precisely that charity is the fruit of truth — the tree is known by its fruit — and if there is no charity, then truth is not adopted or lived either; and where truth is, charity comes into being. Thanks be to God, we see this in all the centuries; despite the negative factors, the fruit of charity

has always been present in Christianity and still is today! We see it in the martyrs, we see it in numerous sisters, friars and priests, who humbly serve the poor and the sick, who are a presence of Christ's charity. And in this way they are the great sign that the truth lies here.

Let us pray the Lord that he may help us to bear fruits of charity and thereby to be witnesses of his truth. Many thanks.