



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 26 May 2010

Munus regendi

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Year for Priests, is drawing to a close; therefore I began to talk in the last Catecheses about the essential tasks of the priest: to teach, to sanctify and to govern. I have already given two Catecheses, one on the ministry of sanctification, the Sacraments above all, and one on that of teaching. So it remains for me today to speak of the priest's mission to govern, to guide - with the authority of Christ, not his own the portion of the People that God has entrusted to him.

How can we comprehend in our modern day culture a dimension of this kind that implies the concept of authority and has its origins in the Lord's own mandate to tend his flock? What is authority really, for us Christians? The cultural, political and historical experiences of the recent past, above all the dictatorships in Eastern and Western Europe in the 20th century, have made contemporary man suspicious of this concept. A suspicion which is often expressed in a conviction that it is necessary to eliminate every kind of authority does not come exclusively from man, and is not regulated and controlled by him. But it is precisely in reviewing those regimes which in the last century disseminated terror and death, that we are forcibly reminded that authority, in every circumstance, when it is exercised without reference to the Transcendent, if it neglects the Supreme Authority, which is God, inevitably finishes by turning against man. It is important, therefore, to recognize that human authority is never an end in itself but always and only a means

and that, necessarily and in every age, the end is the person, created by God with his own inviolable dignity and called to relate to his Creator, both along the path of his earthly journey and in eternal life; it is an authority exercised in responsibility before God, before the Creator. An authority whose sole purpose is understood to be to serve the true good of the person and to be a glass through which we can see the one and supreme Good, which is God. Not only is it not foreign to man, but on the contrary, it is a precious help on our journey towards a total fulfilment in Christ, towards salvation.

The Church is called and commits herself to exercise this kind of authority which is service and exercises it not in her own name, but in the name of Jesus Christ, who received from his Father all authority both in Heaven and on Earth (cf. Mt 28: 18) Christ tends his flock through the Pastor of the Church, in fact: it is he who guides, protects and corrects them, because he loves them deeply. But the Lord Jesus, the supreme Shepherd of our souls, has willed that the Apostolic College, today the Bishops, in communion with the Successor of Peter and the priests, their most precious collaborators, to participate in his mission of taking care of God's People, of educating them in the faith and of guiding, inspiring and sustaining the Christian community, or, as the Council puts it, "to see to it... that each member of the faithful shall be led in the Holy Spirit to the full development of his own vocation in accordance with Gospel preaching, and to sincere and active charity" and to exercise that liberty with which Christ has set us free (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6). Every Pastor, therefore, is a means through whom Christ himself loves men: it is through our ministry, dear priests, it is through us that the Lord reaches souls, instructs, guards and guides them. St Augustine, in his *Commentary on the Gospel of St John*, says: "let it therefore be a commitment of love to feed the flock of the Lord" (cf. 123, 5); this is the supreme rule of conduct for the ministers of God, an unconditional love, like that of the Good Shepherd, full of joy, given to all, attentive to those close to us and solicitous for those who are distant (cf. St Augustine, *Discourse* 340, 1; *Discourse* 46, 15), gentle towards the weakest, the little ones, the simple, the sinners, to manifest the infinite mercy of God with the reassuring words of hope (cf. *ibid.*, *Epistle*, 95, 1).

Even if this pastoral task is founded on the Sacraments, its efficacy is not independent of the personal existence of the priest. In order to be a priest according to the heart of God (cf. Jer 3: 15) it is necessary that not only the mind, but also the freedom and the will be deeply rooted in living friendship with Christ, a clear awareness of the identity received in Priestly Ordination, an unconditional readiness to lead the flock entrusted to him where the Lord desires and not in the direction which might, apparently, seem easier or more convenient. This requires, above all, a continuous and progressive willingness to allow Christ himself to govern the sacerdotal life. In fact, no one is really able to feed Christ's flock, unless he lives in profound and true obedience to Christ and the Church, and the docility of the people towards their priests depends on the docility of the priests towards Christ; for this reason the personal and constant encounter with the Lord, profound knowledge of him and the conformation of the individual will to Christ's will is always at the root of the pastoral ministry .

During the last decades, we have heard the adjective "pastoral" used almost as if it were in opposition to the concept of "hierarchical", and in the same way the idea of "communion" has also been set against it. At this point it may be useful to make a brief comment on the word "hierarchy", which is the traditional designation of the structure of sacramental authority within the Church, ordered according to the three levels of the Sacrament of Holy Orders, episcopate, presbyterate, diaconate: The concept of "hierarchy" carries, in public opinion, an element of subordination and of judgement; therefore to many the concept of hierarchy appears to be in contrast with the flexibility and vitality of the pastoral meaning and also appears contrary to the humility of the Gospel. However, this is a misunderstanding of the meaning of hierarchy, which arose in historical times from abuses of authority and careerism. But these are, in fact, abuses, and have nothing to do with the essential meaning of "hierarchy" itself. Common opinion holds that "hierarchy" is something connected with dominion and therefore cannot correspond to the real sense of the Church, that is unity in the love of Christ. But, as I have said, this is a mistaken interpretation, which has its origins in the abuses of the past, but does not correspond to the real meaning of hierarchy. Let us begin with the word. The word hierarchy is generally said to mean "sacred dominion", yet the real meaning is not this, but rather "sacred origin", that is to say: this authority does not come from man himself, but it has its origins in the sacred, in the Sacrament; so it subjects the person in second place to the vocation, to the mystery of Christ; it makes of the individual a servant of Christ, and only as a servant of Christ can he govern and guide for Christ and with Christ. Therefore he who enters into the Sacred Order of the Sacrament, the "hierarchy", is not an autocrat but he enters into a new bond of obedience to Christ: he is tied to Christ in communion with the other members of the Sacred Order, the Priesthood. Nor can the Pope, reference point for all the Pastors and for the communion of the Church, do what he likes; on the contrary, the Pope is the custodian of obedience to Christ, to his word summed up in the "*regula fidei*", in the Creed of the Church, and must lead the way in obedience to Christ and to his Church. Thus hierarchy implies a triple bond: in the first place the bond with Christ and with the order given by Our Lord to his Church; then the bond with the other Pastors in the one communion of the Church; and lastly, the bond with the faithful who are entrusted to the individual, in the order of the Church.

Therefore it is clear that communion and hierarchy are not contrary to each other, but they influence each other. Together they form one thing (hierarchical communion). The Pastor fulfils his role precisely when he guides and protects his flock and sometimes prevents it from scattering. Except in a vision which is clearly and explicitly supernatural, the task of governing which belongs to the priest is incomprehensible. On the contrary, sustained by a sincere desire for the salvation of each believer, he is particularly precious and necessary, also in our time. If the aim is to spread the message of Christ and to lead men and women towards a saving encounter with him, so that they may have life, then the task of guiding appears as a service lived in pure giving, for the edification of the flock in truth and holiness, often going against the tide, and remembering that he who is greater must act as the lesser, and he who governs as he who serves (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 27).

Where can a priest today find the strength for such an exercise of his ministry, in full fidelity to Christ and to the Church, and complete devotion to his flock? There is only one answer: in Christ the Lord. Jesus' way of governing was not through dominion, but in the humble and loving service of the Washing of the feet, and the kingship of Christ over the Universe is not an earthly triumph, but reaches its highest point on the wood of the Cross, which becomes a judgement for the world and a point of reference for the exercising of that authority which is the true expression of pastoral charity. The saints, among them St John Mary Vianney, carried out with love and devotion the task of caring for the portion of God's People entrusted to them, showing themselves to be strong and determined men with the single aim of promoting the true good of souls, and capable of paying a price in person, even to martyrdom, in order to remain faithful to the truth and justice of the Gospel.

Dear priests, "tend the flock of God that is your charge, not by constraint but willingly... being examples to the flock" (1 Pet 5: 2). Therefore, do not be afraid to lead to Christ each one of the brethren whom he has entrusted to you, certain that every word and every action will bear fruit if they come from obedience to God's will: know how to live in appreciating the merits and in recognition of the limits of the culture in which we find ourselves, with the firm assurance that the proclamation of the Gospel is the greatest service to render to man. In fact, there is no greater good, in this earthly life, than to lead people to God, to reawaken faith, to lift the person out of his inertia and desperation, to give the hope that God is near and directs our personal histories and that of the world: this, in the ultimate analysis, is the deep and final meaning of the task of governing that the Lord has given to us. To form Christ in believers, through that process of sanctification that is a conversion of criteria, scale of values, and patterns of behaviour, to allow Christ to live in every one of the faithful. St Paul sums up his pastoral action in these words, "my little children, with whom I am again in travail until Christ be formed in you" (Gal 4: 19).

Dear brothers and sisters, I should like to invite you to pray for me, the Successor of Peter, who have a specific task in governing the Church of Christ, as have all your Bishops and priests. Pray that we may know how to take care of all the sheep, including those that are lost, that make up the flock entrusted to us. You, dear priests, I cordially invite to the closing celebrations of the Year for Priests, to be held on the 9th, 10th, and 11th June, here in Rome: we shall meditate on conversion and on mission, on the gift of the Holy Spirit and on the relationship with Mary Most Holy, and we shall renew our priestly promises, sustained by all the People of God. Thank you!

To Special Groups

I welcome all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Ireland, Sweden, Australia, India, Barbados, Canada and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke Almighty God's blessings of joy and peace!

Finally, I address my greeting to *young people*, to the *sick* and to *newlyweds*. Today the Church remembers St Philip Neri, who is distinguished for his joy and for his special dedication to youth, whom he educated and evangelized through the inspired pastoral initiative of the Oratory. Dear *young people*, look at this saint to learn to live with evangelical simplicity. Dear *sick*, may St Philip Neri help you to make of your suffering an offering to the heavenly Father, in union with Jesus Crucified. And you, dear *newlyweds*, supported by the intercession of St Philip, be inspired always by the Gospel to build a truly Christian family.

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