



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

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[\[Video\]](#)

Year of Faith. The ways that lead to knowledge of God

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday we reflected on the desire for God that human beings carry deep within them. Today I would like to continue to examine this aspect, meditating briefly with you on some of the ways to attain knowledge of God. I wish to recall, however, that God's initiative always precedes every human initiative and on our journey towards him too it is he who first illuminates us, who directs and guides us, ever respecting our inner freedom. It is always he who admits us to intimacy with him, revealing himself and giving us the grace to be able to accept this revelation in faith. Let us never forget St Augustine's experience: it is not we who possess the Truth after having sought it, but the Truth that seeks us out and possesses us.

Nonetheless there are ways that can open the human heart to knowledge of God, there are signs that lead to God. Of course, we often risk being dazzled by the glare of worldliness that makes us less able to follow these paths and to read these signs. Yet God never tires of seeking us, he is faithful to the human being whom he created and redeemed, he stays close to us in our life because he loves us. This is a certainty that must accompany us every day, even if a certain widespread mentality makes it harder for the Church and for Christians to communicate to every creature the joy of the Gospel and to lead everyone to the encounter with Jesus, the one Saviour of the world.

However, this is our mission. It is the mission of the Church and every believer must carry it out joyously, feeling it his own, through an existence truly enlivened by faith, marked by charity, by service to God and to others, and that can radiate hope. This mission shines out above all in the holiness to which we are all called.

Today — as we know — faith, which is all too often not properly understood and contested or rejected, encounters no lack of difficulties and trials. St Peter said to his Christians: “Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence” (1 Pt 3:15). In the past, in the West, in a society deemed Christian, faith was the context in which people acted; the reference and adherence to God were part of daily life for the majority. Rather, it was the person who did not believe who had to justify his or her own incredulity. In our world the situation has changed and, increasingly, it is believers who must be able to account for their faith. In his Encyclical *Fides et Ratio* Blessed John Paul II stressed that faith is also put to the test in our day, riddled with subtle and captious forms of atheism, both theoretical and practical (cf. nn. 46-47). Ever since the Enlightenment the criticism of religion has been gathering momentum; history has also come to be marked by the presence of atheistic systems in which God was seen as a mere projection of the human mind, an illusion and the product of a society already misled by so many alienating factors. Moreover the past century experienced a strong process of secularization under the banner of the absolute autonomy of the human being, considered as the measure and architect of reality, but impoverished by being created “in the image and likeness of God”. A particularly dangerous phenomenon for faith has arisen in our times: indeed a form of atheism exists which we define, precisely, as “practical”, in which the truths of faith or religious rites are not denied but are merely deemed irrelevant to daily life, detached from life, pointless. So it is that people often believe in God in a superficial manner, and live “as though God did not exist” (*etsi Deus non daretur*). In the end, however, this way of life proves even more destructive because it leads to indifference to faith and to the question of God.

In fact human beings, separated from God, are reduced to a single dimension — the horizontal — and this reductionism itself is one of the fundamental causes of the various forms of totalitarianism that have had tragic consequences in the past century, as well as of the crisis of values that we see in the current situation. By obscuring the reference to God the ethical horizon has also been obscured, to leave room for relativism and for an ambiguous conception of freedom which, instead of being liberating, ends by binding human beings to idols. The temptations that Jesus faced in the wilderness before his public ministry vividly symbolize which “idols” entice human beings when they do not go beyond themselves. Were God to lose his centrality man would lose his rightful place, he would no longer fit into creation, into relations with others. What ancient wisdom evokes with the myth of Prometheus has not faded: man thinks he himself can become a “god”, master of life and death.

With this picture before her, the Church, faithful to Christ’s mandate, never ceases to affirm the truth about man and about his destiny. The Second Vatican Council affirms it concisely: “The

dignity of man rests above all on the fact that he is called to communion with God. The invitation to converse with God is addressed to man as soon as he comes into being. For if man exists it is because God has created him through love, and through love continues to hold him in existence. He cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and unless he entrusts himself to his Creator” (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, n. 19).

What answers, therefore, is faith required to give, “with gentleness and reverence” to atheism, to scepticism, to indifference to the vertical dimension, in order that the people of our time may continue to ponder on the existence of God and take paths that lead to him? I want to point out several paths that derive both from natural reflection and from the power of faith itself. I would like to sum them up very briefly in three words: the world, man, faith.

The first word: the world. St Augustine, who spent much of his life seeking the Truth and was grasped by the Truth, wrote a very beautiful and famous passage in which he said: “Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air distending and diffusing itself, question the beauty of the sky... question all these realities. All respond: ‘See, we are beautiful’. Their beauty is a profession [*confessio*]. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One [*Pulcher*] who is not subject to change?” (*Sermo* 241, 2: pl 38, 1134).

I think we should recover — and enable people today to recover — our capacity for contemplating creation, its beauty and its structure. The world is not a shapeless mass of magma, but the better we know it and the better we discover its marvellous mechanisms the more clearly we can see a plan, we see that there is a creative intelligence. Albert Einstein said that in natural law is revealed “an intelligence of such superiority that, compared with it, all the systematic thinking and acting of human beings is an utterly insignificant reflection” (*The World As I See It*, 1949). Consequently a first path that leads to the discovery of God is an attentive contemplation of creation.

The second word: man. Again, St Augustine was to write a famous sentence in which he says that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself (cf. *Confessions* III, 6, 11).

Hence he formulates the invitation, “do not go outside yourself, return to yourself: the truth is higher than my highest and more inward than my innermost self” (*De Vera Religione*, 39, 72). This is another aspect that we risk losing in the noisy and dispersive world in which we live: the ability to pause and look deeply into ourselves and to reinterpret the thirst for the infinite that we bear within us, that impels us to go further and to refer to the One who can quench it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* says: “with his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God's existence” (n. 33).

The third word: faith. We must not forget, especially in the situation of our time, that the life of faith is a path which leads to the knowledge of and encounter with God. Those who believe are united to God and open to his grace, to the power of his love. Thus their existence becomes a witness, not of themselves but of the Risen One, and their faith does not hesitate to shine out in daily life, open to dialogue that expresses deep friendship for the journey of every human being and can bring hope to people in need of redemption, happiness, a future. Faith, in fact, is an encounter with God who speaks and works in history and converts our daily life, transforming within us mentalities, value judgements, decisions and practical actions. Faith is not an illusion, a flight of fancy, a refuge or sentimentalism; rather it is total involvement in the whole of life and is the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News that can set the whole of the person free. A Christian and a community that are active and faithful to the plan of God who loved us first, are privileged paths for those immersed in indifference or in doubt about their life and action. However, this asks each and every one to make their testimony of faith ever more transparent, purifying their life so that it may be in conformity with Christ. Many people today have a limited idea of the Christian faith, because they identify it with a mere system of beliefs and values rather than with the truth of a God who revealed himself in history, anxious to communicate with human beings in a tête-à-tête, in a relationship of love with them. In fact, at the root of every doctrine or value is the event of the encounter between man and God in Jesus Christ. Christianity, before being a moral or an ethic, is the event of love, it is the acceptance of the Person of Jesus. For this reason the Christian and Christian communities must first look and make others look to Christ, the true Way that leads to God.

To special groups:

I greet the participants in the Conference of the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers. I also greet the El Shaddai European Convention. I welcome the Westminster Cathedral Choir and I thank them, and the other choirs present, for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from England, Denmark, Gibraltar, South Africa, Hong Kong, Japan and the United States, I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

I address an affectionate welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims, especially the parish groups, associations and students. I greet the participants of the Forum organized by *Caritas Internationalis* and the missionaries, priests and lay people who are taking part in the course organized by the Pontifical Salesian University: may your visit to the See of Peter encourage spiritual renewal and the commitment to evangelization in everyone.

Lastly, a thought for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Tomorrow we shall be celebrating the Memorial of St Albert the Great, Patron of all who cultivate the natural sciences. Dear *young people*, may you know how to reconcile strict study with the demands of faith; dear

sick people, trust in the help of medicine, but to an even greater extent in God's mercy; and you, dear *newlyweds*, with love and reciprocal esteem, witness to the beauty of the sacrament you have received.

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