



The Holy See

VISIT TO ROME'S PRISON FOR MINORS, "CASAL DEL MARMO"

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Chapel of the Merciful Father

Fourth Sunday of Lent, 18 March 2007

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Dear Boys and Girls,

I have willingly come to pay you a Visit, and the most important moment of our meeting is Holy Mass, where the gift of God's love is renewed: a love that comforts us and gives us peace, especially in life's difficult moments.

In this prayerful atmosphere I would like to address my greeting to each one of you: to the Hon. Mr Clemente Mastella, Minister of Justice, to whom I express a special "thank you"; to Mrs Melita Cavallo, Department Head of Justice for Minors, to the other Authorities who have spoken, to those in charge, to the operators, teachers and personnel of this juvenile penitentiary, to the volunteers, to your relatives and to everyone present.

I greet the Cardinal Vicar and Auxiliary Bishop Benedetto Tùzia.

I greet in particular, Mons. Giorgio Caniato, General Inspector of the Prisons Chaplaincy, and your Chaplain, whom I thank for expressing your sentiments at the beginning of Holy Mass.

In the Eucharistic celebration it is Christ himself who becomes present among us; indeed, even more: he comes to enlighten us with his teaching - in the Liturgy of the Word - and to nourish us with his Body and his Blood - in the Eucharistic Liturgy and in Communion.

Thus, he comes to teach us to love, to make us capable of loving and thereby capable of living. But perhaps you will say, how difficult it is to love seriously and to live well! What is the secret of

love, the secret of life? Let us return to the Gospel [of the Prodigal Son].

In this Gospel three persons appear: the father and two sons. But these people represent two rather different life projects. Both sons lived peacefully, they were fairly well-off farmers so they had enough to live on, selling their produce profitably, and life seemed good.

Yet little by little the younger son came to find this life boring and unsatisfying: "All of life can't be like this", he thought: rising every day, say at six o'clock, then according to Israel's traditions, there must have been a prayer, a reading from the Holy Bible, then they went to work and at the end of the day another prayer.

Thus, day after day he thought: "But no, life is something more. I must find another life where I am truly free, where I can do what I like; a life free from this discipline, from these norms of God's commandments, from my father's orders; I would like to be on my own and have life with all its beauties totally for myself. Now, instead, it is nothing but work...".

And so he decided to claim the whole of his share of his inheritance and leave. His father was very respectful and generous and respected the son's freedom: it was he who had to find his own life project. And he departed, as the Gospel says, to a far-away country. It was probably geographically distant because he wanted a change, but also inwardly distant because he wanted a completely different life.

So his idea was: freedom, doing what I want to do, not recognizing these laws of a God who is remote, not being in the prison of this domestic discipline, but rather doing what is beautiful, what I like, possessing life with all its beauty and fullness.

And at first - we might imagine, perhaps for a few months - everything went smoothly: he found it beautiful to have attained life at last, he felt happy.

Then, however, little by little, he felt bored here, too; here too everything was always the same. And in the end, he was left with an emptiness that was even more disturbing: the feeling that this was still not life became ever more acute; indeed, going ahead with all these things, life drifted further and further away. Everything became empty: the slavery of doing the same things then also re-emerged. And in the end, his money ran out and the young man found that his standard of living was lower than that of swine.

It was then that he began to reflect and wondered if that really was the path to life: a freedom interpreted as doing what I want, living, having life only for me; or if instead it might be more of a life to live for others, to contribute to building the world, to the growth of the human community....

So it was that he set out on a new journey, an inner journey. The boy pondered and considered all

these new aspects of the problem and began to see that he had been far freer at home, since he had also been a landowner contributing to building his home and society in communion with the Creator, knowing the purpose of his life and guessing the project that God had in store for him.

During this interior journey, during this development of a new life project and at the same time living the exterior journey, the younger son was motivated to return, to start his life anew because he now understood that he had taken the wrong track. I must start out afresh with a different concept, he said to himself; I must begin again.

And he arrived at the home of the father who had left him his freedom to give him the chance to understand inwardly what life is and what life is not. The father embraced him with all his love, he offered him a feast and life could start again beginning from this celebration.

The son realized that it is precisely work, humility and daily discipline that create the true feast and true freedom. So he returned home, inwardly matured and purified: he had understood what living is.

Of course, in the future his life would not be easy either, temptations would return, but he was henceforth fully aware that life without God does not work; it lacks the essential, it lacks light, it lacks reason, it lacks the great sense of being human. He understood that we can only know God on the basis of his Word.

We Christians can add that we know who God is from Jesus, in whom the face of God has been truly shown to us. The young man understood that God's Commandments are not obstacles to freedom and to a beautiful life, but signposts on the road on which to travel to find life.

He realized too that work and the discipline of being committed, not to oneself but to others, extends life. And precisely this effort of dedicating oneself through work gives depth to life, because one experiences the pleasure of having at last made a contribution to the growth of this world that becomes freer and more beautiful.

I do not wish at this point to speak of the other son who stayed at home, but in his reaction of envy we see that inwardly he too was dreaming that perhaps it would be far better to take all the freedoms for himself. He too in his heart was "returning home" and understanding once again what life is, understanding that it is truly possible to live only with God, with his Word, in the communion of one's own family, of work; in the communion of the great Family of God.

I do not wish to enter into these details now: let each one of us apply this Gospel to himself in his own way. Our situations are different and each one has his own world. Nonetheless, the fact remains that we are all moved and that we can all enter with our inner journey into the depths of the Gospel.

Only a few more remarks: the Gospel helps us understand who God truly is. He is the Merciful Father who in Jesus loves us beyond all measure.

The errors we commit, even if they are serious, do not corrode the fidelity of his love. In the Sacrament of Confession we can always start out afresh in life. He welcomes us, he restores to us our dignity as his children.

Let us therefore rediscover this sacrament of forgiveness that makes joy well up in a heart reborn to true life.

Furthermore, this parable helps us to understand who the human being is: he is not a "monad", an isolated being who lives only for himself and must have life for himself alone.

On the contrary, we live with others, we were created together with others and only in being with others, in giving ourselves to others, do we find life.

The human being is a creature in whom God has impressed his own image, a creature who is attracted to the horizon of his Grace, but he is also a frail creature exposed to evil but also capable of good. And lastly, the human being is a free person.

We must understand what freedom is and what is only the appearance of freedom.

Freedom, we can say, is a springboard from which to dive into the infinite sea of divine goodness, but it can also become a tilted plane on which to slide towards the abyss of sin and evil and thus also to lose freedom and our dignity.

Dear friends, we are in the [Season of Lent](#), the 40 days before Easter. In this Season of Lent, the Church helps us to make this interior journey and invites us to conversion, which always, even before being an important effort to change our behaviour, is an opportunity to decide to get up and set out again, to abandon sin and to choose to return to God.

Let us - this is the imperative of Lent - make this journey of inner liberation together.

Every time, such as today, that we participate in the Eucharist, the source and school of love, we become capable of living this love, of proclaiming it and witnessing to it with our life.

Nevertheless, we need to decide to walk towards Jesus as the Prodigal Son did, returning inwardly and outwardly to his father.

At the same time, we must abandon the selfish attitude of the older son who was sure of himself, quick to condemn others and closed in his heart to understanding, acceptance and forgiveness of

his brother, and who forgot that he too was in need of forgiveness.

May the Virgin Mary and St Joseph, my Patron Saint whose Feast it will be tomorrow, obtain this gift for us; I now invoke him in a special way for each one of you and for your loved ones.

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