



The Holy See

EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION WITH MEMBERS OF THE PONTIFICAL BIBLICAL COMMISSION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Pauline Chapel, Apostolic Palace
Thursday, 15 April 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I did not find the time to prepare a real Homily. I would just like to invite each one to a personal meditation, proposing and emphasizing certain passages of today's Liturgy, which lend themselves to the prayerful dialogue among us and the Word of God. The word, the phrase that I would like to propose for this communal meditation is this great affirmation by St Peter: "We must obey God rather than men" (Acts 5: 29). St Peter stands before the supreme religious institution, which one should normally obey, but God is above this institution and God has given him another "command": he must obey God. Obedience to God is freedom; obedience to God gives him the liberty to oppose the institution.

And here exegetes draw our attention to the fact that St Peter's response to the Sanhedrim is almost word for word identical to Socrates' response to the sentence at the tribunal in Athens. The tribunal offers him freedom, liberation; on the condition, however, that he does not continue to seek God. But for him searching for God, the quest for God, is a superior mandate, which comes from God himself. And a freedom bought at the price of renouncing the journey towards God would no longer be freedom. Therefore he must not obey these judges he must not purchase his life at the cost of losing himself but must obey God. Obedience to God has priority.

Here it is important to stress that it is a question of obedience and that it is obedience itself that constitutes freedom. The modern age has spoken of the liberation of man, of his full autonomy, hence also of the liberation from obedience to God. Obedience must no longer exist, man is free,

he is autonomous: that is all. However, this autonomy is a lie: it is an ontological falsehood because man does not exist on his own and for himself, and it is also a political and practical falsehood because collaboration, the sharing of freedom is necessary. And if God does not exist, if God is not a reference accessible to man, the consensus of the majority alone remains the supreme reference. Consequently, the consensus of the majority becomes the last word which we must obey. And this consensus we know it from the history of the past century can also be a "consensus in evil".

Thus we see that the so-called autonomy does not truly set man free. Obedience to God is a freedom because it is the truth, it is the reference that comes before all the other human needs. In the history of humanity these words of Peter and of Socrates are the true beacon of the liberation of man, who can see God and, in God's name, can and must obey, not so much human beings, but God, thus freeing himself from the positivism of human obedience. Dictatorships have always been against this obedience to God. The Nazi, and likewise the Marxist dictatorship, could not accept a God who is above ideological power. The freedom of the martyrs, who recognize God precisely in obedience to divine power, is always the act of liberation through which Christ's freedom reaches us.

Today, thanks be to God, we do not live under dictatorships, yet subtle forms of dictatorship exist: a conformism, which becomes obligatory, thinking as everyone thinks, behaving as everyone behaves, and the subtle assaults on the Church or even those that are less subtle show that this conformism can really be a true dictatorship. This is what applies to us: we must obey God rather than men. However this implies that we truly know God and that we truly wish to obey him. God is not a pretext for one's personal will, but is really the One who calls and invites us, if necessary, even to martyrdom. Therefore, in measuring up to this word that ushers in a new history of freedom in the world, let us pray above all to know God, to know God humbly and truly, and in knowing God, to learn true obedience which is the root of human freedom.

Let us choose a second passage from the First Reading. St Paul says that God exalted Jesus at his right hand as Leader and Saviour (cf. Acts 5: 31). Leader is a translation of the Greek terms *archegos*, which implies a far more dynamic vision: *archegos* is the one who shows the way, who goes ahead, it is a movement, an upwards movement. God raised him at his right hand therefore, speaking of Christ as *archegos* means that Christ walks before us, he precedes us, he shows us the way. And being in communion with Christ is being on the way, it is climbing with Christ, it is following Christ, it is the ascent, it is following the *archegos*, the One who has gone before, who precedes us and points out the way.

Here, evidently, it is important that we are told where Christ arrives and where we too must arrive: *hypsothen* on high ascending to the right hand of the Father. The "sequela" of Christ is not only the imitation of his virtues, it is not only living in this world, as far we are able, as Christ lived, in accordance with his words, but it is a journey that has a destination. And the destination is the

right hand of the Father. There is this journey of Jesus, this following of Jesus which ends at the right hand of the Father. The whole of Jesus' journey, even reaching the right hand of the Father fits into the horizon of this "sequela".

In this regard the destination of this journey is eternal life at the right hand of the Father in communion with Christ. Today all too often we are somewhat afraid of speaking about eternal life. We talk of things that are useful for the world, we show that Christianity also helps us to improve the world, but we do not dare to say that its destination is eternal life and that from this destination stem the criteria for life. We must understand anew that Christianity remains a "fragment" unless we think of this destination, that we want to follow the *archegos* to God's height, to the glory of the Son who makes us sons in the Son, and we must once again recognize that only in the great perspective of eternal life does Christianity reveal its full meaning. We must have the courage, the joy, the great hope that eternal life exists, it is the true life and from this true life comes the light that also illuminates this world.

One may even say leaving aside eternal life, the Heaven promised that it is better to live in accordance with Christian criteria because living in accordance with truth and love, even in the midst of so much persecution is in itself good and is better than everything else. It is precisely this will to live in accordance with truth and love that must also be open to the whole breadth of God's plan with us, to the courage to jubilate already at the prospect of eternal life, the ascent, following our *archegos*. And *Soter* is the Saviour, who saves us from ignorance, in seeking the last things. The Saviour saves us from solitude; he saves us from the emptiness that pervades life without eternity; he saves us by giving us love in its fullness. He is the guide. Christ, the *archegos*, saves us by giving us the light, giving us the truth, giving us the love of God.

Next let us reflect further on this verse: Christ, the Saviour, gave to Israel repentance and forgiveness of sins (v. 31) in the Greek text the term is *metanoia* he gave repentance and pardon for sins. This to me is a very important observation: repentance is a grace. There is an exegetical trend that states that in Galilee Jesus would have proclaimed a grace without conditions, absolutely unconditional, therefore also without penitence, grace as such, without human preconditions.

But this is a false interpretation of grace. Repentance is grace; it is a grace that we recognize our sin; it is a grace that we realize the need for renewal, for change, for the transformation of our being. Repentance the capacity to be penitent, is a gift of grace. And I must say that we Christians, even in recent times, have often avoided the word penitence it seemed to us too difficult. Now, under the attacks of the world that speak of our sins, we see that the capacity to repent is a grace. And we see that it is necessary to do penance, that is, to recognize what is wrong in our lives, open ourselves to forgiveness, prepare ourselves for pardon by allowing ourselves to be transformed.

The pain of repentance, of purification and of transformation this pain is a grace, because it is

renewal, it is a work of divine mercy. And thus these two things of which St Peter speaks repentance and forgiveness correspond to Jesus' initial preaching: *metanoete*, in other words, "repent" (cf. Mk 1: 15). Therefore this is the fundamental point: *metanoia* is not a private affair, which appears to be substituted by grace, but rather *metanoia* is the advent of grace that transforms us. And in conclusion, one word of the Gospel, in which we are told that whoever believes will have eternal life (cf. Jn 3: 36). In faith, in this "transformation" that repentance brings, in this conversion, in this new way of living, we arrive at life, at real life.

At this point two other texts come to mind. In the "priestly prayer" the Lord says: this is life, knowing you and your Anointed? (cf. Jn 17: 3). Understanding the essential, knowing the decisive Person, knowing God and the One whom he has sent is life life and understanding the understanding of the realities that constitute life. And the other text is the response of the Lord to the Sadducees regarding the Resurrection, when, using the Books of Moses, the Lord proves the Resurrection as a fact, by saying: God is the God of Abraham, of Isaac, of Jacob (cf. Mt 22: 31-32; Mk 12: 26-27; Lk 20: 37-38). God is not a God of the dead. If God is the God of these, then they live. Whoever is inscribed in God's name participates in God's life, and lives. Therefore to believe is to be inscribed in the name of God. Thus we are alive. Whoever has a share in God's name is not dead but rather belongs to the living God. In this sense we should be able to understand the dynamism of faith, which entails enrolling our names in the name of God and in this way entering into life.

Let us pray the Lord that this may come about and that today, with our own lives, we may truly come to know God, so that our name enter into God's name and our existence become true life: eternal life, love and truth.

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