



The Holy See

HOLY MASS CONCLUDING THE MEETING
WITH THE "RATZINGER SCHÜLERKREIS"

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Mariapoli Centre, Castel Gandolfo

Sunday, 2 September 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The words of Cardinal Schönborn's exegesis, three years ago, of this Gospel passage still resonate within me: the mysterious correlation of the intimate and the exterior are what makes man impure, that which contaminates him and what is pure. Therefore, today I do not wish to comment on this same Gospel passage, or I will only touch upon it. I will try instead to say a word on the two Readings.

In Deuteronomy we see the "joy of the law": law not as a constraint, as something that takes from us our freedom, but as a present and a gift. When other nations look at this great people — as the Letter says, as Moses says — they will say: What wise people! They will admire the wisdom of this people, the justice of the law and the closeness of God who is at their side and answers them when called upon. This is the humble joy of Israel: to receive a gift from God. This is different from triumphalism, from the pride that comes from ourselves: Israel is not proud of her law like Rome may have been of the Roman Law that it gave to humanity, perhaps like France of the Napoleonic Code, like Prussia of the "Preussisches Landrecht", etc. — legislation we all recognize. But Israel knows: this law was not made by her, it was not the fruit of her genius, it was a gift. God showed them what the law was. God gave them wisdom. The law is wisdom. Wisdom is the art of being human, the art of being able to live well and of being able to die well. And one can live and die well only when the truth has been received and shows us the way: to be grateful for the gift that we did not invent, but that we were given, and to live in wisdom; to learn, thanks to the gift of God, how to be human in the right way.

The Gospel shows us, however, that there is also a danger — as it says right at the beginning of today's passage from Deuteronomy: "Do not add anything and do not take anything away". It teaches us that with the passing of time applications, works, and human customs have been added to this gift from God that increasingly hide what is proper to the wisdom given by God, so as to become true bondage that needs to be broken, or to lead us to presumption: we invented it!

But let us now turn to ourselves, to the Church. According to our faith, in deed, the Church is the Israel made universal, in which all become, through the Lord, children of Abraham; Israel has become universal, in it the essential nucleus of the law endures, free from the contingencies of time and people. This nucleus is simply Christ himself, the love of God for us and our love for him and for all men. He is the living Torah, God's gift to us, in whom we now receive all the wisdom of God. In being united to Christ, in the "co-journey" and "co-life" with him, we ourselves learn how to be upright men, we receive the wisdom that is truth, we know how to live and to die, because he is the Life and the Truth.

It is fitting, then, for the Church, as for Israel, to be full of gratitude and joy. "What people can say that God is so close to them? What people have received this gift?". We did not make it; it was given to us. Joy and gratitude for the fact that we can know that we have received the wisdom to live well, that it is what should distinguish the Christian. In fact, in early Christianity it was like this: being free from the shadow of groping along in ignorance — what am I? why am I? how should I move forward? — being made free, being in the light, in the fullness of the truth. This was the fundamental awareness. A gratitude that radiated around and united people in the Church of Jesus Christ.

But even in the Church there is the same phenomenon: human elements are added and they lead either to presumption, the so-called triumphalism of praising self rather than God, or to bondage, which needs to be removed, broken and smashed. What must we do? What must we say? I think that we are precisely at that impasse in which we see in the Church only what we ourselves have made, and our joy in the faith is marred; that we no longer believe and no longer dare to say: he has shown us who the truth is, what the truth is; he has shown us what man is; he has given us the law for an upright life. We are concerned only with praising ourselves and we fear being bound by rules that hinder our freedom and the newness of life.

If we read today, for example, in the Letter of James: "You were made in the word and in the truth", which of us would dare to rejoice in the truth that we have been given? The question immediately arises: but how can one have the truth? This is intolerance! Today the idea of truth and that of intolerance are almost completely fused, and so we no longer dare to believe in the truth or to speak of the truth. It seems to be far away, it seems something better not to refer to. No one can say: I have the truth — this is the objection raised — and, rightly so, no one can have the truth. It is the truth that possesses us, it is a living thing! We do not possess it but are held by it. Only if we allow ourselves to be guided and moved by the truth, do we remain in it. Only if we are,

with it and in it, pilgrims of truth, then it is in us and for us. I think that we need to learn anew about “not-having-the-truth”. Just as no one can say: I have children — they are not our possession, they are a gift, and as a gift from God, they are given to us as a responsibility — so we cannot say: I have the truth, but the truth came to us and impels us. We must learn to be moved and led by it. And then it will shine again: if the truth itself leads us and penetrates us.

Dear friends, let us ask the Lord to give us this gift. St James tells us today in the Reading: you must not limit yourselves to hearing the Word, you must put it into practice. This is a warning about the intellectualization of the faith and of theology. It is one of my fears at this time, when I read so many intellectual things: they become an intellectual game in which “we pass each other the ball”, in which everything is an intellectual sphere that does not penetrate and form our lives, and, thus, does not lead us to the truth. I think that these words of St James are directed to us theologians: do not just listen, do not just intellectualize — be doers, let yourself be formed by the truth, let yourself be led by it! Let us pray to the Lord that this may happen, and that like this the truth may have power over us, and acquire power in the world through us.

The Church has set the words of Deuteronomy — “Where is there a people to whom God is so close as our God is close to us, every time we invoke him?” — at the centre of the Divine Office of *Corpus Christi*, and gave it new meaning: where is there a people to whom God is as close as our God is to us? In the Eucharist this has become the full reality. It is of course not merely an exterior aspect: someone can stand near the tabernacle and, at the same time, be far from the living God. What matters is inner closeness! God came so close to us that he himself became a man: this should disconcert and surprise us again and again! He is so close that he is one of us. He knows the human being, he knows the “feeling” of the human being, he knows it from within; he has experienced all its joys and all its suffering. As a man, he is close to me, close “within earshot” — so close that he hears me and I am aware: He hears me and answers me, even though perhaps not quite as I imagined.

Let us be filled again with this joy: where is there a people to whom God is so close as our God is to us? So close that he is one of us, touches me from within. Yes, he enters me in the holy Eucharist. A bewildering thought. On this process, St Bonaventure once used in his communion prayers a formula that shakes, almost frightens, one. He said: my Lord, how did you ever think of entering the dirty latrine of my body? Yes, he enters into our misery, he does it knowingly and in order to penetrate us, to clean us and to renew us, so that, through us, in us, the truth may be in the world and bring salvation. Let us ask the Lord forgiveness for our indifference, for our misery that makes us think only of ourselves, for our selfishness that does not seek the truth but follows habit, and that perhaps often makes Christianity resemble a mere system of habits. Let us ask that he come with power into our souls, that he be present in us and through us — and that in this way joy may be born in us again: God is here, and loves me. He is our salvation! Amen.

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