



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE COMMUNITY OF THE ROMAN MAJOR SEMINARY
ON OCCASION OF THE FEAST OF OUR LADY OF TRUST

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Saturday, 17 February 2007

Gregorpaolo Stano, Diocese of Oria (First-Year Philosophy):

Your Holiness, ours is the first of two years dedicated to discernment, during which we are taught to make a profound personal examination. It is a tiring exercise for us, because the language of God is special, and only those who are attentive are able to discern it among the thousands of voices clamouring inside us. We are asking you, therefore, to help us to understand how God talks in practice and what clues he gives you in his private pronouncements?

Pope Benedict XVI: As a first word, a "thank you" to Monsignor Rector for his address. I am already curious to read that text you will be writing and also to learn from it. I am not sure whether I can clarify the essential points of life in the seminary, but I shall give it a try.

Now, for the first question: how can we distinguish God's voice from among the thousands of voices we hear each day in our world. I would say: God speaks with us in many different ways. He speaks through others, through friends, parents, pastors, priests. Here, the priests to whom you are entrusted, who are guiding you.

He speaks by means of the events in our life, in which we are able to discern God's touch; he speaks also through nature, creation, and he speaks, naturally and above all, through his Word, in Sacred Scripture, read in the communion of the Church and read personally in conversation with God.

It is important to read Sacred Scripture in a very personal way, and really, as St Paul says, not as a human word or a document from the past as we read Homer or Virgil, but as God's Word which

is ever timely and speaks to me. It is important to learn to understand in a historical text, a text from the past, the living Word of God, that is, to enter into prayer and thus read Sacred Scripture as a conversation with God.

St Augustine often says in his homilies: I knocked on various occasions at the door of this Word until I could perceive what God himself was saying to me. It is of paramount importance to combine this very personal reading, this personal talk with God in which I search for what the Lord is saying to me, and in addition to this personal reading, reading it in the community is very important because the living subject of Sacred Scripture is the People of God, it is the Church.

This Scripture was not simply restricted to great writers- even if the Lord always needs the person and his personal response -, but it developed with people who were travelling together on the journey of the People of God and thus, their words are expressions of this journey, of this reciprocity of God's call and the human response.

Thus, the subject lives today as it lived at that time so that Scripture does not belong to the past, because its subject, the People of God inspired by this same God, is always the same, and therefore the Word is always alive in the living subject.

It is consequently important to read Sacred Scripture and experience Sacred Scripture in the communion of the Church, that is, with all the great witnesses of this Word, beginning with the first Fathers and ending with today's Saints, with today's Magisterium.

Above all, it is a Word that becomes vital and alive in the Liturgy. I would say, therefore, that the Liturgy is the privileged place where every one of us can enter into the "we" of the sons of God, in conversation with God. This is important. The Our Father begins with the words: "Our Father"; only if I am integrated into the "we" of this "Our" can I find the Father; only within this "we", which is the subject of the prayer of the Our Father, do we hear the Word of God clearly.

Thus, this seems to me most important: the Liturgy is the privileged place where the Word is alive, is present, indeed, where the Word, the *Logos*, the Lord, speaks to us and gives himself into our hands; if we are ready to listen to the Lord in this great communion of the Church of all times, we find him. He opens the door to us little by little.

I would say, therefore, that this is the focus for all the other points: we are personally directed on our journey by the Lord, and at the same time we live in the great "we" of the Church, where the Word of God is alive.

Moreover, other points are associated with it: listening to friends, listening to the priests who guide us, listening to the voice of today's Church; hence, listening to the voice of the events of this time and of creation which become decipherable in this profound context.

To sum up, therefore, I would say that God speaks to us in many ways. It is important to be in the "we" of the Church, in the "we" of the life of the Liturgy. It is important that I personalize this "we" in myself; it is important to be attentive to the other voices of the Lord, also letting ourselves be guided by the people who have experience of God, so to speak, and help us on this journey, so that this "we" becomes my "we", and I become one who truly belongs to this "we".

Thus, discernment grows, and personal friendship with God grows, the capacity to distinguish God's voice among the thousands of voices of today, which is always present and always speaks with us.

Claudio Fabbri, Diocese of Rome (Second-Year Philosophy):

Holy Father, how was the period of your formation to the priesthood organized? What interests did you cultivate? Considering the experience you have had, what are the cardinal points of priestly formation? In particular, what place does Mary occupy in it?

Pope Benedict XVI: I think that our life at our seminary in Freising was organized in a very similar way to yours, even if I do not know your exact daily schedule. I think the day began at 6: 30 or 7 a.m. with a half hour's meditation, when each one spoke silently with the Lord, trying to prepare his soul for the Sacred Liturgy. Holy Mass followed, breakfast, and then the morning lessons.

In the afternoon, seminars, study time, and then again common prayer. In the evening, the so-called "*puncta*", which is when the spiritual director or rector of the seminary spoke to us on various evenings to help us discover the path of meditation; they did not give us a meditation composed in advance, but elements that might help each one of us personalize the Word of the Lord that was to be the object of our meditation.

This was the daily itinerary; then naturally, there were the great feast days with a beautiful liturgy, music.... But it seems to me, and perhaps I will return to this at the end, that it is very important to have a discipline that precedes me and not to have to decide again, every day, what to do and how to live. There is a rule, a set discipline that waits for me and helps me live this in an orderly way.

Now, as to my preferences, naturally I followed the lessons with attention, as best I could. Initially, in the first two years of philosophy, it was above all the figure of St Augustine who fascinated me from the very start, then also the Augustinian current in the Middle Ages: St Bonaventure, the great Franciscans, the figure of St Francis of Assisi.

Above all, I found St Augustine's great humanity fascinating, because from the outset as a

catechumen he was simply unable to identify with the Church, but instead had to have a spiritual struggle to find, little by little, access to the Word of God, to life with God, until he said his great "yes" to his Church.

This journey is so human. In it, we can also today see how one begins to enter into contact with God, how all the forms of our natural resistance must be taken seriously and then channelled to arrive at the great "yes" to the Lord. Thus, his theology conquered me in a very personal way, developed above all by preaching.

This is important because at the outset Augustine wanted to live a purely contemplative life, to write more books on philosophy... but the Lord did not want him to, he made Augustine a priest and Bishop and so for the rest of his life, his work developed essentially in dialogue with a very simple people.

Moreover, he must have always personally discovered the meaning of the Scriptures, and likewise, must have taken this people's ability, their life context, into account to arrive at a realistic and at the same time very profound Christianity.

Then, naturally, for me exegesis was very important: we had two somewhat liberal but nevertheless great exegetes, also true believers, who fascinated us. I can say that Sacred Scripture really was the soul of our theological studies: we truly lived with Sacred Scripture and learned to love it, to converse with it.

I have already spoken of Patristics, of the encounter with the Fathers. Our dogmatics professor was also a very famous person and had nourished his dogmatics with the Fathers and with the Liturgy.

In his opinion, our liturgical formation was a very central point: there were still no liturgical faculties at that time, but our professor of pastoral studies gave us great courses in liturgy, and at the time he was also Rector of the seminary, so the liturgy was lived and celebrated, and thus liturgy taught and thought went together. These, together with Sacred Scripture, were the crucial points of our theological formation. I am always thankful to the Lord for this, because together they truly are the centre of a priestly life.

Another interest was literature: it was obligatory to read Dostoevsky, it was fashionable at that time; then there were also the great French writers: Claudel, Mauriac, Bernanos and also German literature. Furthermore, there was a German edition of Manzoni: at that time I did not speak Italian. So it was that in this sense we gave some sort of form to our human horizon.

Another great love was music, as well as the natural beauty of our land. With these preferences, these realities, I forged ahead on a journey that was not always easy. The Lord helped me to

arrive as far as the "yes" of the priesthood, a "yes" that has accompanied me every day of my life.

Gianpiero Savino, Diocese of Taranto (First-Year Theology):

In the eyes of most people we might appear as young men who say their "yes" firmly and courageously and leave everything to follow the Lord; but we know that we are far from being truly consistent with that "yes". Trusting as sons, we confess to you the partiality of our response to Jesus' call and the daily effort of living a vocation that we feel is propelling us along the path of the definitive and the total. How can we respond to such a demanding vocation as that of shepherds of God's holy People while being constantly aware of our weakness and inconsistencies?

Benedict XVI: It is good to recognize one's weakness because in this way we know that we stand in need of the Lord's grace. The Lord comforts us. In the Apostolic College there was not only Judas but also the good Apostles; yet, Peter fell and many times the Lord reprimanded the Apostles for their slowness, the closure of their hearts and their scant faith. He therefore simply shows us that none of us is equal to this great yes, equal to celebrating "*in persona Christi*", to living coherently in this context, to being united to Christ in his priestly mission.

To console us, the Lord has also given us these parables of the net with the good fish and the bad fish, of the field where wheat but also tares grow. He makes us realize that he came precisely to help us in our weakness, and that he did not come, as he says, to call the just, those who claim they are righteous through and through and are not in need of grace, those who pray praising themselves; but he came to call those who know they are lacking, to provoke those who know they need the Lord's forgiveness every day, that they need his grace in order to progress.

I think this is very important: to recognize that we need an ongoing conversion, that we are simply not there yet. St Augustine, at the moment of his conversion, thought he had reached the heights of life with God, of the beauty of the sun that is his Word. He then had to understand that the journey after conversion is still a journey of conversion, that it remains a journey where the broad perspectives, joys and lights of the Lord are not absent; but nor are dark valleys absent through which we must wend our way with trust, relying on the goodness of the Lord.

Therefore, also the Sacrament of Reconciliation is important. It is not correct to think we must live like this, so that we are never in need of pardon. We must accept our frailty but keep on going, not giving up but moving forward and becoming converted ever anew through the Sacrament of Reconciliation for a new start, and thus grow and mature in the Lord by our communion with him.

It is also important of course not to isolate oneself, not to believe one is capable of going ahead alone. We truly need the company of priest friends and also lay friends who accompany and help

us. It is very important for a priest, in the parish itself, to see how people trust in him and to experience in addition to their trust also their generosity in pardoning his weaknesses. True friends challenge us and help us to be faithful on our journey. It seems to me that this attitude of patience and humility can help us to be kind to others, to understand the weaknesses of others and also help them to forgive as we forgive.

I think I am not being indiscrete if I say that today I received a beautiful letter from Cardinal Martini: I had congratulated him on his 80th birthday - we are the same age; in thanking me he wrote: "I thank the Lord above all for the gift of perseverance. Today", he writes, "good is done rather *ad tempus, ad experimentum*. Good, in accordance with its essence, can only be done definitively; but to do it definitively we need the grace of perseverance. I pray each day", he concluded, "that the Lord will grant me this grace".

I return to St Augustine: at first he was content with the grace of conversion; then he discovered the need for another grace, the grace of perseverance, one which we must ask the Lord for each day; but since - I return to what Cardinal Martini said - "the Lord has given me the grace of perseverance until now, I hope he will also give it to me in the last stage of my journey on this earth".

It seems to me that we must have trust in this gift of perseverance, but we must also pray to the Lord with tenacity, humility and patience to help and sustain us with the gift of true "definitiveness", and to accompany us day after day to the very end, even if our way must pass through dark valleys.

The gift of perseverance gives us joy, it gives us the certainty that we are loved by the Lord, and this love sustains us, helps us and does not abandon us in our weakness.

Koicio Dimov, Diocese of Nicopolis, Bulgaria (Second-Year Theology):

Most Blessed Father, commenting on the Way of the Cross in 2005, you spoke of the dirt in the Church; and in the Homily for the ordination of the Roman priests last year, you warned us of the risk "of careerism, the attempt to get to the top, to obtain a position through the Church". How do we face these problems as serenely and responsibly as possible?

Benedict XVI: It is not an easy question, but it seems to me that I have already said, and it is an important point, that the Lord knows, knew from the beginning, that there is also sin in the Church, and for our humility it is important to recognize this and to see sin not only in others, in structures, in lofty hierarchical duties, but also in ourselves, to be in this way more humble and to learn that what counts before the Lord is not an ecclesial position, but what counts is to be in his love and to make his love shine forth.

Personally I consider St Ignatius' prayer on this point to be very important. It says: "*Suscipe, Domine, universam meam libertatem; accipe memoriam, intellectum atque voluntatem omnem; quidquid habeo vel possideo mihi largitus es; id tibi totum restitui ac tuae prorsus voluntati traoui gubernandum; amorem tuum cum gratia tua mihi dones ed dives sum satis, nec aliud quidquam ultra posco*".

Precisely this last part seems to me to be very important: to understand that the true treasure of our life is living in the Lord's love and never losing this love. Then we are really rich. A man who has discovered a great love feels really rich and knows that this is the true pearl, that this is the treasure of his life and not all the other things he may possess.

We have found, indeed, we have been found by the love of the Lord, and the more we let ourselves be moved by his love in sacramental life, in prayer life, in the life of work, in our free time, the better we will understand that indeed, I have found the true pearl, all the rest is worthless, all the rest is important only to the extent that the Lord's love attributes these things to me. I am rich, I am truly rich and borne aloft if I am in this love. Here I find the centre of life, its riches. Then let us allow ourselves to be guided, let us allow Providence to decide what to do with us.

Here a little story springs to my mind about St Bakhita, the beautiful African Saint who was a slave in Sudan and then discovered the faith in Italy, who became a Sister. When she was old, the Bishop who was paying a visit to her religious house had not met her. He spotted this small, bent African Sister and said to Bakhita: "But what do you do, Sister?"; and Sr Bakhita replied: "I do the same as you, Your Excellency". Astonished, the Bishop asked her: "But what?", and Bakhita answered, "But Your Excellency, we both want to do the same thing: God's will".

This seems to me to be a most beautiful answer, the Bishop and the tiny Sister who was almost no longer capable of working, who were both doing the same thing in their different offices; they were seeking to do God's will and so were in the right place.

I also remember something St Augustine said: All of us are always only disciples of Christ, and his throne is loftier, for his throne is the Cross and only this height is the true height, communion with the Lord, also in his Passion. It seems to me, if we begin to understand this by a life of daily prayer, by a life of dedicated service to the Lord, we can free ourselves of these very human temptations.

Francesco Annesi, Diocese of Rome (Third-Year Theology):

Your Holiness, John Paul II's Apostolic Letter [Salvifici Doloris](#) makes it clear that suffering is a source of spiritual wealth for all who accept it in union with the sufferings of Christ. How can the

priest today witness to the Christian meaning of suffering in a world that resorts to every legal or illegal means to eliminate any form of pain, and how should he behave towards those who are suffering without running the risk of being rhetorical or pathetic?

Benedict XVI: Yes, what is he to do? Well, I think we should recognize that it is right to do our utmost to overcome the suffering of humanity and to help those suffering - there are so many of them in the world - to find a good life and to be relieved from the evils that we ourselves often cause: hunger, epidemics, etc.

However, at the same time, recognizing this duty to alleviate the suffering we ourselves have caused, we must also recognize and understand that suffering is an essential part of our human development.

I am thinking of the Lord's parable of the grain of wheat that fell to the ground and only in this way, by dying, could it bear fruit; and this falling to the ground and dying is not a momentary event but precisely a life process: to fall like a seed into the earth and thus to die, being transformed, being instruments of God so as to bear fruit.

It was not by chance that the Lord told his disciples: the Son of Man must go to Jerusalem to suffer; therefore, anyone who wants to be a disciple of mine must shoulder his cross so he can follow me. In fact, we are always somewhat similar to Peter, who said to the Lord: "No, Lord, this cannot happen to you, you must not suffer". We do not want to carry the Cross, we want to create a kingdom that is more human, more beautiful, on this earth.

This is totally mistaken: the Lord teaches it. However, Peter needed a lot of time, perhaps his entire life, in order to understand it; why is there this legend of the *Quo Vadis*? There is something true in it: learning that it is precisely in walking with the Lord's Cross that the journey will bear fruit. Thus, I would say that before talking to others, we ourselves must understand the mystery of the Cross.

Of course, Christianity gives us joy, for love gives joy. But love is also always a process of losing oneself, hence, a process of coming out of oneself; in this regard, it is also a painful process. Only in this way is it beautiful and helps us to mature and to attain true joy.

Anyone who seeks to affirm or to promise a life that is only happy and easy is a liar, because this is not the truth about man; the result is that one then has to flee to false paradises. And in this way one does not attain joy but self-destruction.

Christianity proclaims joy to us, indeed; this joy, however, only develops on the path of love, and this path of love has to do with the Cross, with communion with the Crucified Christ. And it is presented through the grain of wheat that fell to the ground. When we begin to understand and accept this - every day, because every day brings some disappointment or other, some burden

that may also cause pain -, when we accept this lesson of following Christ, just as the Apostles had to learn at this school, so we too will become capable of helping the suffering.

It is true that it is always difficult, if one who is more or less healthy and in good condition is obliged to comfort someone afflicted by a great evil, whether illness or the loss of love. In the face of these evils with which we are all familiar, everything appears almost inevitably rhetorical and pathetic.

Yet, I would say, if these people feel that we are "com-passionate", that we want to share in carrying the Cross with them in communion with Christ, above all by praying with them, helping them with a silence full of sympathy, love, helping them as best we can, then can we become credible.

We must accept this, as perhaps at first our words appear purely words. However, if we really live in this spirit of truly following Jesus, we also find the way to be close with our sympathy. Etymologically, sympathy means "com-passion" for the human being, helping him, praying, and thereby creating trust in the Lord's goodness that also exists in the darkest valley. Thus, we can open our hearts to the Gospel of Christ himself, who is the true Consoler; opening our hearts to the Holy Spirit, who is called the other Consoler, the other Paraclete, who is there, who is present. We can open our hearts not because of our words, but because of the important teaching of Christ, his being with us, and thereby help make suffering and pain truly a grace of maturation, of communion with the Crucified and Risen Christ.

Marco Ceccarelli: Diocese of Rome, (Deacon):

Your Holiness, in the coming months my companions and I will be ordained priests. We will move from a well-regulated seminary life to the broader context of parish life. What advice can you give us to enable us to adjust as well as possible at the beginning of our priestly ministry?

Benedict XVI: Well, here at the seminary you do have a very good routine. I would say as the first point that it is also important in the life of pastors of the Church, in the daily life of the priest, to preserve as far as possible a certain order. You should never skip Mass - a day without the Eucharist is incomplete - and thus already at the seminary we grow up with this daily liturgy. It seems to me very important that we feel the need to be with the Lord in the Eucharist, not as a professional obligation but truly as an interiorly-felt duty, so that the Eucharist should never be missed.

Another important point is to make time for the Liturgy of the Hours and therefore, for this inner freedom: with all the burdens that exist, it frees us and helps us to be more open, to be deeply in

touch with the Lord.

Of course, we must do all that is required by pastoral life, by the life of a parochial vicar or of a parish priest or by another priestly office. However, I would say, never forget these fixed points, the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours, so that you have a certain order in the daily routine. As I said at the outset, we learned not to have to plan the timetable ever anew; "*Serva ordinem et ordo servabit te*". These are true words.

Next, it is important not to neglect communion with other priests, with one's companions on the way, and not to lose one's personal contact with the Word of God, meditation. How should this be done? I have a fairly simple recipe for it: combine the preparation of the Sunday homily with personal meditation to ensure that these words are not only spoken to others but are really words said by the Lord to me myself, and developed in a personal conversation with the Lord.

For this to be possible, my advice is to begin early on Monday, for if one begins on Saturday it is too late, the preparation is hurried and perhaps inspiration is lacking, for one has other things on one's mind. Therefore, I would say, already on Monday, simply read the Readings for the coming Sunday which perhaps seem very difficult: a little like those rocks at Massah and Meribah, where Moses said: "But how can water come from these rocks?".

Then stop thinking about these Readings and allow the heart to digest them. Words are processed in the unconscious, and return a little more every day. Obviously, books should also be consulted, as far as possible. And with this interior process, day by day, one sees that a response gradually develops. These words gradually unfold, they become words for me. And since I am a contemporary, they also become words for others. I can then begin to express what I perhaps see in my own theological language in the language of others; the fundamental thought, however, remains the same for others and for myself.

Thus, it is possible to have a lasting and silent encounter with the Word that does not demand a lot of time, which perhaps we do not have. But save a little time: only in this way does a Sunday homily mature for others, but my own heart is also touched by the Lord's Word. I am also in touch with a situation when perhaps I have little time available.

I would not dare now to offer too much advice, because life in the large city of Rome is a little different to what I experienced 55 years ago in our Bavaria. But I think these things are essential: the Eucharist, the Office of Readings, prayer and a conversation every day, even a brief one, with the Lord on his words which I must proclaim. And never lose either your friendship with priests, listening to the voice of the living Church, or naturally, availability to the people entrusted to me, because from these very people, with their suffering, their faith experiences, their doubts and difficulties, we too can learn, seek and find God, find our Lord Jesus Christ.

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