



The Holy See

MEETING WITH THE PARISH PRIESTS OF THE DIOCESE OF ROME

"LECTIO DIVINA" OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Hall of Blessings

Thursday, 18 February 2010

Your Eminence,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

It is always a very joyful as well as an important tradition for me to be able to begin Lent with my Presbyterium, the Priests of Rome. Thus, as the local Church of Rome but also as the universal Church, we can start out on this essential journey with the Lord towards the Passion, towards the Cross, the Easter journey.

Let us meditate this year on the passages from the Letter to the Hebrews that have just been read. The Author of this Letter introduced a new way of understanding the Old Testament as a Book that speaks of Christ. The previous tradition had seen Christ above all, essentially, in the key of the Davidic promise, the promise of the true David, of the true Solomon, of the true King of Israel, the true King since he was both man and God. And the inscription on the Cross truly proclaimed this reality to the world: now there is the true King of Israel, who is King of the world, the King of the Jews hangs on the Cross. It is a proclamation of the kingship of Jesus, of the fulfilment of the messianic expectation of the Old Testament which, at the bottom of their hearts, is shared by all men and women who await the true King who will bring justice, love and brotherhood.

However, the Author of the Letter to the Hebrews discovered a citation which until then had gone unnoticed: Psalm 110 [109]: 4 "You are a priest for ever after the order of Melchizedek". This means that not only does Jesus fulfil the Davidic promise, the expectation of the true King of Israel and of the world, but he also makes the promise of the real Priest come true. In a part of the Old

Testament and especially in Qumran there are two separate lines of expectation: of the King and of the Priest. In discovering this verse, the Author of the Letter to the Hebrews realized that the two promises are united in Christ: Christ is the true King, the Son of God in accordance with Psalm 2: 7, from which he quotes but he is also the true Priest.

Thus the whole of the religious world, the whole reality of sacrifices, of the priesthood that is in search of the true priesthood, the true sacrifice, finds in Christ its key, its fulfilment. And with this key it can reinterpret the Old Testament and show precisely that also the religious law abolished after the destruction of the Temple was actually moving towards Christ. Hence it was not really abolished but renewed, transformed, so that in Christ all things might find their meaning. The priesthood thus appears in its purity and in its profound depth.

In this way the Letter to the Hebrews presents the theme of the priesthood of Christ, of Christ the priest, at three levels: the priesthood of Aaron, that of the Temple; Melchizedek; and Christ himself as the true priest. Indeed, the priesthood of Aaron, in spite of being different from Christ's priesthood, in spite of being, so to speak, solely a quest, a journey in the direction of Christ, is nevertheless a "journey" towards Christ and in this priesthood the essential elements are already outlined. Then Melchizedek we shall return to this point who is a pagan. The pagan world enters the Old Testament. It enters as a mysterious figure, without father or mother the Letter to the Hebrews says it simply appears, and in this figure can be seen the true veneration of the Most High God, of the Creator of the Heavens and of the earth. Thus the pagan world too experiences the expectation and profound prefiguration of Christ's mystery. In Christ himself everything is recapitulated, purified and led to its term, to its true essence.

Let us now look at the individual elements concerning the priesthood as best we can. We learn two things from the Law, from the priesthood of Aaron, the Author of the Letter to the Hebrews says: if he is truly to be a mediator between God and man, a priest must be man. This is fundamental and the Son of God was made man precisely in order to be a priest, to be able to fulfil the priest's mission. He must be man we shall come back to this point but he is unable, on his own, to make himself a mediator for God. The priest needs divine authorization, institution, and only by belonging to both spheres the divine and the human can he be a mediator, can he be a "bridge". This is the priest's mission: to combine, to link these two realities that appear to be so separate, that is, the world of God far from us, often unknown to the human being and our human world. The priest's mission is to be a mediator, a bridge that connects, and thereby to bring human beings to God, to his redemption, to his true light, to his true life.

As the first point, therefore, the priest must be on God's side. Only in Christ is this need, this prerequisite of mediation fully brought about. This Mystery was therefore necessary: the Son of God is made man so that he may be the true bridge for us, the true mediation. Others must have at least an authorization from God, or in the Church's case, the Sacrament, that is they must introduce our being into the being of Christ, into divine being. Only with the Sacrament, this divine

act that makes us priests in communion with Christ, can we accomplish our mission. And this seems to me a first point for our meditation: the importance of the Sacrament. No one can become a priest by himself; God alone can attract me, can authorize me, can introduce me into participation in Christ's mystery; God alone can enter my life and take me by the hand. This aspect of divine giving, of divine precedence, of divine action that we ourselves cannot bring about and our passivity being chosen and taken by the hand by God is a fundamental point we must enter into. We must always return to the Sacrament, to this gift in which God gives me what I will never be able to give; participation, communion with divine being, with the priesthood of Christ.

Let us also make this reality a practical factor in our life: if this is how it is, a priest must really be a man of God, he must know God intimately and know him in communion with Christ and so we must live this communion; and the celebration of Holy Mass, the prayer of the Breviary, all our personal prayers are elements of being with God, of being men of God. Our being, our life and our heart must be fixed in God, in this point from which we must not stir. This is achieved and reinforced day after day with short prayers in which we reconnect with God and become, increasingly, men of God who live in his communion and can thus speak of God and lead people to God.

The other element is that the priest must be man, human in all senses. That is, he must live true humanity, true humanism; he must be educated, have a human formation, human virtues; he must develop his intelligence, his will, his sentiments, his affections; he must be a true man, a man according to the will of the Creator, of the Redeemer, for we know that the human being is wounded and the question of "what man is" is obscured by the event of sin that hurt human nature even to the quick. Thus people say: "he lied" "it is human"; "he stole" "it is human"; but this is not really being human. Human means being generous, being good, being a just person, it means true prudence and wisdom. Therefore emerging with Christ's help from this dark area in our nature so as to succeed in being truly human in the image of God is a lifelong process that must begin in our training for the priesthood. It must subsequently be achieved, however, and continue as long as we live. I think that basically these two things go hand in hand: being of God and with God and being true man, in the true sense meant by the Creator when he formed this creature that we are.

To be man: the Letter to the Hebrews stresses our humanity; we find this surprising for it says: "He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness" (5: 2). And then even more forcefully "In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to him who was able to save him from death, and he was heard for his godly fear" (5: 7). For the Letter to the Hebrews, the essential element of our being human is being compassionate, suffering with others: this is true humanity. It is not sin because sin is never solidarity but always tears solidarity apart, it is living life for oneself instead of giving it. True humanity is real participation in the suffering of human beings. It means being a compassionate person *metriopathèin*, the Greek text says that is, being at the core of human passion, really bearing with others the burden of their suffering, the temptation of our time: "God,

where are you in this world?".

The humanity of the priest does not correspond to the Platonic or Aristotelian ideal which claims that the true man is the one who lives in contemplation of the truth alone and so is blessed happy because he only has friendship with beautiful things, with divine beauty, while "the work" is left to others. This is a hypothesis; whereas here it is implied that the priest enter, like Christ, into human wretchedness, carry it with him, visit those who are suffering and look after them and, not only outwardly but also inwardly, take upon himself, recapitulate in himself the "passion" of his time, of his parish, of the people entrusted to his care. This is how Christ showed his true humanity. Of course, his Heart was always fixed on God, he always saw God, he was always in intimate conversation with him. Yet at the same time he bore the whole being, the whole of human suffering entered the Passion. In speaking, in seeing people who were lowly, who had no pastor, he suffered with them. Moreover, we priests cannot withdraw to an *Elysium*. Let us rather be immersed in the passion of this world and with Christ's help and in communion with him, we must seek to transform it, to bring it to God.

Precisely this should be said, with the following really stimulating text: "Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears" (Heb 5: 7). This is not only a reference to the hour of anguish on the Mount of Olives but sums up the whole history of the Passion that embraces Jesus' entire life. Tears: Jesus wept by the tomb of Lazarus, he was truly moved inwardly by the mystery of death, by the terror of death. People forgive the brother, as in this case, the mother and the son, the friend: all the dreadfulness of death that destroys love, that destroys relationships, that is a sign of our finiteness, our poverty. Jesus is put to the test and he confronts this mystery in the very depths of his soul in the sorrow that is death and weeps. He weeps before Jerusalem, seeing the destruction of the beautiful city because of disobedience; he weeps, seeing all the destruction of the world's history; he weeps, seeing that people destroy themselves and their cities with violence and with disobedience.

Jesus weeps with loud cries. We know from the Gospels that Jesus cried out from the Cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (Mk 15: 34; cf. Mt 27: 46) and cried out once again at the end. And this cry responds to a fundamental dimension of the Psalm: in the terrible moments of human life many Psalms are a loud cry to God: "Help us, hear us!". On this very day, in the Breviary, we prayed like this: God, where are you? "You have made us like sheep for slaughter" (Ps 44[43]: 11 [rsv]). A cry of suffering humanity! And Jesus, who is the true subject of the Psalms, truly bears this cry of humanity to God, to God's ears: "help us and hear us!". He transforms the whole of suffering humanity, taking it to himself in a cry to God to hear him.

Thus we see that in this very way he brings about the priesthood, the function of mediator, bearing in himself, taking on in himself the sufferings and passion of the world, transforming it into a cry to God, bringing it before the eyes and to the hands of God and thus truly bringing it to the moment of redemption.

In fact the Letter to the Hebrews says that "he offered up prayers and supplications", "loud cries and tears" (5: 7). It is a correct translation of the verb *prosphèrein*. This is a religious word and expresses the act of offering human gifts to God, it expresses precisely the act of offering, of sacrifice. Thus with these religious terms applied to the prayers and tears of Christ, it shows that Christ's tears, his anguish on the Mount of Olives, his cry on the Cross, all his suffering are nothing in comparison with his important mission. In this very way he makes his sacrifice, he becomes the priest. With this "offered", *prosphèrein*, the Letter to the Hebrews says to us: this is the fulfilment of his priesthood, thus he brings humanity to God, in this way he becomes mediator, he becomes priest.

We say, rightly, that Jesus did not offer God some thing. Rather, he offered himself and made this offering of himself with the very compassion that transforms the suffering of the world into prayer and into a cry to the Father. Nor, in this sense, is our own priesthood limited to the religious act of Holy Mass in which everything is placed in Christ's hands but all of our compassion to the suffering of this world so remote from God is a priestly act, it is *prosphèrein*, it is offering up. In this regard, in my opinion, we must understand and learn how to accept more profoundly the sufferings of pastoral life, because priestly action is exactly this, it is mediation, it is entering into the mystery of Christ, it is communication with the mystery of Christ, very real and essential, existential and then sacramental.

A second term in this context is important. It is said that by means of this obedience Christ is made perfect, in Greek *teleiòthès* (cf. Heb 5: 8-9). We know that throughout the Torah, that is, in all religious legislation, the word *tèleion*, used here, means priestly ordination. In other words the Letter to the Hebrews tells us that precisely by doing this Jesus was made a priest, and his priesthood was fulfilled. Our sacramental priestly ordination should be brought about and achieved existentially but also Christologically, and through precisely this, should bring the world with Christ and to Christ and, with Christ, to God: thus we really become priests, *teleiòthès*. Therefore the priest is not a thing for a few hours but is fulfilled precisely in pastoral life, in his sufferings and his weaknesses, in his sorrows and also in his joys, of course. In this way we increasingly become priests in communion with Christ.

Finally the Letter to the Hebrews sums up all this compassion in the word *hypakoèn*, obedience: it is all obedience. This is an unpopular word in our day. Obedience appears as an alienation, a servile attitude. One does not enjoy one's own freedom, one's freedom is subjected to another's will, hence one is no longer free but determined by another, whereas self-determination, emancipation, would be true human existence. Instead of the word "obedience", as an anthropological keyword we would like the term "freedom". Yet, on considering this problem closely, we see that these two things go together: Christ's obedience is the conformity of his will with the will of the Father; it is bringing the human will to the divine will, to the conformation of our will with God's will.

In his interpretation of the Mount of Olives, of the anguish expressed precisely in Jesus' prayer, "not my will but your will", St Maximus Confessor described this process that Christ carries in himself as a true man, together with the human nature and will; in this act "not my will but your will" Jesus recapitulates the whole process of his life, of leading, that is, natural human life to divine life and thereby transforming the human being. It is the divinization of the human being, hence the redemption of the human being, because God's will is not a tyrannical will, is not a will outside our being but is the creative will itself; it is the very place where we find our true identity.

God created us and we are ourselves if we conform with his will; only in this way do we enter into the truth of our being and are not alienated. On the contrary, alienation occurs precisely by disregarding God's will, for in this way we stray from the plan for our existence; we are no longer ourselves and we fall into the void. Indeed, obedience, namely, conformity to God, the truth of our being, is true freedom, because it is divinization. Jesus, in bearing the human being, being human in himself and with himself, in conformity with God, in perfect obedience, that is, in the perfect conformation between the two wills, has redeemed us and redemption is always this process of leading the human will to communion with the divine will. It is a process for which we pray every day: "May your will be done" And let us really pray the Lord to help us see closely that this is freedom and thus enter joyfully into this obedience and into "taking hold of" human beings in order to bring them by our own example, by our humility, by our prayer, by our pastoral action into communion with God.

Continuing our reading, a sentence of difficult interpretation follows. The Author of the Letter to the Hebrews says that Jesus prayed loudly, with cries and tears, to God who could save him from death and that in his total abandonment he is heard (cf. 5: 7). Here let us say: "No, it is not true, his prayer went unheard, he is dead". Jesus prayed to be released from death, but he was not released, he died a very cruel death. Harnack, a liberal theologian, therefore wrote: "Here a *not* is missing", it must be written "He was not heard", and Bultmann accepted this interpretation. Yet this is a solution that is not an exegesis but rather a betrayal of the text. "Not" does not appear in any of the manuscripts but "he was heard"; so we must learn to understand what "being heard" means, in spite of the Cross.

I see three levels on which to understand these words. At a first level the Greek text may be translated as: "he was redeemed from his anguish", and in this sense Jesus is heard. This would therefore be a hint of what St Luke tells us: an angel strengthened him (cf. Lk 22: 43), in such a way that after the moment of anguish he was able to go, straight away and fearlessly towards his hour, as the Gospels describe it to us, especially that of John. This would be being heard in the sense that God gives him the strength to bear the whole of this burden and so he was heard. Yet to me it seems that this answer is not quite enough. Being heard, in the fullest sense Fr Vanhoye emphasized this would mean "he was redeemed from death", however not for the moment, for that moment, but for ever, in the Resurrection: God's true response to the prayer to be saved from death is the Resurrection and humanity is saved from death precisely in the Resurrection which is

the true healing of our suffering and of the terrible mystery of death.

Already present here is a third level of understanding: Jesus' Resurrection is not only a personal event. I think it would be helpful to keep in mind the brief text in which St John, in chapter 12 of his Gospel, presents and recounts, in a very concise manner, the event on the Mount of Olives. Jesus says: "Now is my soul troubled" (Jn 12: 27) and, in all the anguish of the Mount of Olives, what shall I say? "Father, save me from this hour... Father glorify your name" (cf. Jn 12: 27-28). This is the same prayer that we find in the Synoptic Gospels: "all things are possible to you... your will be done (cf. Mt 26: 42; Mk 14: 36; Lk 22: 42) which in Johannine language appears: either as "save me" or "glorify" [your name]. And God answers: "I have glorified it, and I will glorify it again" (cf. Jn 12: 28). This is the response, it is God hearing him: I will glorify the Cross; it is the presence of divine glory because it is the supreme act of love. On the Cross Jesus is raised above all the earth and attracts the earth to him; on the Cross the "*Kabod*" now appears, the true divine glory of God who loves even to the Cross and thus transforms death and creates the Resurrection.

Jesus' prayer was heard in the sense that his death truly becomes life, it becomes the place where he redeems the human being, where he attracts the human being to himself. If the divine response in John says: "I will glorify" you, it means that this glory transcends and passes through the whole of history over and over again: from your Cross, present in the Eucharist, it transforms death into glory. This is the great promise that is brought about in the Blessed Eucharist which ever anew opens the heavens. Being a servant of the Eucharist is, therefore, a depth of the priestly mystery.

Another brief word, at least about Melchizedek. He is a mysterious figure who enters Sacred History in Genesis 14. After Abraham's victory over several kings, Melchizedek, King of *Salem*, of Jerusalem, appears and brings out bread and wine. This uncommented and somewhat incomprehensible event appears only in Psalm 110 [109] as has been said, but it is clear that Judaism, Gnosticism and Christianity then wished to reflect profoundly on these words and created their interpretations. The Letter to the Hebrews does not speculate but reports only what Scripture says and there are various elements: he is a king of righteousness, he dwells in peace, he is king where peace reigns, he venerates and worships the Most High God, the Creator of Heaven and earth, and he brings out bread and wine (cf. Heb 7: 1-3; Gn 14: 18-20). It is not mentioned here that the High Priest of the Most High God, King of Peace, worships God, Creator of Heaven and earth with bread and wine. The Fathers stressed that he is one of the holy pagans of the Old Testament and this shows that even from paganism there is a path that leads to Christ. The criteria are: worshipping God Most High, the Creator, fostering righteousness and peace and venerating God in a pure way. Thus, with these fundamental elements, paganism too is on its way to Christ, and in a certain way, makes Christ's light present.

In the Roman canon after consecration we have the prayer *supra quae* that mentions certain prefigurations of Christ, his priesthood and his sacrifice: Abel, the first martyr, with his lamb; Abraham, whose intention is to sacrifice his son Isaac, replaced by the lamb sent by God; and

Melchizedek, High Priest of God Most High who brings out bread and wine. This means that Christ is the absolute newness of God and at the same time is present in the whole of history, through history, and history goes to encounter Christ. And not only the history of the Chosen People, which is the true preparation desired by God, in which is revealed the mystery of Christ, but also in paganism the mystery of Christ is prepared, paths lead from it toward Christ who carries all things within him.

This seems to me important in the celebration of the Eucharist: here is gathered together all human prayer, all human desire, all true human devotion, the true search for God that is fulfilled at last in Christ. Lastly. it should be said that the Heavens are now open, worship is no longer enigmatic, in relative signs, but true. For Heaven is open and people do not offer some thing, rather, the human being becomes one with God and this is true worship. This is what the Letter to the Hebrews says: "Our priest... is seated at the right hand of the throne... in the sanctuary, the true tent which is set up... by the Lord" (cf. 8: 1-2).

Let us return to the point that Melchizedek is King of *Salem*. The whole Davidic tradition refers to this, saying: "Here is the place, Jerusalem is the place of the true worship, the concentration of worship in Jerusalem dates back to the times of Abraham, Jerusalem is the true place for the proper veneration of God".

Let us take another step: the true Jerusalem, God's *Salem*, is the Body of Christ, the Eucharist is God's peace with humankind. We know that in his Prologue, St John calls the humanity of Jesus the tent of God, *eskènosèn en hemìn* (cf. Jn 1: 14). It was here that God himself pitched his tent in the world, and this tent, this new, true Jerusalem is at the same time on earth and in Heaven because this Sacrament, this sacrifice, is ceaselessly brought about among us and always arrives at the throne of Grace, at God's presence. Here is the true Jerusalem, at the same time heavenly and earthly, the tent which is the Body of God, which as a risen Body always remains a Body and embraces humanity. And, at the same time, since it is a risen Body, it unites us with God. All this is constantly brought about anew in the Eucharist. We, as priests, are called to be ministers of this great Mystery, in the Sacrament and in life. Let us pray the Lord that he grant us to understand this Mystery ever better, that he make us live this mystery ever better and thus to offer our help so that the world may be opened to God, so that the world may be redeemed. Thank you.

The Holy Father drew inspiration for his "lectio divina" from the following passages from the Letter to the Hebrews:

Heb. 5: 1-10

Heb. 7: 26-28

Heb. 8: 1-2

(*L'Osservatore Romano*, 24 February 2010)

© Copyright 2010 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana