



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

## **GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Paul VI Audience Hall*

*Wednesday, 16 January 2013*

[\[Video\]](#)

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In the Constitution on Divine Revelation, *Dei Verbum*, the Second Vatican Council states that the intimate truth of the whole Revelation of God shines forth for us “in Christ, who is himself both the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (n. 2). The Old Testament tells us that after the Creation — in spite of original sin, in spite of man’s arrogance in wishing to put himself in his Creator’s place — God once again offers us the possibility of his friendship, especially through the Covenant with Abraham and the journey of a small people, the People of Israel. He did not choose this people with the criteria of earthly power but simply out of love. It was a choice that remains a mystery and reveals the style of God who calls some, not in order to exclude the others, but so that they may serve as a bridge that leads to him. A choice is always a choice for the other. In the history of the People of Israel we can retrace the stages of a long journey during which God made himself known, revealed himself, and entered history with words and actions. In order to do this he used mediators, such as Moses, the Prophets and the Judges, who communicated his will to the people, reminding them of the requirement of faithfulness to the Covenant and keeping alive their expectation of the complete and definitive fulfilment of the divine promises.

At Holy Christmas we contemplated the realization of these very promises: the Revelation of God reaching its culmination, its fullness. In Jesus of Nazareth God really visited his people, he visited humanity in a manner that surpassed every expectation: he sent his Only-Begotten Son: God himself became man. Jesus does not tell us something about God, he does not merely speak of the Father but is the Revelation of God, because he is God and thus reveals the face of God. In

the Prologue to his Gospel St John wrote: “no one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known” (Jn 1:18).

I would like to dwell on the phrase: “reveals God’s face”. In this regard St John, in his Gospel, records for us a significant event that we have just heard. When he was approaching the Passion, Jesus reassured his disciples, asking them not to be afraid and to have faith; he then begins a conversation with them in which he talks about God the Father (cf. Jn 14:2-9). At a certain point the Apostle Philip asked Jesus: “Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied” (Jn 14:8). Philip was very practical and prosaic, he even said what we ourselves would like to say: “we want to see him, show us the Father”, he asks to “see” the Father, to see his face. Jesus’ answer is a reply not only to Philip but also to us and it ushers us into the heart of Christological faith; the Lord affirmed: “he who has seen me has seen the Father” (Jn 14:9). These words sum up the newness of the New Testament, that newness which appeared in the Bethlehem Grotto: God can be seen, God has shown his face, he is visible in Jesus Christ.

The theme of the “quest for God’s face”, the desire to know this face, the desire to see God as he is, is clearly present throughout the Old Testament, to the extent that the Hebrew term *pānîm*, which means “face”, recurs 400 times, and refers to God 100 times. One hundred times it refers to God: to the wish to see God’s face is expressed 100 times. Yet the Jewish religion absolutely forbids images, for God cannot be portrayed as, on the contrary, he was portrayed by the neighbouring peoples who worshipped idols; therefore with this prohibition of images the Old Testament seems totally to exclude any “seeing” from worship and from devotion. Yet what did seeking God’s face mean to the devout Israelite, who knew that there could be no depiction of it? The question is important: there was a wish on the one hand to say that God cannot be reduced to an object, like an image that can be held in the hand, nor can anything be put in God’s place; on the other, it was affirmed that God has a face — meaning he is a “you” who can enter into a relationship — and who has not withdrawn into his heavenly dwelling place, looking down at humanity from on high. God is certainly above all things, but he addresses us, he listens to us, he sees us, he speaks to us, he makes a covenant, he is capable of love. The history of salvation is the history of God with humanity, it is the history of this relationship of God who gradually reveals himself to man, who makes himself, his face, known.

At the very beginning of the year, on 1 January, we heard in the liturgy the most beautiful prayer of blessing upon the people: “May the Lord Bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face shine on you, and be gracious to you. May the Lord uncover his face to you and bring you peace (Num 6:24-26). The splendour of the divine face is the source of life, it is what makes it possible to see reality; the light of his face is guidance for life. In the Old Testament there is a figure with whom the theme of “the face of God” is connected in a special way: Moses. The man whom God chose to set his people free from slavery in Egypt, giving him the Law of the Covenant and leading him to the Promised Land. Well, in Chapter 33 of the Book of Exodus it says that Moses had a close and confidential relationship with God: “The Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a

man speaks to his friend” (v. 11). By virtue of this trust, Moses was able to ask God: “show me your glory”, and God’s response was clear: “I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you my name”.... But he said “you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live.... There is a place by me.... You shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen” (vv. 18-23). Thus on the one hand there was the face-to-face conversation as between friends, but on the other, the impossibility in this life of seeing the face of God which remained hidden; sight is restricted. The Fathers said that these words, “you shall see my back”, meant you can only follow Christ and in following him you see the mystery of God from behind; God can be followed by seeing his back.

Something completely new happened, however, with the Incarnation. The search for God’s face was given an unimaginable turning-point, because this time this face could be seen: it is the face of Jesus, of the Son of God who became man. In him the process of the Revelation of God, which began with Abraham’s call, finds fulfilment in the One who is the fullness of this Revelation, because he is the Son of God, he is both “the mediator and the sum total of Revelation” (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, n. 2), the content of Revelation and the Revealer coincide in him. Jesus shows us God’s face and makes God’s name known to us. In the Priestly Prayer at the Last Supper he says to the Father: “I have manifested your name to the men... I made known to them your name” (cf. Jn 17:6; 6, 26). The phrase: “name of God”, means God as the One who is present among men and women. God had revealed his name to Moses by the burning bush, that is, he had made it possible to call on him, had given a tangible sign of his “being” among human beings. All this found fulfilment and completion in Jesus: he inaugurated God’s presence in history in a new way, because whoever sees him, sees the Father, as he said to Philip (cf. Jn 14:9). Christianity, St Bernard said, is the “religion of God’s word”; yet “not a written and mute word, but an incarnate and living” (*Homilia Super Missus Est*, 4, 11: pl 183, 86b). In the patristic and medieval tradition a special formula is used to express this reality: it says that Jesus is the *Verbum abbreviatum* (cf. Rom 9:28, with a reference to Is 10:23), the abbreviated Word, the short and essential Word of the Father who has told us all about him. In Jesus the whole Word is present.

In Jesus too the mediation between God and man attains fulfilment. In the Old Testament there is an array of figures who carried out this role, in particular Moses, the deliverer, the guide, the “mediator” of the Covenant, as he is defined in the New Testament (cf. Gal 3:19; Acts 7:35; Jn 1:17). Jesus, true God and true man, is not simply one of the mediators between God and man but rather “the mediator” of the new and eternal Covenant (cf. Heb 8:6; 9:15; 12:24); “for there is one God”, Paul says, “and there is one *mediator* between God and men, the man Christ Jesus” (1 Tim 2:5 cf. Gal 3:19-20). In him we see and encounter the Father; in him we can call upon God with the name of “Abba, Father”; in him we are given salvation.

The desire to know God truly, that is, to see God’s face, is innate in every human being, even in atheists. And perhaps we unconsciously have this wish simply to see who he is, what he is, who he is for us. However this desire is fulfilled in following Christ, in this way we see his back and, in

the end, we see God too as a friend, in Christ's face we see his face. The important thing is that we not only follow Christ in our needy moments or when we find a slot in our daily occupations, but in our life as such. The whole of our life must be oriented to meeting Jesus Christ, to loving him; and, in our life we must allocate a central place to loving our neighbour, that love which, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, in the weak and in the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us through listening to his word, in an inner conversation with him, in entering this word so that we truly meet him, and of course, in the Mystery of the Eucharist. In the Gospel of St Luke the passage about the two disciples of Emmaus recognize Jesus in the breaking of bread is important; prepared by the journey with him, by the invitation to stay with them that they had addressed to him and by the conversation that made their hearts burn within them, in the end they saw Jesus. For us too the Eucharist is the great school in which we learn to see God's face, we enter into a close relationship with him; and at the same time we learn to turn our gaze to the final moment of history when he will satisfy us with the light of his face. On earth when we are walking towards this fullness, in the joyful expectation that the Kingdom of God will really be brought about. Thank you.

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#### **To special groups:**

Dear Brothers and Sisters, I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the pilgrimage groups from Australia and the United States of America. My particular greeting goes to the pilgrims from the Catholic Near East Welfare Association. I also welcome the deacons from Saint Paul Seminary and the many college and university students present. May the light of the Lord's face shine upon all of you and fill you with his richest blessings of joy and peace!

The Week of Prayer for Christian Unity begins the day after tomorrow, Friday, 18 January. This year its theme is: "What does God require of us?", inspired by a passage of the Prophet Micah (cf. Mi 6:6-8). I invite everyone to pray, asking God with insistence for the great gift of unity among all disciples of the Lord. May the inexhaustible power of the Holy Spirit encourage us to be sincerely committed to seeking unity so that we may all profess together that Jesus is the Saviour of the world. Many thanks.

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