



The Holy See

HOLY MASS IN THE PARISH OF SAINT ANNE IN VATICAN

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Parish of Saint Anne
Sunday, 5 February 2006*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Gospel [passage] we have just listened to begins with a very nice, beautiful episode but is also full of meaning. The Lord went to the house of Simon Peter and Andrew and found Peter's mother-in-law sick with a fever. He took her by the hand and raised her, the fever left her, and she served them.

Jesus' entire mission is symbolically portrayed in this episode. Jesus, coming from the Father, visited peoples' homes on our earth and found a humanity that was sick, sick with fever, the fever of ideologies, idolatry, forgetfulness of God. The Lord gives us his hand, lifts us up and heals us.

And he does so in all ages; he takes us by the hand with his Word, thereby dispelling the fog of ideologies and forms of idolatry. He takes us by the hand in the sacraments, he heals us from the fever of our passions and sins through absolution in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. He gives us the possibility to raise ourselves, to stand before God and before men and women. And precisely with this content of the Sunday liturgy, the Lord comes to meet us, he takes us by the hand, raises us and heals us ever anew with the gift of his words, the gift of himself.

But the second part of this episode is also important. This woman who has just been healed, the Gospel says, begins to serve them. She sets to work immediately to be available to others, and thus becomes a representative of so many good women, mothers, grandmothers, women in various professions, who are available, who get up and serve and are the soul of the family, the soul of the parish.

And here, on looking at the painting above the altar, we see that they do not only perform external services; St Anne is introducing her great daughter, Our Lady, to the Sacred Scriptures, to the hope of Israel, for which she was precisely to be the place of its fulfilment.

Moreover, women were the first messengers of the word of God in the Gospel, they were true evangelists. And it seems to me that this Gospel, with this apparently very modest episode, is offering us in this very Church of St Anne an opportunity to say a heartfelt "thank you" to all the women who care for the parish, the women who serve in all its dimensions, who help us to know the Word of God ever anew, not only with our minds but also with our hearts.

Let us return to the Gospel: Jesus slept at Peter's house, but he rose before dawn while it was still dark and went out to find a deserted place to pray. And here the true centre of the mystery of Jesus appears.

Jesus was conversing with the Father and raised his human spirit in communion with the Person of the Son, so that the humanity of the Son, united to him, might speak in the Trinitarian dialogue with the Father; and thus, he also made true prayer possible for us. In the liturgy Jesus prays with us, we pray with Jesus, and so we enter into real contact with God, we enter into the mystery of eternal love of the Most Holy Trinity.

Jesus speaks to the Father: this is the source and centre of all Jesus' activities; we see his preaching, his cures, his miracles and lastly the Passion, and they spring from this centre of his being with the Father.

And in this way this Gospel teaches us that the centre of our faith and our lives is indeed the primacy of God. Whenever God is not there, the human being is no longer respected either. Only if God's splendour shines on the human face, is the human image of God protected by a dignity which subsequently no one must violate.

The primacy of God. Let us see how the first three requests in the "Our Father" refer precisely to this primacy of God: that God's Name be sanctified, that respect for the divine mystery be alive and enliven the whole of our lives; that "may God's Kingdom come" and "may [his] will be done" are two sides of the same coin; where God's will is done Heaven already exists, a little bit of Heaven also begins on earth, and where God's will is done the Kingdom of God is present.

Since the Kingdom of God is not a series of things, the Kingdom of God is the presence of God, the person's union with God. It is to this destination that Jesus wants to guide us.

The centre of his proclamation is the Kingdom of God, that is, God as the source and centre of our lives, and he tells us: God alone is the redemption of man. And we can see in the history of the last century that in the States where God was abolished, not only was the economy destroyed, but

above all the souls.

Moral destruction and the destruction of human dignity are fundamental forms of destruction, and renewal can only come from God's return, that is, from recognition of God's centrality.

A Bishop from the Congo on an *ad limina* visit in these days said to me: Europeans generously give us many things for development, but there is a hesitation in helping us in pastoral ministry; it seems as though they considered pastoral ministry useless, that only technological and material development were important. But the contrary is true, he said; where the Word of God does not exist, development fails to function and has no positive results. Only if God's Word is put first, only if man is reconciled with God, can material things also go smoothly.

The continuation of the Gospel itself powerfully confirms this. The Apostles said to Jesus: come back, everyone is looking for you. And he said no, I must go on to the next towns that I may proclaim God and cast out demons, the forces of evil; for that is why I came.

Jesus came - the Greek text says, "I came out from the Father" - not to bring us the comforts of life but to bring the fundamental condition of our dignity, to bring us the proclamation of God, the presence of God, and thus to overcome the forces of evil. He indicated this priority with great clarity: I did not come to heal - I also do this, but as a sign -, I came to reconcile you with God. God is our Creator, God has given us life, our dignity: and it is above all to him that we must turn.

And as Fr Gioele has said, today, the Church in Italy is celebrating Pro-Life Day. In their Message, the Italian Bishops have wanted to recall the priority duty to "respect life", since it is a "unavailable" good. Man is not the master of life; rather, he is its custodian and steward, and under God's primacy, this priority of administering and preserving human life, created by God, comes automatically into being.

This truth that man is the custodian and steward of life is a clearly defined point of natural law, fully illumined by biblical revelation. It appears today as a "sign of contradiction" in comparison with the prevalent mindset. Indeed, we note that although there is broad convergence generally on the value of life, yet when this point is reached, that is, the point of the "availability" or "unavailability" to life, the two mindsets are irreconcilably opposed.

In simpler terms, we might say: one of the two mindsets maintains that human life is in human hands, whereas the other recognizes that it is in God's hands. Modern culture has legitimately emphasized the autonomy of the human person and earthly realities, thereby developing a perspective dear to Christianity, the Incarnation of God.

However, as the Second Vatican Council clearly asserted, if this autonomy leads us to think that "material being does not depend on God and that man can use it as if it had no relation to its

Creator", a deep imbalance will result, for "without a Creator there can be no creature" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 36).

It is significant that in the passage cited, the conciliar Document states that this capacity to recognize the voice and manifestation of God in the beauty of creation belongs to all believers, regardless of their religion. From this we can conclude that full respect for life is linked to a *religious sense*, to the inner attitude with which the human being faces reality, as master or as custodian.

Moreover, the word "*respect*" derives from the Latin word *respicere*, to look at, and means a way of looking at things and people that leads to recognizing their substantial character, not to appropriate them but rather to treat them with respect and to take care of them.

In the final analysis, if creatures are deprived of their reference to God as a transcendent basis, they risk being at the mercy of the will of man who, as we see, can make an improper use of it.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us invoke together St Anne's intercession for your parish community, which I greet with affection.

I greet in particular your Parish Priest, Fr Gioele, and I thank him for his words to me at the beginning. I then greet the Augustinian confreres with their Prior General; I greet Archbishop Angelo Comastri, my Vicar General for Vatican City, Archbishop Rizzato, my Almoner, and everyone present, especially the children, young people and all those who regularly use this church.

May St Anne, your heavenly Patroness, watch over you all and obtain for each one the gift of being a witness of the God of life and love.

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