



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE PONTIFICAL ROMAN MAJOR SEMINARY
ON THE MEMORIAL OF OUR LADY OF THE TRUST

LECTIO DIVINA BY HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Chapel of the Seminary

Friday, 4 March 2011

(Video)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am very glad to be here at least once a year with my seminarians, with the young men bound for the priesthood to form the future presbyterate of Rome. I am delighted that this happens every year on the day of Our Lady of Trust, the Mother who day after day accompanies us with her love and gives us the confidence to journey on towards Christ.

“In the unity of the Spirit” is the theme that guides your reflections during this year of formation. It is an expression found, precisely, in the passage of the Letter to the Ephesians that has been presented to us, in which St Paul begs the members of that community to “maintain the unity of the Spirit” (4:3). The second part of the Letter to the Ephesians begins with this text, the so-called “paranetical” or exhortatory part, and begins with the word “*parakalo*”, “I beg you”. However, the same word also comes at the end, “*Paraklitos*”, thus it is an exhortation in the light, in the power of the Holy Spirit. The Apostle’s exhortation is based on the mystery of salvation which he had presented in the first three chapters. In fact, our passage begins with the word “therefore”, “I therefore... beg you...” (v. 1).

The behaviour of Christians is the consequence of the gift, the realization of all that is given to us, every day. Yet, if it is simply the realization of the gift given to us it is not an automatic effect, because with God we are always in the reality of freedom hence — since the response and also

the realization of the gift is freedom — the Apostle must recall it, he cannot take it for granted. Baptism, as we know, does not automatically produce a consistent life: this is the fruit of the will and of the persevering commitment to collaborate with the gift, with the Grace received. And this commitment costs us effort, there is a price to pay in person. This may be why St Paul refers here to his actual condition: “I therefore, a *prisoner* for the Lord, beg you...” (*ibid.*).

Following Christ means sharing in his Passion, his Cross, following him to the very end, and this participation in the Teacher’s destiny profoundly unites us to him and reinforces the authoritativeness of the Apostle’s exhortation.

We now reach the heart of our meditation, encountering a particularly striking word: “call”, “vocation”. St Paul wrote: “lead a life worthy of the *calling*, of the *klesis* to which you have been called” (*ibid.*). And he was to repeat it a little later, affirming that “you were *called* to the one hope that belongs to your *call*” (v. 4). Here, in this case, it is a question of the vocation common to all Christians, namely, the baptismal vocation, the call to be in Christ and to live in him, in his Body. In these words an experience is inscribed and the echo resounds of that of the first disciples, which we know from the Gospels: when Jesus passed along the shores of the Sea of Galilee and called Simon and Andrew, then James and John (*cf.* Mk 1:16-20); and even earlier, at the River Jordan after his Baptism, when, noticing that Andrew and the other disciple were following him Jesus said to them: “Come and see” (Jn 1:39). Christian life begins with a call and always remains an answer, to the very end. And this is in the dimension of believing and that of doing: both the faith and the behaviour of the Christian correspond to the grace of the vocation.

I spoke of the call of the first Apostles, but the word “call” reminds us above all of the Mother of every call, of Mary Most Holy, the Chosen One, the One Called par excellence. The image of the Annunciation to Mary portrays far more than that particular Gospel episode, despite its fundamental character: it contains the whole mystery of Mary, the whole of her history, of her being; and at the same time it speaks of the Church, of her essence as it has always been; as well as of every individual believer in Christ, of every Christian soul who is called.

At this point we must bear in mind that we are not speaking of people of the past. God, the Lord, has called each one of us, each one is called by name. God is so great that he has time for each one of us, he knows me, he knows each one of us by name, personally. It is a personal call for each one of us. I think we should meditate time and again on this mystery: God, the Lord, has called me, is calling me, knows me, awaits my answer just as he awaited Mary’s answer and the answer of the Apostles. God calls me: this fact must make us attentive to God’s voice, attentive to his word, to his call for me, in order to respond, in order to realize this part of the history of salvation for which he has called me.

Then, in this text, St Paul points out to us several concrete elements of this answer with four words: “lowliness”, “meekness”, “patience”, “forbearing one another in love”. Perhaps we could

meditate briefly on these words in which the Christian journey is expressed. Then at the end, we shall once again return to this.

“Lowliness”: the Greek word is “*tapeinophrosyne*”, the same word that St Paul uses in his Letter to the Philippians when he speaks of the Lord who was God and who humbled himself, he made himself “*tapeinos*”, he descended to the point of making himself a creature, of making himself man, obedient even unto death on the Cross (*cf.* Phil 2:7-8). Lowliness, then is not just any word, any kind of modesty, something... it is a Christological word. Imitating God who descends even to me, who is so great that he makes himself my friend, suffers for me and dies for me. This is the humility we must learn, God’s humility. It means that we must always see ourselves in God’s light; thus, at the same time, we can know the greatness of being a person loved by God but also our own smallness, our poverty, and thus behave correctly, not as masters but as servants. As St Paul says: “Not that we lord it over your faith; we work with you for your joy” (2 Cor 1:24). Being a priest, even more than being a Christian, implies this humility.

“Meekness”: the Greek text uses here the word “*praütes*”, the same word that appears in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth” (Mt 5:5). And in the Book of Numbers, the fourth Book of Moses, we find the affirmation that Moses was the meekest man in the world (*cf.* Num 12:3) and in this sense he was a prefiguration of Christ, of Jesus, who said of himself: “I am gentle and lowly in heart” (Mt 11:29). So this word “meek”, or “gentle”, is also a Christological word and once again implies imitating Christ in this manner. For in Baptism we are configured to Christ so we must configure ourselves to Christ, we must discover this spirit of being meek, without violence, of convincing with love and kindness.

“Patience” [magnanimity], “*makrothymia*”, means generosity of heart, it means not being minimalists who give only what is strictly necessary: let us give ourselves with all that we possess and we will also increase in magnanimity.

“Forbearing one another in love”: it is a daily duty to tolerate one another in our own otherness, and precisely to tolerate one another with humility, to learn true love.

And let us now take a step further. This word “call” is followed by the ecclesial dimension. We have now spoken of the vocation as a very personal call: God calls me, knows me, waits for my personal response. However at the same time God’s call is a call to a community, it is an ecclesial call. God calls us to a community. It is true that in this passage on which we are meditating the word “*ekklesia*”, “Church”, is not found but the reality is all the more evident. St Paul speaks of a Spirit and a body. The Spirit creates the body and unites us as it were in one body. And then he speaks of unity, he speaks of the chain of being, of the bond of peace. And with these words he refers to the word “prisoner” at the beginning: it is always the same word, “I am in chains”, “chains will bind you”, but behind them is the great, invisible, liberating chain of love.

We are in this bond of peace which is the Church, it is the great bond that unites us to Christ. Perhaps we must also meditate personally on this point: we are called personally, but we are called to a body. And this is not something abstract but is very real.

At this time the Seminary is the body in which your being on a common journey is brought about in practice. Then there will be the parish: accepting, supporting, enlivening the whole parish, the people, those who are likable and those who are not, becoming integrated into this body. Body: the Church is a body so she has structures, she really has a law and this time it is not so simple to integrate. Of course we want the personal relationship with God, but we often do not like the body. Yet in this very way we are in communion with Christ: by accepting this corporeity of his Church, of the Spirit who is incarnate in the body.

However, perhaps we frequently feel the problem, the difficulty of this community, starting from the actual community of the Seminary to the large community of the Church, with her institutions. We must also keep in mind that it is really lovely to be in a company, to journey on in a large company of all the centuries, to have friends in Heaven and on earth and to be aware of the beauty of this body, to be happy that the Lord has called us in a body and has given us friends in all the parts of the world.

I said that the word "*ekklesia*" is not found here, but there is the word "body", the word "Spirit", the word "bond" and in this brief passage the word "one" recurs seven times. Thus we feel that the Apostle has the unity of the Church at heart. And he ends with a "scale of unity", until Unity: God is One, the God of all. God is One and the oneness of God is expressed in our communion, because God is the Father, the Creator of us all and so we are all brothers and sisters, we are all one body and the oneness of God is the condition for and also the creation of human brotherhood, of peace. Let us therefore also meditate on this mystery of oneness and the importance of always seeking oneness in the communion of the one Christ, of the one God.

We may now go a step further. If we ask ourselves what is the deep meaning of this use of the word "call", we see that it is one of the doors that open on to the Trinitarian mystery. So far we have spoken of the mystery of the Church of the one God but the Trinitarian mystery also appears. Jesus is the mediator of the call of the Father that happens through the Holy Spirit.

The Christian vocation cannot but have a Trinitarian form, both at the level of the individual person and at the level of the ecclesial community. The mystery of the Church is enlivened throughout by the dynamism of the Holy Spirit, which is a vocational dynamism in the broad and perennial sense, starting with Abraham who was the first to hear God's call and to respond with faith and action (*cf.* Gen 12:1-3); until the "behold" of Mary, a perfect reflection of that of the Son of God at the moment when he accepted the Father's call to come into the world (*cf.* Heb 10:5-7).

Thus, at the "heart" of the Church — as St Thérèse of the Child Jesus would say — the call of

every individual Christian is a Trinitarian mystery: the mystery of the encounter with Jesus, with the Word made flesh, through whom God the Father calls us to communion with him and for this reason wishes to give us his Holy Spirit; and it is precisely through the Spirit that we can respond authentically to Jesus and to the Father within a real, filial relationship. Without the breath of the Holy Spirit the Christian vocation simply cannot be explained, it loses its vitality.

And finally the last passage. The form of unity according to the Spirit, as I said, calls for the imitation of Jesus, configuration to him in the concreteness of his behaviour. The Apostle writes, as in our meditation: “with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love”, and then adds that the unity of the Spirit should be maintained “in the bond of peace” (Eph 4:2-3).

The unity of the Church does not come from a “mould” imposed from the outside; rather, it is the fruit of a harmony, a common commitment to behave like Jesus, by virtue of his Spirit.

St John Chrysostom made a very fine commentary on this passage. Chrysostom comments on the image of the “bond”, the “bond of peace”. He says: “a glorious bond is this; with this bond let us bind ourselves together with one another and unto God. This is a bond that bruises not, nor cramps the hands it binds, but it leaves them free, and gives them ample play and greater courage” (*Homily on the Epistle to the Ephesians*, 9, 4:1-3).

Here we find the evangelical paradox: Christian love is a bond, as we said, but a liberating bond! The image of the bond, as I told you, brings us back to the situation of St Paul who is a “prisoner” and is “in chains”. The Apostle is in chains because of the Lord, just as Jesus made himself a servant to set us free. If we are to maintain the unity of the Spirit we must impress upon our own behaviour that humility, meekness and patience to which Jesus witnessed in his Passion; it is necessary to have hand and heart bound by the bond of love that he himself accepted for us by making himself our servant. This is the “bond of peace”. And St John Chrysostom says further in the same commentary: “if you would attach yourself to another [your brother] ... these thus bound by love bear all things with ease.... thus also here he would have us tied one to another; not simply that we be at peace, not simply that we love one another [to be friends], but that all should be one, one soul” (*ibid.*).

The Pauline text, a few elements of which we have meditated on, is very rich. I have only been able to convey to you a few ideas, which I entrust to your meditation. And let us pray the Virgin Mary, Our Lady of Trust, to help us walk joyfully in the unity of the Spirit. Thank you!
