

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 7 November 2012

[Video]

The Year of Faith. The desire for God.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The journey of reflection that we are making together during this Year of Faith leads us to meditate today on a fascinating aspect of the human and the Christian experience: man carries within himself a mysterious desire for God. In a very significant way, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* opens precisely with the following consideration: "The desire for God is written in the human heart, because man is created by God and for God; and God never ceases to draw man to himself. Only in God will he find the truth and happiness he never stops searching for" (n. 27).

A statement like this, that even today in many cultural contexts seems quite acceptable, even obvious, might, however, be taken as a provocation in the West's secularized culture. Many of our contemporaries might actually object that they have no such desire for God. For large sectors of society he is no longer the one longed for or desired but rather a reality that leaves them indifferent, one on which there is no need even to comment. In reality, what we have defined as "the desire for God" has not entirely disappeared and it still appears today, in many ways, in the heart of man. Human desire always tends to certain concrete goods, often anything but spiritual, and yet it has to face the question of what is truly "the" good, and thus is confronted with something other than itself, something man cannot build but he is called to recognize. What can really satisfy man's desire?

In my first Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I sought to analyze how such dynamism can be found in the experience of human love, an experience that in our age is more easily perceived as a moment of ecstasy, of leaving oneself, like a place in which man feels overcome by a desire that surpasses him. Through love, a man and a woman experience in a new way, thanks to each other, the greatness and beauty of life and of what is real. If what is experienced is not a mere illusion, if I truly want the good of the other as a means for my own good, then I must be

willing not to be self-centred, to place myself at the other's service, even to the point of self-denial. The answer to the question on the meaning of the experience of love then passes through the purification and healing of the will, required in loving the other. We must cultivate, encourage, and also correct ourselves, so that this good can truly be loved.

Thus the initial ecstasy becomes a pilgrimage, "an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God" (Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 6). Through this journey one will be able to deepen gradually one's knowledge of that love, initially experienced. And the mystery that it represents will become more and more defined: in fact, not even the beloved is capable of satisfying the desire that dwells in the human heart. In fact, the more authentic one's love for the other is, the more it reveals the question of its origin and its destiny, of the possibility that it may endure for ever. Therefore, the human experience of love has in itself a dynamism that refers beyond the self, it is the experience of a good that leads to being drawn out and finding oneself before the mystery that encompasses the whole of existence.

One could make similar observation about other human experiences as well, such as friendship, encountering beauty, loving knowledge: every good experienced by man projects him toward the mystery that surrounds the human being; every desire that springs up in the human heart echoes a fundamental desire that is never fully satisfied. Undoubtedly by such a deep desire, hidden, even enigmatic, one cannot arrive directly at faith. Men and women, after all, know well what does not satisfy them, but they cannot imagine or define what the happiness they long for in their hearts would be like. One cannot know God based on human desire alone. From this point of view he remains a mystery: man is the seeker of the Absolute, seeking with small and hesitant steps. And yet, already the experience of desire, of a "restless heart" as St Augustine called it, is very meaningful. It tells us that man is, deep down, a religious being (cf. *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 28), a "beggar of God". We can say with the words of Pascal: "Man infinitely surpasses man" (*Pensées*, ed. Chevalier 438; ed. Brunschvicg 434). Eyes recognize things when they are illuminated. From this comes a desire to know the light itself, what makes the things of the world shine and with them ignites the sense of beauty.

We must therefore maintain that it is possible also in this age, seemingly so blocked to the transcendent dimension, to begin a journey toward the true religious meaning of life, that shows how the gift of faith is not senseless, is not irrational. It would be very useful, to that end, to foster a kind of pedagogy of desire, both for the journey of one who does not yet believe and for the one who has already received the gift of faith. It should be a pedagogy that covers at least two aspects. In the first place, to discover or rediscover the taste of the authentic joy of life. Not all satisfactions have the same effect on us: some leave

a positive after-taste, able to calm the soul and make us more active and generous. Others, however, after the initial delight, seem to disappoint the expectations that they had awakened and sometimes leave behind them a sense of bitterness, dissatisfaction or emptiness. Instilling in someone from a young age the taste for true joy, in every area of life – family, friendship, solidarity with those who suffer, self-renunciation for the sake of the other, love of knowledge, art, the beauty of nature — all this means exercising the inner taste and producing antibodies that can fight the trivialization and the dulling widespread today. Adults too need to rediscover this joy, to desire authenticity, to purify themselves of the mediocrity that might infest them. It will then become easier to drop or reject everything that although attractive proves to be, in fact, insipid, a source of indifference and not of freedom. And this will bring out that desire for God of which we are speaking.

A second aspect that goes hand in hand with the preceding one is never to be content with what you have achieved. It is precisely the truest joy that unleashes in us the healthy restlessness that leads us to be more demanding — to want a higher good, a deeper good — and at the same time to perceive ever more clearly that no finite thing can fill our heart. In this way we will learn to strive, unarmed, for the good that we cannot build or attain by our own power; and we will learn to not be discouraged by the difficulty or the obstacles that come from our sin.

In this regard, we must not forget that the dynamism of desire is always open to redemption. Even when it strays from the path, when it follows artificial paradises and seems to lose the capacity of yearning for the true good. Even in the abyss of sin, that ember is never fully extinguished in man. It allows him to recognize the true good, to savour it, and thus to start out again on a path of ascent; God, by the gift of his grace, never denies man his help. We all, moreover, need to set out on the path of purification and healing of desire. We are pilgrims, heading for the heavenly homeland, toward that full and eternal good that nothing will be able to take away from us. This is not, then, about suffocating the longing that dwells in the heart of man, but about freeing it, so that it can reach its true height. When in desire one opens the window to God, this is already a sign of the presence of faith in the soul, faith that is a grace of God. St Augustine always says: "so God, by deferring our hope, stretched our desire; by the desiring, stretches the mind; by stretching, makes it more capacious" (*Commentary on the First Letter of John*, 4,6: PL 35, 2009).

On this pilgrimage, let us feel like brothers and sisters of all men, travelling companions even of those who do not believe, of those who are seeking, of those who are sincerely wondering about the dynamism of their own aspiration for the true and the good. Let us pray, in this Year of Faith, that God may show his face to all those who seek him with a sincere heart. Thank you.

To special groups:

I welcome the Inter-ministerial Delegation for Religious Affairs from Vietnam on official visit to the Vatican. I also greet the group from Saint Paul High School in Japan. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims present at today's Audience, including those from England and Wales, Denmark, Finland, Ghana, Australia, Indonesia, South Korea, Canada and the United States, I cordially impart God's abundant blessings.

And finally, I would like to greet, as usual, the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The day after tomorrow we will celebrate the liturgical feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St John Lateran, Rome's Cathedral. May this be an invitation to you, dear *young people*, to become the precious living stones of the House of the Lord. May it encourage you, dear *sick people*, to offer to God your daily sacrifice for the good of the whole Christian community; and may it urge you, dear *newlyweds*, to make your families little domestic Churches.

APPEAL

I continue to follow with great concern the tragic situation of violent conflict in Syria, where the fighting has not ceased and each day the toll of victims rises, accompanied by the untold suffering of many civilians, especially those who have been forced to abandon their homes.

As a sign of my own solidarity and that of the whole Church for the Syrian people, as well as our spiritual closeness to the Christian communities in that country, I had hoped to send a Delegation of Synod Fathers to Damascus.

Unfortunately, due to a variety of circumstances and developments, it was not possible to carry out this initiative as planned, and so I have decided to entrust a special mission to Cardinal Robert Sarah, President of the Pontifical Council "Cor Unum".

From today until 10 November, he will be in Lebanon, where he will meet the Pastors and faithful of the Churches present in Syria. He will visit a number of refugees from that country and will chair a meeting of Catholic charitable agencies to coordinate efforts, as the Holy See has urgently requested, to provide assistance to the Syrian people, within and outside the country.

As I make my prayer to God, I renew my invitation to the parties in conflict, and to all those who have the good of Syria at heart, to spare no effort in the search for peace and to pursue through dialogue the path to a just coexistence, in view of a suitable political solution of the conflict.

We must do everything that is possible, because one day it may be too late.

© Copyright 2012 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana