



DECEMBER 5, 2012. THE YEAR OF FAITH. GOD REVEALS HIS "BENEVOLENT PURPOSE"

The Catechesis of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the Year of Faith



BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

**PAUL VI AUDIENCE HALL
WEDNESDAY, 5 DECEMBER 2012**

[VIDEO]

Year of Faith. God reveals his "benevolent purpose"

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the beginning of his Letter to the Christians of Ephesus (cf. 1:3-14), the Apostle Paul raised a prayer of blessing to God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, which leads us to experience the Season of Advent, in the context of the Year of Faith. The theme of this hymn of praise is God's plan for man, described in terms full of joy, wonder and thanksgiving, according to his "benevolent purpose" (cf. v. 9), of mercy and love.

Why does the Apostle raise this blessing to God from the depths of his heart? It is because he sees God's action in the perspective of salvation which culminated in the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Jesus, and contemplates how the heavenly Father chose us even before the world's creation, to be his adoptive sons, in his Only-Begotten Son, Jesus

Christ (cf. Rom 8:14f. Gal 4:4f). We had always existed in God's mind in a great plan that God cherished within him and decided to implement and to reveal in "the fullness of time" (cf. Eph 1:10). St Paul makes us understand, therefore, how the whole of creation and, in particular, men and women, are not the result of chance but are part of a benevolent purpose of the eternal reason of God who brings the world into being with the creative and redemptive power of his word. This first affirmation reminds us that our vocation is not merely to exist in the world, to be inserted into a history, nor is it solely to be creatures of God. It is something more: it is being chosen by God, even before the world's creation, in the Son, Jesus Christ. Therefore in him we have existed, so to speak, for ever. God contemplates us in Christ, as his adoptive sons. God's "purpose" which the Apostle also describes as a plan "of love" (Eph 1:5) is described as "the mystery" of his divine will (v. 9), hidden and now revealed in the Person of Christ and in his work. The divine initiative comes before every human response: it is a freely given gift of his love that envelops and transforms us.

But what is the ultimate purpose of this mysterious design? What is the essence of God's will? It is, St Paul tells us, "to unite all things in him [Christ], the Head" (v. 10). In these words we find one of the central formulas of the New Testament that makes us understand the plan of God, his design of love for the whole of humanity, a formula which, in the second century, St Irenaeus of Lyons established as the core of his Christology: to "recapitulate" the whole of reality in Christ. Perhaps some of you may remember the formula used by Pope St Pius X for the consecration of the world to the Sacred Heart of Jesus: "*Instaurare omnia in Christo*", a formula that refers to the Pauline expression and was also the motto of this holy Pope. However the Apostle speaks more precisely of the recapitulation of the universe in Christ. This means that in the great plan of creation and of history, Christ stands as the focus of the entire journey of the world, as the structural support of all things, and attracts to himself the entire reality in order to overcome dispersion and limitation and lead all things to the fullness desired by God (cf. Eph 1:23).

This "benevolent purpose" was not, so to speak, left in the silence of God, in his heavenly heights. Rather, God made it known by entering into a relationship with human beings to whom he did not reveal just something, but indeed himself. He did not merely communicate an array of truths, but communicated himself to us, even to the point of becoming one of us, of taking flesh. The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council says in the Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*: "It pleased God, in his goodness and wisdom, to reveal himself [not only something of himself but himself] and to make known the mystery of his will. His will was that men should have access to the Father, through Christ, the Word made flesh, in the Holy Spirit, and thus become sharers in the divine nature" (n. 2). God does not only say something, but communicates himself, draws us into his divine nature so that we may be integrated into it or divinized. God reveals his great plan of love by entering into a relationship with man, by coming so close to him that he makes himself man. The Council continues: "the invisible God, from the fullness of his love, addresses men as his friends (cf. Ex 33:11; Jn 15:14-15), and moves among them (cf. Bar 3:38), in order to invite and receive them into his own company" (*ibid.*). With their own intelligence and abilities alone human beings would not have been able to achieve this most enlightening revelation of God's love; it is God who has opened his heaven and lowered himself in order to guide men and women in his ineffable love.

St Paul writes further to the Christians of Corinth: "What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him', God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God" (1 Cor 2:9-10). And St John Chrysostom, in a famous passage commenting on the beginning of the Letter to the Ephesians, with these words asks that the faithful enjoy the full beauty of this "loving plan" of God revealed in Christ: "What do you lack yet? You are made immortal, you are made free, you are made a son, you are made righteous, you are made a brother, you are made a fellow-heir, you reign with Christ, you are glorified with Christ; all things are freely given you", and, as it is written, "will he not also give us all things with him?" (Rom 8:32). Your First-fruits (cf. 1 Cor 15:20, 23) is adored by Angels.... What do you lack yet?" (pg 62,11).

This communion in Christ through the action of the Holy Spirit, offered by God to all men and women with the light of Revelation, is not something that is superimposed on our humanity; it is the fulfilment of our deepest aspirations, of that longing for the infinite and for fullness, which dwells in the depths of the human being and opens him or her to a happiness that is not fleeting or limited but eternal. Referring to God who reveals himself and speaks to us through the Scriptures to lead us to him, St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio says: “Holy Scripture... its words are words of eternal life, and it is written not just so that we should believe, but specially so that we should possess eternal life in which we may see, and love, and have all our desires fulfilled” (*Breviloquium, Prologue; Opera Omnia V*, 201f.). Lastly, Blessed Pope John Paul II recalled that “Revelation has set within history a point of reference which cannot be ignored if the mystery of human life is to be known. Yet this knowledge refers back constantly to the mystery of God which the human mind cannot exhaust but can only receive and embrace in faith” (Encyclical *Fides et Ratio*, n. 14).

Therefore, in this perspective, what is the act of faith? It is man’s answer to God’s Revelation that is made known and expresses his plan of love; to use an Augustinian expression it is letting oneself be grasped by the Truth that is God, a Truth that is Love. St Paul stresses that since God has revealed his mystery we owe him “the obedience of faith” (Rom 16:26; cf. 1:5; 2 Cor 10:5-6), by which attitude “man freely commits his entire self to God, making ‘the full submission of his intellect and will to God who reveals’, and willingly assenting to the Revelation given by him” (Dogmatic Constitution, *Dei Verbum*, n. 5). All this leads to a fundamental change in the way of relating to reality as a whole; everything appears in a new light so it is a true “conversion”, faith is a “change of mentality”. This is because God revealed himself in Christ and made his plan of love known, he takes hold of us, he draws us to him, he becomes the meaning that sustains life, the rock on which to find stability. In the Old Testament we find a concentrated saying on faith which God entrusted to the Prophet Isaiah so that he might communicate it to Ahaz, King of Judah. God says, “If you will not believe” — that is, if you are not faithful to God — “surely you shall not be established” (Is 7:9b). Thus there is a connection between *being* and *understanding* which clearly expresses that faith is welcoming in life God’s view of reality, it is letting God guide us with his words and sacraments in understanding what we should do, what journey we should make, how we should live. Yet at the same time it is, precisely, understanding according to God and seeing with his eyes that makes life sure, that enables us to “stand” rather than fall.

Dear friends, Advent, the liturgical Season that we have just begun and that prepares us for Holy Christmas, sets us before the luminous mystery of the coming of the Son of God, the great “benevolent purpose” with which he wishes to draw us to him, to enable us to live in full communion of joy and peace with him. Advent invites us once again, in the midst of so many difficulties, to renew the certainty that God is present: he entered the world, making himself man, a man like us, to fulfil his plan of love. And God asks that we too become a sign of his action in the world. Through our faith, our hope and our charity, he wants to enter the world ever anew and wants ever anew to make his light shine out in our dark night.

To special groups:

I offer a cordial welcome to the pilgrimage group from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee. My greeting also goes to the Anglican visitors from Ardingly College. I thank the choir for their praise of God in song. Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims, including the groups from Australia and the United States of America, I invoke God’s blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Season of Advent that has just begun is lit up in these days by the radiant example of the Immaculate Virgin. May she encourage you, dear *young people* on your journey of adherence to Christ. For

you, dear *sick people*, may Mary be your support for a renewed experience of adherence to Christ. And for you, dear *newlyweds*, may she be your guide in building your family.

APPEAL

Disturbing news is continuing to arrive of the grave humanitarian crisis in the east of the Democratic Republic of the Congo which has been the scene of armed conflicts and violence for months. A large part of the population lacks basic food and thousands of inhabitants have been obliged to flee their homes to seek refuge elsewhere. I therefore renew my appeal for dialogue and for reconciliation and ask the international community to do its utmost to meet the people's needs

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