



The Holy See

HOLY MASS WITH THE MEMBERS OF
THE BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF SWITZERLAND

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Redemptoris Mater Chapel
Tuesday, 7 November 2006*

Dear Confreres,

The texts we have just heard - the Reading, the Responsorial Psalm and the Gospel - have a common theme that could be summarized in the phrase: "God never fails". Or more precisely: initially God always fails, he lets human freedom exist and this freedom constantly says "no"; but God's imagination, the creative power of his love, is greater than the human "no". With every human "no" a new dimension of his love is bestowed and he finds a new and greater way to bring about his "yes" to man, history and creation.

In the great hymn to Christ in the *Letter to the Philippians* with which we began, we listened first of all to an allusion to the story of Adam, who was not satisfied with God's friendship; it was not enough for him because he himself wanted to be a god. He considered friendship as a dependence and considered himself a god, as though he could exist solely by himself. He therefore said "no" in order to become a god himself and in this very way, he threw himself down from his exalted position.

God "failed" in Adam - and likewise, to all appearances, throughout history. But God did not fail, for now he becomes a man himself and so begins a new humanity; he roots God's being in a human being in an irrevocable way and descended to the deepest abysses of man's being: he humbled himself even unto the Cross. He overcame pride with the humility and the obedience of the Cross. And in this way what Isaiah had foretold (chapter 45) came to pass.

At the time when Israel was living in exile and had disappeared from the map, the Prophet predicted that the whole world - "every knee" - would bend before this powerless God. And the *Letter to the Philippians* confirms it: it has now happened.

Through the Cross of Christ, God made himself close to the peoples, he came out of Israel and became the God of the world. And now the cosmos kneels before Jesus Christ, and this is something we too can experience in a marvellous way today: on all the continents, even in the most humble of huts, the Crucifix is present.

The God who had "failed" now through his love truly brings man to bend his knee and thus overcomes the world with his love.

We sang the second part of the Psalm of the Passion as the Responsorial Psalm. It is the Psalm of the righteous sufferer, in the first place suffering Israel who, before the mute God who abandoned it, cries: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me?... Now I am almost spent... you do not act... you do not answer... why have you forsaken me?" (cf. 22[21]). Jesus identifies himself with the suffering Israel, with the suffering just ones of every age abandoned by God, and he cries out at God's abandonment; the pain of being forgotten he carries to the Heart of God himself, and in this way transforms the world.

The second part of the Psalm, the part that we recited, tells us the result of this: the poor will eat and be satisfied. It is the universal Eucharist that derives from the Cross. God now satisfies man throughout the world, the poor who are in need of him. He gives them the satiety they need: he gives God, he gives himself.

The Psalm then says: "All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord". The universal Church derives from the Cross. God goes beyond Judaism to embrace the whole world, to unite it in the banquet of the poor.

And lastly, the Gospel message: again, the failure of God. Those who were invited first declined, they did not come.

God's hall remains empty, the banquet seemed to have been prepared in vain. This is what Jesus experienced in the last stages of his activity: official groups, the authorities, say "no" to God's invitation, which is he himself. They do not come. His message, his call, ends in the human "no". However, God did not fail here, either. The empty hall becomes an opportunity to invite a larger number of people. God's love, God's invitation is extended. Luke recounts this in two episodes. First, the invitation is addressed to the poor, the abandoned, those who were never invited by anyone in the city. In this way, God did what we heard in yesterday's Gospel reading.

(Today's Gospel is part of a small symposium in the setting of a meal at a Pharisee's house. There

are four texts: first, the healing of the man with dropsy; then, the words about the lowest places; then, the teaching about not inviting friends who would invite you back but those who are really hungry, who cannot reciprocate the invitation; and then appropriately, our account follows). God now does what he told the Pharisee to do: he invites those who possess nothing, who are truly hungry, who cannot invite him back, who cannot give him anything.

The second episode follows. He departs from the city to go on the country roads: the homeless are invited. We may suppose that Luke means these two episodes in the sense that the first to enter the hall are Israel's poor and later - because there were not enough of them since God's space was larger - the invitation extends beyond the Holy City to the world of the peoples. Those who do not at all belong to God, who are outside, are now invited to fill the hall. And Luke, who has handed down this Gospel to us, certainly saw in anticipation, in a figurative way, the events recounted later in the *Acts of the Apostles*, where precisely this happens.

Paul always begins his mission in the synagogue with those who are invited first; and only when the authoritative figures excuse themselves and he remains alone with a small group of poor people does he go to the Gentiles.

Thus, the Gospel through this ever new way of the Cross becomes universal, it influences everything, eventually even Rome.

In Rome, Paul summons the heads of the synagogue and proclaims to them the mystery of Jesus Christ, the Kingdom of God in his Person. However, the authorities excuse themselves and he takes his leave of them with these words: Well, since you will not listen, this message will be proclaimed to the Gentiles and they will listen to it. With such confidence he concludes the message of failure: they will listen; the Church of the Gentiles will be built. And she was built and continues to be built.

During the *ad limina* visits, I hear of many serious and tiresome things, but always - precisely from the Third World - I also hear this: that people listen, that they come, that even today the message spreads along the roads to the very ends of the earth and that people crowd into God's hall for his banquet.

Consequently, we should ask ourselves: what does all this mean for us?

First of all, it means one certainty: God does not fail. He "fails" continuously, but for this very reason he does not fail, because through this he finds new opportunities for far greater mercy and his imagination is inexhaustible.

He does not fail because he finds ever new ways to reach people and to open wider his great house so that it is completely filled.

He does not fail because he does not shrink from the prospect of asking people to come and sit at his table, to eat the food of the poor in which the precious gift is offered, God himself. God does not fail, not even today. Even if we come up against many "noes", we can be sure of it.

From the whole of this history of God, starting with Adam, we can conclude: God never fails.

Today too, he will find new ways to call men, and he wants to have us with him as his messengers and servants.

Precisely in our time we know very well how those who were invited first say "no". Indeed, Western Christianity, the new "first guests", now largely excuse themselves, they do not have time to come to the Lord. We know the churches that are ever more empty, seminaries continue to be empty, religious houses that are increasingly empty; we are familiar with all the forms in which this "no, I have other important things to do" is presented. And it distresses and upsets us to be witnesses of these excuses and refusals of the first guests, who in reality should know the importance of the invitation and should feel drawn in that direction.

What should we do?

First of all, we should ask ourselves: why is this happening?

In his Parable the Lord mentions two reasons: possessions and human relations, which involve people to the extent that they no longer feel the need for anything else to fill their time and therefore their interior existence.

St Gregory the Great in his explanation of this text sought to delve into it further and wondered: how can a man say "no" to the greatest thing that exists; that he has no time for what is most important; that he can lock himself into his own existence?

And he answers: in reality, they have never had an experience of God; they have never acquired a "taste" for God; they have never experienced how delightful it is to be "touched" by God! They lack this "contact" - and with it, the "taste for God". And only if we, so to speak, taste him, only then can we come to the banquet.

St Gregory cites the Psalm from which today's Communion Antiphon is taken: Taste, try it and see; taste and then you will see and be enlightened! Our task is to help people so they can taste the flavour for God anew.

In another homily, St Gregory the Great deepened further the same question and asked himself: how can it be that man does not even want to "taste" God?

And he responds: when man is entirely caught up in his own world, with material things, with what he can do, with all that is feasible and brings him success, with all that he can produce or understand by himself, then his capacity to perceive God weakens, the organ sensitive to God deteriorates, it becomes unable to perceive and sense, it no longer perceives the Divine, because the corresponding inner organ has withered, it has stopped developing.

When he overuses all the other organs, the empirical ones, it can happen that it is precisely the sense of God that suffers, that this organ dies, and man, as St Gregory says, no longer perceives God's gaze, to be looked at by him, the fact that his precious gaze touches me!

I maintain that St Gregory the Great has described exactly the situation of our time - in fact, his was an age very similar to ours. And the question still arises: what should we do?

I hold that the first thing to do is what the Lord tells us today in the First Reading, and which St Paul cries to us in God's Name: "Your attitude must be Christ's - *Touto phroneite en hymin ho kai en Christo Iesou*".

Learn to think as Christ thought, learn to think with him! And this thinking is not only the thinking of the mind, but also a thinking of the heart.

We learn Jesus Christ's sentiments when we learn to think with him and thus, when we learn to think also of his failure, of his passage through failure and of the growth of his love in failure.

If we enter into these sentiments of his, if we begin to practise thinking like him and with him, then joy for God is awakened within us, confident that he is the strongest; yes, we can say that love for him is reawakened within us. We feel how beautiful it is that he is there and that we can know him - that we know him in the face of Jesus Christ who suffered for us.

I think this is the first thing: that we ourselves enter into vital contact with God - with the Lord Jesus, the living God; that in us the organ directed to God be strengthened; that we bear within us a perception of his "exquisiteness".

This also gives life to our work, but we also run a risk: one can do much, many things in the ecclesiastical field, all for God..., and yet remain totally taken up with oneself, without encountering God. Work replaces faith, but then one becomes empty within.

I therefore believe that we must make an effort above all to listen to the Lord in prayer, in deep interior participation in the sacraments, in learning the sentiments of God in the faces and the suffering of others, in order to be infected by his joy, his zeal and his love, and to look at the world with him and starting from him.

If we can succeed in doing this, even in the midst of the many "noes", we will once again find people waiting for him who may perhaps often be odd - the parable clearly says so - but who are nevertheless called to enter his hall.

Once again, in other words: it is a matter of the centrality of God, and not just any god but the God with the Face of Jesus Christ. Today, this is crucial.

There are so many problems one could list that must be solved, but none of them can be solved unless God is put at the centre, if God does not become once again visible to the world, if he does not become the determining factor in our lives and also enters the world in a decisive way through us.

In this, I believe that the future of the world in this dramatic situation is decided today: whether God - the God of Jesus Christ - exists and is recognized as such, or whether he disappears.

We are concerned that he be present. What must we do? As the last resort? Let us turn to him! We are celebrating this votive Mass of the Holy Spirit, calling upon him: "Lava quod est sordidum, riga quod est aridum, sana quod est saucium. Flecte quod est rigidum, fove quod est frigidum, rege quod est devium".

Let us invoke him so that he will irrigate, warm and straighten, so that he will pervade us with the power of his sacred flame and renew the earth. Let us pray for this with all our hearts at this time, in these days. Amen.

© Copyright 2006 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana