

On Christ As Mediator Between God and Man

'Jesus is Truly God Among Us, 'The Mediator and the Fullness of All Revelation''

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Here is a translation of the General Audience Pope Benedict XVI gave today in Paul VI Hall.

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Second Vatican Council, in its Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, says that the intimate truth of the revelation of God shines for us "in Christ, who is both the mediator and the fullness of all revelation"(no. 2). The Old Testament tells us how God, after the creation, despite original sin, despite man's arrogance in wanting to take the place of his Creator, again offers the possibility of his friendship, especially through the covenant with Abraham and the journey of a small nation, that of Israel, whom he chooses not according to the criteria of earthly power, but simply out of love. It is a choice that remains a mystery and reveals God's style, who calls some not to exclude others, but so that those called will act as bridge leading to Him: election is always an election for the other. In the history of the people of Israel we can retrace the stages of a long journey in which God makes himself known, reveals himself, enters into history with words and actions. For this work He uses mediators, such as Moses, the Prophets, the Judges, who communicate his will to the people, they remind them of the need for fidelity to the covenant and keep alive the expectation of the full and definitive realization of the divine promises.

And it is precisely the fulfillment of these promises that we contemplated in Christmas: God's revelation reaches its peak, its fullness. In Jesus of Nazareth, God truly visits his people, he visits humanity in a way that exceeds all expectation: he sends his only begotten Son, who becomes man, God himself. Jesus does not simply tell us something about God, he does not simply talk about the Father, because he is God, and thus he reveals to us the face of God. In the Prologue of his Gospel, John writes: "No one has ever seen God: it is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known" (*Jn* 1:18).

I want to focus on this "revealing the face of God." In this regard, St. John, in his Gospel, relates to us a significant fact. Approaching the passion, Jesus reassures his disciples, inviting them not to be afraid and to have faith; then he initiates a dialogue with them in which he speaks of God the Father (cf. *Jn* 14:2-9). At one point, the apostle Philip asks Jesus, "Lord, show us the Father, and we will be satisfied" (*Jn* 14:8). Philip is very practical and concrete: he says what we, too, want to say: "we want to see, show us the Father"; he asks to "see" the Father, to see his face. Jesus' answer is an answer not only for Philip, but also for us and leads us into the heart of the Christological faith of the Church; the Lord affirms: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father" (*Jn* 14:9). This expression contains a synthesis of the novelty of the New Testament, that novelty that appeared in the cave of Bethlehem: God can be seen, he has shown his face, he is visible in Jesus Christ.

Throughout the Old Testament the theme of "seeking the face of God" is ever present, so that the Hebrew term *panîm*, which means "face", occurs no less than 400 times, 100 of which refer to God, it means to see the face of God. Yet the Jewish religion, by forbidding all images, since God cannot be depicted - as instead occurred among their neighbors with the worship of idols; therefore, with this prohibition of imagery, the Old Testament seems to totally exclude "seeing" from worship and piety. What does it mean then, for the pious Israelite, to seek the face of God, while recognizing that there can be no image of Him? The question is important: on the one hand, it is said that God cannot be reduced to an object, to a simple image, nor can anything be put in the place of God; on the other, however, it is affirmed that He has a face, that is, He is a "You" that can enter into a relationship, who isn't closed in his Heavens looking down upon humanity. God is certainly above all things, but he turns to us, hears us, sees and speaks, makes covenants, is capable of love. The history of salvation is history of God with humanity, it is the history of this relationship of God who progressively reveals himself to man, letting him see his face.

Right at the beginning of the year, on January 1, we heard in the liturgy the beautiful prayer of blessing over the people: "The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you, and be gracious to you. The Lord turn his face to you and give you peace" (*Num.* 6:24-26). The splendor of the divine face is the source of life, it is what allows us to see reality, and the light of his countenance

is the guide to life. In the Old Testament there is a figure connected in a very special way to the theme of the "face of God": Moses, whom God chose to free the people from slavery in Egypt, to give them the Law of the covenant and to lead them to the Promised Land. Well, in chapter 33 of the *Book of Exodus*, it says that Moses had a close and confidential relationship with God: "The Lord spoke to Moses face to face, as one speaks with his friend" (v. 11). By virtue of this confidence, Moses asks God: "Show me your glory," and the Lord's answer is clear: "I will make all my goodness pass before you, and will proclaim before you the name ... But you cannot see my face, for no one shall see me and live ... Here is a place near me ... you shall see my back, but my face shall not be seen" (vv. 18-23). On the one hand, then, there is the face to face dialogue as among friends, but on the other, there is the impossibility, in this life, of seeing the face of God, which remains hidden; the vision is limited. The Fathers say that these words, "you shall only see my back", mean: you can only follow Christ and in following you see from behind the mystery of God; God can be followed seeing his back.

Something new happens, however, with the incarnation. The search for the face of God undergoes an unthinkable change, because now this face can be seen: that of Jesus, the Son of God who became man. In Him the path of God's revelation finds fulfillment, which began with the call of Abraham; He is the fullness of this revelation because he is the Son of God, he is both "the mediator and fullness of all revelation" (Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Verbum*, 2), and in Him the content of Revelation and the Revealer coincide. Jesus shows us the face of God and makes known to us the name of God. In the priestly prayer at the Last Supper, He says to the Father: "I have made your name known to those whom you gave me from the world ... I made your name known to them" (cf. *Jn* 17:6,26). The expression "name of God" means God as He who is present among men. To Moses at the burning bush, God had revealed his name, had made it possible to invoke him, had given a concrete sign of his "existence" among men. All this finds fulfillment and completeness in Jesus: He inaugurates a new way of God's presence in history, because he who sees Him, sees the Father, as he says to Philip (cf. *Jn* 14:9). Christianity - says Saint Bernard - is the "religion of the Word of God"; not, however, "a written and mute word, but of the incarnate and living Word" (*Hom. super missus est*, IV, 11: *PL* 183, 86B). In the Patristic and Medieval traditions, a special formula is used to express this reality: Jesus is the *Verbum abbreviatum* (cf. *Rom* 9:28, referring to *Isaiah* 10:23), he is the short, abbreviated and substantial Word of the Father, who has told us everything about Him. In Jesus the whole Word is present.

In Jesus even the mediation between God and man finds its fullness. In the Old Testament, there is a host of figures who have performed this task, particularly Moses, the deliverer, the guide, the "mediator" of the covenant, as also the New Testament defines him (cf. *Gal* 3:19; *Acts* 7:35, *Jn* 1:17). Jesus, true God and true man, is not simply one of the mediators between God and man, he is "the mediator" of the new and everlasting covenant (cf. *Heb* 8:6; 9:15, 12:24); "For there is one God", Paul says, "and one mediator between God and humankind, the man Christ Jesus" (1 *Tim* 2:5, *Gal* 3:19-20). In Him we see and meet the Father; in Him we can invoke God as "*Abbà*, Father"; in Him we are given salvation.

The desire to know God truly, that is, to see the face of God, is in every man, even atheists. And we perhaps unwittingly have this desire to see simply who He is, what He is, who He is for us. But this desire is realized by following Christ, so we see his back and finally also see God as a friend, his face in the face of Christ.

The important thing is that we follow Christ not only when we are in need and when we find space for it in our daily affairs, but with our lives as such. The whole of life should be directed towards encountering Him, towards loving Him; and, in it, a central place must also be given to the love of one's neighbor, that love that, in the light of the Crucified One, enables us to recognize the face of Jesus in the poor, the weak, the suffering. This is only possible if the true face of Jesus has become familiar to us in listening to His Word, in interior dialogue, in entering into this Word in such a way as to really encounter him, and naturally in the Mystery of the Eucharist. In the *Gospel of St. Luke* there is the significant passage of the two disciples of Emmaus, who recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread, thought after being prepared by the journey with Him, prepared by the invitation they made Him to remain with them, prepared by the dialogue that made their hearts burn; so, in the end, they see Jesus. For us, too, the Eucharist is the great school in which we learn to see the face of God, we enter into an intimate relationship with Him, and we learn at the same time to turn our gaze towards the final moment of history, when He will satisfy us with the light of his face. On earth we walk towards this fullness, awaiting the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God. Thank you.