

**WEDNESDAY AUDIENCE: YEAR OF FAITH:
PAPAL CATECHESIS 04**
"Our hearts are restless until they rest in God."
7 November 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The path of reflection that we have undertaken together in this Year of Faith leads us to meditate today on a fascinating aspect of human and Christian experience: man bears within him a mysterious desire for God. Very significantly, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* opens with the following statement: "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"(no. 27).

Such a statement, which even today in many cultural contexts seems quite acceptable, almost obvious, might instead seem a provocation in secularized Western culture. Many of our contemporaries could in fact argue that in no way do they feel such a desire for God. For large sections of society, He is no longer the awaited one, the desired one, but rather a reality that leaves people indifferent, in front of which one should not even make the effort to comment. In reality, what we have defined as "the desire of God" has not disappeared completely, and presents itself even today, in many ways, in the heart of man. Human desire tends always to certain concrete goods, often anything but spiritual, yet finds itself before the question of what is really "the" good, and thus finds itself dealing with something that is other than itself, that man cannot create, but which he is called to recognize. What can truly satisfy human desire?

In my first Encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, I tried to analyze how this dynamism takes place in the experience of human love, an experience that in our age is more easily perceived as a moment of ecstasy, a going out of oneself, a place where man realizes he is permeated by a desire that surpasses him. Through love, man and woman experience in a new way, thanks to each other, the grandeur and beauty of life and reality. If what I experience is not a mere illusion, if I truly desire the other's good as a way also to my own good, then I must be willing to de-centre myself, to put myself at the other's service, to the point of renouncing myself. The answer to the question about the meaning of the experience of love thus passes through the purification and healing of the will, required by the very love which I have for the other. We must practice this, we must train, and even correct ourselves, so that we may truly desire that good.

The initial ecstasy thus 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*, 6). Through this journey, man will gradually deepen in the knowledge of that love which he had initially experienced. And the mystery which it represents will increasingly stand out: not even the person loved, in fact, can satisfy the desire that

dwells in the human heart; on the contrary, the more authentic the love for the other is, the more it allows the question to arise concerning its origin and its destiny, concerning the chance it has of lasting forever. Thus, the human experience of love has within it a dynamism that leads beyond oneself, it is an experience of a good that leads one to go out of oneself and to find oneself before the mystery surrounding the whole of existence.

Similar considerations could also be made with regard to other human experiences, such as friendship, the experience of beauty, the love of knowledge: every good experienced by man reaches out into the mystery surrounding man himself; every desire that arises within the human heart echoes a fundamental desire that is never fully satisfied. Certainly, from that deep desire, which also hides something enigmatic, one cannot arrive directly at faith. Man, after all, knows well what does not satisfy him, but he cannot guess or define what would make him experience that happiness the nostalgia of which he carries in his heart. It is not possible to know God on the basis of man's desire alone. From this point of view, the mystery remains: man is the seeker of the Absolute, a seeker who advances through small and uncertain steps. And yet, already the experience of desire, of the "restless heart" as St. Augustine called it, is highly significant. It tells us that man is, deep down, a religious being (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 28), a "beggar before God." We can say in the words of Pascal: "Man infinitely surpasses man" (*Pensées*, ed. Chevalier 438, ed. Brunschvicg 434). Our eyes recognize objects when they are illuminated by the light. Hence the desire to know the light itself, which makes the things of the world shine and with them, enkindles the sense of beauty.

We must therefore believe it possible in our time, so apparently adverse to the dimension of the transcendent, to open a path towards the authentic religious sense of life, which shows how the gift of faith is not absurd, is not irrational. It would be of great use, for that purpose, to promote a kind of pedagogy of desire, both for the path of those who do not yet believe, and for those who have already received the gift of faith. A pedagogy that includes at least two aspects. First, learning or re-learning the taste for the authentic joys of life. Not all the satisfactions produce the same effect in us: some leave a positive trace, they are able to pacify the soul, they make us more active and generous. Others instead, after the initial light, seem to disappoint the expectations they had aroused and sometimes leave behind bitterness, dissatisfaction or a sense of emptiness. Educating individuals from an early age to savour the true joys, in all areas of life - family, friendship, solidarity with those who suffer, self-denial to serve others, love for knowledge, for art, for the beauties of nature -, all this means exercising that inner taste and producing effective antibodies against the trivialization and flattening prevailing today. Adults, too, need to rediscover these joys, to desire true realities, purifying themselves from the mediocrity in which they find themselves entangled. It will then become easier to drop or reject everything that, while seemingly attractive, instead proves insipid, a source of addiction and not of freedom. And this will cause that desire for God of which we are speaking to emerge.

A second aspect, which goes hand in hand with the previous one, is to never to be satisfied with what has been achieved. It is precisely the truest joys that are capable of freeing in us that healthy unrest that leads us to be more demanding - to desire a higher, more profound good - and at the

same time, to perceive with increasing clarity that nothing finite can fill our hearts. Thus we will learn to stretch out, unarmed, towards that good which we cannot construct or procure for ourselves by our own efforts; we will learn not be discouraged by the difficulty involved or by 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 advances along mistaken paths, when it chases artificial paradises and seems to lose the ability to yearn for the true good. Even in the abyss of sin, that spark is not extinguished in man that allows him to recognize the true good, to savour it, and thus to begin a path of ascent, for which God, through the gift of his grace, never fails to provide his help. All of us, moreover, need to tread a path of the purification and healing of desire. We are pilgrims towards the heavenly homeland, towards that full, eternal good, which nothing will ever be able to snatch from us. It is not a matter, therefore, of stifling the desire which is in the heart of man, but of liberating it, so that it can reach its true stature. When in desire a window is opened towards God, this is already a sign of the presence of faith in the soul, faith that is a grace of God. St. Augustine also said: "By making us wait, God increases our desire, which in turn enlarges the capacity of our soul" (*Commentary on the First Letter of John*, 4,6: PL 35, 2009).

In this pilgrimage, let us feel ourselves the brothers of all men, the travelling companions even of those who do not believe, of those who are seeking, of those who allow themselves to be questioned with sincerity by the dynamism of their desire for truth and goodness. Let us pray, in this Year of Faith, that God show his face to all those who seek him with a sincere heart.

In English Pope Benedict XVI said...

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Continuing our catechesis for the Year of Faith, we now consider the mysterious desire for God which lies deep in the human heart. God has created us for himself and, in the words of Saint Augustine: our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. Even in today's secularized society, this desire for God continues to make itself felt, above all in the experience of love. In love, which seeks the good of the other, we find ourselves by giving ourselves away, in a process involving the purification and healing of our hearts. So too in friendship, in the experience of beauty and the thirst for truth and goodness: we sense that we are caught up in a process which points us beyond ourselves to a mystery in which we dimly perceive the promise of complete fulfilment. Thanks to this innate religious sense, we can open our hearts to the gift of faith which draws us ever closer to God, the source of all good and the fulfilment of our deepest desire. During this Year of Faith, let us pray for our contemporaries who seek the truth with a sincere heart that they may come to know the joy and freedom born of faith.

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.

Appeal by the Holy Father concerning Syria

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 possible because one day it may be too late.

Family – The Domestic Church

Finally, I wish to address, as usual, the young, the sick and the newlyweds. The day after tomorrow we will celebrate the feast of the Dedication of the Basilica of St. John in Lateran, the cathedral of Rome. This event invites you, dear young people, to become living and precious stones, used to build the House of the Lord. It encourages you, dear sick people, to offer to God your daily sacrifice for the good of the whole Christian community; and it pushes you, dear newlyweds, to make your families small domestic churches.