

**WEDNESDAY AUDIENCE: YEAR OF FAITH:  
PAPAL CATECHESIS 05**  
***"God Inspires and Accompanies our Efforts  
to Know Him and to Find Our Happiness in Him"***  
14 November 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Last Wednesday we reflected on the desire for God that the human being carries within his very depths. Today I would like to continue and delve deeper into this aspect, meditating with you briefly about some ways to arrive at the knowledge of God.

I should mention, however, that God's initiative always precedes human action and, even on the path towards Him, it is He who enlightens us, guides us and leads us, always respecting our freedom. And it is He, too, that makes us enter into His intimacy, revealing and giving us the grace to be able to welcome this revelation in faith. Let us never forget the experience of St. Augustine: it is not we who possess the Truth after seeking it, rather it is Truth that seeks us out and possesses us.

However, there are pathways that can open the human heart to the knowledge of God, there are signs leading to God. Of course, we often risk being dazzled by the sparkle of worldliness, which makes us less capable of undertaking such paths or of reading those signs. However, God never tires of looking for us, He is faithful to man whom He created and redeemed, He remains close to our lives, because He loves us. This is a certainty that must accompany us every day, even if certain widespread mentalities make it more difficult for the Church and the Christian to communicate the joy of the Gospel to every creature and to lead all to an encounter with Jesus, the only Saviour of the world. This, however, is our mission, it is the mission of the Church and every believer must live it joyfully, feeling it to be his own, through a life truly animated by faith, marked by charity, by service to God and to others, and capable of radiating hope. This mission shines especially in the holiness to which we are all called.

Today, as we know, there are difficulties and trials for the faith, which is often poorly understood, challenged, rejected. St. Peter said to his Christians: "Always be ready to give an answer, but with gentleness and respect, to anyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that is in your hearts" (1 Pt 3:15). In the past, in the West, in a society considered Christian, the faith was the environment in which one moved; the reference and adherence to God were, for most people, part of everyday life. It was the unbeliever instead who had to justify his disbelief. In our world, the situation has changed and, increasingly, the believer must be able to give an account of his faith. Blessed John Paul II, in his encyclical *Fides et ratio*, emphasized how faith is put to the test also in this contemporary age, crossed by subtle and insidious forms of theoretical and practical atheism (cf. nos. 46-47). From the Enlightenment onwards, criticism towards religion has intensified; history has also been marked by the presence of atheistic systems, in which God was considered a mere projection of the human mind, an illusion and the product of a society already distorted by many

forms of alienation. The last century witnessed a strong process of secularism, in the name of the absolute autonomy of man, considered the measure and architect of reality but deprived of being a creature "in the image and likeness of God." In our time, a phenomenon has arisen that is particularly dangerous to the faith: there is a form of atheism which we define as "practical", which does not deny the truth of the faith or religious rituals, but simply considers them irrelevant to everyday existence, detached from life, useless. Often, then, one believes in God in a superficial way and lives "as if God did not exist" (*etsi Deus not daretur*). In the end, however, this way of life proves even more destructive, because it leads to indifference towards the faith and the question of God.

In reality, man, separated from God, is reduced to a single dimension, the horizontal one, and this reductionism is one of the fundamental causes of the forms of totalitarianism that have had tragic consequences in the last century, as well as of the crisis of values we see in the current reality. In obscuring the reference to God, the ethical horizon has also been obscured, to make room for relativism and an ambiguous conception of freedom, which instead of liberating ends up binding man to idols. The temptations Jesus faced in the desert prior to his public ministry, well represent which "idols" fascinate man, when he does not go beyond himself. When God loses centrality for man, man loses his proper place; he no longer finds his place in creation, in relationships with others. What ancient wisdom evokes with the myth of Prometheus still rings true: man thinks he can become "god", the master of life and death.

Before this picture, the Church, faithful to Christ's mandate, never ceases to affirm the truth about man and his destiny. The Second Vatican Council states succinctly: "The root reason for human dignity lies in man's call to communion with God. From the very circumstance of his origin man is already invited to converse with God. For man would not exist were he not created by God's love and constantly preserved by it; and he cannot live fully according to truth unless he freely acknowledges that love and devotes himself to his Creator "(Const. *Gaudium et spes*, 19).

What answers, then, is the faith called to give, with "gentleness and respect", to atheism, scepticism and indifference to the vertical dimension, so that the man of our time will continue to question himself about the existence of God and travel the paths leading to Him? I would like to mention some ways, both the fruit of natural reflection and of the very power of faith. I'd like to sum these up very briefly in three words: the world, man, faith.

The first: the world. St. Augustine, who during his life long sought the Truth and was seized by it, has a beautiful and famous page, in which he states: "Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea, question the beauty of the air, amply spread out everywhere, question the beauty of the sky... question all these things. They all answer you: 'Here we are, look; we're beautiful'. Their beauty is their confession. Who made these beautiful changeable things, if not one who is beautiful and unchangeable? "(*Sermons*, 241, 2: PL 38, 1134). I think we need to recover and help our contemporaries recover the ability to contemplate creation, its beauty, its structure. The world is not a shapeless magma; rather the more we know about it, the more we discover its amazing mechanisms, the more we see a design, we see that there is a creating intelligence. Albert Einstein said that in the laws of nature "a mind so superior is revealed that in comparison, our

minds are like a totally insignificant reflection" (*Il Mondo come lo vedo io*, 'The World as I See It', Rome 2005). Thus, a first way leading to the discovery of God is the careful contemplation of creation.

The second word: man. St. Augustine has another famous quote that says that God is more intimate to me than I am to myself (cf. *Confessions*, III, 6, 11). From this he formulates the invitation: "Do not go abroad, but return within yourself: truth dwells in the inner man" (*De vera religione*, 39, 72). This is another aspect we risk losing in the noisy and distracted world we live in: the ability to stop and look deep within ourselves and perceive this thirst for the infinite that we carry within us, that pushes us to go further and refers us to Someone who may satisfy it. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* states: "With his openness to truth and beauty, his sense of moral goodness, his freedom and the voice of his conscience, with his longings for the infinite and for happiness, man questions himself about God's existence "(no. 33).

The third word: faith. Especially in the reality of our times, we must not forget that one path leading to knowledge of and the encounter with God is the life of faith. Whoever believes is united to God, is open to his grace, to the power of love. Thus his existence becomes a witness not of himself, but of the Risen Christ, and his faith is not afraid to show itself in everyday life, it is open to the dialogue that expresses deep friendship for the journey of every man, and knows how to open lights of hope onto the need for redemption, for happiness, for the future. Faith is an encounter with God who speaks and acts in history and who converts our daily life, transforming our mentality, value judgments, choices and concrete actions. It is not an illusion, an escape from reality, a comfortable shelter, sentimentality, but is the involvement of one's whole life and is the proclamation of the Gospel, the Good News capable of liberating man in his entirety. A Christian, a community that is industrious and faithful to the plan of God who first loved us, constitutes a privileged way for those who are indifferent or are doubtful about their lives and actions. This, however, asks that each one make their testimony of faith more transparent, purifying his or her own life so that it may conform to Christ. Today many have a limited understanding of the Christian faith, because they identify it with a mere system of beliefs and of values and not so much with the truth of God who has revealed Himself in history, eager to communicate with man face to face, in a loving relationship with him. In reality, at the foundation of every doctrine or value there is the event of the encounter between man and God in Christ Jesus. Christianity, before being a moral or ethical system, is the advent of love, it is to welcome the person of Jesus. For this reason, the Christian and Christian communities must first look and bring others to look to Christ, the true Way leading to God.

### ***In English Pope Benedict XVI said...***

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in our catechesis for the Year of Faith, we have seen that a mysterious desire for God lies deep with the human heart. By his grace, God inspires and accompanies our efforts to know him and to find our happiness in him. Yet today, in our secularized world, faith often seems difficult to justify; we are faced with a "practical" atheism, a tendency to think and live "as if God did not exist".

Yet once God is removed from our lives, we become diminished, for our greatest human dignity consists in being created by God and called to live in communion with him. As believers, we need to offer convincing reasons for our faith and hope. We can find such reasons in the order and beauty of creation itself, which speaks of its Creator; in the longing for the infinite present in the human heart, which finds satisfaction in God alone; and in faith, which illumines and transforms our lives through our daily union with the Lord. By the witness of our living faith, may we lead others to know and love the God who reveals himself in Christ.