



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 7 January 2009*

Saint Paul (17):

Spiritual Worship

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At this first General Audience in 2009, I would like to express to all of you my fervent good wishes for the new year that has just begun. Let us revive within us the commitment to open our minds and hearts to Christ, to be and to live as his true friends. His company will ensure that this year, even with its inevitable difficulties, will be a journey full of joy and peace. In fact, only if we remain united to Jesus will the new year be a good and happy one.

The commitment of union with Christ is the example that St Paul also offers us. Continuing the Catecheses dedicated to him, let us pause to reflect today on one of the important aspects of his thought which concerns the worship that Christians are called to exercise. In the past, it was fashionable to speak of a rather anti-religious tendency in the Apostle, of a "spiritualization" of the idea of worship. Today we understand better that Paul sees in the Cross of Christ a historic turning point that radically transforms and renews the reality of worship. In particular, there are three texts in the Letter to the Romans in which this new vision of worship appears.

1. In Romans 3: 25, after speaking of the "redemption which is in Christ Jesus", Paul continues with what to us is a mysterious formula, saying: "through his Blood, God made him the means of expiation for all who believe". With these words that we find somewhat strange: "means of

expiation", St Paul mentions the so-called "propitiatory" of the ancient temple, that is, the lid covering the Ark of the Covenant that was considered the point of contact between God and man, the point of his mysterious presence in the human world. On the great Day of Atonement "*Yom Kippur*" this "propitiatory" was sprinkled with the blood of sacrificed animals blood that symbolically brought the sins of the past year into contact with God and thus sins cast into the abyss of divine goodness were, so to speak, absorbed by the power of God, overcome and forgiven. Life began anew.

St Paul mentions this rite and says: This rite was an expression of the desire truly to be able to cast all our sins into the abyss of divine mercy and thus make them disappear. With the blood of animals, however, this expiation was not achieved; a more real contact between human sin and divine love was required. This contact took place on the Cross of Christ. Christ, the true Son of God, who became a true man, took all our sins upon himself. He himself is the point of contact between human wretchedness and divine mercy. In his heart the grievous mass of the evil perpetrated by humanity is dissolved and life is renewed.

In revealing this change, St Paul tells us: the old form of worship with animal sacrifices in the Temple of Jerusalem ended with the Cross of Christ the supreme act of divine love become human love. This symbolic worship, the cult of desire, is now replaced by true worship: the love of God incarnate in Christ and brought to its fulfilment in his death on the Cross. This is not, therefore, a spiritualization of true worship; on the contrary it is true worship: real divine-human love replaces the symbolic and temporary form of worship. The Cross of Christ, his love with Flesh and Blood, is the true worship that corresponds with the reality of God and of man. In Paul's opinion, the epoch of the temple and its worship had already ended prior to the external destruction of the temple. Here Paul finds himself in perfect harmony with the words of Jesus who had predicted the destruction of the temple and had also announced another temple, "not made with human hands" the temple of his Risen Body (cf. Mk 14: 58; Jn 2: 19ff.). This is the first text.

2. The second text I would like to speak of today is found in the first verse of chapter 12 of the Letter to the Romans. We have heard it and I shall repeat it: "I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship". There is an apparent paradox in these words: while the sacrifice normally requires the *death* of the victim, Paul speaks on the contrary of the *life* of the Christian. The expression "present your bodies", independently of the successive concept of sacrifice, acquires the religious nuance of "giving as an oblation, an offering". The exhortation "present your bodies" refers to the person in his entirety; in fact, in Romans 6: 13, he invites them to: "yield yourselves". Moreover the explicit reference to the physical dimension of the Christian coincides with the invitation to: "glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6: 20). In other words, it is a question of honouring God in the most practical form of daily life that consists of relational and perceptible visibility.

Conduct of this kind is described by Paul as "a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God". It is here that we actually find the word "sacrifice". In this usage the term belongs to a sacred context and serves to designate the slaughtering of an animal, part of which can be burned in honour of the gods and another part eaten at a banquet by those who are offering the sacrifice. Paul applies it instead to the Christian's life. In fact, he describes this sacrifice using three adjectives. The first "living" expresses vitality. The second "holy" recalls the Pauline idea of holiness not linked to places or objects but to Christians themselves. The third "acceptable to God" recalls perhaps the recurrent biblical expression of sacrifice "a pleasing odour" (cf. Lv 1: 13, 17; 23: 18; 26: 31, etc.).

Immediately afterwards, Paul thus defines this new way of living: "which is your spiritual worship". Commentators on this text well know that the Greek expression (*ten logiken latreían*) is not easy to translate. The Latin Bible translates it as: "*rationabile obsequium*". The actual word "*rationabile*" appears in the First Eucharistic Prayer of the Roman Canon: in it the faithful pray that God will accept this offering as "*rationabile*". The usual Italian translation "*culto spirituale*" [spiritual worship] does not reflect all the nuances of the Greek text (or of the Latin). In any case it is not a matter of less real worship or even worship that is only metaphorical but rather of a more concrete and realistic worship a worship in which the human being himself, in his totality as a being endowed with reason, becomes adoration, glorification of the living God.

This Pauline formula, which returns later in the Roman Eucharistic Prayer, is the fruit of a long development of the religious experience in the centuries before Christ. In this experience theological developments of the Old Testament and trends of Greek thought are encountered. I would like at least to show some elements of this development. The Prophets and many Psalms strongly criticize the bloody sacrifices of the temple. Psalm 50[49], in which God speaks: "if I were hungry, I would not tell you; for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving..." (vv. 12-14). The following Psalm says something similar: "You have no delight in sacrifice; were I to give a burned offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise" (Ps 50[51]: vv. 18ff). In the Book of Daniel, at the time of the new destruction of the temple by the Hellenistic regime (second century b.c.), we find a new step in the same direction. In the heart of the furnace that is, of persecution, suffering Azariah prays in these words: "And at this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader, no burned offering, or sacrifice, or oblation, or incense, no place to make an offering before you or to find mercy. Yet with a contrite heart and a humble spirit may we be accepted, as though it were with burned offerings of rams and bulls... such may be our sacrifice be in your sight this day, and may we wholly follow you" (Dan 3: 15-17). In the destruction of the shrine and of worship, in this situation of the privation of any sign of God's presence, the believer offers as a true holocaust his contrite heart his desire for God.

We see an important and beautiful development but with a danger. There is a spiritualization, a moralization of worship: worship becomes only something of the heart, of the mind. But it lacks the

body, it lacks the community. Thus we understand, for example, that Psalm 51 and also the Book of Daniel, despite the criticism of worship, desire a return to the time of sacrifices. Yet this is a renewed time, a renewed sacrifice, in a synthesis that was not yet foreseeable, that could not yet be conceived of.

Let us return to St Paul. He is heir to these developments, of the desire for true worship, in which man himself becomes the glory of God, living adoration with his whole being. In this sense he says to the Romans: "present your bodies as a living sacrifice... which is your spiritual worship" (Rm 12: 1). Paul thus repeats what he pointed out in chapter 3: the time of animal sacrifices, substitute sacrifices, is over. The time has come for true worship. However, here there is also the danger of a misunderstanding. One might easily interpret this new worship in a moralistic sense: in offering our life we ourselves become true worship. In this way, worship with animals would be replaced by moralism: man himself would do everything on his own with his moral strength. And this was certainly not St Paul's intention. However the question remains: how therefore, can we interpret this "[reasonable] spiritual worship"? Paul always presumes that we are all "one in Christ Jesus" (Gal 3: 28), that we died in Baptism (cf. Rm 1) and that we now live with Christ, for Christ, in Christ.

In this union and only in this way we are able to become in him and with him "a living sacrifice", to offer "true worship". The sacrificed animals were meant to replace the human being, the gift of self, but they could not. In his gift of himself to the Father and to us, Jesus Christ is not a substitute but truly bears within him the human being, our sins and our desire; he really represents us, he takes us upon himself. In communion with Christ, realized in faith and in the sacraments, despite all our inadequacies we truly become a living sacrifice: "true worship" is achieved.

This synthesis forms the background of the Roman Canon in which we pray for this offering to become "*rationabile*" for spiritual worship to be made. The Church knows that in the Holy Eucharist Christ's gift of himself, his true sacrifice, becomes present. However, the Church prays that the community celebrating may truly be united with Christ and transformed; she prays that we may become what we cannot be with our own efforts: a "rational" offering that is acceptable to God. Thus the Eucharistic Prayer interprets St Paul's words correctly. St Augustine explained all this marvellously in the 10th chapter of his "*City of God*". I cite only two sentences from it. "This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ...". "The whole redeemed city, that is to say, the congregation or community of the saints, is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself..." (10, 6: *CCL* 47, 27 ff.).

3. Further, at the end, I add just a few words on the third text of the Letter to the Romans on the new worship. St Paul thus said in chapter 15: "The grace given me by God to be "a minister" of Christ Jesus to the Gentiles in the priestly service (*hierourgein*) of the Gospel of God, so that the offering of the Gentiles may be acceptable, sanctified by the Holy Spirit" (15: 15ff.). I would like to emphasize only two aspects of this marvellous text, with regard to the unique terminology in the Pauline Letters. First of all, St Paul interprets his missionary activity among the world's peoples to

build the universal Church as priestly service. To proclaim the Gospel in order to unite the peoples in the communion of the Risen Christ is a "priestly" action. The apostle of the Gospel is a true priest, he does what is central to the priesthood: prepares the true sacrifice. And then the second aspect: the goal of missionary action is we can say the cosmic liturgy: that the peoples united in Christ, the world, may as such become the glory of God, an "acceptable [offering], sanctified by the Holy Spirit". Here the dynamic aspect appears, the aspect of hope in the Pauline conception of worship: Christ's gift of himself implies the aspiration to attract all to communion in his body, to unite the world. Only in communion with Christ, the exemplary man, one with God, does the world thus become as we all wish it to be: a mirror of divine love. This dynamism is ever present in the Eucharist this dynamism must inspire and form our life. And let us begin the new year with this dynamism. Thank you for your patience.

To special groups

I am pleased to greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including the groups from Finland and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I willingly invoke God's Blessings of joy and peace throughout the year!

Lastly, I address my thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. Yesterday, on the Solemnity of the Epiphany, we recalled the journey to Christ of the Magi who were guided by the light of the star. May their example foster in you, dear *young people*, the desire to encounter Jesus and to transmit to all the joy that flows from acceptance of the Gospel; may it lead you, dear *sick people*, to offer to the Child of Bethlehem your pain and suffering; may it be for you, dear *newly weds*, a constant encouragement to make your families a welcoming "place" for the mysterious signs of God and for the gift of life.

© Copyright 2009 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana