



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 11 January 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

During our journey of reflection on Jesus' prayer as it is presented in the Gospels, I would like today to meditate on the particularly solemn moment of his prayer at the Last Supper.

The temporal and emotional background of the festive meal at which Jesus takes leave of his friends is the imminence of his death, which he feels is now at hand. For some time Jesus had been talking about his Passion and had also been seeking to involve his disciples increasingly in this prospect. The Gospel according to Mark tells that from the time when he set out for Jerusalem, in the villages of distant Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had begun "to teach them that the Son of man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again" (Mk 8:31).

In addition, in the very days when he was preparing to say goodbye to the disciples, the life of the people was marked by the imminence of the Passover, that is, the commemoration of Israel's liberation from Egypt. This liberation, lived in the past and expected in the present and in the future, is experienced again in family celebrations of the Passover. The Last Supper fits into this context, but with a basic innovation.

Jesus looks at his Passion, death and Resurrection with full awareness. He wishes to spend with his disciples this Supper, that has a quite special character and is different from other meals; it is

his Supper, in which he gives something entirely new: himself. In this way Jesus celebrates his Pasch, anticipating his Cross and his Resurrection.

This new element is highlighted for us in the account of the Last Supper in the Gospel of John, who does not describe it as the Passover meal for the very reason that Jesus was intending to inaugurate something new, to celebrate his Pasch, which is of course linked to the events of the Exodus. Moreover, according to John, Jesus died on the cross at the very moment when the Passover lambs were being sacrificed in the Temple.

What then is the key to this Supper? It is in the gestures of breaking bread, of distributing it to his followers and of sharing the cup of wine, with the words that accompany them, and in the context of prayer in which they belong; it is the institution of the Eucharist, it is the great prayer of Jesus and of the Church. However, let us now take a closer look.

First of all, the New Testament traditions of the Institution of the Eucharist (cf. 1 Cor 11:23-25; Lk 22: 14-20; Mk 14:22-25; Mt 26:26-29), point to the prayer that introduces Jesus' acts and words over the bread and over the wine, by using two parallel and complementary verbs. Paul and Luke speak of *eucaristia*/thanksgiving: "And he took bread, and when *he had given thanks* he broke it and gave it to them" (Lk 22:19).

Mark and Matthew, however, emphasize instead the aspect of *eulogia*/blessing: "he took bread, and *blessed*, and broke it, and gave it to them" (Mk 14:22). Both these Greek terms, *eucaristein* and *eulogein*, refer to the Hebrew *berakha*, that is, the great prayer of thanksgiving and blessing of Israel's tradition which inaugurated the important feasts.

The two different Greek words indicate the two intrinsic and complementary orientations of this prayer. *Berakha*, in fact, means primarily thanksgiving and praise for the gift received that rise to God: at the Last Supper of Jesus, it is a matter of bread — made from the wheat that God causes to sprout and grow in the earth — and wine, produced from the fruit that ripens on the vine.

This prayer of praise and thanksgiving that is raised to God returns as a blessing that comes down from God upon the gift and enriches it. Thanking and praising God thus become blessing and the offering given to God returns to man blessed by the Almighty. The words of the Institution of the Eucharist fit into this context of prayer; in them the praise and blessing of the *berakha* become the blessing and transformation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Jesus.

Before the words of the Institution come the actions: the breaking of the bread and the offering of the wine. The one who breaks the bread and passes the cup is first of all the head of the family who welcomes his relatives at table; but these gestures are also those of hospitality, of the welcome in convivial communion of the stranger who does not belong to the house.

These very gestures, in the Supper with which Jesus takes leave of his followers, acquire a completely new depth. He gives a visible sign of the welcome to the banquet in which God gives himself. Jesus offers and communicates himself in the bread and in the wine.

But how can all this happen? How can Jesus give himself at that moment? Jesus knows that his life is about to be taken from him in the torture of the cross, the capital punishment of slaves, which Cicero described as *mors turpissima crucis* [a most cruel and disgraceful death].

With the gift of the bread and of the wine that he offers at the Last Supper, Jesus anticipates his death and his Resurrection, bringing about what he had said in his Good Shepherd Discourse: “I lay down my life, that I may take it again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again; this charge I have received from my Father” (Jn 10:17-18).

He therefore offers in anticipation the life that will be taken from him and in this way transforms his violent death into a free act of giving himself for others and to others. The violence he suffered is transformed into an active, free and redemptive sacrifice.

Once again, in prayer, begun in accordance with the ritual forms of the Biblical tradition, Jesus shows his identity and his determination to fulfil his mission of total love to the very end, and of offering in obedience to the Father’s will. The profound originality of the gift of himself to his followers, through the Eucharistic memorial, is the culmination of the prayer that distinguishes his farewell supper with his own.

In contemplating Jesus’ actions and words on that night, we see clearly that it is in this close and constant relationship with the Father that he carries out his act of bequeathing to his followers and to each one of us the sacrament of love, the “*Sacramentum caritatis*”.

The words: “Do this in remembrance of me” (1 Cor 11:24, 25), ring out twice in the Upper Room. With the gift of himself he celebrates his Pasch, becoming the true Lamb that brings the whole of the ancient worship to fulfilment. For this reason St Paul, speaking to the Christians of Corinth, says: “Christ [our Pasch], our Paschal Lamb, has been sacrificed. Let us, therefore, celebrate the festival... with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth” (1 Cor 5:7-8).

Luke the Evangelist has retained a further precious element of the events of the Last Supper that enables us to see the moving depth of Jesus’ prayer for his own on that night: his attention to each one. Starting with the prayer of thanksgiving and blessing, Jesus arrives at the Eucharistic gift, the gift of himself, and, while he is giving the crucial sacramental reality, he addresses Peter.

At the end of the meal, he says: “Simon, Simon, behold, Satan demanded to have you, that he might sift you like wheat, but I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail; and when you have

turned again, strengthen your brethren” (Lk 22:31-32).

Jesus’ prayer, when his disciples were about to be put to the test, helps them to overcome their weakness in their effort to understand that the way of God passes through the Paschal Mystery of the death and Resurrection, anticipated in the offering of the bread and the wine. The Eucharist is the food of pilgrims that also becomes strength for those who are weary, worn-out and bewildered. And the prayer was specially for Peter, so that once he had turned again he might strengthen his brethren in the faith.

Luke the Evangelist recalls that it was the very gaze of Jesus in seeking Peter’s face at the moment when he had just denied him three times which gave him the strength to continue following in his footsteps: “And immediately, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the word of the Lord” (Lk 22:60-61).

Dear brothers and sisters, by participating in the Eucharist, we experience in an extraordinary manner the prayer that Jesus prayed and prays ceaselessly for every person so that the evil which we all encounter in life may not get the upper hand and that the transforming power of Christ’s death and Resurrection may act within us.

In the Eucharist the Church responds to Jesus’ commandment: “Do this in remembrance of me” (Lk 22,19; cf. 1 Cor 11, 24-26); she repeats the prayer of thanksgiving and praise and, with it, the words of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine into the Body and Blood of the Lord. Our Eucharists are: being attracted at this moment of prayer, being united ever anew to Jesus’ prayer. From the outset, the Church has understood the words of consecration as part of the *prayer prayed together to Jesus*; as a central part of the praise filled with gratitude, through which the fruits of the earth and the work of man come to us anew, given by God as the Body and Blood of Jesus, as the self-giving of God himself in his Son’s self-emptying love (cf. *Jesus of Nazareth, Part Two*, p. 128). Participating in the Eucharist, nourishing ourselves with the Flesh and Blood of the Son of God, we join our prayers to that of the Paschal Lamb on his supreme night, so that our life may not be lost despite our weakness and our unfaithfulness, but be transformed.

Dear friends, let us ask the Lord that after being duly prepared, also with the sacrament of Penance, our participation in his Eucharist, indispensable to Christian life, may always be the highest point in all our prayer. Let us ask that we too, profoundly united in his offering to the Father, may transform our own crosses into a free and responsible sacrifice of love for God and for our brethren. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I greet the many school groups from the United States present at today’s Audience, including the

deacons from St Paul's Seminary in Minnesota. My greeting also goes to the students of Carmel College in New Zealand. I welcome the participants in the Interfaith Journey from Canada. Upon all the English-speaking visitors and their families I cordially invoke God's abundant blessings.

Lastly, an affectionate thought goes to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. The Feast of the Baptism of the Lord that we celebrated last Sunday gives us the opportunity to think back to our own baptism. Dear *young people*, live with joy your belonging to the Church which is the family of Jesus. Dear *sick people*, may the grace of baptism soothe your suffering and impel you to offer to Christ for humanity's salvation. And you, dear *newlyweds*, who are starting out on your conjugal journey, found your marriage on faith, received as a gift on the day of your baptism

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