



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 25 April 2012

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In our last Catechesis I explained that from the outset the Church has had to face unexpected situations on her journey, new issues and emergencies to which she has sought to respond in the light of faith, letting herself be guided by the Holy Spirit. Today I would like to pause to reflect on another of these situations, on a serious problem that the first Christian community of Jerusalem was obliged to face and to solve, as St Luke tells us in the sixth chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, concerning pastoral charity to lonely people and those in need of assistance and help.

This is not a secondary matter for the Church and at that time risked creating divisions in the Church; the number of disciples, in fact continued to increase, but the Greek-speaking began to complain about those who spoke Hebrew because their widows were left out of the daily distribution (cf. Acts 6:1). To face this urgent matter which concerned a fundamental aspect of community life, namely, charity to the weak, the poor and the defenceless, and justice, the Apostles summoned the entire group of disciples. In that moment of pastoral emergency the Apostles' discernment stands out. They were facing the primary need to proclaim God's word in accordance with the Lord's mandate but — even if this was a priority of the Church — they considered with equal gravity the duty of charity and justice, that is, the duty to help widows and poor people and, in response to the commandment of Jesus: love one another as I have loved you (cf. Jn 15:12,17), to provide lovingly for their brothers and sisters in need.

So it was that difficulties arose in the two activities that must coexist in the Church — the proclamation of the word, the primacy of God and concrete charity, justice — and it was necessary to find a solution so that there would be room for both, for their necessary relationship. The Apostles' reflection is very clear, they say, as we heard: "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brethren, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:2-4).

Two points stand out: first, since that moment a ministry of charity has existed in the Church. The Church must not only proclaim the word but must also put the word — which is charity and truth — into practice. And, the second point: these men must not only enjoy a good reputation but also they must be filled with the Holy Spirit and with wisdom; in other words they cannot merely be organizers who know what "to do", but must "act" in a spirit of faith with God's enlightenment, with wisdom of heart. Hence their role — although it is above all a practical one — has nonetheless also a spiritual function. Charity and justice are not only social but also spiritual actions, accomplished in the light of the Holy Spirit.

We can thus say that the Apostles confronted this situation with great responsibility. They took the following decision: seven men were chosen; the Apostles prayed the Holy Spirit to grant them strength and then laid their hands on the seven so that they might dedicate themselves in a special way to this ministry of charity. Thus in the life of the Church, the first steps she took, in a certain way, reflected what had happened in Jesus' public life at Martha and Mary's house in Bethany. Martha was completely taken up with the service of hospitality to offer to Jesus and his disciples; Mary, on the contrary, devoted herself to listening to the Lord's word (cf. Lk 10:38-42). In neither case were the moments of prayer and of listening to God, and daily activity, the exercise of charity in opposition. Jesus' reminder, "Martha, Martha, you are anxious and troubled about many things; one thing is needful. Mary has chosen the good portion, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk 10:41-42) and, likewise, the Apostles' reflection: "We will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4), show the priority we must give to God. I do not wish here to enter into the interpretation of this Martha-Mary passage. In any case activity undertaken to help one's neighbor, "the other", is not to be condemned, but it is essential to stress the need for it to be imbued also with the spirit of contemplation. Moreover, St Augustine says that this reality of Mary is a vision of our situation from heaven, so on earth we can never possess it completely but a little anticipation must be present in all our activities. Contemplation of God must also be present. We must not lose ourselves in pure activism but always let ourselves also be penetrated in our activities by the light of the word of God and thereby learn true charity, true service to others, which does not need many things — it certainly needs the necessary things — but needs above all our heartfelt affection and the light of God.

In commenting on the episode of Martha and Mary St Ambrose urges his faithful and us too: "Let us too seek to have what cannot be taken from us, dedicating diligent, not distracted attention to

the Lord's word. The seeds of the heavenly word are blown away, if they are sown along the roadside. May the wish to know be an incentive to you too, as it was to Mary, this is the greatest and most perfect act". And he added that "attention to the ministry must not distract from knowledge of the heavenly word" through prayer (*Expositio Evangelii secundum Lucam*, VII, 85 PL 15, 1720).

Saints have therefore experienced a profound unity of life between prayer and action, between total love for God and love for their brethren. St Bernard, who is a model of harmony between contemplation and hard work, in his book *De consideratione*, addressed to Pope Innocent II to offer him some reflections on his ministry, insists precisely on the importance of inner recollection, of prayer to defend oneself from the dangers of being hyper-active, whatever our condition and whatever the task to be carried out. St Bernard says that all too often too much work and a frenetic life-style end by hardening the heart and causing the spirit to suffer (cf. II, 3).

His words are a precious reminder to us today, used as we are to evaluating everything with the criterion of productivity and efficiency. The passage from the Acts of the Apostles reminds us of the importance — without a doubt a true and proper ministry is created — of devotion to daily activities which should be carried out with responsibility and dedication and also our need for God, for his guidance, for his light which gives us strength and hope. Without daily prayer lived with fidelity, our acts are empty, they lose their profound soul, and are reduced to being mere activism which in the end leaves us dissatisfied. There is a beautiful invocation of the Christian tradition to be recited before any other activity which says: "*Actiones nostras, quæsumus, Domine, aspirando præveni et adiuuando prosequere, ut cuncta nostra oratio et operatio a te semper incipiat, et per te coepta finiatur*"; that is, "Inspire our actions, Lord, and accompany them with your help, so that our every word and action may always begin and end in you". Every step in our life, every action, of the Church too, must be taken before God, in the light of his word.

In [last Wednesday's Catechesis](#) I emphasized the unanimous prayer of the first Christian community in times of trial and explained how in prayer itself, in meditation on Sacred Scripture, it was able to understand the events that were happening. When prayer is nourished by the word of God we can see reality with new eyes, with the eyes of faith and the Lord, who speaks to the mind and the heart, gives new light to the journey at every moment and in every situation. We believe in the power of the Word of God and of prayer. Even the difficulties that the Church was encountering as she faced the problem of service to the poor, the issue of charity, was overcome in prayer, in the light of God, of the Holy Spirit. The Apostles did not limit themselves to ratifying the choice of Stephen and the other men but "they prayed and laid their hands upon them" (Acts 6:6). The Evangelist was once again to recall these gestures on the occasion of the election of Paul and Barnabas, where we read: "after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off" (Acts 13:3). He confirms again that the practical service of charity is a spiritual service. Both these realities must go hand in hand.

With the act of the laying on of hands, the Apostles conferred a special ministry on seven men so that they might be granted the corresponding grace. The emphasis on prayer — “after praying” — they say, is important because it highlights the gesture’s spiritual dimension; it is not merely a question of conferring an office as happens in a public organization, but is an ecclesial event in which the Holy Spirit appropriates seven men chosen by the Church, consecrating them in the Truth that is Jesus Christ: he is the silent protagonist, present during the imposition of hands so that the chosen ones may be transformed by his power and sanctified in order to face the practical challenges, the pastoral challenges. And the emphasis on prayer also reminds us that the response to the Lord’s choice and the allocation of every ministry in the Church stems solely from a close relationship with God, nurtured daily.

Dear brothers and sisters, the pastoral problem that induced the Apostles to choose and to lay their hands on seven men charged with the service of charity, so that they themselves might be able to devote themselves to prayer and to preaching the word, also indicates to us the primacy of prayer and of the word of God which, however, then result in pastoral action. For pastors, this is the first and most valuable form of service for the flock entrusted to them. If the lungs of prayer and of the word of God do not nourish the breath of our spiritual life, we risk being overwhelmed by countless everyday things: prayer is the breath of the soul and of life. And there is another precious reminder that I would like to underscore: in the relationships with God, in listening to his word, in dialogue with God, even when we may be in the silence of a church or of our room, we are united in the Lord to a great many brothers and sisters in faith, like an ensemble of musical instruments which, in spite of their individuality, raise to God one great symphony of intercession, of thanksgiving and praise. Many thanks!

To special groups:

I greet all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today’s Audience, including those from England, Finland, Sweden, Nigeria, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and the United States of America. Upon you and your families I cordially invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Lord.

Lastly, I address my thoughts to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young* people, may you attend the school of Christ to learn to follow faithfully in his footsteps. May you, dear *sick* people, accept your trials with faith and live them in union with those of Christ. I hope that you, dear *newlyweds* may become generous servants of the Gospel of life.

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