



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Wednesday, 13 June 2012*

[\[Video\]](#)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The daily encounter with the Lord and regular acceptance of the Sacraments enable us to open our mind and heart to his presence, his words and his action. Prayer is not only the breath of the soul but, to make use of a metaphor, it is also the oasis of peace from which we can draw the water that nourishes our spiritual life and transforms our existence. God draws us towards him, offering us enlightenment and consolation, and enabling us to scale the mountain of holiness so that we may be ever closer to him.

This is the personal experience to which St Paul refers in Chapter 12 of his Second Letter to the Corinthians on which I wish to reflect today. In the face of those who contested the legitimacy of his apostolate he does not actually list the communities he has founded, the kilometres he has covered; he does not limit himself to recalling the difficulty and opposition he confronted in order to proclaim the Gospel; he points to his relationship with the Lord, a relationship so intense as also to be marked by moments of ecstasy, of profound contemplation (cf. 2 Cor 12:1); hence he does not boast of his achievements, his strength or his activities and successes, but rather of what God has worked in and through him.

Indeed with great modesty he tells of the moment when he lived the special experience of being caught up to heaven by God. He recalls that 14 years before he sent the Letter he “was caught up to the third heaven” (v. 2). With the language and ways of someone who is telling something that

cannot be told, St Paul also speaks of that event in the third person. He says that a man was caught up into God's "garden", into Paradise. The Apostle's contemplation is so profound and so intense that he does not even remember the content of the revelation he received; yet he clearly remembers the date and the circumstances in which the Lord grasped him in such a complete way and attracted him to himself, just as he had on the road to Damascus at the time of his conversion (cf. Phil 3:12).

St Paul continues, saying that precisely to prevent pride from going to his head in the greatness of the revelations he had received, he has been given a "thorn" (2 Cor 12:7), an affliction, and insistently begs the Risen One to free him of the messenger of Satan, of this painful thorn in the flesh. Three times, he says, he beseeched the Lord to remove this trial. And it is in this situation that in deep contemplation of God, in which "he heard things that cannot be told, which man may not utter" (v. 4), he receives an answer to his entreaty. The Risen One addresses to him clear and reassuring words: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness" (v. 9).

Paul's commentary on these words may leave us amazed, but it shows that he understood what it means to truly be an apostle of the Gospel. In fact he exclaims: "I will all the more gladly boast of my weaknesses, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. For the sake of Christ, then, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities; for when I am weak, then I am strong" (vv. 9b-10), in other words he does not boast of his own actions but of the activity of Christ who acts precisely through his weakness.

Let us reflect a little longer on this event that occurred during the years in which St Paul lived in silence and contemplation, before he began to travel in the West to proclaim Christ, because this attitude of profound humility and trust before God's manifestation of himself is also fundamental to our prayer and to our life, to our relationship with God and to our weaknesses.

First of all, what are the weaknesses that the Apostle is talking about? What is this "thorn" in the flesh? We do not know and he does not tell us but his attitude enables us to realize that every difficulty in following Christ and witnessing to his Gospel may be overcome by opening oneself with trust to the Lord's action. St Paul is well aware that he is an "unworthy servant" (Lk 17:10) — it is not he who has done great things, it is the Lord — an "earthen vessel" (2 Cor 4:7), in which God places the riches and power of his Grace. In this moment of concentrated contemplative prayer, St Paul understands clearly how to face and how to live every event, especially suffering, difficulty and persecution. The power of God, who does not abandon us or leave us on our own but becomes our support and strength, is revealed at the very moment when we experience our own weakness.

Of course, Paul would have preferred to be freed from this "thorn", from this affliction; but God says: "No, you are in need of it. You will have sufficient grace to resist it and to do what must be done. This also applies to us. The Lord does not free us from evils, but helps us to mature in

sufferings, difficulties and persecutions. Faith, therefore, tells us that if we abide in God, “though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed every day”, in trials (cf. v. 16).

The Apostle communicates to the Christians of Corinth and to us too that “this slight momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison” (v. 17). In fact, humanly speaking the burden of his difficulties was not light, it was very heavy; but in comparison with God’s love, with the greatness of being loved by God, it appears light, in the knowledge that the quantity of glory will be boundless. Therefore, to the extent that our union with the Lord increases and that our prayers become intense, we also go to the essential and understand that it is not the power of our own means, our virtues, our skills that brings about the Kingdom of God but that it is God who works miracles precisely through our weakness, our inadequacy for the task. We must therefore have the humility not to trust merely in ourselves, but to work, with the Lord’s help, in the Lord’s vineyard, entrusting ourselves to him as fragile “earthen vessels”.

St Paul refers to two particular revelations that radically changed his life. The first — as we know — is the overwhelming question on the road to Damascus: “Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?” (Acts 9:4), a question that led him to discover and encounter Christ, alive and present, and to hear his call to be an apostle of the Gospel.

The second revelation consists of the words the Lord addressed to him in the experience of contemplative prayer on which we are reflecting: “My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness”. Faith alone, trust in the action of God, in the goodness of God who does not abandon us, is the guarantee that we are not working in vain. Thus the Lord’s Grace was the power that accompanied St Paul in his immense efforts to spread the Gospel and his heart entered the Heart of Christ, becoming able to lead others towards the One who died and rose for us.

In prayer, therefore, let us open our soul to the Lord so that he may come and inhabit our weakness, transforming it into power for the Gospel. Moreover the Greek verb with which Paul describes this dwelling of the Lord in his frail humanity is also rich in meaning; he uses *episkenoō*, which we may convey with “pitching his tent”. The Lord continues to pitch his tent in us, among us: he is the Mystery of the Incarnation. The divine Word himself, who came to dwell in our humanity, who wishes to dwell in us, to put up his tent in us to illuminate and transform our life and the world.

The intense contemplation of God experienced by St Paul recalls that of the disciples on Mount Tabor when, seeing Jesus transfigured and shining with light, Peter said to him, “Master, it is well that we are here; let us make three booths, one for you and one for Moses and one for Elijah” (Mk 9:5). “He did not know what to say, for they were exceedingly afraid”, St Mark adds (v. 6).

Contemplating the Lord is at the same time both fascinating and awe-inspiring: fascinating because he draws us to him and enraptures our hearts by uplifting them, carrying them to his

heights where we experience the peace and beauty of his love; awe-inspiring because he lays bare our human weakness, our inadequacy, the effort to triumph over the Evil One who endangers our life, that thorn embedded also in our flesh. In prayer, in the daily contemplation of the Lord, we receive the strength of God's love and feel that St Paul's words to the Christians of Rome are true, when he wrote: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (Rom 8:38-39).

In a world in which we risk relying solely on the efficiency and power of human means, we are called to rediscover and to witness to the power of God which is communicated in prayer, with which every day we grow in conforming our life to that of Christ, who — as Paul says — "was crucified in weakness, but lives by the power of God. For we are weak in him, but in dealing with you we shall live with him by the power of God" (2 Cor 13:4).

Dear friends, in the past century Albert Schweitzer, a Protestant theologian who won the Nobel Peace Prize, said: "Paul is a mystic and nothing but a mystic", that is, a man truly in love with Christ and so united to him that he could say: Christ lives in me. The mysticism of St Paul is not only founded on the exceptional events he lived through, but also on his daily and intense relationship with the Lord who always sustained him with his Grace.

Mysticism did not distance him from reality, on the contrary it gave him the strength to live each day for Christ and to build the Church to the ends of the world of that time. Union with God does not distance us from the world but gives us the strength to remain really in the world, to do what must be done in the world.

Thus in our life of prayer as well we can perhaps have moments of special intensity in which we feel the Lord's presence is more vivid, especially in situations of aridity, of difficulty, of suffering, of an apparent absence of God. Only if we are grasped by Christ's love will we be equal to facing every adversity, convinced, like Paul, that we can do all things in the One who gives us strength (cf. Phil 4:13). Therefore, the more room we make for prayer the more we will see our life transformed and enlivened by the tangible power of God's love.

This is what happened, for example, to Bl. Mother Teresa of Calcutta who found in contemplation of Jesus and even also in long periods of aridity the ultimate reason and incredible strength to recognize him in the poor and abandoned, in spite of her fragility. Contemplation of Christ in our life does not alienate us — as I have already said — from reality. Rather it enables us to share even more in human events, because the Lord, in attracting us to him through prayer, enables us to make ourselves present and close to every brother and sister in his love. Many thanks.

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the participants in the 21st Intercoiffure World Congress. I also welcome the visitors from the Anglican Diocese of Southwark. My cordial greeting goes to the pilgrims from the Catholic Society of the Two Hearts of Jesus and Mary. I thank the *Cantores Minores* from Finland and the other choirs for their praise of God in song.

At this time, our thoughts and prayers are with all those taking part in the International Eucharistic Congress in Dublin, Ireland. I invite all of you to join me in praying that the Congress will bear rich spiritual fruit in a greater appreciation of our Lord's gift of himself to us in the Eucharist and a deeper love of the mystery of the Church, which draws us into ever fuller communion with him and with one another through the daily celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

Upon all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including those from England, New Zealand, Samoa and the United States I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace!

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Dear *young people*, for many of your peers the holidays have already begun, while for others this is a time of examinations. May the Lord help you live this period serenely, experiencing his constant protection. I ask you, dear *sick people*, to find comfort in the Lord who continues his work of redemption thanks also to your suffering. And you, dear *newlyweds*, may you discover the mystery of God who gives himself for the salvation of all, so that your love may be ever truer, more enduring and welcoming.

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