



“I BELIEVE IN GOD”

The catechesis of the Holy Father Benedict XVI during the Year of Faith



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BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

**PAUL VI AUDIENCE HALL
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[VIDEO]

“I believe in God”

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In this Year of Faith, today I would like to begin to reflect with you on the “Creed”, that is, on the solemn profession of faith that accompanies our life as believers. The opening words of the “Creed” are: “I believe in God”. It is a fundamental affirmation, seemingly simple in its essence, but it opens on to the infinite world of the relationship with the Lord and with his mystery. Believing in God entails adherence to him, the acceptance of his word and joyful obedience to his revelation. As the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches, “Faith is a personal act — the free response of the human person to the initiative of God who reveals himself” (n. 166). The ability to say one believes in God is therefore both a gift — God reveals himself, he comes to meet us — and a commitment, it is divine grace and human responsibility in an experience of conversation with God who, out of love, “addresses men as his friends” (*Dei Verbum*, n. 2) speaks to us, so that, in faith and with faith, we are able to enter into communion with him.

Where can we listen to God and to his word? Sacred Scripture, in which the word of God becomes audible to us and nourishes our life as “friends” of God, is fundamental. The entire Bible narrates God’s revelation of himself to humanity. The entire Bible speaks of faith and teaches us faith by narrating a history in which God carries out his plan of redemption and makes himself close to people, through an array of shining figures who believe in him and entrust themselves to him, to the fullness of revelation in the Lord Jesus.

Chapter 11 of the Letter to the Hebrews that we have just heard is very beautiful in this regard. Here faith is discussed and light is shed on the great biblical figures who lived it, becoming models for all believers. In the first verse the text says: “Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (11:1). The eyes of faith are thus able to see the invisible and the believer’s heart can hope beyond all hope, exactly like Abraham, of whom Paul says in the Letter to the Romans: “in hope he believed against hope” (4:18).

And it is on Abraham himself that I wish to reflect and to focus our attention, since he is the first great figure and reference for speaking of faith in God: Abraham the great patriarch, an exemplary model, father of all believers (cf. Rom 4:11-12). The Letter to the Hebrews presents it in this way: “By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place which he was to receive as an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was to go. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents like Isaac and Jacob had, heirs with him of the same promise. For he looked forward to the city which has sound foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (11:8-10).

The author of the Letter to the Hebrews is referring here to the call of Abraham, recounted in the Book of Genesis, the first book of the Bible. What did God ask of this patriarch? He asked him to set out, leave his own country to journey to the land that he would show him: “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (Gen 12:1).

How would we have responded to such an invitation? In fact it meant setting out with no directions, no knowledge of where God would lead him; it was a journey that demanded radical obedience and trust, to which faith alone gives access. Yet the dark unknown — to which Abraham had to go — was lit by the light of a promise; God added to his order a reassuring word that unfolded to Abraham a future, life in fullness: “I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great... and by you all the families of the earth shall bless themselves” (Gen 12:2, 3).

In Sacred Scripture, the blessing is primarily linked to the gift of life that comes from God and is revealed first of all in fertility, in a life that is multiplied, passing from one generation to the next. And also linked to the blessing is the experience of the possession of a land, a permanent place in which to live and to develop in freedom and safety, fearing God and building a society of people faithful to the Covenant, “a kingdom of priests and a holy nation” (cf. Ex 19:6).

Therefore in the divine plan Abraham was destined to become “the father of a multitude of nations” (Gen 17:5; cf. Rom 4:17-18), and to enter a new land in which to dwell. Yet Sarah, his wife, was barren, she was unable to bear children; and the land to which God was leading him was far from the land of his birth, it was already inhabited by other peoples and would never really belong to him. The biblical narrator emphasizes this, although with great discretion. When Abraham arrives in the place of God’s promise: “at that time the Canaanites were in the land” (Gen 12:6). The land that God gave Abraham did not belong to him, he was a foreigner and would always remain such, with all that this implies: having no ambition to possess, ever aware of his poverty, seeing everything as a gift. This is also the spiritual condition of those who agree to follow the Lord, who decide to set out in response to his call, under the banner of his invisible but powerful blessing. And Abraham, “father of believers”, accepted this call in faith. St Paul wrote in the Letter to the Romans: “in hope

he believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations; as he had been told, 'so shall your descendants be'. He did not weaken in faith when he considered his own body, which was as good as dead because he was about a 100 years old, or when he considered the barrenness of Sarah's womb. No distrust made him waver concerning the promise of God, but he grew strong in his faith as he gave glory to God, fully convinced that God was able to do what he had promised" (Rom 4:18-21).

Faith led Abraham to take a paradoxical path. He was blessed but without the visible signs of blessing: he received the promise that he would become a great people, but with a life marked by the barrenness of his wife Sarah; he was led to a new homeland but had to live there as a foreigner; and the only land he was permitted to possess was a lot in which to bury Sarah (cf. Gen 23:1-20) Abraham was blessed because in faith he was able to discern the divine blessing, going beyond appearances and trusting in God's presence even when God's paths seemed mysterious to him.

What does this mean to us? When we affirm "I believe in God", we are saying, like Abraham, "I trust in you, I entrust myself to you, O Lord", but not as to Someone to turn to solely in times of difficulty or to whom to devote a few moments of the day or week. Saying "I believe in God" means founding my life on him, letting his Word guide it every day, in practical decisions, without fear of losing some part of myself. When, in the Rite of Baptism, the question is asked three times: "Do you believe?" — in God, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit — the holy Catholic Church and the other truths of the faith, the triple response is in the singular: "I do", because it is my own life that with the gift of faith must be given a turning point, it is my life that must change, that must be converted. Every time we take part in a Baptism we should ask ourselves how we ourselves live daily the great gift of faith.

Abraham the believer teaches us faith and, as a stranger on this earth, points out to us the true homeland. Faith makes us pilgrims on earth, integrated into the world and into history, but bound for the heavenly homeland. Believing in God thus makes us harbingers of values that often do not coincide with the fashion and opinion of the moment. It requires us to adopt criteria and assume forms of conduct that are not part of the common mindset. Christians must not be afraid to go "against the current" in order to live their faith, resisting the temptation to "conform". In many of our societies God has become the "great absent One" and many idols have supplanted him, multiform idols, especially possession and the autonomous "I". And even the major and positive breakthroughs of science and technology have instilled in people an illusion of omnipotence and self-sufficiency, and an increasing egotism which has created many imbalances in interpersonal relations and social behaviour.

Nevertheless the thirst for God (cf. Ps 63[62]:1-2) has not been quenched and the Gospel message continues to resonate in the words and deeds of numerous men and women of faith. Abraham, the father of believers, continues to be a father of many children who agree to walk in his footsteps and set out in obedience to the divine call, trusting in the benevolent presence of the Lord and receiving his blessing in order to become themselves a blessing for all. It is the blessed world of faith to which we are all called, in order to walk fearlessly, following the Lord Jesus Christ. And at times it is a difficult journey that also undergoes trial and death, but that opens to life in a radical transformation of reality that only the eyes of faith can perceive and enjoy to the full.

Affirming "I believe in God" impels us, therefore, to set out, to come out of ourselves, exactly as Abraham did, to bring to the daily situation in which we live the certainty that comes to us from faith: namely, the certainty of God's presence in history today too; a presence that brings life and salvation and opens us to a future with him for a fullness of life that will know no end.

To special groups:

During this Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, I offer a warm welcome to the faculty and students of the Bossey Graduate School of Ecumenical Studies, with cordial good wishes for their studies. I also greet the military chaplains from the United Kingdom recently returned from Afghanistan. Upon all the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including the pilgrim and student groups from the United States, I invoke God's blessings of joy and peace.

I am following with concern the news from Indonesia, where a great flood has devastated Jakarta, the capital, claiming a heavy toll of victims, thousands of evacuees and causing extensive damage. I wish to express my closeness to the peoples hit by this natural disaster, as I assure them of my prayers, encouraging solidarity to ensure that no one lacks the necessary assistance.

I hope that in every community the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity will encourage the commitment to ask the Lord insistently for the gift of unity and to live in fraternal communion.

Lastly, an affectionate thought for the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds*. Next Friday we shall be celebrating the Feast of the Conversion of St Paul. Dear *young people*, may the Apostle Paul be for you a model of life in integrity and radical faith. Dear *sick people*, offer up your sufferings for the cause of the unity of Christ's Church. And you, dear *newlyweds*, draw inspiration from the life of the Apostle to the Gentiles, recognizing the primacy of God and his love for your family life. Thanks and best wishes to you all.

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