

Intimacy with God in Christ

THE QUINTESSENCE AND GREATNESS OF CHRISTIANITY

by Pope Benedict XVI

Excerpted from Pope Benedict XVI's Speech to the Swiss Bishops, November 16, 2006

I have thought of two specific themes of which I have already spoken and which I would now like to examine further.

We should not allow our faith to be drained by too many discussions of multiple, minor details, but rather, should always keep our eyes in the first place on the greatness of Christianity.

I remember, when I used to go to Germany in the 1980s and '90s, that I was asked to give interviews and I always knew the questions in advance. They concerned the ordination of women, contraception, abortion and other such constantly recurring problems.

If we let ourselves be drawn into these discussions, the Church is then identified with certain commandments or prohibitions; we give the impression that we are moralists with a few somewhat antiquated convictions, and not even a hint of the true greatness of the faith appears. I therefore consider it essential always to highlight the greatness of our faith – a commitment from which we must not allow such situations to divert us.

What matters above all is to tend one's personal relationship with God, with that God who revealed himself to us in Christ.

Augustine repeatedly emphasized the two sides of the Christian concept of God: God is *Logos* and God is *Love* – to the point that he completely humbled himself, assuming a human body and finally, giving himself into our hands as bread. We must always keep in mind and help others to keep in mind these two aspects of the Christian conception of God.

God is *Spiritus Creator*, he is *Logos*, he is reason. And this is why our faith is something that has to do with reason, can be passed on through reason and has no cause to hide from reason, not even from the reason of our age. But precisely this eternal, immeasurable reason is not merely a mathematics of the universe and far less, some *first cause* that withdrew after producing the *Big Bang*.

This reason, on the contrary, has a heart such as to be able to renounce its own immensity and take flesh. And in that alone, to my mind, lies the ultimate, true greatness of our conception of God. We know that God is not a philosophical hypothesis, he is not something that *perhaps* exists, but we know him and he knows us. And we can know him better and better if we keep up a dialogue with him.

This is why it is a fundamental task of pastoral care to teach people how to pray and how to learn to do so personally, better and better. Today, schools of prayer and prayer groups exist; it is obvious that people want them. Many seek meditation elsewhere because they think that they will not be able to find a spiritual dimension in Christianity.

We must show them once again not only that this spiritual dimension exists, but that it is the source of all things. To this end, we must increase the number of these schools of prayer, for praying together, where it is possible to learn personal prayer in all its dimensions: as silent listening to God, as a listening that penetrates his Word, penetrates his silence, sounds the depths of his action in history and in one's own person; and to understand his language in one's life and then to learn to respond in prayer with the great prayers of the Psalms of the Old Testament and prayers of the New.

By ourselves, we do not possess words for God, but words have been given to us: the Holy Spirit himself has already formulated words of prayer for us; we can enter them, we can pray with them and thus, subsequently, also learn personal prayer even better; we can "learn" God and thus become sure of him even if he is silent – we can become joyful in God.

This intimate being with God, hence, the experience of God's presence, is what makes us, so to speak, experience ever anew the greatness of Christianity, and then also helps us to find our way through all the trivialities among which, of course, it must also be lived and – day after day, in suffering and loving, in joy and sorrow – put into practice.

And from this viewpoint one perceives, in my opinion, the Church as precisely a school of prayer, where the Lord himself teaches us to pray and where we pray together with the Church, both in humble, simple celebrations with only a few of the faithful and also in the feast of faith.

In various conversations, I have perceived now, once again at this very moment, on the one hand, how important for the faithful silence in their contact with God is, and on the other, the feast of faith, how important it is to be able to live festive celebration.

Prayer is hope in action. And in fact, true reason is contained in prayer, which is why it is possible to hope: we can come into contact with the Lord of the world, he listens to us, and we can listen to him. This is what St. Ignatius was alluding to and what I wanted to remind you of today, once again .. (*Ad Rom. 3, 3*) – the truly great thing in Christianity, which does not dispense one from small, daily things but must not be concealed by them either, is this ability to come into contact with God.

The second thing that I have remembered in these very days concerns morals.

I often hear it said that people today have a longing for God, for spirituality, for religion, and are starting once again to see the Church as a possible conversation partner from which, in this regard, they can receive something. (There was a period in which this was basically sought only in other religions.)

Awareness is growing: the Church especially conveys spiritual experience; she is like a tree where the birds can make their nests even if they want to fly away again later – but she is precisely also a place where one can settle for a certain time.

Instead, what people find more difficult is the morality that the Church proclaims. I have pondered on this – I have been pondering on it for a long time – and I see ever more clearly that in our age morality is, as it were, split in two.

Modern society not merely lacks morals but has “discovered” and demands another dimension of morality, which in the Church's proclamation in recent decades and even earlier perhaps has not been sufficiently presented. This dimension includes the great topics of peace, non-violence, justice for all, concern for the poor and respect for creation. They have become an ethical whole which, precisely as a political force, has great power and for many constitutes the substitution or succession of religion.

Instead of religion, seen as metaphysical and as something from above – perhaps also as something individualistic – the great moral themes come into play as the essential which then confers dignity on man and engages him.

This is one aspect: this morality exists and it also fascinates young people, who work for peace, for non-violence, for justice, for the poor, for creation. And there are truly great moral themes that also belong, moreover, to the tradition of the Church. The means offered for their solution, however, are often very unilateral and not always credible, but we cannot dwell on this now. The important topics are present.

I think that this is the great task we have before us: on the one hand, not to make Christianity seem merely morality, but rather a gift in which we are given the love that sustains us and provides us with the strength we need to be able to “lose our own life” and, thus, wake up to the abiding presence of our intimate God – the essence and greatness of our Christianity.

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Sublime Fire

by Thomas Merton

In practice, there is only one vocation: [Intimacy with God – Contemplative union]. Whether you teach, live in the cloister or nurse the sick, whether you are in religion or out of it, married or single, no matter who you are or what you are, you are called to the summit of perfection: you are called to interior life, perhaps to mystical prayer, and to pass the fruits of your contemplation on to others.

If the sublime fire of infused love burns in your soul, it will inevitably send forth throughout the Church and the world an influence more tremendous than could be estimated by the radius reached by words or by example.

Saint John of the Cross writes: “A very little of this pure love is more precious in the sight of God and of greater profit to the Church – even though the soul appear to be doing nothing – than are all other works put together.”