



The Holy See

POPE FRANCIS

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 29 May 2013

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Dear Brothers and Sisters, Good morning!

Last Wednesday I emphasized the deep bond between the Holy Spirit and the Church. Today I would like to begin some catecheses on the mystery of the Church, a mystery which we all experience and of which we are part. I would like to do so with some concepts that are evident in the texts of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

Today the first one is: “The Church as the family of God”.

In recent months I have more than once mentioned the Parable of the Prodigal Son or, rather, of the Merciful Father (cf. Lk 15:11-32). The younger son leaves his father’s house, squanders all he has and decides to go home again because he realizes he has erred. He no longer considers himself worthy to be a son but thinks he has a chance of being hired as a servant. His father, on the contrary, runs to meet him, embraces him, restores to him his dignity as a son and celebrates. This parable, like others in the Gospel, clearly shows God’s design for humanity.

What is God’s plan? It is to make of us all a single family of his children, in which each person feels that God is close and feels loved by him, as in the Gospel parable, feels the warmth of being God’s family. The Church is rooted in this great plan. She is not an organization established by an agreement between a few people, but — as Pope Benedict xvi has so often reminded us — she is a work of God, born precisely from this loving design which is gradually brought about in history.

The Church is born from God's wish to call all people to communion with him, to friendship with him, indeed, to share in his own divine life as his sons and daughters. The very word "Church", from the Greek *ekklesia*, means "convocation": God convokes us, he impels us to come out of our individualism, from our tendency to close ourselves into ourselves, and he calls us to belong to his family.

Furthermore this call originates in creation itself. God created us so that we might live in a profound relationship of friendship with him, and even when sin broke off this relationship with him, with others and with creation, God did not abandon us. The entire history of salvation is the story of God who seeks out human beings, offers them his love and welcomes them. He called Abraham to be the father of a multitude, he chose the People of Israel to make a covenant that would embrace all peoples, and in the fullness of time, he sent forth his Son so that his plan of love and salvation might be fulfilled in a new and eternal Covenant with the whole of humanity.

When we read the Gospels, we see that Jesus gathers round him a small community which receives his word, follows it, shares in his journey, becomes his family, and it is with this community that he prepares and builds his Church.

So what is the Church born from? She is born from the supreme act of love of the Cross, from the pierced side of Jesus from which flowed blood and water, a symbol of the sacrament of the Eucharist and of Baptism. The lifeblood of God's family, of the Church, is God's love which is actualized in loving him and others, all others, without distinction or reservation. The Church is a family in which we love and are loved.

When did the Church manifest herself? We celebrated it two Sundays ago; she became manifest when the gift of the Holy Spirit filled the heart of the Apostles and spurred them to go out and begin their journey to proclaim the Gospel, spreading God's love.

Still today some say: "Christ yes, the Church no". Like those who say "I believe in God but not in priests". But it is the Church herself which brings Christ to us and which brings us to God. The Church is the great family of God's children. Of course, she also has human aspects. In those who make up the Church, pastors and faithful, there are shortcomings, imperfections and sins. The Pope has these too — and many of them; but what is beautiful is that when we realize we are sinners we encounter the mercy of God who always forgives. Never forget it: God always pardons and receives us into his love of forgiveness and mercy. Some people say that sin is an offence to God, but also an opportunity to humble oneself so as to realize that there is something else more beautiful: God's mercy. Let us think about this.

Let us ask ourselves today: how much do I love the Church? Do I pray for her? Do I feel part of the family of the Church? What do I do to ensure that she is a community in which each one feels welcome and understood, feels the mercy and love of God who renews life? Faith is a gift and an

act which concern us personally, but God calls us to live with our faith together, as a family, as Church.

Let us ask the Lord, in a very special way during this Year of Faith, that our communities, the whole Church, be increasingly true families that live and bring the warmth of God.

Greetings:

I offer a cordial welcome to all the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors present at today's Audience, including those from England, Scotland, Ireland, Norway, Sweden, Canada and the United States. May you always grow in love for Christ and for God's family which is the Church. God bless you all!

Lastly I address you, dear *young people*, *sick people* and *newlyweds*. At this last Audience in the month of May our thoughts turn spontaneously to Mary Most Holy, the bright star on our journey as Christians. Let us constantly refer to her to find in her intercession and in her example inspiration and sure guidance on our daily pilgrimage of faith.

Tomorrow, the Feast of *Corpus Christi*, we shall celebrate Holy Mass at St John Lateran at 7:00 pm. It will be followed by the solemn procession to St Mary Major. I ask the faithful of Rome and the pilgrims to join in this act of profound faith for the Eucharist, which is the most precious treasure of the Church and of humanity.
