

Fr. Roger J. Landry
Retreat at the Casa Maria of the Sister Servants of the Eternal Word
Irondale, Alabama
“Pope Benedict XVI and Prayer”
March 16-18, 2012

Friday night Mass

1. Question of the Scribe

- a. At the beginning of the Gospel, a scribe asks Jesus a question. What’s the most important thing I need to do? And Jesus responds with an answer we know very well and will explore in a few minutes.
- b. At the beginning of this retreat, however, we come to Jesus with our questions. The question obviously takes the form of prayer: What do you want of me, Jesus? He wants to respond to our question just as he did to the scribe in the Gospel. We’re going to be focused throughout the retreat on Jesus’ not only on Jesus’ answer but on the ability to have a dialogue with him in prayer.
- c. The Word of God begins his response to us in anticipation through the prophet Hosea in the first reading.

2. Conversion

- a. Jesus began his whole public ministry, as he began Lent, by calling us to conversion and a faith in the Gospel that works itself out through love.
- b. In today’s first reading, Hosea for God, says, Return, O Israel, to the Lord, your God.” You haven’t been loving me as I call you to in the Gospel and you haven’t been loving others.
- c. “Take with you words and return to the Lord” — God gives us his words with which to address him.
- d. He promises to heal our defections and love us freely.
- e. He says “Let the one who is wise understand these things; let him who is prudent know them. Straight are the paths of the Lord and the just walk in them.”
- f. Psalm: I am the Lord your God: hear my voice. “If only my people would hear me and walk in my ways. I would feed them with the best of wheat, and with honey from the rock I would fill them.”
- g. We turn to the meaning of conversion. Meaning of conversion.
 - i. Not tweaking.
 - ii. Not minor change
 - iii. Aversion, adversion, conversion.
 - iv. Conversion comes from the Greek word “metanoia,” which means to rethink, to question one’s own and common way of living; to allow God to enter into the criteria of one’s life; to not merely judge according to the current opinions; ... not to live as all the others live, not do what all do, not feel justified in dubious, ambiguous, evil actions just because others do the same; to begin to see one’s life through the eyes of God; ... not aiming at the judgment of the majority, of men, but on the justice of God.”
 - v. The conversion being asked of us is to turn with Christ continually, to hear his voice and act on it. This is wisdom!

3. Love of God

- a. Now we come to the Gospel. Jesus uses the words of the Shema: “Hear O Israel.”
- b. He talks about the most essential thing of all, the most important thing we need to do.
- c. Love God
 - i. All our heart
 1. We’re centered on God. That we don’t follow him by halves.
 2. We seek to love him above all loves. When a compromise comes, God doesn’t lose, but wins.
 3. We can never love him “enough.” We are trying, with his help, to love him more.
 - ii. All our mind — consecrate our mind to him.
 1. To love God with all our mind means that we dedicate our minds to him and seek to use the gift of knowledge to grow in love of him. If we’re doing this, we will never

think we know “enough” about God, but rather will apply our minds, whatever intelligence we have, to the truths and mysteries of our faith. We’ll use our ability to read to get to read about God. We’ll use our vision to watch programs about God. We’ll use our capacity to hear to listen to others talk about God. We’ll use our whole mind and all our intellectual gifts to try to grow closer to God, so that having gotten to know him better, we might love him more. There are many means at our disposal. We can love him with all our minds through the Bible he has revealed to us, through our own “theologizing” about the creation and governance of the world, through the teaching of the Catechism, the teachings of the Popes and Councils, as well many solid Catholic books, pamphlets, videos, audio cassettes or CDs, websites, and so much more.

- iii. All our soul — state of grace
- iv. All our strength — calling us to make the effort
- v. St. Thérèse of Lisieux
 1. Thérèse died on the evening of 30 September 1897, saying the simple words, “My God, I love you!”, looking at the Crucifix she held tightly in her hands. **These last words of the Saint are the key to her whole doctrine, to her interpretation of the Gospel the act of love, expressed in her last breath was as it were the continuous breathing of her soul, the beating of her heart. The simple words “Jesus I love you”, are at the heart of all her writings.** The act of love for Jesus immersed her in the Most Holy Trinity.
- vi. St. Augustine on making up for lost time
 1. At the end of the Apostolic Letter *Augustinum Hipponensem*, John Paul II **wished to ask the Saint himself what he would have to say to the people of today** and answers first of all with the words Augustine entrusted to a letter dictated shortly after his conversion: "It seems to me that the hope of finding the truth must be restored to humankind" (*Epistulae*, 1, 1); that truth which is Christ himself, true God, to whom is addressed one of the most beautiful prayers and most famous of the *Confessions* (X, 27, 38):
 - a. **"Late have I loved you**, beauty so old and so new: late have I loved you. And see, you were within and I was in the external world and sought you there, and in my unlovely state I plunged into those lovely created things which you made. You were with me, and I was not with you. The lovely things kept me far from you, though if they did not have their existence in you, they had no existence at all. You called and cried aloud and shattered my deafness. You were radiant and resplendent, you put to flight my blindness. You were fragrant, and I drew in my breath and now pant after you. I tasted you, and I feel but hunger and thirst for you. You touched me, and I am set on fire to attain the peace which is yours."
 - b. Here then, **Augustine encountered God and throughout his life experienced him to the point that this reality - which is primarily his meeting with a Person, Jesus - changed his life, as it changes the lives of everyone, men and women, who in every age have the grace to encounter him.** Let us pray that the Lord will grant us this grace and thereby enable us to find his peace.
 - c. In a beautiful passage, **St Augustine defines prayer as the expression of desire** and affirms that **God responds by moving our hearts toward him.** On our part we must purify our desires and our hopes to welcome the sweetness of God (cf. *In I Ioannis* 4, 6). Indeed, only this opening of ourselves to others saves us. Let us pray, therefore, that we can follow the example of this great convert every day of our lives, and in every moment of our life encounter the Lord Jesus, the only One who saves us, purifies us and gives us true joy, true life.

- d. Flourishes in love of neighbor
 - i. Prayer doesn't take us away from our neighbor.
 - ii. Unity with will of God makes us seek what he seeks, love what he loves, want what he wants. *Idem velle, idem nolle*. He loves our neighbor.
 - iii. Not love me as I have loved you, but love one another. Peter and 3-fold commission.
 - iv. We should especially mention the great parable of the Last Judgment (cf. Mt 25:31-46), in which love becomes the criterion for the definitive decision about a human life's worth or lack thereof. Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. 'As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me' (Mt 25:40). Love of God and love of neighbor have become one: in the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself, and in Jesus we find God (DCE 15).
 - v. B16 speaks about St. Catherine of Genoa, who united prayer and running a hospital for the desperately ill.
 - 1. We must never forget that the more we love God and the more constantly we pray, the better we will succeed in truly loving those who surround us, who are close to us, so that we can see in every person the Face of the Lord whose love knows no bounds and makes no distinctions. The mystic does not create distance from others or an abstract life, but rather approaches other people so that they may begin to see and act with God's eyes and heart. With her life St Catherine teaches us that the more we love God and enter into intimacy with him in prayer the more he makes himself known to us, setting our hearts on fire with his love.
- e. One command
 - i. This two-fold commandment is really one command, because we either love both God AND neighbor or we fail to love both God and neighbor: "Here we see the necessary interplay between love of God and love of neighbor which the First Letter of John speaks of with such insistence. If I have no contact whatsoever with God in my life, then I cannot see in the other anything more than the other, and I am incapable of seeing in him the image of God. But if in my life I fail completely to heed others, solely out of a desire to be 'devout' and to perform my 'religious duties,' then my relationship with God will also grow arid. It becomes merely 'proper,' but loveless. Only my readiness to encounter my neighbor and to show him love makes me sensitive to God as well. Only if I serve my neighbor can my eyes be opened to what God does for me and how much he loves me. ... Love of God and love of neighbor are thus inseparable, they form a single commandment. But both live from the love of God who has loved us first" (DCE 18).
- f. How can we live this out?
 - i. Pope Benedict gives us a clear path, where we renew frequently, even daily, our conversion. He points us the place where we hear his voice. He indicates the place we are strengthened by God to love him and love others. It's the Mass.
 - ii. The saints—consider the example of Blessed Teresa of Calcutta—constantly renewed their capacity for love of neighbor from their encounter with the Eucharistic Lord, he said, and conversely this encounter acquired its realism and depth in their service to others.
 - iii. He writes that the sacrament of the Eucharist "is social in character, for in sacramental communion I become one with the Lord, like all the other communicants. As Saint Paul says, 'Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread' (*1 Cor* 10:17). Union with Christ is also union with all those to whom he gives himself. I cannot possess Christ just for myself; I can belong to him only in union with all those who have become, or who will become, his own. Communion draws me out of myself towards him, and thus also towards unity with all Christians. We become 'one body,' completely joined in a single existence. Love of God and love of neighbor are now truly united: God incarnate draws us all to himself" (DCE 14).
 - iv. The Pope continues by saying that this connection between the Eucharist and love of God and neighbor was seen by the early Christians who called the Eucharist, *agape*, from the Greek word used to describe Christ's type of total self-giving and sacrificial love: "We can

thus understand how *agape* also became a term for the Eucharist: there God's own *agape* comes to us bodily, in order to continue his work in us and through us. Only by keeping [this] in mind ... can we correctly understand Jesus' teaching on love. The transition which he makes from the Law and the Prophets to the twofold commandment of love of God and of neighbor, and his grounding the whole life of faith on this central precept, is not simply a matter of morality — something that could exist apart from and alongside faith in Christ and its sacramental re-actualization. Faith, worship and ethos [how we behave toward others] are interwoven as a single reality which takes shape in our encounter with God's *agape*.

... 'Worship' itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist that does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented...'. (DCE 14).

- g. During this retreat, we'll have the chance to receive God's united love each day and become strengthened to love him and others as he has loved us first.
- h. To love God and neighbor in the way Christ and his vicar specify today is the "first" and "greatest" thing we need to do in life. If we achieve everything else in life but fail in this, our life will have been a waste. But if we fail at everything else in life but do this, then one day we will be called saints! This is something we need to ponder on retreat. Tonight as we come together to celebrate this "agape," this love feast of the Eucharist in which we first receive his love and then are told by him to "do this in memory of me" — to give our body and blood, our sweat and tears out of love for our neighbor — we ask him to fill us with his own divine love, so that we might love him with one-hundred percent of our mind, heart, soul and energy, and love our neighbor in the same way he has loved us and has called us to love ourselves.