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Homily

**In the school of God's love
together with the prophet Ezekiel**

10th INTERNATIONAL YOUTH FORUM :
"LEARNING TO LOVE"
"Centro Mondo Migliore"
Rocca di Papa, 27 March 2010, 12.00 noon

(*Ezk* 37: 21-28)

Your Eminence,
Dear brothers in the priesthood,
Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,
Dear friends!

1. The Prophet Ezekiel by Michelangelo

The Sistine Chapel is a place of unmatched historical and artistic interest as well as being a special liturgical and spiritual space within the Vatican. Here we can see, in a central position on the right hand side of the ceiling, a very large image of the Prophet Ezekiel which was painted as a fresco by Michelangelo in 1510. Ezekiel is one in the series of seven major and minor prophets of the Old Testament, with Jeremiah, Isaiah, Daniel, Joel, Zachariah and Jonah, that are portrayed in the spaces between the spandrels.¹

As we listened to the first reading which is taken from the book of Ezekiel (*Ezk* 37: 21-28), I could see how the image of the old man Ezekiel is very appropriate for this Forum. This is because, in Michelangelo's fresco, he is speaking with a young person. Ezekiel came from a priestly tribe and he lived in the sixth century before Christ during the period of the Babylonian captivity (from 598 to 539). We see that he is wearing a 'tallith' on his head and shoulders, the traditional Hebrew prayer shawl. A particular meaning can be attributed to the colours of the clothes of this majestic figure: the light blue of the shawl indicates contemplation, the red of his garment signifies love, and penance is represented by the purple of his mantle.

The eyes of the prophet are fixed upon the two hands of the boy that are pointing upwards. Ezekiel's right hand is held open in a prayerful position to support and confirm his words. With his left hand he firmly holds a half-open scroll with undecipherable writing that is most likely the book of prophecies.

¹ Cf. H. W. Pfeiffer SJ, *Die Sixtinische Kapelle - neu entdeckt*, Belser Verlag, Stuttgart 2007, 161 f.

The youth – depicted in a style reminiscent of Sandro Botticelli (1455-1510) – has one foot placed upon a closed book. He is turned slightly to the left with his gaze fixed upon the eyes of the man of God. The entire scene gives the impression that a certain tension reigns between these two individuals, as if they have opposing opinions or perspectives. The commanding figure of the prophet is in motion and this movement causes his prayer shawl to flutter. Ezekiel is turning towards the boy, almost as if he were challenging him with the words: believe me, I am right! My argument rests on the word of God and also on the experience of my long life!

Now we may ask: What is it exactly that the great prophet Ezekiel wants to convince this young man of?

2. *Ezekiel's timeless words*

The passage from the book of Ezekiel that we have just heard could offer us a partial response to our question.² These seven verses contain essential elements of his prophetic thought, and at the same time they recall some points that have emerged in our reflections during these past four days.

The prophet Ezekiel reveals in these lines the promise and the plan that God wants to see accomplished in his people. This promise is a covenant of peace that will remain forever. It is a divine task that has no expiration date. Humankind does not merit this pact. It is a pure gift on God's part, simply because He loves humanity.

Ezekiel presents three promises that form the covenant in which God himself is the main player – “then say to them, Thus says the Lord God” (*Ezk* 37: 21):

- “I will bless them and multiply them...” (cf. *Ezk* 37: 26 b)
- “My dwelling place shall be with them ...” (cf. *Ezk* 37; 28)
- “I will be their God, and they shall be my people” (cf. *Ezk* 37: 23 b, 27 b)

The first promise recalls God's instruction to be fruitful and multiply that we find in the book of Genesis (cf. *Gen* 1: 28; 9: 1), but it places emphasis on the role of divine intervention in the growth of his people. Here we touch upon the same topic we met yesterday, how the fruitfulness of love can take on different forms but is always a gift from God. Ezekiel is firmly convinced that God is the Lord of Life (cf. *Ezk* 18: 4), as seen in the first part of chapter 37 where we come to understand that human beings are called to eternal life (cf. *Ezk* 37: 5).

The second promise proclaims that God will dwell among his people. It is a vision of the new temple that will stand right at the centre of their homeland (cf. *Ezk* 40-44). God will not remain far off “above the clouds”, but will be present and always accessible to those He calls his own. This means that human beings can have direct access to God, especially in the decisive moments of their lives, such as choices concerning state of life, career, or spouse.

² Cf. M. GREENBERG, *Ezechiel*, vol. II, chap. 21-37, in: HThKAT, Herder, Freiburg im Breisgau 2005, 474-477; K. F. POHLMANN, *Der Prophet Hesekiel/Ezechiel*, Kapitel 20-48, in: ATD 22, 2, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 2000; H.F. Fuhs, *Ezechiel II 25-48*, in: *Die Neue Echter Bibel, Kommentar zum Alten Testament mit der Einheitsübersetzung*, Echter, Würzburg 1988, 211-213

Many people seek other advisers and forget the true Master of Life and the “school of love”.

In the first part of the third promise – known as the “The Covenant Formula” – we have “I will be their God”, the first commandment of the Decalogue (cf. *Ex* 20: 2; *Deut* 5: 6). This promise also confirms that God’s people have been specially chosen – “and they shall be my people” (cf. *Jer* 30: 22). We are all aware that many of our contemporaries aspire to other “gods” such as material riches or fame. This holds also for our relationships, sometimes even for our family life and our dealings with friends, when we follow the dictates of the types of interests that are “in vogue” in our day.

3. With Ezekiel in the school of God’s love

Let us return to our initial question: what might Ezekiel be saying to the boy painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel? Taking into account the words of the first reading, he might be saying: Young man, do not ever forget that God is the God of Life. Open your heart to God’s promises and to the life plan He has for you. When making decisions, remember that God has established his dwelling among us, that He is close to you. Go and consult with Him. Give to his words – words that can sometimes be so gentle – more credit than you give to the rough words of this world. Do not take other “gods” as ideals or examples. Do not forget or ever betray your vocation through which you belong to the people of God! On this depends whether others can recognise in you the presence and the deeds of the invisible God!

Dear friends, we can say that Christian marriage implies the acceptance of God’s promises that we heard today from the prophet Ezekiel. All of God’s deeds are a demonstration of his love for humanity, and we are called to enter into this divine dynamic of love.

Christian marriage is different from every other form of setting out on a life “lived together” because it is prepared, undertaken and lived out in the presence of God and with God. God is the first witness and the constant companion of a love that binds the spouses together. This presence of God does not disturb conjugal life, nor is it an intrusion. It offers clear direction and firm stability to this undertaking. Christian marriage is not a “closed circle”. It keeps the door open to life, to true friendship, and to helping the needy. In this way, those who stand “outside” will identify the God of this couple and of this family. They will know to which people they really belong.

This openness to God and this continual reference to God are not only important for the conjugal and family life of Christians. They are also valid for every “true” interpersonal relationship. Already in the first century before Christ, Cicero knew that true friendship implies concordance between human and divine matters, that it means to be in agreement about the great values and human virtues, and also, in a special way, it requires consensus regarding the question of God.³ I am convinced that many marriages fail nowadays because spouses have never sought this concordance and consensus, especially in “divine matters!”

Lastly, do not forget the three main “subjects” in any “school of love”, symbolized by the colours of Ezekiel’s garments. Michelangelo used red profusely to symbolise true deep love. Blue represents contemplation, that is, the need to establish a personal relationship with God

³ Cf. MARCUS TULLIUS CICERO, *Laelius de amicitia - Über die Freundschaft, Lateinisch-Deutsch* ed. M. Faltner, Collection: Tusculum-Bücherei, Heimeran Verlag, München 1966, 28: “*Est enim amicitia nihil aliud nisi omnium divinarum humanarumque rerum cum benevolentia et caritate consensio*”.

through prayer. Lastly, purple stands for penitence: the need for reciprocal forgiveness!

We all know that God's plan of love is not easy. At the same time, we know that we have received divine promises that assure us of God's closeness and his consolation. These were proclaimed by Ezekiel nearly two thousand six hundred years ago and were fully accomplished in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

In his first encyclical letter "*Deus Caritas Est*" (no. 12), Pope Benedict XVI comments on the incarnation of the "God-who-is-with-us" in this way: "The real novelty of the New Testament lies not so much in new ideas as in the figure of Christ himself, who gives flesh and blood to those concepts – an unprecedented realism. In the Old Testament, the novelty of the Bible did not consist merely in abstract notions but in God's unpredictable and in some sense unprecedented activity. This divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the 'stray sheep', a suffering and lost humanity.... His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form... It is there that this truth can be contemplated. It is from there that our definition of love must begin. In this contemplation the Christian discovers the path along which his life and love must move."⁴

Amen.

⁴ BENEDICT XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 25 December 2005, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Vatican City 2006, 30 f.