



# The Holy See

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BENEDICT XVI

**GENERAL AUDIENCE**

*Castel Gandolfo*

*Wednesday, 31 August 2011*

[Video]

## ***Art and Prayer***

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

In this period I have recalled several times the need for every Christian, in the midst of the many occupations that fill our days, to find time for God and for prayer. The Lord himself gives us many opportunities to remember him. Today I would like to reflect briefly on one of these channels that can lead to God and can also be of help in the encounter with him. It is the way of artistic expression, part of that “*via pulchritudinis*” — the “way of beauty”, of which I have spoken several times and whose deepest meaning must be recovered by men and women today.

It may have happened on some occasion that you paused before a sculpture, a picture, a few verses of a poem or a piece of music that you found deeply moving, that gave you a sense of joy, a clear perception, that is, that what you beheld was not only matter, a piece of marble or bronze, a painted canvas, a collection of letters or an accumulation of sounds, but something greater, something that “speaks”, that can touch the heart, communicate a message, uplift the mind.

A work of art is a product of the creative capacity of the human being who in questioning visible reality, seeks to discover its deep meaning and to communicate it through the language of forms, colour and sound. Art is able to manifest and make visible the human need to surpass the visible, it expresses the thirst and the quest for the infinite.

Indeed it resembles a door open on to the infinite, on to a beauty and a truth that go beyond the daily routine. And a work of art can open the eyes of the mind and of the heart, impelling us upward.

However some artistic expressions are real highways to God, the supreme Beauty; indeed, they help us to grow in our relationship with him, in prayer. These are works that were born from faith and express faith. We can see an example of this when we visit a Gothic cathedral: we are enraptured by the vertical lines that soar skywards and uplift our gaze and our spirit, while at the same time we feel small yet long for fullness....

Or when we enter a Romanesque church we are spontaneously prompted to meditate and to pray. We perceive that these splendid buildings contain, as it were, the faith of generations. Or when we listen to a piece of sacred music that plucks at our heartstrings, our mind, as it were, expands and turns naturally to God.

I remember a concert of music by Johann Sebastian Bach in Munich, conducted by Leonard Bernstein. At the end of the last passage, one of the *Cantatas*, I felt, not by reasoning but in the depths of my heart, that what I had heard had communicated truth to me, the truth of the supreme composer, and impelled me to thank God. The Lutheran bishop of Munich was next to me and I said to him spontaneously: "in hearing this one understands: it is true; such strong faith is true, as well as the beauty that irresistibly expresses the presence of God's truth".

Yet how many pictures or frescos, fruits of the artist's faith, in their form, in their colour, in their light, urge us to think of God and foster within us the desire to draw from the source of all beauty. What Marc Chagall, a great artist, wrote, remains profoundly true: that for centuries painters have dipped their paintbrush in that coloured alphabet which is the Bible. Thus how often artistic expression can bring us to remember God, to help us to pray or even to convert our heart!

Paul Claudel, a famous French poet, playwright and diplomat, precisely while he was listening in the Cathedral of Notre Dame to the singing of the *Magnificat* during Christmas Mass in 1886, had a tangible experience of God's presence. He had not entered the church for reasons of faith but rather in order to seek arguments against Christians and instead God's grace worked actively in his heart.

Dear friends, I ask you to rediscover the importance of this path also for prayer, for our living relationship with God. Towns and villages throughout the world contain treasures of art that express faith and beckon to us to return to our relationship with God. May the visits to places filled with art, then, not only be opportunities for cultural enrichment — that too — but may they become above all moments of grace, incentives to strengthen our bond and our dialogue with the Lord so that — in switching from simple external reality to the more profound reality it expresses — we may pause to contemplate the ray of beauty that strikes us to the quick, that almost "wounds" us,

and that invites us to rise toward God.

I end with a prayer from a Psalm, Psalm 27[26]: “One thing have I asked of the Lord, that will I seek after; that I may dwell in the house of the Lord all the days of my life, to behold the beauty of the Lord, and contemplate his temple” (v. 4).

Let us hope that the Lord will help us to contemplate his beauty, both in nature and in works of art, so that we, moved by the light that shines from his face, may be a light for our neighbour. Many thanks.

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**To special groups:**

I am pleased to greet the English-speaking pilgrims and visitors here today, especially those from Scotland and Malta. Today we reflect on the need to draw near to God through the experience and appreciation of artistic beauty. Art is capable of making visible our need to go beyond what we see and it reveals our thirst for infinite beauty, for God. Dear friends, I invite you to be open to beauty and to allow it to move you to prayer and praise of the Lord. May Almighty God bless all of you!

Lastly I address a cordial word of welcome to the Italian-speaking pilgrims. In particular I greet the Bishops, friends of the Sant'Egidio Community, the faithful of various parishes, accompanied by their parish priests, and the newlyweds. I hope that this meeting will strengthen each one in renewed adherence to God, the source of light, hope and peace. With this in mind let us now sing the *Our Father* together in Latin.

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