



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St. Peter's Square

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[\[Video\]](#)

Apostolic Journey to Croatia

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I would like to speak to you about my [Pastoral Visit to Croatia](#), which I made last Saturday and Sunday. It was a short Apostolic Journey that took place entirely in the capital, Zagreb, yet it was full of meetings and especially of an intense spirit of faith, since the Croats are a deeply Catholic people.

I renew my most heartfelt thanks to Cardinal Bozanić, Archbishop of Zagreb, to Archbishop Srakić, President of the Bishops' Conference and to the other Bishops of Croatia, as well as to the President of the Republic, for the warm welcome they offered me. I extend my gratitude to all the civil authorities and to all who collaborated in various ways in this event, especially to people who offered prayers and sacrifices for this intention.

"Together in Christ": this was the motto of my visit. It expresses first of all the experience of everyone meeting in the name of Christ, the experience of being Church, demonstrated by the People of God gathering round the Successor of Peter. However, "Together in Christ" in this case had a special reference to the family: indeed, the main purpose of my visit was the First National Day of Croatian Catholic Families, which culminated in the Eucharistic concelebration on Sunday morning, which saw the participation, in the Hippodrome of Zagreb, at which a great multitude of

the faithful participated. It was very important to me to strengthen in the faith especially families, which the Second Vatican Council called “of the domestic Church” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 11). Bl. John Paul II, who visited Croatia three times gave great prominence to the role of the family in the Church; so, with this journey, I wanted to give continuity to this aspect of his Magisterium. In Europe today, the nations with a solid Christian tradition have a special responsibility in defending and promoting the value of the family founded on marriage, which in any case remains crucial in both the educational and social spheres. This message therefore had special importance for Croatia which, with its rich spiritual, ethical and cultural patrimony, is preparing to enter the European Union.

The Holy Mass was celebrated in the spiritual atmosphere peculiar to the Novena of Pentecost. As in a great “Upper Room”, open to the sky, the Croatian families gathered in prayer, invoking together the gift of the Holy Spirit. This enabled me to underline the gift of, and commitment to, communion in the Church, as well as to encourage married couples in their mission. In our day, while unfortunately the increase in separation and divorce can be seen, the fidelity of spouses has become in itself an important witness to Christ’s love that makes it possible to experience Marriage for what it is, namely, the union of a man and a woman who, with Christ’s grace, love each other and help each other throughout their lives, in joy and in suffering, in health and in sickness. The first education in faith consists precisely in witnessing this fidelity to the conjugal pact; from it, children learn without words that God is faithful, patient, respectful and generous love.

Faith in God who is Love, is transmitted primarily with the witness of a fidelity to conjugal love which is naturally expressed in love for the children, the fruit of this union. But this fidelity is impossible without the grace of God, without the support of faith and of the Holy Spirit. This is why the Virgin Mary never ceases to intercede with her Son so that — as the wedding at Cana — he may continually replenish the gift to the married couple of “good wine”, that is of his grace which enables them to live as “one flesh” in the different stages and situations of life.

The Vigil with the young people fitted very well into this context of great attention to the family. It was held on Saturday evening in Jelačić Square, the heart of the city of Zagreb. There I was able to meet the new generation of Croats and I perceived the full force of their youthful faith, enlivened by a great impetus towards life and its meaning, towards good, towards freedom, in other words towards God. It was beautiful and moving to hear these young people singing with joy and enthusiasm, and then, in the moments of listening and praying, to see them meditating in profound silence! I repeated to them the question that Jesus asked his first disciples: “What do you seek?” (Jn 1:38), but I told them that God looks for them first and even before they themselves seek him. This is the joy of faith: discovering that God loves us first! It is a discovery which always keeps us as disciples, and therefore ever young in spirit! This mystery, during the Vigil, was experienced in the prayer of Eucharistic adoration: in silence, our being “together in Christ” found its fullness. Thus my invitation to follow Jesus was an echo of the Word that he himself addresses to the

hearts of the young.

Another moment we might say, of the “Upper Room” was the celebration of Vespers in the Cathedral with the bishops, priests, religious and young people studying in the Seminaries and in the Novitiates. Here too, in a particular way, we experienced our being “family” as an ecclesial community. The monumental tomb of Bl. Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac, Bishop and Martyr, is located in the Cathedral of Zagreb. In Christ’s name he courageously opposed first the abuses of Nazism and Fascism and later, those of the Communist regime. He was imprisoned and confined to the village of his birth. Created a Cardinal by Pope Pius XII, he died in 1960 from an illness he contracted in prison. In the light of his witness, I encouraged the bishops and priests in their ministry, urging them to communion and to apostolic dynamism. I proposed anew to the consecrated men and women the beauty and radicalism of their form of life. I invited the seminarians and novices to follow joyfully Christ who has called them by name. This moment of prayer, enriched by the presence of so many brothers and sisters who have dedicated their life to the Lord, was a great comfort to me, and I pray that Croatian families may always be fertile ground for the birth of numerous holy vocations at the service of the Kingdom of God.

Another significant meeting was with the representatives of civil society, of the political, academic, cultural and business worlds, with the diplomatic corps and with the religious leaders, gathered in the National Theatre of Zagreb. In that context I had the joy of paying homage to the great Croatian cultural tradition, inseparable from its history of faith and from the living presence of the Church, which down the centuries promoted many institutions, and above all formed distinguished seekers of the truth and of the common good.

Among them I recalled in particular the Jesuit, Fr Ruder Bošković, a great scientist, the third centenary of whose birth falls this year. Once again the deepest vocation of Europe appeared clearly to all of us: to safeguard and to renew a humanism which has Christian roots and can be described as “catholic”, that is, universal and integral. A humanism which puts at the centre the conscience of the human being, his openness to the transcendent and at the same time his historical reality, capable of inspiring political projects that are different but converge in the construction of a real democracy, founded on the ethical values rooted in human nature itself.

In looking at Europe from the viewpoint of a nation with an ancient and solid Christian tradition — which is an integral part of the European civilization — while it is preparing to enter the political Union, we felt anew the urgency of the challenge that today faces all the people of this continent: in other words, not to be afraid of God, of the God of Jesus Christ, who is Love and Truth and who takes nothing from freedom but restores it to the continent and gives it a horizon of trustworthy hope.

Dear friends, every time the Successor of Peter makes an Apostolic Journey the whole ecclesial body participates in a certain way in the dynamism of communion and mission proper to his

ministry. I thank all those who have accompanied and sustained me with prayers, ensuring the success of my Pastoral Visit. Now, as we thank the Lord for this great gift, let us ask him, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, Queen of Croats, that all I have been able to sow may bear abundant fruit, for Croatian families, for the entire nation and for the whole of Europe.

To special groups:

I am pleased to greet the members of the seminar on Christianity and culture sponsored by Seton Hall University. I also welcome the Council of International Catholic Charismatic Renewal Services. My greeting also goes to the International Leadership Program for Lasallian Universities, to the Sisters of St Paul of Chartres, and to the delegates to the World Congress on Menopause. Upon all present, especially the pilgrims from England, Ireland, South Africa, Australia, India, Singapore, the Philippines and the United States, I invoke God's Blessings of lasting joy and peace.

Lastly I greet the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newlyweds* present. Next Sunday we shall celebrate the Solemnity of Pentecost. I exhort you, dear *young people*, to invoke frequently the Holy Spirit, who makes you undaunted witnesses of Christ. May the Consoler Spirit help you, dear *sick people*, to welcome with faith the mystery of suffering and to offer it for the salvation of all humanity and may it sustain you, dear *newlyweds*, in building your family on the sound foundation of the Gospel.

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