



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF JOHN PAUL II

TO THE ABBOT OF SUBIACO ON THE OCCASION

OF THE FEAST OF ST. BENEDICT, PATRON OF EUROPE *To my beloved Brother Dom Mauro Meacci*

*Abbot of Subiaco*¹. I was delighted to learn that the great Benedictine monastic family intends to celebrate the 1,500th anniversary of St Benedict's foundation in Subiaco of that "schola dominici servitii" which down the centuries led countless numbers of men and women "per ducatum Evangelii" to a closer union with Christ. I would like to join spiritually in the thanksgiving that the whole monastic order, born of the holy Patriarch's faith and love, is offering to the Lord for the great gifts which have enriched it since the beginning of its history. My revered Predecessor, St Gregory the Great, a Benedictine monk and celebrated biographer of St Benedict, invited us to discern the basis of a life wholly dedicated to "seeking and serving Christ, the one true Saviour" (*Preface of the Mass of St Benedict*), in the atmosphere of great faith in God and intense love for his law which motivated the original family of the saint from Norcia. This spiritual striving, which grew and developed as he faced the challenges of life, soon led the young man to forego the illusions of worldly knowledge and possessions to devote himself to learning the wisdom of the Cross and to being conformed to Christ alone. From Norcia to Rome, from Affile to Subiaco, Benedict's spiritual journey was guided by the one desire to please Christ. This longing was strengthened and increased during the three years he lived in the grotto of the Sacro Speco, when "he laid those solid foundations of Christian perfection on which he could later build an edifice of extraordinary height" (Pius XII, *Fulgens radiatur*, 21 March 1947). His prolonged and intimate union with Christ prompted him to gather other brothers around him in order to carry out "those great designs and goals to which he had been called by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit" (*ibid.*). Illumined by divine light, Benedict became a beacon and guide for poor shepherds in search of faith and for devout people who needed direction in the way of the Lord. After a further period of solitude and difficult trials, 1,500 years ago, when he was barely 20 years old, he founded the first Benedictine monastery at Subiaco, not far from the Sacro Speco. In this way the grain of wheat that had chosen to hide itself in the soil of Subiaco and to waste away in penance for love of Christ, gave rise to a new model of consecrated life, becoming a fruitful ear of wheat.² The small, obscure grotto of Subiaco thus became the cradle of the Benedictine Order. From it a bright beacon of faith and civilization shone out which, through the example and work of the holy Patriarch's spiritual sons, flooded the West and East of Europe and the other continents, as the marble plaque there records. The fame of his holiness attracted scores of young men in search of God, whom he organized with practical genius into 12 monasteries. Here Sts Placid and Maurus were formed in an atmosphere of Gospel simplicity, living faith and active charity. The first splendid jewels of the monastic family of Subiaco, they were taught the "service of the Almighty" by Benedict himself. To protect his monks from the consequences of a ferocious persecution, after completing the organization of the existing monasteries with the appointment of suitable superiors, Benedict took a few monks with him and set out for Cassino, where he founded the monastery of Monte Cassino, which would soon become the cradle for the growth of Western monasticism and a centre

of evangelization and Christian humanism. Even in this matter Benedict proved himself a steadfast man of faith: trusting in God and like Abraham hoping against all hope, he believed that the Lord would continue to bless his work, despite the obstacles raised by human envy and violence.³ At the heart of St Benedict's monastic experience is a simple, typically Christian principle, which the monk adopts in all its radicalness: to unify one's life around the primacy of God. This "tendere in unum", the first, fundamental condition for entering monastic life, must be the commitment unifying the life of the individual and the community, and be expressed in the "conversatio morum" which is fidelity to a life-style lived concretely in daily obedience. The search for Gospel simplicity requires continual examination, that is, the effort "to do the truth", by constantly returning to the initial gift of the divine call which is at the root of one's own religious experience. This commitment, which is part of the Benedictine life, is particularly called for by the celebrations of the 1,500th anniversary of the monastery's foundation, which falls during the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000. The *Book of Leviticus* prescribes: "You shall hallow the fiftieth year, and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants; it shall be a jubilee for you, when each of you shall return to his property and each of you shall return to his family" (25:10). The invitation to return to one's own "heredity", to one's own family, is especially timely for the Benedictine monastic community, called to live the Jubilee of its 15th centuries of life and that of the Holy Year as a favourable time for a renewed fidelity to the "heredity" of the holy Patriarch by acquiring a deeper sense of his original charism.⁴ The example of St Benedict and the Rule itself offer significant direction for fully accepting the gift of these anniversaries. First and foremost they invite a witness of tenacious fidelity to the Word of God, meditated on and received through "lectio divina". This involves maintaining silence and an attitude of humble adoration before God, for the divine word reveals its depths to those who, through silence and mortification, are attentive to the Spirit's mysterious action. While the requirement of regular silence establishes times when human words must be stilled, it points to a style marked by great moderation in verbal communication. If it is perceived and lived in its profound sense, it slowly teaches the interiorization by which the monk opens himself to a genuine knowledge of God and man. In a particular way, the great silence in monasteries has a unique symbolic power of recalling what really counts: Samuel's absolute availability (cf. 1 Sm 3) and the total, loving gift of self to the Father. None of the rest is eliminated, but is accepted in its profound reality and brought to God in prayer. It is this school of "lectio divina" which the Church expects from monasteries: she does not seek masters of biblical exegesis, who can also be found elsewhere, but rather witnesses to a humble and tenacious fidelity to the Word in the inconspicuous setting of everyday life. Thus the "vita bonorum" becomes a "viva lectio" which can be understood even by those who, disillusioned by the inflation of human words, seek what is essential and authentic in their relationship with God and are ready to understand the message given by a life in which a relish for beauty and order is combined with moderation. Familiarity with the Word, which the Benedictine Rule guarantees by reserving much time for it in the daily schedule, will not fail to instil serene trust, to cast aside false security and to root in the soul a vivid sense of the total lordship of God. The monk is thus protected from convenient or utilitarian interpretations of Scripture and brought to an ever deeper awareness of human weakness, in which God's power shines brightly.⁵ Along with listening to God's Word there is the commitment to prayer. The Benedictine monastery is above all a place of prayer, in the sense that everything in it is organized to make the monks attentive and responsive to the voice of the Spirit. This is why the complete celebration of the Divine Office, whose centre is the Eucharist and which structures the monastic day, is the "opus Dei" in which "dum cantamus iter facimus ut ad nostrum cor veniat et sui nos amoris gratia accendat". The Word of Sacred Scripture inspires the Benedictine monk's dialogue with God; in this he is helped by the austere beauty of the Roman liturgy in which this Word, proclaimed with solemnity or sung in plainchant that is the fruit of a spiritual understanding of the riches it contains, has an absolutely pre-eminent role compared to other liturgies, where the most striking element is the splendid poetic compositions which have blossomed on the stock of the biblical text. This praying with the Bible calls

for an ascesis of self-emptying which enables us to be attuned to the sentiments that Another places on our lips and stirs in our heart (*ut mens nostra concordet voci nostrae*). The primacy of the Word is thus affirmed in life, and it prevails, not because it is imposed by constraint but because it draws us discreetly and faithfully by its own attraction. Once it has been accepted, the Word searches and discerns, imposes clear choices and thus brings the monk, through obedience, into the *historia Salutis* summed up in the Passover of Christ, who was obedient to the Father (cf. *Heb 5:7-10*). It is this prayer, *memoria Dei*, which makes unity of life possible in practice, despite multiple activities: as Cassian teaches, these are not demeaned but are continually brought back to their centre. By extending liturgical prayer to the whole day through the free and silent personal prayer of the brothers, an atmosphere of recollection is created in the monastery in which the actual times of celebration find their full truth. In this way the monastery becomes a "school of prayer", that is, a place where the community, by deeply encountering God in the liturgy and at various moments of the day, introduces those who seek the face of the living God to the wonders of Trinitarian life.⁶ Prayer, which marks the hours of the day in the liturgy and becomes the personal and silent meditation of the brothers, is the most important expression and source of the unity of the monastic community, which is based on the unity of faith. Every monk is required to look with attention and faith at himself and at the community: in this each one will support his brothers and be supported by them - not only by those with whom he lives, but also by those who have gone before him and have given the community its unmistakable features, with its riches and its limitations - and together with them feels supported by Christ who is the foundation. If this basic harmony is lacking and indifference or even rivalry creeps in, every brother begins to feel just "one of many", with the risk of deceiving himself that fulfilment will be found in personal projects that prompt him to seek refuge in contacts with the outside world rather than in full participation in the common life and apostolate. Today more than ever there is an urgent need to foster fraternal life within communities, in which a style of friendship is lived which is no less true because it maintains those distances which safeguard the other person's freedom. This is the witness that the Church expects of all religious, but first and foremost of monks.⁷ I ardently hope that the celebrations of the 1,500th anniversary of the beginning of monastic life at Subiaco will be an opportunity for this community and for the whole Benedictine Order to renew their fidelity to the holy Patriarch's charism, their fervour in community life, in listening to the Word of God, in prayer and in the commitment to proclaiming the Gospel in accordance with the tradition of the Subiaco Congregation. May every Benedictine community present itself with a well-defined identity, like a "city on a hill", distinct from the surrounding world, but open and welcoming to the poor, to pilgrims and to all who are searching for a life of greater fidelity to the Gospel! With these wishes, which I entrust to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin, so devoutly revered and invoked in this monastery and in all Benedictine communities, I cordially impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you and to the monks of Subiaco. *From the Vatican, 7 July 1999* **JOHN PAUL II** © Copyright 1999 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana