



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

St Peter's Square

Wednesday, 30 April 2008

Apostolic Journey to the United States of America

Dear Brothers and Sisters, Although several days have already passed since my return, I would like, nevertheless, to devote today's Catechesis, as usual, to the Apostolic Journey I made to the United Nations Organizations and to the United States of America from 15 to 21 April. I first of all renew the expression of my most heartfelt gratitude to the United States Bishops' Conference, and likewise to President Bush for having invited me, and for the warm welcome they gave me. I would like, however, to extend my "thank you" to all those in Washington and in New York who came to greet me and to express their love for the Pope or who accompanied and sustained me with their prayers and the offering of their sacrifices. As is well known, the occasion of the Visit was the 200th anniversary of the elevation of the Country's first Diocese - Baltimore - to a metropolitan Archdiocese and the establishment of the Sees of New York, Boston, Philadelphia and Louisville. On this characteristically ecclesial occasion, I therefore had the joy of going in person, for the first time as Successor of Peter, to visit the beloved People of the United States of America, to strengthen Catholics in the faith, to renew and to increase brotherhood among all Christians and to proclaim to all the Message of "Christ our Hope" which resounds as the motto of my Journey. During the *Meeting with the President* at his residence, I was able to pay tribute to this great Country which was built from the outset on the foundations of a felicitous combination of religious, ethical and political principles which still constitute a valid example of healthy secularism where the religious dimension, with the diversity of its expressions, is not only tolerated but appreciated as the Nation's "soul" and a fundamental guarantee of human rights and duties. In this context the Church can carry out her mission of evangelization and human promotion with freedom and commitment and also as a "critical conscience". She thus contributes to building a

society worthy of the human person and, at the same time, encourages a Country such as the United States - to which everyone looks as to one of the principal actors on the international stage - toward global solidarity, ever more necessary and urgent, and the patient exercise of dialogue in international relations. The mission and role of the ecclesial Community were naturally the focus of the *Meeting with the Bishops*, which was held at the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception, Washington. In the liturgical context of Vespers, we praised the Lord for the progress made by the People of God in the United States, for the zeal of its Pastors and the fervour and generosity of its faithful. This is expressed in the high and candid esteem in which faith is held and in countless charitable and humanitarian initiatives, at home and abroad. At the same time, I supported my Brothers in the Episcopate in their far from easy task of sowing the Gospel in a society marked by many contradictions, which even threaten the coherence of Catholics and the clergy themselves. I encouraged them to make their voice heard on the current moral and social issues and to form the lay faithful to be good "leaven" in the civil community, starting with the fundamental cell which is the family. In this regard I urged them to repropose the Sacrament of Matrimony as a gift and an indissoluble commitment between a man and a woman, the natural context for welcoming and raising children. The Church and the family, together with school, especially schools of Christian inspiration - must cooperate in order to offer young people a sound moral education, but in this task those who work in communications and entertainment also have a great responsibility. In thinking of the painful matter of the sexual abuse of minors committed by ordained ministers, I wanted to express my closeness to the Bishops, encouraging them in their endeavour to bind up the wounds and to strengthen relations with their priests. In responding to some of the questions the Bishops asked, I took the opportunity to stress several important aspects: the intrinsic relationship between the Gospel and "natural law"; a healthy conception of freedom that is understood and realized in love; the ecclesial dimension of Christian experience; the need for a new way to proclaim "salvation" as fullness of life, especially to young people, and to teach prayer, from which generous responses to the Lord's call germinate. In the great and festive *Eucharistic Celebration at Nationals Park Stadium* in Washington we invoked the Holy Spirit upon the whole Church in the United States of America so that, firmly rooted in the faith transmitted by the Fathers and profoundly united and renewed, she may face present and future challenges with courage and hope, the hope that "does not disappoint us, because God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit" (Rom 5: 5). One of these challenges is certainly that of education. I therefore met at the *Catholic University of America* the Rectors of Catholic universities and colleges, diocesan heads of teaching and representatives of teachers and students. The duty to educate is an integral part of the Church's mission and the American ecclesial community is increasingly involved in it, at the same time rendering an important social and cultural service to the entire Country. It is important that this service continue, and it is likewise important to care for the quality of Catholic institutes so that in them people may truly be formed in accordance with "measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ" (cf. Eph 4: 13), combining faith and reason, freedom and truth. Thus with joy I strengthened teachers in their precious task of intellectual charity. In a Country with a multicultural vocation such as the United States of America the meetings with the representatives of other religions have acquired special importance: in

Washington, at the John Paul II Cultural Center, with Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Jains; in New York, the Visit to the Synagogue. These were very cordial moments, especially the latter, which confirmed the common commitment to dialogue, and to the promotion of peace and of spiritual and moral values. In what can be considered the homeland of religious freedom, I wanted to recall that the latter should always be defended with united efforts, to avoid any form of discrimination and prejudice. And I emphasized the great responsibility of religious leaders both in teaching respect and non-violence, as well as keeping alive the deepest questions of the human conscience. The ecumenical celebration in Parish Church of St Joseph was also marked by great cordiality. Together we prayed the Lord to increase in Christians the ability to account, with ever greater unity, for the one great hope that is in them (cf. I Pt 3: 15) through their common faith in Jesus Christ. Another important objective of my journey was the Visit to the Headquarters of the UN, the fourth Visit of a Pope after Paul VI's in 1965 and the two Visits of John Paul II in 1979 and 1995.

On the 60th anniversary of the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" Providence gave me the opportunity to confirm the value of this Charter at the broadest and most authoritative supra-national Assembly. I referred to its universal foundations, that is, the dignity of the human person, created by God in his image and likeness so that he might cooperate in the world with God's great plan of life and peace. Like peace, respect for human rights is also rooted in "justice", in other words, in a valid ethical order for all epochs and all peoples, which can be summarized in the famous maxim: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you" or, expressed in a positive form in Jesus' words: "Treat others the way you would have them treat you" (Mt 7: 12). On this basis, which constitutes the Holy See's characteristic contribution to the United Nations Organization, I renewed and I renew again today the effective commitment of the Catholic Church to contribute to strengthening international relations marked by the principles of responsibility and solidarity. The other moments of my stay in New York also remain deeply impressed on my heart. In St Patrick's Cathedral, in the heart of Manhattan - truly a "house of prayer for all peoples" I celebrated Holy Mass for priests and consecrated people who came from every part of the Country. I shall never forget the great warmth with which they congratulated me on the third anniversary of my election to the Chair of Peter. It was a moving moment in which I experienced in a tangible way all of the Church's support for my ministry. I can say the same about the Meeting with Young People and Seminarians at the Diocesan Seminary which was preceded by a very significant stop among disabled children and young people with their relatives. To the youth, who by their nature thirst for truth and love, I proposed several outstanding men and women who bore an exemplary witness to the Gospel in American territory, the Gospel of truth which makes them free in love, in service and in a life spent for others. By coming to grips with the problems that threaten young people today, they can find in the saints the light that dispels this darkness: the light of Christ, hope for every person! This hope, stronger than sin and death, enlivened the moment charged with emotion that I spent in silence in the abyss of Ground Zero, where I lit a candle, praying for all the victims of that terrible tragedy. Lastly, my Visit culminated in the Eucharistic celebration in New York's Yankee Stadium: I still carry in my heart that celebration of faith and brotherhood with which we celebrated the 200th anniversary of the oldest dioceses in

North America. Enriched with faith and with the traditions of successive waves of immigrants, the little flock of the origins has developed enormously. To that Church, which now faces the challenges of the present time, I had the joy of proclaiming anew "Christ our Hope" yesterday, today, and for ever. Dear brothers and sisters, I ask you to join me in thanksgiving for the comforting success of this Apostolic Visit and in asking God, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary, to make it bear a fruitful harvest for the Church in America and in every part of the world.* *

***To special groups** I offer a warm welcome to the participants in the third Christian-Buddhist Symposium, meeting in Castel Gandolfo during these days. Upon all of you and upon the English-speaking pilgrims from England, Ireland, Scandinavia, Malta, South Africa, Korea, Thailand, Canada and the United States, I cordially invoke the joy and peace of the Risen Christ. My thoughts go lastly to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. Today the liturgy commemorates the holy Pontiff Pius V who, moved by profound love for the Church, promoted the propagation of the faith with tireless zeal and reformed liturgical worship. May his example and his intercession encourage you, dear *young people*, to carry out authentically and coherently your Christian vocation; may it sustain you, dear *sick people*, so that you may persevere in hope and offer your sufferings in union with those of Christ for the salvation of humanity; may it make you, dear *newly-weds* grow in the reciprocal commitment to fidelity and love.

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