



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Paul VI Audience Hall

Wednesday, 17 September 2008

Apostolic Journey to France

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today's meeting gives me the pleasant opportunity of reviewing the various events of the Pastoral Visit to France which I made a few days ago; a Visit that culminated, as you know, with the pilgrimage to Lourdes on the occasion of the 150th anniversary of the Apparitions of Our Lady to St Bernadette. As I offer fervent thanks to the Lord who granted me such a providential opportunity, I once again express my deep gratitude to the Archbishop of Paris, to the Bishop of Tarbes and Lourdes, to their respective collaborators and to all who contributed in various ways to the success of my pilgrimage. I also cordially thank the President of the Republic and the other Authorities who welcomed me so courteously.

The Visit began in Paris, where I met in spirit the entire French people, thereby paying homage to a beloved nation in which, since the second century, the Church has played a fundamental civilizing role. It is interesting that precisely in this context the need developed for a healthy distinction between the political and religious spheres in accordance with Jesus' famous words: "Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's" (Mk 12: 17). However, if the image of Caesar was stamped on Roman coins which for this reason were to be rendered to him, the human heart bears the imprint of the Creator, the one Lord of our life. Genuine secularism does not mean, therefore, leaving the spiritual dimension out of consideration but rather recognizing that it is precisely this that radically guarantees our freedom and autonomy from earthly realities, thanks to the dictates of creative Wisdom which the human conscience is capable of accepting and actuating.

The broad reflection on the theme I addressed at the meeting with the world of culture, "The origins of Western theology and the roots of European culture" fits into this perspective. The venue was chosen for its symbolic importance: the Collège des Bernardins, which the late Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger wished to develop as a centre of cultural dialogue. It is a 12th century building, built for the Cistercians, where young monks studied. Thus the monastic theology which also gave birth to our Western culture is also really present there. The starting point of my Discourse was a reflection on monasticism, whose goal was the search for God, *quaerere Deum*. At the time of the profound crisis of the ancient civilization, the monks, guided by the light of faith, chose the right pathway: the pathway of listening to the Word of God. Thus they were great scholars of the Sacred Scriptures and monasteries became schools of wisdom and "*dominici servitii*" school, "in the Lord's service", as St Benedict called them. So it was that the search for God, by its nature, brought the monks to a culture of the word. *Quaerere Deum*, in searching for God, they sought him by following his Word and must therefore have acquired an ever deeper knowledge of this Word. It is necessary to penetrate the secret of the language in order to understand its structure. In the search for God revealed to us in the Sacred Scriptures, the profane sciences, oriented to attaining a deeper knowledge of the secrets of languages, thus became important. Consequently, it was *eruditio* that developed in the monasteries which permitted the formation of culture. Today, for this very reason, *quaerere Deum* - seeking God, journeying towards God, is still, as it was in the past, the main path and foundation of every true culture.

Architecture too is an artistic expression of the search for God and there is no doubt that the Cathedral of Notre-Dame in Paris constitutes an example of universal value. Inside this magnificent church where I had the joy of presiding at the celebration of Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary, I urged the priests, deacons, men and women religious and seminarians who had come from every part of France, to give priority to the religious listening to the Divine Word, looking to the Virgin Mary as a sublime model. In front of Notre-Dame I then greeted the young people who had arrived in enthusiastic throngs. As they were about to start a long prayer vigil, I consigned to them two treasures of the Christian faith: the Holy Spirit and the Cross. The Spirit opens to human intelligence horizons which transcend it and enable it to perceive the beauty and truth of God's love revealed on the Cross itself. This is a love from which nothing will ever be able to separate us and which is experienced by giving one's own life after the example of Christ. I then made a brief stop at the Institut de France, the headquarters of five national Academies: since I myself am a member of one of them, I was overjoyed to meet my colleagues here. My Visit culminated in the Eucharistic celebration on the Esplanade des Invalides. Re-echoing St Paul's words to the Corinthians, I invited the faithful of Paris and of all France to seek the living God who showed us his true Face in Jesus, present in the Eucharist, and urged us to love our brethren as he loved us.

I then went to Lourdes. Here I was immediately able to join thousands of the faithful on the "Jubilee Way", which retraces the places of St Bernadette's life: the parish church with the baptismal font in which she was baptized; the "*Cachot*", where she lived as a child in great

poverty; the Grotto of *Massabielle*, where the Blessed Virgin appeared to her 18 times. In the evening I took part in the traditional [torchlight procession](#), a wonderful manifestation of faith in God and of devotion to his and our Mother. Lourdes is truly a place of light, prayer, hope and conversion, founded on the rock of the love of God whose culminating revelation was in the glorious Cross of Christ.

By a happy coincidence, [last Sunday the liturgy commemorated the Exaltation of the Cross](#), a sign of hope par excellence since it is the greatest possible witness of love. In Lourdes, at the school of Mary, the first and perfect disciple of the Crucified One, pilgrims learn to view the crosses of their own life in the very light of the glorious Cross of Christ. In fact, on appearing to Bernadette in the Grotto of *Massabielle*, the first gesture Mary made was the Sign of the Cross, in silence, without speaking. And Bernadette imitated her, making the Sign of the Cross in turn, although with a trembling hand. And so Our Lady began her initiation into the essence of Christianity: the Sign of the Cross is the epitome of our faith and by making it with an attentive heart, we enter into the full mystery of our salvation. That gesture of Our Lady contains the whole message of Lourdes! God so loved us that he gave himself for us: this is the message of the Cross, "a mystery of death and glory". The Cross reminds us that there is no true love without suffering, there is no gift of life without pain. Many people learn this truth in Lourdes, which is a school of faith and hope, because it is also a school of charity and service to our brethren. It is in this context of faith and prayer that the important [meeting with the French Bishops](#) took place; it was a moment of intense spiritual communion in which together we entrusted our common pastoral expectations and concerns to the Blessed Virgin.

The next stage was the [Eucharistic procession](#) with thousands of the faithful, including, as always, numerous sick people. Before the Blessed Sacrament, our spiritual communion with Mary became even more intense and profound, because she gives us eyes and a heart that can contemplate her Divine Son in the Holy Eucharist. The silence of those thousands of people before the Lord was moving. It was not an empty silence but filled with prayer and with an awareness of the presence of the Lord who loved us to the point of being lifted up on the Cross for our sake. Lastly, Monday, 15 September, the liturgical memorial of Our Lady of Sorrows, was devoted in a special way to the sick. After a brief Visit to the Hospital Chapel where Bernadette received her First Communion, I presided at the [celebration of Holy Mass in front of the Basilica of the Rosary](#), during which I administered the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick. With the sick people and their care givers, I chose to meditate on the tears that Mary shed beneath the Cross and on her smile that illuminates Easter morning.

Dear brothers and sisters, together let us thank the Lord for this Apostolic Visit rich in so many spiritual gifts. In particular, let us praise him because Mary, in appearing to St Bernadette, opened a privileged space in the world in which to encounter the divine love that heals and saves. In Lourdes, the Blessed Virgin asks everyone to consider the earth as the place of our pilgrimage toward the definitive Homeland, which is Heaven. Actually, we are all pilgrims and are in need of

the Mother who guides us; and in Lourdes her smile invites us to continue with great trust, in the knowledge that God is good, God is love.

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I happily greet the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, including pilgrims from England, Scotland, Ireland, Denmark, Australia, Burma, Japan, and the United States of America. God bless you all!

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