



The Holy See

VISIT TO THE ROMAN BASILICA OF ST PAUL-OUTSIDE-THE-WALLS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Monday, 25 April 2005

Your Eminences,

Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters in the Lord,

I give thanks to God who, at the beginning of my ministry as Successor of Peter, has granted me to pause in prayer at the Apostle Paul's tomb. It is a deeply-desired pilgrimage, an act of faith that I am making not only in my own name but also in the name of the beloved Diocese of Rome, of which the Lord has constituted me Bishop and Pastor, and of the universal Church, entrusted to my pastoral care.

It is a pilgrimage, so to speak, to the roots of mission, the mission that the Risen Christ entrusted to Peter, to the Apostles and in a special way also to Paul, urging him to proclaim the Gospel to the Gentiles, so that he came as far as this city where, after preaching the Kingdom of God for some time (cf. Acts 28: 31), he poured out his blood, bearing the extreme witness to his Lord who had "grasped" him (Phil 3: 12) and sent him forth.

Even before Providence led him to Rome, the Apostle wrote his most important Letter, from a doctrinal point of view, to the Christians of this city, the capital of the Empire. The first part of it has just been proclaimed, a closely packed introduction in which the Apostle greets the community of Rome, introducing himself as a "servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle" (Rom 1: 1). A little further on he adds: "Through him [Christ] we have been favoured with apostleship, that we may spread his name and bring to obedient faith all the Gentiles" (Rom 1: 5).

Dear friends, as the Successor of Peter, I am here to revive in the faith this "apostolic grace", since

God, as the Apostle to the Gentiles has likewise said, has entrusted me with "anxiety for all the Churches" (II Cor 11: 28).

We have before our eyes the example of my beloved Venerable Predecessor John Paul II, a missionary Pope: the more than 100 Apostolic Visits that he made outside of Italy testify to the truly unique intensity of his activity. What impelled him to this dynamism other than that same love of Christ which transformed St Paul's existence (cf. II Cor 5: 14)? May the Lord also foster a similar love in me, so that I will not rest before the urgent need to proclaim the Gospel in our world today.

The Church is by nature missionary; her urgent duty is to evangelize. The Second Vatican Council dedicated to missionary activity the Decree entitled, precisely, "*Ad Gentes*". It recalls that "the Apostles... following the footsteps of Christ, 'preached the word of truth and begot churches' (St Augustine, *Enarr. in Ps. 44, 23: PL 36, 508; CChr. 30, 510*)", and that it "is the duty of their successors to carry on this work so that 'the word of God may run and be glorified' (II Thes 3: 1) and the Kingdom of God proclaimed and renewed throughout the whole world" (*Ad Gentes*, n.1).

At the beginning of the third millennium, the Church feels with renewed intensity that Christ's missionary mandate is more timely than ever. The Great Jubilee of the Year 2000 led her to "set out anew from Christ", contemplated in prayer, so that the light of his truth might shine on all men and women, primarily through the witness of holiness.

I would like here to recall the motto that St Benedict placed in his Rule, urging his monks "to prefer nothing to the love of Christ" (chap. IV). In fact, the Lord's call to Paul on the road to Damascus brought him to this: to making Christ the centre of his life, leaving all things for the sublimity of knowing him and the mystery of his love, and subsequently, striving to proclaim him to all, especially the pagans, "that we may spread his name" (Rom 1: 5). Passion for Christ brought him to preach the Gospel not only with words but with his very life, which he modelled ever more closely on that of his Lord.

At last, Paul proclaimed Christ with martyrdom, and his blood, together with Peter's and that of many other Gospel witnesses, fertilized the Church of Rome which presides in charity over universal communion (cf. St Ignatius of Antioch, *Ad Rom.*, Inscr.: Funk, I, 252).

As we all know, the 20th century was a period of martyrdom. Pope John Paul II placed a strong emphasis on this when he asked the Church to "update the Martyrology", and canonized and beatified numerous martyrs of recent history.

Consequently, if the blood of martyrs is the seed of new Christians, it is legitimate at the beginning of the third millennium to expect the Church to blossom anew, especially in the places where she has suffered the worst for the faith and Gospel witness.

Let us entrust this hope to the intercession of St Paul. May he obtain for the Church of Rome, especially for her new Bishop and for the entire People of God, the joy of proclaiming and bearing witness of the Good News of Christ the Saviour to everyone.

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