



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT

TO SANTA MARIA DI LEUCA AND BRINDISI (APULIA - ITALY)

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION
ON THE SQUARE IN FRONT
OF THE SHRINE OF ST MARY *DE FINIBUS TERRAE***

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Santa Maria di Leuca

Saturday, 14 June 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

My Visit in Apulia, the second after the [Eucharistic Congress in Bari](#), begins as a Marian pilgrimage, on this extreme tip of Italy and Europe, at the Shrine of St Mary *de finibus terrae*. With great joy I address my affectionate greeting to you all. I warmly greet Bishop Vito De Grisantis for having invited me and for his cordial welcome; together with him I greet the other Bishops of the Region, in particular Archbishop Cosmo Francesco Ruffini of Lecce, as well as all the priests and deacons, consecrated persons and all the faithful. With gratitude I greet Minister Raffaele Fitto, who is representing the Italian Government, and the various civil and military Authorities present.

In this place, so important historically for devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, I wanted the liturgy to be dedicated to her, Star of the Sea and Star of Hope. "*Ave, maris stella, / Dei Mater alma, / atque semper virgo, / felix caeli porta!*". The words of this ancient hymn are a greeting which in some way echoes that of the Angel at Nazareth. All Marian titles, in fact, have as it were budded and blossomed from that first name with which the heavenly messenger addressed the Virgin: "Hail, full of grace" (Lk 1: 28). We heard it in St Luke's Gospel, most appropriately because this Shrine - as the memorial tablet above the central door of the atrium attests - is called after the Most Holy Virgin of the "Annunciation". When God called Mary "full of grace" the hope of salvation for the human race was enkindled: a daughter of our people found grace in the Lord's eyes, he chose her as Mother of the Redeemer. In the simplicity of Mary's home, in a poor village of

Galilee, the solemn prophecy of salvation began to be fulfilled: "I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel" (Gn 3: 15). Therefore the Christian people have made their own the canticle of praise that the Jews raised to Judith and that just a little while ago we prayed as a Responsorial Psalm: "O daughter, you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth" (Jdt 13: 18). Without violence but with the meek courage of her "yes", the Virgin freed us, not from an earthly enemy but from the ancient adversary, by giving a human body to the One who was to crush his head once and for all.

This is why Mary shines on the sea of life and history as a Star of Hope. She does not shine with her own light, but reflects the light of Christ, the Sun who appeared on humanity's horizon so that in following the Star of Mary we can steer ourselves on the journey and keep on the route towards Christ, especially in dark and stormy moments. The Apostle Peter was well acquainted with this experience because he had lived it in the first person. One night, while he was crossing the Sea of Galilee with the other disciples, he was caught in a storm. Their boat, at the mercy of the waves, was unable to sail on. Walking on the waters, Jesus came to them at that very moment and asked Peter to get out of the boat and walk towards him. Peter took a few steps on the waves but then felt himself sinking and cried out: "Lord, save me!". Jesus grasped him by the hand and he brought him to safety (cf. Mt 14: 24-33). This episode later proved to be a sign of the trial that Peter would have to pass through at the time of Jesus' Passion. When the Lord was arrested, he was afraid and denied him three times: he was overcome by the storm. But when his eyes met Christ's gaze, God's mercy renewed him and, causing him to dissolve in tears, raised him from his fall.

I have wished to recall the story of St Peter because I know that this place and your whole Church have a special link with the Prince of the Apostles. Tradition credits him with the first proclamation of the Gospel in this land, as your Bishop recalled at the outset. The Fisherman "caught" by Jesus cast his nets as far as here and today we give thanks for having been the object of this "miraculous catch" that has lasted 2,000 years, a catch that, exactly as St Peter wrote: "called [us] out of darkness into the marvellous light [of God]" (cf. 1 Pt 2: 9). In order to become fishers of men with Christ one first needs to be "caught" by him. St Peter is a witness of this reality, as also is St Paul, the great convert, the 2,000th anniversary of whose birth we shall be celebrating in a few days. As Successor of Peter and Bishop of the Church founded on the blood of these two outstanding Apostles, I have come to confirm you in the faith of Jesus Christ, the only Saviour of man and of the world.

Peter's faith and Mary's faith are combined at this Shrine. Here one can draw from the double principle of the Christian experience: Marian and Petrine. Both, together, help us, dear brothers and sisters, to "start afresh from Christ", to renew your faith so that it may respond to the demands of our time. Mary teaches you to continue ceaselessly to listen to the Lord in the silence of prayer, to welcome his word with generous openness and the deep desire to offer yourselves, your actual lives, to God so that by the power of the Holy Spirit his eternal Word may "become flesh" once

again today, in our history. Mary will help you to follow Jesus faithfully and to unite yourselves to him in the Sacrificial offering, to carry in your hearts the joy of the Resurrection and to live in constant docility to the Spirit of Pentecost. In a complimentary manner St Peter too will teach you to feel and believe with the Church, steadfast in the Catholic faith. He will bring you to have the taste and passion for unity, communion and joy in walking together with your Pastors. And, at the same time, you will participate in the missionary concern to share the Gospel with everyone, to take it to the ends of the earth.

"De finibus terrae": the name of this holy place is very beautiful and evocative because it re-echoes one of Jesus' last words to his disciples. Jutting out between Europe and the Mediterranean, between the West and the East, it reminds us that the Church has no boundaries, she is universal. And geographical, cultural, ethnic, and even religious frontiers are an invitation to the Church to evangelize with a view to "communion in diversity". The Church was born at Pentecost, she was born universal and her vocation is to speak all the world's languages. The Church exists, according to her original vocation and mission that were revealed to Abraham, to be a blessing to benefit all the peoples of the earth (cf. Gn 12: 1-3); to be, in the language of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council, a sign and instrument of unity for the entire human race (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, n. 1). The Church in Apulia possesses a marked vocation to be a bridge between peoples and cultures. This land and this Shrine are effectively an "outpost" in this sense and I was very pleased to note, both in your Bishop's letter and also in his words today, how this sensitivity is alive among you and perceived positively, with a genuine Gospel spirit.

Dear friends, we know well, because the Lord Jesus was very clear about this, that the effectiveness of witness is proportional to the intensity of love. It is pointless reaching out to the ends of the earth if we do not love one another first and help one another within the Christian community. The exhortation of the Apostle Paul, which we listened to in the Second Reading (Col 3: 12-17), is therefore not only fundamental for the life of your ecclesial family but also for your commitment to animate the social milieu. In fact, in a context that is tending increasingly to encourage individualism, the first service of the Church is that of educating in the social sense, in attention for one's neighbour and in solidarity and sharing. The Church, endowed by her Lord as she is with continuously renewed spiritual energy, can also exercise a positive influence at the social level because she fosters a renewed humanity and open and constructive human relationships, in respect and at the service, in the first place, of the least and of the weakest.

Here in the Salento, as in all of Southern Italy, ecclesial communities are places where the young generations can learn hope, not as a utopia but rather as a tenacious confidence in the power of goodness. Goodness wins through and although at times it can seem to have been defeated by oppression and cunning, in reality it continues to work in silence and discretion, bearing fruit in the long term. This is Christian social renewal, based on the transformation of consciences, on moral formation and on prayer; yes, because prayer gives the strength to believe and to fight for goodness even when humanly it would tempt one to be discouraged and to withdraw. The

initiatives your Bishop mentioned at the start, those of the Marcelline Sisters and of the Trinitarian Fathers, as well as others that are being implemented in your territory, are eloquent signs of this typically ecclesial style of human and social promotion. At the same time, making the most of the opportunity of the Civil Authorities' presence, I am pleased to recall that the Christian community cannot and does not wish to encroach upon the legitimate and rightful domains of the Institutions; rather, it urges and supports them in their tasks and always offers to collaborate with them for the good of all, starting with the most unfavourable and difficult situations.

Lastly, my thoughts return to the Most Holy Virgin. From this Shrine of St Mary *de finibus terrae* I would like to go on a spiritual pilgrimage to the various Marian Shrines in the Salento, true gems set in this peninsula, set like a bridge over the sea. The Marian piety of the populations was formed under the wonderful influence of the Basilian devotion to the *Theotokos*, a devotion cultivated later by the sons of St Benedict, St Dominic and St Francis, and expressed in the most beautiful churches and simple holy chapels that are cared for and preserved as signs of the rich religious and civil heritage of your people. Let us therefore turn once again to you, Virgin Mary, who stood unwavering at the foot of your Son's Cross. You are a model of faith and hope in the power of truth and goodness. With the words of the ancient hymn we invoke you: "Break the fetters of the oppressed, / give light to the blind, / cast all evil from us, / beseech our every good". And, extending our gaze to the horizon where heaven and sea meet, we want to entrust to you the peoples who look out on the Mediterranean and those of the whole world, invoking development and peace for all: "Grant us peace in our day, / watch over our way, / grant that we may see your Son, / in the fullness of joy in heaven". Amen.

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