



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO FRANCE ON THE OCCASION OF THE 150th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE APPARITIONS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AT LOURDES
(SEPTEMBER 12 - 15, 2008)

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION ON THE OCCASION
OF THE 150th ANNIVERSARY OF THE APPARITIONS
OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Prairie, Lourdes
Sunday, 14 September 2008*

*Dear Cardinals,
Dear Bishop Perrier,
Dear Brothers in the episcopate and the priesthood,
Dear pilgrims, brothers and sisters,*

“Go and tell the priests that people should come here in procession, and that a chapel should be built here.” This is the message Bernadette received from the “beautiful lady” in the apparition of 2 March 1858. For 150 years, pilgrims have never ceased to come to the grotto of Massabielle to hear the message of conversion and hope which is addressed to them. And we have done the same; here we are this morning at the feet of Mary, the Immaculate Virgin, eager to learn from her alongside little Bernadette.

I would like to thank especially Bishop Jacques Perrier of Tarbes and Lourdes for the warm welcome he has given me, and for the kind words he has addressed to me. I greet the Cardinals, the Bishops, the priests, the deacons, the men and women religious, and all of you, dear Lourdes

pilgrims, especially the sick. You have come in large numbers to make this Jubilee pilgrimage with me and to entrust your families, your relatives and friends, and all your intentions to Our Lady. My thanks go also to the civil and military Authorities who are here with us at this Eucharistic celebration.

“What a great thing it is to possess the Cross! He who possesses it possesses a treasure” (Saint Andrew of Crete, *Homily X* on the Exaltation of the Cross, PG 97, 1020). On this day when the Church’s liturgy celebrates the feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross, the Gospel you have just heard reminds us of the meaning of this great mystery: God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that men might be saved (cf. *Jn* 3:16). The Son of God became vulnerable, assuming the condition of a slave, obedient even to death, death on a cross (cf. *Phil* 2:8). By his Cross we are saved. The instrument of torture which, on Good Friday, manifested God’s judgement on the world, has become a source of life, pardon, mercy, a sign of reconciliation and peace. “In order to be healed from sin, gaze upon Christ crucified!” said Saint Augustine (*Treatise on Saint John*, XII, 11). By raising our eyes towards the Crucified one, we adore him who came to take upon himself the sin of the world and to give us eternal life. And the Church invites us proudly to lift up this glorious Cross so that the world can see the full extent of the love of the Crucified one for mankind, for every man and woman. She invites us to give thanks to God because from a tree which brought death, life has burst out anew. On this wood Jesus reveals to us his sovereign majesty, he reveals to us that he is exalted in glory. Yes, “Come, let us adore him!” In our midst is he who loved us even to giving his life for us, he who invites every human being to draw near to him with trust.

This is the great mystery that Mary also entrusts to us this morning, inviting us to turn towards her Son. In fact, it is significant that, during the first apparition to Bernadette, Mary begins the encounter with the sign of the Cross. More than a simple sign, it is an initiation into the mysteries of the faith that Bernadette receives from Mary. The sign of the Cross is a kind of synthesis of our faith, for it tells how much God loves us; it tells us that there is a love in this world that is stronger than death, stronger than our weaknesses and sins. The power of love is stronger than the evil which threatens us. It is this mystery of the universality of God’s love for men that Mary came to reveal here, in Lourdes. She invites all people of good will, all those who suffer in heart or body, to raise their eyes towards the Cross of Jesus, so as to discover there the source of life, the source of salvation.

The Church has received the mission of showing all people this loving face of God, manifested in Jesus Christ. Are we able to understand that in the Crucified One of Golgotha, our dignity as children of God, tarnished by sin, is restored to us? Let us turn our gaze towards Christ. It is he who will make us free to love as he loves us, and to build a reconciled world. For on this Cross, Jesus took upon himself the weight of all the sufferings and injustices of our humanity. He bore the humiliation and the discrimination, the torture suffered in many parts of the world by so many of our brothers and sisters for love of Christ. We entrust all this to Mary, mother of Jesus and our

mother, present at the foot of the Cross.

In order to welcome into our lives this glorious Cross, the celebration of the Jubilee of Our Lady's apparitions in Lourdes urges us to embark upon a journey of faith and conversion. Today, Mary comes to meet us, so as to show us the way towards a renewal of life for our communities and for each one of us. By welcoming her Son, whom she presents to us, we are plunged into a living stream in which the faith can rediscover new vigour, in which the Church can be strengthened so as to proclaim the mystery of Christ ever more boldly. Jesus, born of Mary, is the Son of God, the sole Saviour of all people, living and acting in his Church and in the world. The Church is sent everywhere in the world to proclaim this unique message and to invite people to receive it through an authentic conversion of heart. This mission, entrusted by Jesus to his disciples, receives here, on the occasion of this Jubilee, a breath of new life. After the example of the great evangelizers from your country, may the missionary spirit which animated so many men and women from France over the centuries, continue to be your pride and your commitment!

When we follow the Jubilee Way in the footsteps of Bernadette, we are reminded of the heart of the message of Lourdes. Bernadette is the eldest daughter of a very poor family, with neither knowledge nor power, and in poor health. Mary chose her to transmit her message of conversion, prayer and penance, which fully accord with words of Jesus: "What you have hidden from the wise and understanding, you have revealed to babes" (*Mt 11:25*). On their spiritual journey, Christians too are called to render fruitful the grace of their Baptism, to nourish themselves with the Eucharist, to draw strength from prayer so as to bear witness and to express solidarity with all their fellow human beings (cf. *Homage to the Virgin Mary*, Piazza di Spagna, 8 December 2007). It is therefore a genuine catechesis that is being proposed to us in this way, under Mary's gaze. Let us allow her to instruct us too, and to guide us along the path that leads to the Kingdom of her Son!

In the course of her catechesis, the "beautiful lady" reveals her name to Bernadette: "I am the Immaculate Conception". Mary thereby discloses the extraordinary grace that she has received from God, that of having been conceived without sin, for "he has looked on his servant in her lowliness" (cf. *Lk 1:48*). Mary is the woman from this earth who gave herself totally to God, and who received the privilege of giving human life to his eternal Son. "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let what you have said be done to me" (*Lk 1:38*). She is beauty transfigured, the image of the new humanity. By presenting herself in this way, in utter dependence upon God, Mary expresses in reality an attitude of total freedom, based upon the full recognition of her true dignity. This privilege concerns us too, for it discloses to us our own dignity as men and women, admittedly marked by sin, but saved in hope, a hope which allows us to face our daily life. This is the path which Mary opens up for man. To give oneself fully to God is to find the path of true freedom. For by turning towards God, man becomes himself. He rediscovers his original vocation as a person created in his image and likeness.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, the primary purpose of the shrine at Lourdes is to be a place of

encounter with God in prayer and a place of service to our brothers and sisters, notably through the welcome given to the sick, the poor and all who suffer. In this place, Mary comes to us as a mother, always open to the needs of her children. Through the light which streams from her face, God's mercy is made manifest. Let us allow ourselves to be touched by her gaze, which tells us that we are all loved by God and never abandoned by him! Mary comes to remind us that prayer which is humble and intense, trusting and persevering, must have a central place in our Christian lives. Prayer is indispensable if we are to receive Christ's power. "People who pray are not wasting their time, even though the situation appears desperate and seems to call for action alone" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 36). To allow oneself to become absorbed by activity runs the risk of depriving prayer of its specifically Christian character and its true efficacy. The prayer of the Rosary, so dear to Bernadette and to Lourdes pilgrims, concentrates within itself the depths of the Gospel message. It introduces us to contemplation of the face of Christ. From this prayer of the humble, we can draw an abundance of graces.

The presence of young people at Lourdes is also an important element. Dear friends, gathered this morning around the World Youth Day Cross: when Mary received the angel's visit, she was a young girl from Nazareth leading the simple and courageous life typical of the women of her village. And if God's gaze focussed particularly upon her, trusting in her, Mary wants to tell you once more that not one of you is indifferent in God's eyes. He directs his loving gaze upon each one of you and he calls you to a life that is happy and full of meaning. Do not allow yourselves to be discouraged by difficulties! Mary was disturbed by the message of the angel who came to tell her that she would become the Mother of the Saviour. She was conscious of her frailty in the face of God's omnipotence. Nevertheless, she said "yes", without hesitating. And thanks to her yes, salvation came into the world, thereby changing the history of mankind. For your part, dear young people, do not be afraid to say yes to the Lord's summons when he invites you to walk in his footsteps. Respond generously to the Lord! Only he can fulfil the deepest aspirations of your heart. You have come to Lourdes in great numbers for attentive and generous service to the sick and to the other pilgrims, setting out in this way to follow Christ the servant. Serving our brothers and sisters opens our hearts and makes us available. In the silence of prayer, be prepared to confide in Mary, who spoke to Bernadette in a spirit of respect and trust towards her. May Mary help those who are called to marriage to discover the beauty of a genuine and profound love, lived as a reciprocal and faithful gift! To those among you whom he calls to follow him in the priesthood or the religious life, I would like to reiterate all the joy that is to be had through giving one's life totally for the service of God and others. May Christian families and communities be places where solid vocations can come to birth and grow, for the service of the Church and the world!

Mary's message is a message of hope for all men and women of our day, whatever their country of origin. I like to invoke Mary as the *star of hope* (*Spe Salvi*, 50). On the paths of our lives, so often shrouded in darkness, she is a beacon of hope who enlightens us and gives direction to our journey. Through her "yes", through the generous gift of herself, she has opened up to God the gates of our world and our history. And she invites us to live like her in invincible hope, refusing to

believe those who claim that we are trapped in the fatal power of destiny. She accompanies us with her maternal presence amid the events of our personal lives, our family lives, and our national lives. Happy are those men and women who place their trust in him who, at the very moment when he was offering his life for our salvation, gave us his Mother to be our own!

Dear Brothers and Sisters, in this land of France, the Mother of the Lord is venerated in countless shrines which thereby manifest the faith handed down from generation to generation. Celebrated in her Assumption, she is your country's beloved patroness. May she always be honoured fervently in each of your families, in your religious communities and in your parishes! May Mary watch over all the inhabitants of your beautiful country and over the pilgrims who have come in such numbers from other countries to celebrate this Jubilee! May she be for all people the Mother who surrounds her children in their joys and their trials! Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope and to love with you. Show us the way towards the kingdom of your Son Jesus! Star of the sea, shine upon us and lead us on our way! (cf. *Spe Salvi*, 50). Amen.

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