



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO CAMEROON AND ANGOLA
(MARCH 17-23, 2009)

**EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION WITH THE BISHOPS,
PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS PEOPLE,
ECCLESIAL MOVEMENTS AND CATECHISTS
OF ANGOLA AND SÃO TOMÉ**

HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI

*Saint Paul's Church in Luanda
Saturday, 21 March 2009*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,
Beloved labourers in the Lord's vineyard,*

As we have just heard, the children of Israel said to one another, “let us make haste to know the Lord.” They encouraged one another with these words amid their many tribulations. These misfortunes had overtaken them – the Prophet explains – because they lived without knowledge of God; their hearts were poor in love. The only physician capable of healing them was the Lord. Indeed, he himself, as a good physician, opened their wounds so that the sore might heal. And the people made up their mind: “Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us” (*Hos 6:1*). Thus human poverty was to intersect with divine mercy, which desires only to embrace the poor.

We see this in the Gospel passage that we have just heard: “Two men went up into the temple to pray”; the one “went down to his house justified rather than the other” (*Lk 18:10, 14*). The latter had paraded all his merits before God, virtually making God his debtor. Deep down, he felt no

need for God, even though he thanked him for letting him become so perfect, “not like this tax collector”. And yet it was the tax collector who went down to his house justified. Conscious of his sins, and so not even lifting his head – although in his trust he is completely turned towards Heaven – he awaits everything from the Lord: “O God, be merciful to me, a sinner” (*Lk 18:13*). He knocks on the door of mercy, which then opens and justifies him, for, as Jesus concludes: “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted” (*Lk 18:14*).

Saint Paul, the patron saint of the city of Luanda and of this splendid church built some fifty years ago, speaks to us from personal experience about this God who is rich in mercy. I wanted to highlight the second millennium of the birth of Saint Paul by celebrating the present Pauline Year, so that we can learn from him how to know Jesus Christ more fully. This is the testimony which Paul has bequeathed to us: “The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners; but I received mercy for this reason, that in me, as the foremost, Jesus Christ might display his perfect patience for an example to those who were to believe in him for eternal life” (*1 Tim 1:15-16*). In the course of the centuries, the number of people touched by grace has continually grown. You and I are among them. Let us give thanks to God because he has called us to be part of this age-long procession and thus to advance towards the future. In the footsteps of all Jesus’ followers, let us join them in following Christ himself and thus enter into the Light.

Dear brothers and sisters, I feel great joy to be here today with you, my fellow-workers in the Lord’s vineyard, where you labour daily to prepare the wine of divine mercy and to pour it out as balm on the wounds of your people who have suffered so many tribulations. Archbishop Gabriel Mbilingi has spoken of your hopes and your struggles in his gracious words of welcome. With a heart full of gratitude and hope I greet you all – women and men devoted to the cause of Jesus Christ – those of you who are here and the many others whom you represent: Bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, seminarians, catechists, leaders of the many different movements and associations present in this beloved Church of God. I would also like to mention the contemplative women religious, an unseen but extremely fruitful presence for our common journey. Finally, let me offer a particular greeting to the Salesian community and the faithful of this parish of Saint Paul; they have welcomed us to their church, without hesitating to yield the place which is usually theirs in the liturgical assembly. I know that they are gathered in the field next door, and I hope, at the end of this Eucharist, to see them and give them my blessing, but even now I say to them: “Many thanks! May God raise up in you, and through you, many apostles modelled on your patron.”

The decisive event in Paul’s life was his encounter with Jesus on the road to Damascus: Christ appeared to him as a dazzling light, he spoke to him and he won him over. The Apostle saw the Risen Jesus; and in him he beheld the full stature of humanity. As a result Paul experienced an inversion of perspective; he now saw everything in the light of this perfect stature of humanity in

Christ: what had earlier seemed essential and fundamental, he now considered nothing more than “refuse”; no longer “gain” but loss, for now the only thing that mattered was life in Christ (cf. *Phil* 3:7-8). Far from being merely a stage in Paul’s personal growth, this was a death to himself and a resurrection in Christ: one form of life died in him, and a new form was born, with the Risen Christ.

My brothers and sisters, “let us make haste to know the Lord”, the Risen One! As you know, Jesus, perfect man, is also our true God. In him, God became visible to our eyes, to give us a share in his divine life. With him a new dimension of being, of life, has come about, a dimension which integrates matter and through which a new world arises. But this qualitative leap in universal history which Jesus brought about in our place and for our sake – how is it communicated to human beings, how does it permeate their life and raise it on high? It comes to each of us through faith and Baptism. This sacrament is truly death and resurrection, transformation and new life, so much so that the baptized person can say together with Paul: “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (*Gal* 2:20). I live, but no longer I. In a certain way, my identity has been taken away and made part of an even greater identity; I still have my personal identity, but now it is changed and open to others as a result of my becoming part of Another: in Christ I find myself living on a new plane. What then has happened to us? Paul gives us the answer: You have become one in Christ Jesus (cf. *Gal* 3:28).

Through this process of our “christification” by the working and grace of God’s Spirit, the gestation of the Body of Christ in history is gradually being accomplished in us. At this moment I would like to go back in thought five centuries, to the years following 1506, when, in these lands, then visited by the Portuguese, the first sub-Saharan Christian kingdom was established, thanks to the faith and determination of the king, Dom Alphonsus I Mbemba-a-Nzinga, who reigned from 1506 until his death in 1543. The kingdom remained officially Catholic from the sixteenth century until the eighteenth, with its own ambassador in Rome. You see how two quite different ethnic groups – the Bantu and the Portuguese – were able to find in the Christian religion common ground for understanding, and committed themselves to ensuring that this understanding would be long-lasting, and that differences – which undoubtedly existed, and great ones at that – would not divide the two kingdoms! For Baptism enables all believers to be one in Christ.

Today it is up to you, brothers and sisters, following in the footsteps of those heroic and holy heralds of God, to offer the Risen Christ to your fellow citizens. So many of them are living in fear of spirits, of malign and threatening powers. In their bewilderment they end up even condemning street children and the elderly as alleged sorcerers. Who can go to them to proclaim that Christ has triumphed over death and all those occult powers (cf. *Eph* 1:19-23; 6:10-12)? Someone may object: “Why not leave them in peace? They have their truth, and we have ours. Let us all try to live in peace, leaving everyone as they are, so they can best be themselves.” But if we are convinced and have come to experience that without Christ life lacks something, that something real – indeed, the most real thing of all – is missing, we must also be convinced that we do no injustice to anyone if we present Christ to them and thus grant them the opportunity of finding their

truest and most authentic selves, the joy of finding life. Indeed, we must do this. It is our duty to offer everyone this possibility of attaining eternal life.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us say to them, in the words of the Israelite people: "Come, let us return to the Lord; for he has torn, that he may heal us." Let us enable human poverty to encounter divine mercy. The Lord makes us his friends, he entrusts himself to us, he gives us his Body in the Eucharist, he entrusts his Church to us. And so we ought truly to be his friends, to be one in mind with him, to desire what he desires and to reject what he does not desire. Jesus himself said: "You are my friends if you do what I command you" (*Jn* 15:14). Let this, then, be our common commitment: together to do his holy will: "Go into all the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation" (*Mk* 16:15). Let us embrace his will, like Saint Paul: "Preaching the Gospel ... is a necessity laid upon me; woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!" (*1 Cor* 9:16).

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