



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO CASSINO AND MONTE CASSINO **EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION** *HOMILY OF HIS*
HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Cassino, Piazza Miranda
Sunday, 24 May 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"You shall receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you shall be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria and to the end of the earth" (Acts 1: 8). With these words, Jesus took his leave of the Apostles, as we heard in the First Reading. Immediately afterwards the sacred Author adds that "as they were looking on, he was lifted up, and a cloud took him out of their sight" (Acts 1: 9). This is the mystery of the Ascension that we are celebrating today. But what do the Bible and the Liturgy wish to tell us by saying that Jesus "was lifted up"? We cannot understand the meaning of these words from a single text or from a single book of the New Testament but rather by listening attentively to the whole of Sacred Scripture. In fact the verb "to lift up" was originally used in the Old Testament and refers to royal enthronement. Thus Christ's Ascension means in the first place the enthronement of the Crucified and Risen Son of Man, the manifestation of God's kingship over the world.

However, there is an even deeper meaning that is not immediately perceptible. In the passage from the Acts of the Apostles it is said first that Jesus was "lifted up" (v. 9) and then it says "taken up" (v. 11). The event is not described as a journey to on high but rather as an action of the power of God who introduces Jesus into the space of closeness to the Divine. The presence of the cloud that "took him out of their sight" (v. 9), recalls a very ancient image of Old Testament theology and integrates the account of the Ascension into the history of God with Israel, from the cloud of Sinai and above the tent of the Covenant in the desert, to the luminous cloud on the mountain of the Transfiguration.

To present the Lord wrapped in clouds calls to mind once and for all the same mystery expressed in the symbolism of the phrase, "seated at the right hand of God". In Christ ascended into Heaven,

the human being has entered into intimacy with God in a new and unheard-of way; man henceforth finds room in God for ever. "Heaven": this word Heaven does not indicate a place above the stars but something far more daring and sublime: it indicates Christ himself, the divine Person who welcomes humanity fully and for ever, the One in whom God and man are inseparably united for ever. Man's being in God, this is Heaven. And we draw close to Heaven, indeed, we enter Heaven to the extent that we draw close to Jesus and enter into communion with him. For this reason today's Solemnity of the Ascension invites us to be in profound communion with the dead and Risen Jesus, invisibly present in the life of each one of us.

In this perspective we understand why the Evangelist Luke says that after the Ascension the disciples returned to Jerusalem "with great joy" (24: 52). Their joy stems from the fact that what had happened was not really a separation, the Lord's permanent absence: on the contrary, they were then certain that the Crucified-Risen One was alive and that in him God's gates, the gates of eternal life, had been opened to humanity for ever. In other words, his Ascension did not imply a temporary absence from the world but rather inaugurated the new, definitive and insuppressible form of his presence by virtue of his participation in the royal power of God. It was to be up to them, the disciples emboldened by the power of the Holy Spirit, to make his presence visible by their witness, preaching and missionary zeal. The Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension must also fill us with serenity and enthusiasm, just as it did the Apostles who set out again from the Mount of Olives "with great joy". Like them, we too, accepting the invitation of the "two men in dazzling apparel", must not stay gazing up at the sky, but, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit must go everywhere and proclaim the saving message of Christ's death and Resurrection. His very words, with which the Gospel according to St Matthew ends, accompany and comfort us: "and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mt 28: 19).

Dear brothers and sisters, the historical character of the mystery of Christ's Resurrection and Ascension helps us to recognize and understand the transcendent condition of the Church which was not born and does not live to compensate for the absence of her Lord who has "disappeared" but on the contrary finds the reason for her existence and mission in the invisible presence of Jesus, a presence working through the power of his Spirit. In other words, we might say that the Church does not carry out the role of preparing for the return of an "absent" Jesus, but, on the contrary, lives and works to proclaim his "glorious presence" in a historical and existential way. Since the day of the Ascension, every Christian community has advanced on its earthly pilgrimage toward the fulfilment of the messianic promises, fed by the word of God and nourished by the Body and Blood of her Lord. This is the condition of the Church, the Second Vatican Council recalls, as she "presses forward amid the persecutions of the world and the consolations of God", announcing the Cross and death of the Lord until he comes" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 8).

Brothers and sisters of this beloved diocesan community, today's Solemnity urges us to consolidate our faith in the Real Presence of Jesus in history: without him we can do nothing effective in our life or our apostolate. It is he, as the Apostle Paul recalls in the Second Reading,

whose "gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, for the equipment of the saints, for the work of ministry, for building up the Body of Christ", that is, the Church. And this is in order that we "attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God" (Eph 4: 11-13), since the common vocation of one and all is to form "one body and one spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call" (Eph 4: 41). My Visit today fits into this perspective. As your Pastor noted, its purpose is to encourage you "to build, found and rebuild" your diocesan community ceaselessly on Christ. How? St Benedict himself points out the way to us in his *Rule* when he recommends that we prefer nothing to Christ: "*Christo nihil omnino praeponere*" (LXII, 11).

I therefore thank God for the good that your community is doing under the guidance of Fr Abbot Dom Pietro Vittorelli, its Pastor, whom I greet with affection and thank for his courteous words to me on behalf of all. With him I greet the monastic community, the Bishops, priests and men and women religious present. I greet the civil and military Authorities and in the first place the Mayor to whom I am grateful for the welcome address with which he greeted me on my arrival in this Piazza Miranda, which from this day on will be called after me, although I do not deserve it. I greet the catechists, the pastoral workers, the young people and all those who in various ways see to spreading the Gospel in this region, laden with history, which experienced periods of great suffering during the Second World War. Silent witnesses of it are the numerous cemeteries that surround your rebuilt town: among them I remember in particular those of Poland, Germany and the Commonwealth. I extend my greeting, lastly, to all the inhabitants of Cassino and of the neighbouring towns: I reach out to each one, and especially to the sick and the suffering, with the assurance of my affection and my prayers.

Dear brothers and sisters, at this celebration we hear resonating St Benedict's appeal to keep our hearts fixed on Christ, to prefer nothing to him. This does not distract us, on the contrary it is an even greater incentive to build a society in which solidarity may be expressed by concrete signs. But how? Benedictine spirituality, well known to you, proposes an evangelical programme that is summed up in the motto: *ora et labora et lege* prayer, work and culture. First of all is prayer which is the most beautiful legacy that St Benedict bequeathed to the monks, but also to your particular Church: to your clergy, the majority of whom were trained at the Diocesan Seminary, for centuries housed in this same Abbey of Monte Cassino, to the seminarians, to the many people educated at the Benedictine schools and "recreation" centres and in your parishes, to all of you who live in this region. In lifting your gaze from every village and part of the diocese you can admire the Monastery of Monte Cassino, that constant reminder of Heaven, to which you climb every year in procession on the eve of Pentecost. Prayer, to which with its sonorous tolling the bell of St Benedict summons the monks every morning, is the silent path that leads us straight to God's Heart; it is the breath of the soul that restores peace to us in the storm of life. Furthermore, at the school of St Benedict, the monks have always cultivated a special love for the word of God in *lectio divina*, which today has become the common patrimony of many. I know that your diocesan Church, in adopting the guidelines of the Italian Bishops' Conference, takes great pains to acquire

a deeper knowledge of the Bible and indeed has inaugurated a programme for the study of the Sacred Scriptures, this year dedicated to the Evangelist Mark, which will continue over the next four years and conclude, please God, with a diocesan pilgrimage to the Holy Land. May attentive listening to the divine word nourish your prayers and make you prophets of truth and love in a unanimous commitment to evangelization and human advancement.

Another pivot of Benedictine spirituality is work. Humanizing the working world is characteristic of the soul of monasticism and this is also an endeavour of your community that seeks to be beside the numerous workers in the large industry present at Cassino and in the businesses connected with it.

I know how critical the situation of many of the workers is. I express my solidarity to all those who are living in a worrying and precarious plight, to workers on redundancy pay or who have actually been discharged. May the wound of unemployment that afflicts this territory induce the public authorities, entrepreneurs and all who have means to seek, with the help of all, effective solutions to the employment crisis, creating employment in order to safeguard families. In this regard how can we forget that the family urgently needs better protection because this institution is dangerously threatened at its very roots? Then I am thinking of the young people who have difficulty in finding dignified work that will enable them to build a family. I would like to say to them: do not feel discouraged, dear friends, the Church does not abandon you! I know that at least 25 young people of your Diocese took part in the last [World Youth Day in Sydney](#). In treasuring that extraordinary spiritual experience, may you be Gospel leaven among your friends and peers; with the power of the Holy Spirit, be new missionaries in this land of St Benedict!

Lastly, attention to the world of culture and education is part of your tradition. The famous Archives and Library of Monte Cassino contain innumerable testimonies of the commitment of men and women who meditated upon and sought ways to improve the spiritual and material life of human beings. In your Abbey the "*quaerere Deum*" is tangible, that is, it is possible to feel that European culture has consisted in the search for God and the readiness to listen to him and this also applies in our day. I know that you work with this same spirit in universities and schools so that they may become workshops of knowledge, research and enthusiasm for the future of the generations to come. I also know that in preparation for this Visit, you recently held a congress on the theme of education, to inspire in everyone a keen determination to pass on to the young the indispensable values of our human and Christian heritage. In today's cultural effort which aspires to creating a new humanism, faithful to the Benedictine tradition, you rightly intend also to pay attention to the frail or the weak, to the disabled and to immigrants. and I am grateful to you that you are giving me the opportunity to inaugurate on this very day the "House of Charity" at which a culture attentive to life is being built with deeds.

Dear brothers and sisters, it is not hard to see that your community, this portion of the Church which lives round Monte Cassino, is the heir and depositary of the mission steeped in St Benedict's spirit to proclaim that in our life no one and nothing must take priority over Jesus; the

mission to construct, in Christ's name, a new humanity under the banner of acceptance and assistance to the weakest. May your holy Patriarch help you and accompany you together with St Scholastica, his sister; and may the holy Patrons and especially Mary, Mother of the Church and Star of our Hope protect you. Amen!

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