



The Holy See

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HOLY MASS

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Cathedral Square, Erfurt

Saturday, 24 September 2011

(Video)

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Praise the Lord at all times, for he is good.” These are the words that we sang just before the Gospel. Yes, we truly have reason to thank God with all our heart. If we think back thirty years to the Elizabeth Year 1981, when this city formed part of the German Democratic Republic, who would have thought that a few years later, the wall and the barbed wire at the border would have come down? And if we think even further back, some 70 years, to the year 1941, in the days of National Socialism during the Second World War, who could have predicted that the “thousand-year *Reich*” would turn to dust and ashes just four years later?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, here in Thuringia and in the former German Democratic Republic, you have had to endure first a brown and then a red dictatorship, which acted on the Christian faith like acid rain. Many late consequences of that period are still having to be worked through, above all in the intellectual and religious fields. Most people in this country since that time have spent their lives far removed from faith in Christ and from the communion of the Church. Yet the last two decades have also brought good experiences: a broader horizon, an exchange that reaches beyond borders, a faithful confidence that God does not abandon us and that he leads us along new paths. “Where God is, there is a future”.

We are all convinced that the new freedom has helped to give people greater dignity and to open

up many new opportunities. On the part of the Church, we can point gratefully to many things that have become easier, whether it be new opportunities for parish activities, renovation and enlargement of churches and community centres, or diocesan initiatives of a pastoral or cultural nature. But the question naturally arises: have these opportunities led to an increase in faith? Are not the roots of faith and Christian life to be sought in something deeper than social freedom? It was actually amid the hardships of pressure from without that many committed Catholics remained faithful to Christ and to the Church. Where do we stand today? These people accepted personal disadvantages in order to live their faith. Here I should like to thank the priests and the men and women who assisted them during that period. I would like to remember especially the pastoral care of refugees immediately after the Second World War: many priests and laypersons achieved great things in order to relieve the plight of those driven from their homes, and to provide them with a new home. Sincere thanks go not least to the parents who brought up their children in the Catholic faith in the midst of the diaspora and in an anticlerical political environment. With gratitude I would like to recall the Religious Weeks for Children during the holidays and the fruitful work of the Catholic youth centres "Saint Sebastian" in Erfurt and "Marcel Callo" in Heiligenstadt. Especially in Eichsfeld, many Catholic Christians resisted the Communist ideology. May God richly reward all of them for the tenacity of their faith. That courageous witness, that patient life with God, that patient trust in God's guidance are like a precious seed that promises rich fruit for the future.

God's presence is always seen especially clearly in the saints. Their witness to the faith can also give us the courage to begin afresh today. Above all, we may think of the patron saints of the Diocese of Erfurt: Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia, Saint Boniface and Saint Kilian. Elizabeth came from a foreign land, from Hungary, to the Wartburg here in Thuringia. She led an intense life of prayer, linked to the spirit of penance and evangelical poverty. She regularly went down from her castle into the town of Eisenach, in order to care personally for the poor and the sick. Her life on this earth was only short – she was just twenty-four years old when she died – but the fruits of her holiness have endured across the centuries. Saint Elizabeth is greatly esteemed also by Protestant Christians. She can help us all to discover the fullness of the faith, its beauty, its depth and its transforming and purifying power and to translate it into our everyday lives.

The founding of the diocese of Erfurt in 742 by Saint Boniface reminds us of the Christian roots of our country. This event is also the first recorded mention of the city of Erfurt. The missionary bishop Boniface had come from England and it was characteristic of his approach that he worked in essential unity and in close association with the Bishop of Rome, the Successor of Saint Peter; he knew that the Church must be one around Peter. We honour him as the "Apostle of Germany"; he died as a martyr. Two of his companions, who also bore witness by shedding their blood for the Christian faith, are buried here in the Cathedral of Erfurt: Saints Eoban and Adelar.

Even before the Anglo-Saxon missionaries, Saint Kilian, an itinerant missionary from Ireland, was at work in Thuringia. Together with two companions he died in Würzburg as a martyr, because he criticized the moral misconduct of the Duke of Thuringia who resided there. Nor must we forget

Saint Severus, the patron saint of the Church here on the Cathedral Square: he was Bishop of Ravenna in the fourth century and his remains were brought to Erfurt in 836, in order to anchor the Christian faith more firmly in this region. From these saints, though they were dead, came forth the living witness of the Church that ever endures, the witness of faith that makes all times fruitful and shows us the path of life.

Let us ask, then, what do these saints have in common? How can we describe the particular quality of their lives and yet understand that it concerns us and can have an influence on our life too? Firstly, the saints show us that it is possible and good to live in a relationship with God, to live this relationship in a radical way, to put it in first place, not just to squeeze it into some corner of our lives. The saints help us to see that for his part God first reached out to us. We could not attain to him, we could not somehow reach out into the unknown, had he not first loved us, had he not first come towards us. After making himself known to our forefathers through the calling that he addressed to them, he revealed and continues to reveal himself to us in Jesus Christ. Still today Christ comes towards us, he speaks to every individual, just as he did in the Gospel, and invites every one of us to listen to him, to come to understand him and to follow him. This summons and this opportunity the saints acted on, they recognized the living God, they saw him, they listened to him and they went towards him, they travelled with him; they so to speak “caught” his contagious presence, they reached out to him in the ongoing dialogue of prayer, and in return they received from him the light that shows where true life is to be found.

Faith always includes as an essential element the fact that it is shared with others. No one can believe alone. We receive the faith – as Saint Paul tells us – through hearing, and hearing is part of being together, in spirit and in body. Only within this great assembly of believers of all times, who found Christ and were found by him, am I able to believe. In the first place I have God to thank for the fact that I can believe, for God approaches me and so to speak “ignites” my faith. But on a practical level, I have my fellow human beings to thank for my faith, those who believed before me and who believe with me. This great “with”, apart from which there can be no personal faith, is the Church. And this Church does not stop at national borders, as we can see from the nationalities of the saints that I spoke of: Hungary, England, Ireland and Italy. Here we see the importance of spiritual exchange, which encompasses the entire universal Church. Indeed, it was fundamental for the development of the Church in our country, and it remains fundamental for all times: that we believe in union with one another across the continents, and learn to believe from one another. If we open ourselves up to the whole of the faith in all of history and the testimony given to it in the whole Church, then the Catholic faith also has a future as a public force in Germany. At the same time the saints that I mentioned show us the great fruitfulness of a life lived with God, the fruitfulness of this radical love for God and neighbour. Even when they are few in number, saints change the world, and great saints remain as forces for change throughout history.

Thus the political changes that swept through our country in 1989 were motivated not just by the demand for prosperity and freedom of movement, but decisively by the longing for truthfulness.

This longing was kept awake partly through people completely dedicated to serving God and neighbour and ready to sacrifice their lives. They and the saints I mentioned earlier give us courage to make good use of this new situation. We have no wish to withdraw into a purely private faith, but we want to shape this hard-won freedom responsibly. Like Saints Kilian, Boniface, Adelar, Eoban and Elizabeth of Thuringia, we want to engage with our fellow citizens as Christians and invite them to discover with us the fullness of the Good News, its relevance for the present, its strength and vitality, and its beauty. Then we will resemble the famous bell of the Cathedral of Erfurt, which bears the name "*Gloriosa*", the "glorious". It is thought to be the largest free-swinging medieval bell in the world. It is a living sign of our deep rootedness in the Christian tradition, but also a summons to set out upon the mission. It will ring out once more today at this solemn Mass, to mark its conclusion. May it inspire us, after the example of the saints, to ensure that in this world, witness to Christ is both seen and heard, that God's glory is both seen and heard, and that we live accordingly in a world where God is present and where he gives beauty and meaning to life. Amen.

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