



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE SECOND GROUP OF GERMAN BISHOPS
ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Consistory Hall

Saturday, 18 November 2006

Your Eminences,

Dear Confreres in the Episcopate,

I welcome you here at the Pope's house with special joy, dear Confreres from our common German and Bavarian Homeland. Your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* brings you to the tombs of the Apostles, which do not only speak of the past but above all refer us to the Risen Lord, who is always present in his Church and always "goes before" her (cf. Mk 16: 7).

The tombs tell us that the Church is ever bound to witness to her origins but at the same time continues to be alive in the sacrament of Apostolic Succession; and that, through the apostolic ministry, the Lord always speaks to us in the present.

This touches on our apostolic task as Successors of the Apostles; we live within the bond that binds us to the One who is the Alpha and the Omega (cf. Rv 1: 8; 21: 6; 22: 13), the One who is and who was and who is to come (Rv 1: 4).

We proclaim the Lord in the living community of his Body, enlivened by his Spirit - in living communion with the Successor of Peter and the College of Bishops. The *ad limina* visit must strengthen us in this communion; it must help us so that we are increasingly guided to be faithful and wise stewards of the goods entrusted to us by the Lord (cf. Lk 12: 42).

To stay faithful to the Lord, hence, to herself, the Church must be continually renewed. But how should this be done?

To answer this question we must first probe the will of the Lord, Head of the Church, and recognize clearly that all ecclesial reform is born from the serious commitment to acquire a deeper knowledge of the truth of the Catholic faith, and from the ongoing aspiration to moral purification and virtue. This appeal is addressed primarily to every individual, and then to the entire People of God.

The reform process can easily slip into external activism if those who are implementing it do not lead an authentic spiritual life and constantly examine the reasons for their action in the light of the faith. This is true for all the members of the Church: Bishops, priests, deacons, Religious and all the faithful.

In his *Regula Pastoralis*, Pope St Gregory the Great set, as it were, a mirror before the Bishop: "not relaxing in his care for what is inward from being occupied in outward things.... One whose estimation is such that... great necessity is laid upon him to maintain rectitude. He often receives inappropriate external praise but should not relax his care for what is inward" (cf. Book II, 1).

It is a matter of setting aside the individual ego - and this is certainly also the daily duty of every Christian - and of exposing oneself to the loving and challenging gaze of Jesus. The encounter with the living Christ is always the centre of our service and gives our life its decisive orientation.

In him, God focuses his love on us, and through our priestly and episcopal ministry it is passed on to people in the most varied situations, to the healthy as well as to the sick, to the suffering as well as to those who are at fault. God gives us his love that forgives, heals and sanctifies.

He encounters us again and again "in the men and women who reflect his presence, in his Word, in the sacraments and especially in the Eucharist. In the Church's Liturgy, in her prayer, in the living community of believers, we experience the love of God, we perceive his presence, and we thus learn to recognize that presence in our daily lives" (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 17).

Naturally, the Church needs institutional and structural planning. Ecclesial institutions, pastoral planning and other juridical structures are, to a certain extent, simple needs. At times, however, they are presented as the essential, which makes it impossible to discern what is *truly* essential. They correspond to their authentic meaning only if they are assessed and oriented to the criterion of the truth of faith.

In short, it must and will be faith itself in all its greatness, clarity and beauty that defines the rhythm of reform, which is fundamental and which we need.

In all this, of course, it should never be forgotten that those on whose skills and good will depend the implementation of the measures for reform are always human beings. However difficult it may seem in the individual case, in this regard new and clear personal decisions must always be

made.

Dear Brothers in the episcopal ministry, I know that many of you are quite rightly concerned that *pastoral structures develop in keeping with the present situation*.

In the face of the currently dwindling numbers of priests and unfortunately also of the faithful who go to (Sunday) Mass, models are being applied in various German-speaking Dioceses for the modification and restructuring of pastoral care which threaten to blur the image of the parish priest, that is, the priest who, as a man of God and of the Church, guides a parish community.

I am sure, dear Confreres, that you are not leaving these projects to be worked out by aloof planners, but that you entrust them only to priests and collaborators who not only possess the necessary enlightened judgment of faith and an adequate theological, canonical, historical and practical training as well as sufficient pastoral experience, but who also truly have at heart the salvation of humankind.

Thus, as we would have said in the past, they should be marked by "zeal for souls" and have the *integral*, hence, *eternal* salvation of man as the *suprema lex* of their thought and action.

Above all, you will give your approval only to those structural reforms that are in full harmony with the Church's teaching on the priesthood and with her juridical norms, taking care that the application of the reforms in no way lessens the magnetism of the priestly ministry.

If people sometimes hold that the laity are unable to become sufficiently integrated into Church structures, it is because their opinions are based on a restrictive fixation on collaboration in directive bodies, on important positions in Church-funded structures or on the exercise of specific liturgical roles.

Of course, these areas also have their importance, but must not lead to forgetfulness of *the broad and open field of the urgently necessary apostolate of lay people* and its multiple tasks: the proclamation of the Good News to millions of their fellow citizens who do not know Christ and his Church; catechesis for children and adults in our parish communities; charitable services; work in the social communications media, as well as the social commitment to the integral protection of human life, to social justice and to the area of Christian cultural initiatives.

Indeed, there is no lack of tasks for committed lay Catholics, but perhaps today, it is the missionary spirit, creativity and courage to set out on new routes that are sometimes lacking.

In my Address to the first group of German Bishops I mentioned briefly the many liturgical roles that lay people can carry out in the Church today: the role of extraordinary minister of the Eucharist, and in addition, the roles of lector and of guidance of the liturgy of the Word. I do not wish to return to this subject here.

It is important that these duties are not exercised or claimed as a right but rather are carried out in a *spirit of service*. The Liturgy calls us all to God's service, for God and for humankind. In this service we do not wish to be prominent but to stand humbly before God and let his light shine through us.

In this Discourse, I would like briefly to address an additional four points that truly matter to me. The first point is *the proclamation of the faith to the youth of our time*.

Young people today live in a secularized culture, totally oriented to material things. In daily life - in the means of communication, at work, in leisure time - they experience at most a culture in which God is absent. Yet, they are waiting for God.

The World Youth Days have shown us what expectation and readiness for God and the Gospel exist in the young people of our time.

Our response to this expectation must take many forms. The World Youth Days presuppose that youth in their own surroundings, especially the parish, can encounter faith.

Here, for example, the task of altar servers is important; it brings children and young people into contact with the altar, with the Word of God and the intimate life of the Church. It was beautiful, during the altar-servers pilgrimage, to see so many young people from Germany joyfully gathered in faith. Persevere in this task and make sure that altar servers can truly find God, his Word, the Sacrament of his Presence in the Church and can learn from this to shape their own lives.

Another important way is also work with choirs, where young people can acquire an education in beauty and an education in communion and can experience the joy of participating in Mass and thus receive a formation in the faith.

After the Council, the Holy Spirit endowed us with the "movements". They sometimes appear to be rather strange to the parish priest or Bishop but are places of faith where young people and adults try out a model of life in faith as an opportunity for life today.

I therefore ask you to approach movements very lovingly. Here and there, they must be corrected or integrated into the overall context of the parish or Diocese. Yet, we must respect the specific character of their charism and rejoice in the birth of communitarian forms of faith in which the Word of God becomes life.

The second subject I would like to touch on at least briefly are *ecclesial charitable institutions*. In my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, I spoke of the service of charity as a fundamental and indispensable expression of faith in the Church's life. I also mentioned the interior principle of charitable acts. "'The love of Christ urges us on,' (II Cor 5: 14)" (n. 35).

The "duty" of charity itself (cf. I Cor 9: 16) which spurred St Paul to go out into the whole world to proclaim the Gospel, this "duty" of the love of Christ itself has inspired German Catholics to set up charitable institutions to help people who live in poverty to claim their right to share in the goods of the earth.

It is now important to see that, in their programmes and actions, such charitable works truly correspond to the inner impulse of love sustained by faith. It is important to make sure that they do not fall into political dependence but solely serve their task of justice and love.

For this reason, close collaboration with the Bishops and the Episcopal Conferences is in turn essential, because they are truly familiar with the local situation and can ensure that the gift of the faithful is kept safe from the confusion of political and other interests and used for the good of people.

The Pontifical Council "Cor Unum" has much experience in this field and will gladly offer its help and advice in all these matters.

I also have the topic of *marriage* and *the family* particularly at heart.

Today, the order of marriage as established in creation and of which the Bible tells us expressly in the narrative of creation (cf. Gn 2: 24) is gradually being obscured.

To the extent that man seeks in new ways to build for himself the world as a whole, thereby ever more perceptibly endangering its foundations, he also loses his vision of the order of creation with regard to his own life. He considers he can define himself as he pleases by virtue of an inane freedom.

Thus, the foundations that support his life and the life of society are undermined. It becomes difficult for young people to commit themselves definitively. They are afraid of finality, which seems to them impracticable and contrary to freedom.

In this way it becomes more and more difficult to welcome children and to give them that lasting space for the growth and development that only the family founded on marriage can provide.

In this situation just mentioned, it is very important to help young people say to themselves the definitive "yes" that is not in opposition to freedom but constitutes its greatest opportunity.

Love reaches its true maturity in the patience required by being together for the whole of life. It is in this environment of lifelong love that children too must learn to live and love.

Therefore, I would like to ask you to do all you can to see that marriage and the family are formed,

promoted and encouraged.

Lastly, here are a few brief words on *ecumenism*.

All the praiseworthy *initiatives on the journey to the full unity of all Christians* find common prayer and reflection on the Holy Scriptures fertile soil in which to grow and develop communion.

In Germany, our efforts must be directed above all to Christians of the Lutheran and Reformed faith. At the same time, let us not lose sight of our brothers and sisters of the Orthodox Churches, although they are proportionally fewer.

From all Christians the world is entitled to expect a unanimous profession of faith in Jesus Christ, Redeemer of humanity. The ecumenical commitment, therefore, cannot stop at joint documents. It becomes visible and effective wherever Christians of various Churches and Ecclesial Communities, in a social context that is ever more foreign to religion, profess the values passed on by the Christian faith convincingly and together, and forcefully emphasize them in their political and social action.

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate, Since I myself come from your Land which is so dear to me, I feel particularly involved in the achievements of the Church in Germany as well as by the challenges she must face.

I know all that is good in the Church in our Country, not only by observation and personal experience but also because Bishops, priests and other visitors from Europe and from many other parts of the world speak to me time and again of the good they receive through ecclesial structures and people.

The Church in Germany truly has a wealth of spiritual and religious resources. The faithful service of so many priests, deacons, Religious and professional ecclesial collaborators in pastoral situations that are not always easy, all too often too little appreciated, deserves respect and recognition.

I am also deeply grateful because an ever greater number of Christians are willing to be involved in parish communities and Dioceses, in associations and movements, and also as Catholic believers to take on responsibility in the heart of society. In this context, I share with you the firm hope that the Church in Germany will become more and more mission oriented and will find ways to pass on the faith to future generations.

I am well acquainted, dear Confreres in the Episcopate, with your generous commitment and with that of all the priests, deacons, Religious and lay people in your Dioceses. Thus, I desire to witness once again today to my affection and to encourage you to carry out your service as united and confident Pastors.

I am sure that the Lord will accompany and reward your faithfulness and zeal with his Blessing.

May Mary, Virgin Most Holy and Mother of God, Mother of the Church and Help of Christians, implore for you, the clergy and the faithful of our Country, the strength, joy and perseverance to face the necessary commitment for an authentic renewal of the life of faith with courage and with firm trust in the help of the Holy Spirit.

Through her maternal intercession and through that of all the saints venerated in our Country, I warmly impart the Apostolic Blessing to you and to all the faithful in Germany.

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