



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE BISHOPS OF THE WESTERN CATHOLIC CONFERENCE
OF CANADA ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT**

Monday, 9 October 2006

Dear Brother Bishops,

"We should celebrate and rejoice ... he has come to life; he was lost and is found" (*Lk 15:32*). With fraternal affection I warmly welcome you, the Bishops of the Western Catholic Conference of Canada, and I thank Bishop Wiesner for the good wishes offered on your behalf. I warmly reciprocate them and assure you, and those entrusted to your pastoral care, of my prayers and solicitude. Your meeting with the Successor of Peter concludes the visits *ad limina Apostolorum* of the Canadian Bishops' Conference. Notwithstanding the increasingly secular climate within which you serve, your reports contain much from which you can draw encouragement. In particular, I have been heartened to note the zeal and generosity of your priests, the selfless dedication of the Religious present in your Dioceses and the increasing readiness among the laity to embolden their witness to Christ's truth and love in their homes, schools, places of work and in the public sphere.

The Parable of the Prodigal Son is one of the best-loved passages of Sacred Scripture. Its profound description of God's mercy and the important human desire for conversion and reconciliation, as well as the mending of a broken relationship, speak to men and women of every epoch. Man is frequently tempted to exercise his freedom by distancing himself from God. The experience of the Prodigal Son enables us to note, both in history and in our own lives, that when freedom is sought outside God the result is negative: a loss of personal dignity, moral confusion and social disintegration. The Father's passionate love for humanity, however, triumphs over human pride. Freely given, it is a love that forgives and leads people to enter ever more deeply into the communion of the Church of Christ. He truly offers to all peoples unity in God, and, just as this is perfectly demonstrated by Christ on the Cross, reconciles justice and love (cf. *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 10).

And what of the elder brother? Is he not, in a certain sense, all men and women as well; perhaps particularly those who sadly distance themselves from the Church? His rationalization of his attitude and actions evokes a certain sympathy, yet in the final analysis illustrates his inability to understand unconditional love. Unable to think beyond the limits of natural justice, he remains trapped within envy and pride, detached from God, isolated from others and ill at ease with himself.

Dear Brothers, as you reflect upon the three characters in this parable - the Father in his abundant mercy, the younger son in his joy at being forgiven, and the elder brother in his tragic isolation - be confirmed in your desire to address the loss of a sense of sin, to which you have referred in your reports. This pastoral priority reflects an eager hope that the faithful will experience God's boundless love as a call to deepen their ecclesial unity and overcome the division and fragmentation that so often wound today's families and communities. From this perspective, the Bishop's responsibility to indicate the destructive presence of sin is readily understood as a service of hope: it strengthens believers to avoid evil and to embrace the perfection of love and the plenitude of Christian life. I wish therefore to commend your promotion of the Sacrament of Penance. While this Sacrament is often considered with indifference, what it effects is precisely the fullness of healing for which we long. A new-found appreciation of this Sacrament will confirm that time spent in the confessional draws good from evil, restores life from death, and reveals anew the merciful face of the Father.

Understanding the gift of reconciliation calls for a careful reflection on the ways to evoke conversion and penance in man's heart (cf. *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*, 23). While manifestations of sin abound – greed and corruption, betrayed relationships and exploitation of persons – the recognition of individual sinfulness has waned. Behind this weakening of the recognition of sin, with its commensurate attenuation of the need to seek forgiveness, is ultimately a weakening of our relationship with God (cf. *Address at Ecumenical Vespers*, Regensburg, 12 September 2006).

Not surprisingly this phenomenon is particularly pronounced in societies marked by secularist post-Enlightenment ideology. Where God is excluded from the public forum the sense of offence against God - the true sense of sin - dissipates, just as when the absolute value of moral norms is relativized the categories of good or evil vanish, along with individual responsibility. Yet, the human need to acknowledge and confront sin in fact never goes away, no matter how much an individual may, like the elder brother, rationalize to the contrary. As Saint John tells us: "If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves" (1 Jn 1:8). It is an integral part of the truth about the human person. When the need to seek forgiveness and the readiness to forgive are forgotten, in their place a disturbing culture of blame and litigiousness arises. This ugly phenomenon, however, can be dispelled. Following the light of Christ's healing truth is to say with the father: "My son, you are with me always and all I have is yours" and we must be glad "because your brother ... who was lost ... is found" (Lk 15:31-32).

The lasting peace and harmony so longed for by individuals, families and society underpin your concerns to deepen reconciliation and understanding with the many First Nations communities found in your region. Much has been achieved. In this regard, I have been heartened to learn from you about the work of the Catholic Aboriginal Council for Reconciliation and the aims of the Amerindian Fund. Such initiatives bring hope and bear witness to the love of Christ which draws us forward (cf. *2 Cor 5:14*). Yet there is still much to be accomplished. I therefore encourage you to address with compassion and determination the underlying causes of the difficulties surrounding the social and spiritual needs of the Aboriginal faithful. Commitment to truth opens the way to lasting reconciliation through the healing process of asking for forgiveness and granting forgiveness - two indispensable elements for peace. In this way our memory is purified, our hearts are made serene, and our future is filled with a well-founded hope in the peace which springs from truth.

With fraternal affection I share these reflections with you and assure you of my prayers as you seek to make the sanctifying and reconciling mission of the Church ever more appreciated and recognizable in your ecclesial and civic communities. With these sentiments I commend you to Mary, the Mother of Jesus, and to the intercession of Blessed Kateri Tekakwitha. To you and to the priests, deacons, Religious, and lay faithful of your Dioceses I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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