



The Holy See

***ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CURIA
AND PAPAL REPRESENTATIVES
FOR THE TRADITIONAL EXCHANGE OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS***

Clementine Hall

Monday, 21 December 2009

(Video)

Your Eminences,

Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The Solemnity of Christmas, as the Cardinal Dean Angelo Sodano has just emphasized, is a very special occasion of encounter and communion. The Child whom we adore in Bethlehem invites us to feel the immense love of God, that God who came down from heaven and drew close to each one of us, to make us his children, a part of his own family. This traditional Christmas meeting of the Successor of Peter with his closest collaborators is likewise a family meeting, one which strengthens our bonds of affection and communion so that we may be, increasingly, that "enduring Upper Room", dedicated to spreading the Kingdom of God, as has just been recalled. I thank the Cardinal Dean for his cordial words expressing the good wishes of the [College of Cardinals](#), the Members of the [Roman Curia](#) and the Governorate, as well as of all the Papal Representatives who are deeply united with us in bringing to the men and women of our time the light born in the manger of Bethlehem. As I receive you with great joy, I also wish to express to each of you my gratitude for your generous and capable service to the Vicar of Christ and to the Church.

Another year full of important events for the Church and for the world is drawing to a close. As I look back upon this year with great gratitude, I would like at this moment to mention just a few key points for the life of the Church. From the [Pauline Year](#) we have moved on to the [Year for Priests](#).

From the impressive figure of the Apostle to the Gentiles who, struck by the light of the Risen Christ and by his call, took the Gospel to the peoples of the world, we have passed to the humble Curé of Ars, who spent his whole life in the little village that had been entrusted to him and yet, precisely in the humility of his service, made God's reconciling goodness visible throughout the world. Starting with these two figures we can see the great breadth of the priestly ministry, the grandeur of small things, and how, through the seemingly insignificant service of one individual, God can achieve great things, purifying and renewing the world from within.

For the Church, and for me personally, the year now ending was to a great extent marked by Africa. First of all, there was my [Journey to Cameroon and Angola](#). It was moving for me to experience the great cordiality with which the Successor of Peter, the *Vicarius Christi*, was welcomed. The festive joy and warm affection I met with along all the roads was not directed to a mere chance guest. In the encounter with the Pope the universal Church could be experienced, the community that embraces the world and is brought together by God through Christ the community that is not founded on human interests but rather is offered to us by God's loving concern for us. All together we form the family of God, brothers and sisters by virtue of our one Father: this was our lived experience. And we were able to feel that God's loving concern for us in Christ is neither something of the past nor the fruit of learned theories, but rather but a completely concrete reality, here and now. God himself is in our midst: we perceived this through the ministry of the Successor of Peter. Thus we were raised above our simple everyday routine. Heaven opened up, and this is what makes a day become a holiday. And it is at the same time something that is enduring. It continues to be true, even in daily life, that heaven is no longer closed; that God is near; that in Christ we all belong to one another.

The memory of the liturgical celebrations made a particularly deep impression on me. The celebrations of the Holy Eucharist were truly feasts of faith. I would like to mention two elements that strike me as particularly important. First of all there was a great shared joy which was also expressed bodily, but in a disciplined manner, directed to the presence of the living God. With this, the second element already became apparent: the sense of sacredness, of the mystery of the living God's presence, fashioned, as it were, each individual action. The Lord is present the Creator, the One to whom all things belong, from whom we come and towards whom we make our pilgrim way. I spontaneously thought of Saint Cyprian's words; in his commentary on the "Our Father" he wrote: "Let us remember we are in God's sight. We must be pleasing in God's eyes, both in the attitude of our bodies and in the use of our voices" (*De Dom. Or.*, 4 : CSEL III, 1, p. 269). Yes, we had this awareness that we were standing before God. The result was neither fear nor inhibition, nor external obedience to rubrics nor much less the need of some to show off to others or to shout out in an undisciplined manner. Rather, there was what the Fathers called "*sobria ebrietas*": a sense of joyfulness that in any case remains sober and orderly, uniting people from within, leading them to a communal praise of God, a praise which at the same time inspires love of neighbour and mutual responsibility.

Naturally, an important part of [my Journey in Africa](#) was the meeting with my Brother Bishops and the inauguration of the [Synod for Africa](#), with the presentation of the *Instrumentum Laboris*. That meeting took place in the context of an evening conversation on the feast of Saint Joseph, a conversation in which the representatives of the individual episcopates touchingly expressed their hopes and concerns. I think that Saint Joseph, the good master of his house, who personally knows what it means to consider, attentively and hopefully, the future paths of the family, lovingly heard us and ushered us into the Synod itself. Let us cast just a brief glance at the [Synod](#). What became clear above all during [my visit to Africa](#) was the theological and pastoral import of the papal primacy as a point of convergence for the unity of God's Family. There, in the Synod, we saw emerge even more clearly the importance of collegiality of the unity of the Bishops who receive their ministry precisely because they enter into the community of the successors of the Apostles: each one is a Bishop, a successor of the Apostles, only to the extent that he participates in the community of those in whom the *Collegium Apostolorum* perseveres in unity with Peter and with his Successor. Just as in the liturgies in Africa, and then again in Saint Peter's in Rome, the liturgical renewal of the [Second Vatican Council](#) took shape in an exemplary way, so in the communion of the [Synod](#) the conciliar ecclesiology was lived out in a very practical way. We were also able to hear very moving accounts by members of the faithful from Africa accounts of concrete suffering and reconciliation in the tragedies of the Continent's recent history.

The [Synod](#) had as its theme: The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. This is a theological and, especially, a pastoral theme of great timeliness, but it could have been misunderstood as being a political theme. The task of the Bishops was to transform theology into pastoral care, namely into a very concrete pastoral ministry in which the great perspectives found in sacred Scripture and Tradition find application in the activity of Bishops and priests in specific times and places. Here, however, it was necessary not to succumb to the temptation to enter personally into politics and, from being Pastors, to become political leaders. In fact, the very practical question that Pastors constantly have to face is precisely this: how can we be realistic and practical without claiming a political competence that does not belong to us? We might also say: it was the problem of a positive "laicity", practised and interpreted correctly. This is also a fundamental theme of the Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, published on the feast of Saints Peter and Paul, which thus took up and further developed the question of the theological and practical role of the Church's social doctrine.

Did the Synod Fathers succeed in finding the rather narrow path between mere theological theory and immediate political action, the path of the "shepherd"? In my [brief address at the end of the Synod](#) I answered this question in the affirmative, in a conscious and explicit way. Of course, in drafting the Post-Synodal Document we will need to pay attention to maintaining this balance and thereby make that contribution to the Church and society in Africa which has been entrusted to the Church by virtue of her mission. I would like to try to explain this briefly with regard to a single point. As has been said, the theme of the Synod designated three great words which are basic to theological and social responsibility: reconciliation justice peace. One might say that reconciliation

and justice are the two essential premises of peace and that, therefore, to a certain extent, they also define its nature. Let us limit ourselves to the word "reconciliation". A mere glance at the sufferings and sorrows of recent history in Africa, but also in many other parts of the world, shows that unresolved and deeply rooted disputes can in some situations cause outbreaks of violence in which every trace of humanity seems to disappear. Peace can only be achieved as the result of inner reconciliation. We may consider the history of Europe following the Second World War as a positive example of a process of reconciliation that is succeeding. The fact that since 1945 there have been no more wars in Western and Central Europe has without a doubt been due primarily to wise and ethically oriented political and economic structures, but these were only able to develop because of the prior existence of inner processes of reconciliation which made possible a new coexistence. Every society needs acts of reconciliation in order to enjoy peace. These acts are a prerequisite of a good political order, but they cannot be achieved by politics alone. They are pre-political processes and they must spring from other sources.

The Synod sought to examine in depth the concept of reconciliation as a task for the Church in our day, and called attention to its various dimensions. Today Saint Paul's appeal to the Corinthians has again proved most timely. "We are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God" (2 Cor 5: 20). If man is not reconciled with God, he is also in conflict with creation. He is not reconciled with himself, he would like to be something other than what he is and consequently he is not reconciled with his neighbour either. Part of reconciliation is also the ability to acknowledge guilt and to ask forgiveness from God and from others. Lastly, part of the process of reconciliation is also the readiness to do penance, the willingness to suffer deeply for one's sin and to allow oneself to be transformed. Part of this is the gratuitousness of which the Encyclical Caritas in Veritate speaks repeatedly: the readiness to do more than what is necessary, not to tally costs, but to go beyond merely legal requirements. Part of this is the generosity which God himself has shown us. We think of Jesus' words: "If you are offering your gift at the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift" (Mt 5: 23ff.). God, knowing that we were unreconciled and seeing that we have something against him, rose up and came to meet us, even though he alone was in the right. He came to meet us even to the Cross, in order to reconcile us. This is what it means to give freely: a willingness to take the first step; to be the first to reach out to the other, to offer reconciliation, to accept the suffering entailed in giving up being in the right. To persevere in the desire for reconciliation: God gave us an example, and this is the way for us to become like him; it is an attitude constantly needed in our world. Today we must learn once more how to acknowledge guilt, we must shake off the illusion of being innocent. We must learn how to do penance, to let ourselves be transformed; to reach out to the other and to let God give us the courage and strength for this renewal. Today, in this world of ours, we need to rediscover the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation. The fact that it has largely disappeared from the daily life and habits of Christians is a symptom of a loss of truthfulness with regard both to ourselves and to God; a loss that endangers our humanity and diminishes our capacity for peace. Saint

Bonaventure was of the opinion that the Sacrament of Penance was a sacrament of humanity as such, a sacrament that God had instituted in its essence immediately after original sin through the penance he imposed on Adam, even though it could only take on its full shape in Christ, who is the reconciling power of God in person and who took our penance upon himself. In fact, the unity of sin, repentance and forgiveness is one of the fundamental conditions for being truly human: these conditions find complete expression in the sacrament, yet in their deepest roots they are part of the experience of being human persons as such. Thus the Synod of Bishops for Africa was right to reflect also on the rites of reconciliation found in the African tradition, as places of learning and preparation for the great reconciliation which God gives in the Sacrament of Penance. This reconciliation, however, demands the broad "forecourt" of the acknowledgement of sin and humble repentance. Reconciliation is a pre-political concept and a pre-political reality, and for this very reason it is of the greatest importance for the task of politics itself. Unless the power of reconciliation is created in people's hearts, political commitment to peace lacks its inner premise. At the Synod, the Pastors of the Church strove for that inner purification of man which is the essential prior condition for building justice and peace. But this purification and inner development towards true humanity cannot exist without God.

Reconciliation this key word brings to mind the second important journey of the year: [my pilgrimage to Jordan and the Holy Land](#). In this regard I would like first of all to thank warmly the King of Jordan for the great hospitality with which he welcomed me and accompanied me throughout my pilgrimage. My gratitude more especially concerns the exemplary way in which he has worked for peaceful coexistence between Christians and Muslims, respect for the religion of others, and for cooperation in our common responsibility before God. I also heartily thank the Government of Israel for all it did to enable my visit to take place peacefully and safely. I am particularly grateful for the possibility granted me to celebrate two great public liturgies in [Jerusalem](#) and [Nazareth](#) in which Christians were able to appear publicly as communities of faith in the Holy Land. Lastly, my thanks go also to the Palestinian Authority which likewise welcomed me with great cordiality; it too gave me the possibility of presiding at a public [liturgical celebration in Bethlehem](#) and of coming to know the sufferings as well as the hopes of the Territory. Everything that can be seen in those countries cries out for reconciliation, justice and peace. My [visit to Yad Vashem](#) represented an overwhelming encounter with the cruelty of human sin, with the hatred of a blind ideology which, with no justification, consigned millions of human beings to death and thereby, in the end, even wished to eliminate God from the world, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and the God of Jesus Christ. Thus, Yad Vashem is, in the first place, a memorial against hatred, a heartfelt appeal for purification and forgiveness, for love. This very monument to human sin made all the more important my visit to the places commemorating the faith, and allowed us to perceive their continuing relevance. In Jordan we saw the lowest point of the land along the River Jordan. How could one not be reminded of the words of the Letter to the Ephesians, which tell us that Christ "descended into the lower parts of the earth" (Eph 4: 9). In Christ God descended to the lowest depths of the human being, even into the night of hatred and blindness, the darkness of man's distance from God, in order to kindle there the flame of his love.

He is present in even the darkest night: "if I go down to the nether world, behind, you are there": this phrase of Psalm 139[138]: 8 became a reality in Jesus' descent. Thus the encounter with the places of salvation in the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth, in the Grotto of the Nativity in Bethlehem, at the site of the Crucifixion on Calvary, and before the empty tomb, witness to the Resurrection, was in some sense to touch the history of God with us. Faith is not a myth. It is real history whose traces are tangible for us. This realism of faith does us good, especially amid the turmoil of the present time. God truly revealed himself. In Jesus Christ he truly became flesh. As the Risen One, Jesus remains true man, he ceaselessly opens our humanity to God and always proves that God is a God who is near. Yes, God is alive and relates to us. In all his grandeur he is still the God who is near, "God-with-us", who continually calls out to us: let yourselves be reconciled, with me and with one another! He always sets before our personal and community life the task of reconciliation.

Finally, I would like once again to express my joy and gratitude for my [Visit to the Czech Republic](#). Prior to this Journey I had always been told that it was a country with a majority of agnostics and atheists, in which Christians are now only a minority. All the more joyful was my surprise at seeing myself surrounded everywhere by great cordiality and friendliness, that the important liturgies were celebrated in a joyful atmosphere of faith; that in the setting of the University and the world of culture my words were attentively listened to; and that the state authorities treated me with great courtesy and did their utmost to contribute to the success of the visit. I could now be tempted to say something about the beauty of the country and the magnificent testimonies of Christian culture which only make this beauty perfect. But I consider most important the fact that we, as believers, must have at heart even those people who consider themselves agnostics or atheists. When we speak of a new evangelization these people are perhaps taken aback. They do not want to see themselves as an object of mission or to give up their freedom of thought and will. Yet the question of God remains present even for them, even if they cannot believe in the concrete nature of his concern for us. In [Paris, I spoke of the quest for God](#) as the fundamental reason why Western monasticism, and with it, Western culture, came into being. As the first step of evangelization we must seek to keep this quest alive; we must be concerned that human beings do not set aside the question of God, but rather see it as an essential question for their lives. We must make sure that they are open to this question and to the yearning concealed within it. Here I think naturally of the words which Jesus quoted from the Prophet Isaiah, namely that the Temple must be a house of prayer for all the nations (cf. Is 56: 7; Mk 11: 17). Jesus was thinking of the so-called "Court of the Gentiles" which he cleared of extraneous affairs so that it could be a free space for the Gentiles who wished to pray there to the one God, even if they could not take part in the mystery for whose service the inner part of the Temple was reserved. A place of prayer for all the peoples by this he was thinking of people who know God, so to speak, only from afar; who are dissatisfied with their own gods, rites and myths; who desire the Pure and the Great, even if God remains for them the "unknown God" (cf. Acts 17: 23). They had to pray to the unknown God, yet in this way they were somehow in touch with the true God, albeit amid all kinds of obscurity. I think that today too the Church should open a sort of "Court of the Gentiles" in which people might in some way latch on

to God, without knowing him and before gaining access to his mystery, at whose service the inner life of the Church stands. Today, in addition to interreligious dialogue, there should be a dialogue with those to whom religion is something foreign, to whom God is unknown and who nevertheless do not want to be left merely Godless, but rather to draw near to him, albeit as the Unknown.

Finally, once again, a word about the [Year for Priests](#). As priests we are available to all: to those who know God at first hand and to those for whom he is the Unknown. We all need to become acquainted with him ever anew, and we need to seek him constantly in order to become true friends of God. How, in the end, can we get to know God other than through those people who are friends of God? The inmost core of our priestly ministry consists of our being Christ's friends (cf. Jn 15: 15), friends of God through whom others may also discover God's closeness. And so, together with my profound gratitude for all the assistance which you have given to me throughout the past year, these are my good wishes for Christmas: may we become ever closer friends of Christ and thus friends of God, and so become the salt of the earth and the light of the world. I wish all of you a Holy Christmas and a Happy New Year!

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