



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO AREZZO, LA VERNA AND SANSEPOLCRO

(MAY 13, 2012)

VISIT TO THE SHRINE OF LA VERNA

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS POPE BENEDICT XVI

Sunday, 13 May 2012

[Video]

The stop planned in La Verna, where the Pope was to go on Sunday afternoon, was cancelled due to inclement weather. The following is a translation of the Address which the Holy Father intended to give.

Dear Friars Minor,

Dear Daughters of Saint Mother Clare,

Dear Brothers and Sisters: the Lord give you peace!

Contemplating the Cross of Christ! We climbed as pilgrims up to the Sasso Spicco of La Verna where “two years before his death” (Celano, *Vita Prima*, III, 94: ff, 484) St Francis, received the wounds of the glorious Passion of Christ in his body. His journey as a disciple led him to a union so profound with the Lord that he shared with him even the exterior signs of his supreme act of love on the Cross. A journey which began at San Damiano before the Crucifix, contemplated with mind and heart. The continuous meditation on the Cross, in this holy place, has been a means of sanctification for many Christians, who, throughout eight centuries, have knelt and prayed here in silence and in recollection.

The glorious Cross of Christ takes on the suffering of the world, but it is above all a tangible sign of love, the measure of God’s goodness to mankind. In this place we, too, are called to recover the

supernatural dimension of our lives, to raise our eyes from what is contingent, to entrust ourselves totally to the Lord, with a free heart and in perfect joy, contemplating the Crucifix so that it may wound us with his love.

“Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord, all praise is Yours, all glory, honour and blessings (*Canticle of the Creatures*: ff, 263, written in the vernacular). Only by letting ourselves be illuminated by the love of God, can man and nature as a whole be redeemed, our beauty can finally reflect the splendour of Christ’s face, as the moon reflects the sun. Springing from the glorious Cross, the Blood of the Crucifix returns to give life to the dry bones of Adam who is in us, so that each one may find the joy to walk toward holiness, to climb upward, toward God. Through this blessed place, I join in the prayer of all Franciscans on earth: “We adore you O Christ and we bless you here and in all churches throughout the world, because by your holy Cross you have redeemed the world”.

Captured by the love of Christ! One does not climb La Verna without being led by the prayer of St Francis of the *Absorbeat*, which recites: “May the power of your love, O Lord, ardent and sweet power, so absorb our hearts as to withdraw them from all that is under heaven. Grant that we may be ready to die for love of your love, as you died for love of my love” (*Prayer of the “Absorbeat”*, 1: ff, 277). Contemplation of the Crucifix is a labour of the mind, but it cannot rise freely without the support, without the power of love. In this very place, Friar Bonaventure of Bagnoregio, the distinguished son of St Francis, composed his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum* showing us the way to move forward towards the heights where one encounters God. This great Doctor of the Church communicated to us his own experience, inviting us to prayer. First, the mind must be given to the Passion of the Lord, for it is the sacrifice of the Cross that wipes away our sins, a fault that can only be filled by the love of God: “I urge the reader”, he writes, “above all to beseech in prayer for Christ crucified, by Whose blood we are purged of our sins” (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prol. 4). But, in order to be effective, our prayer needs tears, that is an interior movement of our love which responds to the love of God. And it is then necessary to have that *admiratio*, which St Bonaventure sees in the humble ones of the Gospel, those capable of wonder before the salvific work of Christ. And humility is precisely the door to every virtue. It is actually not possible to reach God with the intellectual pride of a closed search within oneself, but only with humility, according to the famous expression of St Bonaventure: Man “must not believe that it suffices to read without unction, speculate without devotion, investigate without wonder, examine without exultation, work without piety, know without love, understand without humility, be zealous without divine grace, see him without wisdom divinely inspired” (*ibid.*).

Contemplation of the Crucifix is extraordinarily effective because it makes us pass from the order of things thought, to lived experience; from salvation hoped for to the promised land. St Bonaventure says: “whoever looks at [the Crucifix] with attention... makes the Passover, that is the transit, together with Him” (*ibid.*, VII, 2). This is the heart of the experience of La Verna, of the experience that the *Poverello* of Assisi made here. On this Holy Mountain, St Francis lived within

himself the profound unity *sequela, imitatio* and *conformatio Christi*. And this is how he says to us that it is not enough to call oneself Christian to be Christian, nor even to seek to do good deeds. It is necessary to conform oneself to Jesus with a slow, gradual transformation of one's being into the image of the Lord, so that by Divine Grace, every member of His Body, which is the Church, may show the necessary likeness with the Head, Christ the Lord. And on this journey — as the Medieval masters in line with the great Augustine teach us — one moves from knowledge of oneself, from the humility of looking with sincerity deep inside oneself.

Carry the love of Christ! Many pilgrims have climbed and still climb this Holy Mountain to contemplate the Love of God Crucified and to let themselves be seized by him. Ever so many pilgrims have climbed in search of God, which is the true reason for which the Church exists: to build a bridge between God and mankind. Here they meet you too, sons and daughters of St Francis. Always remember that the consecrated life has the specific duty to witness, by word and by the example of a life according to the evangelical counsels, the fascinating love story between God and humanity, which runs through history.

That Medieval Franciscan left an indelible mark on your Church of Arezzo. The repeated visits of the *Poverello* of Assisi and the time he spent in your territory are a precious treasure. The events of La Verna are unique and fundamental for the singularity of the stigmata imprinted on the body of the Seraphic Friar Francis, but also for the collective history of his Friars and of your people, who rediscover still, at the Sasso Spicco, the centrality of Christ in the life of the believer. Montauto di Anghiari, Le Celle of Cortona, the Hermitage of Montecasale, and that of Cerbaiolo, and the other minor sites on Franciscan Tuscany continue to mark the identity of the Community of Arezzo, of Cortona and of Biturgense.

Many outstanding figures have shone in these lands, like St Margaret of Cortona, a little-known Franciscan penitent, who was capable of reliving in herself the extraordinary vivacity of the charism of the *Poverello* of Assisi, combing the contemplation of the Crucifix with charity for the least. The love of God and neighbour continues to animate the valuable work of the Franciscans in your ecclesial community. The profession of the evangelical counsels is a sure way to live the love of Christ. In this blessed place, I ask the Lord to continue to send out workers into his vineyard, and especially to young people I address this urgent appeal, that whoever hears God's call may respond with generosity and may have the courage to give him/herself to the consecrated life and the ministerial priesthood.

I have become a pilgrim to La Verna, as the Successor of Peter, and I would like every one of us to listen to Jesus' question to Peter again: "Simon, son of John, do you love me more than these?... Feed my lambs" (Jn 21:15). It is love for Christ which is at the base of the Pastor's life, as it is for the consecrated: a love which does not fear commitment or work. Carry this love to the people of our time, so often closed in their own individualism; be a sign of God's immense mercy. Priestly piety teaches priests to live what they celebrate, sharing our own life with those we meet:

sharing their sorrow, caring for their problems, accompanying them on their journey of faith.

Thank you, Minister General José Carballo, for your words, and I thank the entire Franciscan family and all of you. Persevere, like your holy forefather, in the imitation of Christ, so that you may encounter St Francis and by encountering St Francis, may you encounter the Lord.