



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO CASSINO AND MONTE CASSINO CELEBRATION OF SECOND VESPERS OF THE
ASCENSION
WITH THE BENEDICTINE ABBOTS
AND COMMUNITIES OF MONKS AND NUNS *HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI*

Benedictine Archabbey of Monte Cassino

Sunday, 24 May 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters of the great Benedictine Family,

At the end of my Visit today I am particularly glad to pause in this sacred place, in this Abbey, four times destroyed and rebuilt for the last time after the bombing of the Second World War 65 years ago. "*Succisa virescit*": the words of the new coat of arms clearly convey its history. Monte Cassino, like the age-old oak planted by St Benedict, "stripped of its leaves" by the violence of the war, sprang up even more vigorously than before. More than once I have been able to enjoy the hospitality of the monks and have spent unforgettable moments of stillness and prayer in this Abbey. This evening we entered singing the *Laudes regiae* in order to celebrate Vespers together on the Solemnity of the Ascension of Jesus. I express to each one of you the joy of sharing this moment of prayer, as I greet you all with affection, grateful to you for your welcome and to all who have accompanied me on this Apostolic Pilgrimage. I greet in particular Dom Pietro Vittorelli, the Abbot, who has expressed your common sentiments. I extend my greeting to the Abbots, the Abbesses and the Benedictine communities who are present here.

The liturgy today invites us to contemplate the mystery of the Lord's Ascension. In the short Reading from the First Letter of Peter, we were urged to fix our gaze on our Redeemer who died "for sins once for all", that he might bring us back to God; he "has gone into Heaven" and is at the right hand of God "with angels, authorities, and powers subject to him" (cf. 1 Pt 3: 18, 22). "Carried up into Heaven" and made invisible to the eyes of his disciples, Jesus nevertheless did not abandon them. Indeed, "put to death in the flesh but made alive in the spirit (1 Pt 3: 18), he is now present in a new way, within believers, and in him salvation is offered to every human being

independently of his race, language or culture. The First Letter of Peter contains precise references to fundamental Christological events of the Christian faith. The Apostle is concerned to shed light on the universal significance of salvation in Christ. We find a similar incentive in St Paul, the 2,000th anniversary of whose birth we are celebrating and who wrote to the community at Corinth: "He (Christ) died for all, that those who live might live no longer for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5: 15).

To live no longer for ourselves but for Christ: this is what gives full meaning to the life of those who let themselves be conquered by him. This is clearly demonstrated by the human and spiritual life of St Benedict who, having abandoned all things, set out to follow Jesus Christ faithfully. Embodying the Gospel in his life, he became the pioneer of a vast movement of spiritual and cultural rebirth in the West. I would like here to mention an extraordinary event in his life related by St Gregory the Great, his biographer, and which is certainly well known to you. One might almost say that the holy Patriarch was also "carried up into Heaven" in an indescribable mystic experience. On the night of 29 October 540, we read in the biography, while leaning out of the window, "his eyes fixed on the stars and wrapt in divine contemplation, the Saint felt that his heart was burning... for him the starry firmament was like the embroidered curtain that veiled the Holy of Holies. At a certain point, his soul felt transported to the other side of the veil, to contemplate unveiled the Face of the One who dwells in inaccessible brightness" (cf. A.I. Schuster, *Storia di san Benedetto e dei suoi tempi*, Ed. Abbazia di Viboldone, Milan, 1965, p. 11 and ff.). Of course, similarly to what happened for Paul after he had been taken up into Heaven, for St Benedict too subsequent to this extraordinary spiritual experience, a new life had to begin. Indeed, although the vision was but fleeting the effects endured, his features themselves, the biographers say, were altered by it, his expression always remained serene and his behaviour angelic and although he lived on earth it was obvious that his heart was already in Paradise.

St Benedict did not of course receive this divine gift to satisfy his intellectual curiosity, but rather so that the charism with which God had endowed him might enable him to reproduce in the monastery the very life of Heaven and to re-establish the harmony of creation through contemplation and work. Rightly, therefore, the Church venerates him as an "eminent teacher of monastic life" and a "doctor of spiritual wisdom in his love of prayer and work"; a luminous "guide of the peoples to the light of the Gospel" who, "lifted up to Heaven on a shining path", teaches men and women of all the epochs to seek God and the eternal riches prepared by him (cf. *Preface of the Saint* in the monastic supplement to MR, 1980, 153).

Yes, Benedict was a shining example of holiness and pointed Christ out to the monks as the one great ideal; he was a teacher of civilization who, in suggesting a balanced and adequate vision of the divine requirements and ultimate destiny of the human being, always also kept clearly in mind the needs and reasons of the heart, to teach and inspire authentic and constant brotherhood so that in the complex social relations people would not lose sight of a spiritual unity that would always be capable of building and fostering peace. It is not by chance that the word *PAX* is used

to greet pilgrims and visitors at the entrance of this Abbey, rebuilt after the dreadful disaster of the Second World War; it rises like a silent warning to reject every form of violence in order to build peace: in families, in communities, among peoples and throughout humanity. St Benedict invites every person who climbs this hill to seek peace and to follow him: "*inquire pacem et sequere eam* (Ps 33: 14-15)" (*Rule*, Prologue, 17).

At his school monasteries down the centuries became fervent centres of dialogue, encounter and a beneficial blending of different peoples, unified by the evangelical culture of peace. Monks have been able to teach the art of peace by word and example, putting into practice the three "bonds" that Benedict mentions as necessary to preserve the unity of the Spirit among human beings: the Cross, that is the very law of Christ; the book, or in other words culture; and the plough that implies work, the domination of matter and of time. Thanks to the activity of monasteries that is structured in accordance with the threefold daily commitment of prayer, study and work, entire peoples on the European continent have experienced authentic redemption and a beneficial moral, spiritual and cultural development, learning the meaning of continuity with the past, practical action for the common good, openness to God and the transcendent dimension. Let us pray that Europe may always be able to make the most of this patrimony of Christian principles and ideals that constitutes an immense cultural and spiritual wealth.

This is possible but only if one accepts the constant teaching of St Benedict, that is the "*quaerere Deum*", the quest for God, as man's fundamental commitment. Human beings cannot completely fulfil themselves, they cannot be truly happy without God. It is your task in particular, dear monks, to be living examples of this inner and profound relationship with him, implementing without compromise the programme that your Founder summed up in the "*nihil amori Christi praeponere*", "prefer nothing to the love of Christ" (*Rule* 4: 21). Holiness consists of this, a valid proposal for every Christian, especially in our time, in which people feel the need to anchor life and history to sound spiritual references. For this reason, dear brothers and sisters, your vocation is more up to date than ever and your mission as monks and nuns is indispensable.

From this place, where his mortal remains rest, the holy Patron of Europe continues to invite everyone to pursue his work of evangelization and human promotion. In the first place he encourages you, dear monks, to stay faithful to the spirit of your origins and to be authentic interpreters of his programme of spiritual and social rebirth. May the Lord grant you this gift through the intercession of your Holy Founder, of St Scholastica, his sister, and of the Order's Saints. And may the heavenly Mother of the Lord, whom we invoke today as "Help of Christians," watch over you and protect this Abbey and all your monasteries as well as the diocesan community that has grown up around Monte Cassino. Amen!

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