



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PILGRIMAGE FROM THE DIOCESE
OF ALTAMURA-GRAVINA-ACQUAVIVA DELLE FONTI**

*Paul VI Audience Hall
Saturday, 2 July 2011*

*Your Excellency,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am truly glad to welcome so many of you, full of enthusiasm for the faith. Thank you! I thank Bishop Mario Paciello for his words on behalf of you all. I greet the civil authorities, the priests, the men and women religious, the seminarians and each one of you, extending my thoughts and affection to your diocesan community and, in particular, to those who are living in situations of suffering and hardship. I am grateful to the Lord because your visit gives me the opportunity to share a moment in the synodal process of the Church in Altamura-Gravina-Acquaviva delle Fonti.

The Synod is an event that gives us a tangible experience of being the “People of God” journeying on, of being the Church, a pilgrim community in history moving towards eschatological fulfilment in God. This means recognizing that the Church in herself does not possess the vital principle but depends on Christ, of whom she is a sign and an effective instrument. She finds her own deepest identity in her relationship with the Lord Jesus: to be a gift of God to humanity, prolonging through the Holy Spirit the presence and the work of salvation of the Son of God. In this perspective we understand that the Church is essentially a mystery of love at the service of humanity and with a view to its sanctification.

Concerning this point the Second Vatican Council declared: “[God] has, however, willed to make men holy and save them, not as individuals without any bond or link between them, but rather to make them into a people who might acknowledge him in truth and serve him in holiness” (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 9).

We see here that the Word of God has truly created a people, a community, it has created a common joy, a common pilgrimage towards the Lord. Being Church, therefore, is not only a result of our own human organizational effort. Rather, it finds its source and true meaning in the communion of love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit: this eternal love is the source that gives rise to the Church and the Blessed Trinity, it is the model of unity in diversity which generates and shapes the Church as a mystery of communion.

If we are to understand and live more intensely being Church, the “People of God”, the “Body of Christ”, “Communion”, it is always necessary to start afresh from this truth and in a new way. Otherwise we risk reducing everything to a horizontal dimension that mars the identity of the Church — as well as the proclamation of faith — and would impoverish both our life and the life of the Church.

It is important to stress that the Church is not a social or philanthropic organization like many others. She is the community of God, the community of believers, that loves, that worships the Lord Jesus and that spreads its “sails” to the breath of the Holy Spirit. She is thus a community able to evangelize and humanize. The profound relationship with Christ, lived and nourished by the word and by the Eucharist, is what makes proclamation effective, motivates commitment to catechesis and gives life to the witness of love.

Many men and women of our time need to encounter God, to encounter Christ, to rediscover the beauty of the God who is close, the God who in Jesus Christ revealed his face as Father, who calls us to recognize the meaning and value of life and make people realize that to live as a human being is good.

The present period of history, as we know, is chequered with patches of light and shade. We are witnessing complex attitudes: withdrawal into self, narcissism, the desire for possessions and consumerism, sentiments and affections free from responsibility. The causes of this disorientation, expressed in profound existential unease, are many; yet at the root of them all we can perceive the denial of man's transcendent dimension and of the founding relationship with God. It is therefore crucial that Christian communities promote reliable and demanding itineraries of faith.

Dear friends, special attention should be paid to the approach to education in Christian living so that every man and woman may make an authentic journey of faith through the different stages of life; a journey on which — like the Virgin Mary — the person profoundly receives the word of God and puts it into practice, becoming a Gospel witness.

The Second Vatican Council stated in the Declaration *Gravissimum Educationis*: “Christian education... is especially directed towards ensuring that those who have been baptized, as they are gradually introduced to a knowledge of the mystery of salvation, become daily more appreciative of the gift of faith which they have received. They should be trained to live their own

lives in the new self, justified and sanctified through the the truth” (n. 2). The family is primarily responsible for this educational commitment. Dear parents, may you be the first witnesses of faith! Do not be afraid of the difficulties in which you are required to carry out your mission. You are not alone! The Christian community is close to you and supports you. Catechesis accompanies your children in their human and spiritual development but should be seen as an ongoing formation that is not limited to preparation for receiving the Sacraments.

Throughout our life we must increase in the knowledge of God, as well as in the knowledge of what it means to be a human being. May you always be able to find strength and light in the Liturgy. Participation in the Eucharistic celebration on the Lord’s Day is crucial for families and for the whole community; since it is the structure of our time. Let us always remember that in the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, the Lord Jesus works for the transformation of people by absorbing us in him. It is precisely thanks to the encounter with Christ, to communion with him, that the Christian community can witness to communion, opening itself to service, welcoming the poorest and lowliest and recognizing God’s Face in the sick and in every needy person. I therefore ask you, on the basis of contact with the Lord in daily prayer and, especially, in the Eucharist, to develop appropriate educational possibilities and forms of voluntary service that exist in the diocese in order to form reliable people open and attentive to situations of spiritual and material hardship.

Ultimately, pastoral action must aim at forming people with a mature faith to live in contexts in which God is frequently disregarded. They must be consistent in their faith so that Christ’s light may be brought to all milieus. If they are to pass on the beauty of being Christian, they must be people who live their faith with joy.

Lastly, I would like to address a special thought to you, dear priests. Always be grateful for the gift you have received so that you may serve the People of God entrusted to your care with love and dedication. Proclaim the Gospel with courage and faithfulness, be witnesses of God’s mercy and, guided by the Holy Spirit, may you be able to point out the truth confidently dialoguing with culture and with those in search of God.

Dear brothers and sisters, let us entrust the progress of your diocesan community to Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Lord and Mother of the Church, our Mother. In her we contemplate what the Church is and what she is called to be. With her “yes” she gave the world Jesus and now fully shares in God’s glory. We too are called to give the Lord Jesus to humanity, never forgetting that we must always be his disciples. I thank you again very much for your lovely visit and I warmly thank you for your faith. I accompany you with my prayers and impart to all of you and to the entire diocese the Apostolic Blessing.

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