



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square

Wednesday, 12 September 2007

Apostolic Journey to Austria

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today, I intend to reflect on the Pastoral Visit to Austria which I had the joy of making a few days ago. I am particularly familiar with this Country, both because it borders my native Land and because of the numerous contacts I have always had with it.

The special reason for this Visit was the 850th anniversary of Austria's most important Shrine of Mariazell, also beloved by the Hungarian faithful and frequently visited by pilgrims from the neighbouring nations. Thus, it was first and foremost a Pilgrimage whose motto was "Look to Christ": going forth to meet Mary who shows Jesus to us.

I warmly thank Cardinal Schönborn, Archbishop of Vienna, and the Country's entire Episcopate for the major commitment with which they prepared and followed my Visit. I thank the Austrian Government and all the civil and military Authorities who contributed their valid collaboration; in particular, I thank the Federal President for the cordiality with which he welcomed and accompanied me at the various moments of my Visit.

My first stopping place was by the Mariensäule, the historic column on which the statue of the Immaculate Virgin stands. There I met thousands of young people and began my Pilgrimage. I did not omit a visit to the Judenplatz [Jewish Square] to pay homage at the monument which commemorates the Shoah.

Mindful of the history of Austria and of its close relations with the Holy See, as well as of Vienna's importance in international politics, the programme for my Pastoral Journey included meetings with the President of the Republic and with the Diplomatic Corps. They were precious opportunities in which the Successor of Peter had the opportunity to urge leaders of nations always to encourage the cause of peace and of authentic economic and social development.

Looking especially at Europe, I renewed my encouragement to pursue the current process of unification on the basis of the values inspired by the common Christian patrimony.

Moreover, Mariazell is one of the symbols of the European peoples' encounter round the Christian faith. How can we forget that Europe has inherited a tradition of thought that binds faith, reason and sentiment?

Distinguished philosophers, even independently of their faith, have recognized the central role played by Christianity in preserving the modern conscience from nihilistic or fundamentalist trends.

The meeting with the political and diplomatic Authorities in Vienna was therefore especially useful for fitting my Apostolic Visit into the current context of the European Continent.

I made the actual pilgrimage on Saturday, 8 September, Feast of the Nativity of Mary, to whom the Shrine of Mariazell is dedicated. It was founded in 1157 when a Benedictine monk of the neighbouring St Lambrecht's Abbey, invited to preach in that place, experienced the miraculous help of Mary, of whom he was carrying a small wooden statue.

The cell (*Zell*) in which the monk set the statuette subsequently became a pilgrimage destination and in the course of two centuries an important Shrine was built, where still today Our Lady of Grace is venerated as *Magna Mater Austriae*. It gave me great joy to return as Successor of Peter to that holy place, so dear to the peoples of Central-Eastern Europe.

There I admired the exemplary courage of thousands and thousands of pilgrims who, despite the rain and cold, desired to be present at this anniversary celebration with great joy and faith. I described to them the central theme of my Visit: "*Look to Christ*", which the Bishops of Austria had wisely examined during its preparation that lasted nine months.

But only on reaching the Shrine did we fully understand what this motto means. We had before us the statue of Our Lady pointing to the Child Jesus with one hand and, high up above the altar in the Basilica, the Crucifix.

There our Pilgrimage had reached its destination: we contemplated God's Face in that Child in his Mother's arms and in that Man with his arms wide open. To look to Jesus with Mary's eyes means encountering God-Love, who for our sake was made man and died on the Cross.

At the end of Mass in Mariazell, I conferred the "mandate" upon members of parish pastoral

councils, recently renewed throughout Austria. This was an eloquent ecclesial act by which I placed under Mary's protection the great "network" of parishes at the service of communion and mission. At the Shrine, I then spent some moments of joyful brotherhood with the local Bishops and the Benedictine Community.

I met priests, Religious, deacons and seminarians, and I celebrated Vespers with them. Spiritually united to Mary, we praised the Lord for the humble dedication of so many men and women who entrust themselves to his mercy and devote themselves to serving God.

Despite their human limitations, indeed, in the simplicity and humility of their humanity, these people endeavour to offer a reflection of God's goodness and beauty to all by following Jesus on the path of poverty, chastity and obedience. These are three vows whose authentic Christological meaning, which is not individualistic but relational and ecclesial, should be properly understood.

On Sunday morning, I then celebrated the solemn Eucharist in St Stephen's Cathedral in Vienna. In my Homily, I wanted in particular to delve into the meaning and value of Sunday, to support the *Alliance in Defence of Free Sundays Movement*. Non-Christian people and groups also belong to this movement.

As believers, we of course have deep reasons for living the Lord's Day, just as the Church has taught us. "*Sine dominico non possumus!*": Without the Lord and without his Day we cannot live, declared the Martyrs of Abitene (present-day Tunisia) in 304 A.D.

Nor can we Christians of the third millennium live without Sunday: a day that gives meaning to work and rest, that actualizes the meaning of Creation and Redemption, expresses the value of freedom and of service to neighbour....

Sunday is all this: far more than a precept! If the peoples of the ancient Christian civilization abandon this meaning and allow Sunday to be reduced to a weekend or an opportunity for worldly and commercial interests, they have decided to renounce their own culture.

Heiligenkreuz [Holy Cross] Abbey is not far from Vienna; it was a joy for me to visit that flourishing community of Cistercian monks, which has existed for 874 consecutive years! Annexed to the Abbey is the School for Advanced Studies in Philosophy and Theology, which recently acquired the title of "Pontifical".

In addressing the monks in particular, I recalled St Benedict's important teaching on the Divine Office, emphasizing the value of prayer as a service of praise and adoration to which God is entitled by his infinite beauty and goodness.

Nothing must be put before this sacred service - says the Benedictine Rule (43, 3) -, so that the

whole of life, with times for work and rest, may be summed up in the liturgy and oriented to God. Nor must theological study be separated from spiritual life and prayer, as St Bernard of Clairvaux, father of the Cistercian Order, maintained. The presence of the Theological Academy beside the Abbey attests to this espousal of faith and reason, of heart and mind.

The last Meeting on my Journey was with the world of volunteers. I wanted thereby to express my appreciation to the numerous people of various ages who work without remuneration to serve their neighbour in both ecclesial and civil communities.

Voluntary work is not only "doing": it is first and foremost a way of being that stems from the heart, from a grateful approach to life, and impels one to "give back" and to share with one's neighbour the gifts received. In this perspective, I wanted once again to encourage the volunteer culture.

The volunteer's action should not be seen as a "stop-gap" intervention for the State and public institutions, but rather as a complementary, always necessary, presence to keep attention to the lowliest alive and to further a personalized style in interventions.

Therefore, everyone can be a volunteer worker: even the poorest and most underprivileged person has certainly much to share with others by making his own contribution to building the civilization of love.

To conclude, I renew my thanksgiving to the Lord for this Visit-Pilgrimage to Austria. The central destination has once again been a Marian Shrine around which it was possible to live a strong ecclesial experience, just as happened a week earlier in Loreto with the young Italians.

Furthermore, in Vienna and in Mariazell, the living, faithful and variegated reality of the Catholic Church was illustrated most clearly by the presence of so many of her members at the scheduled events.

It was a joyous and involving presence of a Church which, like Mary, is always called to "look to Christ" to be able to show him and offer him to all; a Church teacher and witness of a generous "yes" to life in all its dimensions; a Church which puts into practice her 2,000-year-old tradition at the service of a future of peace and true social progress for the entire human family.

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I am pleased to welcome the English-speaking visitors present at today's Audience, especially those from England, Wales, Scotland, Denmark, Sweden, Malta and the United States. Upon all of you I cordially invoke joy and peace in our Lord Jesus Christ.

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