



The Holy See

BENEDICT XVI

GENERAL AUDIENCE

Saint Peter's Square
Wednesday, 20 May 2009

Pilgrimage to the Holy Land

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today I shall talk about the Apostolic Journey that I made from 8 to 15 May to the Holy Land, for which I do not cease to thank the Lord because it turned out to be a great gift for the Successor of Peter and for the whole Church. I would like once again to express a heartfelt "thank you" to H.B. Patriarch Fouad Twal, to the Bishops of the various rites, to the Priests and to the Franciscans of the Custody of the Holy Land. I thank the King and Queen of Jordan, the President of Israel and the President of the National Palestinian Authority, together with their respective Governments, all the Authorities and all those who in various ways collaborated in the preparation and success of my Visit. It was first and foremost a pilgrimage, indeed, a pilgrimage par excellence to the sources of our faith; and at the same time a Pastoral Visit to the Church which lives in the Holy Land: a community of unique importance because it is a living presence in the place where it was born.

The first stage, from 8 to 11 May, was in Jordan, in whose territory are located two of the most important holy places: Mount Nebo, from which Moses contemplated the Promised Land and where he died without entering it; then Bethany "on the other side of the Jordan", where, according to the fourth Gospel, St John began to baptize. The Memorial of Moses on Mount Nebo is a site with a strong symbolic value: it speaks of our condition as pilgrims between an "already" and a "not yet", between a promise so important and beautiful as to hearten us on the way, and fulfilment that surpasses us and also surpasses this world. The Church lives this "eschatological" and "pilgrim disposition" in herself: she is already united with Christ her Bridegroom but for the time

being the wedding feast is only anticipated, in expectation of his glorious return at the end of time (cf. Second Vatican Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, nn. 48-50). In Bethany I had the joy of blessing the foundation stones of two churches that will be built on the site where St John baptized the people. This event was a sign of the openness and respect for religious freedom and for the Christian tradition which prevail in the Hashemite Kingdom and deserves deep appreciation. I was able to show this just recognition, united with profound respect for the Muslim community, the Religious Leaders, the Diplomatic Corps and the university Rectors who met at the Al-Hussein Bin Talal Mosque, that King Abdallah II commissioned in memory of his father, the famous King Hussein, who welcomed Pope Paul VI on his historic pilgrimage in 1964. How important it is that Christians and Muslims live side by side peacefully and in mutual respect! Thanks be to God and to the commitment of the government leaders this is happening in Jordan. I prayed that it would be like this also elsewhere, thinking especially of the Christians who instead experience difficult situations in neighbouring Iraq.

A large Christian community lives in Jordan, increased by Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. It is a significant presence appreciated in society, also because of its institutions for education and social assistance, attentive to the human person independently of his or her race or religion. A beautiful example is the "Regina Pacis" Rehabilitation Centre in Amman, which takes in numerous people afflicted by disabilities. In visiting it, I was able to bring a word of hope, but in turn I also received one, as a testimony strengthened by suffering and by human sharing; as a sign of the Church's commitment in the field of culture, I also blessed the foundation stone of the Latin Patriarchate of Jerusalem's University of Madaba. I rejoiced in giving a start to this new scientific and cultural institution so that it may tangibly express that the Church encourages the quest for truth and for the common good and may offer a space for higher learning open to all who want to commit themselves to this search, an indispensable premise for a true and fruitful dialogue among civilizations. Likewise in Amman two solemn liturgical celebrations took place: Vespers in the Greek-Melkite Cathedral of St George and Holy Mass in the International Stadium which enabled us to savour together the beauty of meeting one another as God's pilgrim People, rich in their different traditions and united in the one faith.

After leaving Jordan, in the late morning of Monday, 11 May, I landed in Israel where, from my arrival, I introduced myself as a pilgrim of faith in the Land where Jesus was born, lived, died and rose, and at the same time, as a pilgrim of peace to implore from God that in the place where he chose to make himself man all men and women may live as his children, that is, as brothers and sisters. This second aspect of my journey naturally emerged in my meetings with the civil authorities: in my visit to the Israeli President and to the President of the Palestinian Authority. In that Land blessed by God, it sometimes seems impossible to extricate oneself from the spiral of violence. But nothing is impossible to God and to those who trust in him! For this reason faith in the one just and merciful God, which is the most precious resource of those peoples, must be able to release its full charge of respect, reconciliation and collaboration. I desired to express this wish in paying a visit both to the Grand Mufti and the leaders of the Islamic community of Jerusalem

and to the Chief Rabbinate of Israel, as well as at the meeting with the organizations involved in inter-religious dialogue and then, at the encounter with the religious leaders of Galilee.

Jerusalem is the cross-roads of the three great monotheistic religions, and its very name "City of Peace" expresses God's plan for humanity: to make it one great family. This design, announced to Abraham, was completely fulfilled in Jesus Christ, whom St Paul calls "our peace", because through his Sacrifice he forcefully broke down the dividing wall of hostility (cf. Eph 2: 14). Thus all believers must leave behind them their prejudices and desire to dominate and must in harmony obey the fundamental Commandment: in other words to love God with all one's might and to love one's neighbour as oneself. It is to this that Jews, Christians and Muslims are called to bear witness, in order to honour with acts that God to whom they pray with their lips. And it is exactly this that I carried in my heart, in my prayers, as I visited in Jerusalem the Western or Wailing Wall and the Dome of the Rock, symbolic places respectively of Judaism and of Islam. The Visit to the Yad Vashem Memorial, built in Jerusalem in honour of the victims of the *Shoah*, was also a moment of intense recollection. In silence we paused there, praying and meditating on the mystery of the "name": every human person is sacred, and his name is written in the heart of the eternal God. The horrendous tragedy of the *Shoah* must never be forgotten! On the contrary, we must always remember that universal recommendation of sacred respect for human life, which always possesses an infinite value.

As I have already mentioned, the priority of my Journey was the Visit to the Catholic Communities of the Holy Land and this also took place in various stages at Jerusalem, Bethlehem and Nazareth. In the Upper Room, my mind fixed on Christ who washed the Apostles' feet and instituted the Eucharist, as well as on the gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church on the Day of Pentecost, I was able to meet, among others, the Custos of the Holy Land and to meditate with him on our vocation to be one, to form one body and one mind, to transform the world with the gentle force of love. Of course, this call encounters particular difficulty in the Holy Land, therefore, with the heart of Christ I repeated to my brother Bishops his very words: "Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom" (Lk 12: 32). I then briefly greeted the women and men religious of contemplative life, thanking them for the service that with their prayers they offer to the Church and to the cause of peace.

Above all the supreme moments of communion with the Catholic faithful were the Eucharistic celebrations. In Josaphat Valley, in Jerusalem, we meditated on the Resurrection of Christ as a force of hope and peace for that City and for the whole world. In Bethlehem, in the Palestinian Territories, Holy Mass was celebrated in front of the Basilica of the Nativity with the participation of the faithful from Gaza, whom I had the joy to comfort personally, assuring them of my special closeness. Bethlehem, the place in which the celestial hymn of peace for all men rang out, is a symbol of the distance that still separates us from the fulfilment of that proclamation. Precariousness, isolation, uncertainty, poverty: all this has led so many Christians to leave for distant places. Yet the Church continues on her way, supported by the power of faith and

witnessing to love with concrete works of service to the brethren such as, for example, the [Caritas Baby Hospital in Bethlehem](#), supported by the Dioceses of Germany and Switzerland, and humanitarian action in the refugee camps. [In the camp that I visited](#) I wished to assure the families that are housed there of the closeness and encouragement of the universal Church and I invited everyone to seek peace with non violent methods, after the example of St Francis of Assisi. [I celebrated the third and last Mass with the people last Thursday, in Nazareth](#), the town of the Holy Family. We prayed for all the families that they might rediscover the beauty of marriage and family life, the value of domestic spirituality and of education, attention to children who are entitled to grow up in peace and serenity. In addition, [in the Basilica of the Annunciation, together with all the Pastors, consecrated people, ecclesial movements and lay people involved in Galilee, we sang our faith](#) in the creative and transforming power of God. There, where the Word was made flesh in the womb of the Virgin Mary, flows an inexhaustible source of hope and joy that does not cease to bring life to the heart of the Church, a pilgrim through history.

My [pilgrimage](#) ended last Friday with the stop at the [Holy Sepulchre](#) and with two important ecumenical meetings in Jerusalem: at the [Greek Orthodox Patriarchate](#), where the representatives of all the Churches in the Holy Land had gathered, and lastly, at the [Armenian Apostolic Patriarchal Church](#). I am pleased to sum up the whole of the itinerary that I was granted to follow precisely in the sign of Christ's Resurrection: despite the vicissitudes that have scarred the Holy Places down the centuries, despite the wars, destruction and unfortunately also conflicts between Christians, the Church has continued her mission, impelled by the Spirit of the Risen Lord. She is on her way towards full unity, so that the world may believe in the love of God and experience the joy of his peace. On my knees on Calvary and at the Holy Sepulchre I invoked the power of love that flows from the Paschal Mystery, the only force that can renew men and women and direct history and the cosmos to its destiny. I also ask you to pray for this intention, as we prepare for the Feast of the Ascension which we shall be celebrating in the Vatican tomorrow. Thank you for your attention.

To special groups

I welcome all the English-speaking pilgrims present today, including the College groups from America. May your visit to Rome be a time of deep spiritual renewal. Upon all of you I invoke God's abundant blessings of joy and peace.

Lastly, my thoughts turn to the *young people*, the *sick* and the *newly weds*. The Solemnity of the Lord's Ascension which we shall be celebrating tomorrow in the Vatican as in other countries, while it will be celebrated in Italy next Sunday invites us to look to Jesus who, before ascending into Heaven, entrusted to the Apostles the mandate to take his Message of salvation to the very ends of the earth. Dear *young people*, may you strive to put your energies at the service of the Gospel.

Dear *sick people*, may you live your suffering united to the Lord, in the certainty that you are making a precious contribution to the growth of his Kingdom in the world. And you, dear *newly weds*, make sure that your families are places in which one learns to be joyful witnesses to the Gospel of hope.

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This coming Sunday, the Church celebrates World Communications Day. [In my message](#) this year, I am inviting all those who make use of the new technologies of communication, especially the young, to utilize them in a positive way and to realize the great potential of these means to build up bonds of friendship and solidarity that can contribute to a better world.

The new technologies have brought about fundamental shifts in the ways in which news and information are disseminated and in how people communicate and relate to each other. I wish to encourage all those who access cyberspace to be careful to maintain and promote a culture of respect, dialogue and authentic friendship where the values of truth, harmony and understanding can flourish.

Young people in particular, I appeal to you: bear witness to your faith through the digital world! Employ these new technologies to make the Gospel known, so that the Good News of God's infinite love for all people, will resound in new ways across our increasingly technological world!

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