



The Holy See

**PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO BARI FOR THE CLOSING OF THE
24th ITALIAN NATIONAL EUCHARISTIC CONGRESS**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Esplanade of Marisabella
Sunday, 29 May 2005*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

"Glorify the Lord, Jerusalem; Zion, praise your God (Responsorial Psalm).

The invitation of the Psalmist that is also echoed in the Sequence expresses very clearly the meaning of this Eucharistic Celebration: we are gathered here to praise and bless the Lord. This is what urged the Italian Church to gather here in Bari on the occasion of the National Eucharistic Congress.

I also wanted to join all of you today to give special emphasis to the celebration of the Solemnity of the Body and Blood of Christ, thus to pay homage to Christ in the Sacrament of his love and at the same time to strengthen the bonds of communion that bind me to the Church in Italy and to her Pastors. My venerable and beloved Predecessor, Pope John Paul II, would also have liked to have been here at this important ecclesial event, as you know. We all feel that he is close to us and with us is glorifying Christ, the Good Shepherd, whom he can now contemplate directly.

I greet with affection all of you who are taking part in this solemn liturgy: Cardinal Camillo Ruini and the other Cardinals present, Archbishop Francesco Cacucci of Bari, whom I thank for his kind words, the Bishops of Puglia and those who have come here in large numbers from every corner of Italy; priests, men and women religious and lay people, particularly the young people, and of

course, all those who helped in various ways with the organization of the Congress.

I likewise greet the Authorities who, with their welcome presence, stress that Eucharistic Congresses are part of the history and culture of the Italian people.

The intention of this Eucharistic Congress, which ends today, was once again to present Sunday as the "weekly Easter", an expression of the identity of the Christian community and the centre of its life and mission.

The chosen theme - "*Without Sunday we cannot live*" - takes us back to the year 304, when the Emperor Diocletian forbade Christians, on pain of death, from possessing the Scriptures, from gathering on Sundays to celebrate the Eucharist and from building places in which to hold their assemblies.

In Abitene, a small village in present-day Tunisia, 49 Christians were taken by surprise one Sunday while they were celebrating the Eucharist, gathered in the house of Octavius Felix, thereby defying the imperial prohibitions. They were arrested and taken to Carthage to be interrogated by the Proconsul Anulinus.

Significant among other things is the answer a certain Emeritus gave to the Proconsul who asked him why on earth they had disobeyed the Emperor's severe orders. He replied: "*Sine dominico non possumus*": that is, we cannot live without joining together on Sunday to celebrate the Eucharist. We would lack the strength to face our daily problems and not to succumb.

After atrocious tortures, these 49 martyrs of Abitene were killed. Thus, they confirmed their faith with bloodshed. They died, but they were victorious: today we remember them in the glory of the Risen Christ.

The experience of the martyrs of Abitene is also one on which we 21st-century Christians should reflect. It is not easy for us either to live as Christians, even if we are spared such prohibitions from the emperor. From a spiritual point of view, the world in which we find ourselves, often marked by unbridled consumerism, religious indifference and a secularism closed to transcendence, can appear a desert just as "*vast and terrible*" (Dt 8: 15) as the one we heard about in the first reading from the Book of Deuteronomy. God came to the aid of the Jewish people in difficulty in this desert with his gift of manna, to make them understand that "*not by bread alone does man live, but by every word that comes forth from the mouth of the Lord*" (Dt 8: 3).

In today's Gospel, Jesus has explained to us, through the gift of manna, for what bread God wanted to prepare the people of the New Covenant. Alluding to the Eucharist he said: "*This is the bread that came down from heaven. Unlike your ancestors who ate and died nonetheless, the man who feeds on this bread shall live forever*" (Jn 6: 58).

In taking flesh, the Son of God could become Bread and thus be the nourishment of his people, of us, journeying on in this world towards the promised land of Heaven.

We need this Bread to face the fatigue and weariness of our journey. Sunday, the Lord's Day, is a favourable opportunity to draw strength from him, the Lord of life.

The Sunday precept is not, therefore, an externally imposed duty, a burden on our shoulders. On the contrary, taking part in the Celebration, being nourished by the Eucharistic Bread and experiencing the communion of their brothers and sisters in Christ is a need for Christians, it is a joy; Christians can thus replenish the energy they need to continue on the journey we must make every week.

Moreover, this is not an arbitrary journey: the path God points out to us through his Word goes in the direction inscribed in man's very existence. The Word of God and reason go together. For the human being, following the Word of God, going with Christ means fulfilling oneself; losing it is equivalent to losing oneself.

The Lord does not leave us alone on this journey. He is with us; indeed, he wishes to share our destiny to the point of identifying with us.

In the Gospel discourse that we have just heard he says, *"He who feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood remains in me, and I in him"* (Jn 6: 56). How is it possible not to rejoice in such a promise?

However, we have heard that at his first announcement, instead of rejoicing, the people started to murmur in protest: *"How can he give us his flesh to eat?"* (Jn 6: 52). To tell the truth, that attitude has frequently been repeated in the course of history. One might say that basically people do not want to have God so close, to be so easily within reach or to share so deeply in the events of their daily life.

Rather, people want him to be great and, in brief, we also often want him to be a little distant from us. Questions are then raised that are intended to show that, after all, such closeness would be impossible.

But the words that Christ spoke on that occasion have lost none of their clarity: *"Let me solemnly assure you, if you do not eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood, you have no life in you"* (Jn 6: 53). Truly, we need a God who is close to us. In the face of the murmur of protest, Jesus might have fallen back on reassuring words: "Friends", he could have said, "do not worry! I spoke of flesh but it is only a symbol. What I mean is only a deep communion of sentiments".

But no, Jesus did not have recourse to such soothing words. He stuck to his assertion, to all his

realism, even when he saw many of his disciples breaking away (cf. Jn 6: 66). Indeed, he showed his readiness to accept even desertion by his apostles, while not in any way changing the substance of his discourse: *"Do you want to leave me too?"* (Jn 6: 67), he asked. Thanks be to God, Peter's response was one that even we can make our own today with full awareness: *"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"* (Jn 6: 68). We need a God who is close, a God who puts himself in our hands and who loves us.

Christ is truly present among us in the Eucharist. His presence is not static. It is a dynamic presence that grasps us, to make us his own, to make us assimilate him. Christ draws us to him, he makes us come out of ourselves to make us all one with him. In this way he also integrates us in the communities of brothers and sisters, and communion with the Lord is always also communion with our brothers and sisters. And we see the beauty of this communion that the Blessed Eucharist gives us.

We are touching on a further dimension of the Eucharist that I would like to point out before concluding.

The Christ whom we meet in the Sacrament is the same here in Bari as he is in Rome, here in Europe, as in America, Africa, Asia and Oceania. He is the one same Christ who is present in the Eucharistic Bread of every place on earth. This means that we can encounter him only together with all others. We can only receive him in unity.

Is not this what the Apostle Paul said in the reading we have just heard? In writing to the Corinthians he said: *"Because the loaf of bread is one, we, many though we are, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf"* (1 Cor 10: 17).

The consequence is clear: we cannot communicate with the Lord if we do not communicate with one another. If we want to present ourselves to him, we must also take a step towards meeting one another.

To do this we must learn the great lesson of forgiveness: we must not let the gnawings of resentment work in our soul, but must open our hearts to the magnanimity of listening to others, open our hearts to understanding them, eventually to accepting their apologies, to generously offering our own.

The Eucharist, let us repeat, is the sacrament of unity. Unfortunately, however, Christians are divided, precisely in the sacrament of unity. Sustained by the Eucharist, we must feel all the more roused to striving with all our strength for that full unity which Christ ardently desired in the Upper Room.

Precisely here in Bari, fortunate Bari, a city that preserves the bones of St Nicholas, a land of

encounter and dialogue with our Christian brethren of the East, I would like to reaffirm my desire to assume as a fundamental commitment working with all my might for the re-establishment of the full and visible unity of all Christ's followers.

I am aware that expressions of good will do not suffice for this. We need concrete acts that penetrate souls and shake consciences, prompting each one to that inner conversion that is the necessary condition for any progress on the path of ecumenism (cf. *Message to the Universal Church*, Sistine Chapel, 20 April 2005; *L'Osservatore Romano* English Edition, 27 April, p. 3).

I ask you all to set out with determination on the path of that spiritual ecumenism which, through prayer, opens the doors to the Holy Spirit, who alone can create unity.

Dear friends who have come to Bari from various parts of Italy to celebrate this Eucharistic Congress, we must rediscover the joy of Christian Sundays. We must proudly rediscover the privilege of sharing in the Eucharist, which is the sacrament of the renewed world.

Christ's Resurrection happened on the first day of the week, which in the Scriptures is the day of the world's creation. For this very reason Sunday was considered by the early Christian community as the day on which the new world began, the one on which, with Christ's victory over death, the new creation began.

As they gathered round the Eucharistic table, the community was taking shape as a new people of God. St Ignatius of Antioch described Christians as "having attained new hope" and presented them as people "who lived in accordance with Sunday" ("*iuxta dominicam viventes*"). In this perspective, the Bishop of Antioch wondered: "How will we be able to live without him, the One whom the prophets so long awaited?" (*Ep. ad Magnesios*, 9, 1-2).

"How will we be able to live without him?". In these words of St Ignatius we hear echoing the affirmation of the martyrs of Abitene: "*Sine dominico non possumus*".

It is this that gives rise to our prayer: that we too, Christians of today, will rediscover an awareness of the crucial importance of the Sunday Celebration and will know how to draw from participation in the Eucharist the necessary dynamism for a new commitment to proclaiming to the world Christ "*our peace*" (Eph 2: 14). Amen!

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