



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO ASSISI
ON THE EIGHTH CENTENARY
OF THE CONVERSION OF SAINT FRANCIS

EUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Square outside the Lower Basilica of St Francis
Sunday, 17 June 2007*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

What is the Lord saying to us today while we celebrate the Eucharist in the evocative setting of this square, in which eight centuries of holiness, devotion, art and culture linked to the name of Francis of Assisi are gathered?

Today, everything here speaks of conversion, as Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino recalled and whom I warmly thank for his kind words. With him, I greet the entire Church of Assisi-Nocera Umbra-Gualdo Tadino, as well as the Pastors of the Churches of Umbria.

I extend a grateful thought to Cardinal Attilio Nicora, my Legate for the two Papal Basilicas of this Town.

I address an affectionate greeting to the sons of Francis of the various Orders present here with their Ministers General. I express my cordial respects to the President of the Council of Ministers and to all the Civil Authorities who have wished to honour us with their presence. Speaking of conversion means going to the heart of the Christian message, and at the same time

to the roots of human existence. The Word of God just proclaimed enlightens us by holding up to our gaze *three converted figures*.

The first is David. The passage concerning him, taken from the *Second Book of Samuel*, presents to us one of the most dramatic conversations in the Old Testament. A burning verdict lies at the heart of this dialogue, with which the Word of God, uttered by the Prophet Nathan, exposes a king who had reached the summit of his political fortune but had also fallen to the lowest level of his moral life.

To grasp the dramatic tension of this dialogue, it is necessary to bear in mind its historical and theological horizon. This horizon is outlined by the event of love with which God chooses Israel as his People, establishing a Covenant with them and taking care to assure them a land and freedom.

David is a link in this history of God's continuing concern for his People. He was chosen in a difficult period and placed beside King Saul, then to become his successor. God's design also concerns his descendants connected with the messianic project, which was to find its complete fulfilment in Christ, "Son of David".

The figure of David is thus an image of both historical and religious importance. In even starker contrast with this is the abjection into which he falls. Blinded by his passion for Bathsheba, he wrenches her from her husband, one of his most faithful warriors, and then orders his assassination in cold blood. This is something that makes one shudder: how could a man chosen by God fall so low?

The human being is truly greatness and wretchedness: he is great because he bears in himself God's image and is the object of his love; he is wretched because he can make evil use of the freedom which is his great privilege, ending by setting himself against his Creator.

God's verdict on David, pronounced by Nathan, sheds light on the intimate fibres of the conscience where armies, power and public opinion count for nothing but where one is alone with God himself.

"*You are that man*" are the words that nailed David to his responsibilities. Deeply struck by them, the king developed sincere repentance and opened himself to the offer of mercy. This is the path of conversion.

Today, it is Francis who invites us to make this journey beside David. From what the Saint's biographers have said of his youthful years, nothing would lead us to imagine actions as serious as those imputed to the ancient King of Israel. Yet, in the *Testament* he compiled during the last months of his life, Francis himself regarded the first 25 years of his existence as a time when he "was in sin" (cf. *Testament* 1).

Over and above its individual manifestations, he conceived of sin as organizing one's whole life around oneself, pursuing vain dreams of earthly glory.

While he was the "king of feasts" among the young men of Assisi (cf. *2 Cell*, 3, 7), he was not without spontaneous generosity. But this was still far from the Christian love that is given to the other without reserve.

As he himself recalled, the sight of lepers seemed bitter to him. Sin prevented him from overcoming his physical repugnance to recognize them as so many brothers to love. Conversion led him to show them mercy and at the same time obtained mercy for him.

Serving lepers, even to the point of kissing them, was not merely a philanthropic gesture, a "social" conversion, so to speak, but a true religious experience commanded by the initiative of God's grace and love: "The Lord himself", he said, "led me among them" (*Test.* 2). It was then that what had seemed bitter was changed into "sweetness in (his) soul and body" (*Test.* 3).

Yes, my dear brothers and sisters, converting to love means passing from bitterness to "sweetness", from sorrow to true joy. Man is truly himself and fulfils himself completely to the extent that he lives with God and of God, recognizing him and loving him in his brethren.

Another aspect of the journey of conversion emerges in the passage from the *Letter to the Galatians*. It is explained to us by another great convert, the Apostle Paul. The discussion in which the primitive community found itself involved is the immediate context of his words: in this discussion, many Christians who came from Judaism tended to link salvation to fulfilling the requirements of the ancient Law, thereby making the newness of Christ and the universality of his message vain.

Paul stood as a witness and champion of grace. On the road to Damascus, Christ's radiant face and strong voice had snatched him from his violent zeal as a persecutor and had kindled within him the new zeal of the Crucified One, who reconciles in his Cross those who are near and far (cf. Eph 2: 11-22).

Paul realized that in Christ the whole of the law is fulfilled and that those who adhere to Christ are united with him and fulfil the law. Bringing Christ, and with Christ the one God, to all peoples became his mission. Christ "is our peace, who has made us both one, and has broken down the dividing wall of hostility" (Eph 2: 14).

At the same time, Paul's very personal confession of love also expresses the common essence of Christian life: "The life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me" (Gal 2: 20b). And how can one respond to this love except by embracing the Crucified Christ to the point of living his very life? "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I

who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20a).

In speaking of being crucified with Christ, St Paul was not only referring to his new birth in Baptism, but to the whole of his life at the service of Christ. This connection with his apostolic life appears clearly in the final words of his defence of Christian freedom at the end of the *Letter to the Galatians*: "Henceforth let no man trouble me; for I bear on my body the marks of Jesus" (6: 17).

This is the first time in the history of Christianity that the words "the marks of Jesus" [stigmata] appear. In the dispute on the right way of seeing and living the Gospel, it is not, in the end, the arguments that decide our thought: it is the reality of life that decides, communion lived and suffered with Jesus, not only in ideas or words but in the depths of our existence, also involving the body, the flesh.

The bruises that the Apostle received in the long history of his passion are the witness of the presence of the Cross of Jesus in St Paul's body; they are his stigmata. Thus, one can say that it is not circumcision that saves: these stigmata are the consequence of his Baptism, the expression of his dying with Jesus, day after day, the sure sign of his being a new creature (cf. Gal 6: 15).

Moreover, by using the word "marks", Paul is referring to the ancient practice of branding the slave with his owner's mark. Thus, the servant was "marked" as the property of his owner and was under his protection. The sign of the Cross, stamped on Paul's skin through long drawn-out suffering, was his boast. It legitimized him as a true servant of Jesus, protected by the Lord's love.

Today, dear friends, Francis of Assisi presents all of these words of Paul anew, together with the power of his witness. Since the time when the faces of lepers, loved through love of God, made him understand in a certain way the mystery of *kenosis* (cf. Phil 2: 7) - the humbling of God in the flesh of the Son of Man -, from the time when the voice of the Crucifix in San Damiano put in his heart the programme for his life, "Go, Francis, repair my house" (2 *Ce/I*, 6, 10), his journey was none other than the daily effort to put on Christ.

He fell in love with Christ. The wounds of the Crucified One wounded his heart before leaving their marks on his body on Mount La Verna. He could truly say with Paul: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me".

And so we come to the evangelical heart of today's Word of God. Jesus himself, in the passage from Luke's Gospel which has just been read, explains to us the dynamism of authentic conversion, pointing out to us as a model the sinful woman redeemed by love. It should be recognized that this woman had ventured much.

The manner in which she chose to come before Jesus, bathing his feet with tears and drying them with her hair, kissing them and sprinkling scented oil upon them, was done to shock those who

viewed people in her condition with the merciless eye of the judge.

What is striking, on the other hand, is the tenderness with which Jesus treated this woman, exploited and judged by so many. In Jesus she found at last a pure eye, a heart capable of loving without exploiting. In the gaze and heart of Jesus she received the revelation of God-Love!

To avoid any misunderstanding, it should be noted that Jesus' mercy was not expressed by putting moral law in parentheses. For Jesus, good is good and evil is evil. Mercy does not change the connotations of sin but consumes it in a fire of love.

This purifying and healing effect is achieved if within the person there is a corresponding love which implies recognition of God's law, sincere repentance and the resolution to start a new life.

The sinful woman in the Gospel was pardoned greatly because she loved greatly. In Jesus, God comes to give love to us and to ask love of us.

My dear brothers and sisters, what was *the life of the converted Francis* if not a great act of love? This is revealed by his passionate prayers, rich in contemplation and praise, his tender embrace of the Divine Child at Greccio, his contemplation of the Passion at La Verna, his living "according to the form of the Holy Gospel" (2 *Test.* 14), his choice of poverty and his quest for Christ in the faces of the poor.

This was his conversion to Christ, to the point that he sought to be "transformed" into him, becoming his total image; and this explains his typical way of life by virtue of which he appears to us to be so modern, even in comparison with the great themes of our time such as the search for peace, the safeguard of nature, the promotion of dialogue among all people. In these things Francis was a true teacher. However, he was so by starting from Christ.

Indeed, Christ is "our peace" (cf. Eph 2: 14). Christ is the very principle of the cosmos, since through him all things were made (cf. Jn 1: 3). Christ is the divine truth, the eternal "*Logos*", in which, in time, every "*dia-logos*" finds its ultimate foundation. Francis profoundly embodies this "Christological" truth which is at the root of human existence, the cosmos and history.

I cannot forget in today's context the initiative of John Paul II, my Predecessor of holy memory, who in 1986 wanted to gather here at a [*Prayer Meeting for Peace*](#) representatives of the Christian denominations and of the different world religions.

It was a prophetic intuition and a moment of grace, as I said a few months ago in my Letter to the Bishop of this Town on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of that event. The choice of celebrating the meeting at Assisi was prompted precisely by the witness of Francis as a man of peace to whom so many people, even from other cultural and religious positions, look with

sympathy.

At the same time, the light of the "Poverello" on that initiative was a guarantee of Christian authenticity, since his life and message are so visibly based on Christ's choice to reject *a priori* any temptation of religious indifferentism which would have nothing to do with authentic interreligious dialogue.

The "spirit of Assisi", which has continued to spread throughout the world since that event, counters the spirit of violence and the abuse of religion as a pretext for violence. Assisi tells us that faithfulness to one's own religious conviction, and especially faithfulness to the Crucified and Risen Christ, is not expressed in violence and intolerance but in sincere respect for the other, in dialogue, in a proclamation that appeals to freedom and reason and in the commitment to peace and reconciliation.

The failure to combine acceptance, dialogue and respect for all with the certainty of faith which every Christian, like the Saint of Assisi, is bound to foster, proclaiming Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life of man (cf. Jn 14: 6), the one Saviour of the World, can be neither an evangelical nor a Franciscan attitude.

May Francis of Assisi obtain the grace of an authentic and full conversion to the love of Christ for this particular Church, for the Churches in Umbria, for the whole of the Church in Italy whose Patron he is, together with St Catherine of Siena, and for the many people in the world who refer to him.

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