



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO FRANCE ON THE OCCASION OF THE 150th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE APPARITIONS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY AT LOURDES
(SEPTEMBER 12 - 15, 2008)

**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH PRIESTS,
RELIGIOUS PEOPLE, SEMINARIANS AND DEACONS**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Notre-Dame Cathedral, Paris

Friday, 12 September 2008

*Dear Brother Cardinals and Bishops,
Reverend Canons of the Cathedral Chapter,
Reverend Chaplains of Notre-Dame,
Dear Priests and Deacons,
Dear Friends from Non-Catholic Churches and Ecclesial Communities,
Dear Brothers and Sisters!*

Blessed be God who has brought us together in a place so dear to the heart of every Parisian and all the people of France! Blessed be God, who grants us the grace of offering him our evening prayer and giving him due praise in the very words which the Church's liturgy inherited from the synagogue worship practised by Christ and his first disciples! Yes, blessed be God for coming to our assistance – *in adiutorium nostrum* – and helping us to offer him our sacrifice of praise!

We are gathered in the Mother Church of the Diocese of Paris, Notre-Dame Cathedral, which rises in the heart of the city as a living sign of God's presence in our midst. My predecessor, Pope Alexander III, laid its first stone, and Popes Pius VII and John Paul II honoured it by their

presence. I am happy to follow in their footsteps, a quarter of a century after coming here to offer a conference on catechesis. It is hard not to give thanks to the Creator of both matter and spirit for the beauty of this edifice. The Christians of Lutetia had originally built a cathedral dedicated to Saint Stephen, the first martyr; as time went on it became too small, and was gradually replaced, between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries, by the great building we admire today. The faith of the Middle Ages built the cathedrals, and here your ancestors came to praise God, to entrust to him their hopes and to express their love for him. Great religious and civil events took place in this shrine, where architects, painters, sculptors and musicians have given the best of themselves. We need but recall, among so many others, the architect Jean de Chelles, the painter Charles Le Brun, the sculptor Nicolas Coustou and the organists Louis Vierne and Pierre Cochereau. Art, as a pathway to God, and choral prayer, the Church's praise of the Creator, helped Paul Claudel, who attended Vespers here on Christmas Day 1886, to find the way to a personal experience of God. It is significant that God filled his soul with light during the chanting of the Magnificat, in which the Church listens to the song of the Virgin Mary, the Patroness of this church, who reminds the world that the Almighty has lifted up the lowly (cf. *Lk* 1:52). As the scene of other conversions, less celebrated but no less real, and as the pulpit from which preachers of the Gospel like Fathers Lacordaire, Monsabré and Samson transmitted the flame of their passion to the most varied congregations, Notre-Dame Cathedral rightly remains one of the most celebrated monuments of your country's heritage. Following a tradition dating back to the time of Saint Louis, I have just venerated the relics of the True Cross and the Crown of Thorns, which have now found a worthy home here, a true offering of the human spirit to the power of creative Love.

Beneath the vaults of this historic Cathedral, which witnesses to the ceaseless dialogue that God wishes to establish with all men and women, his word has just now echoed to become the substance of our evening sacrifice, as expressed in the offering of incense, which makes visible our praise of God. Providentially, the words of the Psalmist describe the emotion filling our souls with an exactness we could hardly have dared to imagine: "I was glad when they said to me, 'Let us go to the house of the Lord!'" (*Ps* 121:1). *Laetatus sum in his quae dicta sunt mihi*: the Psalmist's joy, brimming over in the very words of the Psalm, penetrates our hearts and resonates deeply within them. We truly rejoice to enter the house of the Lord, since, as the Fathers of the Church have taught us, this house is nothing other than a concrete symbol of Jerusalem on high, which comes down to us (cf. *Rev* 21:2) to offer us the most beautiful of dwelling-places. "If we dwell therein", writes Saint Hilary of Poitiers, "we are fellow citizens of the saints and members of the household of God, for it is the house of God" (*Tract. in Ps.* 121:2). And Saint Augustine adds: "This is a psalm of longing for the heavenly Jerusalem ... It is a Song of Steps, not for going down but for going up ... On our pilgrimage we sigh, in our homeland we will rejoice; but during this exile, we meet companions who have already seen the holy city and urge us to run towards it" (*En. in Ps.* 121:2). Dear friends, during Vespers this evening, we are united in thought and prayer with the voices of the countless men and women who have chanted this psalm in this very place down the centuries. We are united with the pilgrims who went up to Jerusalem and to the steps of its Temple, and with the thousands of men and women who understood that their earthly pilgrimage

was to end in heaven, in the eternal Jerusalem, trusting Christ to guide them there. What joy indeed, to know that we are invisibly surrounded by so great a crowd of witnesses!

Our pilgrimage to the holy city would not be possible if it were not made in the Church, the seed and the prefiguration of the heavenly Jerusalem. “Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labour in vain” (*Ps* 126:1). Who is this Lord, if not our Lord Jesus Christ? It is he who founded his Church and built it on rock, on the faith of the Apostle Peter. In the words of Saint Augustine, “It is Jesus Christ our Lord who himself builds his temple. Many indeed labour to build, yet unless the Lord intervenes to build, in vain do the builders labour” (*Tract. in Ps.* 126:2). Dear friends, Augustine goes on to ask how we can know who these builders are, and his answer is this: “All those who preach God’s word in the Church, all who are ministers of God’s divine Sacraments. All of us run, all of us work, all of us build”, yet it is God alone who, within us, “builds, exhorts, and inspires awe; who opens our understanding and guides our minds to faith” (*ibid.*). What marvels surround our work in the service of God’s word! We are instruments of the Holy Spirit; God is so humble that he uses us to spread his word. We become his voice, once we have listened carefully to the word coming from his mouth. We place his word on our lips in order to bring it to the world. He accepts the offering of our prayer and through it he communicates himself to everyone we meet. Truly, as Paul tells the Ephesians, “he has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing” (1:3), for he has chosen us to be his witnesses to the ends of the earth, and he made us his elect, even before we came into existence, by a mysterious gift of his grace.

God’s Word, the Eternal Word, who was with him from the beginning (cf. *Jn* 1:1), was born of a woman, born a subject of the law, in order to redeem the subjects of the law, “to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as sons” (cf. *Gal* 4:4-5). The Son of God took flesh in the womb of a woman, a virgin. Your cathedral is a living hymn of stone and light in praise of that act, unique in the annals of human history: the eternal Word of God entering our history in the fulness of time to redeem us by his self-offering in the sacrifice of the Cross. Our earthly liturgies, entirely ordered to the celebration of this unique act within history, will never fully express its infinite meaning. Certainly, the beauty of our celebrations can never be sufficiently cultivated, fostered and refined, for nothing can be too beautiful for God, who is himself infinite Beauty. Yet our earthly liturgies will never be more than a pale reflection of the liturgy celebrated in the Jerusalem on high, the goal of our pilgrimage on earth. May our own celebrations nonetheless resemble that liturgy as closely as possible and grant us a foretaste of it!

Even now the word of God is given to us as the soul of our apostolate, the soul of our priestly life. Each morning the word awakens us. Each morning the Lord himself “opens our ear” (cf. *Is* 50:5) through the psalms in the Office of Readings and Morning Prayer. Throughout the day, the word of God becomes the substance of the prayer of the whole Church, as she bears witness in this way to her fidelity to Christ. In the celebrated phrase of Saint Jerome, to be taken up in the XII Assembly of the Synod of Bishops next month: “Ignorance of the Scriptures is ignorance of Christ” (*Prol. in Is.*). Dear brother priests, do not be afraid to spend much time reading and meditating on

the Scriptures and praying the Divine Office! Almost without your knowing it, God's word, read and pondered in the Church, acts upon you and transforms you. As the manifestation of divine Wisdom, if that word becomes your life "companion", it will be your "good counsellor" and an "encouragement in cares and grief" (*Wis 8:9*).

"The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword", as the author of the Letter to the Hebrews tells us (4:12). Dear seminarians, who are preparing to receive the sacrament of Holy Orders and thus to share in the threefold office of teaching, governing and sanctifying, this word is given to you as a precious treasure. By meditating on it daily, you will enter into the very life of Christ which you will be called to radiate all around you. By his word, the Lord Jesus instituted the Holy Sacrament of his Body and Blood; by his word, he healed the sick, cast out demons and forgave sins; by his word, he revealed to us the hidden mysteries of his Kingdom. You are called to become stewards of this word which accomplishes what it communicates. Always cultivate a thirst for the word of God! Thus you will learn to love everyone you meet along life's journey. In the Church everyone has a place, everyone! Every person can and must find a place in her.

And you, dear deacons, effective co-workers of the Bishops and priests, continue to love the word of God! You proclaim the Gospel at the heart of the Eucharistic celebration, and you expound it in the catechesis you offer to your brothers and sisters. Make the Gospel the centre of your lives, of your service to your neighbours, of your entire *diakonia*. Without seeking to take the place of priests, but assisting them with your friendship and your activity, may you be living witnesses to the infinite power of God's word!

In a particular way, men and women religious and all consecrated persons draw life from the Wisdom of God expressed in his word. The profession of the evangelical counsels has configured you, dear consecrated persons, to Christ, who for our sakes became poor, obedient and chaste. Your only treasure – which, to tell the truth, will alone survive the passage of time and the curtain of death – is the word of the Lord. It is he who said: "Heaven and earth will pass away; my words will not pass away" (*Mt 24:35*). Your obedience is, etymologically, a "hearing", for the word *obey* comes from the Latin *obaudire*, meaning to turn one's ear to someone or something. In obeying, you turn your soul towards the one who is the Way, and the Truth and the Life (cf. *Jn 14:6*), and who says to you, as Saint Benedict taught his monks: "Hear, my child, the teaching of the Master, and hearken to it with all your heart" (*Prologue to the Rule of Saint Benedict*). Finally, let yourselves be purified daily by him who said: "Every branch that bears fruit my Father prunes, to make it bear more fruit" (*Jn 15:2*). The purity of God's word is the model for your own chastity, ensuring its spiritual fruitfulness.

With unfailing confidence in the power of God, who has saved us "in hope" (cf. *Rom 8:24*) and who wishes to make of us one flock under the guidance of one shepherd, Christ Jesus, I pray for the unity of the Church. I greet once again with respect and affection the representatives of the

Christian Churches and ecclesial communities who, as our brothers and sisters, have come to pray Vespers together with us in this cathedral. So great is the power of God's word that we can all be entrusted to it, remembering what Saint Paul once did, our privileged intercessor during this year. As Paul took leave of the presbyters of Ephesus at Miletus, he did not hesitate to entrust them "to God and to the word of his grace" (Acts 20:32), while warning them against every form of division. I implore the Lord to increase within us the sense of this unity of the word of God, which is the sign, pledge and guarantee of the unity of the Church: there is no love in the Church without love of the word, no Church without unity around Christ the Redeemer, no fruits of redemption without love of God and neighbour, according to the two commandments which sum up all of Sacred Scripture!

Dear brothers and sisters, in Our Lady we have the finest example of fidelity to God's word. Her great fidelity found fulfilment in the Incarnation; with absolute confidence, Mary can say: "Behold the handmaid of the Lord; let it be done to me according to your word!" (Lk 1:38). Our evening prayer is about to take up the Magnificat, the song of her whom all generations will call blessed. Mary believed in the fulfilment of the words the Lord had spoken to her (cf. Lk 1:45); she hoped against all hope in the resurrection of her Son; and so great was her love for humanity that she was given to us as our Mother (cf. Jn 19:27). Thus we see that "Mary is completely at home with the word of God; with ease she moves in and out of it. She speaks and thinks with the word of God; the word of God becomes her word, and her word issues from the word of God" (*Deus Caritas Est*, 41). To her, then, we can say with confidence: "Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom!" (*Spe Salvi*, 50). Amen.

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