



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO SAN GIOVANNI ROTONDOEUCCHARISTIC CONCELEBRATION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Square outside the Church of Saint Pio of Pietrelcina

Sunday, 21 June 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

At the heart of my pilgrimage to this place where everything speaks of the life and holiness of Padre Pio of Pietrelcina, I have the joy of celebrating for you and with you the Eucharist, a mystery that was the centre of his whole life, the origin of his vocation, the power of his witness, the consecration of his sacrifice. With deep affection I greet all of you who have gathered here in large numbers, and all those who have joined us via radio and television. In the first place, I greet Archbishop Domenico Umberto D'Ambrosio who after years of faithful service to this diocesan community is preparing to take over the care of the Archdiocese of Lecce. I cordially thank him too for having expressed your sentiments. I greet the other Bishops who are concelebrating. I address a special greeting to the Capuchin Friars with the Minister General Fra Mauro Jöhri, the Definitor General, the Minister Provincial, the Father Guardian of the Convent, the Rector of the Shrine and the Capuchin Fraternity of San Giovanni Rotondo. I also greet with gratitude all those who make their contribution by serving the Shrine and the annexed institutions; I greet the civil and military Authorities; I greet the priests, the deacons, the other religious, men and women, and all the faithful. I address an affectionate thought to everyone in the House for the Relief of Suffering, to people who are all alone and to all the inhabitants of your town.

We have just heard the Gospel reading of the calming of the storm, which was presented with a brief but incisive passage from the Book of Job, in which God reveals himself as the Lord of the sea. Jesus rebukes the wind and orders the sea to be calm, he speaks to it as if it were identified with the power of the devil. In fact, according to what the First Reading and Psalm 107[106] tell us, in the Bible the sea is considered a threatening, chaotic and potentially destructive element which God the Creator alone can dominate, govern and calm.

Yet, there is another force a positive force that moves the world, capable of transforming and renewing creatures: the power of "Christ's love" (2 Cor 5: 14) as St Paul calls it in his Second Letter to the Corinthians not, therefore essentially a cosmic force, but rather divine, transcendent. It also acts on the cosmos but, in itself, Christ's love is "another" power and the Lord manifested this transcendent otherness in his Pasch, in the "holiness" of the "way" he chose to free us from the dominion of evil, as happened for the Exodus when he brought the Jews out of Egypt through the waters of the Red Sea. "Your way, O God, is holy", the Psalmist exclaims, "Your way was through the sea/ your path through the great waters" (Ps 77[76]: 13, 19). In the Paschal Mystery, Jesus passed through the abyss of death, because in this way God wanted to renew the universe through the death and Resurrection of his Son, who "died for all", that all might live "for him who for their sake died and was raised" (2 Cor 5: 15), and not live for their own sake alone.

The solemn gesture of calming the stormy sea was a clear sign of Christ's lordship over negative powers and induces one to think of his divinity: "Who then is this", his own Disciples asked fearfully, "that even wind and sea obey him?" (Mk 4: 41). Their faith is not yet firm, it is being formed; it is a mingling of fear and trust; on the other hand, Jesus' confident abandonment to the Father is total and pure. This is why he could sleep during the storm, completely safe in God's arms. The time would come, however, when Jesus too would feel fear and anguish, when his hour came he was to feel the full burden of humanity's sins upon him, like a wave at high tide about to break over him. That was indeed to be a terrible tempest, not cosmic but spiritual. It was to be the final, extreme assault of evil against the Son of God.

Yet, in that hour Jesus did not doubt in the power of God the Father or in his closeness, even though he had to experience to the full the distance of hatred from love, of falsehood from the truth, of sin from grace. He experienced this drama in himself with excruciating pain, especially in Gethsemane, before his arrest, and then throughout his Passion until his death on the Cross. In that hour, Jesus on the one hand was one with the Father, fully abandoned *to* him; on the other, since he showed solidarity to sinners, he was as it were separated and felt abandoned *by* him.

Some Saints have lived Jesus' experience intensely and personally. [Padre Pio of Pietrelcina](#) is one such. A simple man, of humble origin, whom "Christ made... his own" (Phil 3: 12) as the Apostle Paul wrote of himself to make him a chosen instrument of the eternal power of his Cross: a power of love for souls, of forgiveness and of reconciliation, of spiritual fatherhood, of effective solidarity with the suffering. The stigmata that marked his Body closely united him with the Crucified and Risen One. A genuine follower of St Francis of Assisi, like the *Poverello* he made St Paul's experience his own, as he described it in his Letters: "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20); or: "death is at work in us, but life in you" (2 Cor 4: 12). This does not mean alienation, the loss of one's personality: God never annihilates human beings but transforms them with his Spirit and orientates them to serving his plan of salvation. Padre Pio retained his own natural gifts and his own temperament, but he offered all things to God, who was able to make free use of them to extend Christ's work: to

proclaim the Gospel, to forgive sins and to heal the sick in body and in mind.

Like Jesus, [Padre Pio](#) did not have to battle with earthly enemies, in radical combat, but rather with the spirit of evil (cf. Eph 6: 12). The greatest "storms" that threatened him were the assaults of the devil, from which he defended himself with "the armour of God", with "the shield of faith" and with the "sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God" (Eph 6: 11, 16, 17). By staying united with Jesus, he always focussed on the depth of the human drama, and for this reason offered himself up as well as his many sufferings and could expend himself for the healing and relief of the sick, a privileged sign of God's mercy, of his Kingdom which comes, indeed, which is already in the world, of the victory of love and life over sin and death. To guide souls and to alleviate suffering; we may thus sum up [St Pio of Pietrelcina](#) in the words of the Servant of God [Pope Paul VI](#): "he was a man of prayer and suffering" (*Address to the Capuchin Chapter Fathers*, 20 February 1971).

Dear friends, Friars Minor Capuchin, the members of prayer groups and all the faithful of San Giovanni Rotondo, you are the heirs of [Padre Pio](#) and the legacy he has bequeathed to you is his holiness. In one of his letters he wrote: "It seems that Jesus had no work for his hands other than to sanctify your soul" (Epist. II, p. 155). This was always his priority concern, his priestly and paternal caring: so that people might return to God, might be able to experience his mercy and, inwardly renewed, rediscover the beauty and joy of being Christians, of living in communion with Jesus, of belonging to his Church and of putting the Gospel into practice. Padre Pio attracted people to the way of holiness with his own witness, pointing out by his example the "track" that leads to it: prayer and charity.

First of all *prayer*. Like all great men of God [Padre Pio](#) himself had become prayer, body and soul. His days were a Rosary lived, that is, a continuous meditation and assimilation of Christ's mysteries in spiritual union with the Virgin Mary. This explains the unique coexistence within him of supernatural gifts and human concreteness.

And it all culminated in the celebration of holy Mass in which he was fully united with the dead and Risen Lord. From prayer, as an ever living source, flowed *charity*. The love that he carried in his heart and passed on to others was full of tenderness, always attentive to the real situations of people and families. Especially in the sick and the suffering, he encouraged special love for the Heart of Christ and it was precisely from this that the project of a great work dedicated to "the relief of suffering" took its origin and form. It is not possible to understand or interpret this institution adequately if it is separated from the source that inspired it, which is evangelical charity, enlivened, in its turn, by prayer.

Today, dear friends, [Padre Pio](#) presents all this to our attention anew. The risks of activism and secularization are ever present; thus my [Visit](#) is also intended to strengthen your fidelity to the mission you have inherited from your most beloved Father. Many of you, men and women religious and lay people, are so taken up by the thousands of tasks demanded of you by the

service to pilgrims or to the sick in hospital that you run the risk of neglecting the one truly necessary thing: listening to Christ in order to do God's will. When you realize that you are close to running this risk, look to Padre Pio: at his example, at his suffering, and invoke his intercession so that he may obtain for you from the Lord the light and strength that you need to continue your own mission, steeped in love for God and in fraternal charity. And may he continue from Heaven to exercise that exquisite spiritual fatherhood that distinguished him during his earthly existence; may he continue to accompany his confreres, his spiritual children and the entire work that he began. Together with St Francis and with Our Lady whom he so deeply loved and made loved in this world, may he always watch over all of you and protect you. And then, also in the storms that may suddenly break, you will be able to feel the breath of the Holy Spirit that is stronger than any contrary wind and impels the Barque of the Church and each one of us onward. This is why we must always live in serenity and cultivate in our hearts joy, giving thanks to the Lord. "His love is for ever" (Responsorial psalm).

Amen!

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