



The Holy See

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

MEETING WITH CLERGY AND MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Cathedral of San Rufino
Sunday, 17 June 2007*

*Dear Priests and Deacons,
Dear Men and Women Religious,*

I can sincerely say that I was looking forward to meeting you in this ancient Cathedral in which the diocesan Church usually gathers around the Bishop.

This morning, after being with the different members of the People of God during the Eucharistic Celebration outside the Basilica of St Francis, it seemed to me beautiful to arrange a special Meeting with you, also because of the presence of so many consecrated people in this Diocese.

I thank Archbishop Domenico Sorrentino, Pastor of this Church, for expressing your sentiments of communion and affection. And I have indeed sensed your affection right from the start. I offer you heartfelt thanks.

I also warmly greet the Bishop emeritus, Bishop Sergio Goretti, who for years, as we heard, 25 years, guided this Church, renowned for her long and holy history. I remember so many wonderful meetings that we had here in Assisi. Thank you, Your Excellency!

As you know, as Archbishop Sorrentino has recalled, the occasion which brings me to Assisi today is the commemoration of the *Eighth Centenary of the Conversion of Francis*. I too have become a pilgrim.

Already as a student and when I was preparing for a professorship, I studied St Bonaventure and consequently, St Francis, too. I was making a spiritual pilgrimage to Assisi well before coming here in person. Thus, in this long pilgrimage of my life, I am glad to be with you today in the Cathedral, with you priests and men and women religious.

Having trodden in the footsteps of the "Poverello", I shall be inspired mainly by him in what I say. However, in the context of this Cathedral, I cannot fail to mention the other Saints who have made this Church famous, starting with the Patron, St Rufinus, joined by St Rinaldo and Blessed Angelo.

It goes without saying that, beside Francis, there is Clare, whose house was in the neighbourhood of this Cathedral. I have just been able to see the baptistery where tradition claims that both St Francis and St Clare were baptised and later, St Gabriel of Our Lady of the Sorrowful Virgin.

This detail gives me a starting point for a first reflection. If we are speaking today of Francis' conversion, thinking of the radical life choice he made as a young man, we cannot forget that his first "conversion" took place in the gift of Baptism. The full response which he was to give as an adult would merely be the ripening of the seed of holiness that he received then.

It is important that we have a deeper awareness of the *baptismal* dimension of holiness in our life and in our pastoral approach. It is a gift and a duty for all the baptized.

My venerable and beloved Predecessor was referring to this dimension when he wrote in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: "To ask catechumens: "Do you wish to receive Baptism?" means at the same time to ask them: "Do you wish to become holy?" (n. 31).

The millions of pilgrims attracted by Francis' charism who walk along these streets must be helped to grasp the essential core of Christian life and to aspire to the "high standard", which is precisely, holiness. It is not enough for them to admire Francis: through him they must be able to encounter Christ, to profess him and love him with "true faith; certain hope; perfect love" (*Prayer Before the Crucifix*, 1).

Christians of our time are more and more confronted by the trend to accept a diminished Christ, whose extraordinary humanity is admired but whose divinity in its profound mystery is rejected. Francis himself suffers a sort of mutilation when he is cast as a witness of albeit important values appreciated by contemporary culture, which overlooks the fact that his profound decision, we might say the heart of his life, was his choice for Christ.

In Assisi, a high-profile pastoral approach is more necessary than ever. To this end, you, priests and deacons, and you, persons of consecrated life, must have a strong sense of the privilege and responsibility of living in this territory of grace. It is true that all who visit this City receive a beneficial message, even from its "stones" and history. The stones speak clearly but this does not prescind from making a vigorous spiritual proposal, which can help when confronting the many seductions of relativism that are a feature of today's culture.

Assisi has the gift of appealing to people of many cultures and religions, in the name of a dialogue that constitutes an indispensable value. John Paul II linked his name with this icon of Assisi as the City of dialogue and peace. I appreciated, in this regard, that you also wished to honour the memory of his special relationship with this City by dedicating to him a hall with paintings portraying him right beside this Cathedral.

It was clear to John Paul II that Assisi's vocation to dialogue is bound to Francis' message and must continue to be hinged on the structural pillars of his spirituality.

In Francis everything started from God and returned to God. His *Praises of God Most High* reveal his constantly enraptured heart in conversation with the Trinity. His relationship with Christ found its most meaningful place in the Eucharist. Even his love for neighbour developed from his experience of God's love.

When he mentioned in his *Testament* his meeting with lepers as the event that began his conversion, he emphasized that it was God himself who led him to that merciful embrace (cf. *Testament 2*).

The various biographical testimonies agree in describing his conversion as a gradual opening to the Word which comes from on high. The same logic emerged in his begging for alms and his almsgiving, motivated by the love of God (cf. *2 Cel 47, 77*).

His gazing at nature was actually contemplation of the Creator in the beauty of his creatures. His actual hope of peace is thus modulated as a prayer, since the way in which he was to express it was revealed to him: "May the Lord give you peace" (*2 Test. 23*).

Francis was a man for others because he was *a man of God* through and through. To seek to separate the "horizontal" dimension of his message from the "vertical" would make Francis unrecognizable.

It is up to you, ministers of the Gospel and of the altar, to you, men and women religious, to develop a proclamation of the Christian faith that is equal to today's challenges. You have a great history and I desire to express my appreciation for all that you already do.

If today I am returning to Assisi as Pope, you know, however, that it is not my first Visit to this City and that it has always made a most beautiful impression on me. Your spiritual and pastoral traditions must retain their perennial values, yet at the same time they must be renewed in order to give an authentic answer to new questions.

I would therefore like to encourage you to adhere confidently to the pastoral programme that your Bishop has presented to you. In it are pointed out the great and demanding perspectives of *communion*, *charity* and *mission*, and it emphasizes the fact that they are rooted in an authentic conversion to Christ.

Lectio divina, the centrality of the Eucharist, the Liturgy of the Hours and Eucharistic Adoration and contemplation of the mysteries of Christ in the Marian perspective of the Rosary ensure that atmosphere and spiritual tension without which all pastoral commitments, fraternal life, even the commitment to the poor, would risk being shipwrecked because of our frailty and weariness.

Have courage, dear friends! The Church of all regions of the world looks with special sympathy to this City, to this Ecclesial Community. Francis' name, accompanied by Clare's, asks that this City be distinguished by a special missionary enthusiasm; but for this very reason it also requires that this Church live an intense *experience of communion*.

The "*Motu Proprio*" *Totius Orbis* fits into this perspective. With it, as your Bishop mentioned, I established that the two important Papal Basilicas of St Francis and St Mary of the Angels, although continuing to enjoy the Holy See's special attention through the Papal Legate, for pastoral concerns would come under the jurisdiction of the Bishop of this Church.

I am truly delighted to know that the new journey has begun under the banner of great willingness and collaboration, and I am certain that it will bear rich fruit.

Indeed, the time was right to take this step for various reasons. It was suggested by the new breath that the Second Vatican Council brought to the theology of the particular Church, showing how the mystery of the universal Church is expressed in her. The particular Churches, in fact, "are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them (*in quibus et ex quibus*) that the one and unique Catholic Church exists" (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n. 23).

There is a mutual inner appeal between the universal and the particular Churches. Precisely while they live their identity as "portions" of the People of God, the individual Churches also express communion and "diakonia" in relation to the universal Church, scattered across the world and enlivened by the Spirit and served by the ministry of unity of the Successor of Peter.

Such "catholic" openness belongs to each Diocese and in a certain way marks all the dimensions

of her life. However, it is accentuated when a Church possesses a charism which attracts people and is active beyond her own boundaries.

And how can we deny that this is the charism of Francis and of his message? The many pilgrims who come to Assisi spur this Church on to surpass herself. Moreover, it is undeniable that Francis would have had a special relationship with his hometown. Assisi, in a certain way, is identified with the journey of holiness of its great son. This is demonstrated by my own Pilgrimage today, which sees me stopping at so many places, of course not all, that were part of Francis' life in this City.

I am then also pleased to emphasize that the spirituality of Francis of Assisi helps both in understanding the universality of the Church, which he expressed in his special devotion to the Vicar of Christ, and in understanding the value of the particular Church, given that his relationship with the Bishop of Assisi was strong and filial.

It is necessary to rediscover not only the biographical but also the "ecclesiological" value of that encounter of the young Francis with Bishop Guido, to whose discernment and in whose hands, stripping himself of everything, he made his choice of life for Christ (cf. 1 *Cel* I, 6, 14-15).

The timeliness of a unifying arrangement, as was assured by the "[Motu Proprio](#)", became advisable also because of the need for better coordinated and more effective pastoral action.

Since the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent Magisterium, it has been necessary for consecrated people and communities of consecrated life, also those of pontifical right, to fit organically into the life of the particular Church, in conformity with their Constitutions and the laws of the Church (cf. [Christus Dominus](#), nn. 33-35; *CIC* 678-680).

If these communities are entitled to expect acceptance and respect for their own charism, they must nevertheless avoid living as "islands" and must integrate themselves with conviction and generosity into the service and pastoral programme adopted by the Bishop for the entire diocesan community.

I address a special thought to you, dear priests, who work every day together with the deacons at the service of the People of God. Your enthusiasm, your communion and your life of prayer and generous ministry are indispensable. It can happen that you feel weariness or fear as you face the new demands and problems, but we must trust that the Lord will give us the necessary strength to do what he asks of us.

He - let us pray and we are sure - will never let vocations be lacking if we implore him with prayer and at the same time are concerned to seek and foster them with a fervent and imaginative youth and vocations ministry, which can reveal the beauty of the priestly ministry. In this context, I also gladly greet the superiors and students of the Pontifical Seminary of the Umbrian Region.

You, consecrated persons, give account with your lives of the hope you have placed in Christ. You are a great treasure for this Church, both in the context of parish pastoral work and for the benefit of the very many pilgrims who often come and ask you for hospitality and also expect a spiritual witness of you.

May you in particular, cloistered Religious, be able to hold high the torch of contemplation. I would like to repeat to each one of you the words which St Clare wrote in a letter to Agnes of Bohemia, asking her to make Christ her "mirror": "Look into this mirror every day, O Queen, spouse of Jesus Christ, and continually examine your face in it..." (Fourth Letter to Agnes, 15).

May your hidden life of prayer never leave you out of the Church's missionary dynamism; on the contrary, may it place you at its heart. The loftier the apostolic challenges are, the greater is the need for your charism. Be signs of the love of Christ, to whom all the other brothers and sisters exposed to the toil of apostolic life and secular commitment in the world may look.

As I renew the expression of my affection to you, full of trust, and entrust you to the intercession of the Blessed Virgin Mary and of your Saints, starting with Francis and Clare, I impart a special Apostolic Blessing to you all.

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