



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO GERMANY

22-25 SEPTEMBER 2011

VESPERS OF THE BLESSED VIRGIN MARY

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Chapel of the Shrine, Etzelsbach

Friday, 23 September 2011

(Video)

Dear Sisters and Brothers,

I would like to greet all of you most warmly, all who have come here to Etzelsbach for this time of prayer. Ever since my youth I have heard so much about Eichsfeld that I thought at some point I must see it for myself and pray together with you. I offer sincere thanks to Bishop Wanke, who pointed out to me this strip of land from the aircraft, and I thank your speakers and representatives who have brought me gifts symbolic of this region, thereby giving me at least an indication of the variety that is found here.

So I am very glad that my wish to visit Eichsfeld has been fulfilled, and that here in Etzelsbach I can now thank Mary in company with you. “Here in the beloved quiet vale”, as the pilgrims’ hymn says, “under the old lime trees”, Mary gives us security and new strength. During two godless dictatorships, which sought to deprive the people of their ancestral faith, the inhabitants of Eichsfeld were in no doubt that here in this shrine at Etzelsbach an open door and a place of inner peace was to be found. The special friendship with Mary that grew from all this, is what we seek to cultivate further, not least through today’s celebration of Vespers of the Blessed Virgin Mary.

When Christians of all times and places turn to Mary, they are acting on the spontaneous conviction that Jesus cannot refuse his mother what she asks; and they are relying on the unshakable trust that Mary is also *our* mother – a mother who has experienced the greatest of all

sorrows, who feels all our griefs with us and ponders in a maternal way how to overcome them. How many people down the centuries have made pilgrimages to Mary, in order to find comfort and strength before the image of the Mother of Sorrows, as here at Etzelsbach!

Let us look upon her likeness: a woman of middle age, her eyelids heavy with much weeping, gazing pensively into the distance, as if meditating in her heart upon everything that had happened. On her knees rests the lifeless body of her son, she holds him gently and lovingly, like a precious gift. We see the marks of the crucifixion on his bare flesh. The left arm of the corpse is pointing straight down. Perhaps this sculpture of the *Pietà*, like so many others, was originally placed above an altar. The crucified Jesus would then be pointing with his outstretched arm to what was taking place on the altar, where the holy sacrifice that he had accomplished becomes present in the Eucharist.

A particular feature of the holy image of Etzelsbach is the position of Our Lord's body. In most representations of the *Pietà*, the dead Jesus is lying with his head facing left, so that the observer can see the wounded side of the Crucified Lord. Here in Etzelsbach, however, the wounded side is concealed, because the body is facing the other way. It seems to me that a deep meaning lies hidden in this representation, that only becomes apparent through silent contemplation: in the Etzelsbach image, the hearts of Jesus and his mother are turned to one another; the hearts come close to each other. They exchange their love. We know that the heart is also the seat of the deepest affection and the most intimate compassion. In Mary's heart there is room for the love that her divine Son wants to bestow upon the world.

Marian devotion focuses on contemplation of the relationship between the Mother and her divine Son. In their prayers and sufferings, in their thanksgiving and joy, the faithful have constantly discovered new dimensions and qualities which this mystery can help to disclose for us, for example when the image of the Immaculate Heart of Mary is seen as a symbol of her deep and unreserved loving unity with Christ. It is not self-realization, the desire for self-possession and self-formation, that truly enables people to flourish, according to the model that modern life so often proposes to us, which easily turns into a sophisticated form of selfishness. Rather it is an attitude of self-giving, self-emptying, directed towards the heart of Mary and hence towards the heart of Christ and towards our neighbour: this is what enables us to find ourselves.

"We know that in everything God works for good with those who love him, who are called according to his purpose" (*Rom 8:28*), as we have just heard in the reading from the Letter to the Romans. With Mary, God has worked for good in everything, and he does not cease, through Mary, to cause good to spread further in the world. Looking down from the Cross, from the throne of grace and salvation, Jesus gave us his mother Mary to be our mother. At the moment of his self-offering for mankind, he makes Mary as it were the channel of the rivers of grace that flow from the Cross. At the foot of the Cross, Mary becomes our fellow traveller and protector on life's journey. "By her motherly love she cares for her son's sisters and brothers who still journey on

earth surrounded by dangers and difficulties, until they are led into their blessed home,” as the Second Vatican Council expressed it (*Lumen Gentium*, 62). Yes indeed, in life we pass through high-points and low-points, but Mary intercedes for us with her Son and helps us to discover the power of his divine love, and to open ourselves to that love.

Our trust in the powerful intercession of the Mother of God and our gratitude for the help we have repeatedly experienced impel us, as it were, to think beyond the needs of the moment. What does Mary actually want to say to us, when she rescues us from some trial? She wants to help us grasp the breadth and depth of our Christian vocation. With a mother’s tenderness, she wants to make us understand that our whole life should be a response to the love of our God, who is so rich in mercy. “Understand,” she seems to say to us, “that God, who is the source of all that is good and who never desires anything other than your true happiness, has the right to demand of you a life that yields wholly and joyfully to his will, striving at the same time that others may do likewise.” Where God is, there is a future. Indeed – when we allow God’s love to pervade and to shape the whole of our lives, then heaven stands open. Then it is possible so to shape the present that it corresponds more and more to the Good News of our Lord Jesus Christ. Then the little things of everyday life acquire meaning, and great problems find solutions.

Confident of this, we pray to Mary; confident of this, we put our faith in Jesus Christ, our Lord and God. Amen.

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