



The Holy See

**LETTER OF JOHN PAUL II
TO THE BISHOP OF LIÈGE
ON THE 50th ANNIVERSARY OF THE RECOGNITION
OF THE APPARITIONS OF OUR LADY AT BANNEUX**

*To the Most Reverend Albert Houssiau
Bishop of Liège*

1. Fifty years ago, on 22 August 1949, Bishop Louis-Joseph Kerkhofs, your predecessor in the see of Liège, definitively recognized the reality of the apparitions of Our Lady of the Poor in Banneux. Moved to recall the Eucharist which I myself, during my Apostolic Visit to Belgium in May 1985, had the joy of celebrating in this shrine which has an important outreach, I gladly join in the prayer of the pilgrims who go there to seek comfort and strength from Our Lady of Banneux, invoked by the name of *Our Lady of the Poor, Health of the Sick*. With the whole Church, I thank the Lord for the outstanding mission carried out by the Mother of the Saviour and for the example of faith she offers the entire Christian people, called, like her, to follow Christ, every day repeating her "yes", her *fiat*.

2. In 1933, a few years before the Second World War, Mary appeared in Banneux as a messenger of peace. In a certain way she was summoning the leaders of society to become the artisans of peace and educators of peoples, inviting each person to care for his brothers and sisters, the lowliest, the most despised and the suffering, who are all beloved by God. Today it is still up to us to pray that "Mary, Mediatrix of grace, ever watchful and concerned for all her children, [may] obtain for all humanity the precious gift of harmony and peace" (*Message on the 50th Anniversary of the End of the Second World War in Europe*, 8 May 1995, n. 16).

3. In contemplating the Virgin Mary, the faithful discover the marvels God worked in his humble handmaid, and in her, Mother of the Church and Queen of Heaven, see the prefiguration of what humanity is called to be through the grace of salvation which was obtained for us through the Saviour's Death and Resurrection.

The faithful who enrol in Mary's school take a path of prayer that guarantees a Christian life; with her they discover the mercy of the Father who stoops down to all human beings, especially the poor, the little and the suffering. Therefore we can tirelessly repeat with Mary her canticle of thanksgiving: "He has regarded the low estate of his handmaiden. For behold, henceforth all generations will call me blessed" (*Lk 1: 48*).

4. Every pilgrimage a Christian makes is an important moment in his spiritual life. It helps him discover the power of prayer which unifies the being and is the source of the witness each person is called to bear, and of his mission. With Mary we become humble children in the Lord's hands, asking forgiveness for our faults and thereby rediscovering the joy of being God's children who know they are infinitely loved and so have a deep desire to be converted.

Whoever you are, as St Bernard said, "when you are assaulted by the winds of temptation, when you see the pitfalls of misfortune, look at the Star, call upon Mary". "If, troubled by the burden of sin and ashamed at the blemishes on your conscience, you begin to feel overcome by sadness and the temptation to despair, think of Mary. In peril, anguish and doubt, think of Mary, call upon Mary. May her name be for ever on your lips and in your heart. And to obtain her intercession, never cease to follow her example". Be certain that "in following her, you will not stray and in calling upon her, you will not despair" (*Second homily on the Gospel passage: "The Angel Gabriel was sent"*). Then, on returning to their daily lives, the faithful receive the grace of renewed trust. They are made more attentive to God's word and the responsibility they receive through their Baptism. They also recognize more readily God's signs on their path.

5. The apparitions of Banneux invite Christians to question themselves about the mystery of suffering, which finds its meaning in the mystery of the Cross of the Lord. When he faces suffering which, in human terms, is inexplicable, the believer turns spontaneously to God who alone can help him to bear it and endure it, sustaining his hope of salvation and eternal beatitude. In a very special way, God is tenderly and lovingly present to every person afflicted by illness, for he is moved by the experiences of his people, the people he loves, to whom he wants to bring relief and comfort. "Then the Lord said, "I have seen the affliction of my people ... and have heard their cry.... I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them ... and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land"" (*Ex 3: 7-8*). As I explained in the Apostolic Letter *Salvifici doloris*, every person who offers his suffering contributes mysteriously to raising the world to God, and shares especially in the work of our redemption (cf. n. 19). He is thus joined particularly to Christ our Saviour.

6. I also commend to God those whose mission it is to care for their brethren, to help them and to accompany them with compassion in their physical and moral trials, as well as the members of the pastoral care teams in the hospitals and clinics and everyone who visits the sick and the elderly.

Following the example of the Good Samaritan, they are, as it were, the loving hand of the Lord

outstretched to those who are suffering in body and soul; they show them that no trial whatsoever can take away their dignity as children of God (cf. *ibid.*, nn. 28-30). May they tirelessly continue their mission, thus reminding the world that every human life, from its origin to its natural end, is precious in God's eyes!

7. As I entrust you to the intercession of Our Lady of Banneux and the saints of your land, I cordially impart my Apostolic Blessing to you, as well as to the faithful who travel to the shrine of Banneux in the spirit of the Great Jubilee and to the priests and faithful of your Diocese and of all the Dioceses of Belgium.

From the Vatican, 31 July 1999.