



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO VERONA ON THE OCCASION
OF THE FOURTH NATIONAL ECCLESIAL CONVENTION

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Bentegodi Stadium
Thursday, 19 October 2006*

*Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

Today, in this Eucharistic celebration we live the key moment of the Fourth National Convention of the Church in Italy, which is gathered around the Successor of Peter. The heart of every ecclesial event is the Eucharist, in which Christ the Lord draws us together, speaks to us, nourishes and sends us.

The Verona stadium, the place chosen for this solemn liturgy, is significant: it is a place where non-religious rites are usually celebrated, sports events attracting millions of fans.

Today, this space is host to the Risen Jesus, truly present in his Word, in the assembly of the People of God with its Pastors and, in an eminent way, in the Sacrament of his Body and his Blood.

Christ comes today in this modern Areopagus to pour forth his Spirit on the Church in Italy, so that, renewed by his breath in a new Pentecost, she can "communicate the Gospel in a changing world", as proposed by the pastoral directives of the Italian Bishops' Conference for the years 2000-2010.

And you, dear Brother Bishops, with the Presbyters and Deacons, to you, dear delegates of the Dioceses and of lay groups, to you men and women religious and committed laity, I address my most cordial greeting that I extend to those joining us by radio and television.

I greet and spiritually embrace the entire Italian Church, the living Body of Christ. I want to express in a special way my appreciation to those who have worked hard to prepare and organize this Convention: the President of the Italian Bishops' Conference, Cardinal Camillo Ruini; the Secretary General, Mons. Giuseppe Betori, with the collaborators of the various offices; Cardinal Dionigi Tettamanzi and the other members of the preparatory committee; Bishop Flavio Roberto Carraro of Verona, to whom I am grateful for the kind words he addressed to me at the beginning of the celebration also in the name of this beloved community of Verona that welcomes us. Our esteem also goes to Mister President of the Council of Ministers and the other distinguished Authorities present. Lastly, a cordial thank you to the communications team following the work of this important session of the Church in Italy.

The Bible Reading proclaimed a short time ago illuminates the theme of the Convention: "Witnesses of the Risen Jesus, Hope of the World". The Word of God highlights Christ's Resurrection, an event that has regenerated believers to a lively hope, as the Apostle Peter states at the beginning of his First Letter. This text constitutes the axis underpinning the itinerary of preparations for this great national meeting. As his Successor, I too exclaim with joy: "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ" (I Pt 1: 3), because through the Resurrection of his Son he has regenerated us and has given us by faith the invincible hope of eternal life, so that we live in the present always directed towards the goal, which is the final meeting with our Lord and Saviour.

Strengthened by this hope, we are not afraid of trials, which, however painful and heavy, can never impair the profound joy that comes from being loved by God. In his merciful providence, he has given his Son for us and we, even without seeing him, believe in him and love him (cf. I Pt 1: 3-9). His love is sufficient for us.

Strengthened by this love, firm in faith in the Resurrection of Jesus that builds hope, our Christian witness is born and constantly renewed. It is there that our "Creed" is rooted, the symbol of faith from which the initial preaching was drawn and that continues unaltered to nourish the People of God.

The content of the "*kerygma*", the proclamation, which constitutes the substance of the entire Gospel message, is Christ, the Son of God made Man, who died and rose for us. His Resurrection is the qualifying mystery of Christianity, the superabundant fulfilment of all salvific promises, also those we have heard in the First Reading taken from the end of the Book of the prophet Isaiah.

From the Risen Christ, the first fruits of the new humanity, regenerated and regenerating, the

"poor" people are truly born, as the prophet foretold, who have opened their hearts to the Gospel and have become and always become new "oaks of righteousness", "the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified", rebuilders of ruins, restorers of deserted cities, considered by all as the blessed offshoot of the Lord (cf. Is 61: 3-4, 9).

The mystery of the Resurrection of the Son of God, who, by rising to Heaven is next to the Father, has effused upon us the Holy Spirit and allows us to embrace with a single glance Christ and the Church: the Risen One and the resurrected, the first fruits and the field of God, the cornerstone and the living stones, to use another image from the First Letter of Peter (cf. 2: 4-8).

So it happened at the beginning with the first apostolic community, and thus it must be even now. From the day of Pentecost, in fact, the light of the Risen Lord has transfigured the life of the Apostles. They already had the clear perception of not being simply disciples of a new and interesting doctrine, but witnesses chosen and responsible for a revelation linked to the salvation of their contemporaries and all future generations.

The Paschal faith filled their hearts with ardour and extraordinary zeal, which made them able to face every difficulty and even death, and impressed their words with an irresistible power of persuasion. Hence, a group of people, lacking human resources and strong by their faith alone, fearlessly faced difficult persecution and martyrdom.

The Apostle John writes: "This is the victory that overcomes the world, our faith" (I Jn 5: 4b). The truth of this affirmation is documented also in Italy by two millennia of Christian history, with the countless testimonies of martyrs, saints and blessed who have left an indelible mark on every corner of the beautiful Peninsula in which we live. Some of them were recalled at the beginning of the Convention and their faces accompany our work.

Today, we are the heirs of those victorious witnesses! But precisely from this observation the question arises: what is our faith? To what extent are we able to communicate it today?

The certainty that Christ is risen assures us that no opposition can ever destroy the Church. We are heartened also by the awareness that only Christ can fully satisfy the profound longings of every human heart and respond to the most disturbing questions on pain, injustice and evil, on death and the afterlife.

Therefore, our faith is stable, but it is necessary that this faith come alive in each one of us. There is then a vast and capillary effort to be made so that each Christian is transformed into a "witness" ready and able to assume the duty to give a reason to everyone, and always of the hope that is in one (cf. I Pt 3: 15).

To do this, we must return to proclaiming powerfully and joyfully the event of Christ's death and

Resurrection, heart of Christianity, principal fulcrum of our faith, powerful lever of our certainty, impetuous wind that sweeps away every fear and indecision, every doubt and human calculation.

This decisive change in the world can only come from God. Only starting from the Resurrection can the true nature of the Church and her witness be understood, which is not something detached from the Paschal Mystery but rather is a fruit of it, manifested and accomplished by those who, receiving the Holy Spirit, are sent by Christ to take up his very same mission (cf. Jn 20: 21-23).

"Witnesses of the Risen Jesus": this definition of the Christian comes directly from the Gospel passage of Luke proclaimed today, but also from the Acts of the Apostles (cf. 1: 8, 22). Witnesses *of* the Risen Jesus. That "of" must be well understood! It means that the witness is "of" the Risen Jesus, that is, belonging to him, and exactly as such can render a valid witness to him, can speak about him, make him known, lead to him, transmit his presence.

It is exactly the contrary of what happens with the other expression: "hope of the world". Here the preposition "of" does not at all mean belonging to, because Christ is not *of* the world, as also Christians must not be of the world.

The hope, which is Christ, is *in* the world, is *for* the world, but it is precisely because Christ is God, is "the Holy One" (in Hebrew, *Qadosh*). Christ is hope for the world because he is risen, and he is risen because he is God.

Christians too can bring hope to the world, because they are of Christ and of God in the measure in which they die with him to sin and rise with him to the new life of love, of forgiveness, of service, of non-violence.

As St Augustine said: "You have believed, you have been baptized: the old life is dead, it was killed on the Cross, buried in Baptism. The old life is buried in which you lived ill at ease: may the new life arise" (cf. *Sermone Guelf*. IX, in M. Pellegrino, *Vox Patrum*, 177). Only if, like Christ, they are not *of* the world, can Christians be hope *in* the world and *for* the world.

Dear brothers and sisters, my wish, which surely you share, is that the Church in Italy can begin again from this Convention as urged on by the words of the Risen Lord, who repeats to each and every one of you: be witnesses in the world today of my passion and my Resurrection (cf. Lk 24: 48).

In a changing world, the Gospel does not alter. The Good News always remains the same: Christ has died and is risen for our salvation! In his Name take the message of conversion and forgiveness for sins to everyone, but be yourselves the first to witness to a converted and forgiven life.

We know well that this is not possible without being "clothed with power from on high" (Lk 24: 49), without the interior strength of the Spirit of the Risen One. To receive it, as Jesus told his disciples, one must not leave Jerusalem but must remain in the "city" where the mystery of salvation is consummated, the supreme act of love of God for humanity. One must remain in prayer with Mary, the Mother given to us by Christ from the Cross.

For Christians, citizens of the world, to remain in Jerusalem means none other than to remain in the Church, the "city of God", where one can receive the "unction" [anointing] of the Holy Spirit.

In these days of the National Ecclesial Convention, the Church in Italy, obeying the command of the Risen Lord, is gathered and has relived the original experience of the Upper Room, to receive anew the gift from on High.

Now, consecrated by this "unction", go! Take the happy news to the poor, bandage the wounds of broken hearts, proclaim freedom to the enslaved, liberty to captives, proclaim a year of mercy of the Lord (cf. Is 61: 1-2).

Rebuild the ancient ruins, raise up former devastations, repair the deserted cities (cf. Is 61: 4). There are many difficult situations that await a resolute intervention! Bring into the world the hope of God, who is Christ the Lord, he who is risen from the dead and lives and reigns for ever and ever.

Amen.

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