



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT
TO THE BASILICA OF SAINT LAWRENCE OUTSIDE THE WALLS
ON THE OCCASION OF THE 1750th ANNIVERSARY
OF THE MARTYRDOM OF THE HOLY DEACON

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

First Sunday of Advent, 30 November 2008

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

Today on the First Sunday of Advent, we enter that four-week Season with which a new liturgical year begins and that immediately prepares us for the Feast of Christmas, the memorial of the Incarnation of Christ in history. Yet, the spiritual message of Advent is more profound and already orients us to the glorious return of the Lord at the end of our history. Adventus is the Latin word that could be translated by "arrival", "coming" or "presence". In the language of the ancient world it was a technical term that indicated the arrival of an official, and especially the visit of kings or emperors to the provinces, but it could also be used for the appearance of a divinity, which emerged from its hidden dwelling-place and thus manifested its divine power; its presence was solemnly celebrated with worship.

By using this term, "Advent", Christians wanted to express the special relationship that bound them to the Crucified and Risen Christ. He is a King who, having entered this poor province called earth, made us the gift of his visit and after his Resurrection and Ascension into Heaven desired in any case to stay with us; we perceive his mysterious presence in the liturgical assembly. Indeed, in celebrating the Eucharist, we proclaim that he did not withdraw from the world, that he did not leave us alone and, even though we cannot see and touch him as with material and tangible realities, he is in any case with us and among us. Indeed, he is in us, because he can attract to himself and communicate his life to every believer who opens his/her heart to him. Thus, Advent means commemorating the first coming of the Lord in the flesh, with his definitive return already in

mind, and, at the same time, it means recognizing that Christ present in our midst makes himself our travelling companion in the life of the Church who celebrates his mystery. This knowledge, dear brothers and sisters, nourished by listening to the Word of God, must help us to see the world with different eyes, to interpret the individual events of life and history as words that God addresses to us, as signs of his love that assure us of his closeness in every situation; this awareness, in particular, should prepare us to welcome him when "he will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead and his kingdom will have no end", as in a little while we shall repeat in the Creed. In this perspective, Advent becomes for all Christians a time of expectation and hope, a privileged time for listening and reflection, as long as we let ourselves be guided by the liturgy, which invites us to advance to meet the Lord who comes.

"Come, Lord Jesus": dear friends, this ardent invocation of the Christian community of the early days must also become our constant aspiration, the aspiration of the Church in every epoch, which longs for and prepares herself for the encounter with her Lord. Come today, Lord; enlighten us, give us peace, help us triumph over violence. Come Lord, we pray precisely in these weeks: "Lord... let us see your face and will shall be saved" (Ps 80[79]: 3), we have just prayed with the words of the Responsorial Psalm. And the Prophet Isaiah revealed to us in the First Reading that the Face of Our Saviour is that of a tender and merciful father who cares for us in all circumstances because we are the work of his hands: "You, O Lord, are our Father, our Redeemer from of old is your name" (63: 16). Our God is a father prepared to forgive repentant sinners and to welcome those who trust in his mercy (cf. Is 64: 4). We had drifted away from him because of sin, falling under the dominion of death, but he took pity on us and, on his own initiative, without any merit on our part, decided to meet our needs, sending his only Son as our Redeemer. As we face such a great mystery of love, our thanksgiving rises spontaneously and our invocation becomes more trusting: Show us your steadfast love, O Lord, today, in our time, in every part of the world, let us feel your presence and grant us your salvation (cf. Gospel acclamation).

Dear brothers and sisters, the thought of Christ's presence and his return at the end of time is particularly significant in this Basilica of yours beside the monumental cemetery of Verano where so many of our beloved deceased rest while they await resurrection. How often are funerals celebrated in this temple; how often do the works of the liturgy ring out full of comfort: "In him who rose from the dead, our hope of resurrection dawned. The sadness of death gives way to the bright promise of immortality" (cf. Preface for Christian Death I).

Yet your monumental Basilica, which makes us think back to the primitive Basilica built by the Emperor Constantine and later transformed to acquire its present appearance, speaks above all of the glorious martyrdom of St Lawrence, Archdeacon of Pope St Sixtus II and his reliable steward in the administration of the community's goods. Today I have come to celebrate the Blessed Eucharist to join you in paying homage to him in a most unusual circumstance, on the occasion of the Jubilee Year of Lawrence, established to commemorate the 1,750th anniversary of holy Deacon's birth in Heaven. History confirms to us how glorious is the name of this Saint, by whose

sepulchre we have gathered. His concern for the poor, the generous service that he rendered to the Church of Rome in the context of assistance and charity, his fidelity to the Pope which he took to the point of desiring to follow him in the supreme trial of martyrdom and the heroic witness of pouring out his blood, which he suffered only a few days later, are facts well known to all. St Leo the Great, in a beautiful homily, thus comments on the atrocious martyrdom of this "illustrious hero": "The flames of could not overcome Christ's love and the fire that burned outside was less keen than that which blazed within". And he adds: "The Lord desired to spread abroad his glory throughout the world, so that from the East to the West the dazzling brightness of his deacon's light does shine, and Rome is become as famous through Lawrence as Jerusalem was ennobled by Stephen" (Homily 85, 4: PL 54, 486).

The 50th anniversary of the death of the Servant of God Pope Pius XII falls this year and this reminds us of a particularly dramatic event in the centuries-old history of your Basilica. It took place during the Second World War, when, exactly on 19 July 1943, a violent bombardment caused severe damage to the building and to the whole neighbourhood, sowing death and destruction. The generous gesture made by my venerable Predecessor can never be eradicated from the memory of history: he hastened here immediately to help and to comfort the people so badly hit, among the still smouldering ruins. Nor have I forgotten that this same Basilica also contains the urns of two other great people: in the hypogeum in fact, are placed for the veneration of the faithful the mortal remains of Bl. Pius IX, while in the atrium is the tomb of Alcide De Gasperi, who was a wise and balanced guide for Italy during the difficult years of the post-war reconstruction and, at the same time, a distinguished statesman capable of looking to Europe with a broad Christian vision.

While we are gathered here in prayer, I would like to greet you all with affection, starting with the Cardinal Vicar, with Monsignor Vicegerent, who is also Commendatory Abbot of the Basilica, with the Auxiliary Bishop of the Northern Sector of Rome and with your Parish Priest, Fr Bruno Mustacchio, whom I thank for his kind words at the beginning of the liturgical celebration. I greet the Minister General of the Order of Capuchins and the Friars of the Community who carry out their service with zeal and dedication, welcoming the many pilgrims, assisting the poor with charity and witnessing to hope in the Risen Christ to all those who visit the Cemetery of Verano. I would like to assure you of my appreciation, and, above all, of my remembrance in prayer. I also greet the various groups who are involved in the animation of the catechesis, the liturgy, charity, the members of the two polyphonic choirs, the Franciscan Third Order, local and regional. Then I have learned with pleasure that for some years the "diocesan missionary laboratory" has been housed here, to inculcate in the parish communities a missionary awareness, and I willingly join you in expressing the hope that this initiative of our Diocese will help to inspire a courageous missionary pastoral action that will bring the proclamation of God's merciful love to every corner of Rome, involving mainly young people and families. Lastly, I would like to extend my thoughts to the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, especially to the elderly, the sick and people who are lonely and in difficulty. I remember all and each one at this Holy Mass.

Dear brothers and sisters, at the beginning of this Advent what better message can we glean from St Lawrence than that of holiness? He repeats to us that holiness, that is, going to meet Christ who comes ceaselessly to visit us, does not go out of fashion, on the contrary as time passes it shines brightly and expresses the perennial striving for God of humankind. May this Jubilee event therefore be an occasion for your parish community of a renewed adherence to Christ, a further deepening of the sense of belonging to his Mystical Body which is the Church, and a constant commitment of evangelization through charity. May Lawrence, a heroic witness of the Crucified and Risen Christ be for each person an example of docile adherence to the divine will, so that, as we heard the Apostle Paul remind the Corinthians, we too may live in such a way as to be found "guiltless" in the day of Our Lord (cf. 1 Cor 1: 7-9).

To prepare ourselves for Christ's coming is also the exhortation we hear in today's Gospel: "Watch", Jesus tells us in Luke's short parable about the master of the house who goes on a journey but the date of whose return is unknown (cf. Mk 13: 33-37). Watching means following the Lord, choosing what Christ chose, loving what he loved, conforming one's own life to his; watching means passing every instant of our time in the sphere of his love without letting oneself be disheartened by the inevitable difficulties and problems of daily life. This is what St Lawrence did, this is what we must do and let us ask the Lord to grant us his grace so that Advent may be an incentive for all to walk in this direction. May Mary, the humble Virgin of Nazareth chosen by God to become Mother of the Redeemer, St Andrew whose feast we are celebrating today, and St Lawrence, an example of fearless Christian faithfulness to the point of martyrdom, guide us and go with us. Amen!

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