



The Holy See

PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE HOLY LAND
(8-15 MAY 2009)

**BLESSING OF THE FOUNDATION STONES
OF THE LATIN AND GREEK MELKITE CHURCHES**

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Bethany beyond the Jordan
Fifth Sunday of Easter, 10 May 2009

Your Royal Highness,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Dear Friends,

It is with great spiritual joy that I come to bless the foundation stones of two Catholic Churches to be built beside the river Jordan, a place marked by many memorable events in biblical history. The prophet Elijah the Tishbite, was from this area, not far north of Galaad. Near here, facing Jericho, the waters of the Jordan opened before Elijah who was taken up by the Lord in a chariot of fire (cf. *2 Kg 2:9-12*). Here the Spirit of the Lord called John the son of Zechariah to preach a conversion of hearts. John the Evangelist also places in this area the meeting between the Baptist and Jesus, who at his baptism was “anointed” by the Spirit of God descending as a dove, and proclaimed the beloved Son of the Father (cf. *Jn 1:28; Mk 1:9-11*).

I was honored to be received at this important site by Their Majesties King Abdullah II and Queen Rania. I again wish to express my sincere gratitude for the warm hospitality they have shown me during my visit to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. I greet with joy His Beatitude Gregorios III Laham, Patriarch of Antioch for the Greek Melkite Church. I also greet with affection His Beatitude

Fouad Twal, Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem. I extend my warm best wishes to His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, to the Auxiliary Bishops present, particularly to Archbishop Yasser Ayyach and the Most Reverend Salim Sayegh, whom I thank for his kind words of welcome. I am pleased to greet all the Bishops, priests, religious and faithful who accompany us today. Let us rejoice in the knowledge that the two buildings, one Latin, the other Greek Melkite, will serve to build up, each according to the traditions of its own community, the one family of God.

The foundation stone of a church is a symbol of Christ. The Church rests on Christ, is sustained by him and cannot be separated from him. He is the one foundation of every Christian community, the living stone, rejected by the builders but chosen and precious in God's sight as the cornerstone (cf. 1 Pet 2:4-5, 7). With him, we too are living stones built into a spiritual house, a dwelling place for God (cf. Eph 2:20-22; 1 Pet 2:5). Saint Augustine loved to refer to the mystery of the Church as the *Christus totus*, the whole Christ, the full or complete Body of Christ, Head and members. This is the reality of the Church; it is Christ and us, Christ with us. He is with us as the vine is with its own branches (cf. Jn 15:1-8). The Church is in Christ a community of new life, a dynamic reality of grace that flows from him. Through the Church Christ purifies our hearts, enlightens our minds, unites us with the Father and, in the one Spirit, moves us to a daily exercise of Christian love. We confess this joyful reality as the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.

We enter the Church through baptism. The memory of Christ's own baptism is brought vividly before us in this place. Jesus stood in line with sinners and accepted John's baptism of penance as a prophetic sign of his own passion, death and resurrection for the forgiveness of sins. Down through the centuries, many pilgrims have come to the Jordan to seek purification, renew their faith and draw closer to the Lord. Such was the pilgrim Egeria, who left a written account of her visit during the late fourth century. The Sacrament of Baptism, drawing its power from Christ's death and resurrection, will be cherished especially by the Christian communities that gather in the new church buildings. May the Jordan always remind you that you have been washed in the waters of baptism and have become members of the family of Jesus. Your lives, in obedience to his word, are being transformed into his image and likeness. As you strive to be faithful to your baptismal commitment of conversion, witness and mission, know that you are being strengthened by the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the prayerful contemplation of these mysteries enrich you with spiritual joy and moral courage. With the Apostle Paul, I encourage you to grow in the whole range of noble attitudes covered by the blessed name of agape, Christian love (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-13). Promote dialogue and understanding in civil society, especially when claiming your legitimate rights. In the Middle East, marked by tragic suffering, by years of violence and unresolved tensions, Christians are called to offer their contribution, inspired by the example of Jesus, of reconciliation and peace through forgiveness and generosity. Continue being grateful to those who lead you and serve you faithfully as ministers of Christ. You do well to accept their guidance in faith knowing that, by receiving the apostolic teaching they transmit, you welcome Christ and you

welcome the One who sent him (cf. Mt 10:40).

My dear brothers and sisters, we now proceed to bless these two stones, the beginning of two new sacred buildings. May the Lord sustain, strengthen and increase the communities that will worship in them. And may he bless you all with his gift of peace. Amen!

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