



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC VISIT
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE CZECH REPUBLIC
(SEPTEMBER 26-28, 2009)

**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH PRIESTS,
MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS, SEMINARIANS
AND LAY MOVEMENTS**

ADDRESS BY THE HOLY FATHER

Cathedral of Saints Vitus, Wenceslaus and Adalbert - Prague
Saturday, 26 September 2009

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I greet all of you in the words of Saint Paul that we have just heard in our Scripture reading: *Grace and peace to you from God our Father!* First of all I address these words to the Cardinal Archbishop, whom I thank for his gracious words. I extend my greeting to the other Cardinals and Bishops present, to the priests and deacons, the seminarians, men and women religious, to the catechists and pastoral workers, to the young people, the families, and to the representatives of ecclesial associations and movements.

We are gathered this evening in a place that is dear to you, a place that is a visible sign of the power of divine grace acting in the hearts of believers. The beauty of this thousand-year-old church is indeed a living testimony to your people's rich history of faith and Christian tradition: a history that is illuminated in particular by the faithfulness of those who sealed their adherence to Christ and to the Church by martyrdom. I am thinking of Saint Wenceslaus, Saint Adalbert and Saint John Nepomuk, milestones in your Church's history, to whom we may add the example of the young Saint Vitus, who preferred to die a martyr's death rather than betray Christ, and the

examples of the monk Saint Procopius and Saint Ludmila. From the twentieth century, I recall the experiences of two Archbishops of this local Church, Cardinals Josef Beran and František Tomášek, and of many Bishops, priests, men and women religious, and lay faithful, who resisted Communist persecution with heroic fortitude, even to the sacrifice of their lives. Where did these courageous friends of Christ find their strength if not from the Gospel? Indeed, they were captivated by Jesus who said: "If any man would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me" (Mt 16:24). In the hour of trial they heard another saying of Jesus resounding deep within them: "If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (Jn 15:20).

The heroism of these witnesses to the faith reminds us that only through personal intimacy and a profound bond with Christ is it possible to draw the spiritual vitality needed to live the Christian vocation to the full. Only the love of Christ can make the apostolate effective, especially in moments of difficulty and trial. Love for Christ and for one's fellow men and women must be the hallmark of every Christian and every community. In the *Acts of the Apostles* we read that "the company of those who believed were of one heart and soul" (4:32). Tertullian, an early Church writer, noted that pagans were impressed by the love that bound Christians together (cf. *Apologeticum* XXXIX). Dear brothers and sisters, imitate the divine Master who "came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mk 10:45). Let love shine forth in each of your parishes and communities, and in your various associations and movements. According to the image used by Saint Paul, let your Church be a well-structured body with Christ as Head, in which every member acts in harmony with the whole. Nourish your love for Christ by prayer and listening to his word; feed on him in the Eucharist, and by his grace, be builders of unity and peace wherever you go.

Twenty years ago, after the long winter of Communist dictatorship, your Christian communities began once more to express themselves freely, when, through the events triggered by the student demonstration of 17 November 1989, your people regained their freedom. Yet you are well aware that even today it is not easy to live and bear witness to the Gospel. Society continues to suffer from the wounds caused by atheist ideology, and it is often seduced by the modern mentality of hedonistic consumerism amid a dangerous crisis of human and religious values and a growing drift towards ethical and cultural relativism. In this context there is an urgent need for renewed effort throughout the Church so as to strengthen spiritual and moral values in present-day society. I know that your communities are already actively engaged on several fronts, especially in charitable work, carried out under the auspices of *Caritas*. Your pastoral activity in the field of educating new generations should be undertaken with particular zeal. Catholic schools should foster respect for the human person; attention should also be given to the pastoral care of young people outside the school environment, without neglecting other groups of the faithful. Christ is for everyone! I sincerely hope that there will be a growing accord with other institutions, both public and private. It is always worth repeating that the Church does not seek privileges, but only to be able to work freely in the service of all, in the spirit of the Gospel.

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord in his goodness make you like the salt spoken of in the Gospel, salt that gives savour to life, so that you may be faithful labourers in the Lord's vineyard. Dear Bishops and priests, it is your task to work tirelessly for the good of those entrusted to your care. Always draw inspiration from the Gospel image of the Good Shepherd, who knows his sheep, calls them by name, leads them to safe pastures, and is prepared to give his life for them (cf. Jn 10:1-19). Dear consecrated persons, by professing the evangelical counsels you recall the primacy that each of us must give to God in our lives. By living in community, you bear witness to the enrichment that comes from practising the commandment of love (cf. Jn 13:34). By your fidelity to this vocation, you will help the men and women of today to let themselves be captivated by God and by the Gospel of his Son (cf. *Vita Consecrata*, 104). And you, dear young people in seminaries or houses of formation, be sure to acquire a solid cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation. In this Year of Priests, with which I chose to mark the 150th anniversary of the death of the Curé d'Ars, may you learn from the example of this pastor who was completely dedicated to God and to the care of souls; he was well aware that it was his ministry, nourished by prayer, that constituted his path to sanctification.

Dear Brothers and Sisters, with gratitude to the Lord, we shall be marking a number of anniversaries this year: the 280th anniversary of the canonization of Saint John Nepomuk, the 80th anniversary of the dedication of Saint Vitus' Cathedral, and the 20th anniversary of the canonization of Saint Agnes of Bohemia, the event which heralded your country's deliverance from atheist oppression. All these are good reasons for persevering in the journey of faith with joy and enthusiasm, counting on the maternal intercession of Mary, Mother of God, and all your Patron Saints. Amen!

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