



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI TO THE BISHOPS OF THE BELGIUM ON THEIR "AD LIMINA" VISIT

Saturday, 8 May 2010

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,

I wish you a very cordial welcome on the occasion of your visit *ad limina Apostolorum* which brings you on pilgrimage to the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul. This visit is a sign of the ecclesial communion that unites the Catholic Community of Belgium to the Holy See. It is also a good opportunity to strengthen this communion through mutual listening, common prayer and the charity of Christ, especially in these times when your own Church is tried by sin. I warmly greet Archbishop André-Joseph Léonard for his words on your behalf and on behalf of your diocesan communities. It gives me pleasure to address a special thought to Cardinal Godfried Danneels, who governed the Archdiocese of Malines-Brussels and your Bishops' Conference for more than 30 years.

In reading your reports on the situation of your respective dioceses, I have been able to take stock of the changes taking place in Belgian society. These are trends that many European countries have in common but that in your country have their own specific features. Some of them, already mentioned during your previous *ad limina* visit, have become more pronounced. I am referring to the dwindling number of baptized people who witness publicly to their faith and to their membership in the Church, to the gradual increase in the average age of the clergy and of men and women religious, to the insufficient number of ordained or consecrated people involved in active pastoral work and in the fields of education and social assistance and to the limited number of candidates to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. Christian formation, especially of the young generations, matters related to respect for life and to the institution of marriage and of the

family constitute other sensitive issues. Further, one could mention the complex and often worrying situations linked to the financial crisis, unemployment, the social integration of immigrants and the peaceful coexistence of the nation's different linguistic and cultural communities.

I have been able to note how aware you are of these situations and of the importance of insisting on a sounder and deeper religious formation. I have read your Pastoral Letter, *La belle profession de la foi*, [The Beautiful Profession of Faith] part of the series *Grandir dans la foi* [Growing in the Faith]. With this Letter you have wished to encourage the faithful overall to rediscover the beauty of the Christian faith. Thanks to prayers and reflection in common on the revealed truths expressed by the *Creed*, one rediscovers that faith does not consist solely in accepting a set of truths and values but first in entrusting oneself to Someone, to God, to listening to him, to loving him and to speaking to him, in order to engage in serving him (cf. p. 5).

A significant event, for the present and for the future, was the Canonization of Fr Damien de Veuster. This new Saint speaks to the consciences of Belgians. Has he not been designated the most outstanding son of the nation of all time? His greatness, lived in the total gift of himself to his brother lepers, to the point of catching the contagious disease and dying of it, lies in his inner wealth, his constant prayer and his union with Christ, whom he saw present in his brothers and sisters and to whom, as Christ did, he gave himself without reserve. In this Year for Priests, it is right to hold up his example as a priest and a missionary. The fall in the number of priests must not be perceived as an inevitable process. The Second Vatican Council said forcefully that the Church cannot do without the ministry of priests. It is therefore necessary and urgent to give the ministry of priests its right place and to recognize its irreplaceable sacramental character. This results in the need for a broad and serious vocations apostolate that is based on the exemplarity and holiness of priests, on attention to the seeds of a vocation present in many young people and on assiduous and trusting prayer, as Jesus recommended (cf. Mt 9: 37).

I address a cordial and grateful greeting to all priests and consecrated people, often overburdened by work and desirous of the support and friendship of their Bishop and their confreres, without forgetting the older priests who have devoted their whole life to serving God and their brethren. Nor do I forget the missionaries as a whole. May all priests, men and women religious and lay people of Belgium receive my encouragement and the expression of my gratitude, and may they not forget that Christ alone calms every storm (cf. Mt 8: 25-26) and restores strength and courage (cf. Mt 11: 28-30 and Mt 14: 30-32) in order to lead a holy life in full fidelity to their ministry, to their consecration to God and to Christian witness.

The Constitution *Sacrosanctum concilium* stresses that it is in the Liturgy that the mystery of the Church is made manifest in its grandeur and its simplicity (cf. Introduction, n. 2). Thus it is important that priests take care in liturgical celebrations, particularly the Eucharist, to ensure that they permit a profound communion with the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is necessary that celebrations take place with respect for the Church's liturgical tradition, with the

active participation of the faithful, according to each one's specific role, uniting personally with Christ's Paschal Mystery.

In your reports you show that you are attending to the formation of lay people with a view to their increasingly effective incorporation in the animation of temporal realities. This is a praiseworthy programme that is born from the vocation of every baptized person, configured to Christ the priest, prophet and king. It is right to discern all the possibilities that stem from the common vocation to holiness and the apostolic commitment of lay people, with respect for the essential distinction between the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful. All the members of the Catholic community, but in a particular way the lay faithful, are called to witness openly to their faith and to be leaven in society, while respecting both a healthy laicism in the public institutions and the other religious denominations. This witness cannot be limited to the personal encounter alone but must also acquire the characteristics of a public proposal, respectful but legitimate, of the values inspired by Christ's Gospel message.

The brevity of this meeting does not permit me to treat other subjects dear to me and that you also mentioned in your reports. I shall thus end by asking you to kindly convey to your communities, priests, men and women religious and all the Catholics of Belgium my affectionate greetings, assuring them of my prayers to the Lord for them. May the Virgin Mary, venerated in so many shrines in Belgium help you in your ministry and protect you all by her motherly tenderness. To you and to all the Kingdom's Catholics, I wholeheartedly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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