

PILGRIMAGE TO THE SHRINE OF THE HOLY FACE IN MANOPPELLO (ITALY)

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Friday, 1 September 2006

Before entering the Shrine of Manoppello, the Holy Father greeted the faithful gathered outside it:

As the Psalms say, we are all "seeking the Face of the Lord". And this is also the meaning of my Visit. Let us seek together to know the Face of the Lord ever better, and in the Face of the Lord let us find this impetus of love and peace which also reveals to us the path of our life.



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

First of all, I must once again say a heartfelt "thank you" for this welcome, for your words, Your Excellency, so profound, so friendly, for the expression of your friendship and for the deeply meaningful gifts: the Face of Christ venerated here, for me, for my house, and then the gifts of your land that express the beauty and generosity of the earth, of the people who live and work here, and the goodness of the Creator himself. *I simply want to thank the Lord for today's simple, family meeting in a place where we can meditate on the mystery of divine love, contemplating the image of the Holy Face.*

I extend my most heartfelt gratitude to all of you present here for your cordial welcome and for the dedication and discretion with which you have supported my private pilgrimage, which nevertheless, as an ecclesial pilgrimage, cannot be entirely private. I greet and thank in particular, I repeat, your Archbishop, a longstanding friend. We worked together in the Theological Commission. And in many conversations I always learned from his wisdom, and also from his books. Thank you for your gifts which I very much appreciate as "signs", as Archbishop Forte has called them.

Indeed, they are *signs of the affective and effective communion* which binds the people of this beloved Abruzzi Region to the Successor of Peter.

I address a special greeting to you, priests, men and women religious and seminarians gathered here. I am particularly glad to see a large number of *seminarians: the future of the Church in our midst*. Since it is impossible to meet the entire diocesan Community - perhaps that will be for another time - I am glad that you are representing it, people already dedicated to the priestly ministry and the consecrated life or who are on the way to the priesthood.

You are people whom I like to think of as in love with Christ, attracted by him and determined to make your own life a continuous quest for his Holy Face.

Lastly, I address a grateful thought to the community of the Capuchin Fathers who are offering us hospitality and who for centuries have cared for this Shrine, the goal of so many pilgrims.

During my pause for prayer just now, I was thinking of the first two Apostles who, urged by John the Baptist, followed Jesus to the banks of the Jordan River, as we read at the beginning of John's Gospel (cf. 1: 35-37).



The Evangelist recounts that Jesus turned around and asked them: *"What do you seek?". And they answered him, "Rabbi... where are you staying?". And he said to them, "Come and see" (cf. Jn 1: 38-39).*

That very same day, the two who were following him had an unforgettable experience which prompted them to say: *"We have found the Messiah" (Jn 1: 41).*

The One whom a few hours earlier they had thought of as a simple "rabbi" had acquired a very precise identity: *the identity of Christ who had been awaited for centuries.* But, in fact, what a long journey still lay ahead of those disciples!

They could not even imagine *how profound the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth could be or how unfathomable, inscrutable, his "Face" would prove,* so that even after living with Jesus for three years, Philip, who was one of them, was to hear him say at the Last Supper: "Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?". And then the words that sum up the novelty of Jesus' revelation: *"He who has seen me has seen the Father" (Jn 14: 9).*

Only after his Passion when they encountered him Risen, when the Spirit enlightened their minds and their hearts, would the Apostles understand the significance of the words Jesus had spoken and recognize him as the Son of God, the Messiah promised for the world's redemption. *They were then to become his unflinching messengers, courageous witnesses even to martyrdom.*

"He who has seen me has seen the Father". Yes, dear brothers and sisters, *to "see God" it is necessary to know Christ and to let oneself be molded by his Spirit* who guides believers "into all the truth" (cf. Jn 16: 13). *Those who meet Jesus, who let themselves be attracted by him and are prepared to follow him even to the point of sacrificing their lives, personally experience, as he did on the Cross, that only the "grain of wheat" that falls into the earth and dies, bears "much fruit" (Jn 12: 24).*

This is the path of Christ, the way of total love that overcomes death: he who takes it and "hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life" (Jn 12: 25). *In other words, he lives in God already on this earth, attracted and transformed by the dazzling brightness of his Face.*

This is *the experience of God's true friends, the saints who, in the brethren, especially the poorest and neediest, recognized and loved the Face of that God, lovingly contemplated for hours in prayer.* For us they are encouraging examples to imitate; *they assure us that if we follow this path, the way of love, with fidelity, we too, as the Psalmist sings, will be satisfied with God's presence (cf. Ps 17[16]: 15).*

"Jesu... quam bonus te quaerentibus! - How kind you are, Jesus, to those who seek you!". This is what we have just sung in the ancient hymn "Jesu, dulcis memoria" [Jesus, the very thought of you], which some people attribute to St Bernard. It is a hymn that acquires rare eloquence in the Shrine dedicated to the Holy Face, which calls to mind *Psalm 24[23]: "Such is the generation of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob" (v. 6).*

But which is "the generation" of those who seek the Face of God, which generation deserves to "ascend the hill of the Lord" and "stand in his holy place"?

The Psalmist explains: it consists of those who have "clean hands and a pure heart", who do not speak falsehoods, who do not "swear deceitfully" to their neighbor (cf. vv. 3-4). Therefore, in order to enter into communion with Christ and to contemplate his Face, to recognize the Lord's Face in the faces of the brethren and in daily events, we require "clean hands and a pure heart".

Clean hands, that is, a life illumined by the truth of love that overcomes indifference, doubt, falsehood and selfishness; and pure hearts are essential too, hearts enraptured by divine beauty, as the Little Teresa of Lisieux says in her prayer to the Holy Face, hearts stamped with the hallmark of the Face of Christ.

Dear priests, if the holiness of the Face of Christ remains impressed within you, pastors of Christ's flock, do not fear: the faithful entrusted to your care will also be infected with it and transformed.

And you, seminarians, who are training to be responsible guides of the Christian people, do not allow yourselves to be attracted by anything other than Jesus and the desire to serve his Church. I would like to say as much to you, men and women religious, so that your activities may be a visible reflection of divine goodness and mercy.

"Your Face, O Lord, I seek": seeking the Face of Jesus must be the longing of all of us Christians; indeed, we are "the generation" which seeks his Face in our day, the Face of the "God of Jacob". If we persevere in our quest for the Face of the Lord, at the end of our earthly pilgrimage, he, Jesus, will be our eternal joy, our reward and glory for ever: "Sis Jesu nostrum gaudium, qui es futurus praemium: sit nostra in te gloria, per cuncta semper saecula".

This is the certainty that motivated the saints of your Region, among whom I would like to mention in particular *Gabriel of Our Lady of Sorrows* and Camillus de Lellis; our reverent remembrance and our prayer is addressed to them.

But let us now address a thought of special devotion to the "Queen of all the saints", the Virgin Mary, whom you venerate in the various shrines and chapels scattered across the valleys and mountains of the Abruzzi Region. *May Our Lady, in whose face - more than in any other creature - we can recognize the features of the Incarnate Word, watch over the families and parishes and over the cities and nations of the whole world.*

May the Mother of the Creator also help us to respect nature, a great gift of God that we can admire here, looking at the marvelous mountains surrounding us. This gift, however, is exposed more and more to the serious risks of environmental deterioration and must therefore be defended and protected. This is urgently necessary, as Archbishop Forte noted and as is appropriately highlighted by the Day of Reflection and Prayer for the Safeguarding of Creation, which is being celebrated by the Church in Italy this very day.

Dear brothers and sisters, as I thank you once again for your presence and for your gifts, I invoke the Blessing of God upon you and upon all your loved ones with the ancient biblical formula: *"May the Lord bless you and keep you: may the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you: may the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace" (cf. Nm 6: 24-26). Amen!*