



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

## Mass of Thanksgiving for Pope Benedict XVI

*Archbishop Vincent Nichols*

24 FEBRUARY 2013, WESTMINSTER CATHEDRAL, LONDON

**During this season of Lent, my brothers and sisters, we seek each day to renew our life in the Lord. Today, in the readings of the Mass, we have heard of two startling moments in which the relationship between God and us his people has been made clear.**

The first is with Abram, right at the start of the initiative of God to form a people for his very self. A covenant, a promise, a binding agreement is fashioned in the drama of sacrifice and fire. Through them Abram is assured of God's presence and promise.

Then, in the Gospel of St Luke, we see the founding apostles of the Church drawn into an extraordinary experience of the majesty and glory of Jesus. In the strength of this experience, they will follow him faithfully, even through his death and to the ending of their own lives.

Today, at this Mass, we pray especially for Pope Benedict XVI as he prepares to step down from the Chair of St Peter with astonishing courage and humility. He has constantly reminded us that our personal relationship with the Lord lies at the heart of our life of faith and that this relationship is lived and fashioned within the community of the Church. Indeed the very first words he spoke, on his election as the Supreme Pontiff, expressed his trust in the Lord and his willingness to serve in the Church. On the balcony of St Peter's Basilica, on 19 April 2005, he said that he came 'as a humble servant in the vineyard of the Lord.'

Today, as we thank God for the years of service given by Pope Benedict so tirelessly and at such cost, we recognise that he has remained true to those words.

He has never sought to draw attention to himself. Remember his words, on his way to the UK for that remarkable Visit in 2010, when asked if his Visit would 'make the Church...more credible and attractive to everyone?' He said: 'I would say that a Church that seeks to be particularly attractive is already on the wrong path.' He went on to explain that, 'The Church is at the service of another: she serves, not for herself, not to be a strong body, rather she serves to make the proclamation of Jesus Christ accessible, the great truths and great forces of love, reconciling love that... always comes from the presence of Jesus Christ.' His sole purpose in his Visit, then, was to draw attention to Christ and to proclaim Christ's loving presence for all.

For me an abiding and powerful image of the ministry of Pope Benedict will be that of him at prayer before the Blessed Sacrament together with 90,000 people under the night sky in Hyde Park. There, in that profound and remarkable silence, he led us to the Lord, to our own moment of 'covenant' with the Lord, in which we learned again of the abiding and steadfast love of the Lord on which we build our lives. As one mother told me: 'My teenage sons learned more about prayer in those fifteen minutes of silence in Hyde Park than in all the years of their young lives.'

This humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord has also been able to grapple with the most demanding challenges of our time. This we saw for ourselves during that same Visit to the UK. His simple presence, together with the brilliance and clarity of his words, won over so many people, especially his distinguished audience of politicians and civic leaders gathered in Westminster Hall. As he walked the length of that great Hall, pausing at the spot where St Thomas More had been condemned to death on account of his loyalty to the Papacy, the applause never wavered, for seven or eight minutes, such was the affectionate recognition given to him.

His address was for us a model of engagement with contemporary society with all its doubts and nervousness towards the things of faith. He acknowledged the achievements of British democracy, yet also pointed out its shortcomings. He asked: 'By appeal to what authority can moral dilemmas be resolved today?', then adding: 'If the moral principles underpinning the democratic process are themselves determined by nothing more solid than social consensus, then the fragility of the process becomes all too evident' - as indeed we see today. Then he said: 'Herein lies the real challenge for democracy'. It was at this point he outlined our essential task, a task to which he has dedicated himself throughout his Pontificate, and long before it, too. It is the task of showing again and again how reason and faith intertwine, becoming the true source of moral judgement and human wisdom. Faith is not a problem to be solved, he reminded us, but a resource, a treasure to be discovered afresh.

As our Holy Father prepares for his life of prayer, reflection and, I hope, writing, this is the task he leaves to us: again and again, with respect and positive regard for all, especially those who disagree most uncharmingly, we are to offer the reasons for the hope which sustain us. This hope is so beautifully expressed in the reading we heard from St Paul. In reminding us that our final homeland is in heaven he gives us again the perspective in which we live each day on this earth. Thus our true and lasting hope lies in the Lord, the one we seek to serve. He will come again and he alone has the power to transform us, and all creation, into his own likeness, the glory for which we have first been created.

We are witness to this true and lasting hope, which is no facile optimism, by the simple goodness of our lives, the kindness and clarity of our words and the joy and freedom with which we undertake our tasks.

On Thursday the See of Peter becomes vacant in these most historic circumstances. We know what we are to do at that point. We know that God will provide a successor to Pope Benedict, who will lead and shepherd us with all the grace of that high office. We will pray for the Church, for the discussions and decisions of the Conclave. But for these remaining days we cherish and love Our Holy Father Pope Benedict. We thank him for all he has given us and we praise God for the blessings of his Pontificate. May the Lord bless and preserve him. May the Lord bless his holy Church.

Amen.

**+Vincent Nichols**  
*Archbishop of Westminster*