

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

**CELEBRATION OF VESPERS
WITH BISHOPS, PRIESTS, MEN AND WOMEN RELIGIOUS,
ECCLESIAL AND PASTORAL MOVEMENTS OF GALILEE**

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Upper Basilica of the Annunciation - Nazareth
Thursday, 14 May 2009*

*Brother Bishops,
Father Custos,
Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

It is profoundly moving for me to be present with you today in the very place where the Word of God was made flesh and came to dwell among us. How fitting that we should gather here to sing the Evening Prayer of the Church, giving praise and thanks to God for the marvels he has done for us! I thank Archbishop Sayah for his words of welcome and through him I greet all the members of the Maronite community here in the Holy Land. I greet the priests, religious, members of ecclesial movements and pastoral workers from all over Galilee. Once again I pay tribute to the care shown by the Friars of the Custody, over many centuries, in maintaining holy places such as this. I greet the Latin Patriarch Emeritus, His Beatitude Michel Sabbah, who for more than twenty years presided over his flock in these lands. I greet the faithful of the Latin Patriarchate and their current Patriarch, His Beatitude Fouad Twal, as well as the members of the Greek-Melkite community, represented here by Archbishop Elias Chacour. And in this place where Jesus himself grew to maturity and learned the Hebrew tongue, I greet the Hebrew-speaking Christians, a reminder to us of the Jewish roots of our faith.

What happened here in Nazareth, far from the gaze of the world, was a singular act of God, a powerful intervention in history, through which a child was conceived who was to bring salvation to the whole world. The wonder of the Incarnation continues to challenge us to open up our understanding to the limitless possibilities of God's transforming power, of his love for us, his desire to be united with us. Here the eternally begotten Son of God became man, and so made it possible for us, his brothers and sisters, to share in his divine sonship. That downward movement of self-emptying love made possible the upward movement of exaltation in which we too are raised to share in the life of God himself (cf. *Phil 2:6-11*).

The Spirit who "came upon Mary" (cf. *Lk 1:35*) is the same Spirit who hovered over the waters at the dawn of Creation (cf. *Gen 1:2*). We are reminded that the Incarnation was a new creative act. When our Lord Jesus Christ was conceived in Mary's virginal womb through the power of the Holy Spirit, God united himself with our created humanity, entering into a permanent new relationship with us and ushering in a new

Creation. The narrative of the Annunciation illustrates God's extraordinary courtesy (cf. Mother Julian of Norwich, *Revelations* 77-79). He does not impose himself, he does not simply pre-determine the part that Mary will play in his plan for our salvation: he first seeks her consent. In the original Creation there was clearly no question of God seeking the consent of his creatures, but in this new Creation he does so. Mary stands in the place of all humanity. She speaks for us all when she responds to the angel's invitation. Saint Bernard describes how the whole court of heaven was waiting with eager anticipation for her word of consent that consummated the nuptial union between God and humanity. The attention of all the choirs of angels was riveted on this spot, where a dialogue took place that would launch a new and definitive chapter in world history. Mary said, "Let it be done to me according to your word." And the Word of God became flesh.

When we reflect on this joyful mystery, it gives us hope, the sure hope that God will continue to reach into our history, to act with creative power so as to achieve goals which by human reckoning seem impossible. It challenges us to open ourselves to the transforming action of the Creator Spirit who makes us new, makes us one with him, and fills us with his life. It invites us, with exquisite courtesy, to consent to his dwelling within us, to welcome the Word of God into our hearts, enabling us to respond to him in love and to reach out in love towards one another.

In the State of Israel and the Palestinian Territories, Christians form a minority of the population. Perhaps at times you feel that your voice counts for little. Many of your fellow Christians have emigrated, in the hope of finding greater security and better prospects elsewhere. Your situation calls to mind that of the young virgin Mary, who led a hidden life in Nazareth, with little by way of worldly wealth or influence. Yet to quote Mary's words in her great hymn of praise, the *Magnificat*, God has looked upon his servant in her lowliness, he has filled the hungry with good things. Draw strength from Mary's canticle, which very soon we will be singing in union with the whole Church throughout the world! Have the confidence to be faithful to Christ and to remain here in the land that he sanctified with his own presence! Like Mary, you have a part to play in God's plan for salvation, by bringing Christ forth into the world, by bearing witness to him and spreading his message of peace and unity. For this, it is essential that you should be united among yourselves, so that the Church in the Holy Land can be clearly recognized as "a sign and instrument of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race" (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). Your unity in faith, hope and love is a fruit of the Holy Spirit dwelling within you, enabling you to be effective instruments of God's peace, helping to build genuine reconciliation between the different peoples who recognize Abraham as their father in faith. For, as Mary joyfully proclaimed in her *Magnificat*, God is ever "mindful of his mercy, the mercy promised to our forefathers, to Abraham and his children for ever" (*Lk* 1:54-55).

Dear friends in Christ, be assured that I constantly remember you in my prayer, and I ask you to do the same for me. Let us turn now towards our heavenly Father, who in this place looked upon his servant in her lowliness, and let us sing his praises in union with the Blessed Virgin Mary, with all the choirs of angels and saints, and with the whole Church in every part of the world.