

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

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

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Greek-Melkite Cathedral of Saint-Georges - Amman
Saturday, 9 May 2009*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

It is a great joy for me to celebrate Vespers with you this evening in the Greek-Melkite Cathedral of Saint George. I warmly greet His Beatitude Gregorios III Laham, the Greek Melkite Patriarch, who has joined us from Damascus, Emeritus Archbishop Georges El-Murr and His Excellency Yaser Ayyach, Archbishop of Petra and Philadelphia, whom I thank for his kind words of welcome which I gladly reciprocate with sentiments of respect. I also greet the leaders of the other Catholic Churches present in the East – Maronite, Syrian, Armenian, Chaldean and Latin. To all of you and to the priests, Sisters and Brothers, seminarians and lay faithful gathered here this evening I express my sincere thanks for giving me this opportunity to pray with you and to experience something of the richness of our liturgical traditions.

The Church herself is a pilgrim people and thus, through the centuries, has been marked by determinant historical events and pervading cultural epochs. Sadly, some of these have included times of theological dispute or periods of repression. Others, however, have been moments of reconciliation – marvellously strengthening the communion of the Church – and times of rich cultural revival, to which Eastern Christians have contributed so greatly. Particular Churches within the universal Church attest to the dynamism of her earthly journey and manifest to all members of the faithful a treasure of spiritual, liturgical, and ecclesiastical traditions which point to God's universal goodness and his will, seen throughout history, to draw all into his divine life.

The ancient living treasure of the traditions of the Eastern Churches enriches the universal Church and could never be understood simply as objects to be passively preserved. All Christians are called to respond actively to the Lord's mandate – as Saint George did in dramatic ways according to popular record – to bring others to know and love him. In fact the vicissitudes of history have strengthened the members of particular Churches to embrace this task with vigor and to engage resolutely with the pastoral realities of today. Most of you trace ancient links to the Patriarchate of Antioch, and your communities are thus rooted here in the Near East. And, just as two thousand years ago it was in Antioch that the disciples were first called Christians, so

also today, as small minorities in scattered communities across these lands, you too are recognized as followers of the Lord. The public face of your Christian faith is certainly not restricted to the spiritual solicitude you bear for one another and your people, essential though that is. Rather, your many works of universal charity extend to all Jordanians – Muslims and those of other religions – and also to the large numbers of refugees whom this Kingdom so generously welcomes.

Dear brothers and sisters, the first Psalm (103) we prayed this evening presents us with glorious images of God the bountiful Creator, actively present in his creation, providing life with abundant goodness and wise order, ever ready to renew the face of the earth! The Epistle reading we have just heard, however, paints a different picture. It warns us, not in a threatening way, but realistically, of the need to stay alert, to be aware of the forces of evil at work creating darkness in our world (cf. *Eph* 6:10-20). Some might be tempted to think this a contradiction; yet reflecting on our ordinary human experience we recognize spiritual struggle, we acknowledge the daily need to move into Christ's light, to choose life, to seek truth. Indeed, this rhythm – turning away from evil and girding ourselves with the Lord's strength – is what we celebrate at every Baptism, the gateway to Christian life, the first step along the way of the Lord's disciples. Recalling Christ's baptism by John in the waters of the Jordan, the assembled pray that the one to be baptized will be rescued from the kingdom of darkness and brought into the splendour of God's kingdom of light, and so receive the gift of new life.

This dynamic movement from death to newness of life, from darkness to light, from despair to hope, that we experience so dramatically during the Triduum, and is celebrated with great joy in the season of Easter, ensures that the Church herself remains young. She is alive because Christ is alive, truly risen. Vivified by the presence of the Spirit, she reaches out every day, drawing men and women to the living Lord. Dear Bishops, priests, Brothers and Sisters, dear lay faithful, our respective roles of service and mission within the Church are the tireless response of a pilgrim people. Your liturgies, ecclesiastical discipline and spiritual heritage are a living witness to your unfolding tradition. You amplify the echo of the first Gospel proclamation, you render fresh the ancient memories of the works of the Lord, you make present his saving graces and you diffuse anew the first glimmers of the Easter light and the flickering flames of Pentecost.

In this way, imitating Christ and the Old Testament patriarchs and prophets, we set out to lead people from the desert towards the place of life, towards the Lord who gives us life in abundance. This marks all your apostolic works, the variety and calibre of which are greatly appreciated. From kindergartens to places of higher education, from orphanages to homes for the elderly, from work with refugees to a music academy, medical clinics and hospitals, interreligious dialogue and cultural initiatives, your presence in this society is a marvellous sign of the hope that defines us as Christian.

That hope reaches far beyond the confines of our own Christian communities. So often you find that the families of other religions, with whom you work and offer your service of universal charity, hold concerns and worries that cross religious and cultural boundaries. This is especially noticeable in regard to the hopes and aspirations of parents for their children. What parent or person of good will could not

be troubled by the negative influences so pervasive in our globalized world, including the destructive elements within the entertainment industry which so callously exploit the innocence and sensibility of the vulnerable and the young? Yet, with your eyes firmly fixed on Christ, the light who dispels all evil, restores lost innocence, and humbles earthly pride, you will sustain a magnificent vision of hope for all those you meet and serve.

May I conclude with a special word of encouragement to those present who are in formation for the priesthood and religious life. Guided by the light of the Risen Lord, inflamed with his hope, and vested with his truth and love, your witness will bring abundant blessings to those whom you meet along the way. Indeed the same holds for all young Christian Jordanians: do not be afraid to make your own wise, measured and respectful contribution to the public life of the Kingdom. The authentic voice of faith will always bring integrity, justice, compassion and peace!

Dear friends, with sentiments of great respect for all of you gathered with me this evening in worship, I again thank you for your prayers for my ministry as the Successor of Peter and I assure you and all those entrusted to your pastoral care of a remembrance in my own daily prayer.

Thank you.

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