



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO VITERBO AND BAGNOREGIO EUCHARISTIC

CONCELEBRATION HOMILY OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI *Valle Faul - Viterbo*

Sunday, 6 September 2009 Dear Brothers and Sisters, The setting in which we are celebrating Mass is truly original and evocative: we are in the "Valley" overlooking the ancient Port called *Faul*, a word whose four letters recall the four hills of the ancient *Viterbium: Fanum-Arbanum-Vetulonia-Longula*. On one side stands the imposing Palace, once the residence of the Popes, which as your Bishop recalled witnessed five conclaves in the 13th century. We are surrounded by buildings and spaces, the testimony of many events in the past and today woven into the life of your City and Province. In this context, which evokes centuries of civil and religious history, the whole of your Diocesan Community is gathered here, with the Successor of Peter, to be strengthened by him in fidelity to Christ and to his Gospel. Dear brothers and sisters, I address to all of you my thoughts of gratitude for your warm welcome. I greet in the first place your beloved Pastor, Bishop Lorenzo Chiarinelli, whom I thank for his words of welcome. I greet the other Bishops, in particular those of Lazio, together with the Cardinal Vicar of Rome, the beloved diocesan priests, the deacons, the seminarians, the men and women religious, the young people and the children, and I extend my remembrance to all the members of the diocese.

Your Diocese has recently been united with Viterbo, with the Abbey of San Martino of Monte Cimino, with the Dioceses of Acquapendente, Bagnoregio, Montefiascone and Tuscania. This new configuration is now artistically portrayed, sculpted on the "Bronze Doors" of the Cathedral Church which I was able to bless and to admire as I began my Visit at Piazza San Lorenzo. I address with respect the Civil and Military Authorities, the representatives of the Parliament, the Government, the Region and the Province, and especially the Mayor of the City, who has expressed the cordial sentiments of the population of Viterbo. I thank the Police Forces and I greet the many soldiers present in this city, as well as those involved in peace missions throughout the world. I greet and thank the volunteers and all who have contributed to the fulfilment of my Visit. I reserve a very particular greeting for the elderly and those who are alone, for the sick, for those in prison and for all those who have been unable to take part in our meeting of prayer and friendship. Dear brothers and sisters, every liturgical assembly is a space for the presence of God. Gathered for the Blessed Eucharist, disciples of the Lord proclaim that he is risen, that he is alive and is the Giver of life; and let us witness that his presence is grace, it is fulfilment, it is joy. Let us open our hearts to his word and welcome the gift of his presence! In this Sunday's First Reading, the Prophet Isaiah (35: 4-7) encourages those "who are of a fearful heart" and proclaims this marvellous newness which

experience has confirmed: when the Lord is present the eyes of the blind are reopened, the ears of the deaf unstopped and the lame man leaps like a hart. All things are reborn and all things are revived, for beneficial waters irrigate the desert. The "desert", in Isaiah's symbolic language, can call to mind the tragic events, difficult situations and loneliness that often mark life; the deepest desert is the human heart when it loses the capacity for listening, speaking and communicating with God and with others. Eyes then become blind because they are incapable of seeing reality; ears are closed so as not to hear the cry of those who implore help; hearts are hardened in indifference and selfishness. But now, the Prophet proclaims, all is destined to change; the "dry land" of a closed heart will be watered by a new, divine sap. And when the Lord comes, to those who are fearful of heart in every epoch he says authoritatively: "Be strong, fear not!" (v. 4). Here the Gospel episode recounted by St Mark (7: 31-37) fits in perfectly. Jesus heals a deaf-mute in the pagan land. First he welcomes him and takes care of him with the language of gestures which is more direct than words; and then, using an Aramaic term, he says "*Eph'phatha*", that is, "be opened", restoring the man's hearing and speech. Full of wonder, the crowd exclaims: "he has done all things well" (v. 37). We can see in this "sign" Jesus' ardent desire to overcome man's loneliness and incommunicability created by selfishness, in order to bring about a "new humanity", the humanity of listening and speech, of dialogue, of communication, of communion with God. A "good" humanity, just as all of God's Creation is good; a humanity without discrimination, without exclusion as the Apostle James recommends in his Letter (2: 1-5) so that the world is truly and for all a "scene of true brotherhood" (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 37), in an opening to love of our common Father, who created us and made us his sons and daughters. Dear Church of Viterbo, may Christ, whom we see in the Gospel opening ears and releasing the tongue of the deaf-mute, open your hearts and always give you the joy of listening to his word, the courage to proclaim his Gospel, the ability to speak of God and to speak in this way with your brothers and sisters and, finally, the courage to discover God's Face and his Beauty! However, for this to happen, as St Bonaventure of Bagnoregio where I shall go this afternoon recalls, the mind must, "in beholding these things, transcend and pass over, not only this visible world, but even itself" (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum* VII, 1). This is the itinerary of salvation, illumined by the light of God's word and nourished by the sacraments that bring together all Christians. I would now like to take up certain spiritual and pastoral paths of this journey which you too are called to take, beloved Church which dwells in this region. One priority that is very close to your Bishop's heart is *education in the faith*, as research, as Christian initiation, as life in Christ. It is "becoming Christian" that consists in that "learning Christ" which St Paul expresses with the phrase: "It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2: 20). Parishes, families and the various associations are involved together in this experience. Catechists and all educators are called to commit themselves. Schools from primary schools to the University of Tuscia, ever more important and prestigious, and in particular Catholic schools, including the "San Pietro" Philosophical and Theological Institute are called to offer their own contribution. There are ever timely models, authentic pioneers of education in the faith from which to draw inspiration. I would like to mention, among others, St Rose Venerini (1656-1728) whom I had the joy of canonizing three years ago a true precursor of girls' schools in Italy, precisely during the "Age of Enlightenment"; St Lucia Filippini (1672-1732), who, with the help of

Venerable Cardinal Marco Antonio Barbarigo (1640-1706), founded the praiseworthy "Religious Teachers Filippini". It will be possible to draw further from these spiritual sources successfully in order to face with clarity and consistency the current, unavoidable and overriding "educational emergency", a great challenge to every Christian community and to the whole of society, which is actually a process of "Eph'phatha", of opening the eyes and the ears and also releasing the tongue. Education goes together with the *witness of faith*. "Faith", St Paul writes, "work[s] through love" (Gal 5: 6). It is from this perspective that the Church's charitable action gains her identity: her initiatives, her works, are signs of faith and of the love of God who is Love, as I recalled frequently in my Encyclicals *Deus Caritas Est* and *Caritas in Veritate*. Here the presence of volunteers is flourishing and ever increasing both at the personal level and as voluntary associations *Caritas* is the organization that serves as their vehicle and for their education. The young St Rose (1233-1251), Co-Patroness of the Diocese whose feast falls precisely in these days, is a shining example of faith and generosity to the poor. Furthermore, how can we omit to mention that St Giacinta Marescotti (1585-1640) from her monastery encouraged Eucharistic Adoration in the city and gave life to institutions and projects for prisoners and social outcasts? Nor can we forget the Franciscan witness of St Crispin, a Capuchin (1668-1759), which still inspires the presence of praiseworthy social aid. It is significant that in this atmosphere of Gospel fervour many houses of consecrated life came into being and in particular, cloistered monasteries, which constitute a visible reminder of the primacy of God in our lives and remind us that the first form of charity is, precisely, prayer. Emblematic in this regard is the example of Bl. Gabriella Sagheddu (1914-1939), a Trappist nun. In the Monastery of Vitorchiano, where she is buried, the spiritual ecumenism that was urgently pressed for by the Second Vatican Council (cf. *Unitatis Redintegratio*, n. 8) continues to be presented, nourished by ceaseless prayer. I also recall Bl. Domenico Bårberi (1792-1849), a Passionist from Viterbo. In 1845 he accepted into the Church John Henry Newman, who later became a Cardinal, a high-profile intellectual of luminous spirituality. Lastly, I would like to mention a third aspect of your pastoral plan: *attention to the signs of God*. As Jesus did with the deaf-mute, God continues likewise to reveal to us his project through "events and words". Listening to his word and discerning his signs must therefore be the task of every Christian and every community. The most immediate of God's signs is undoubtedly attention to one's neighbour in accordance with what Jesus said: "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt 25: 40). Furthermore, as the *Second Vatican Council* affirmed, the Christian is called to be "a witness before the world to the resurrection and life of the Lord Jesus, and a sign of the living God" (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 38). The priest whom Christ has chosen all for himself must be such in the first place. During this Year for Priests, pray with greater intensity for priests, for seminarians and for vocations, so that they may be faithful to this vocation of theirs! Likewise, every consecrated and every baptized person must be a sign of the living God. Lay faithful, young people and families, do not be afraid to live and to bear witness to the faith in the various sectors of society, in the many situations of human existence! In this context also Viterbo has contributed prestigious figures. On this occasion it is a duty and a joy to commemorate Mario Fani of Viterbo the young man who founded the "Circolo Santa Rosa" who, together with Giovanni Acquaderni of Bologna, kindled that first spark which was later to become the historic experience of the laity in Italy:

Catholic Action. The seasons of history come and go, social contexts change, but the vocation of Christians to live the Gospel in solidarity with the human family, in step with the times, has not been silenced and does not go out of fashion. This is social commitment, this is the service proper to political action, this is integral human development. Dear brothers and sisters, when the heart is fearful in the desert of life do not be afraid, entrust yourselves to Christ, the first-born of the new humanity: a family of brothers and sisters built in freedom and justice, in the truth and charity of God's children. Saints dear to you belong to this great family: Lawrence, Valentine, Hilary, Rose, Lucia, Bonaventure and many others. Our common Mother is Mary whom you venerate with the title of Our Lady of the Oak as Patroness of the whole Diocese in its new configuration. May they keep you ever united and nourish in each one the desire to proclaim Christ's presence and love with words and with deeds! Amen.