



The Holy See

HOLY MASS ON THE OCCASION OF THE HOLY FATHER'S 85TH BIRTHDAY

HOMILY OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Pauline Chapel

Monday, 16 April 2012

Your Eminences,

Dear Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood,

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

On the day of my birth and of my Baptism, 16 April, the Church's liturgy has set three signposts which show me where the road leads and help me to find it. In the first place, it is the Memorial of St Bernadette Soubirous, the seer of Lourdes; then there is one of the most unusual Saints in the Church's history, Benedict Joseph Labre; and then, above all, this day is immersed in the Paschal Mystery, in the Mystery of the Cross and the Resurrection. In the year of my birth this was expressed in a special way: it was Holy Saturday, the day of the silence of God, of his apparent absence, of God's death, but also the day on which the Resurrection was proclaimed.

We all know and love Bernadette Soubirous, the simple girl from the south, from the Pyrenees. Bernadette grew up in the France of the 18th-century Enlightenment in a poverty which it is hard to imagine.

The prison that had been evacuated because it was too insanitary, became — after some hesitation — the family home in which she spent her childhood. There was no access to education, only some catechism in preparation for First Communion. Yet this simple girl, who retained a pure and honest heart, had a heart that saw, that was able to see the Mother of the Lord and the Lord's beauty and goodness was reflected in her. Mary was able to appear to this girl and through her to speak to the people of the time and beyond it.

Bernadette could see with her pure and genuine heart. And Mary pointed out the spring to her: she was able to discover the spring of pure and uncontaminated living water; water that is life, water that gives purity and health. And down the centuries this living water has become a sign from Mary, a sign that shows where the sources of life are found, where we can purify ourselves, where we can find what is uncontaminated. This sign is all the more important in our time, in which we see the world so anxious and in which the need for water, pure water, becomes pressing. From Mary, the Mother of the Lord, from her pure heart, pure and genuine life-giving water also wells: water which in this century — and in centuries to come — purifies and heals us.

I think we can consider this water as an image of truth that comes to us in faith: not simulated but rather uncontaminated truth. Indeed to be able to live, to be able to be pure, we need to have within us a longing for pure life, for undistorted truth, for what is not contaminated by corruption, a longing to be unblemished. So on this day, this little Saint has always been a sign for me, who has shown me where the living water we need comes from — the water that purifies us and gives life — and a sign of how we ought to be: with all our knowledge and all our skills, although they are necessary, we must not lose our simple hearts, the simple gaze of the heart that can perceive the essential, and we must always pray the Lord to preserve in us the humility that enables the heart to remain clairvoyant — to see what is simple and essential, the beauty and goodness of God — and in this way to find the spring from which flows the purifying life-giving water.

Then there is Benedict Joseph Labre, the pious mendicant pilgrim of the 18th century who, after failing several times, at last found his vocation to go on pilgrimage as a beggar, without anything, without any support and keeping for himself nothing he received except what he absolutely needed. He was a pilgrim travelling across Europe to all the European shrines, from Spain to Poland and from Germany to Sicily: a truly European Saint! We can also say: a rather unusual Saint who begging, wandered from one shrine to another and wanted to do nothing other than to pray and thereby bear witness to what counts in this life: God. Of course, his is not an example to emulate, but a signpost, a finger pointing to the essential. He shows us that God alone suffices; that beyond anything in this world, beyond our needs and capacities, what matters, what is essential is to know God. He is enough on his own. And this “only God”, he shows us in a dramatic way. At the same time, this truly European life that, from shrine to shrine, embraces the entire continent of Europe makes it clear that whoever opens to God does not estrange himself from the world and from men, but rather finds brothers, because God causes all borders to fall, God alone eliminates the borders because, thanks to him, we all are brothers and sisters, we belong to one another. He makes it clear that the oneness of God means, at the same time, brotherhood and reconciliation among men, the demolition of frontiers that unites us and heals us. In this way he is a Saint of peace, just as he was a Saint without demands, who died deprived of all but blessed with everything.

And then, finally, we come to the Paschal Mystery. The same day on which I was born, thanks to my parent’s concern, I was also reborn through water and the Holy Spirit, as we have just heard in

the Gospel. First, there is the gift of life that my parents gave me in very difficult times, and for which I thank them. But it cannot be taken for granted that human life in itself is a gift. Can it really be a beautiful gift? Do we know what will befall man in the dark days ahead — or in the brighter days that could come? Can we foresee to what troubles, what terrible events he might be exposed? Is it right to simply give life like this? Is it responsible or too uncertain? It is a problematic gift, if it is left to itself. Biological life is in itself a gift, but it is surrounded by a great question. It becomes a true gift only if, along with it, we are given a promise that is stronger than any evil that could threaten us, if it is immersed in a power that ensures that it is good to be human, that there will be good for this person no matter what the future brings. Thus, with birth is associated rebirth, the certitude that, truly, it is good to be alive, because the promise is stronger than evil. This is the meaning of rebirth by water and the Holy Spirit: to be immersed in the promise that only God can make — it is good that you exist, and you can be certain of that whatever comes. With this assurance I was able to live, reborn by water and the Holy Spirit. Nicodemus asks the Lord: “How can an old man possibly be reborn?”. Now, rebirth is given to us in Baptism, but we must continually grow in it, we must always let ourselves be immersed by God in his promise, in order to be truly reborn in the great, new family of God which is stronger than every weakness and than any negative power that threatens us. Therefore, this is a day of great thanksgiving.

The day I was baptized, as I said, was Holy Saturday. Then it was still customary to anticipate the Easter Vigil in the morning, which would still be followed by the darkness of Holy Saturday, without the Alleluia. It seems to me that this singular paradox, this singular anticipation of light in a day of darkness, could almost be an image of the history of our times. On the one hand, there is still the silence of God and his absence, but in the Resurrection of Christ there is already the anticipation of the “yes” of God, and on the basis of this anticipation we live and, through the silence of God, we hear him speak, and through the darkness of his absence we glimpse his light. The anticipation of the Resurrection in the middle of an evolving history is the power that points out the way to us and helps us to go forward.

Let us thank the good Lord for he has given us this light and let us pray to him so that it might endure forever. And on this day I have special cause to thank him and all those who have ever anew made me perceive the presence of the Lord, who have accompanied me so that I might never lose the light.

I am now facing the last chapter of my life and I do not know what awaits me. I know, however, that the light of God exists, that he is Risen, that his light is stronger than any darkness, that the goodness of God is stronger than any evil in this world. And this helps me to go forward with certainty. May this help *us* to go forward, and at this moment I wholeheartedly thank all those who have continually helped me to perceive the “yes” of God through their faith.

Finally, Cardinal Dean, a warm thank you for your words of brotherly friendship, for all the collaboration during all these years. And a special thank you to all the collaborators over the 30

years in which I have been in Rome, who have helped me to carry the weight of my responsibilities. Thank you. Amen.

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