



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY MEETING
OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR LATIN AMERICA**

*Consistory Hall
Friday, 8 April 2011*

*Your Eminences,
Dear Brothers in the Episcopate,*

I greet with affection the Counsellors and Members of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, meeting in Rome for the Plenary Assembly. I greet in a special way Cardinal Marc Ouellet, Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and President of this Pontifical Commission. I warmly thank him for his words on behalf of all, and for presenting to me the results of these days of study and reflection.

The theme chosen for this meeting, “Impact of Popular Piety on the Process of Evangelization in Latin America”, directly addresses one of the most important aspects of the missionary task in which the particular Churches of the great Latin American region are engaged. The bishops who met in Aparecida for the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops’ Conferences, which I had the pleasure of opening on my [Journey to Brazil in May 2007](#), presented popular piety as a means of encountering Jesus Christ and of expressing the faith of the Church.

This cannot, therefore, be considered as something secondary in Christian life, for it “would mean forgetting the primacy of the action of the Spirit and of the freely chosen project of God’s love” (*Final Document*, n. 263).

This simple expression of faith originates in the very first stages of evangelization in those lands. In fact, as Christ’s salvific message gradually enlightened and enlivened their cultures, the deep and rich popular piety characteristic of the lively faith of the Latin American peoples was gradually

woven. As I said in my [Address at the Opening Session of the Conference of Aparecida](#), it constitutes “the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified” (n. 1).

To carry out the new evangelization in Latin America, in a process that permeates all which the Christian is and does, the many expressions of popular piety cannot be ignored. These forms of popular piety, well-channelled and properly supported, encourage a fruitful encounter with God, deep reverence for the Most Blessed Sacrament, profound devotion to the Virgin Mary, the cultivation of affection for the Successor of Peter and an awareness of membership in the Church. May all this also be useful in evangelizing, in communicating faith, in bringing the faithful closer to the sacraments, and in strengthening the bonds of friendship and family and community union, as well as to increase solidarity and the exercise of charity.

If popular piety is not to be reduced to a mere cultural expression of a specific region, faith must consequently be its main source. Furthermore, it must be closely related to the sacred Liturgy which cannot be replaced by any other form of religious expression. In this respect, it cannot be forgotten, as is stated in the [Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy](#) published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Sacraments, that “the Liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship which are in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other. In this relationship, however, the Liturgy remains the primary reference point so as ‘clearly and prudently to channel the yearnings of prayer and the charismatic life’ which are found in popular piety. For its part, popular piety, because of its symbolic and expressive qualities, can often provide the Liturgy with important insights for inculturation and stimulate an effective dynamic creativity” (n. 58).

Many expressions of faith linked to the important celebrations of the liturgical year are to be found in popular piety. Through them the simple people of Latin America reaffirm the love they feel for Jesus Christ, in whom they find a manifestation of God’s closeness, of his compassion and of his mercy. Numerous shrines are dedicated to the contemplation of the mysteries of the childhood, Passion, death and Resurrection of the Lord. Multitudes of people go to them to place in his divine hands their sorrows and their joys, praying at the same time for an abundance of graces and imploring forgiveness for their sins.

The devotion to the Most Holy Virgin Mary of the Latin American and Caribbean peoples is also closely bound to Jesus. From the dawn of evangelization Mary has accompanied the children of this region and is an inexhaustible source of hope to them. For this reason, they turn to her as Mother of the Saviour, in order to constantly feel her loving protection under different names. The saints are likewise seen as bright stars that spangle the hearts of many of the faithful in these regions, edifying them by their example and protecting them with their intercession.

However, it is impossible to deny the existence of certain off-course forms of popular piety. These, rather than fomenting active participation in the Church, create confusion and can foster a

religious practice that is merely superficial, detached from a firmly-rooted and inwardly lively faith. In this regard I would like to recall here what I wrote to seminarians last year: “Certainly, popular piety tends towards the irrational, and can at times be somewhat superficial. Yet it would be quite wrong to dismiss it. Through that piety, the faith has entered human hearts and become part of the common patrimony of sentiments and customs, shaping the life and emotions of the community. Popular piety is thus one of the Church’s great treasures. The faith has taken on flesh and blood. Certainly popular piety always needs to be purified and refocused, yet it is worthy of our love and it truly makes us into the ‘People of God’ ” (*Letter to Seminarians*, 18 October 2010, n. 4).

At the meetings I have had in the past few years on the occasion of the *ad limina* visits of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, I have always been informed of the happenings in their respective ecclesiastical circumscriptions in order to launch the continental Mission. With this Mission the Latin American episcopate has wished to relaunch the process of the new evangelization following Aparecida, and has invited all the Church’s members of the Church to adopt a permanent state of mission. This is a very important option, because of the desire to return to a fundamental aspect of the Church’s work, namely, to give primacy to the Word of God so that it may be the permanent nourishment of Christian life and the pivot of all pastoral action.

This encounter with the divine Word must lead to a profound change of life, a radical identification with the Lord and his Gospel in order to become fully aware that it is necessary to be solidly anchored in Christ, acknowledging that “being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction” (Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, n. 1).

In this regard I am glad to know that in the parishes and small ecclesial communities of Latin America the practice of *lectio divina* as an ordinary way to nourish prayer and by so doing to reinforce the spiritual life of the faithful is spreading. For “the Bible offers an inexhaustible source of inspiration to popular piety, as well as unrivalled forms of prayer and thematic subjects” (*Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, n. 87).

Dear brothers, I thank you for your effective contributions to protect, promote and purify all that is related to the expression of popular piety in Latin America. To achieve this goal, it will be invaluable to continue to give an impetus to the Continental Mission. In it a special place must be assigned to all that constitutes a privileged way of enabling faith to be accepted in people’s hearts, all that touches people’s inmost feelings and is vigorously and actively expressed through charity (cf. Gal 5:6).

At the end of this joyful meeting, while I invoke the sweet name of Mary Most Holy, the perfect disciple and teacher of evangelization, I cordially impart to you the Apostolic Blessing, as a pledge of divine benevolence.

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