



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO CROATIA

(JUNE 4-5, 2011)

CELEBRATION OF VESPERS WITH BISHOPS, PRIESTS, RELIGIOUS AND SEMINARIANS AND PRAYER AT THE TOMB OF BLESSED ALOJZIJE VIKTOR STEPINAC

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

*Cathedral of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Stephen, Zagreb
Sunday, 5 June 2011*

(Video)

*Dear Brother Bishops and Priests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I give thanks to God for this encounter, in prayer, which allows me to spend a special moment of communion with you, Bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, seminarians and novices. I greet all of you with affection and I thank you for the witness that you render to the Church, following the example of many Pastors and Martyrs down the centuries in this land, from Saint Domnius to Blessed Cardinal Stepinac, the beloved Cardinal Kuharić and many others. I thank Cardinal Josip Bozanić for the kind words which he has addressed to me. This evening we gather for a devoted and prayerful remembrance of Blessed Alojzije Stepinac, a fearless Pastor and an example of apostolic zeal and Christian fortitude, whose heroic life continues today to illuminate the faithful of the Dioceses of Croatia, sustaining the faith and life of the Church in this land. The merits of this unforgettable Bishop are derived essentially from his faith: in his life, he always had his gaze fixed on Jesus, to whom he was always conformed, to the point of becoming a living image of Christ, and of Christ suffering. Precisely because of his strong Christian conscience, he knew how to resist every form of totalitarianism, becoming, in a time of Nazi and Fascist

dictatorship, a defender of the Jews, the Orthodox and of all the persecuted, and then, in the age of communism, an advocate for his own faithful, especially for the many persecuted and murdered priests. Yes, he became an advocate for God on this earth, since he tenaciously defended the truth and man's right to live with God.

“For by a single offering [Christ] has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (*Heb 10:14*). This phrase from the *Letter to the Hebrews* which we have just heard, invites us to consider the figure of Blessed Cardinal Stepinac according to the “form” of Christ and his sacrifice. Christian martyrdom is in fact the highest measure of holiness, but it is so always and only thanks to Christ, by his gift, as a response to his oblation which we receive in the Eucharist. Blessed Alojzije Stepinac responded with his priesthood, with the episcopate, with the sacrifice of his life: a unique “yes” united to that of Christ. His martyrdom signals the culmination of the violence perpetrated against the Church during the terrible period of communist persecution. Croatian Catholics, and in particular the clergy, were objects of oppression and systematic abuse, aimed at destroying the Catholic Church, beginning with its highest Authority in this place. That particularly difficult period was characterized by a generation of Bishops, priests and Religious who were ready to die rather than to betray Christ, the Church and the Pope. The people saw that the priests never lost faith, hope and charity, and thus they remained always united. This unity explains what is humanly inexplicable: that such a hardened regime could not make the Church bow down.

Today too, the Church in Croatia is called to be united, to meet the challenges of a changed social context, identifying with missionary fervour new ways of evangelization, especially in the service of younger generations. My dear Brother Bishops, I would like to encourage you above all in the fulfilment of your mission. The more you work in fruitful cooperation among yourselves and in communion with the Successor of Peter, the more you will be able to confront the difficulties of our age. It is also important for Bishops above all and for priests to strive for reconciliation among separated Christians and between Christians and Muslims, following the footsteps of Christ who is our peace. Regarding your priests, do not neglect to offer them clear spiritual, doctrinal and pastoral directions. While the Christian community admits legitimate diversity within itself, it cannot render faithful witness to the Lord except in the communion of its members. This requires of you the service of vigilance, offered in dialogue and with great love, but also with clarity and firmness. Dear Brothers, adhering to Christ means “keeping his word” (cf. *Jn 14:23*).

To this end, Blessed Cardinal Stepinac expressed himself in this way: “One of the greatest evils of our time is mediocrity in the questions of faith. Let us not deceive ourselves... Either we are Catholic or we are not. If we are, this must be seen in every area of our life” (*Homily on the Solemnity of Saints Peter and Paul, 29 June 1943*). The Church's moral teaching, often misunderstood today, cannot be detached from the Gospel. It falls particularly to the Bishops to propose it authoritatively to the faithful, in order to assist them in evaluating their personal responsibilities and in harmonizing their moral choices with the demands of the faith. In this way, your society will make progress towards that “cultural shift” necessary for promoting a culture of

life and a society worthy of man.

Dear priests – especially those of you in charge of parishes – I know the importance and the variety of your tasks in an age when the scarcity of priests is beginning to make itself felt strongly. I urge you not to lose heart, to remain vigilant in prayer and in your spiritual lives, in order to perform your ministry fruitfully: to teach, to sanctify and to guide all those who are entrusted to your care. Welcome with magnanimity those who knock at the door of your heart, offering to each one the gifts that divine goodness has entrusted to you. Persevere in communion with your Bishops and in mutual cooperation. Nourish your commitment at the life-giving waters of Scripture, the Sacraments, the constant praise of God, always open and docile to the actions of the Holy Spirit; you will thus be effective workers in the new evangelization, which you are called to realize together with the laity, in a coordinated way and without confusing what pertains to ordained ministry with what belongs to the universal priesthood of all the baptized. Keep close to your hearts the promotion of vocations to the priesthood; by your enthusiasm and your fidelity, strive to transmit a living desire to respond generously and without hesitation to Christ, who calls each one to be conformed more intimately to himself, Head and Shepherd.

Dear consecrated men and women, how much the Church expects of you, who have the mission of bearing witness in every age to “the way of life which Jesus, the supreme Consecrated One and missionary of the Father for the sake of his Kingdom, embraced and proposed to his disciples” (*Vita Consecrata*, 22). May God himself be your only treasure: let yourselves be formed by him, thus making visible to the men and women of today – athirst for true values – the holiness, truth, and love of our heavenly Father. Sustained by the grace of the Spirit, speak to the people with the eloquence of a life transfigured by the newness of Easter. Your whole existence will thus become a sign of, and a service to, the consecration received by each of the baptized when they were incorporated into Christ.

To the young people preparing themselves for the priesthood or the consecrated life, I wish to repeat that the divine Master is constantly at work in the world and he says to all those he calls, “Follow me” (*Mt 9:9*). It is a call which asks to be confirmed every day with a response of love. May your hearts always be ready! May the heroic testimony of Blessed Alojzije Stepinac inspire a renewal of vocations among the young people of Croatia. And you, dear Brothers in the Episcopate and the priesthood, do not neglect to offer to young seminarians and novices a balanced formation, to prepare them for a ministry that is well integrated into the society of our time, thanks to the depth of their spiritual lives and the seriousness of their studies.

Beloved Church in Croatia, with courage and humility take up the task of being the moral conscience of society, “salt of the earth” and “light of the world” (cf. *Mt 5:13-14*). Be always faithful to Christ and to the message of the Gospel, in a society which seeks to relativize and secularize every area of life. May the joy of faith and hope dwell within you. My dearest friends! May Blessed Cardinal Alojzije Stepinac and all the saints of your land intercede for your people and may the

Mother of the Saviour protect you. With great affection, I impart to you and to the entire Church in Croatia my Apostolic Blessing. Amen.

Praised be Jesus and Mary!

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