



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II

TO THE MONKS OF THE ABBEY OF MONTE CASSINO *Friday, 18 May 1979 Beloved Brothers and*

Sons! Thirty-five years ago, on 18 May 1944, the Polish soldiers of General Anders, who had just arrived at the front and had been attached to the British "Eighth Army", succeeded in hoisting the red and white Polish flag on the still smoking ruins of this historic Abbey. Three months before, on 15 February 1944, hundreds of tons of explosives had been dropped by the bombers, destroying the Abbey, considered a military target, while between one bombardment and another the cross-fire of artillery from land and sea sowed death and ruin everywhere. In the Polish cemetery over a thousand crosses recall the sacrifice of these young men who, together with many other armies, fought and died for freedom and peace. Thirty-five years have passed; and now today, here in Monte Cassino, in the famous Abbey, risen again and glorious, a son of Poland, become Pope, remembers and prays for his brothers, together with all the fallen, victims of mistaken ideas and of human conflicts. Oh, the designs of God are really mysterious and the ways of history unforeseeable! Who could ever have imagined that this century, with its stupendous conquests, and progress, would see the outbreak of such hatred and such cruelty? And who could ever have foreseen that the voice of Peter's Successor would come precisely from tortured and humiliated Poland? There remains only to await the future anxiously, certain, however, that through the sometimes tragic events of humanity, Christ conquers always, and love, in the end, is also always victorious. Already nine years ago I climbed up here to Monte Cassino with two-hundred priests who had been prisoners in the concentration camps of Dachau and Mathausen. Today, having become Vicar of Christ, I have returned with no longer just Poland, but Italy and the whole world in my heart! I am here to pray, to meditate with you and also to outline a programme of life in the light of Monte Cassino and St Benedict. 1) *Let us listen first of all to the voice of Monte Cassino.* What can it say to us, what does it want to say to us, this outstanding monument of religious spirit and of humanity? Three times it was destroyed and three times it rose again from its ruins, remaining a mystical centre of inexpressible value for Italy, Europe and the world. There came up here the humble and the powerful, saints and sinners, mystics and the desperate. There came here poets, writers, philosophers and artists. There arrived here souls thirsty for truth or tormented by doubt, and they found peace and certainty. Here came defenceless and fugitive multitudes, exhausted and frightened, victims of the storms of the times, and they found refuge and comfort. Why did these humble or important people flock to Monte Cassino? Dante Alighieri, as you well know, has St Benedict himself explain it: "That mount, upon whose slope Cassino lies, / was erst thronged on its summit by people / deceived and ill-disposed. / And I am he who first brought up there the name / of Him who brought to earth that truth / which lifts us so high; / and so great grace shone upon me, that I drew / the places round about / away from the impious cult which seduced the world (Paradise XXII 37-45). People have always come and continue to come here to meet "the truth which lifts us so high", to breathe a different atmosphere, transcendent and transforming. Come, therefore, O peoples, to Monte Cassino! Come to meditate on past history and understand the true meaning of our earthly pilgrimage! Come to regain peace and serenity,

tenderness with God and friendship with men, to bring back hope and goodness to the frantic metropolises of the modern world, to the anguish of so many tormented and disappointed souls! Come particularly you, young people, thirsty for innocence, contemplation, interior beauty, pure joy; you who seek the ultimate and decisive meaning of existence and history, come, and recognize and enjoy Christian and Benedictine spirituality, before letting yourselves be attracted by other experiences! And you, Benedictine Monks, keep alive your spirituality, your mystical contemplation joined with work, understood as a service of God and brothers! Let your deep joy be praise of God by means of the strong and sweet Latin language and the sublime and purifying Gregorian melodies. Be an example to the world by your work in silence and humble obedience.)

2) *Let us listen in particular to St Benedict's voice.* A representative man and a real giant of history, St Benedict is great not only because of his holiness, but also because of his intelligence and industry, which succeeded in giving a new course to the events of history. We will recall only the essential elements of his interesting and adventurous life. Born about 480 at Norcia, that is, in the inland mountains of Umbria, Benedict studied rhetoric in Rome for some time, then, frightened or disgusted by the corruption of the environment, he withdrew in solitude to Lake Aniene, at Subiaco, where as many as thirteen monasteries were constructed. Forced to leave the valley of the Aniene, Benedict made his way to this high hill which dominates the village of Cassino. In 529 he founded the famous Monastery here and dedicated himself to the evangelization of those peoples who were still pagan, while his sister Scholastica directed the convent of religious women. About the end of the fifth century, the world was upset by a tremendous crisis of values and institutions, caused by the end of the Roman Empire, the invasion of other peoples and the decay of morals. In this black night of history, St Benedict was a luminous star. Endowed with a deep human sensitivity, in his project for the reform of society St Benedict looked particularly to man, following three main lines:— the value of the individual, as a person;— the dignity of work, understood as service of God and brothers;— the necessity of contemplation, that is of prayer: having understood that God is the Absolute, and we live in the Absolute, the soul of everything must be prayer: , "Ut in omnibus glorificetur Deus" (Rule). In short, therefore, it can be said that St Benedict's message is an invitation to interiority. Man must first of all enter himself, he must know himself deeply, he must discover within himself the aspiration to God and traces of the Absolute. The theocentric and liturgical character of the social reform advocated by St Benedict seems to follow exactly the famous exhortation of St Augustine: "Noli foras ire, in teipsum redi; in interiore homine habitat veritas" (*Vera rel.* 39, 72). St Gregory, in his famous "Dialogues" (Migne, P.L. 125-204), in which he narrates St Benedict's life, writes that he "lived alone with himself under the eyes of the one who observes us from above: solus superni spectatoris oculis habitavit secum" (Lb. II, C. III). Let us listen to St Benedict's voice: from interior solitude, from contemplative silence, from victory over the noise of the external world, from this "living with oneself", there is born the dialogue with oneself and with God, which leads right to the summits of asceticism and mysticism.

3) *And finally, let us listen further to the voice of the times.* The voice of our times, which we are living with anxiety and trepidation, tells us that men are aiming more and more at unity. The need is felt for greater mutual knowledge among individuals and among peoples. But today, especially, Europe is realizing its unity, not only economic, but also social and political, though respecting individual nationalities. Many complicated problems have to be tackled and solved, from the cultural and scholastic field to the juridical and economic. But listening to St Benedict, who was defined "Father of Europe" by Pius XII and whom Paul VI decreed its heavenly Patron, the times are urging towards increasingly intense reciprocal understanding, which will defeat and overcome social inequalities, selfish indifference, arrogance and intolerance. And is this not the message of Christian faith? This Christian faith which is the soul and the spirit of Europe and which invites us to be meek, patient, merciful, peacemakers, pure in heart, poor in spirit, hungry and thirsty for righteousness (Mt 5:1-12). In this way St Benedict's voice unites with the voice of the times. Let the Beatitudes be the programme of life for Europe and for all. St Paul says to us, too: "Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness,

meekness, and patience, forbearing one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other... And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts!" (Col 3:12-15). We wish to pray here for this peace of Christ; and if we observe all the present search for greater unity among European peoples, we hope that this will lead also to deeper awareness of the roots—spiritual roots, Christian roots—because, if a common house is to be built, deeper foundations also have to be laid.. A superficial foundation is not enough. And that deeper foundation—as we have seen also in our analysis—always means "spiritual". Let us pray that the search for a more united Europe will be based on the spiritual foundation of the Benedictine tradition, of the Christian tradition, the Catholic one, which means universal. Only in the name of this tradition is it possible that now, in this place, today, there should come as Bishop of Rome the son of a people different in language and history, but rooted in the same foundation, in the same spiritual tradition, in the same Christianity, with such a Christian past that he can be among you not just as one of the family, but also as your pastor. Let us turn our eyes and our heart to the Blessed Virgin! May she assist us to be all in agreement to unite Europe and the whole world in the one sun that is Christ! In 1944, at the end of the tragic days at Monte Cassino, as soon as the troops arrived at the summits of the still smoking ruins, a group of Polish Catholic soldiers erected there a little chapel dedicated to Mary; then they adorned it as best they could in those dramatic circumstances, and finally prostrated themselves in trusting prayer. On that soil this new Church rises today. Beloved brothers and sons, let us unite in prayer to Mary, in imitation of her virtues, in filial and consistent love; and then let us proceed with faith and courage, saying with St Benedict "Ora et labora et noli contristari!". © Copyright 1979 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana