



THIRD EUROPEAN ECUMENICAL
ASSEMBLY

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Sibiu, Saturday, 8 September 2007

8:00-10:30, The Tent

Feast of the Birth of The Virgin Mary

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HOMILY

**Celebration of the Eucharist according to the Byzantine Rite
on the Feast of the Birth of the Virgin Mary
during the Third European Ecumenical Assembly**

My dear brothers and sisters in Jesus Christ,
My dear friends,

How good it is to gather this morning to celebrate the birthday of the Blessed Virgin Mary. Above any other Mary is the model of discipleship for all Christians and it is the call to discipleship that has brought us from across Europe to meet, share, pray and celebrate with fellow Christians. That model of discipleship is also eloquently portrayed in Martha and Mary: the communion of the one who listens together with the mission of the one who acts. We are here to listen and to act.

I cannot help but wonder at the many Marian sanctuaries and shrines there must be, or the literally thousands of places throughout the world that are named after Mary Mother of Jesus, because of those who have gone from this great continent to take the Word of God to the ends of the earth. I am sure that we should rejoice in all those who have gone before us having heard the word of God and kept it.

The Church in Europe is of course very different in our day and we stand together in this place endeavouring once again to rediscover that unity for which the Lord prayed. There are those who would say that the ecumenical spirit is beginning to wane or that there is neither the energy nor the desire for unity. To those people and with you I say no! Listen rather to the word just proclaimed to us: "God raised him on high and gave him the name which is above all other names ... that every tongue should acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord". Our mission is the proclamation of the name of the Lord and so the teaching of the Second Vatican Council resonates with us: "There is no ecumenism worthy of the name without interior conversion, newness of attitudes and unstinted love" (UR, 8). All unity is unity with Jesus Christ. Raising our eyes to him, we can peer over the barriers of confessional or denominational boundaries and differences. The closer we come to him, the nearer we draw to each other.

Interior conversion is conversion to him; newness of attitude enables us to become brothers and sisters in the Lord; unstinted love is love of Christ and therefore of each other. The journey to Christian unity is a pilgrimage to exalt the name of the Lord and so it is a path where there is no pausing, no turning back.

We affirm today that we want unity, we bend the knee and pray for unity, we commit ourselves to work for unity.

And our model this day is Mary, the Mother of God. She readily accepted the Word of God and immediately sought to do his will. Without hesitation she went and visited her cousin Elizabeth who in her turn responded with her own proclamation of the name of the Lord.

And so I say to you this morning, let this gathering of European Christians rekindle in you the genuine desire for unity. Take heed of the example of Martha, Mary and Mary the Mother of God: do not let it rest here. Be not satisfied in simply gathering. Take that desire with you, so that prayer for unity and the work of unity is accomplished in your hearts, in your homes and communities. As Jesus counselled the woman in the crowd: hear the Word of God and *keep* it.

When we began this pilgrimage back in January 2006 I told those gathered in Rome a story and I make no apology for repeating it now:

It was a story of four tailors and they could well have been four tailors from Romania – even from here in Sibiu! They all lived in the same place, along the same street. Times were bad, so one of them decided he would put an advertisement in the window of his house. It said, “Here is the best tailor in the town”. The next tailor came along and he saw what the other man had put in, so he put in his window, “Here is the best tailor in all Romania!” The third tailor came along and he saw the other two advertisements, and put in his window, “Here you will find the best tailor in the whole, wide world!” The fourth tailor came along. He looked at the first, and he looked at the second, and he looked at the third, and he put in his window, “Here is the best tailor in the street”!!

I am sure you get the point of the story. Our meeting with fellow Christians here is a great ecumenical event – but ecumenism is not essentially about great events, rather about the little happenings, in *your* homes and *your* parishes and *your* villages and towns. It is there that the Holy Spirit of God works the miracles of his grace. It was to her home that the Angel came to Mary to tell her the Good News. It was to the home of her cousin that Mary went, putting her faith into practice. It was at home that Martha worked for the Lord and Mary listened to his word.

What are you doing in *your* home, *your* parish, *your* town – *your* street – to promote the work of ecumenism, so that the Lord’s prayer, “May they all be one” might be fulfilled?

What is so lovely in celebrating the birthday of Mary is that we can remember how she went home and stored up in her heart all that had

been said and done for her. So it is from our homes – our streets - having gone from here that we contemplate Europe: our continent and our home.

Europe too has a memory and a heart. It has a history, but more importantly it has a present and a future. Countless numbers of the Christian men and women of Europe have given life to the soul of Europe: building its churches; forming its culture; nurturing its children to holiness and sanctity; bringing shape and sense to the laws by which we live and to great democratic principles and ideals. Millions of Christians have travelled from Europe and carried the Gospel and its values to every corner of the globe.

The values of the world were fostered in Europe; the values of Europe are Christian. There is honour and truth in cherishing the Gospel of Jesus Christ as the foundation stone of our continent.

What a shame that so many people and indeed political figures seem unable to accept this fact of our history. They worry and fret about so many things and fail to acknowledge not only our shared Christian birthright, but also the green shoots and sturdy oak trees of Christianity that infuse European culture.

Marking the fiftieth anniversary of the *Treaty of Rome* in March this year Pope Benedict had this to say:

“An authentic European "common home" cannot be built without considering the identity of the people of this Continent of ours. It is a question of a historical, cultural, and moral identity before being a geographic, economic, or political one; an identity comprised of a set of universal values that Christianity helped forge, thus giving Christianity not only a historical but a foundational role vis-à-vis Europe. These values, which make up the soul of the Continent, must remain in the Europe of the third millennium...”

With the Holy Father, to the people and the Governments of our continent of Europe, we Christians gathered in Sibiu today cry out: never forget the rock from which you were hewn.

Our witness and that of numerous communities from the Atlantic Coast to the shores of the Black Sea is that Christianity is alive. It is sheer folly to ignore deliberately the faith of Europeans or to disregard their beliefs as the stagnant remnants of history. The Gospel of Jesus Christ lived in the homes and hearts of believers, and proclaimed with the immediacy of Mary, has an indispensable part to play in the life of Europe today and in the future. When our faith is vigorous, then European civilisation itself is vibrant.

The Christian message is quite simply one of life: Christ is not dead he is alive and we acclaim Jesus Christ as Lord, to the glory of God the Father. In doing so we also accept our mission to hear the Word of God and to keep it; so that there may be life, hope, freedom, vitality and joy in the home and in the heart of every single one of God's children in Europe.

Mary, Mother of the Church, honoured and invoked at so many shrines in Europe, our home, pray for us.

Saturday, 8 September 2007
Sibiu, Romania