

HOLY FATHER'S ADDRESS AT ECUMENICAL CELEBRATION

The address of Pope Benedict XVI at the ecumenical celebration at Westminster Abbey on Friday 17th September.

Dear friends in Christ,

I thank the Lord for this opportunity to join you, the representatives of the Christian confessions present in Great Britain, in this magnificent Abbey Church dedicated to Saint Peter, whose architecture and history speak so eloquently of our common heritage of faith. Here we cannot help but be reminded of how greatly the Christian faith shaped the unity and culture of Europe and the heart and spirit of the English people. Here too, we are forcibly reminded that what we share, in Christ, is greater than what continues to divide us.

I am grateful to His Grace the Archbishop of Canterbury for his kind greeting, and to the Dean and Chapter of this venerable Abbey for their cordial welcome. I thank the Lord for allowing me, as the Successor of Saint Peter in the See of Rome, to make this pilgrimage to the tomb of Saint Edward the Confessor. Edward, King of England, remains a model of Christian witness and an example of that true grandeur to which the Lord summons his disciples in the Scriptures we have just heard: the grandeur of a humility and obedience grounded in Christ's own example (cf. Phil 2:6-8), the grandeur of a fidelity which does not hesitate to embrace the mystery of the Cross out of undying love for the divine Master and unflinching hope in his promises (cf. Mk 10:43-44).

This year, as we know, marks the hundredth anniversary of the modern ecumenical movement, which began with the Edinburgh Conference's appeal for Christian unity as the prerequisite for a credible and convincing witness to the Gospel in our time. In commemorating this anniversary, we must give thanks for the remarkable progress made towards this noble goal through the efforts of committed Christians of every denomination. At the same time, however, we remain conscious of how much yet remains to be done. In a world marked by growing interdependence and solidarity, we are challenged to proclaim with renewed conviction the reality of our reconciliation and liberation in Christ, and to propose the truth of the Gospel as the key to an authentic and integral human development. In a society which has become increasingly indifferent or even hostile to the Christian message, we are all the more compelled to give a joyful and convincing account of the hope that is within us (cf. 1 Pet 3:15), and to present the Risen Lord as the response to the deepest questions and spiritual aspirations of the men and women of our time.

As we processed to the chancel at the beginning of this service, the choir sang that Christ is our "sure foundation". He is the Eternal Son of God, of one substance with the Father, who took flesh, as the Creed states, "for us men and for our salvation". He alone has the words of everlasting life. In him, as the Apostle teaches, "all things hold together" ... "for in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell" (Col 1:17,19).

Our commitment to Christian unity is born of nothing less than our faith in Christ, in this Christ, risen from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father, who will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead. It is the reality of Christ's person, his saving work and above all the historical fact of his resurrection, which is the content of the apostolic kerygma and those credal formulas which, beginning in the New Testament itself, have guaranteed the integrity of its transmission. The Church's unity, in a word, can never be other than a unity in the apostolic faith, in the faith entrusted to each new member of the Body of Christ during the rite of Baptism. It is this faith which unites us to the Lord, makes us sharers in his Holy Spirit, and thus, even now, sharers in the life of the Blessed Trinity, the model of the Church's koinonia here below.

Dear friends, we are all aware of the challenges, the blessings, the disappointments and the signs of hope which have marked our ecumenical journey. Tonight we entrust all of these to the Lord, confident in his providence and the power of his grace. We know that the friendships we have forged, the dialogue which we have begun and the hope which guides us will provide strength and direction as we persevere on our common journey. At the same time, with evangelical realism, we must also recognize the challenges which confront us, not only along the path of Christian unity, but also in our task of proclaiming Christ in our day. Fidelity to the word of God, precisely because it is a true word, demands of us an obedience which leads us together to a deeper understanding of the Lord's will, an obedience which must be free of intellectual conformism or facile accommodation to the spirit of the age. This is the word of encouragement which I wish to leave with you this evening, and I do so in fidelity to my ministry as the Bishop of Rome and the Successor of Saint Peter, charged with a particular care for the unity of Christ's flock.

Gathered in this ancient monastic church, we can recall the example of a great Englishman and churchman whom we honour in common: Saint Bede the Venerable. At the dawn of a new age in the life of society and of the Church, Bede understood both the importance of fidelity to the word of God as transmitted by the apostolic tradition, and the need for creative openness to new developments and to the demands of a sound implantation of the Gospel in contemporary language and culture.

This nation, and the Europe which Bede and his contemporaries helped to build, once again stands at the threshold of a new age. May Saint Bede's example inspire the Christians of these lands to rediscover their shared legacy, to strengthen what they have in common, and to continue their efforts to grow in friendship. May the Risen Lord strengthen our efforts to mend the ruptures of the past and to meet the challenges of the present with hope in the future which, in his providence, he holds out to us and to our world. Amen.