

Pope Benedict's Message in His Own Words

This weekend, Pope Benedict will gather in New York City with over a hundred thousand believers in St. Patrick's Cathedral, Yankee Stadium, a major seminary, and Ground Zero, as well as in other venues. His visit and message will go out to the entire world. And he will, by the way, talk about other things besides his distress over clergy abuse of minors.

The media love to shape and, yes, manipulate reader responses, and they do so best by selecting out and highlighting a small part of the totality of what a person says and does. So the constant refrain of headlines about that one topic doesn't help get out the Pope's fuller message. For this reason, I've decided to offer extracts from his homily in Washington DC.

First, though, I need to acknowledge the general respect that the media have shown for Benedict XVI and his predecessor, John Paul II. Online yesterday, I happened upon a media source completely opposed to their presence in our country: "American Atheists Will be Ready to Protest the Vatican's Oppressive and Theocratic Agenda for Our Country and the Rest of the World! We'll be hosting peaceful demonstrations in both cities to protest the papal agenda for cultural, social and political hegemony. We invite all Atheist, Freethought, Secular Humanists and other nonbelievers to join us in speaking out. Whatever label you use to describe your nonbelief and opposition to clerical authoritarianism of all denominations - whether you're a Rational, a Bright, a Humanist, Agnostic, Atheist, or a strict Separationist - we welcome you!" With this and other like-minded movements, I'm grateful for any good press.

Having met last Wednesday with area pastors, I'm also fully aware that not all Christians are equally elated that the Pope has come to America.

Here, then, are extracts from Pope Benedict's homily last Thursday in Washington DC (please note that he was speaking mainly to Catholics):

"Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ, 'Peace be with you!' (John 20:19).

"With these, the first words of the Risen Lord to his disciples, I greet all of you in the joy of this Easter season. Before all else, I thank God for the blessing of being in your midst...Two hundred years [after the founding of the Catholic Church in America, we] can rightfully praise the accomplishment of past generations in bringing together widely differing immigrant groups within the unity of the Catholic faith and in a

common commitment to the spread of the Gospel...The Church in the United States is now called to look to the future, firmly grounded in the faith passed on by previous generations, and ready to meet new challenges...with the hope born of God's love, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Romans 5:5).

“In the exercise of my ministry as the Successor of Peter, I have come to America to confirm you, my brothers and sisters, in the faith of the Apostles (cf. Luke 22:32). I have come to proclaim anew, as Peter proclaimed on the day of Pentecost, that Jesus Christ is Lord and Messiah, risen from the dead, seated in glory at the right hand of the Father, and established as judge of the living and the dead (cf. Acts 2:14ff.). I have come to repeat the Apostle's urgent call to conversion and the forgiveness of sins, and to implore from the Lord a new outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church in this country...

“The readings of today's Mass invite us to consider the growth of the Church in America as one chapter in the greater story of the Church's expansion following the descent of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost. In those readings we see the inseparable link between the risen Lord, the gift of the Spirit for the forgiveness of sins, and the mystery of the Church.

“Christ established his Church on the foundation of the Apostles (cf. Revelation 21:14)...[The Church's] unity...gives rise to an unceasing missionary outreach, as the Spirit spurs believers to proclaim ‘the great works of God’ and to invite all people to enter the community of those saved by the blood of Christ and granted new life in his Spirit.

“I pray, then, that this significant anniversary in the life of the Church in the United States, and the presence of the Successor of Peter in your midst, will be an occasion for all Catholics to reaffirm their unity in the apostolic faith, to offer their contemporaries a convincing account of the hope which inspires them (cf. 1 Peter 3:15), and to be renewed in missionary zeal for the extension of God's Kingdom.

“The world needs this witness! Who can deny that the present moment is a crossroads, not only for the Church in America but also for society as a whole? It is a time of great promise, as we see the human family in many ways drawing closer together and becoming ever more interdependent. Yet at the same time we see clear signs of a disturbing breakdown in the very foundations of society: signs of alienation, anger and polarization on the part of many of our contemporaries; increased

violence; a weakening of the moral sense; a coarsening of social relations; and a growing forgetfulness of God.

“‘Lord, send out your Spirit, and renew the face of the earth!’ (cf. Psalm 104:30). The words of today's Responsorial Psalm are a prayer which rises up from the heart of the Church in every time and place. They remind us that the Holy Spirit has been poured out as the first fruits of a new creation, ‘new heavens and a new earth’ (cf. 2 Peter 3:13; Rev 21:1), in which God's peace will reign and the human family will be reconciled in justice and love.

“We have heard Saint Paul tell us that all creation is even now ‘groaning’ in expectation of that true freedom which is God's gift to his children (Romans 8:21-22), a freedom which enables us to live in conformity to his will. Today let us pray fervently that the Church in America will be renewed in that same Spirit, and sustained in her mission of proclaiming the Gospel to a world that longs for genuine freedom (cf. John 8:32), authentic happiness, and the fulfillment of its deepest aspirations!

“Young people need to be helped to discern the path that leads to true freedom: the path of a sincere and generous imitation of Christ, the path of commitment to justice and peace...So much more remains to be done in forming the hearts and minds of the young in knowledge and love of the Lord...

“Dear friends, my visit to the United States is meant to be a witness to ‘Christ our Hope’. Americans have always been a people of hope: your ancestors came to this country with the expectation of finding new freedom and opportunity, while the vastness of the unexplored wilderness inspired in them the hope of being able to start completely anew, building a new nation on new foundations. To be sure, this promise was not experienced by all the inhabitants of this land; one thinks of the injustices endured by the native American peoples and by those brought here forcibly from Africa as slaves. Yet hope, hope for the future, is very much a part of the American character. And the Christian virtue of hope - the hope poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, the hope which supernaturally purifies and corrects our aspirations by focusing them on the Lord and his saving plan - that hope has also marked, and continues to mark, the life of the Catholic community in this country.

“It is in the context of this hope born of God's love and fidelity that I acknowledge the pain which the Church in America has experienced as a result of the sexual abuse of minors. No words of mine could describe the pain and harm inflicted by such abuse. It is important that those who have suffered be given loving pastoral attention. Nor can I adequately describe the damage that has occurred within the community of the Church. Great efforts have already been made to deal honestly and fairly with this tragic situation, and to ensure that children - whom our Lord loves so deeply (cf. Mark 10:14), and who are our greatest treasure - can grow up in a safe environment. These efforts to protect children must continue. Yesterday I spoke with your Bishops...Today I encourage each of you to do what you can to foster healing and reconciliation, and to assist those who have been hurt. Also, I ask you to love your priests, and to affirm them in the excellent work that they do. And above all, pray that the Holy Spirit will pour out his gifts upon the Church, the gifts that lead to conversion, forgiveness and growth in holiness.

“Saint Paul speaks...of a kind of prayer which arises from the depths of our hearts in sighs too deep for words, in ‘groanings’ (Romans 8:26) inspired by the Spirit. This is a prayer which yearns, in the midst of chastisement, for the fulfillment of God's promises. It is a prayer of unfailing hope, but also one of patient endurance and, often, accompanied by suffering for the truth. Through this prayer, we share in the mystery of Christ's own weakness and suffering, while trusting firmly in the victory of his Cross. With this prayer, may the Church in America embrace ever more fully the way of conversion and fidelity to the demands of the Gospel. And may all Catholics experience the consolation of hope, and the Spirit's gifts of joy and strength.

“...Let us trust in the Spirit's power to inspire conversion, to heal every wound, to overcome every division, and to inspire new life and freedom. How much we need these gifts! ...As the Church in the United States gives thanks for the blessings of the past two hundred years, I invite you, your families, and every parish and religious community, to trust in the power of grace to create a future of promise for God's people in this country. I ask you, in the Lord Jesus, to set aside all division and to work with joy to prepare a way for him, in fidelity to his word and in constant conversion to his will. Above all, I urge you to continue to be a leaven of evangelical hope in American society, striving to bring the

light and truth of the Gospel to the task of building an ever more just and free world for generations yet to come.

“Those who have hope must live different lives! By your prayers, by the witness of your faith, by the fruitfulness of your charity, may you point the way towards that vast horizon of hope which God is even now opening up to his Church, and indeed to all humanity: the vision of a world reconciled and renewed in Christ Jesus, our Savior. To him be all honor and glory, now and forever. Amen.”

Fr. Dean McFalls, April 18, 2008, Our Lady of Guadalupe Parish, Lathrop