

Pope Concludes Triumphant Trip to U.S.

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(April 21, 2008) Pope Benedict XVI arrived in Rome at 4:40 a.m. this morning, concluding a triumphal five-day visit to the United States. He ended the trip the same way he began it - by recalling Christ as our hope and exclaiming "God Bless America!"

"It has been a joy for me to witness the faith and devotion of the Catholic community here," he told a cheering crowd of more than 3,000 people at New York's John F. Kennedy International Airport on Sunday night.

He named his visit to the United Nations as was one of the "high points" of the trip, and said his visit to Ground Zero earlier that day "will remain firmly etched in my memory, as I continue to pray for those who died and for all who suffer in consequence of the tragedy."

The Pope's three-day visit to New York was the second leg of his trip to the United States. He arrived in New York on Friday morning where he addressed the U.N., then attended an ecumenical meeting in St. Joseph's Church in New York later in the day.

Saturday began with a 9:15 Mass with priests and men and women religious at St. Patrick's Cathedral where he exhorted them to proclaim and embody the hope of Christ "in a world where self-centeredness, greed, violence, and cynicism so often seem to choke the fragile growth of grace in people's hearts."

He admitted this is no easy task in a society that seems to have forgotten God and resents the demands of Christian morality. People tend to look at the Church "from the outside," he said, and even for those within the Church, "the light of faith can be dimmed by routine, and the splendor of the Church obscured by the sins and weaknesses of her members."

Quoting the psalmist who said, "Oh Lord my God, when you send forth your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth," he said these words "summon us to ever deeper faith in God's infinite power to transform every human situation, to create life from death, and to light up even the darkest night."

Later the same day, the Pope met with young people at St. Joseph's Seminary in New York where he talked about his own teenage years under Nazi rule, which he referred to as "a sinister regime that thought it had all the answers."

"Many of your grandparents and great-grandparents will have recounted the horror of the destruction that ensued," he said. "Indeed, some of them came to America precisely to escape such terror."

Young people should thank God for the liberties they enjoy in a democracy where human rights are respected. However, he reminded them that the power to destroy remains.

The powers of destruction exist in our culture in the form of drug and substance abuse, homelessness, poverty, racism, violence and degradation - especially of girls and women, he said. It can also be found in a false idea of freedom which is often misused by those who have an ulterior agenda to use a distortion of the truth to manipulate others.

“How many young people have been offered a hand which in the name of freedom or experience has led them to addiction, to moral or intellectual confusion, to hurt, to a loss of self-respect, even to despair and so tragically and sadly to the taking of their own life?” he asked.

“Dear friends, truth is not an imposition. Nor is it simply a set of rules. It is a discovery of the One who never fails us; the One whom we can always trust. In seeking truth we come to live by belief because ultimately truth is a person: Jesus Christ. That is why authentic freedom is not an opting out. It is an opting in; nothing less than letting go of self and allowing oneself to be drawn into Christ's very being for others.”

He reminded youth that the power to destroy can never win. “It never triumphs; it is defeated. This is the essence of the hope that defines us as Christians.”

At the conclusion of the visit, American Idol singer Kelly Clarkson performed a moving rendition of the “Ave Maria.”

On Sunday morning, the Pope made his much-anticipated visit to Ground Zero where he knelt and silently prayer. In attendance were sixteen family members, four first responders and four survivors.

Lieutenant Eddie Mullen of Ladder 142 in Queens, New York, told Catholic News Agency that the Pope's visit to New York, and to the World Trade Center, was an incredible, beautiful thing.

“ . . . This visit of his is an incredible blessing, an unbelievable experience. In New York, there is always a contrary point of view. I have never in my life experienced an event where no one can find anything bad to say. His message of healing, of peace, of hope, of love is something we can all agree on.”

While at Ground Zero, Pope Benedict prayed for the conversion of “all those whose hearts and minds are consumed with hatred” and for peace in “our violent world; peace in the hearts of all men and women and peace among the nations of the earth.”

After concluding his prayer, Pope Benedict blessed the site and the people present with holy water, then met individually with the 24 people who were invited to the ceremony.

Pope Benedict's last stop before heading to the airport was a huge open air Mass in Yankee Stadium which was attended by 60,000 people. He began his homily by saying, “Christ is the way that leads to the Father, the truth which gives meaning to human existence, and the source of that life which is eternal joy with all the saints in his heavenly Kingdom.”

He then turned to questions of “authority” and “obedience” saying, “these are not easy words to speak nowadays. Words like these represent a ‘stumbling stone’ for many of our contemporaries, especially in a society which rightly places a high value on personal freedom.”

However, seen in the light of faith in Jesus Christ, the Gospel “teaches us that true freedom, the freedom of the children of God, is found only in the self-surrender which is part of the mystery of love. Only by losing ourselves, the Lord tells us, do we truly find ourselves.”

Real freedom, the Pope said, results when we turn away from sin, which “clouds our perceptions and weakens our resolve.” As the truth makes us free, “this freedom in truth brings in its wake a new and liberating way of seeing reality.”

He then called upon all Americans to “use wisely the blessings of freedom, in order to build a future of hope for coming generations.”

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