

WELCOMING ADDRESS TO PILGRIMS: *FATIMA 12 Sept. 2010*

My Brothers and Sisters in Christ, and all of you with whom I share a common call to a life of discipleship and holiness in Christ, I greet you warmly and welcome you all heartily to this very special place of prayer.

This is indeed a place of grace: a place of special witness through the Blessed Virgin Mary of God's unceasing offer of salvation and of his relentless call on humanity to repent and to accept the grace of redemption in Christ.

Here, at Fatima, as in the case of Bethel in the story of Jacob (Gen.28), heaven and earth embrace. For, with the apparition of the Blessed Virgin Mary to the three shepherd girls: Lucia and her cousins, in 1917, the ladder of God's gracious solicitude for the salvation of humankind was lowered onto the earth; and since that day, God's grace and favour have not ceased to descend the ladder to sinful humanity, just as the prayers and supplications of man have not ceased to ascend the same ladder to God.

Here, at Fatima, in her apparitions to Lucia and her cousins between May 13 and October 13, the Blessed Virgin Mary instructed the doing of processions in honour of the Immaculate Conception, the frequent recitation of the rosary, the reception of *communion of reparation* on the first Saturday of every month, and, most importantly, the doing of penance and praying for the conversion of Russia, for the aversion of a terrible war, for the achievement of peace and for the conversion of souls.

The latter instruction about penance and prayer for conversions has been the enduring characteristic of this apparition; so that Fatima has become generally synonymous with the *call of humanity to conversion and to repentance*; and it a mother's passionate reminder to the world of her Son's central Gospel message: a relentless call on humanity to open up to a grace of conversion (repentance) from God, and to a life of penance. The principal experience of all pilgrims to Fatima, then, as the Blessed Virgin Mary's message through the shepherd girls to the people of Fatima and the rest of the world articulates it, is conversion and commitment to a life of penance. In this sense, Fatima repeats the invitation of Jesus to conversion, with which he began his ministry: "*The kingdom of heaven is at hand, repent and believe the good news*" (Mk.1:15).

Entrusted from the cross by dying Jesus to his disciples and to all his followers in every age as their mother, the Blessed Virgin Mary has made the message of her Son her own, its repetition and reminder to the disciples of his Son her mission; and she has not spared her tears to impress on sinful humanity the urgency of her Sons' call to repentance.

Following so closely after the Holy Father: Pope Benedict XVI's visit here and his great call to penance in the context of the celebration of the conclusion of the *Year for Priests*, I wish to conjure the same sentiments of repentance within all of us gathered here in pilgrimage these few days, and pray, with the blind Bartimaeus, that the Lord may open our eyes, minds and hearts to discern and to love those values which make for true peace in our world and sustain a culture of life and a civilization of love.

Welcome to this pilgrimage; and may the Blessed Virgin Mary spread her mantle wide to receive and to enfold all of us.