

WITNESS TO CHRIST



A MESSAGE OF RENEWAL AND HOPE FOR U.S. CATHOLICS

He assured the bishops that they are “a respected voice that has much to offer to the discussion of the pressing social and moral questions of the day.” There are many issues of moral concern, he added, and the Catholic community “needs to offer a clear and united witness on such matters.”

FOR REFLECTION: As a Catholic citizen, do I make my voice heard in defense of those who are weak, voiceless, and alone?

A Matter of Shame and Scandal
Pope Benedict met privately with the victims of the clergy sexual abuse scandal and publicly addressed the issue on several occasions. He confessed to being ashamed by the scandals and acknowledged that such cases were “sometimes very badly handled.” Calling on Catholics everywhere to help “foster healing and reconciliation,” he asked all of us to love and support the thousands of good priests who serve the Church during this difficult time.

5. SEEK UNITY.

Pope Benedict repeatedly expressed sorrow for the divisions within our Church and called on Catholics to “reaffirm their unity in the apostolic faith,” asking:
Was not this unity of vision and purpose — rooted in faith and a spirit of constant conversion and self-sacrifice — the secret of the impressive growth of the Church in this country?



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He went on to tell the priests and seminarians at St. Patrick’s Cathedral that one of the “great disappointments” of recent history . . . has been the experience of division between different groups, different generations,

different members of the same religious family. We can only move forward if we turn our gaze together to Christ!

In the light of faith, we will then discover the wisdom and strength needed to open ourselves to points of view which may not necessarily conform to our own ideas or assumptions.

He further added, addressing the bishops: There is a need for all of us to move beyond sterile divisions, disagreements, and preconceptions, and to listen together to the voice of the Spirit, who is guiding the Church into a future of hope.

FOR REFLECTION: What can I do in my own Catholic community to promote unity and overcome division?

6. MAKE CHRIST THE CENTER OF OUR LIVES.

Everywhere, the Pope challenged his listeners to turn toward Christ. The Church’s mission is ultimately one of evangelization, introducing people to Christ’s “transforming love and truth.” This is where renewal begins, he told educators:

Those who meet him are drawn by the very power of the Gospel to lead a new life characterized by all that is beautiful, good, and true; a life of Christian witness nurtured and strengthened within the community of our Lord’s disciples, the Church.

The Faith is not simply a matter of rules and prohibitions, but is about the liberating encounter that we have with the Lord in prayer, the sacraments and liturgy, and our world. “Our most urgent challenge,” the Pope told priests and seminarians, “is to communicate the joy born of faith and the experience of God’s love.”

FOR REFLECTION: How can I draw closer to Christ? How can I better radiate the joy of my Faith?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

- Books**
The Apostles, Pope Benedict XVI, Our Sunday Visitor, 2007.
The Apostles Study Guide, Amy Welborn, Our Sunday Visitor, 2007.
The Fathers, Pope Benedict XVI, Our Sunday Visitor, 2008.
The Fathers Study Guide, Amy Welborn, Our Sunday Visitor, 2008
Jesus of Nazareth, Pope Benedict XVI, Doubleday, 2007.
Questions and Answers, Pope Benedict XVI, Our Sunday Visitor, 2008.

- Web Sites**
http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/index.htm
<http://www.osv.com/papalvisit/>
<http://www.uspapalvisit.org/>

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OurSundayVisitor
200 Noll Plaza • Huntington, IN 46750
1-800-348-2440 • Fax: 1-800-498-6709 • www.osv.com

By Greg Erlandson
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Inventory Number: P797



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0408

For six days, Pope Benedict XVI transfixed our nation, filling Catholics with a sense of pride in our past and hope in our future as he encouraged us, by word and example, to be witnesses to Christ as our Hope in our daily lives.



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The Pope had two clear goals for his visit:

- ✠ To “be a source of renewal and hope for the Church in the United States,” and
- ✠ To “strengthen the resolve of Catholics to contribute ever more responsibly to the life of this nation.”

Now, it is our responsibility as Catholics to put his words into action — to follow his path to a deeper and more committed life of faith. Here are the six action steps drawn from his visit that will enable us to contribute to the renewal of our Church and our nation.

1. APPRECIATE OUR AMERICAN CATHOLIC ROOTS.

Pope Benedict knows the history of our country well; he reminded us in nearly every talk of our impressive legacy. At Yankee Stadium, he spoke of the “impressive growth which God has given the Church in your country in the past 200 years,” noting

- ✠ the “towering figures” of our past, such as St. Elizabeth Ann Seton
- ✠ the generosity of our Catholic ancestors who worked together to build up a great network of churches, hospitals, and schools in every corner of our country
- ✠ our historic openness to the immigrant, the needy, and the sick, and
- ✠ the sacrifices made by our young Church for the sake of God’s kingdom.

“On these solid foundations,” he told us, “the future of the Church in America must, even now, begin to rise!”

FOR REFLECTION: In my parish or diocese, what is the evidence of the faith, generosity, and sacrifice of earlier generations of Catholics?

2. MAKE EDUCATION A PRIORITY.

Pope Benedict particularly stressed the importance of knowing our Faith. As he told the bishops, “The importance of providing sound formation in the faith cannot be overstated.” He praised the high value that Catholics have placed on religious education, and he said religious education for children, youth, and adults must be “maintained and expanded.”

Speaking at Nationals Ballpark, the Pope urged us to make education in the Faith a priority:

The fidelity and courage with which the Church in this country will respond to the challenges raised . . . will depend in large part upon your own fidelity in handing on the treasure of your Catholic faith.

Much progress has been made in developing solid programs of religious education; however, he added: . . . so much more remains to be done in forming the hearts and minds of the young in knowledge and love of the Lord. The challenges confronting us require a comprehensive and sound instruction in the truths of the faith.

FOR REFLECTION: What have I been doing to grow in knowledge of my Faith? Can I help others to grow as Catholics by volunteering as a teacher or catechist?

3. LIVE OUR FAITH EVERY DAY.

Education in the Faith is only part of the challenge. During his homily at Nationals Ballpark, Pope Benedict directed us to form a “mindset . . . which is genuinely Catholic, confident in the profound harmony of faith and reason, and prepared to bring the richness of faith’s vision to bear on the urgent issues which

affect the future of American society.”

In other words, ours is not just a Sunday faith. To the bishops, he posed the question:

Is it consistent to profess our beliefs in church on Sunday, and then during the week to promote business practices or medical procedures contrary to those beliefs?

He further told the bishops:

Any tendency to treat religion as a private matter must be resisted. Only when their faith permeates every aspect of their lives do Christians become truly open to the transforming power of the Gospel.

In the Our Father, we pray that “Thy kingdom come.” It is our task to work for the growth of the Lord’s kingdom, a task that we must face with confidence, as he told us at Yankee Stadium:

It means overcoming every separation between faith and life, and countering false gospels of freedom and happiness.

This is no contradiction between our faith and our political life, he said, for our goal is “to enrich American society and culture with the beauty and truth of the Gospel.”

FOR REFLECTION: Do those around me see in my actions that my Faith is not just something I practice on Sundays?

The “Liberating Power” of Confession

Speaking to our bishops, Pope Benedict encouraged American Catholics particularly to seek out the Sacrament of Reconciliation, or Penance:

The liberating power of this sacrament, in which our honest confession of sin is met by God’s merciful word of pardon and peace, needs to be rediscovered. . . . To a great extent, the renewal of the Church in America and throughout the world depends on the renewal of the practice of Penance and the growth in holiness which that sacrament both inspires and accomplishes.

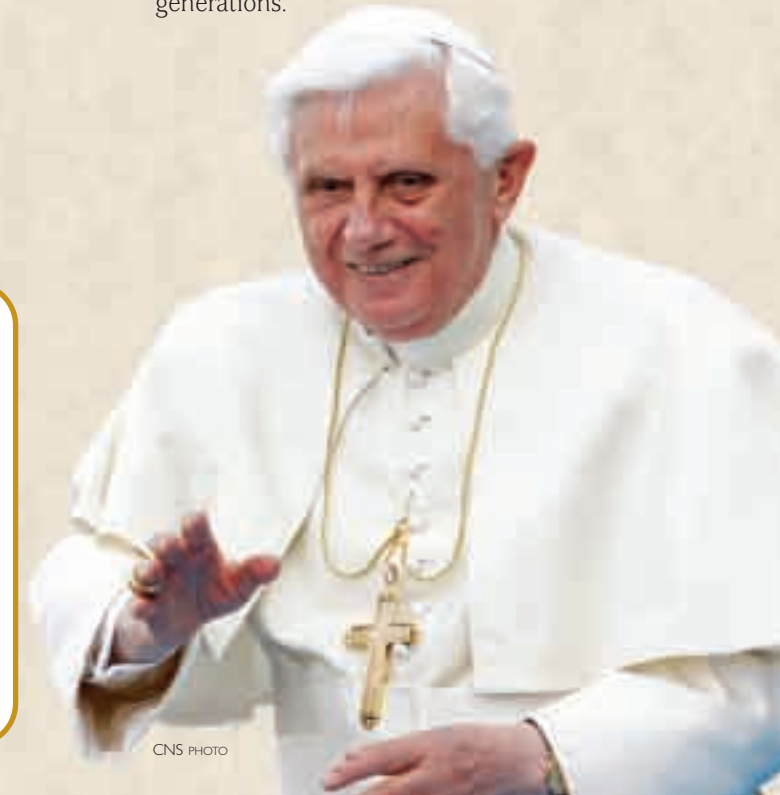
4. DEFEND THE WEAKEST AMONG US.

Pope Benedict reminded us at Yankee Stadium of our duty to “care for the poor, the sick, and the stranger in [our] midst.” Our care for those who cannot defend themselves is based on our belief in the “inalienable dignity and rights of each man, woman, and child in our world — including the most defenseless of all human beings, the unborn child in the mother’s womb.”

Asserting that children also must be able to “grow up in a safe environment,” the Pope expressed his great sorrow and shame for the abuse suffered by children within the community of the Church, as well as concern for the larger crisis of abuse in U.S. society.

Speaking of immigrants in the life of the Church, he told the bishops:

I want to encourage you and your communities to continue to welcome the immigrants who join your ranks today. . . . This, indeed, is what your fellow countrymen have done for generations.



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