

Pope Benedict XVI. in Bavaria

**Tuesday, September 12, 2006,
Ecumenical celebration of vespers
in the cathedral Regensburg**

Sermon by the Holy Father

Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ!

We are gathered here – Orthodox Christians, Catholics and Protestants – to sing together the evening praise of God. At the heart of this liturgy are the Psalms, in which the Old and the New Covenant come together and our prayer is joined to the Israel which believes and lives in hope. This is an hour of gratitude for the fact that we can pray together in this way and, by turning to the Lord, at the same time grow in unity among ourselves.

Among those gathered for this evening's Vespers, I would like first to greet warmly the representatives of the Orthodox Church. I have always considered it a special gift of God's Providence that, as a professor at Bonn, I was able to come to know and to love the Orthodox Church, personally as it were, through two young Archimandrites, Stylianos Harkianakis and Damaskinos Papandreou, both of whom later became Metropolitans. At Regensburg, thanks to the initiative of Bishop Graber, further meetings occurred: during the symposia on the "Spindlhof" and with scholarship students who had studied here. I am happy indeed to recognize some familiar faces and to renew earlier friendships. In a few days time, at Belgrade, the theological dialogue will resume on the fundamental theme of *koinonia* in the two aspects which the *First Letter of John* indicates to us at the very beginning of its first chapter. Our *koinonia* is above all communion with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit; it is communion with the triune God, made possible by the Lord through his incarnation and the outpouring of the Spirit. This communion with God creates in turn *koinonia* among people, as a participation in the faith of the Apostles, and therefore as a communion in faith – a communion which is "embodied" in the Eucharist and, transcending all boundaries, builds up the one Church (cf. *1 Jn* 1:3). I hope and pray that these discussions will be fruitful and that the communion with the living God which unites us, like our own communion in the faith transmitted by the Apostles, will grow in depth and maturity towards that full unity, whereby the world can recognise that Jesus Christ is truly the One sent from God, the Son of God, the Saviour of the world (cf. *Jn* 17:21). "So that the world may believe", we must become one: the seriousness of this commitment must spur on our dialogue.

I also extend warm greetings to our friends of the various traditions stemming from the Reformation. Here too many memories arise in my heart: memories of friends in the Jäger-Stählin circle, who have already passed away, and these memories are mixed with gratitude for our present meetings. Obviously, I think in particular of the demanding efforts to reach a consensus on justification. I recall all the stages of that process up, to the memorable meeting with the late Bishop Hanselmann here in Regensburg – a meeting that contributed decisively to the achievement of the conclusion. I am pleased to see that in the meantime the World Methodist Council has adhered to the Declaration. The agreement on justification remains an important task, one not yet fully complete: in theology justification is an essential theme, but in the life of the faithful today – it seems to me – it is only dimly present. Because of the dramatic events of our time, the theme of mutual forgiveness is felt with increased urgency, yet there is little perception of our fundamental need of God's forgiveness, of our justification by him. Our modern consciousness in general is no longer aware of the fact that we stand as debtors before God and that sin is a reality which can be overcome only by God's initiative. Behind this weakening of the theme of justification and of the forgiveness of sins is ultimately a weakening of our relation with God. In this sense, our first task will perhaps be to rediscover in a new way the living God present in our lives.

Let us now hear what Saint John was saying to us a moment ago in the biblical reading. I

wish to stress three statements present in this complex and rich text. The central theme of the whole letter appears in verse 15: “Whoever confesses that Jesus is the Son of God, God abides in him, and he in God”. Once again John spells out, as he had done before in verses 2 and 3 of chapter 4, the profession of faith, the *confessio*, that ultimately distinguishes us as Christians: faith in the fact that Jesus is the Son of God who has come in the flesh. “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known”; so we read at the end of the prologue of the Fourth Gospel (*Jn* 1:18). We know who God is through Jesus Christ, the only one who **is** God. It is through him that we come into contact with God. In this time of interreligious encounters we are easily tempted to attenuate somewhat this central confession or indeed even to hide it. But by doing this we do not do a service to encounter or dialogue. We only make God less accessible to others and to ourselves. It is important that we bring to the conversation not fragments, but the whole image of God. To be able to do so, our personal communion with Christ and our love of him must grow and deepen. In this common confession, and in this common task, there is no division between us. And we pray that this shared foundation will grow ever stronger.

And so we have arrived at the second point which I would like to consider. This is found in verse 14, where we read: “And we have seen and testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Saviour of the world”. The central word in this sentence is μαρτυροῦμεν – we bear witness, we are witnesses. The Profession of Faith must become witness. The root word μάρτυς brings to mind the fact that a witness of Jesus Christ must affirm by his whole existence, in life and death, the testimony he gives. The author of the Letter says of himself: “We have seen” (cf. 1:1). Because he has seen, he can be a witness. This presupposes that we also – succeeding generations – are capable of seeing, and can bear witness as people who have seen. Let us pray to the Lord that we may see! Let us help one another to develop this capacity, so that we can assist the people of our time to see, so that they in turn, through the world fashioned by themselves, will discover God! Across all the historical barriers may they perceive Jesus anew, the Son sent by God, in whom we see the Father. In verse 9 it is written that God has sent his Son into the world so that we might have life. Is it not the case today that only through an encounter with Jesus Christ can life become really life? To be a witness of Jesus Christ means above all to bear witness to a certain way of living. In a world full of confusion we must again bear witness to the standards that make life truly life. This important task, common to all Christians, must be faced with determination. It is the responsibility of Christians, now, to make visible the standards that indicate a just life, which have been clarified for us in Jesus Christ. He has taken up into his life all the words of Scripture: “Listen to him” (*Mk* 9:7).

And so we come to the third word, of our text (*1 Jn* 4:9), which I wish to stress: *agape* – love. This is the key-word of the whole letter and particularly of the passage which we have heard. *Agape* does not mean something sentimental or something grandiose; it is something totally sober and realistic. I attempted to explain something of this in my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. *Agape* (love) is really the synthesis of the Law and the Prophets. In love everything is “fulfilled”; but this everything must daily be “filled out”. In verse 16 of our text we find the marvellous phrase: “We know and believe the love God has for us”. Yes, man can believe in love. Let us bear witness to our faith in such a way that it shines forth as the power of love, “so that the world may believe” (*Jn* 17:21). Amen!