**CONTEMPLATION OF THE CROSS**

Pope Benedict XVI

*during a visit to La Verna, in 2012*

Dear brothers and sisters: may the Lord give you peace!

To contemplate the Cross of Christ! We have come as pilgrims to the Sasso Spicco of La Verna where “two years before his death” (Celano, *Vita Prima*, III, 94: FF, 484), St Francis had the wounds of the glorious passion of Christ impressed upon his body. His journey as a disciple brought him to a union with the Lord so profound that he shared even the outward signs of His supreme act of love on the Cross. It was a journey that began at San Damiano before the Crucifix, which he contemplated with mind and heart. Continual meditation on the Cross in this holy place has been a way of sanctification for so many Christians, who over the course of eight centuries, have knelt here in prayer, silence, and recollection.

The glorious Cross of Christ sums up the world’s sufferings, but it is above all a tangible sign of love, the measure of God’s goodness to man. In this place, we too are called to rediscover life’s supernatural dimension, to lift our eyes from what is contingent, and to return to complete reliance upon the Lord, with a free heart and in perfect joy, by contemplating the Crucified, that He may wound us with His love.

“Almighty, omnipotent good Lord, Thine be the praise, the glory, and the honour, and every benediction” (*Canticle of Brother Sun*: FF, 263). It is only by allowing himself to be illumined by the light of God’s love that man and the entire creation may be redeemed, that beauty may finally reflect the splendour of the face of Christ, as the moon reflects the sun. The Blood of the Crucified flowing from the glorious Cross vivifies the dried bones of Adam who is in us, so that each of us might rediscover the joy of setting off on the path of sanctity, of climbing upwards, towards God. From this blessed place, I unite myself to the prayer of all Franciscans on earth: “We adore you, O Christ, and we bless You, because by Your holy cross, You have redeemed the world.”

*Enraptured by the love of Christ!* We cannot ascend La Verna without allowing ourselves to be guided by the prayer of St Francis, by the *absorbeat*, which reads: “May the ardent and sweet strength of Your love, I beg you, O Lord, so absorb my heart as to withdraw it from all that is under heaven, so that I may die for love of Your love, as You have died for love of my love” (*The Prayer “absorbeat”,* 1: FF, 277). The contemplation of the Crucified is the work of the mind, but it is unable to soar the heights without the support, without the force of love. In this same place, Brother Bonaventure of Bagnoregio – the illustrious son of St Francis – worked out his *Itinerarium mentis in Deum (The Soul’s Journey into God)*, pointing out to us the way to follow in order to set off for the heights, there to meet God. This great Doctor of the Church communicates to us his own experience by inviting us to prayer. First, the mind should turn to the Passion of the Lord, since it is the sacrifice of the Cross that blots out our sin, a lack that can only be filled by God’s love: “I exhort the reader – he write – to cry out in prayer through Christ Crucified, whose blood cleanses us of the stain of sins” (*Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Prol. 4). But to be effective, our prayer needs our tears; that is, our interior involvement, our love, which responds to the love of God. Then what is needed is that *admiratio [wonder]*, which St Bonaventure sees in the humble ones of the Gospel, who are capable of experiencing wonder before Christ’s saving work. And humility is the door to every virtue. For it is not through the intellectual pride of a search enclosed upon itself that one attains to God, but rather through humility, according to the famous expression of St Bonaventure: “May[man] not believe that it suffices to read without unction, to speculate without devotion, to investigate without wonder, to examine without exultation, to work without piety, to know without love, to understand without humility, to study without divine grace, to see without wisdom divinely inspired” (*ibidem*).

The contemplation of the Crucified has an extraordinary efficiency, for it causes us to pass from the order of things thought, to that of experience lived, from hoped-for salvation to the sweet and blessed homeland. St Bonaventure affirms: “He who gazes intently [upon the Crucified] … makes the Passover with Him – that is, the passage, VII, 2). This is the heart of the experience of La Verna, of the Poverello of Assisi’s experience here. On the Sacred Mount, St Francis lived in his own person the profound unity of *sequela, imitatio* and *conformatio* Christi [*following, imitating,* and *conforming* to Christ]. And so, he tells us, too, that it is not enough to call ourselves Christians to be Christians, nor is it enough to seek to perform good works. We need to conform ourselves to Jesus through a slow, steady commitment to the transformation of our being to the image of the Lord, so that through divine grace, every member of His Body, which is the Church, might show forth the necessary likeness with its Head, Christ the Lord. And we begin this journey – as the medieval masters teach us on the basis of St Augustine – with self-knowledge, with the humility of looking within ourselves with honesty.

*To bear the love of Christ!* How many pilgrims have climbed and continue to climb this Holy Mount in order to contemplate the love of the Crucified God and to allow themselves to be enraptured by Him. How many pilgrims have ascended in the search of God, which is the true reason for the Church’s existence: to be a bridge between God and man. And here they encounter you as well, sons and daughters of St Francis. Always remember that the consecrated life has the specific task of bearing witness – through words and by the example of a life lived in accordance with the evangelical counsels – to the enchanting love story between God and humanity, which transcends history ….

May you persevere like our Holy Father [Francis] in the imitation of Christ, so that those whom you meet may encounter St Francis, and in encountering St Francis may encounter the Lord.

[Translation by Diane Montagna]