



POPE BENEDICT XVI

650th Anniversary of the Venerable English College *Address to Bishops, Rector, Staff and Students of the Venerable*

PRIVATE AUDIENCE, 3 DECEMBER 2012, APOSTOLIC PALACE, HOLY SEE

**Your Eminence,
Dear Brother Bishops,
Monsignor Hudson,
Students and Staff of the Venerable English College,**

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you today to the Apostolic Palace, the House of Peter. I greet my Venerable brother, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, a former Rector of the College, and I thank Archbishop Vincent Nichols for his kind words, spoken on behalf of all present. I too look back with great thanksgiving in my heart to the days that I spent in your country in September 2010. Indeed, I was pleased to see some of you at Oscott College on that occasion, and I pray that the Lord will continue to call forth many saintly vocations to the priesthood and the religious life from your homeland.

Through God's grace, the Catholic community of England and Wales is blessed with a long tradition of zeal for the faith and loyalty to the Apostolic See. At much the same time as your Saxon forebears were building the Schola Saxonum, establishing a presence in Rome close to the tomb of Peter, Saint Boniface was at work evangelizing the peoples of Germany. So as a former priest and Archbishop of the See of Munich and Freising, which owes its foundation to that great English missionary, I am conscious that my spiritual ancestry is linked with yours. Earlier still, of course, my predecessor Pope Gregory the Great was moved to send Augustine of Canterbury to your shores, to plant the seeds of Christian faith on Anglo-Saxon soil. The fruits of that missionary endeavour are only too evident in the six-hundred-and-fifty-year history of faith and martyrdom that distinguishes the English Hospice of Saint Thomas à Becket and the Venerable English College that grew out of it.

Potius hodie quam cras, as Saint Ralph Sherwin said when asked to take the missionary oath, "rather today than tomorrow". These words aptly convey his burning desire to keep the flame of faith alive in England, at whatever personal cost. Those who have truly encountered Christ are unable to keep silent about him. As Saint Peter himself said to the elders and scribes of Jerusalem, "we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard" (Acts 4:20). Saint Boniface, Saint Augustine of Canterbury, Saint Francis Xavier, whose feast we keep today, and so many other missionary saints show us how a deep love for the Lord calls forth a deep desire to bring others to know him. You too, as you follow in the footsteps of the College Martyrs, are the men God has chosen to spread the message of the Gospel today, in England and Wales, in Canada, in Scandinavia. Your forebears faced a real possibility of martyrdom, and it is right and just that you venerate the glorious memory of those forty-four alumni of your College who shed their blood for Christ. You are called to imitate their love for the Lord and their zeal to make him known, potius hodie quam cras. The consequences, the fruits, you may confidently entrust into God's hands.

Your first task, then, is to come to know Christ yourselves, and the time you spend in seminary provides you with a privileged opportunity to do so. Learn to pray daily, especially in the presence of the Blessed Sacrament, listening attentively to the word of God and allowing heart to speak to heart, as Blessed John Henry Newman would say. Remember the two disciples from the first chapter of Saint John's Gospel, who followed Jesus and asked to know where he was staying, and, like them, respond eagerly to his invitation to "come and see" (1:37-39). Allow the fascination of his person to capture your imagination and warm your heart. He has chosen you to

be his friends, not his servants, and he invites you to share in his priestly work of bringing about the salvation of the world. Place yourselves completely at his disposal and allow him to form you for whatever task it may be that he has in mind for you.

You have heard much talk about the new evangelization, the proclamation of Christ in those parts of the world where the Gospel has already been preached, but where to a greater or lesser degree the embers of faith have grown cold and now need to be fanned once more into a flame. Your College motto speaks of Christ's desire to bring fire to the earth, and your mission is to serve as his instruments in the work of rekindling the faith in your respective homelands. Fire in sacred Scripture frequently serves to indicate the divine presence, whether it be the burning bush from which God revealed his name to Moses, the pillar of fire that guided the people of Israel on their journey from slavery to freedom, or the tongues of fire that descended upon the Apostles at Pentecost, enabling them to go forth in the power of the Spirit to proclaim the Gospel to the ends of the earth. Just as a small fire can set a whole forest ablaze (cf. Jas 3:5), so the faithful testimony of a few can release the purifying and transforming power of God's love so that it spreads like wildfire throughout a community or a nation. Like the martyrs of England and Wales, then, let your hearts burn with love for Christ, for the Church and for the Mass.

When I visited the United Kingdom, I saw for myself that there is a great spiritual hunger among the people. Bring them the true nourishment that comes from knowing, loving and serving Christ. Speak the truth of the Gospel to them with love. Offer them the living water of the Christian faith and point them towards the bread of life, so that their hunger and thirst may be satisfied. Above all, however, let the light of Christ shine through you by living lives of holiness, following in the footsteps of the many great saints of England and Wales, the holy men and women who bore witness to God's love, even at the cost of their lives. The College to which you belong, the neighbourhood in which you live and study, the tradition of faith and Christian witness that has formed you: all these are hallowed by the presence of many saints. Make it your aspiration to be counted among their number.

Please be assured of an affectionate remembrance in my prayers for yourselves and for all the alumni of the Venerable English College. I make my own the greeting so often heard on the lips of a great friend and neighbour of the College, Saint Philip Neri, *Salvete, flores martyrum!* Commending you, and all to whom the Lord sends you, to the loving intercession of Our Lady of Walsingham, I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing as a pledge of peace and joy in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you.

Benedictus PP. XVI