

Pope asks young people not to forget 'question of God'

VATICAN CITY - Celebrating Palm Sunday Mass at the Vatican, Pope Benedict XVI asked young people not to let the question of God drift out of their lives.

The pope opened Holy Week with a procession and liturgy in St. Peter's Square April 1, blessing palms and olive branches in memory of Christ's triumphal entry into Jerusalem a few days before his death.

Dressed in red and gold vestments, the pope carried a braided palm as he walked along the cobbled square at the head of a long line of cardinals, bishops and priests. The choir sang a "Hosanna," evoking the acclamation of the people of Jerusalem when Jesus arrived in the holy city.

Some 50,000 people crowded into the sunlit square and applauded the pope, who turns 80 April 16. It was the start of the year's busiest period of papal liturgies.

In his sermon, the pope said Palm Sunday poses an important question for Christians of all ages: "What does it mean, in concrete terms, to 'follow Christ?'"

If for Christ's disciples it meant giving up their professions and physically accompanying Christ through the Holy Land, for modern Christians it is a call to an interior change, he said.

"It involves the fundamental decision to no longer consider efficiency and profit, career and success as the ultimate purpose of my life, but to recognize instead truth and love as the authentic criteria," he said.

In short, self-realization ceases to be the most important thing in life, he said.

Addressing young people in particular, the pope looked to the liturgy's processional psalm, which he said suggested two important conditions for those who wish to follow Christ.

First, he said, they must ask themselves about God.

“Dear young friends, how important this is today: not to simply let oneself be drawn here and there in life, not to be satisfied with what everyone thinks and says and does,” he said.

The important thing is to “look around oneself in search of God” and not allow the question of God to “dissolve in our souls,” he said.

The second condition mentioned in the psalm, the pope said, was to have “innocent hands and pure hearts.”

“Innocent hands are hands that are not used for acts of violence. They are hands that are not dirtied by corruption or bribes,” he said.

Pure hearts, the pope said, are those that “do not simulate and are not stained with lies and hypocrisy.”

The pope said the events of Holy Week underline how Christ opened the doors for those who would follow him through the ages – including those who feel indifferent or closed to God.

In effect, the pope said, Jesus on the cross says to all people: If you have trouble seeing God in creation or accepting the message of the church, then “look at me ... and see that I am suffering for your love. Open yourselves to me and to God the Father.”

He noted that many today do follow Christ, often giving up easy lifestyles in order to give themselves totally to those who suffer or opposing with courage and truth the “violence and lies” of the world.

Palm Sunday also marked the church’s celebration of World Youth Day in most countries, and at the end of the liturgy the pope delivered greetings to young people in seven languages. Each salutation prompted a round of cheering, chanting, applause and flag-waving.

“May the great events of Holy Week, in which we see love unfold in its most radical form, inspire you to be courageous witnesses of charity for your friends, your communities and our world,” the pope said in English.

On his way back to his papal apartment, he rode in an open jeep through the vast crowd, waving to pilgrims.