

Pope prays for peace, honors fallen soldiers in visit to Monte Cassino

MONTE CASSINO, Italy – At the Benedictine Abbey of Monte Cassino, founded by St. Benedict and rebuilt after being destroyed by U.S. bombers during World War II, Pope Benedict XVI prayed for peace.

After celebrating evening prayer with members of the abbey community and with representatives of Benedictine monks and nuns from around the world May 24, Pope Benedict lighted a lamp at the Polish military cemetery on the hillside just below the abbey.

The pope prayed that God would “welcome into your merciful embrace” all those who fell in the battle of Monte Cassino as well as “the fallen of every war that has bloodied the earth.”

“Give to all those still suffering because of fratricidal wars the strength of invincible hope, the courage to take daily actions for peace (and) a concrete trust in the civilization of love,” he prayed.

Standing before the tombs of more than 1,000 Polish soldiers who died with thousands of Allied and German troops on the hillside, Pope Benedict also asked God to help modern men and women understand that peace is more precious than any material thing.

“Make us, your children in Christ, persevering builders of peace and untiring servants of life, the priceless gift of your love,” the pope prayed.

Pope Benedict began the day by celebrating Mass in a square in Cassino, the town below the hilltop abbey.

Celebrating the feast of the Ascension of the Lord, the pope said the Ascension filled the disciples with joy because his return to heaven meant that he always would be present with them spiritually.

Like the disciples, he said, “we must not stand here staring at the heavens, but under the guidance of the Holy Spirit we must go everywhere and proclaim the saving message of the death and resurrection of Christ.”

The church “was not born and does not live to make up for the absence of its Lord, who has ‘disappeared,’ but finds its reason for being and its mission in the invisible presence of Jesus working with the power of his Holy Spirit,” the pope said.

Pope Benedict asked the crowd to look up at the monastery on the hill, the burial place of St. Benedict, and to remember that keeping one’s eyes fixed on Christ does not distract attention from the needs of the world.

“On the contrary, it pushes us to commit ourselves even more to building a society where solidarity is expressed with concrete signs,” he said.

Reminding the crowd that the Benedictine motto is “prayer and work,” Pope Benedict offered a special prayer for the unemployed and for those in precarious work situations.

As for the first part of the motto, Pope Benedict said that prayer “is the silent path that leads us directly to the heart of God; it is the breath of the soul that gives us peace during the storms of life.”

Reciting the “Regina Coeli” prayer after Mass, the pope said his May 8-15 pilgrimage to the Holy Land was an opportunity to remind people that “peace is, first of all, a gift of God” for which people must pray.

But it also is a gift entrusted to human efforts and initiatives, starting with efforts to ensure peaceful and forgiving relationships in one’s family or religious community and then in one’s neighborhood, city and country.

“Only learning, with the grace of Christ, to combat and defeat evil within oneself and in one’s relations with others can one become an authentic builder of peace and civil progress,” he said.

Celebrating evening prayer in the abbey church, Pope Benedict said the building stands “as a silent warning to reject every form of violence in order to promote

peace in the family, in the community, among peoples and for all humanity.”