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ERFURT - 24.09.2011 - 09:00

**Domplatz
Holy Mass**

Official translation

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

“Praise the Lord at all times, for he is good.” These are the words that we sang just before the Gospel. Yes, we truly have reason to thank God with our whole hearts. If we think back thirty years to the Elizabeth Year 1981, when this city formed part of the German Democratic Republic, who would have thought that a few years later, the wall and the barbed wire at the border would have come down? And if we think even further back, some 70 years, to the year 1941, in the days of National Socialism, who could have predicted that the so-called “thousand-year *Reich*” would turn to dust and ashes just four years later?

Dear Brothers and Sisters, here in Thuringia and in the former German Democratic Republic, you have had to endure first a brown and then a red dictatorship, which acted on the Christian faith like acid rain. Many late consequences of that period are still having to be worked through, above all in the intellectual and religious fields. Most people in this country since that time have spent their lives far removed from faith in Christ and from the communion of the Church. Yet the last two decades have also brought good experiences: a broader horizon, an exchange that reaches beyond borders, a faithful confidence that God does not abandon us and that he leads us along new paths. “Where God is, there is a future”.

We are all convinced that the new freedom has helped bring about greater dignity and a great many new possibilities for people’s lives. On the part of the Church, we can point gratefully to many things that have become easier, whether it be new opportunities for parish activities, renovation and enlargement of churches and community centres, or diocesan initiatives of a pastoral or cultural nature. But have these opportunities led to an increase in faith? Are not the deep roots of faith and Christian life to be sought in something very different from social freedom? It was actually amid the hardships of pressure from without that many committed Catholics remained faithful to Christ and to the Church. They accepted personal disadvantages in order to live their faith. Here I should like to thank the priests and the men and women who assisted them during that period. I would like to remember especially the pastoral care of refugees immediately after the Second World War: many priests and laypersons achieved great things in order to relieve the plight of those driven from their homes, and to provide them with a new home. Sincere thanks go not least to the parents who brought up their children in the Catholic faith in the midst of the diaspora and in an anticlerical political environment. With gratitude we remember, for example, the Religious Weeks for Children during the holidays and the fruitful work of the Catholic youth centres “Saint Sebastian” in Erfurt and “Marcel Callo” in Heiligenstadt. Especially in Eichsfeld, many Catholic Christians resisted the Communist ideology. May God richly reward their tenacity in the faith. That courageous witness and that patient trust in God’s guidance are like a precious seed that promises rich fruit for the future.

God’s presence is seen especially clearly in his saints. Their witness to the faith can also give us the courage to begin afresh today. Above all, we may think of the patron saints of the Diocese of Erfurt: Saint Elizabeth of Thuringia, Saint Boniface and Saint Kilian. Elizabeth came from a foreign land, from Hungary, to the Wartburg here in Thuringia. She led an intense life of prayer, linked to the spirit of penance and evangelical poverty. She regularly went down from her castle into the town of Eisenach, in order to care personally for the poor and the sick. Her life on this earth was only short – she was just twenty-four years old when she died – but the fruit of her holiness was vast. Saint Elizabeth is greatly esteemed also by Protestant Christians. She can help us all to discover the fullness of the faith that has been handed down to us and to translate it into our everyday lives.

The foundation of the diocese of Erfurt in 742 by Saint Boniface reminds us of the Christian roots of our country. This event at the same time forms the first recorded mention of the city of Erfurt. The missionary bishop Boniface had come from England and he worked in close association with the successor of Saint Peter. We honour him as the “Apostle of Germany”; he died as a martyr. Two of his companions, who also bore witness by shedding their blood for the Christian faith, are buried here in the Cathedral of Erfurt: Saints Eoban and Adelar.

Even before the Anglo-Saxon missionaries, Saint Kilian, an itinerant missionary from Ireland, was at work in

Thuringia. Together with two companions he died in Würzburg as a martyr, because he criticized the moral misconduct of the Duke of Thuringia whose seat was in that place. Nor must we forget Saint Severus, the patron saint of the Severus Church here on the Cathedral Square: he was Bishop of Ravenna in the fourth century and his remains were brought to Erfurt in 836, in order to anchor the Christian faith more firmly in this region.

What do these saints have in common? How can we describe the particular qualities of their lives and make them fruitful for ourselves? The saints show us that it is truly possible and good to live our relationship with God in a radical way, to put him in first place, not as one concern among others. The saints help us to see that God first reached out to us, he revealed and continues to reveal himself to us in Jesus Christ. Christ comes towards us, he speaks to every individual with an invitation to follow him. This was an opportunity that the saints acted on, they as it were reached out to him from deep within themselves in the ongoing dialogue of prayer, and in return they received from him the light that shows where true life is to be found.

Faith always includes as an essential element the fact that it is shared with others. In the first place I have God to thank for the fact that I can believe, for God approaches me and so to speak “ignites” my faith. But on a practical level, I also have to thank my fellow human beings for my faith, those who believed before me and who believe with me. This “with”, without which there can be no personal faith, is the Church. And this Church does not stop at national borders, as we can see from the nationalities of the saints I mentioned earlier: Hungary, England, Ireland and Italy. Here we see the importance of spiritual exchange, which encompasses the entire universal Church. If we open ourselves up to the whole of the faith in all of history and the testimony given to it in the whole Church, then the Catholic faith also has a future as a public force in Germany. At the same time the saints that I mentioned show us the great fruitfulness of a holy life, of this radical love for God and neighbour. Saints, even if there are only a few of them, change the world.

Thus the political changes that swept through your country in 1989 were motivated not just by the demand for prosperity and freedom of movement, but also decisively by the longing for truthfulness. This longing was kept awake partly through people completely dedicated to serving God and neighbour and ready to sacrifice their lives. They and the saints I mentioned before give us courage to make good use of this new situation. We have no wish to hide in a purely private faith, but we want to shape this hard-won freedom responsibly. Like Saints Kilian, Boniface, Adelar, Eoban and Elizabeth of Thuringia, we want to engage with our fellow citizens as Christians and to invite them to discover with us the fullness of the Good News. Then we will resemble the famous bell of the Cathedral of Erfurt, which bears the name “*Gloriosa*”, the “glorious”. It is thought to be the largest free-swinging medieval bell in the world. It is a living sign of our deep rootedness in the Christian tradition, but also a summons to set out upon the mission. It will ring out once more at the end of today’s solemn Mass. May it inspire us, after the example of the saints, to ensure that witness to Christ is both seen and heard in the world in which we live. Amen.
