

*Sunday 14 September*

Most Holy Father,

On August 15 earlier this year, at the Angelus, you said, “I think especially at this time of the unique world citadel of life and hope which is Lourdes”. The city of Lourdes has, for more than a thousand years, been watched over by a towering citadel of rock.

But the real citadel of Lourdes is a spring which is always pure, fresh and bright. It has been flowing for 150 years in the Grotto of Massabielle and will continue to do so for a long time to come. It is a sign of life and hope, as you yourself have said. In this Jubilee year, 10 million pilgrims, from all the countries in the world, have shared your thoughts. They have visited Lourdes in search of reasons for living and hoping. They have come to the spring of clear water.

On August 15, after you declared Lourdes to be the world citadel of life and hope, you went on to say : “... Lourdes, where I shall, if it is the will of God, be going in a month’s time”. Fortunately it has been God’s will and you are here today. Welcome!

“Welcome”: all the pilgrims and all the people travelling through Lourdes are welcome. Your presence deserves more than a simple greeting of welcome. It is a blessing that we have to welcome.

Once in my life I received the gift of foresight. It was April 19 2005. The radios had just announced that a Pope had been elected. I switched on the television to find out who was going to take on the formidable task of following the dearly beloved John Paul II. As I waited, I was surprised to hear myself saying to someone standing close to me, “I hope he will take the name of Benedict”.

I was not thinking then of Saint Benedict. Nor was I thinking of Benedict XV, who was much criticized when he sought to be a champion of peace during the First World War. When I said, “I hope he will take the name of Benedict”, I was thinking of our world. It sometimes happens that our world might think itself ill-fated, as it realizes that its marvellous discoveries can turn

against it. Even more often, it believes that it has been forsaken, left to wander aimlessly under an empty and silent sky. In this dispirited world, the mission of the Church is to tell the world that it is loved, despite its wounds, that it is blessed. The supreme sign of this blessing is the Cross, the glorious Cross of the Lord that we are celebrating today.

It stands over our assembly today because it is the sign shared by all Christians. It is present on the altar for the Eucharist which commemorates the infinite love of Christ. It is there, at the foot of this platform, in the midst of the crowd, in the form of the Cross of the World Youth Days. It brought the young people together, around you, in Sydney. It is bringing them together once again around you here in Lourdes, by the Grotto. Following Pope John Paul II, you told the young people in front of Notre-Dame in Paris on Friday, "I entrust you with the Cross of Christ". You entrust it to them as a treasure, as a source of blessing.

Through the name you chose, Most Holy Father, you refute the prophets of doom. This world is not lost. It is saved. May God bless you, Holy Father, in your ministry! May the years you spend in the service of the Church, as a witness of the Gospel, be a sign from God for the world, a sign of blessing! Here in Lourdes we ceaselessly present this intention to Mary, the new Eve, the Immaculate Conception, who is blessed among women.

+ Jacques PERRIER