

"All this is clearer if you say it first in a positive way."

On August 5, 2006 Pope Benedict XVI was interviewed for the first time by media professionals. The interview was transmitted by Vatican Radio and made available by the Vatican Information Service. Excerpts follow.

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The basic theme [of the upcoming trip to Bavaria] is that we have to

rediscover God--not just any God, but the God who has a human face. For when we see Jesus Christ we see God. Starting here we must find the way to meet each other in the family, among generations, and then among cultures and peoples. We must find the way to reconciliation and to peaceful coexistence in this world, the ways that lead to the future. We won't find these ways if we don't receive light from above....This basic message of faith naturally finds its place in the everyday reality where we seek, above all, cooperation among peoples and ways that can lead to reconciliation and peace.

In the western world today we are experiencing a wave of new and drastic secularization. It has become more difficult to believe because the world in which we find ourselves is completely made up of ourselves; God doesn't appear directly anymore. We don't drink from the

source anymore; humanity has rebuilt the world by itself....Along with that, the West is being strongly influenced by other cultures in which the original religious element is very powerful. These cultures are horrified when they experience the West's coldness towards God. This "presence of the sacred" in other cultures, even if often veiled, touches the western world; it touches us at the crossroads of so many cultures. The quest for "something bigger" wells up again from the depths of western people. We see how in young people there is a search for something "more"; we see how the religious phenomenon is returning, even if that search is rather indefinite. But with all this the Church is present once more, and faith is offered as the answer. This visit, like the visit to Cologne, is an opportunity to help people see that believing is beautiful, that the joy of a huge universal community

possesses a transcendent strength, that behind this belief lies something important, and that together with the new movements there are also new outlets in the search for the faith that lead us from one to the other. These are positive developments for society as a whole.

The world needs this desire [young people have] to do good; it needs this commitment! So here is another message: the courage to make definitive decisions. Young people are very generous but when they face the risk of a life-long commitment, be it marriage or a priestly vocation, they are afraid. The world is moving dramatically: nowadays I can continually do whatever I want with my life with all its unpredictable future events. By making a definitive decision am I not tying up my personal freedom and depriving myself of freedom of movement? No; it's a question of

reawakening the courage to make definitive decisions. They are really the only ones that allow us to grow, to move ahead and to reach something great in life. They are the only decisions that do not destroy our freedom but point us in the right direction. To risk making this leap towards the definitive and so embrace life fully is something I am happy to [tell young people].

Of course there is a relationship of tension and equilibrium in the Church today; that's the way it has to be. Multiplicity and unity must always find a meeting ground, and this must be present in ever new ways. We have a new polyphony of cultures nowadays in which Europe is no longer the determining factor. Christians on the various continents are starting to have their own importance, their own characteristics. We must keep

learning about this fusion of different components.

[In our relationships with other churches] the first thing we need to do is to clarify, establish, and put into practice important ethical directives for society, thus guaranteeing a consistent social ethic without which society cannot fulfil its political ends, namely, justice for all, living together in a positive way, and peace. We already agree on the common Christian basics as they confront the great moral challenges. Now we have to witness to God in a world that has problems finding Him, as we said, and to make God visible in the human face of Jesus Christ, to give joy as well because we are not alone in this world. Only in this way can we rejoice in the the greatness of humanity. Humanity is not an evolutionary product that turned out badly. We are the image of God. We have to move on these two levels: the

level of important ethical points of reference and the level that manifests the presence of God, a concrete God, starting from within and working towards those ethical issues. If we do this, and especially if, in all our singular communities, we try not to live the faith in too specific a fashion but always start from its deepest basics, then maybe we still won't reach external manifestations of unity quickly, but we will mature towards an interior unity that, God willing, one day will bring with it an exterior form of unity too.

Christianity is not a collection of prohibitions: it's a positive way of life. It's very important that we assert this again because it has almost completely disappeared. [In regard to sexuality and the family, for instance,] we've heard so much about what is not allowed; now it's time to proclaim in a positive way that man and woman are made for

each other, that the scale of sexuality, eros, agape, indicates the level of love and it's in this way that marriage develops, first of all, as a joyful and blessing-filled encounter between a man and a woman. The family guarantees continuity among generations and through which generations are reconciled to each other and even cultures can meet. So first we have to stress what we want; then it will follow that we don't want something else. This is not a Catholic invention that man and woman are made for each other; all cultures know this. As far as abortion is concerned, it's part of the fifth, not the sixth, commandment: "You shall not kill!". We have to presume this is obvious and always stress that the human person begins in the mother's womb and remains a human person until his or her last breath. The human person must always be respected as a human person. But all

this is clearer if you say it first in a positive way.

[With respect to] moral issues I am more and more convinced that the basic question is about education, formation. Progress becomes true progress only if it serves the human person and if the human person grows: not only in terms of technical power, but also in moral awareness. The real problem of our historical moment lies in the imbalance between the incredibly fast growth of our technical power and that of our moral capacity, which has not grown in proportion. This is why the formation of the human person is the true recipe, the key to it all, and this is what the Church proposes. Briefly speaking, this formation has a dual dimension: we have to learn, acquire knowledge, ability, know-how. But if we only teach how to build and to use machines, and how to use contraceptives, then we shouldn't be

surprised when we find ourselves facing wars and AIDS epidemics. We also need the formation of the heart to provide the human person with points of reference so as to use the techniques correctly. And that's what we try to do, helping people to form a true conscience, which gives them freedom. We try to form human beings capable of reconciliation, who know that we must build and not destroy and who have the necessary references to be able to live together. So we should correct the image of a Church that only teaches severe "no's."

We have to stress better what we want that is positive. It's important for the secular world to understand that the Christian faith is not an impediment but a bridge for dialogue. To a large extent what's missing is a "religious centerpiece" that can act as point of departure and of arrival for those who want to

enter into a relationship. That's why we must show the new intercultural environment that pure rationality separated from God is insufficient. We need a wider rationality that sees God in harmony with reason and is aware that the Christian faith that developed in Europe is also a means to bring together reason and culture and to integrate them with action in a single and comprehensive vision. It is an important task to show that the Word which we possess is not the refuse of history, so to speak, but a universal necessity.

I've never felt strong enough for many long trips. But where a trip allows me to communicate a message or responds to a sincere request, I want to go, in the "measure" that it is possible for me. Some trips are already planned: next year there's the meeting of the Latin American Episcopal Conference in Brazil. My presence can strengthen the hope

that is very much alive in that part of the world. Then I'd like to visit the Holy Land, and I hope to visit it in a time of peace. For the rest, we shall see what Providence has in store.

Today we reflect a great deal on [the role of women in the Church]. As you know, we believe that our faith and the constitution of the college of the Apostles, does not allow for the priestly ordination of women. But it is a mistake to think that the only role one can have in the Church is the priesthood. There are many other functions in the life of the Church. Beginning with the Mother of God and Mary Magdalen, and from the time of the Fathers of the Church, their sisters, and later on in the Middle Ages and modern times, great women have played fundamental roles. Consider Hildegard of Bingen, Catherine of Siena, and Bridget of Sweden, who spoke out strongly before bishops and popes. We must

continue to explore the rightful place of women in the Church, including departments of the Holy See. But Canon Law limits authority to make legally binding decisions to those in Holy Orders. I believe that women themselves, with their energy and strength, with their superiority, with what I'd call their "spiritual power," will know how to make their own space. And we will listen to God so as not to stand in their way but rather rejoice when women become fully effective in roles best suited to them.

During the pontificate of John Paul II and especially the event of his death and the transition to the new pontificate large numbers of people were attracted to Catholicism. A kind of inner strength was generated. It is beautiful to see the experience of community become an experience of faith at the same time. When that experience occurs in Rome it becomes more alive and gives to

Catholicism its luminous intensity. Of course, this has to continue everywhere in everyday life. The two must go together--from the great moments when one feels how good it is to be there, when the Lord's presence is felt and we form a great community reconciled beyond all boundaries, to the tiring pilgrimage of everyday existence. The bright points move us to turn toward others, knowing how to invite them to join our pilgrim community.... Demonstrating solidarity means letting ourselves be inspired by the Lord.

[In regard to the large numbers of recent beatifications and canonizations], at first I thought it a bit overwhelming and that perhaps we needed to be more selective in choosing figures who could clearly inspire us. I have decentralized beatifications in order to make these figures more visible in the specific

places where they lived. I also think that this decentralization is more in keeping with the collegiality of the episcopate and that it brings out the way different countries have their own personalities. When beatifications are celebrated in different places they can touch vast numbers of people, who say, "Here is one of us"! They pray to him and are inspired. So we should be happy to see lots of [beatifications and canonizations]. As society becomes more global, people everywhere can get to know these blessed souls, and that is wonderful. The Episcopal Conferences should give greater visibility to those who leave a profound impression on the people, but not too many of them. We need to study the lives of these wonderful historical figures who are timely and inspirational.

[As for the Papal office], such circumstances and situations do, of

course, influence one's relationships with people and one's responsibilities. Let's say that my basic personality and even my basic vision have grown, but in everything that is essential I have remained the same as ever. [The Papal office] is tiring, but not burdensome; I try to find joy here too.

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