



The Holy See

INTERVIEW OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI WITH THE JOURNALISTS DURING THE FLIGHT TO BERLIN

Papal Flight

Thursday, 22 September 2011

On Thursday morning, 22 September, the Holy Father flew from Ciampino to Berlin on his third Apostolic Visit to his homeland. Soon after take-off he granted an interview to the journalists on board the Papal flight — now a firmly-established tradition — whose pre-selected questions were put to the Pope by Fr Federico Lombardi, SJ, Director of the Holy See Press Office and of the Vatican Television Centre. The following is a translation of the questions and answers in both Italian and German.

Q. (Father Lombardi): *Your Holiness, we welcome you. We are the usual group of journalists accompanying you; we are preparing to give your Visit resonance in the world press and we are very grateful that at the very beginning of it you have made time for us, to help us understand better the significance of this Journey. It is a special journey because you are going to your own country and you will be speaking your own language. In Germany there are about 4,000 accredited journalists at the various stages of the Journey. On this plane there are 68 of us, of whom just over 20 are German. I shall therefore ask you several questions and I am asking you the first one in German, so that you can speak to our German colleagues in their and your language. I explain to the Italians that it is a question on how German the Pope still feels.*

Your Holiness, may we be permitted — at the start — to ask you a very personal question? How German does Pope Benedict XVI still feel? And what causes you to notice how much — or how much less — your German origins still play a part?

Holy Father. *Hölderlin said: “birth counts for more than anything else”, and of course I too feel this. I was born in Germany and roots cannot, indeed must not be severed. I received my cultural formation in Germany, my language is German and language is the manner by which the spirit*

lives and works. The whole of my cultural formation took place there. When I do theology, I do so from within the perspective that I learned at German universities. I'm afraid I have to admit that I still read more works in German than in other languages, so that being German is a very strong element in my cultural identity. Belonging to German history, with its strengths and its weaknesses, is something that cannot and must not be erased.

For a Christian, however, there is something more. In Baptism one is born anew, into a new people made up of all peoples, a people that embraces all peoples and all cultures and in which one feels truly at home, without losing one's natural roots. When great responsibility is assumed within this new people — as in my own case, the supreme responsibility — then it is clear that one identifies with this new people ever more deeply.

The roots produce a tree that spreads in various ways and the fact that one feels at home in this large community of a people made up of all peoples, namely the Catholic Church, becomes ever more alive and profound, permeating the whole of one's life without erasing what went before. I would therefore say that origins endure, cultural outlooks endure as well as, of course, a special love and a special responsibility, but all this is integrated and expanded within the great sense of belonging to the "*civitas Dei*", as Augustine would say, to the people made up of all peoples, in which we are all brothers and sisters.

Father Lombardi: *Thank you Holy Father. And now let us continue in Italian. Holy Father, in recent years there has been an increasing number of people leaving the Church in Germany, partly because of the abuse of minors committed by members of the clergy. What do you feel about this phenomenon? And what would you say to those who want to leave the Church?*

Holy Father: Let us perhaps begin by identifying what it is that specifically motivates those who feel scandalized by these crimes that have come to light in recent times. In the light of this information, I can well understand, especially if it involves people who are close, that someone might say: "This is no longer my Church. For me the Church was a humanizing and moralizing force. If representatives of the Church do the opposite, I can no longer live with this Church."

This is a specific situation. There is generally a variety of motives in the context of the secularization of our society. And such departures are usually the final step in a long process of moving away from the Church. In this context, I think it important to ask oneself; "Why am I in the Church? Do I belong to the Church as I would to a sports club, a cultural association, etc., where I have my interests, such that I can leave if those interests are no longer satisfied? Or is being in the Church something deeper?"

I would say it is important to know that being in the Church is not like being in some association, but it is being in the net of the Lord, with which he draws good fish and bad fish from the waters of death to the land of life. It is possible that I might be alongside bad fish in this net and I sense this,

but it remains true that I am in it neither for the former nor for the latter but because it is the Lord's net; it is something different from all human associations, a reality that touches the very heart of my being. In speaking to these people I think we must go to the heart of the question: what is the Church? In what does her diversity consist? Why am I in the Church even though there are terrible scandals and terrible forms of human poverty? Therefore, we should renew our awareness of the special nature of "being Church", of being the people made up of all peoples, which is the People of God, and thereby learn to tolerate even scandals and work against these scandals from within, precisely by being present within the Lord's great net.

Father Lombardi: *Thank you, Your Holiness. This is not the first time that certain groups have demonstrated their opposition to your coming to a country. Germany's relationship with Rome was traditionally critical, to some degree even within Catholic circles. The controversial topics are familiar by now: condoms, the Eucharist, celibacy. Before your Journey, some members of Parliament also adopted critical stances. Yet even before your Journey to Great Britain the atmosphere did not seem friendly and then things went well and it was all a success. What are the sentiments with which you are now returning to your former homeland and with which you will speak to the Germans?*

Holy Father: I would say first of all that it is normal that in a free society and in a secularized age there should be opposition to a Visit from the Pope. It is also right that it be expressed — with respect for all — it is right that they express their antagonism. It is part of our freedom and we must note that secularization and opposition to Catholicism itself is strong in our societies. And when such opposition is expressed politely, one cannot object.

Moreover, it is also true that many are looking forward to the Visit and there is great love for the Pope. Yet perhaps I should say further that in Germany this opposition has various dimensions: the old opposition between the cultures of Germany and Rome, the conflicts of history, and then ours is the country of the Reformation, which even further accentuated these conflicts. However, there is also a great consensus towards the Catholic faith, a growing conviction that we need conviction, that we need a moral force in our time, we need a presence of God in this time of ours.

Therefore I know that besides the opposition — which I find natural and to be expected — a great many people are waiting for me joyfully, waiting for a celebration of faith, a being together, and they look forward to the joy of encountering God and of living together in the future, for God to take us by the hand and show us the way. For this reason I am going to my native Germany joyfully and I am glad to be taking Christ's message to my country.

Father Lombardi: *Thank you, and now one final question. Holy Father you will visit the former convent of the reformer Martin Luther at Erfurt. The Evangelical Christians and the Catholics in dialogue with them are preparing to commemorate the fifth centenary of the Reformation. With what message, with what thoughts are you preparing for this meeting? Should your Journey also*

be seen as a fraternal gesture to our brothers and sisters separated from Rome?

Holy Father. When I accepted the invitation to make this journey, it was clear to me that ecumenism with our Evangelical friends must be a strong point, a central point of this journey. We are living in a time of secularism, as has already been said, in which it is the mission of Christians, together, to make the message of God, the message of Christ present, to make it possible to believe, to go forward with these great ideas, these great truths.

Consequently, for Catholics and Evangelicals to come together is a fundamental element for our time, even though, institutionally, we are not perfectly united; even though there are still problems, even serious problems, nevertheless we are united in the foundation of our faith in Christ, our faith in the triune God and in man as the image of God. And showing this to the world and deepening this unity is essential at this moment in history. I am therefore grateful to our friends, our Protestant brothers and sisters, who have made a very meaningful sign possible: our meeting at the monastery from which Luther started out on his theological journey, our prayer in the Church where he was ordained a priest and our conversation together about our responsibility as Christians in this time. Thus I am very happy to be able to demonstrate this fundamental unity, the fact that we are brothers and sisters working together for humanity's good, proclaiming the joyful message of Christ, of the God who has a human face and speaks with us.

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