



The Holy See

CONCLUSION OF THE MEETING OF THE HOLY FATHER WITH THE BISHOPS OF SWITZERLAND

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

Thursday, 9 November 2006

I would first like to thank you all for this meeting, which seems very important to me as an exercise of collegial affection, an expression of our common responsibility for the Church and for the Gospel in the world at this time. Thank you for everything!

I am sorry that because of other commitments, especially the *ad limina* visits - in these days it is the turn of the German Bishops - I was unable to be with you.

I would have really liked to hear the voice of the Swiss Bishops - but perhaps there will be other opportunities - and of course, also to hear the dialogue of the Roman Curia and the Swiss Bishops: in the Roman Curia too, the Holy Father always speaks as responsible for the whole Church.

Thank you, therefore, for this meeting, which it seems to me is a help to us all because it is an experience of the Church's unity as well as of the hope that accompanies us in all the difficulties that surround us.

In addition, I would like to ask you to excuse me for having come without a prepared text on the very first day; I had of course given it some thought, but I did not have the time to write. And so, once again now, I am presenting myself with this impoverishment, but it might be right also for a Pope to be poor in all senses at this time in the Church's history.

In any case, I am unable to offer you a grand Discourse now as would have been fitting after a meeting with these results.

I must say, in fact, that I had already read the summary of your discussions and I have listened to it just now with great attention: it seems a very well thought out and rich text. It truly responds to the essential questions that concern us, both for the unity of the Church as a whole and for the specific issues of the Church in Switzerland. It seems to me that it really plots the path for the years to come and demonstrates our common desire to serve the Lord. It is a very rich text.

In reading it, I thought: it would be somewhat absurd if I were now to start once again to treat the topics discussed thoroughly and intensely over the past three days. I see here the condensed and rich result of the work done; to add anything further to the individual points would, I think, be very difficult, partly because the result of the work is known to me but not the actual voices of those who spoke during the discussions.

I therefore thought that perhaps it would be right this evening, at the conclusion, to return once again to the important topics which occupy us and are, in short, the basis of all the details - even if obviously each detail is important.

In the Church, the institution is not merely an external structure while the Gospel is purely spiritual. In fact, the Gospel and the Institution are inseparable because the Gospel has a body, the Lord has a body in this time of ours. Consequently, issues that seem at first sight merely institutional are actually theological and central, because it is a matter of the realization and concretization of the Gospel in our time.

The best thing to do now, therefore, would be to stress once again the great perspectives within which the whole of our reflection takes place. Allow me with the indulgence and generosity of the members of the Roman Curia, to continue in German, because we have excellent interpreters who would otherwise be left idle.

I have thought of two specific themes of which I have already spoken and which I would now like to examine further.

Let us return, therefore, to the subject of "God". The words of St Ignatius spring to mind: "The Christian is not the result of persuasion, but of power (*Epistula ad Romanos* 3, 3). We should not allow our faith to be drained by too many discussions of multiple, minor details, but rather, should always keep our eyes in the first place on the greatness of Christianity.

I remember, when I used to go to Germany in the 1980s and '90s, that I was asked to give interviews and I always knew the questions in advance. They concerned the ordination of women, contraception, abortion and other such constantly recurring problems.

If we let ourselves be drawn into these discussions, the Church is then identified with certain commandments or prohibitions; we give the impression that we are moralists with a few somewhat

antiquated convictions, and not even a hint of the true greatness of the faith appears. I therefore consider it essential always to highlight the greatness of our faith - a commitment from which we must not allow such situations to divert us.

In this perspective I would now like to continue by completing last Tuesday's reflections and to stress once again: what matters above all is to tend one's personal relationship with God, with that God who revealed himself to us in Christ.

Augustine repeatedly emphasized the two sides of the Christian concept of God: God is *Logos* and God is *Love* - to the point that he completely humbled himself, assuming a human body and finally, giving himself into our hands as bread. We must always keep in mind and help others to keep in mind these two aspects of the Christian conception of God.

God is *Spiritus Creator*, he is *Logos*, he is reason. And this is why our faith is something that has to do with reason, can be passed on through reason and has no cause to hide from reason, not even from the reason of our age. But precisely this eternal, immeasurable reason is not merely a mathematics of the universe and far less, some *first cause* that withdrew after producing the *Big Bang*.

This reason, on the contrary, has a heart such as to be able to renounce its own immensity and take flesh. And in that alone, to my mind, lies the ultimate, true greatness of our conception of God. We know that God is not a philosophical hypothesis, he is not something that *perhaps* exists, but we know him and he knows us. And we can know him better and better if we keep up a dialogue with him.

This is why it is a fundamental task of pastoral care to teach people how to pray and how to learn to do so personally, better and better. Today, schools of prayer and prayer groups exist; it is obvious that people want them. Many seek meditation elsewhere because they think that they will not be able to find a spiritual dimension in Christianity.

We must show them once again not only that this spiritual dimension exists but that it is the source of all things. To this end, we must increase the number of these schools of prayer, for praying together, where it is possible to learn personal prayer in all its dimensions: as silent listening to God, as a listening that penetrates his Word, penetrates his silence, sounds the depths of his action in history and in one's own person; and to understand his language in one's life and then to learn to respond in prayer with the great prayers of the Psalms of the Old Testament and prayers of the New.

By ourselves, we do not possess words for God, but words have been given to us: the Holy Spirit himself has already formulated words of prayer for us; we can enter them, we can pray with them and thus subsequently, also learn personal prayer ever better; we can "learn" God and thus

become sure of him even if he is silent - we can become joyful in God.

This intimate being with God, hence, the experience of God's presence, is what makes us, so to speak, experience ever anew the greatness of Christianity, and then also helps us to find our way through all the trivialities among which, of course, it must also be lived and - day after day, in suffering and loving, in joy and sorrow - put into practice.

And from this viewpoint one perceives, in my opinion, the significance of the Liturgy also as precisely a school of prayer, where the Lord himself teaches us to pray and where we pray together with the Church, both in humble, simple celebrations with only a few of the faithful and also in the feast of faith.

In various conversations, I have perceived now, once again at this very moment, on the one hand, how important for the faithful silence in their contact with God is, and on the other, the feast of faith, how important it is to be able to live festive celebration.

The world also has its feast days. Nietzsche actually said: We can only celebrate if God does not exist. But this is absurd: only if God exists and touches us can there be true festivity. And we know that these feasts of faith open people's hearts wide and create impressions that are helpful for the future. I saw once again during my Pastoral Visits to Germany, Poland and Spain that faith there is lived as a festive celebration and that it accompanies people and guides them.

In this context I would like to mention something else that struck me and made a lasting impression.

In St Thomas Aquinas' last work that remained unfinished, the *Compendium Theologiae* which he intended to structure simply according to the three theological virtues of faith, hope and charity, the great Doctor began and partly developed his chapter on hope. In it he identified, so to speak, hope with prayer: the chapter on hope is at the same time the chapter on prayer.

Prayer is hope in action. And in fact, true reason is contained in prayer, which is why it is possible to hope: we can come into contact with the Lord of the world, he listens to us, and we can listen to him. This is what St Ignatius was alluding to and what I wanted to remind you of today, once again: *ou peismones to ergon, alla megethous estin ho Christianismos (Ad Rom. 3, 3)* - the truly great thing in Christianity, which does not dispense one from small, daily things but must not be concealed by them either, is this ability to come into contact with God.

The second thing that I have remembered in these very days concerns morals.

I often hear it said that people today have a longing for God, for spirituality, for religion, and are starting once again to see the Church as a possible conversation partner from which, in this regard, they can receive something. (There was a period in which this was basically sought only in

other religions).

Awareness is growing: the Church especially conveys spiritual experience; she is like a tree where the birds can make their nests even if they want to fly away again later - but she is precisely also a place where one can settle for a certain time.

Instead, what people find more difficult is the morality that the Church proclaims. I have pondered on this - I have been pondering on it for a long time - and I see ever more clearly that in our age morality is, as it were, split in two.

Modern society not merely lacks morals but has "discovered" and demands another dimension of morality, which in the Church's proclamation in recent decades and even earlier perhaps has not been sufficiently presented. This dimension includes the great topics of peace, non-violence, justice for all, concern for the poor and respect for creation. They have become an ethical whole which, precisely as a political force, has great power and for many constitutes the substitution or succession of religion.

Instead of religion, seen as metaphysical and as something from above - perhaps also as something individualistic -, the great moral themes come into play as the essential which then confers dignity on man and engages him.

This is one aspect: this morality exists and it also fascinates young people, who work for peace, for non-violence, for justice, for the poor, for creation. And there are truly great moral themes that also belong, moreover, to the tradition of the Church. The means offered for their solution, however, are often very unilateral and not always credible, but we cannot dwell on this now. The important topics are present.

The other part of morality, often received controversially by politics, concerns life. One aspect of it is the commitment to life from conception to death, that is, its defence against abortion, against euthanasia, against the manipulation and man's self-authorization in order to dispose of life.

People often seek to justify these interventions with the seemingly great purpose of thereby serving the future generations, and it even appears moral to take human life into one's own hands and manipulate it.

However, on the other hand, the knowledge also exists that human life is a gift that demands our respect and love from the very first to its very last moments, also for the suffering, the disabled and the weak.

The morality of marriage and the family also fit into this context. Marriage is becoming, so to speak, ever more marginalized.

We are aware of the example of certain countries where legislation has been modified so that marriage is no longer defined as a bond between a man and a woman but a bond between persons; with this, obviously, the basic idea is destroyed and society from its roots becomes something quite different.

The awareness that sexuality, *eros* and marriage as a union between a man and a woman go together - "and they become one flesh" (Gn 2: 24) - this knowledge is growing weaker and weaker; every type of bond seems entirely normal - they represent a sort of overall morality of non-discrimination and a form of freedom due to man.

Naturally, with this the indissolubility of marriage has become almost a utopian idea which many public figures seem precisely to contradict. So it is that even the family is gradually breaking up. There are of course many explanations for the problem of the sharp decline in the birth rate, but certainly a decisive role is also played in this by the fact that people want to enjoy life, that they have little confidence in the future and that they feel the family is no longer viable as a lasting community in which future generations may grow up.

In these contexts, therefore, our proclamation clashes with an awareness, as it were, contrary to society and with a sort of anti-morality based on a conception of freedom seen as the faculty to choose autonomously with no pre-defined guidelines, as non-discrimination, hence, as the approval of every type of possibility.

Thus, it autonomously establishes itself as ethically correct, but the other awareness has not disappeared. It exists, and I believe we must commit ourselves to reconnecting these two parts of morality and to making it clear that they must be inseparably united.

Only if human life from conception until death is respected is the ethic of peace possible and credible; only then may non-violence be expressed in every direction, only then can we truly accept creation and only then can we achieve true justice.

I think that this is the great task we have before us: on the one hand, not to make Christianity seem merely morality, but rather a gift in which we are given the love that sustains us and provides us with the strength we need to be able to "lose our own life". On the other hand, in this context of freely given love, we need to move forward towards ways of putting it into practice, whose foundation is always offered to us by the Decalogue, which we must interpret today with Christ and with the Church in a progressive and new way.

These, therefore, were the themes I thought I should and could elaborate. I thank you for your indulgence and your patience. Let us hope that the Lord will help us all on our journey!

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