



The Holy See

PASTORAL VISIT TO THE REBIBBIA DISTRICT PRISON (ROME)

***RESPONSES OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THE INMATES***

Rebibbia

Sunday, 18 December 2011

My name is Rocco. First of all, I want to offer you our and my personal “thank you” for this visit which, on behalf of everyone here, is deeply appreciated and brings a great content of solidarity, humanity and comfort at such a dramatic moment for Italian inmates. I would like to ask Your Holiness, if your gesture will be understood in its simplicity, by our politicians and government officials too, so that the conditions of dignity and of hope, which both need to be acknowledged of every living being, might be returned to us, the lowest rung. Hope and dignity are indispensable to resume the path of a life worthy of being lived.

Thank you for your words. I feel your affection for the Holy Father, and I am touched by the friendship that I feel from all of you. I would like to say that I often think of you and always pray for you because I know that this is a very difficult condition which often, instead of helping to renew friendship with God and humanity, makes the inner situation worse. I have come, above all, to show you my personal and deep closeness, in communion with Christ who loves you, as I have said. But certainly this visit, which is meant to be personal to you, is also a public gesture reminding our citizens and our Government of the fact that there are great problems and difficulties in Italian prisons. And, of course, the purpose of these prisons is to aid justice, and justice implies in the first place human dignity. So they should be built in such a way that dignity may grow, that dignity be respected and that you may renew within yourselves the sense of dignity, in order to better respond to this intimate vocation. We have listened to the Minister of Justice, we heard how she feels for your situation in all respects, and thus we may be sure that our Government and those in charge will do their utmost to improve this situation, to help you really find here a good realization of justice that will help you return to society with the full

conviction of your human vocation and with the full respect which your human condition demands. Therefore as much as I can, would always like to give signs of how important it is that these prisons respond to their purpose of renewing human dignity and not attacking this dignity, and of improving the situation. And I hope that the Government has each and every possibility to respond to this calling. Thank you.

My name is Omar. Holy Father, I would like to ask you a million things, which I have always imagined asking you, but today I find it difficult to ask you even one. I am moved by this event, your visit to the prison is a powerful thing for us inmates, Christian and Catholic. So, more than a question I prefer to ask you to let us cling to you with our own suffering and that of our families, like a power line to communicate with Our Lord. I love you.

I love you, too, and I am grateful for these words that touch my heart. I think my visit shows that I would like to follow the words of the Lord which always touch me, where he says — I read it in my discourse — on the Last Judgment: “you visited me in prison and it was I who waited for you”. The Lord’s identification with prisoners compels us deeply, and I must ask myself: have I acted according to this imperative of the Lord? Have I kept in mind this word of the Lord? This is one reason why I have come, because I know that the Lord waits for me in you, that you need this human acknowledgment and that you need the Lord’s presence, who, at the Last Judgement, will question us on this very point and, therefore, I hope that here, more and more, the true aim of these detention centres: that of helping one to find oneself again, helping one to move forward with oneself, in reconciliation with oneself, with others, with God, to reenter society and to assist in humanity’s progress. The Lord will help you. In my prayers, I am always with you. I know that it is a special duty for me to pray for you, almost of “pulling you to the Lord”, up high, for the Lord, through our prayers, helps: prayer is a reality. I also invite everyone else to pray, so that there is, so to speak, a strong cable that will “pull you to the Lord” and will connect us to one another, so that on our way to the Lord we are all linked together. Rest assured of this strength of my prayers and I also invite others to join with you in prayer, and in this way to find an almost single rope that goes toward the Lord.

My name is Alberto: Your Holiness, does it seem right to you that after losing one member after another of my family, now that I am a new man, and father to a beautiful two-month-old baby girl named Gaia, they do not permit me the possibility of going home, although I have well paid my debt to society?

First of all, congratulations! I am happy that you are a father, that you consider yourself a new man and that you have a beautiful daughter: this is a gift of God. I, naturally, do not know the details of your case, but I hope with you that as soon as possible you can return to your family. You know that in Church teaching the family is fundamental, it is important for a father to hold his daughter in his arms. And so, I pray and hope that as soon as possible you can really hold your daughter in your arms, be with your wife and child to build a beautiful family and in this way to collaborate for

the future of Italy.

Your Holiness, My name is Federico, speaking for the inmates of G14, the infirmary. What could the incarcerated, the sick, those with HIV possibly ask the Pope? Do they ask our Pope, already burdened by all the suffering of the world, to pray for them? To pardon them? To carry them in his heart? Yes, we would like to ask this, but above all that you carry our voices where they are not heard. We are absent from our families, but not from life. We fell and in our falls we did bad things to others, but we are standing up again. Too little is said about us, and then often in ways so cruel as to wish us wiped out of society entirely. It makes us feel subhuman. You are everyone's Pope, our Pope and we beg you to make sure that we are not stripped of our dignity, along with our freedom. So that it is not taken for granted that being secluded means being excluded forever. Your presence is a great honour for us! Our best wishes for a Holy Christmas to everyone.

Yes, your words are truly memorable for me: We fell, but we are here to stand up again. This is important, this courage to stand, to go forward with the help of the Lord and with the help of all your friends. You also said that they speak in a "cruel" way about you. Unfortunately it is true, but I would like to say that that is not all, there are others who speak well of you and think well of you. I am thinking of my little papal family; I am surrounded by four "lay sisters" and we often speak of this problem; they have friends in different prisons, we even receive gifts from them and we send gifts ourselves. So this situation is present in a very positive way in my family and I think it is in many others as well. We have to tolerate some speaking in a "cruel" way, they speak in a "cruel" way about the Pope, too, and, yet we go forward. It seems important to me to encourage everyone to think well, to find meaning in your suffering, to aim to help you in the process of rising again. And, let us say, I will do my part to invite all to think in this just way, not disparagingly but humanely, realizing that anyone can fall, but that God wants everyone to come to him, and we must cooperate in the spirit of brotherhood and awareness of our own fragility, so that they can truly rise again and move forward with dignity and always find respect for their dignity, so that it increases and in this way they can also find joy in life, for life is given to us by the Lord, with his plan. And if we recognize this plan, God is with us, and even the dark passages have their meaning to give us a greater understanding of ourselves, in order to help us become more ourselves, more the children of God and so to be really happy to be human beings, because we are created by God, even in diverse difficult conditions. May the Lord help you, and we are close to you.

My name is Gianni, from section G8. Your Holiness, I was taught that the Lord sees and reads inside us. I wonder why is absolution delegated to priests? If I asked for it on my knees alone in my room, turning to the Lord, would he absolve me? Or would it be another kind of absolution? What would the difference be?

Yes, you are asking me an important and true question. I would say two things. The first: naturally, if you kneel down and with true love for God pray that God forgives you, he forgives you. It has

always been the teaching of the Church that one, with true repentance — that is not only in order to avoid punishment, difficulty, but for love of the good, for love of God — asks for forgiveness, he is pardoned by God. This is the first part. If I honestly know that I have done evil, and if love for goodness, a desire for goodness is reborn within me, repentance for not having responded to this love, and I ask forgiveness of God, who is the Good, he gives it to me. But there is a second element: sin is not only a “personal”, individual thing between myself and God. Sin always has a social dimension, a horizontal one. With my personal sin, even if perhaps no one knows it, I have damaged the communion of the Church, I have sullied the communion of the Church, I have sullied humanity. And therefore this social, horizontal dimension of sin requires that it be absolved also at the level of the human community, of the community of the Church, almost physically. Thus, this second dimension of sin, which is not only against God but concerns the community too, demands the Sacrament, and the Sacrament is the great gift in which through confession, we can free ourselves from this thing and we can really receive forgiveness in the sense of a full readmission to the community of the living Church, of the Body of Christ. And so, in this sense, the necessary absolution by the priest, the Sacrament, is not an imposition — let us say — on the limits of God’s goodness, but, on the contrary, it is an expression of the goodness of God because it shows me also concretely, in the communion of the Church, I have received pardon and can start anew. Thus, I would say, hold on to these two dimensions: the vertical one, with God, and the horizontal one, with the community of the Church and humanity. The absolution of the priest, sacramental absolution, is necessary to really absolve me of this link with evil and to fully reintegrate me into the will of God, into the vision of God, into his Church and to give me sacramental, almost bodily, certitude: God forgives me, he receives me into the community of his children. I think that we must learn how to understand the Sacrament of Penance in this sense: as a possibility of finding again, almost physically, the goodness of the Lord, the certainty of reconciliation.

Your Holiness, My name is Nwaihim Ndubuisi, section G11. Holy Father, last month you made a Pastoral Visit to Africa, to the small nation of Benin, one of the poorest countries in the world. You saw the faith and enthusiasm of those people for Jesus Christ. You saw people suffering for different reasons: racism, hunger, child labour... I ask you: they put their hope and faith in God and they die surrounded by poverty and violence. Why doesn't God listen to them? Maybe God only hears the rich and powerful who instead have no faith. Thank you, Holy Father.

First of all, I would like to say that I was very happy in your land; the welcome from the Africans was so warm, I felt a human cordiality which in Europe is somewhat obscured, because we have other things in our heart that make the heart a little heavy. Here [in Benin] there was an exuberant warmth, so to speak, I too felt the joy of life, and this was one of my most beautiful impressions: despite the poverty and all the great suffering that I also saw — I met lepers, aids patients, etc. — notwithstanding all these problems and great poverty, there is a joy of life, a joy of being a human creature because there is a native awareness that God is good and loves me, and being human is being loved by God. Thus, this was, let us say, the dominant, powerful impression I had: seeing in

a suffering Country, more joy, cheerfulness, than in rich Countries. And this also makes me think how joy is absent in rich Countries; we all are completely occupied with so many problems: how to do this, how to set this up, how to save this, to buy more. And with the mass of things that we have we are ever more distanced from ourselves and from the original experience that God exists and that God is close to me. Therefore I would say that to own large properties and to have power does not make one necessarily happy, it is not the greatest gift. It could, I would also say, be a negative thing that prevents me from really living. The measures of God, the criteria of God, are different from ours. God gives to these poor ones joy, the awareness of his presence, he makes them feel that he is close to them even in suffering, in difficulty and, of course, calls all of us so that we may do all we can to leave the darkness of diseases, of poverty. It is our duty, thus in so doing we can become happier. The two parts should therefore complete one another: we must help so that also Africa, these poor countries, may overcome problems of poverty, and help them to live; and they must help us to understand that material things do not have the last word. And we must pray to God: show us, help us, so that there may be justice, so that all may live in the joy of being your children.

At the end of the discussion, an inmate named Stefan, from section G11, read the following prayer:

Oh God, give me the courage to call you Father.

You know that I do not always give you the attention you deserve.

You do not forget me, even though I so often live far from the light of your face.

Come close, despite everything, despite my sin however great or small, secret or public, it may be.

Give me inner peace, that which only you know how to give.

Give me the strength to be true, sincere; tear away from my face the masks that obscure the awareness that I am worthy only because I am your son. Forgive me my faults and grant me the possibility to do good.

Shorten my sleepless nights; grant me the grace of a conversion of heart.

Remember, Father, those who are outside of here and still love me, that thinking of them, I remember that only love gives life, while hate destroys and resentment transforms into hell long and endless days.

Remember me, Oh God. Amen

After the prayer, the Pope said:

Dear friends, I said that we are all children of God, as children let us now pray together to our Father, as the Lord taught us to pray:

Our Father...

At the end of the visit, he said the following words:

Dear friends, a warm thank you for this welcome, I wish everyone a good Christmas. May a little of the light of the Lord come to us. Advent is a time of waiting: we are not yet there, but we know that we are moving toward the light and that God loves us. In this way, happy Sunday and also merry Christmas. Best wishes! Thank you.

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