



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE MEMBERS OF THE ROMAN CURIA
AT THE TRADITIONAL EXCHANGE OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS**

Clementine Hall

Friday, 22 December 2006

*Your Eminences,
Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Presbyterate,
Dear Brethren,*

I meet you today with great joy and address my cordial greeting to each one of you. I thank you for being present at this traditional appointment held close to holy Christmas.

I especially thank Cardinal Angelo Sodano for the words with which he has expressed the sentiments of everyone here, inspired by the central theme of the Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. On this important occasion I would like to express my gratitude to him once more for the service to the Pope and to the Holy See that he has carried out for so many years as Secretary of State, and I ask the Lord to reward him for the good that he has done with his wisdom and his zeal for the Church's mission.

At the same time, I desire to offer a special greeting to Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone for the new task that I have entrusted to him. I gladly extend these sentiments to all those who have entered the service of the Roman Curia or of the Governorate this year, while we remember with affection and gratitude those whom the Lord has called from this life to himself.

The year that is coming to an end, as you have said, Your Eminence, lives on in our memory; deeply impressed upon it are the horrors of the war near the Holy Land as well as the general danger of a clash between cultures and religions - a danger that hangs threateningly over our time in history.

The problem of ways towards peace has thus become a challenge of primary importance for all who are concerned about humankind. This is true in particular for the Church, for which the promise that accompanied her at the outset also means a responsibility and a task: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among men with whom he is pleased" (Lk 2: 14).

The Angel's greeting to the shepherds on the night of Christ's birth in Bethlehem reveals an unbreakable link between the relationship of men and women with God and their own mutual relationships.

Peace on earth cannot be found without reconciliation with God, without harmony between Heaven and earth.

This correlation of the theme "God" with the theme "peace" was the decisive aspect of my four Apostolic Journeys this year: I would like to review them here.

First of all was my *Pastoral Visit to Poland*, the Country in which our beloved Pope John Paul II was born. For me, the journey to his Homeland was an intimate duty of gratitude for all that he gave to me personally and above all to the Church and to the world during the quarter century of his service.

His greatest gift to all of us was his steadfast faith and the radicalism of his dedication. His motto was "*Totus tuus*". It reflected his whole being. Yes, he gave himself without reserve to God, to Christ, to the Mother of Christ, to the Church: to the service of the Redeemer and to the redemption of man.

He held nothing back. He let the flame of faith consume him to his inmost depths. He showed us how, as people of today, it is possible to believe in God, the Living God who made himself close to us in Christ. He showed us that a definitive and radical dedication of one's whole life is possible, and that, precisely in giving oneself, life becomes great and immense and fruitful.

In Poland, everywhere I went I encountered the joy of faith. "The joy of the Lord is your strength" - this word which amid the wretchedness of the new beginning, the scribe Ezra cried out to the People of Israel who had just returned from the Exile (Neh 8: 10), can be experienced tangibly here. I was deeply struck by the great cordiality with which I was welcomed everywhere. The people saw in me the Successor of Peter to whom is entrusted the pastoral ministry for the entire Church.

They saw the one to whom, despite all his human frailty, the word of the Risen Lord is addressed then as today: "Tend my sheep" (cf. Jn 21: 15-19); they saw the Successor of the one to whom Jesus had said, in the district of Caesarea Philippi, "you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church" (Mt 16: 18). Peter, on his own, was not a rock; he was a weak and unsteady man.

Nonetheless, the Lord wished to make Peter himself a rock, to show that through a weak human being, he himself firmly sustains his Church and keeps her united.

Thus, the Visit to Poland was for me a celebration of catholicity in the deepest sense. Christ is our peace and reunites the separated: over and above all the differences in the historical epochs and cultures, he is reconciliation. Through the Petrine Ministry we experience this unifying force of faith which, starting from many peoples ever anew, builds the one People of God. We truly experienced with joy that, coming from many peoples, we form the one People of God: his Holy Church.

For this reason the Petrine Ministry can be the visible sign that guarantees this unity and forms a concrete unit. Once again, I want to thank the Church in Poland explicitly and with all my heart for this moving experience of catholicity.

My travels in Poland could not omit a visit to Auschwitz-Birkenau, to that place of the cruellest barbarities, the attempt to wipe out the People of Israel, and thus render their election by God vain and indeed, to banish God himself from history.

It was a source of great comfort to me at that moment to see a rainbow appearing in the sky as, before the horrors of that place, I cried out to God like Job, shaken by the dread of his apparent absence but at the same time supported by the certainty that even in his silence he does not cease to be and remain with us. The rainbow was, as it were, a response: Yes, I exist, and the words of the promise, of the Covenant which I spoke after the flood, are still valid today (cf. Gn 9: 12-17).

The Visit to Valencia, Spain, was under the banner of the theme of marriage and the family. It was beautiful to listen, before the people assembled from all continents, to the testimonies of couples - blessed by a numerous throng of children - who introduced themselves to us and spoke of their respective journeys in the Sacrament of Marriage and in their large families.

They did not hide the fact that they have also had difficult days, that they have had to pass through periods of crisis. Yet, precisely through the effort of supporting one another day by day, precisely through accepting one another ever anew in the crucible of daily trials, living and suffering to the full their initial "yes", precisely on this Gospel path of "losing oneself", they had matured, rediscovered themselves and become happy.

Their "yes" to one another in the patience of the journey and in the strength of the Sacrament with which Christ had bound them together, had become a great "yes" to themselves, their children, to God the Creator and to the Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Thus, from the witness of these families a wave of joy reached us, not a superficial and scant gaiety that is all too soon dispelled, but a joy that developed also in suffering, a joy that reaches down to the depths and truly redeems man.

Before these families with their children, before these families in which the generations hold hands and the future is present, the problem of Europe, which it seems no longer wants to have children, penetrated my soul. To foreigners this Europe seems to be tired, indeed, it seems to be wishing to take its leave of history.

Why are things like this? This is the great question. The answers are undoubtedly very complex. Before seeking these answers, it is only right to thank the many married couples in our Europe who still say "yes" to children today and accept the trials that this entails: social and financial problems, as well as worries and struggles, day after day; the dedication required to give children access to the path towards the future.

In mentioning these difficulties, perhaps the reasons also become clearer why for many the risk of having children appears too great.

A child needs loving attention. This means that we must give children some of our time, the time of our life. But precisely this "raw material" of life - time - seems to be ever scarcer. The time we have available barely suffices for our own lives; how could we surrender it, give it to someone else? To have time and to give time - this is for us a very concrete way to learn to give oneself, to lose oneself in order to find oneself.

In addition to this problem comes the difficult calculation: what rules should we apply to ensure that the child follows the right path and in so doing, how should we respect his or her freedom? The problem has also become very difficult because we are no longer sure of the norms to transmit; because we no longer know what the correct use of freedom is, what is the correct way to live, what is morally correct and what instead is inadmissible.

The modern spirit has lost its bearings, and this lack of bearings prevents us from being indicators of the right way to others. Indeed, the problem goes even deeper. Contemporary man is insecure about the future. Is it permissible to send someone into this uncertain future? In short, is it a good thing to be a person?

This deep lack of self assurance - plus the wish to have one's whole life for oneself - is perhaps the deepest reason why the risk of having children appears to many to be almost unsustainable. In fact, we can transmit life in a responsible way only if we are able to pass on something more than mere biological life, and that is, a meaning that prevails even in the crises of history to come and a certainty in the hope that is stronger than the clouds that obscure the future.

Unless we learn anew the foundations of life - unless we discover in a new way the certainty of faith - it will be less and less possible for us to entrust to others the gift of life and the task of an unknown future.

Connected with that, finally, is also the problem of definitive decisions: can man bind himself for ever? Can he say a "yes" for his whole life? Yes, he can. He was created for this. In this very way human freedom is brought about and thus the sacred context of marriage is also created and enlarged, becoming a family and building the future.

At this point, I cannot be silent about my concern about the legislation for *de facto* couples. Many of these couples have chosen this way because - at least for the time being - they do not feel able to accept the legally ordered and binding coexistence of marriage. Thus, they prefer to remain in the simple *de facto* state. When new forms of legislation are created which relativize marriage, the renunciation of the definitive bond obtains, as it were, also a juridical seal.

In this case, deciding for those who are already finding it far from easy becomes even more difficult.

Then there is in addition, for the other type of couple, the relativization of the difference between the sexes.

The union of a man and a woman is being put on a par with the pairing of two people of the same sex, and tacitly confirms those fallacious theories that remove from the human person all the importance of masculinity and femininity, as though it were a question of the purely biological factor.

Such theories hold that man - that is, his intellect and his desire - would decide autonomously what he is or what he is not. In this, corporeity is scorned, with the consequence that the human being, in seeking to be emancipated from his body - from the "biological sphere" - ends by destroying himself.

If we tell ourselves that the Church ought not to interfere in such matters, we cannot but answer: are we not concerned with the human being? Do not believers, by virtue of the great culture of their faith, have the right to make a pronouncement on all this? Is it not their - our - duty to raise our voices to defend the human being, that creature who, precisely in the inseparable unity of body and spirit, is the image of God? The Visit to Valencia became for me a quest for the meaning of the human being.

In our minds let us travel to Bavaria - Munich, Altötting, Regensburg and Freising. There, I was able to live unforgettably beautiful days of encounter with faith and with the faithful of my Homeland. The great theme of my Journey to Germany was God. The Church must speak of many things: of all the issues connected with the human being, of her own structure and of the way she is ordered and so forth. But her true and - under various aspects - only theme is "God".

Moreover, the great problem of the West is forgetfulness of God. This forgetfulness is spreading. In short, all the individual problems can be traced back to this question, I am sure of it.

Therefore, on that Journey, my main purpose was to shed clear light on the theme "God", also mindful of the fact that in several parts of Germany there are a majority of non-baptized persons for whom Christianity and the God of faith seem to belong to the past.

Speaking of God, we are touching precisely on the subject which, in Jesus' earthly preaching, was his main focus. The fundamental subject of this preaching is God's realm, the "Kingdom of God". This does not mean something that will come to pass at one time or another in an indeterminate future. Nor does it mean that better world which we seek to create, step by step, with our own strength. In the term "Kingdom of God", the word "God" is a subjective genitive. This means: God is not something added to the "Kingdom" which one might even perhaps drop.

God is the subject. Kingdom of God actually means: God reigns. He himself is present and crucial to human beings in the world. He is the subject, and wherever this subject is absent, nothing remains of Jesus' message.

Therefore, Jesus tells us: the Kingdom of God does not come in such a way that one may, so to speak, line the wayside to watch its arrival. "The Kingdom of God is in the midst of you!" (cf. Lk 17: 20ff.).

It develops wherever God's will is done. It is present wherever there are people who are open to his arrival and so let God enter the world. Thus, Jesus is the Kingdom of God in person: the man in whom God is among us and through whom we can touch God, draw close to God. Wherever this happens, the world is saved.

Two topics made an impression during the days of my Visit to Bavaria. They were and are linked to the theme of God: "the priesthood" and "dialogue". Paul calls Timothy - and in him, the Bishop and in general the priest - "man of God" (I Tm 6: 11). This is the central task of the priest: to bring God to men and women. Of course, he can only do this if he himself comes from God, if he lives *with* and *by* God. This is marvellously expressed in a verse of a priestly Psalm that we - the older generation - spoke during our admittance to the clerical state: "The Lord is my chosen portion and my cup, you hold my lot" (Ps 16[15]5).

The priest praying in this Psalm interprets his life on the basis of the distribution of territory as established in Deuteronomy (cf. 10: 9). After taking possession of the Land, every tribe obtained by the drawing of lots his portion of the Holy Land and with this took part in the gift promised to the forefather Abraham.

The tribe of Levi alone received no land: its land was God himself. This affirmation certainly had an entirely practical significance. Priests did not live like the other tribes by cultivating the earth, but on offerings. However, the affirmation goes deeper. The true foundation of the priest's life, the ground of his existence, the ground of his life, is God himself.

The Church in this Old Testament interpretation of the priestly life - an interpretation that also emerges repeatedly in Psalm 119[118] - has rightly seen in the following of the Apostles, in communion with Jesus himself, as the explanation of what the priestly mission means. The priest can and must also say today, with the Levite: "*Dominus pars hereditatis meae et calicis mei*". God himself is my portion of land, the external and internal foundation of my existence.

This theocentricity of the priestly existence is truly necessary in our entirely function-oriented world in which everything is based on calculable and ascertainable performance. The priest must truly know God from within and thus bring him to men and women: this is the prime service that contemporary humanity needs. If this centrality of God in a priest's life is lost, little by little the zeal in his actions is lost. In an excess of external things the centre that gives meaning to all things and leads them back to unity is missing. There, the foundation of life, the "earth" upon which all this can stand and prosper, is missing.

Celibacy, in force for Bishops throughout the Eastern and Western Church and, according to a tradition that dates back to an epoch close to that of the Apostles, for priests in general in the Latin Church, can only be understood and lived if it is based on this basic structure.

The solely pragmatic reasons, the reference to greater availability, is not enough: such a greater availability of time could easily become also a form of egoism that saves a person from the sacrifices and efforts demanded by the reciprocal acceptance and forbearance in matrimony; thus, it could lead to a spiritual impoverishment or to hardening of the heart.

The true foundation of celibacy can be contained in the phrase: *Dominus pars* - You are my land. It can only be theocentric. It cannot mean being deprived of love, but must mean letting oneself be consumed by passion for God and subsequently, thanks to a more intimate way of being with him, to serve men and women, too. Celibacy must be a witness to faith: faith in God materializes in that form of life which only has meaning if it is based on God.

Basing one's life on him, renouncing marriage and the family, means that I accept and experience God as a reality and that I can therefore bring him to men and women. Our world, which has become totally positivistic, in which God appears at best as a hypothesis but not as a concrete reality, needs to rest on God in the most concrete and radical way possible.

It needs a witness to God that lies in the decision to welcome God as a land where one finds one's own existence. For this reason, celibacy is so important today, in our contemporary world, even if its fulfilment in our age is constantly threatened and questioned.

A careful preparation during the journey towards this goal and persevering guidance on the part of the Bishop, priest friends and lay people who sustain this priestly witness together, is essential. We need prayer that invokes God without respite as the Living God and relies on him in times of

confusion as well as in times of joy. Consequently, as opposed to the cultural trend that seeks to convince us that we are not capable of making such decisions, this witness can be lived and in this way, in our world, can reinstate God as reality.

The other great subject linked to the theme of God is that of dialogue. The inner circle of the complex dialogue which today requires the common commitment of all Christians to unity became clear in the [Ecumenical Vespers in the Regensburg Cathedral](#), where, in addition to the brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church, I was able to meet many friends of Orthodoxy and Evangelical Christianity. We were all gathered together to recite the Psalms and listen to the Word of God, and it is no small thing that this unity was granted to us.

The [meeting with the University](#) was dedicated - as befitted the place - to the dialogue between faith and reason.

On the occasion of my meeting with the philosopher Jürgen Habermas a few years ago in Munich, he said that we would need thinkers who could translate the encoded convictions of the Christian faith into the language of the secularized world to make them newly effective.

In fact, the world's urgent need of the dialogue between faith and reason is becoming ever more obvious.

Immanuel Kant, in his day, saw the essence of illuminism expressed in the so-called "*sapere aude*": in the courage of thought that does not allow itself to be embarrassed by any prejudice.

Well, since then, the cognitive capacity of the human being, his dominion over matter by the power of thought, has made progress that would have been inconceivable at the time.

However, the power the human being holds in his hands, which science has increased, is increasingly becoming a danger that threatens the human being himself and the world.

Reason oriented totally to taking the world in hand, no longer accepts limits. It is already on the point of dealing with the person merely as matter of its own production and power.

Our knowledge is growing but at the same time, a progressive blinding of reason with regard to its own foundations and the criteria that give it direction and meaning is being recorded.

Faith in that God, who is in person the creative Reason of the universe, must be accepted by science in a new way as a challenge and a chance.

Reciprocally, this faith must recognize anew its intrinsic immensity and its own reasonableness. Reason needs the *Logos* which was at the beginning and is our light. Faith, for its part, needs the

conversation with modern reason to take stock of its own greatness and to correspond to its own responsibilities. And this is what I sought to highlight in my lesson at Regensburg. It is a matter which is certainly not solely academic: it addresses the future of us all.

In Regensburg the dialogue between the religions was only marginally touched on and in a twofold perspective. Secularized reason is unable to enter into a true dialogue with the religions. It remains closed to the question of God, and this will end by leading to the clash of cultures.

The other perspective concerned the affirmation that the religions must encounter one another in the common task of putting themselves at the service of the truth and thus, of the human being.

My Visit to Turkey afforded me the opportunity to show also publicly my respect for the Islamic Religion, a respect, moreover, which the Second Vatican Council (cf. Declaration Nostra Aetate, n. 3) pointed out to us as an attitude that is only right.

I would like here to express once again my gratitude to the Authorities of Turkey and to the Turkish People, who welcomed me with such immense hospitality and offered me unforgettable days of encounter.

In a dialogue to be intensified with Islam, we must bear in mind the fact that the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task. This task is very similar to the one that has been imposed upon Christians since the Enlightenment, and to which the Second Vatican Council, as the fruit of long and difficult research, found real solutions for the Catholic Church.

It is a question of the attitude that the community of the faithful must adopt in the face of the convictions and demands that were strengthened in the Enlightenment.

On the one hand, one must counter a dictatorship of positivist reason that excludes God from the life of the community and from public organizations, thereby depriving man of his specific criteria of judgment.

On the other, one must welcome the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights and especially the freedom of faith and its practice, and recognize these also as being essential elements for the authenticity of religion.

As in the Christian community, where there has been a long search to find the correct position of faith in relation to such beliefs - a search that will certainly never be concluded once and for all -, so also the Islamic world with its own tradition faces the immense task of finding the appropriate solutions in this regard.

The content of the dialogue between Christians and Muslims will be at this time especially one of

meeting each other in this commitment to find the right solutions. We Christians feel in solidarity with all those who, precisely on the basis of their religious conviction as Muslims, work to oppose violence and for the synergy between faith and reason, between religion and freedom. In this sense, the two dialogues of which I have spoken penetrate each other.

In Istanbul, lastly, I was once again able to live happy hours of ecumenical closeness in my meeting with the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I. Some days ago he wrote me a letter in which the words of gratitude welling up from the depths of his heart reminded me very vividly of the experience of communion of those days.

We felt we were brothers, not only on the basis of words and historical events, but from the depths of the soul; that we were united by the common faith of the Apostles ever in our thoughts and personal feelings.

We experienced a profound unity in faith, and we pray to the Lord yet more insistently that he will quickly also grant full unity in the common breaking of the Bread.

My deep gratitude and fraternal prayers are addressed at this time to Patriarch Bartholomew and his faithful, as well as to the various Christian communities which I was able to meet in Istanbul. Let us hope and pray that religious freedom, which corresponds with the intimate nature of faith and is recognized in the principles of the Turkish Constitution, may find in suitable juridical forms, as well as in the daily life of the Patriarchate and the other Christian communities, an increasingly practical fulfilment.

"Et erit iste pax" - this will be peace, the Prophet Micah says (5: 4) about the future ruler of Israel, whose birth in Bethlehem he announces. The Angels said to the shepherds grazing their flocks in the fields around Bethlehem: "on earth peace among men", the expected One has arrived (Lk 2: 14).

He himself, Christ, the Lord, said to his disciples: "Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you" (Jn 14: 27). It is from these words that the liturgical greeting developed: "Peace be with you".

This peace that is communicated in the liturgy is Christ himself. He gives himself to us as peace, as reconciliation beyond all frontiers. Wherever he is welcomed, islands of peace develop. We human beings would have liked Christ to banish all wars once and for all, to destroy weapons and establish universal peace. But we have to learn that peace cannot be attained only from the outside with structures, and that the attempt to establish it with violence leads only to ever new violence.

We must learn that peace - as the Angel of Bethlehem said - is connected with *eudokia*, with the opening of our hearts to God.

We must learn that peace can only exist if hatred and selfishness are overcome from within. The human being must be renewed from within, must become new and different. Thus, peace in this world always remains weak and fragile. We suffer from this. For this very reason we are called especially to let ourselves be penetrated within by God's peace and to take his power into the world. All that was wrought in and through the Sacrament of Baptism must be fulfilled in our lives: the dying of the former self, hence, the rebirth of the new. And we will pray to the Lord insistently over and over again: Please move hearts! Make us new people! Help the reason of peace to overcome the irrationality of violence! Make us bearers of your peace!

May the Virgin Mary, to whom I entrust you and your work, obtain this grace for us. I extend to each one of you present here and to all your loved ones, my most fervent good wishes, and as a sign of our joy, tomorrow will be a free day for the Curia to prepare well, physically and spiritually, for Christmas. I impart my Apostolic Blessing with affection to the collaborators of the various Dicasteries and Offices of the Roman Curia and of the Governorate of Vatican City State. Merry Christmas and very many good wishes also for the New Year!

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