



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
TO CAMEROON AND ANGOLA
(MARCH 17-23, 2009)

***INTERVIEW OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
DURING THE FLIGHT TO AFRICA***

Tuesday, 17 March 2009

Q. – Your Holiness, we are grateful for your presence with us today; there are about seventy of us preparing to make this journey with you. We offer you our best wishes and we hope to be of service to you, by enabling many others to take part in this visit. As usual, we want to express our thanks to you for this conversation that you have granted us; we have prepared for it by collecting, in the course of recent days, a certain number of questions from our colleagues – about thirty have been received – and then we chose the ones that seem likely to put together a fairly complete picture of this journey and to be of interest to all. We are most obliged to you for the responses that you will offer us. The first question comes from our colleague Brunelli, from Italian television, who is here on our right:

Q. – *Good morning. Your Holiness, for some time, and in particular in the wake of your recent letter to the Bishops of the world, many newspapers have been talking about the “isolation of the Pope”. What do you have to say about that? Do you really feel isolated? And what are your feelings, in the light of recent events, as you make your way towards Africa with us?*

A. – To tell the truth, I must say I find this myth of my isolation rather amusing. I do not feel alone at all. Every day I receive scheduled visits from my closest co-workers, from the Secretary of State to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, etc. Then I regularly see all the Heads of Dicastery, and every day I receive Bishops on their Ad Limina visits. Recently I met all the Bishops of Nigeria, one after another, and then it was the Bishops of Argentina ... We have had two

Plenarie in recent days, one with the Congregation for Divine Worship and one with the Congregation for the Clergy. Then I talk to my friends, another whole network – recently my year group from my seminary days came from Germany for the day so that we could talk together ... So isolation is not a problem, I am truly surrounded by friends in a splendid collaboration with Bishops, co-workers, and lay people, and I am grateful for this. I am going to Africa with great joy: I love Africa, I have made many African friends from the time when I was a professor right up to the present; I love the joy of the faith, this joyful faith that is found in Africa. You know that the Lord's command for the successor of Peter is "to strengthen his brothers in the faith": I try to do so. But I am sure that I myself shall return strengthened by them, having so to speak "caught" something of their joyful faith.

Q. – The second question is from John Thavis, Rome Bureau Chief of Catholic News Service, the news agency of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

Q. – *Your Holiness, you are travelling to Africa during a global economic crisis that has also had repercussions on poor countries. Moreover, Africa at the present time has to respond to the challenge of a food crisis. I want to ask three things: is this situation going to be touched on during your visit? Will you be asking the international community to tackle Africa's problems? And thirdly, will you be speaking of these problems in the Encyclical that you are preparing?*

A. – Thank you for the question. Naturally, I am not going to Africa with a political or economic agenda, which would lie outside my competence. I am going with a programme that is religious, to do with faith and morals, but this too has an essential contribution to make to the problem of the current economic crisis. We all know that a fundamental element of the crisis is the ethical deficit in economic structures. It has been understood that ethics is not something "outside" the economy, but "inside", and that the economy does not function if it does not include the ethical element. Therefore, speaking of God and speaking of the great spiritual values that constitute the Christian life, I will try to make my own contribution, which should also help to overcome the present crisis, and to renew the economic system from within, which is where the real crisis lies. And of course I shall be appealing for international solidarity. The Church is Catholic, that is to say, universal, open to all cultures and all continents. She is present within all political systems and thus, for Catholicism, solidarity is an internal and fundamental principle. I should like to make an appeal first and foremost for Catholic solidarity, while also extending this to include the solidarity of all those who recognize their responsibility within today's human society. Obviously I shall be speaking of this in the Encyclical too: this is a reason for the delay. We were almost ready to publish it, when this crisis broke out, and we looked at the text again so as to respond more fully, within our particular competence, and within the social teaching of the Church, but with reference to the specific details of the current crisis. In this way I hope that the Encyclical can also be an element that helps to overcome the difficult situation of the present time.

Q. – Your Holiness, the third question comes from our colleague Isabelle de Gaulmyn from “La Croix”.

Q. – *Holy Father, good morning. I will ask the question in Italian, but perhaps you could kindly answer in French ... The Special Council for Africa of the Synod of Bishops has asked that the quantitative growth of the Church in Africa should also become a qualitative growth. At times, the leaders of the Church are thought of as a wealthy and privileged group, and their conduct is not consistent with the proclamation of the Gospel. Will you invite the Church in Africa to make a commitment to an examination of conscience and a purification of its structures?*

A. – I shall try, if I can, to speak in French. I have a more positive view of the Church in Africa: it is a Church that is very close to the poor, a Church with suffering members, with people who need assistance, and thus it seems to me that the Church is truly an institution that still functions even when other structures no longer function, through her system of education, health care, assistance, in all these situations, she is present in the world of the poor and the suffering. Naturally, original sin is also present in the Church; there is not a perfect society, and therefore there are also sinners and shortcomings in the Church in Africa, and in this sense, an examination of conscience, an interior purification is always necessary. I would think of the eucharistic liturgy in this context – we always begin with a purification of conscience and a new beginning in the Lord’s presence. I would also say that, more than a purification of structures – which is always necessary as well – a purification of hearts is needed, because structures are the reflection of hearts. We do what we can to give new impetus to spirituality, to the presence of God in our hearts, both to purify the structures of the Church, and also to assist the purification of the structures of society.

Q. – Now a question from the German journalists here with us: Christa Kramer, representing Sankt Ulrich Verlag, would like to ask this:

Q. – *Holy Father, safe journey! Father Lombardi asked me to speak in Italian, so I shall put the question in Italian. When you speak to Europe, you often speak of a context from which God seems to be disappearing. In Africa it isn’t like that, but there is an aggressive presence of sects, there are the traditional African religions. What, then, is the specific content of the message of the Catholic Church that you would like to present in this context?*

A. – Very well, first we all recognize that in Africa the problem of atheism scarcely arises, since the reality of God is so present, so real in the hearts of the Africans that not to believe in God, to live without God simply isn’t a temptation. It is true that there are also problems with sects: we do not proclaim, as some of them do, a Gospel of prosperity, but a Christian realism. We do not proclaim

miracles, as some do, but the sobriety of the Christian life. We are convinced that all of this sobriety, this realism which proclaims a God who became man, therefore a profoundly human God, a God who suffers, also, with us, gives meaning to our own suffering through a proclamation with a broader horizon, which has more future. And we know that these sects are not very stable: at any given time, it may be all very well to proclaim prosperity, miraculous healings, etc., but after a while, it becomes clear that life is difficult, that a human God, a God who suffers with us is more convincing, more real, and offers greater help for life. It is also important that we have the structure of the Catholic Church. We do not proclaim a small group that after a certain time becomes isolated and lost, but we enter into this great universal network of catholicity, which is not only trans-temporal, but above all, it is present as a great network of friendship that unites us and also helps us to overcome individualism so as to arrive at this unity in diversity, which is the true promise.

Q. – Now a further question from a French speaker: our colleague Philippe Visseyrias from France 2:

Q. – *Your Holiness, among the many ills that beset Africa, one of the most pressing is the spread of Aids. The position of the Catholic Church on the way to fight it is often considered unrealistic and ineffective. Will you address this theme during the journey? Holy Father, would you be able to respond in French to this question?*

A. – I would say the opposite. I think that the most efficient, most truly present player in the fight against Aids is the Catholic Church herself, with her movements and her various organizations. I think of the Sant'Egidio community that does so much, visibly and also behind the scenes, in the struggle against Aids, I think of the Camillians, and so much more besides, I think of all the Sisters who take care of the sick. I would say that this problem of Aids cannot be overcome merely with money, necessary though it is. If there is no human dimension, if Africans do not help [*by responsible behaviour*], the problem cannot be overcome by the distribution of prophylactics: on the contrary, they increase it. The solution must have two elements: firstly, bringing out the human dimension of sexuality, that is to say a spiritual and human renewal that would bring with it a new way of behaving towards others, and secondly, true friendship offered above all to those who are suffering, a willingness to make sacrifices and to practise self-denial, to be alongside the suffering. And so these are the factors that help and that lead to real progress: our twofold effort to renew humanity inwardly, to give spiritual and human strength for proper conduct towards our bodies and those of others, and this capacity to suffer with those who are suffering, to remain present in situations of trial. It seems to me that this is the proper response, and the Church does this, thereby offering an enormous and important contribution. We thank all who do so.

Q. – And now, one last question which comes from Chile, because we are very international here: we also have the correspondent from Chilean Catholic Television with us. And we give her the opportunity for the last question: Maria Burgos ...

Q. – *Thank you, Father Lombardi. Your Holiness, what signs of hope does the Church see on the African Continent? And do you intend to give Africa a message of hope?*

A. – Our faith is hope by definition. Sacred Scripture says so. And therefore, anyone with faith is also convinced of bringing hope. It seems to me, despite all the problems that we know well, that there are great signs of hope. New governments, new openness to cooperation, the fight against corruption – a great evil that must be overcome! – and also the openness of the traditional religions to the Christian faith, because in the traditional religions everyone recognizes God, the one God, but he seems somewhat distant. They are waiting for him to come closer. It is in the proclamation of God made man that they recognize that God truly has come closer. Then, the Catholic Church has so much in common: let's say, the cult of ancestors finds its response in the communion of saints, in purgatory. The saints are not only the canonized, they are also our loved ones who have died. And thus, in the Body of Christ is accomplished exactly what the cult of ancestors somehow intuited. And so on. Thus there is a profound connection here that truly gives hope. And interreligious dialogue is also growing – I have now spoken with more than half of the African Bishops, and they have told me that relations with the Muslims, despite the problems that can be identified, are highly promising. Dialogue is growing in mutual respect and cooperation in common ethical responsibilities. Moreover, there is a growing sense of catholicity which helps to overcome tribalism, one of the great problems, and from this comes the joy of being Christian. One problem with the traditional religions is the fear of spirits. One of the African Bishops said to me: people are truly converted to Christianity, they become fully Christian once they know that Christ really is stronger. There is no more fear. And this too is a growing phenomenon. Thus, I would say, with so many elements and problems that are not lacking, there is a growth in spiritual, economic and human resources which give hope, and I should like to highlight these elements of hope.

Q. – Many thanks, Your Holiness, for the time that you have given us and for what you have said. It is an excellent introduction for following your journey with great enthusiasm. We will make every effort to spread your message over the whole continent and to all our readers and listeners.

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