



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO CROATIA

(JUNE 4-5, 2011)

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

Papal Flight

Saturday, 4 June 2011

Question - *Your Holiness, you have been to Croatia several times and your Predecessor made three journeys to this country. Can one speak of a special relationship between the Holy See and Croatia? What are the reasons and the most significant aspects of this relationship and this journey?*

Answer - I have been to Croatia twice. The first time was for the funeral of Cardinal Šeper — my predecessor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith — who was a great friend of mine, he was also President of the Theological Commission of which I was a member. I was therefore acquainted with his kindness, his intelligence, his discernment and his cheerfulness. And this also gave me an idea of Croatia itself because he was a great Croat and a great European. And then I was invited to go there a second time by his private secretary Čapek, also a very good and cheerful man, for a symposium and a celebration at a Marian shrine.

There I experienced a popular piety which, I must say, is very like that in my own region. And I was very happy to see this embodiment of the faith: a faith lived with the heart, where the supernatural becomes natural and the natural is illuminated by the supernatural. And so it was that I saw and experienced this Croatia, with her 1,000-old Catholic history, always very close to the Holy See and, of course, with her ancient Church's long history. I saw that there is a very profound brotherhood in faith, in the will to serve God for man, in Christian humanity. In this regard I think there is a natural connection in this true catholicity which is open to all and transforms the world — or aspires to transform the world — in accordance with the ideas of the Creator.

Question - *Holy Father, Croatia is about to join the 27 nations that belong to the European Union. However in recent times a certain sceptism has crept into the Croatian people's perception of the Union. In this situation are you planning to give the Croatians a message of encouragement so that their outlook on Europe is not solely economic but also cultural, based on Christian values?*

Answer - I believe the majority of Croatians thinks essentially with great joy of the time when Croatia will join the European Union, because it is a profoundly European nation. Cardinal Šeper, Cardinal Kuharić and Cardinal Bozanić, always said to me: "We are not the Balkans, we are Mitteleuropa". Hence Croatia is a people in the heart of Europe, part of its history and its culture.

In this regard — I think — it is logical, good and necessary for it to join the Union. I also think that the prevalent sentiment is joy at being where, historically and culturally, Croatia has always been. One can of course also understand a certain scepticism in a relatively small nation on entering this ready-made, ready-built Europe. It is understandable that there may be fear of an excessively strong centralizing bureaucracy or of a rationalistic culture that might not take sufficiently into account its history, rich heritage or the riches of its historical diversity.

It seems to me that this may also be a mission of this people entering now: to renew their diversity in unity. The European identity is an identity of its own, formed of the wealth of the different cultures that converge in the Christian faith, in the great Christian values.

If these are once again to be visible and effective, it seems to me that it is also a mission of Croats who are now entering it to reinforce — against a certain abstract rationalism — the historicity of our cultures and our diversity, which is our wealth. I encourage Croats in this perspective: the process of entering Europe is a reciprocal process of giving and receiving. Croatia gives too, with its history, with its human and economic capacity, and naturally receives, thereby also broadening its horizons and living in this great exchange which is not only financial but also cultural and spiritual.

Question - *Many Croats were hoping that the canonization of Bl. Cardinal Stepinac might take place during your visit. What in your view is the most important aspect of this man today?*

Answer - The Cardinal was a great pastor and a great Christian, hence also a man of exemplary humanism. I would say that Cardinal Stepinac was destined to live in two contrasting dictatorships, both of which seemed anti-humanist: first the Ustaša regime which appeared to be making the dream of autonomy and independence come true but was in fact false, because Hitler exploited it for his own aims. Cardinal Stepinac was well aware of this and defended true humanism against this regime, protecting Serbs, Jews and gypsies. He was an example — let us say — of the strength of true humanism, suffering.

Then there was the counter dictatorship of Communism, under which he once again fought for the

faith, for God's presence in the world, for true humanism which is dependent on God's presence; man alone is the image of God and so humanism flourishes.

This — let us say — was his destiny: to fight in two different and contrasting battles and in this very decision for what was true, contrary to the spirit of the times, for this true humanism which comes from the Christian faith. He is an important example not only for Croatians but for us all.