



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO GERMANY

22-25 SEPTEMBER 2011

MEETING WITH SEMINARIANS

ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI

St Charles Borromeo Seminary Chapel, Freiburg im Breisgau

Saturday, 24 September 2011

(Video)

Dear Seminarians, dear Sisters and Brothers!

It is a great joy for me to be able to come together here with young people who are setting out to serve the Lord, young people who want to listen to his call and follow him. I would like to express particularly warm thanks for the beautiful letter that the Rector and the seminarians wrote to me. It truly touched my heart, to see how you had reflected on my letter, and developed your own questions and answers from it, and to see how seriously you are taking what I tried to say in my letter, on the basis of which you are now working out your own path.

Of course it would be wonderful if we could hold a conversation with one another, but my travel schedule, which I am bound to follow, sadly does not permit such things. So I can only try, in the light of what you have written and what I myself had written, to offer just one or two further ideas.

In considering the question – What is the seminary for? What does this time mean? – I am always particularly struck by the account that Saint Mark gives of the birth of the apostolic community in the third chapter of his Gospel. Mark says: “And he appointed twelve”. He makes something, he does something, it is a creative act; and he made them, “to be with him, and to be sent out to preach” (*Mk 12:14*). That is a twofold purpose, which in many respects seems contradictory. “To be with him”: they are to be with him, in order to come to know him, to hear what he says, to be formed by him; they are to go with him, to accompany him on his path, surrounding him and

following him. But at the same time they are to be envoys who go out, who take with them what they have learnt, who bring it to others who are also on a journey – into the margins, into the wide open spaces, even into places far removed from him. And yet this paradox holds together: if they are truly with him, then they are also always journeying towards others, they are searching for the lost sheep; they go out, they must pass on what they have found, they must make it known, they must become envoys. And conversely, if they want to be good envoys, then they must always be with him. As Saint Bonaventure once said: the angels, wherever they go, however far away, always move within the inner being of God. This is also the case here: as priests we must go out onto the many different streets, where we find people whom we should invite to his wedding feast. But we can only do this if in the process we always remain with him. And learning this: this combination of, on the one hand, going out on mission, and on the other hand being with him, remaining with him, is – I believe – precisely what we have to learn in the seminary. The right way of remaining with him, becoming deeply rooted in him – being more and more with him, knowing him more and more, being more and more inseparable from him – and at the same time going out more and more, bringing the message, passing it on, not keeping it to ourselves, but bringing the word to those who are far away and who nevertheless, as God's creatures and as people loved by Christ, all have a longing for him in their hearts.

The seminary is therefore a time for training; also, of course, a time for discernment, for learning: does he want me for this? The mission must be tested, and this includes being in community with others and also of course speaking with your spiritual directors, in order to learn how to discern what his will is. And then learning to trust: if he truly wants this, then I may entrust myself to him. In today's world, which is changing in such an unprecedented way and in which everything is in a constant state of flux, in which human ties are breaking down because of new encounters, it is becoming more and more difficult to believe that I will hold firm for the whole of my life. Even for my own generation, it was not exactly easy to imagine how many decades God might assign to me, and how different the world might become. Will I be able to hold firm with him, as I have promised to do? ... It is a question that demands the testing of the vocation, but then also – the more I recognize that he does indeed want me – it demands trust: if he wants me, then he will also hold me, he will be there in the hour of temptation, in the hour of need, and he will send people to me, he will show me the path, he will hold me. And faithfulness is possible, because he is always there, because he is yesterday, today and tomorrow, because he belongs not only to this time, but he is the future and he can support us at all times.

A time for discernment, a time for learning, a time for vocation ... and then, naturally, a time for being with him, a time for praying, for listening to him. Listening, truly learning to listen to him – in the word of sacred Scripture, in the faith of the Church, in the liturgy of the Church – and learning to understand the present time in his word. In exegesis we learn much about the past: what happened, what sources there are, what communities there were, and so on. This is also important. But more important still is that from the past we should learn about the present, we should learn that he is speaking these words now, and that they all carry their present within them,

and that over and above the historical circumstances in which they arose, they contain a fullness which speaks to all times. And it is important to learn this present-day aspect of his word – to learn to listen out for it – and thus to be able to speak of it to others. Naturally, when one is preparing the homily for Sunday, it often seems ... my goodness, so remote! But if I live with the word, then I see that it is not at all remote, it is highly contemporary, it is right here, it concerns me and it concerns others. And then I also learn how to explain it. But for this, a constant inner journey with the word of God is needed.

Personally being with Christ, with the living God, is one thing: another is that we can only ever believe within the “we”. I sometimes say that Saint Paul wrote: “Faith comes from hearing” – not from reading. It needs reading as well, but it comes from hearing, that is to say from the living word, addressed to me by the other, whom I can hear, addressed to me by the Church throughout the ages, from her contemporary word, spoken to me the priests, bishops and my fellow believers. Faith must include a “you” and it must include a “we”. And it is very important to practise this mutual support, to learn how to accept the other as the other in his otherness, and to learn that he has to support me in my otherness, in order to become “we”, so that we can also build community in the parish, calling people into the community of the word, and journeying with one another towards the living God. This requires the very particular “we” that is the seminary, and also the parish, but it also requires us always to look beyond the particular, limited “we” towards the great “we” that is the Church of all times and places: it requires that we do not make ourselves the sole criterion. When we say: “We are Church” – well, it is true: that is what we are, we are not just anybody. But the “we” is more extensive than the group that asserts those words. The “we” is the whole community of believers, today and in all times and places. And so I always say: within the community of believers, yes, there is as it were the voice of the valid majority, but there can never be a majority against the apostles or against the saints: that would be a false majority. We are Church: let us be Church, let us be Church precisely by opening ourselves and stepping outside ourselves and being Church with others.

Well now, according to the schedule, I daresay I ought really to draw to a close now. I would like to make just one more point to you. In preparing for the priesthood, study is very much a part of the journey. This is not an academic accident that has arisen in the western Church, it is something essential. We all know that Saint Peter said: “Always be prepared to make a defence to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you” (*1 Pet* 3:15). Our world today is a rationalist and thoroughly scientific world, albeit often somewhat pseudo-scientific. But this scientific spirit, this spirit of understanding, explaining, know-how, rejection of the irrational, is dominant in our time. There is a good side to this, even if it often conceals much arrogance and nonsense. The faith is not a parallel world of feelings that we can still afford to hold on to, rather it is the key that encompasses everything, gives it meaning, interprets it and also provides its inner ethical orientation: making clear that it is to be understood and lived as tending towards God and proceeding from God. Therefore it is important to be informed and to understand, to have an open mind, to learn. Naturally in twenty years’ time, some quite different philosophical theories will be

fashionable from those of today: when I think what counted as the highest, most modern philosophical fashion in our day, and how totally forgotten it is now ... still, learning these things is not in vain, for there will be some enduring insights among them. And most of all, this is how we learn to judge, to think through an idea – and to do so critically – and to ensure that in this thinking the light of God will serve to enlighten us and will not be extinguished. Studying is essential: only thus can we stand firm in these times and proclaim within them the reason for our faith. And it is essential that we study critically – because we know that tomorrow someone else will have something else to say – while being alert, open and humble as we study, so that our studying is always with the Lord, before the Lord, and for him.

Yes, I could say much more, and perhaps I should ... but I thank you for your attention. In my prayers, all the seminarians of the world are present in my heart – and not only those known to me by name, like the individuals I had the pleasure of receiving here this evening; I pray, as they make their inner journey towards the Lord, that he may bless them all, give light to them all and show them the right way, and that he may grant us to receive many good priests. Thank you very much.

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