



POPE BENEDICT XVI

In-Flight Interview

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As is traditional at the start of Apostolic Journeys, Pope Benedict XVI held a mid-flight press conference with journalists accompanying him on his four-day visit to the United Kingdom. Here is a Vatican Radio translation of the question and answer session:

Q. – Your Holiness, welcome among us and thank you for being available for our questions. We have a group of 70 journalists present here from different parts of the world. Of course some have come especially from the UK to join our group for the flight. As usual, in recent days my colleagues have given me several questions for consideration in this initial conversation, the beginning of a long-awaited and challenging journey, which we hope will be truly beautiful. I chose a series of questions, from among those that were submitted, and I will ask them in Italian so as not to tax you too much. My colleagues will help those who are not familiar with Italian, to understand. The first question: during the preparation for this journey there have been contrary discussions and positions. The country has a past tradition of a strong anti-Catholic position. Are you concerned about how you will be received?

A. – Firstly, good day to you all and I wish you a good journey. I must say that I'm not worried, because when I went to France I was told: "This will be a most anticlerical country with strong anticlerical currents and with a minimum of faithful." When I went to the Czech Republic it was said: "This is the most non-religious country in Europe and even the most anti-clerical". So Western countries, all have, each in their own specific way, according to their own history, strong anticlerical or anti-Catholic currents, but they always also have a strong presence of faith. So in France and the Czech Republic I saw and experienced a warm welcome by the Catholic community, a strong attention from agnostics, who, however, are searching, who want to know, to find the values that advance humanity and they were very careful to see if they could hear something from me in this respect, and tolerance and respect for those who are anti-Catholic. Of course Britain has its own history of anti-Catholicism, this is obvious, but is also a country with a great history of tolerance. And so I'm sure on the one hand, there will be a positive reception from Catholics, from believers in general, and attention from those who seek as we move forward in our time, mutual respect and tolerance. Where there is anti-Catholicism I will go forward with great courage and joy.

Q. – The UK, like many other Western countries – there is an issue that you have already touched on in the first answer –it is considered a secular country. There is a strong atheist movement, even for cultural reasons. However, there are also signs that religious faith, particularly in Jesus Christ, is still alive on a personal level. What can this mean for Catholics and Anglicans? Can anything be done to make the Church as an institution, more credible and attractive to everyone?

A. – I would say that a Church that seeks to be particularly attractive is already on the wrong path, because the Church does not work for her own ends, she does not work to increase numbers and thus power. The Church

is at the service of another: she serves, not for herself, not to be a strong body, rather she serves to make the proclamation of Jesus Christ accessible, the great truths and great forces of love, reconciling love that appeared in this figure and that always comes from the presence of Jesus Christ. In this regard, the Church does not seek to be attractive in and of herself, but must be transparent for Jesus Christ and to the extent that she is not out for herself, as a strong and powerful body in the world, that wants power, but is simply the voice of another, she becomes truly transparent for the great figure of Christ and the great truth that he has brought to humanity. The power of love, in this moment one listens, one accepts. The Church should not consider herself, but help to consider the other and she herself must see and speak of the other. In this sense, I think, both Anglicans and Catholics have the same simple task, the same direction to take. If both Anglicans and Catholics see that the other is not out for themselves but are tools of Christ, children of the Bridegroom, as Saint John says, if both carry out the priorities of Christ and not their own, they will come together, because at that time the priority of Christ unites them and they are no longer competitors seeking the greatest numbers, but are united in our commitment to the truth of Christ who comes into this world and so they find each other in a genuine and fruitful ecumenism.

Q. – Thank you Your Holiness. A third question. As is well known and as was also highlighted by recent surveys, the sexual abuse scandal has shaken the confidence of the faithful in the Church. How do you think you can help restore that trust?

A. – First, I must say that these revelations have been a shock for me, not only a great sadness. It is difficult to understand how this perversion of the priestly ministry was possible. The priest at the time of ordination, after having prepared for this moment for years, says yes to Christ, to be his voice, his mouth, his hands and serve Him with his whole life, so that the Good Shepherd who loves and helps and guides to the truth is present in the world. How a man who has done this and said this may also fall into this perversion is difficult to understand. It is a great sadness, a sadness that even the authority of the Church has not been sufficiently vigilant and not fast or decided enough in taking the necessary measures. Because of all of this, we are in a time of repentance, humility, and renewed sincerity. As I wrote to the Irish bishops, I think we now realize its a time of penance, a time to renew and relearn humility with complete sincerity. Regarding the victims, I would say there are three important things. Our first interest is for the victims: how can we repair the damage done? What can we do to help these people overcome this trauma, to regain their life and rediscover confidence in the message of Christ? Care, commitment to victims is the first priority, with material, psychological, spiritual aid. Second, the problem of the guilty persons. The just punishment is exclusion from all possibilities of access to young people because we know that this is a disease and free will does not work where there is disease. So we have to protect these people against themselves and find ways to help them, protect them against themselves and exclude them from any access to young people. The third point is prevention in education, in the choice of candidates for the priesthood to be so careful that, as much as humanly possible, we exclude future cases. And I would now also like to thank the British Bishops for their attention and cooperation with both the See of St. Peter and with public bodies. It seems to me that the British Bishops have done a great job in their attention to the sensitivity of the victims and the law and I am very grateful to them for this.

Q. – Your Holiness, the figure of Cardinal Newman is obviously very significant: you have made an acception for Cardinal Newman to preside over the beatification. Do you think that his memory will help to overcome divisions between Anglicans and Catholics? What are the aspects of his personality which you would like to give stronger emphasis to?

A. – Cardinal Newman is mainly, on the one hand, a modern man, who took on all of the problems of modernity, he experienced the problem of agnosticism, the impossibility of knowing God, of believing; a

man who throughout his life was on a journey, a journey to let himself be transformed by the truth, in a search of great sincerity and great willingness, to learn more, to find and to accept the path to true life. This modernity of his inner-being and life points to the modernity of his faith: it is not a faith in the formulas of a bygone age, it is a most personal form of faith, lived, suffered, found through a long process of renewal and conversion. He is a man of great culture who on the one hand participates in our sceptical culture of today, in the question: "Can we understand something certain about the truth of man, of the human being, or not? And how can we arrive at the convergence of the verisimilitude? ". A man who, on the other hand, with a great knowledge of the culture of the Church Fathers, he studied and renewed the internal genesis of the faith, thus acknowledging his figure and his inner constitution, he is a man of great spirituality, a great humanism, a man of prayer, of a deep relationship with God and a relationship with himself, and therefore also of a deep relationship with the other men of his and our time. So I would say these three elements: the modernity of his existence, with all the doubts and problems of our existence today, his great culture, knowledge of the great cultural treasures of mankind, his constant quest for the truth, continuous renewal and spirituality: spiritual life, life with God, give this man an exceptional greatness for our time. Therefore, it is a figure of Doctor of the Church for us, for all and also a bridge between Anglicans and Catholics.

Q. – And one last question, this visit is considered a state visit – this is how it has been qualified. What does this mean for relations between the Holy See and the United Kingdom? Are there are major points of common accord, particularly given the great challenges of today’s world?

A. – I am very grateful to Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth II, who wanted to give this visit the rank of a state visit and who expressed the public nature of this visit and also the common responsibility of politics and religion for the future of continent, for the future of humanity: the large, shared responsibility so that the values that create justice and politics and which come from religion, share the journey in our time. Of course, the fact that legally it is a state visit, does not make this visit a political matter, because if the Pope is head of state, this is just an instrument to ensure the independence of his message and public nature of his work as pastor.

In this sense, the State visit is substantially and essentially a pastoral visit, a visit in the responsibility of the faith for which the Supreme Pontiff, the Pope, exists. Of course, the character of a state visit focuses attention on the converging interests of politics and religion. Politics is essentially designed to ensure justice and with justice, freedom, but justice is a moral value, a religious value, and so faith, the proclamation of the Gospel connects with politics in justice and here common interests are also born. Britain has a great experience and a great record in combating the evils of this time, misery, poverty, disease, drugs and all these fights against misery, poverty, slavery, abuse of man, drugs ... are also the goals of the faith, because they are the aims of the humanization of man, so that the image of God be restored against the destruction and devastation. Another common task is the commitment to world peace and the ability to live peace, peace education and establish the virtues that make man capable of peace. And, finally, an essential element of peace is the dialogue of religions, tolerance, openness to one another and this is a deep aim both of Britain, as a society, and of the Catholic faith: to be open to the outside world, open to dialogue, in this way to open to truth and the common path of humanity and to rediscovering the values that are the foundation of our humanism!