



Benedict XVI on Youth, the Faith, and More

Interview With Vatican Radio

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Q: Holy Father, on April 25 you said: "I'm looking forward to Cologne." Can you describe your feelings more concretely?

Benedict XVI: Yes -- in many ways. First of all, I have spent several wonderful years in the Rhineland, so I'm simply delighted to breathe in the character of the Rhineland, of this international city and all that is connected to it.

Then there is also the fact that Providence wanted my first trip abroad to take me to Germany. I would not have dared to have initiated it. But if the Almighty God decides to do something like that to you, then one can only be delighted.

And also, this first trip abroad will be an encounter with young people from all over the world. It is always wonderful to encounter the youth, because they are full of problems -- but perhaps also full of hope, full of zest and expectation, because young people contain the dynamic of the future, and hence the encounter with them also makes oneself more sweeping, more joyful and open.

These are several of the reasons which have since then strengthened the joy within me, and not at all diminished it.

Q: Holy Father, can you tell me what you would like to transmit to the youth of the world? What is the main issue you would like to "bring about"?

Benedict XVI: Yes -- I would like to show them how beautiful it is to be Christian, because the widespread idea which continues to exist is that Christianity is composed of laws and bans which one has to keep and, hence, is something toilsome and burdensome -- that one is freer without such a burden.

I want to make clear that it not a burden to be carried by a great love and realization, but it is like having wings. It is wonderful to be a Christian with this knowledge that it gives us a great breadth, a large community. As Christians we are never alone -- in the sense that God is always with us, but also in the sense that we are always standing together in a

large community, a community for The Way, that we have a project for the future -- and in this way a Being which is worth believing in.

This is the joy of being a Christian and is the beauty of believing.

Q: Holy Father, being a Pope means building bridges, to be a pontiff. The Church has an ancient wisdom and you are encountering a dynamic youth, which is not as wise. How can a bridge be built between this old wisdom -- and also an aged Pope -- and the youth? How does that work?

Benedict XVI: [laughs] Yes -- we will see in how far the Lord will help me. But in any case, wisdom in itself is not something stale -- as we in German connect the word "wisdom" with such a stale taste, but it is the understanding of the facts of the matter, it is the view of what is "essential."

Young people of course want to learn about life, they want to newly discover life, and they don't want someone to regurgitate it for them. Perhaps this is the contrast one can see here. But at the same time, wisdom is also what the "world" interprets it to be, which also is again something new as, in the new context, it leads to what matters, and how one can achieve what really matters.

In this regard I believe that speaking, believing, and living out something which has been given to humanity and has illuminated it, is not the regurgitation of something stale, but it is precisely suited to the dynamics of young people, who are also asking for the great and the whole.

That is what the wisdom of belief is about, not that we know many details -- that is important for every job -- but, that we know, above all, the details of what life is about and how being human, and the future, is to be shaped.

Q: Holy Father, you have also said, "The Church is young" -- it is nothing old. Can you describe a bit more in detail what exactly you mean by that?

Benedict XVI: Yes -- first of all we say that she is young in the biological sense, meaning that many young people belong to the Church. But she is also young in the sense that her belief comes out from the fresh font of God himself.

It is not a stale fare, which we have had for 2,000 years and which is reheated again and again; rather, God himself is the spring of all youth and of all life.

And when belief is a gift, in other words the new water which springs from him -- given to us again and again, with which we can then live and which we may, so to speak, feed strength into the ways of the world -- then the Church is a rejuvenating power.

There is one Church Father who once saw the Church and saw this strange element about it: The Church does not become older in the course of the years. On the contrary it grows

younger, because she is forever moving toward the Lord, meaning she is going toward the spring from which youth, newness, refreshment, and the strength of life stems.

Q: You know the Church in Germany better than I and all of us, and the issue of ecumenism -- the unity between the Catholic and Protestant churches is a central question. Are there perhaps some utopian hopes that the World Youth Day may bring about a breakthrough on ecumenical issues? Does ecumenism play a small, medium or large role in this regard?

Benedict XVI: Yes -- it exists insofar as the task of unity permeates the entire nature of the Church and is not some marginal task on the side. Especially when one centrally lives this belief; it is the beginning of the path toward unity.

Concrete ecumenical talks are, of course, not a large part of the agenda, since it is primarily an encounter of Catholic people from all over the world -- and, of course, also those who are not Catholic but who want to ask if there is perhaps something to be found.

Insofar as this dimension will be present, it will be in the encounters of the young people themselves -- who, of course, don't only speak to the Pope, but, above all, meet with each other. I will have a meeting with our Protestant friends, but unfortunately we won't have much time together -- as the "daily work load" will be heavy, but we will have some time to reflect on how we shall proceed.

I recall very well, and with pleasure, the first visit to Germany by Pope John Paul II. When he was in Mainz, he sat at a table with the representatives of the Protestant communities, and together they developed a strategy on how to proceed. The commission was then founded from which the Common Declaration on Justification emerged.

I think that the substantial issue is that all of us, especially in the centrality of our Christian identity and not only in the particular moments of meeting, keep in mind this unity. This means that what we do in faith, is always essentially ecumenical.

Q: Holy Father, especially in our Nordic and rich countries, not only are more people turning away from the Church and the faith, but it is especially the young people. What can one do to counter this and above all, how can one perhaps answer the fundamental question -- What sense does my life have? -- so that the youth will say: "The Church is 'the thing' it is 'our thing'!"

Benedict XVI: [laughs] Yes -- we all try to bring the Gospel to young people, because this is the answer we have been waiting for. It is evident that many heavy burdens exist in our modern Western society, driving us away from Christianity. Faith and God appear to be far away. Life itself is full of possibilities and tasks.

First, one wants to grasp life on one's own, to live it as fully as possible. I think of the Prodigal Son who thought his father's house was boring, who thought he needed to take

life on by the full, to seize hold of it and to enjoy it -- until he noticed that it is really empty, and that he was free and great when he lived in his father's house.

So I think that, in any case, among young people the sentiment is spreading that all these diversions we are being offered and the entire leisure industry, in spite of everything that one does and can do, buy and can sell -- this cannot be everything, that there must be something more about it.

In this regard I believe that there is also a big question which could also be the essential one. It cannot be all, what we have or what we can buy. That is the reason why the so-called market of religions exists, which offers religion as a product and, hence, degrades it.

But it is a sign that this question exists. To really understand this question and not just talk around it -- not to put aside Christianity as something out of date or sufficiently exhausted, but precisely to let it be recognized as a possibility, because it came from God himself and is hence always a fresh possibility, it always carries and brings about new dimensions.

The Lord says: "He will lead you into things which he cannot tell you now." Christianity is full of undiscovered dimensions and it shows itself fresh and anew if one poses his questions again fundamentally.

In other words: It is the meeting point of the question which is there and the answer which we are living, and through the question we receive it anew. This should be the event of the encounter between the proclamation of the Gospel and young people.

Q: At the moment, I'm living with the feeling that Europe is more and more giving up, and that its human values founded in Christianity are counting less and less. Chinese and Indians are working very hard, are well educated, while we in Europe are lazy and morose. The main issue is Christian roots -- especially now in the European Constitution. Europe is in a crisis. Could perhaps World Youth Day, with nearly 1 million people, give the impulse to really search for the Christian roots, especially among young people -- in order for us to continue to live as human beings?

Benedict XVI: We are hoping for this, especially because such an encounter of people from all continents should also give the "old" continent, the host, a new impulse and help us so that we don't only see the sick, the tired and the missed opportunities in European history, because, after all, we are in a state of self-pity and self-accusation.

Yes, many bad things have happened in all histories, but it is also in our history during which such huge technological possibilities have been developed, and have become particularly dramatic.

But then we must also see what great things have come out from Europe. The entire world today wouldn't be living in the so-called civilization which came out from Europe if these good things hadn't originated in greater roots.

Now we are only offering the latter. One takes only the civilization, but looks for different roots, and, hence, ends up with contradictions. I think that this civilization, with all its dangers and hopes, can only lead to greatness if it is tamed: If it re-recognizes its own springs of strength, if we again see the greatness, which will give this endangered possibility of human existence a direction and greatness.

If we're happy to be living on this continent which has determined the world's fate -- for good and bad -- and undertake the ongoing task to rediscover the truth, purity, and greatness which gives us our future -- we will continuously, and even in new and better ways, stand in the service of all humanity.

Q: As a last question, can one formulate the ideal aim of the World Youth Day in Cologne? What would be the aim if all would work out perfectly?

Benedict XVI: [laughs] Yes, well, a wave of new faith among young people -- especially the youth in Germany and Europe.

We still have large Christian institutions in Germany. Many Christian things occur, but there is also a great fatigue and we are so concerned with structural questions that the zest and the joy of faith are missing.

If this zest, this joy, to know Christ would come alive again and gave the Church in Germany and Europe a new dynamic, then I think the aim of World Youth Day would be achieved.

[Translation of German original by Vatican Radio]