

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
ON THE OCCASION OF CHRISTMAS GREETINGS
TO THE ROMAN CURIA**

*Clementine Hall
Friday, 21 December 2012*

*Dear Cardinals,
Brother Bishops and Priests,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

It is with great joy that I meet you today, dear Members of the [College of Cardinals](#), Representatives of the [Roman Curia](#) and the [Governorate](#), for this traditional event in the days leading up to the feast of Christmas. I greet each one of you cordially, beginning with Cardinal Angelo Sodano, whom I thank for his kind words and for the warm good wishes that he extended to me on behalf of all present. The Dean of the College of Cardinals reminded us of an expression that appears frequently during these days in the Latin liturgy: *Prope est iam Dominus, venite, adoremus!* The Lord is already near, come, let us adore him! We too, as one family, prepare ourselves to adore the Child in the stable at Bethlehem who is God himself and has come so close as to become a man like us. I willingly reciprocate your good wishes and I thank all of you from my heart, including the Papal Representatives all over the world, for the generous and competent assistance that each of you offers me in my ministry.

Once again we find ourselves at the end of a year that has seen all kinds of difficult situations, important questions and challenges, but also signs of hope, both in the Church and in the world. I shall mention just a few key elements regarding the life of the Church and my Petrine ministry. First of all, as the Dean of the College of Cardinals mentioned, there were the journeys to [Mexico and Cuba](#) – unforgettable encounters with the power of faith, so deeply rooted in human hearts, and with the *joie de vivre* that issues from faith. I recall how, on my arrival in Mexico, there were endless crowds of people lining the long route, cheering and waving flags and handkerchiefs. I recall how, on the journey to the attractive provincial capital Guanajuato, there were young people respectfully kneeling by the side of the road to receive the blessing of Peter's Successor; I recall how the [great liturgy](#) beside the statue of Christ the King made Christ's kingship present among us – his peace, his justice, his truth. All this took place against the backdrop of the country's problems, afflicted as it is by many different forms of violence and the hardships of economic dependence. While these problems cannot be solved simply by religious fervour, neither can they be solved without the inner purification of hearts that issues from the power of faith, from the encounter with Jesus Christ. And then there was Cuba – here too there were great liturgical celebrations, in which the singing, the praying and the silence made tangibly present the One that the country's authorities had tried for so long to exclude. That country's search for a proper balancing of the relationship

between obligations and freedom cannot succeed without reference to the basic criteria that mankind has discovered through encounter with the God of Jesus Christ.

As further key moments in the course of the year, I should like to single out the [great Meeting of Families in Milan](#) and the visit to [Lebanon](#), where I [consigned](#) the [Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation](#) that is intended to offer signposts for the life of churches and society in the Middle East along the difficult paths of unity and peace. The last major event of the year was the [Synod on the New Evangelization](#), which also served as a collective inauguration of the [Year of Faith](#), in which we commemorate the opening of the [Second Vatican Council](#) fifty years ago, seeking to understand it anew and appropriate it anew in the changed circumstances of today.

All these occasions spoke to fundamental themes of this moment in history: the family (Milan), serving peace in the world and dialogue among religions (Lebanon) and proclaiming the message of Jesus Christ in our day to those who have yet to encounter him and to the many who know him only externally and hence do not actually recognize him. Among these broad themes, I should like to focus particularly on the theme of the family and the nature of dialogue, and then to add a brief observation on the question of the new evangelization.

The great joy with which families from all over the world congregated in Milan indicates that, despite all impressions to the contrary, the family is still strong and vibrant today. But there is no denying the crisis that threatens it to its foundations – especially in the western world. It was noticeable that the Synod repeatedly emphasized the significance, for the transmission of the faith, of the family as the authentic setting in which to hand on the blueprint of human existence. This is something we learn by living it with others and suffering it with others. So it became clear that the question of the family is not just about a particular social construct, but about man himself – about what he is and what it takes to be authentically human. The challenges involved are manifold. First of all there is the question of the human capacity to make a commitment or to avoid commitment. Can one bind oneself for a lifetime? Does this correspond to man's nature? Does it not contradict his freedom and the scope of his self-realization? Does man become himself by living for himself alone and only entering into relationships with others when he can break them off again at any time? Is lifelong commitment antithetical to freedom? Is commitment also worth suffering for? Man's refusal to make any commitment – which is becoming increasingly widespread as a result of a false understanding of freedom and self-realization as well as the desire to escape suffering – means that man remains closed in on himself and keeps his "I" ultimately for himself, without really rising above it. Yet only in self-giving does man find himself, and only by opening himself to the other, to others, to children, to the family, only by letting himself be changed through suffering, does he discover the breadth of his humanity. When such commitment is repudiated, the key figures of human existence likewise vanish: father, mother, child – essential elements of the experience of being human are lost.

The Chief Rabbi of France, Gilles Bernheim, has shown in a very detailed and profoundly moving study that the attack we are currently experiencing on the true structure of the family, made up of father, mother, and child, goes much deeper. While up to now we regarded a false understanding of the nature of human freedom as one cause of the crisis of the family, it is now becoming clear that the very notion of being – of what being human really means – is being called into question. He quotes the famous saying of Simone de Beauvoir: “one is not born a woman, one becomes so” (*on ne naît pas femme, on le devient*). These words lay the foundation for what is put forward today under the term “gender” as a new philosophy of sexuality. According to this philosophy, sex is no longer a given element of nature, that man has to accept and personally make sense of: it is a social role that we choose for ourselves, while in the past it was chosen for us by society. The profound falsehood of this theory and of the anthropological revolution contained within it is obvious. People dispute the idea that they have a nature, given by their bodily identity, that serves as a defining element of the human being. They deny their nature and decide that it is not something previously given to them, but that they make it for themselves. According to the biblical creation account, being created by God as male and female pertains to the essence of the human creature. This duality is an essential aspect of what being human is all about, as ordained by God. This very duality as something previously given is what is now disputed. The words of the creation account: “male and female he created them” (*Gen 1:27*) no longer apply. No, what applies now is this: it was not God who created them male and female – hitherto society did this, now we decide for ourselves. Man and woman as created realities, as the nature of the human being, no longer exist. Man calls his nature into question. From now on he is merely spirit and will. The manipulation of nature, which we deplore today where our environment is concerned, now becomes man’s fundamental choice where he himself is concerned. From now on there is only the abstract human being, who chooses for himself what his nature is to be. Man and woman in their created state as complementary versions of what it means to be human are disputed. But if there is no pre-ordained duality of man and woman in creation, then neither is the family any longer a reality established by creation. Likewise, the child has lost the place he had occupied hitherto and the dignity pertaining to him. Bernheim shows that now, perforce, from being a subject of rights, the child has become an object to which people have a right and which they have a right to obtain. When the freedom to be creative becomes the freedom to create oneself, then necessarily the Maker himself is denied and ultimately man too is stripped of his dignity as a creature of God, as the image of God at the core of his being. The defence of the family is about man himself. And it becomes clear that when God is denied, human dignity also disappears. Whoever defends God is defending man.

At this point I would like to address the second major theme, which runs through the whole of the past year from [Assisi](#) to the [Synod on the New Evangelization](#): the question of dialogue and proclamation. Let us speak firstly of dialogue. For the Church in our day I see three principal areas of dialogue, in which she must be present in the struggle for man and his humanity: dialogue with states, dialogue with society – which includes dialogue with cultures and with science – and finally dialogue with religions. In all these

dialogues the Church speaks on the basis of the light given her by faith. But at the same time she incorporates the memory of mankind, which is a memory of man's experiences and sufferings from the beginnings and down the centuries, in which she has learned about the human condition, she has experienced its boundaries and its grandeur, its opportunities and its limitations. Human culture, of which she is a guarantee, has developed from the encounter between divine revelation and human existence. The Church represents the memory of what it means to be human in the face of a civilization of forgetfulness, which knows only itself and its own criteria. Yet just as an individual without memory has lost his identity, so too a human race without memory would lose its identity. What the Church has learned from the encounter between revelation and human experience does indeed extend beyond the realm of pure reason, but it is not a separate world that has nothing to say to unbelievers. By entering into the thinking and understanding of mankind, this knowledge broadens the horizon of reason and thus it speaks also to those who are unable to share the faith of the Church. In her dialogue with the state and with society, the Church does not, of course, have ready answers for individual questions. Along with other forces in society, she will wrestle for the answers that best correspond to the truth of the human condition. The values that she recognizes as fundamental and non-negotiable for the human condition she must propose with all clarity. She must do all she can to convince, and this can then stimulate political action.

In man's present situation, the dialogue of religions is a necessary condition for peace in the world and it is therefore a duty for Christians as well as other religious communities. This dialogue of religions has various dimensions. In the first place it is simply a dialogue of life, a dialogue of being together. This will not involve discussing the great themes of faith – whether God is Trinitarian or how the inspiration of the sacred Scriptures is to be understood, and so on. It is about the concrete problems of coexistence and shared responsibility for society, for the state, for humanity. In the process, it is necessary to learn to accept the other in his otherness and the otherness of his thinking. To this end, the shared responsibility for justice and peace must become the guiding principle of the conversation. A dialogue about peace and justice is bound to move beyond the purely pragmatic to become an ethical struggle for the truth and for the human being: a dialogue concerning the values that come before everything. In this way what began as a purely practical dialogue becomes a quest for the right way to live as a human being. Even if the fundamental choices themselves are not under discussion, the search for an answer to a specific question becomes a process in which, through listening to the other, both sides can obtain purification and enrichment. Thus this search can also mean taking common steps towards the one truth, even if the fundamental choices remain unaltered. If both sides set out from a hermeneutic of justice and peace, the fundamental difference will not disappear, but a deeper closeness will emerge nevertheless.

Two rules are generally regarded nowadays as fundamental for interreligious dialogue:

1. Dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at understanding. In this respect it differs from evangelization, from mission;
2. Accordingly, both parties to the dialogue remain consciously within their identity, which the dialogue does not place in question either for themselves or for the other.

These rules are correct, but in the way they are formulated here I still find them too superficial. True, dialogue does not aim at conversion, but at better mutual understanding – that is correct. But all the same, the search for knowledge and understanding always has to involve drawing closer to the truth. Both sides in this piece-by-piece approach to truth are therefore on the path that leads forward and towards greater commonality, brought about by the oneness of the truth. As far as preserving identity is concerned, it would be too little for the Christian, so to speak, to assert his identity in a such a way that he effectively blocks the path to truth. Then his Christianity would appear as something arbitrary, merely propositional. He would seem not to reckon with the possibility that religion has to do with truth. On the contrary, I would say that the Christian can afford to be supremely confident, yes, fundamentally certain that he can venture freely into the open sea of the truth, without having to fear for his Christian identity. To be sure, we do not possess the truth, the truth possesses us: Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, and we know that his hand is holding us securely on the path of our quest for knowledge. Being inwardly held by the hand of Christ makes us free and keeps us safe: free – because if we are held by him, we can enter openly and fearlessly into any dialogue; safe – because he does not let go of us, unless we cut ourselves off from him. At one with him, we stand in the light of truth.

Finally, at least a brief word should be added on the subject of proclamation, or evangelization, on which the post-synodal document will speak in depth, on the basis of the Synod Fathers' propositions. I find that the essential elements of the process of evangelizing appear most eloquently in Saint John's account of the calling of two of John the Baptist's disciples, who become disciples of Jesus Christ (1:35-39). First of all, we have the simple act of proclamation. John the Baptist points towards Jesus and says: "Behold the Lamb of God!" A similar act is recounted a few verses later. This time it is Andrew, who says to his brother Simon "We have found the Messiah" (1:41). The first and fundamental element is the straightforward proclamation, the kerygma, which draws its strength from the inner conviction of the one proclaiming. In the account of the two disciples, the next stage is that of listening and following behind Jesus, which is not yet discipleship, but rather a holy curiosity, a movement of seeking. Both of them, after all, are seekers, men who live over and above everyday affairs in the expectation of God – in the expectation that he exists and will reveal himself. Stimulated by the proclamation, their seeking becomes concrete. They want to come to know better the man described as the Lamb of God by John the Baptist. The third act is set in motion when Jesus turns round, approaches them and asks: "What do you seek?" They respond with a further question, which demonstrates the openness of their expectation, their readiness to take new steps. They ask: "Rabbi, where are

you staying?" Jesus' answer "Come and see!" is an invitation to walk with him and thereby to have their eyes opened with him.

The word of proclamation is effective in situations where man is listening in readiness for God to draw near, where man is inwardly searching and thus on the way towards the Lord. His heart is touched when Jesus turns towards him, and then his encounter with the proclamation becomes a holy curiosity to come to know Jesus better. As he walks with Jesus, he is led to the place where Jesus lives, to the community of the Church, which is his body. That means entering into the journeying community of catechumens, a community of both learning and living, in which our eyes are opened as we walk.

"Come and see!" This saying, addressed by Jesus to the two seeker-disciples, he also addresses to the seekers of today. At the end of the year, we pray to the Lord that the Church, despite all her shortcomings, may be increasingly recognizable as his dwelling-place. We ask him to open our eyes ever wider as we make our way to his house, so that we can say ever more clearly, ever more convincingly: "we have found him for whom the whole world is waiting, Jesus Christ, the true Son of God and true man". With these sentiments, I wish you all from my heart a blessed Christmas and a happy New Year. Thank you.