

PILGRIMAGE
OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE HOLY LAND
(8-15 MAY 2009)

***INTERVIEW OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI
DURING THE FLIGHT TO THE HOLY LAND***

*Papal Flight
Friday, 8 May 2009*

Father Lombardi:

Your Holiness, thank you very much for giving us the opportunity once again for a meeting with you at the beginning of such an important and demanding journey. Among other things, it allows us to wish you a good journey and to assure you that we will play our part in spreading the messages that you wish to convey to us. As usual, the questions I am about to ask are the result of a collection of questions proposed by my colleagues here present. I shall put these questions to you myself, purely for ease of logistics, but they were in fact produced by a joint effort.

Q. Your Holiness, this journey is taking place at a very delicate moment for the Middle East: there are strong tensions – at the time of the crisis in Gaza, there was even speculation that you might decide not to come. At the same time, a few days after your journey, the principal political leaders of Israel and the Palestinian Authority will also be meeting President Obama. Do you think you can offer a contribution to the peace process that now seems to have become deadlocked?

A. Good morning! First I should like to thank all of you for the work that you do, and let us all wish one another a good journey, a good pilgrimage, a good return journey. As for the question, certainly I shall seek to contribute to peace not as an individual but in the name of the Catholic Church, and of the Holy See. We are not a political power, but a spiritual force, and this spiritual force is a reality that can contribute to advances in the peace process. I see three levels. First, as believers we are convinced that prayer is a real force: it opens the world to God. We are convinced that God listens and that he can act in history. I think that if millions of people – millions of believers – all pray, this is truly a force that influences and can contribute to moving forward the cause of peace. Second: we are seeking to assist in the formation of consciences. The conscience is the human capacity to perceive the truth, but this capacity is often impeded by particular interests. And to break free from these interests, to open up more to the truth, to true values, is a major undertaking: it is a task of the Church to help us to know true criteria, true values, and to free us from particular interests. And so – in third place – we also speak – no doubt about it – to reason: precisely because we are not a political force, we can perhaps more easily, and in the light of the faith, see the true criteria, we can assist in understanding

what contributes to peace and we can appeal to reason, we can support positions that are truly reasonable. This we have already done and we wish to do so again now and in the future.

Q. Thank you, Your Holiness. The second question. As a theologian, you have reflected particularly on the common roots shared by Christians and Jews. How is it that, despite the efforts towards dialogue, misunderstandings often occur? How do you see the future of dialogue between the two communities?

A. The important thing is that we really do have the same roots, the same books of the Old Testament, a Book which – both for the Jews and for us – conveys Revelation. Yet of course, after two thousand years of distinct, not to say separate, histories, it is no wonder if misunderstandings arise, because very different traditions of interpretation, language and thought have been formed, there is so to speak a very different “semantic cosmos”, such that the same words used in the two traditions mean different things; and with this use of words that, in the course of history have acquired different meanings, misunderstandings obviously arise. We must each do all we can to learn the language of the other, and it seems to me that we are making great progress here. Today it is possible for young people, future teachers of theology, to study in Jerusalem, at the Hebrew University, and Jews have academic contacts with us: thus an encounter is taking place between one “semantic cosmos” and the other. Let us learn from one another and let us go forward along the path of true dialogue, let us each learn from the other, and I am sure and convinced that we will make progress. And this will also help peace, indeed it will help mutual love.

Q. Your Holiness, this journey has two essential dimensions of inter-religious dialogue – with Islam and with Judaism. Are the two directions completely separate from one another, or will there also be a common message concerning the three Abrahamic religions?

A. Certainly there is also a common message and there will be opportunities to highlight it. Notwithstanding our diverse origins, we have common roots because, as I have already said, Christianity is born from the Old Testament and the Scripture of the New Testament would not exist without the Old, because it makes constant reference to “the Scriptures”, that is, to the Old Testament. Islam too was born in a world where both Judaism and the various branches of Christianity: Judeo-Christianity, Antiochene Christianity, and Byzantine Christianity were all present, and all these circumstances are reflected in the Koranic tradition, with the result that we have much in common in terms of our origins and our faith in the one God. So it is important on the one hand to have bilateral dialogues – with the Jews and with Islam – and then also trilateral dialogue. I myself was the Co-Founder of a foundation for dialogue among the three religions, at which leading figures like Metropolitan Damaskinos and the Chief Rabbi of France René Samuel Sirat and others came together, and this foundation also issued an edition of the books of the three religions: the Koran, the New Testament and the Old Testament. So the trilateral dialogue must go forward, it is extremely important for peace and also – let us say – for living one’s own religion well.

Q. *One final question. Your Holiness, you have often spoken of the problem of the declining number of Christians in the Middle East and especially in the Holy Land. It is a phenomenon with various causes of a political, economic and social character. What can be done in practice to assist the Christian presence in the region? What contribution do you hope to make with your journey? Is there hope for these Christians in the future? Do you have a particular message for the Christians in Gaza who will come to meet you in Bethlehem?*

A. Certainly there is hope, because while this is a difficult moment, as you have mentioned, it is also a time of hope for a new beginning, for a new impetus along the path to peace. We wish above all to encourage the Christians in the Holy Land and throughout the Middle East to remain, to offer their contribution in their countries of origin: they are an important component of the life and culture of these regions. In practice, what the Church brings – in addition to words of encouragement and common prayer – are chiefly schools and hospitals. In this sense, we have thoroughly practical establishments here. Our schools educate a generation that will be able to make its presence felt in life today, in public life. The Catholic Church is opening a University in Jordan, which strikes me as an important setting in which young people – both Muslims and Christians – will meet, will learn together, and where a Christian intelligentsia can be formed that is suitably prepared to work for peace. But in general, our schools provide a very important opportunity that opens up a future for the Christians, and the hospitals make our presence visible. Moreover, there are many Christian associations that help Christians in different ways, and with practical assistance they encourage them to stay. So I hope that the Christians really will find the courage, the humility, the patience to remain in these lands, and to offer their contribution to the future of these lands.

Father Lombardi:

Thank you, Your Holiness, with these replies you have helped us to put our journey in context from a spiritual point of view, and from a cultural point of view. Once more I express to you my own good wishes, and those of all my colleagues on this flight, including the others who are flying to the Holy Land at this time, in order to take part and to assist, through their reporting, in attaining a positive outcome for this demanding mission of yours. May you and all your collaborators have a good journey, and to my colleagues I say: *Buon lavoro!*