



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY TO BENIN

18-20 NOVEMBER 2011

INTERVIEW OF THE HOLY FATHER BENEDICT XVI WITH THE JOURNALISTS DURING THE FLIGHT TO BENIN

Papal Flight

Friday, 18 November 2011

Father Lombardi: Your Holiness, we welcome you among us, among this group of journalists accompanying you on your way to Africa. We are very grateful to you for devoting some of your time to us once again. Here, on this aeroplane, there are around forty journalists, photographers and cameramen from various agencies and television companies, then there are also the Vatican media operators travelling with you: around fifty persons. In Cotonou, about a thousand journalists are waiting for us, and they will be following the journey *in situ*. As usual, we are going to ask you some questions that have been put together in recent days among our colleagues. The first question I shall address to you in French, as it occurs to me that this would be welcomed by listeners and viewers in Benin, who will be able to follow the interview once we have arrived.

Father Lombardi: Holy Father, this journey takes us to Benin. But it is a very important journey for the whole of the African continent. What made you think Benin would be the right country for a message addressed to the whole of Africa, for today and for the future?

Holy Father: There are a number of reasons. The first is that Benin is a country at peace, both externally and internally. There are well-functioning democratic institutions, established in a spirit of freedom and responsibility, and so justice and work for the common good are possible and guaranteed by the functioning of the democratic institutions and the sense of responsibility in freedom. The second reason is that, as in most African countries, there are different religions present, and they coexist peacefully. There are Christians of different confessions – which is not always easy, there are Muslims, and finally there are the traditional religions, and all three of these

different religions live side by side in mutual respect with a shared responsibility for peace, for interior and exterior reconciliation. It seems to me that this coexistence of religions, where interreligious dialogue fosters peace and freedom, is very important, and it is also an important element of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation. And finally, the third reason is that it is the country of my dear friend Cardinal Bernardin Gantin. I have always wanted, one day, to pray at his tomb. He was really a great friend – perhaps I will speak of him at the end, and so to visit the country of Cardinal Gantin, a great representative of Catholic Africa, and of African civilization at its most humane, is a further reason for me to go to Benin.

Father Lombardi: While Africans are experiencing the weakening of their traditional communities, the Catholic Church finds herself faced with the increasing success of Evangelical or Pentecostal Churches, which sometimes spring up spontaneously in Africa. They offer an attractive faith, and a great simplification of the Christian message: they emphasize healings, and they mix their rituals with those of the traditional religions. What stance does the Catholic Church adopt towards these communities, which are so aggressive towards her? And how can the Church be attractive, when these communities portray themselves as festive, warm or inculturated?

Holy Father: These communities are a worldwide phenomenon, found in all continents. In particular, they have a strong presence, in different forms, in Latin America and in Africa. I would say that the characteristic elements are minimal institutional character, few institutions, lightweight teaching, a straightforward message, simple, easily grasped, apparently concrete and then – as you say – a participative liturgy with the expression of personal emotions and of the native culture, with combinations of different religions, sometimes in a syncretistic way. All this, on the one hand, guarantees success, but it also implies instability. We also know that many people come back to the Catholic Church or else migrate from one of these communities to another. Hence, we must not imitate these communities, but we must ask what we can do to give fresh vitality to the Catholic faith. And I would say that an initial point is certainly a simple, profound, easily grasped message; it is important that Christianity should not come across as a difficult European system that others cannot understand and put into practice, but as a universal message that there is a God, a God who matters [to us], a God who knows us and loves us, and that concrete religion stimulates cooperation and fraternity. So, a simple concrete message is very important. Another very important point is that the institution should never be too heavy, that is to say, the initiative of the community and of the individual should be predominant. And I would also say that a participative but not emotional liturgy is needed: it must not be based merely on the expression of emotions, but should be characterized by the presence of the mystery into which we enter, by which we are formed. And finally, I would say, it is important for inculturation not to lose universality. I would prefer to speak of interculturalism, rather than inculturation, that is, a meeting of cultures within the shared truth of our humanity and our era, giving rise to a growth in universal fraternity; we must not lose the great gift of catholicity, meaning that in every part of the world we are brothers, we are a family, knowing one another and working together in a spirit of fraternity.

Father Lombardi: Your Holiness, in recent decades Africa has seen many peace-keeping operations, conferences for national reconstruction, truth and reconciliation commissions with results that are sometimes good and sometimes disappointing. During the Synodal Assembly, the bishops spoke forcefully about the responsibility of politicians for the problems of the continent. What message do you intend to address to Africa's political leaders, and what is the specific contribution that the Church can make to the building of lasting peace on the continent?

Holy Father: The message is contained in the text that I shall consign to the Church in Africa: I cannot summarize it now, in a few words. It is true that there have been a great many international conferences specifically about Africa, for universal fraternity. Good things have been said, and sometimes good things have actually been done: we must acknowledge this. But without any doubt, words loom larger, good intentions and good will are more conspicuous than real results, and we must ask ourselves why the reality does not match the words and the intentions. A fundamental factor, it seems to me, is that this renewal, this universal fraternity demands sacrifice, it demands that people move beyond selfishness and live for others. This is easy to say, but hard to accomplish. Man, in consequence of original sin, wants to possess himself, to possess life, and not to give his life. Whatever I have, I want to keep. But if this is my attitude, if I want not to give but to possess, then of course good intentions lead nowhere. Indeed it is only through love and knowledge of a God who loves us and gives to us that we can arrive at the point where we dare to lose our lives and give ourselves, knowing that this is how we stand to gain. So the contents of today's Synod document are concerned with this fundamental position: by loving God and by living in friendship with this God who gives himself, we too can dare to give, we can implore the grace to give, not just to possess; to sacrifice, to be there for others, to lose our lives in the certitude that in this way, we truly gain.

Father Lombardi: Your Holiness, at the opening of the African Synod in Rome, you spoke of Africa as a great "spiritual lung for a humanity that appears to be in a crisis of faith and hope". Bearing in mind Africa's great problems, this expression seems almost disconcerting. In what sense do you really think that Africa can be a source of faith and hope for the world? Do you also see a role for Africa in the evangelization of the rest of the world?

Holy Father: Of course Africa has great problems and difficulties, the whole of mankind has great problems. If I think back to my youth, the world then was totally different from the world today, and sometimes I think I am living on a different planet from the one I knew as a boy. Man is caught up in a process of transformation that is getting faster all the time. For Africa over the last 50-60 years – from independence, after the colonial era, up to the present – this process has been very demanding, and of course it has been very difficult, there have been great difficulties and problems, and they are not solved yet. As mankind moves forward, so do the difficulties. Yet the freshness of Africa's yes to life and the youthfulness that is found there, so full of enthusiasm and hope as well as humour and liveliness, show us that Africa has a reserve of humanity, there is still a freshness about its religious sense and its hope; there is still a perception of metaphysical

reality, total reality, including God: not this reduction to positivism, that constricts our life and makes it somewhat dry, extinguishing hope in the process. So I would say that the fresh humanism found in Africa's young soul, despite all the problems of today and tomorrow, shows that Africa still has a reserve of life and vitality for the future, on which we can depend.

Father Lombardi: One final question, Your Holiness, let us go back for a moment to a point that you mentioned among the reasons for this journey to Benin: we know that a very important place in this journey belongs to the figure of the late Cardinal Gantin. You knew him very well: he was your predecessor as Dean of the Sacred College, and he was universally held in great esteem. Would you like to offer us a brief personal testimony about him?

Holy Father: I first set eyes on Cardinal Gantin at my ordination as Archbishop of Munich in 1977. He had come because one of his students had studied with me: so there was already a notional friendship between us, even though we had yet to meet. On that crucial day of my episcopal ordination, I was very pleased to meet this young African bishop, so full of faith, joy and courage. Later we worked together a great deal, especially when he was Prefect of the Congregation for Bishops and then in the Sacred College. I always admired his practical and profound intelligence; his sense of discernment, of not resorting to stock phrases, but understanding what was the essential point and what made no sense. And then his real sense of humour, which was very fine. Above all he was a man of deep faith and prayer. All this made Cardinal Gantin not just a friend, but also an example to follow, a great African bishop, a great Catholic. I am truly glad to have the opportunity now to pray at his tomb and to feel his closeness and his great faith, which for me makes him a constant example and friend.

Father Lombardi: Thank you, Holy Father. If I may, I will just add that "your student" who invited Cardinal Gantin is present with us today on this journey: he is Monsignor Barthélémy Adoukounou and he too is present for this beautiful occasion. Finally, we thank you for giving us your time. We wish you a good journey, and as usual, we will aim to work together to communicate your messages for Africa over the coming days. Thank you again, and we will see you again soon.