



The Holy See

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY
TO LEBANON
(14-16 SEPTEMBER 2012)

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

Papal Flight
Friday, 14 September 2012

Father Lombardi: Your Holiness, welcome and thank you for being here with us. There are just over 50 journalists in the entourage, representing different language groups and nationalities. Naturally there are many hundreds, perhaps thousands more, waiting for us in Lebanon, and they are all paying close attention to this journey, as they know how demanding and how important it is. We are grateful to you for being with us to answer some challenging questions that the journalists themselves have put together in recent days. The first two questions I will ask in French. The Holy Father will answer in French, as this is more or less the official language of the journey, and the other three will be in Italian.

Your Holiness, many terrible anniversaries are occurring at this time, for example that of the 11 September attacks, and the massacre at the Sabra and Chatila refugee camps. On the borders of Lebanon a civil war is being fought, amid much bloodshed, and in other countries too we see an ever-present risk of violence. Holy Father, what are your feelings as you undertake this journey? Have you been tempted to cancel it for security reasons, or has anyone suggested that you should cancel it?

Holy Father: Dear friends, I am very pleased and grateful for this opportunity to speak with you. I can tell you that no one advised me to cancel this journey, and for my part I never considered doing so, because I know that as the situation becomes more complex, it is all the more necessary to offer this sign of fraternal encouragement and solidarity. That is the aim of my visit: to issue an invitation to dialogue, to peace and against violence, to go forward together to find solutions to the problems. My feelings on this journey are above all feelings of gratitude for the opportunity to visit

this great country at this time, a country which – as Pope John Paul II said – is a multiple message, within the region, of encounter and of the origin of the three Abrahamic religions. Above all I am grateful to the Lord who has given me this opportunity, I am grateful to all the institutions and people who have worked and continue to work for this journey. And I am grateful to all those who are accompanying me in prayer. With this protection through prayer and hard work, I am content and I am sure that we can be of real service to the good of humanity and to the cause of peace.

Father Lombardi: Thank you, Holy Father. Many Catholics are expressing concern about increasing forms of fundamentalism in various parts of the world and about attacks that claim large numbers of Christians as victims. In this difficult and often violent context, how can the Church respond to the imperative of dialogue with Islam, on which you have often insisted?

Holy Father: Fundamentalism is always a falsification of religion. It goes against the essence of religion, which seeks to reconcile and to create God's peace throughout the world. Therefore the task of the Church and of religions is to undertake a purification – a lofty purification of religion from such temptations is always necessary. It is our task to illumine and purify consciences and to make it clear that every person is an image of God. We must respect in the other not only his otherness, but also, within that otherness, the essence we truly have in common as the image of God, and we must treat the other as an image of God. So the essential message of religion must be against violence – which is a falsification of it, like fundamentalism – and it must be the education, illumination and purification of consciences so as to make them capable of dialogue, reconciliation and peace.

Father Lombardi: Let us continue in Italian. In the context of the surging clamour for democracy that has begun to spread in many countries of the Middle East through the so-called “Arab Spring”, and in view of the social conditions in most of these countries, where Christians are a minority, is there not a risk of an inevitable tension between the dominant majority and the survival of Christianity?

Holy Father: I would say that in itself, the Arab spring is a positive thing: it is a desire for greater democracy, greater freedom, greater cooperation and a revived Arab identity. This cry for freedom, which comes from a young generation with more cultural and professional formation, who seek greater participation in political and social life, is a mark of progress, a truly positive development that has been hailed by Christians too. Of course, bearing in mind the history of revolutions, we know that this important and positive cry for freedom is always in danger of overlooking one aspect – one fundamental dimension of freedom – namely tolerance of the other, the fact that human freedom is always a shared freedom, which can only grow through sharing, solidarity and living side by side according to certain rules. This is always the danger, and it is the danger in this case too. We must do all we can to ensure that the concept of freedom, the desire for freedom, goes in the right direction and does not overlook tolerance, the overall social fabric,

and reconciliation, which are essential elements of freedom. Hence the renewed Arab identity seems to me to imply also a renewal of the centuries-old, millennia-old, coexistence of Christians and Arabs, who side by side, in mutual tolerance of majority and minority, built these lands and cannot do other than live side by side. I therefore think it important to recognize the positive elements in these movements and to do all we can to ensure that freedom is correctly conceived and corresponds to growth in dialogue rather than domination of one group over others.

Father Lombardi: Holy Father, in Syria today, as in Iraq a while ago, many Christians have felt obliged, reluctantly, to leave their homeland. What does the Catholic Church intend to do or say in order to help in this situation and to stem the flow of Christians from Syria and other Middle Eastern countries?

Holy Father: First of all I must say that it is not only Christians who are leaving, but also Muslims. Naturally, there is a great danger of Christians leaving these lands and their presence there being lost, and we must do all we can to help them to stay. The essential way to help would be to put an end to war and violence which is causing this exodus. Therefore the first priority is to do all we can to halt the violence and to open up a real possibility of staying together for the future. What can we do against war? Of course we can always spread the message of peace, we can make it clear that violence never solves problems and we can build up the forces of peace. The work of journalists is important here, as they can help a great deal to show that violence destroys rather than builds, that it is of no use to anyone. Then Christian gestures may help, days of prayer for the Middle East, for Christians and Muslims, to demonstrate the possibilities for dialogue and for solutions. I also believe that there must be an end to the importation of arms: without which, war could not continue. Instead of importing weapons, which is a grave sin, we should import ideas of peace and creativity, we should find ways of accepting each person in his otherness, we should therefore make visible before the world the respect that religions have for one another, respect for man as God's creation and love of neighbour as fundamental to all religions. In this way, using all possible means, including material assistance, we must help to bring an end to war and violence so that all can help rebuild the country.

Father Lombardi: Holy Father, you bring with you an Apostolic Exhortation addressed to all the Christians of the Middle East. Today this is a suffering population. Besides prayer and sentiments of solidarity, do you see concrete steps that the Churches and the Catholics of the West, especially in Europe and America, can take in order to support their brethren in the Middle East?

Holy Father: I would say that we need to influence public opinion and politicians to make a real commitment, using all their resources, all their opportunities, with real creativity, in favour of peace and against violence. No one should hope to gain from violence, all must contribute positively. In this sense, we have a real duty to warn, to educate and to purify. Moreover, our charitable organizations should offer material help and do everything they can. We have organizations like the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, specifically for the Holy Land, but other similar organizations

could also provide material, political and human assistance in these lands. I would like to say once again that visible signs of solidarity, days of public prayer, and other such gestures can catch the attention of public opinion and produce concrete results. We are convinced that prayer is effective. If it is carried out with great confidence and faith, it will leave its mark.