

MEETING WITH THE BISHOPS
OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA

**RESPONSES OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO THE QUESTIONS POSED BY THE BISHOPS**

*National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C.
Wednesday, 16 April 2008*

1. The Holy Father is asked to give his assessment of the challenge of increasing secularism in public life and relativism in intellectual life, and his advice on how to confront these challenges pastorally and evangelize more effectively.

I touched upon this theme briefly in my address. It strikes me as significant that here in America, unlike many places in Europe, the secular mentality has not been intrinsically opposed to religion. Within the context of the separation of Church and State, American society has always been marked by a fundamental respect for religion and its public role, and, if polls are to be believed, the American people are deeply religious. But it is not enough to count on this traditional religiosity and go about business as usual, even as its foundations are being slowly undermined. A serious commitment to evangelization cannot prescind from a profound diagnosis of the real challenges the Gospel encounters in contemporary American culture.

Of course, what is essential is a correct understanding of the just autonomy of the secular order, an autonomy which cannot be divorced from God the Creator and his saving plan (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 36). Perhaps America's brand of secularism poses a particular problem: it allows for professing belief in God, and respects the public role of religion and the Churches, but at the same time it can subtly reduce religious belief to a lowest common denominator. Faith becomes a passive acceptance that certain things "out there" are true, but without practical relevance for everyday life. The result is a growing separation of faith from life: living "as if God did not exist". This is aggravated by an individualistic and eclectic approach to faith and religion: far from a Catholic approach to "thinking with the Church", each person believes he or she has a right to pick and choose, maintaining external social bonds but without an integral, interior conversion to the law of Christ. Consequently, rather than being transformed and renewed in mind, Christians are easily tempted to conform themselves to the spirit of this age (cf. *Rom* 12:3). We have seen this emerge in an acute way in the scandal given by Catholics who promote an alleged right to abortion.

On a deeper level, secularism challenges the Church to reaffirm and to pursue more actively her mission in and to the world. As the Council made clear, the lay faithful have a particular responsibility in this regard. What is needed, I am convinced, is a greater sense of the intrinsic relationship between the Gospel and the natural law on the one hand, and, on the other, the pursuit of authentic human good, as embodied in civil law and in personal moral decisions. In a society that rightly values personal liberty, the Church needs to promote at every level of her teaching – in catechesis, preaching,

seminary and university instruction – an apologetics aimed at affirming the truth of Christian revelation, the harmony of faith and reason, and a sound understanding of freedom, seen in positive terms as a liberation both *from* the limitations of sin and *for* an authentic and fulfilling life. In a word, the Gospel has to be preached and taught as an integral way of life, offering an attractive and true answer, intellectually and practically, to real human problems. The “dictatorship of relativism”, in the end, is nothing less than a threat to genuine human freedom, which only matures in generosity and fidelity to the truth.

Much more, of course, could be said on this subject: let me conclude, though, by saying that I believe that the Church in America, at this point in her history, is faced with the challenge of recapturing the Catholic vision of reality and presenting it, in an engaging and imaginative way, to a society which markets any number of recipes for human fulfillment. I think in particular of our need to speak to the hearts of young people, who, despite their constant exposure to messages contrary to the Gospel, continue to thirst for authenticity, goodness and truth. Much remains to be done, particularly on the level of preaching and catechesis in parishes and schools, if the new evangelization is to bear fruit for the renewal of ecclesial life in America.

2. The Holy Father is asked about “a certain quiet attrition” by which Catholics are abandoning the practice of the faith, sometimes by an explicit decision, but often by distancing themselves quietly and gradually from attendance at Mass and identification with the Church.

Certainly, much of this has to do with the passing away of a religious culture, sometimes disparagingly referred to as a “ghetto”, which reinforced participation and identification with the Church. As I just mentioned, one of the great challenges facing the Church in this country is that of cultivating a Catholic identity which is based not so much on externals as on a way of thinking and acting grounded in the Gospel and enriched by the Church’s living tradition.

The issue clearly involves factors such as religious individualism and scandal. Let us go to the heart of the matter: faith cannot survive unless it is nourished, unless it is “formed by charity” (cf. *Gal 5:6*). Do people today find it difficult to encounter God in our Churches? Has our preaching lost its salt? Might it be that many people have forgotten, or never really learned, how to pray in and with the Church?

Here I am not speaking of people who leave the Church in search of subjective religious “experiences”; this is a pastoral issue which must be addressed on its own terms. I think we are speaking about people who have fallen by the wayside without consciously having rejected their faith in Christ, but, for whatever reason, have not drawn life from the liturgy, the sacraments, preaching. Yet Christian faith, as we know, is essentially ecclesial, and without a living bond to the community, the individual’s faith will never grow to maturity. Indeed, to return to the question I just discussed, the result can be a quiet apostasy.

So let me make two brief observations on the problem of “attrition”, which I hope will stimulate further reflection.

First, as you know, it is becoming more and more difficult, in our Western societies, to speak in a meaningful way of “salvation”. Yet salvation – deliverance from the reality of evil, and the gift of new life and freedom in Christ – is at the heart of the Gospel. We need to discover, as I have suggested, new and engaging ways of proclaiming this message and awakening a thirst for the fulfillment which only Christ can bring. It is in the Church’s liturgy, and above all in the sacrament of the Eucharist, that these realities are most powerfully expressed and lived in the life of believers; perhaps we still have much to do in realizing the Council’s vision of the liturgy as the exercise of the common priesthood and the impetus for a fruitful apostolate in the world.

Second, we need to acknowledge with concern the almost complete eclipse of an eschatological sense in many of our traditionally Christian societies. As you know, I have pointed to this problem in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi*. Suffice it to say that faith and hope are not limited to this world: as theological virtues, they unite us with the Lord and draw us toward the fulfillment not only of our personal destiny but also that of all creation. Faith and hope are the inspiration and basis of our efforts to prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God. In Christianity, there can be no room for purely private religion: Christ is the Savior of the world, and, as members of his Body and sharers in his prophetic, priestly and royal *munera*, we cannot separate our love for him from our commitment to the building up of the Church and the extension of his Kingdom. To the extent that religion becomes a purely private affair, it loses its very soul.

Let me conclude by stating the obvious. The fields are still ripe for harvesting (cf. *Jn* 4:35); God continues to give the growth (cf. *I Cor* 3:6). We can and must believe, with the late Pope John Paul II, that God is preparing a new springtime for Christianity (cf. *Redemptoris Missio*, 86). What is needed above all, at this time in the history of the Church in America, is a renewal of that apostolic zeal which inspires her shepherds actively to seek out the lost, to bind up those who have been wounded, and to bring strength to those who are languishing (cf. *Ez* 34:16). And this, as I have said, calls for new ways of thinking based on a sound diagnosis of today’s challenges and a commitment to unity in the service of the Church’s mission to the present generation.

3. The Holy Father is asked to comment on the decline in vocations despite the growing numbers of the Catholic population, and on the reasons for hope offered by the personal qualities and the thirst for holiness which characterize the candidates who do come forward.

Let us be quite frank: the ability to cultivate vocations to the priesthood and the religious life is a sure sign of the health of a local Church. There is no room for complacency in this regard. God continues to call young people; it is up to all of us to encourage a generous and free response to that call. On the other hand, none of us can take this grace for granted.

In the Gospel, Jesus tells us to pray that the Lord of the harvest will send workers. He even admits that the workers are few in comparison with the abundance of the harvest (cf. *Mt 9:37-38*). Strange to say, I often think that prayer – the *unum necessarium* – is the one aspect of vocations work which we tend to forget or to undervalue!

Nor am I speaking only of prayer *for vocations*. Prayer itself, born in Catholic families, nurtured by programs of Christian formation, strengthened by the grace of the sacraments, is the first means by which we come to know the Lord's will for our lives. To the extent that we teach young people to pray, and to pray well, we will be cooperating with God's call. Programs, plans and projects have their place; but the discernment of a vocation is above all the fruit of an intimate dialogue between the Lord and his disciples. Young people, if they know how to pray, can be trusted to know what to do with God's call.

It has been noted that there is a growing thirst for holiness in many young people today, and that, although fewer in number, those who come forward show great idealism and much promise. It is important to listen to them, to understand their experiences, and to encourage them to help their peers to see the need for committed priests and religious, as well as the beauty of a life of sacrificial service to the Lord and his Church. To my mind, much is demanded of vocation directors and formators: candidates today, as much as ever, need to be given a sound intellectual and human formation which will enable them not only to respond to the real questions and needs of their contemporaries, but also to mature in their own conversion and to persevere in life-long commitment to their vocation. As Bishops, you are conscious of the sacrifice demanded when you are asked to release one of your finest priests for seminary work. I urge you to respond with generosity, for the good of the whole Church.

Finally, I think you know from experience that most of your brother priests are happy in their vocation. What I said in my address about the importance of unity and cooperation within the presbyterate applies here too. There is a need for all of us to move beyond sterile divisions, disagreements and preconceptions, and to listen together to the voice of the Spirit who is guiding the Church into a future of hope. Each of us knows how important priestly fraternity has been in our lives. That fraternity is not only a precious possession, but also an immense resource for the renewal of the priesthood and the raising up of new vocations. I would close by encouraging you to foster opportunities for ever greater dialogue and fraternal encounter among your priests, and especially the younger priests. I am convinced that this will bear great fruit for their own enrichment, for the increase of their love for the priesthood and the Church, and for the effectiveness of their apostolate.

Dear Brother Bishops, with these few observations, I once more encourage all of you in your ministry to the faithful entrusted to your pastoral care, and I commend you to the loving intercession of Mary Immaculate, Mother of the Church.