

A round of questions for the 'shepherd-in-chief'

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 15, 2008 All Things Catholic

Anyone who's ever learned a foreign language knows that perhaps 50 percent of a language is predictable according to its own rules, and the rest simply is what it is, the product of history and culture rather than logic. Try explaining to an ESL student why the plural of "mouse" is "mice," but the plural of "spouse" is not "spice," and you'll find that going over the rules really doesn't help; in the end, that's just how things are.

Much the same point applies to the inner life of the Catholic church. Maybe half of it flows rationally enough from theology and canon law, but the rest can be difficult to grasp in terms of strict logic. Last week brought a fresh reminder of the point, in the form of Pope Benedict XVI's 90-minute Q&A with priests in northern Italy.

The Vatican released a transcript of the pope's remarks last Friday, and I've posted a translation here: <http://ncrcafe.org/node/2039> [1]. In keeping with local custom, two-thirds of the event was in German, one-third in Italian.

Logically speaking, there's no particular reason why the clergy of obscure dioceses in the Alps ought to be proxies for Catholics everywhere in the pope's most substantive annual exchange on the state of the faith. The Alto Adige region of northern Italy just happens to be, however, where Benedict XVI takes his summer vacation, and he's adopted the custom of sitting down with local pastors during his break. These are wide-ranging and remarkably candid conversations, basically the only regular occasion where the rank-and-file has the chance to put questions to the shepherd-in-chief.

To be sure, this is not the prime minister facing back-benchers in the House of Commons. Prior to Benedict's encounter on Aug. 6 in Bressanone, the local bishop, a Capuchin by the name of Wilhelm Emil Egger, asked his priests, deacons and seminarians to submit proposed questions for the pope. Egger then chose six questions -- attempting, according to Vatican spokesperson Fr. Federico Lombardi, to pick themes that drew the most interest and that also responded to the different backgrounds of the participants. Egger passed the questions on to Benedict in advance, giving the pope time to think about what he wanted to say. (For the record, this is basically the same procedure employed for press conferences aboard the papal plane.)

In other words, these are not really unscripted affairs; the pope has advance knowledge of the topics, and theoretically could avoid any question he doesn't want to take. That said, the sessions nevertheless offer a rare opportunity to probe the pope's mind on matters of keen interest at the grass roots.

I'll offer four highlights from this year's edition.

Benedict and the Environment

Generally the questions in these get-togethers come from pastors out in the trenches. This time, however, Benedict also decided to take one from an activist and theologian: Fr. Karl Golser, who directs the Institute for Justice, Peace and Care of Creation in Bressanone. A former official of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith during the early years of then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's tenure, Golser publishes and speaks widely on environmental topics.

Setting up his query, Golser asserted that too many believers fail to see a connection between their faith and questions such as climate change or pollution. He then asked Benedict what can be done to bring these matters more into the Christian mainstream. Given the controlled nature of the event, the pope's decision to take the question in the first place was, in effect, one way of responding to that concern.

Benedict minced no words in condemning what he termed the "brutal consumption of creation," and he called for an urgent renewal of the theology of creation. Beyond that, Benedict made four points that, together, could be said to represent the heart of his environmental message.

1. *Biblical faith promotes respect for the environment, not indifference:* Over the years, critics have often charged that the language of the Book of Genesis about humanity "subjugating" the earth has fostered ecological arrogance, a disastrous belief that human beings can do whatever they want with the planet. Instead, Benedict insisted, wherever the biblical vision has been taken seriously, people have clearly understood their role as custodians of creation rather than its master. As evidence, the pope pointed to monastic practices of gardening and cultivation; what grew up around monasteries, he said, were in fact "little paradises," "oases of creation," offering proof that the Biblical vision is one of "protection of creation, not destroying it."
2. *The environmental movement needs God:* What the natural environment most needs today, the pope argued, are people who "see it through God's eyes." Ultimately, it is only God who sets limits to the human lust for consumption and power. If matter is all that exists in the universe, why shouldn't we scramble to grab as much of it as possible? If this life is the only one, why shouldn't we milk every possible unit of pleasure out of it? The bottom line, according to Benedict, is this: "True and effective measures against the waste and destruction of creation can only be realized and developed, understood and lived, when creation is considered from the point of view of God." In that regard, Benedict said, it's important to hold the doctrines of creation and redemption, earthly life and eternal life, together.
3. *Care for the earth is not just about policies, but lifestyles:* The pope insisted that it's not only laws and business practices that have to change, but styles of life. "It's not just a question of finding techniques that can prevent environmental harms, even if it's important to find alternative sources of energy and so on," Benedict said. "All this won't be enough if we ourselves don't find a new style of life, a discipline which is made up in part of renunciations." In that regard, the pope argued, Christians should lead by example. Christians should offer proof through the simplicity of their own lives that they believe what they say, and that it's possible to be happy and fulfilled while living in ways that respect the inner dynamics of creation.
4. *A "clear and decisive" public role:* Today's widespread sensation that "the world may be slipping away -- because we ourselves are driving it away," Benedict said, creates an opportunity to present the faith in public as a "positive proposition." This is especially the case, Benedict said, where there is "already a sensibility" for the faith. The popular sense of being "oppressed by the problems of creation," Benedict suggested, creates a context in which people may be willing to take a new look at the Christian message,

including its call to "a discipline of responsibility to the future and to others." Thus, the pope said, Christians have a "duty to intervene in a clear and decisive manner in public opinion."

Human Virtues and Evangelization

A seminarian named Michael Horrer, who had followed Benedict XVI to Australia for World Youth Day, asked the pope how to "exercise our mission as witnesses of Christ" back home among families, friends, and acquaintances.

In the first place, Benedict urged renewed commitment to the spiritual basics -- prayer, meditation on Scripture, the Eucharist, and the Sacrament of Penance.

Beyond that, the pope didn't dwell on specific evangelization strategies, but instead recommended the cultivation of simple human virtues. He offered several examples: "Honesty, joy, openness to listening to one's neighbor, the capacity to forgive, generosity, goodness, [and] cordiality." Such qualities, Benedict said, "are indicative of the fact that faith is truly present," and often represent the best form of witness.

In that regard, the pope told a brief story about a conversation he'd once had with the head of the Knights of Malta. One year at Christmas this official took a group of young people to Termini, the central train station in Rome, in order to spread some cheer among the poor and outcasts who tend to congregate there. As he was getting ready to leave, the official later told the pope, he heard one of the young people say, "This is better than the discothèque! Here it's truly beautiful, because I can do something for others."

Benedict suggested that the story provides a template for how successful witness often emerges, naturally and unscripted, through the effort to focus on others rather than oneself. Do that, the pope implied, and the rest will follow.

"A light will radiate out from us," the pope said, "without our having to think about it too much, without adopting a way of acting that's -- to put it this way -- 'propagandistic.' It will happen on its own, because it reflects our soul."

To use a bit of jargon that I've coined elsewhere, this comes across as a very "affirmative orthodoxy" recipe for evangelization. In today's debates over missionary strategy and what it means to be "evangelical," Benedict's suggestion is to focus in the first place on basic human decency -- goodness, as he puts it, "in the most ample sense of the term."

A collegial tone

Fr. Franz Pixner, a dean in the Bressanone diocese, asked the pope a sort of omnibus question. Starting from the premise that today's priests are stretched too thin, Pixner managed to wrap the issues of mandatory celibacy, the ordination of *virii probati*, the role of women in the church, and the use of lay people to administer baptisms and

give homilies into a single 200-word query.

To be honest, Benedict didn't even try to respond to most points; instead, he restricted himself to a few words about striking the right balance between the singular role of the priest and appreciation for other charisms. In passing, he reaffirmed the value of priestly celibacy, saying that it provides a "great reminder" of the priest's total gift of himself to God and to others.

What was noteworthy was less the substance of the response than its spirit. Benedict readily conceded that the points raised by Pixner "worry pastors and all of us in this time," and stressed that "no one has a ready recipe" in terms of what to do. Rather than providing definitive answers, Benedict called for a "dialogue among ourselves, a responsible dialogue of the faith, in order to find the right path."

"We are all searching together," Benedict said. In that context, he said, his own remarks should be understood simply "as part of a much larger dialogue."

It's worth recalling that the pope was not caught off guard by the question. He knew in advance what was coming, and still replied in this decidedly non-oracular fashion. His intent seemed to be to invite, rather than to close, conversation.

Of course, what Benedict has in mind is not a dialogue without limits; his brief remarks are enough to suggest, for example, that a reconsideration of mandatory clerical celibacy is not in the cards. Nonetheless, Benedict's tone throughout the session was strikingly modest and collegial. Later, in response to another question, the pope jokingly said he couldn't supply an "infallible answer," but could only "respond based on what I see." When Golser asked his question about ecology, Benedict modestly began by saying, "You could certainly respond better than me."

In part, that tone reflects the personality of Benedict XVI, the humility which has charmed audiences in Rome and abroad. In part, however, it also is a deliberate ecclesial act, a choice to foster collegial conversation rather than settling every matter by diktat. It's a case in which a pope leads not only by what he says, but by how he says it - and by what he chooses not to say.

Mercy over Severity

The final question came from a local pastor named Fr. Paolo Rizzi, and it expressed a typical pastor's gripe: Too many kids these days, Rizzi complained, come forward for First Communion and Confirmation but don't show up at Mass on Sunday. Sometimes, he said, he's tempted to tell them, "Just stay home for all of it!" Rizzi asked the pope what pastoral strategy he would suggest.

In response, Benedict said that when he was a younger priest, he was "rather more severe," taking the position that if candidates didn't practice the faith on a regular basis, they shouldn't receive the sacraments. Today, however, he said he sees things a little differently.

"In the course of time, I have realized that we have to follow the example of the Lord, who was very open with people who were at the margins of Israel," he said. "If we can see even a tiny flame of desire for communion in the church ? it seems right to me to be rather generous."

Naturally, Benedict said, when the faith is completely absent, administering the sacraments would be a sham. He described the phenomenon in terms any pastor will readily recognize: "Where there is no element of faith ? First Communion would just be a party with a big lunch, nice clothes and nice gifts," the pope said.

At the same time, Benedict said, even small stirrings of the faith ought to be encouraged rather than snuffed out, and thus his instinct is usually to err on the side of mercy.

It would be a fascinating exercise to press Benedict XVI to reflect on how that preference for mercy over severity, yet always in respect of the faith, might be "cashed out" in other thorny pastoral situations - such as, for example, the vexed questions of communion for pro-choice politicians, or administering the sacraments to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics.

One hopes that priests in northern Italy, who will probably get another shot at quizzing the pope next year, are taking notes.

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