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Interview with Benedict XVI aboard the papal plane

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

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Prague

On the papal plane en route to the Czech Republic yesterday, Pope Benedict XVI took five questions from reporters. The following is an *NCR* translation of a transcript from that exchange provided by the Italian daily *Corriere della Sera*.

Among other things, Benedict XVI discusses the experience of eastern European nations under Communism, the role of ethics in the global economy, his wrist fracture during his summer vacation, and the upcoming second volume of his book on Jesus and the gospels.

Your Holiness, as you said last Sunday during the Angelus address, the Czech Republic is not only geographically but also historically at the heart of Europe. Can you explain what you meant, and tell us how and why you believe this visit can be important for the entire continent, in terms of its cultural and spiritual journey, and also the political task of constructing the European Union?

For centuries, the territory of this Czech Republic has been a place of encounter among cultures. Let's begin in the ninth century: On the one hand, in Moravia, we have the great mission of the brothers Cyril and Methodius who, from Byzantium, carried Byzantine culture but also created the Slavic culture with the Cyrillic alphabet and with a liturgy in Slavic; on the other hand, in Bohemia, the dioceses carried the gospel in the Latin language, and in this connection with the Roman-Latin culture we thus see two cultures meeting. Every such meeting is difficult but also fertile, and we can easily illustrate the point with this example.

I'll take a step forward: in the 14th century, it was Charles IV who created here in Prague the first

university in central Europe. A university in itself is a place of encounter among cultures, and in this case it became a place of encounter between the Slavic culture and German-speaking culture. As in the era of the Reformation, precisely in this territory the encounters and conflicts became decisive and strong, as we all know.

I'll take another step forward into the present time: In the past century, the Czech Republic suffered under a particularly rigorous Communist dictatorship, but the resistance, both secular and Catholic, was also of a very high level. I think of Vaclav Havel, of personalities such as Cardinal Tomasek, which clearly gave Europe a message about what liberty is and how we must live, how we must commit ourselves to liberty. From these encounters of cultures through the centuries, and from this last phase of reflection, not only of suffering, so many messages come to us about a new concept of liberty and society. These messages should, and must, have implications for the construction of Europe. We must be very attentive to the lessons of this country.

We're now at twenty years after the fall of the Communist regimes of eastern Europe. John Paul II, visiting different countries that had lived under Communism, encouraged them to use their recovered liberty responsibly. What is your message for the peoples of eastern Europe in this new historical phase?

As I said, these countries suffered in a particular way under the dictatorship, but in that suffering concepts of liberty matured which are still relevant and which must still be elaborated and realized. I'm thinking, for example, of a text by Vaclav Havel that says: dictatorship is based upon lies, and if the lies are overcome, if no one lies anymore, if the truth comes to light, then there will also be liberty, and thus he developed this connection between liberty and truth.

Liberty isn't liberalism, arbitrariness, but it's connected, it's conditioned by the great values of love and solidarity and in general by the good. Thus I think that these concepts, these ideas which have matured in the time of the dictatorships, must not be lost now. We must return precisely to this task, and with regard to an idea of liberty which is often a little hollow and without values, we must recognize that liberty and values, liberty and the good, liberty and truth go together, because otherwise liberty destroys itself.

This seems to me to be the message that comes from these countries, and that must be actualized in this moment.

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Your Holiness, the Czech Republic is a very secularized nation in which the Catholic church is a minority. In that situation, how can the church contribute effectively to the common good of the country?

It's normally the creative minorities that determine the future. In that sense, the Catholic church must understand itself as a creative minority with a legacy of values which are not a thing of the past, but which are a very living and relevant force that must be realized, rendered present in the public debate, and in our struggle for a true concept of liberty and of peace.

In that sense, the church can make contributions in various sectors. The first, I would say, is precisely in the intellectual dialogue between agnostics and believers. Both need each other: The agnostic cannot be content to not know, but must be in search of the great truth of faith; the Catholic cannot be content to have faith, but must be in search of God all the time, and in the dialogue with others, a Catholic can learn

more about God in a deeper fashion. This is the first level, the great intellectual, ethical and human dialogue.

In the educational sector, the church has much to offer in formation. In Italy, we talk about the problem of the 'educational emergency,' a problem common to the whole West, and here the church must once again actualize, concretize, and open up for the future its great legacy.

A third sector is Caritas: the church has always regarded charity as a sign of its identity, to be in service to the poor, to be an organism of charity. Caritas in the Czech Republic does a great deal for different communities, in situations of need, and offers much also to suffering humanity on the different continents. It thereby gives an example of responsibility for others, of international solidarity which is the basis for peace.

Your Holiness, your last encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, had a large echo around the world. What do you think of the response? are you satisfied? Do you think that the recent global crisis is an occasion in which humanity has become more willing to reflect on the importance of moral and spiritual in order to confront the great problems of the future? Will the church continue to offer orientations in this direction?

I'm very content for the great discussion, which was precisely my goal: to promote and stimulate a discussion about these problems, to not allow things to stand as they are but to find new models of a responsible economy both in individual countries and for the entirety of a unified humanity.

To me, it really seems visible today that ethics is not something exterior to the economy, which, as technical matter, could function on its own; rather, ethics is an interior principle of the economy itself, which cannot function if it does not take account of the human values of solidarity and reciprocal responsibility. To integrate ethics into the construction of the economy itself is the great challenge of this moment, and I hope to have made a contribution to this challenge with the encyclical. The discussion that's underway strikes me as encouraging.

Certainly, we want to continue to respond to the challenges of the moment and to help ensure that the sense of responsibility becomes stronger than the desire for profit, that responsibility for others becomes stronger than egoism. This is the sense in which we want to make a contribution.

To conclude, a more personal question. Over the summer you had a small fracture of your wrist. Have you now completely recovered? Have you resumed all your activity? Were you able to work on the second part of your book on Jesus, as you had hoped?

I haven't yet completely recovered, but I can see that my right hand is working, and I can do the essential things. I can eat, and above all I can write: My thinking develops above all through writing, and therefore it was for me truly a burden and a school of patience to not be able to write for six weeks. Anyway, I was able to work, to read, to do other things. I made a little progress with the book, but I still have a great deal to do. I think that with the bibliography and all the things that still have to be done, with the help of God maybe it could be finished next spring. But that's a hope.

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