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Sex abuse crisis 'terrifying,' pope says

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

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Lisbon, Portugal

En route to a May 11-14 visit to Portugal, Benedict XVI called the reality of the sexual abuse crisis 'terrifying' and said that the greatest persecution of the church comes not from external attacks but from sin within the church.

Benedict's insistence that the real problem is internal seemed to distance the pope from other senior Vatican officials, who in recent weeks have blamed the media and other parties for unjust criticism of the Catholic church.

While those comments came in response to a question, the questions were submitted to the Vatican by reporters covering the trip several days in advance, suggesting that Benedict wanted to address the crisis and chose his words carefully, rather than being caught off guard.

Benedict also said that while forgiveness must be part of the church's response to the crisis, that must not come at the expense of justice.

In total, the pope's session with the press this morning lasted approximately 16 minutes. Beyond the sexual abuse crisis, Benedict also touched upon the relationship between secularism and religious faith as well as Europe's current economic turmoil.

The following is a rush transcript of Benedict's comments aboard the papal plane. The pope spoke in Italian; what follows is an NCR translation.

What concerns and feelings do you bring with you regarding the situation of the church in Portugal? In the past it was a deeply Catholic country that carried the faith throughout the world,

but now it's undergoing profound secularization both in daily life and on the political/legal level. How can the faith be announced in a context which is indifferent, and sometimes hostile, to the church?

First of all, good morning to all of you. I hope we all have a good trip, despite the famous ash cloud which we're above right now.

In terms of Portugal, first of all I have feelings of joy and gratitude for everything this country has done and is doing in the world and in history, the deep humanity of this people which I've been able to know through a visit and so many Portuguese friends. I would say it's true that Portugal has been a great force for the Catholic faith, and it's carried that faith in every part of the world ? a courageous, intelligent, creative faith. It's created great cultures, which we see in Brazil, in Portugal itself, but also the presence of the Portuguese spirit in Africa and Asia.

On the other hand, this presence of secularism isn't entirely new. The dialectic between secularism and faith in Portugal has a long history. By the seventeenth century, there was already a strong current of the Enlightenment ? it's enough to think of names such as Pombal. In these centuries, Portugal lived in this dialectic which today naturally has been radicalized and is reflected in all aspects. This seems to me a challenge, but also a great possibility. In these centuries, the dialectic among the Enlightenment, secularism and faith always had people who wanted to build bridges and to create a dialogue. Unfortunately, the dominant tendency was to see a contradiction and to see one as excluding the other. Today we can see this is false. We have to find a synthesis and be able to dialogue. In the multi-cultural situation we're all in, it's clear that a European culture which would be solely rationalist, which would not have any sense of the transcendent dimension, would not be in a position to dialogue with the other great cultures of humanity ? all of which have this sense of the transcendent dimension, which is a dimension of the human person. To think that there's a pure reason, even a historic reason, which exists entirely in itself, is an error, and we discover that more and more. It touches only a part of the human person expressed in a given historic situation, and is not reason as such. Reason as such is open to transcendence, and only in the meeting between transcendent reality, faith and history is human life fully realized.

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I think the mission of Europe in this situation is to find a path to this dialogue, to integrate faith, rationality, and modernity in a single anthropological vision of the concrete human person and render that vision for the future of humanity.

For that reason, the presence of secularism is something normal, but a separation of cult from life, a separation of secularism from cult and faith, is anomalous and must be overcome. The great challenge is for the two to meet and to discover their true identity ? this, as I said, is a mission for Europe and a human necessity in our time.

Thank you, Holy Father. Continuing on the theme of Europe, the economic crisis was recently aggravated in Europe, especially in Portugal. Some European leaders think the future of the EU is at risk. What lesson should we learn from this crisis, including at the ethical and moral level? What are the keys for consolidating the unity and cooperation of the European states in the future?

I would say that this economic crisis, with its moral component, is a case of application and making concrete what I said before: two separate cultural currents must meet, otherwise we won't find the path to

the future. Here, too, I believe there's a false dualism. There's an economic positivism that thinks it's possible to realize itself without an ethical component ? a market that regulates itself, by exclusively economic impulses and positivistic reason. Ethics would be something different, something extraneous. In reality, we can see today that a pure economic pragmatism which ignores the reality of the human person, who is inherently ethical, inevitably creates problems. This is a moment to recognize that ethics is not something exterior, but rather interior to all forms of rationality, including economic reason.

On the other hand, we also have to confess the Catholic-Christian faith often has been overly individualistic. It left the concrete things of the economy to the world, thinking only of individual salvation and religious acts, without recognizing that these things imply a global responsibility and a responsibility for the world. We have to enter into a concrete dialogue, as I tried to do in my encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, and the whole tradition of the social teaching of the church moves in this sense ? broadening the ethical aspect of the faith from the individual to a responsibility for the world.

The latest events in the market show that the ethical dimension is an interior part of economic life because the human person is one. It's a matter of a healthy anthropology, and only in this way can we solve the problem, only in this way can Europe realize its mission.

Thank you. Now we look to Fatima, which will be the spiritual culmination of this trip. What meaning do the apparitions of Fatima have for us today? When you presented the Third Secret of Fatima in a press conference at the Vatican Press Office in June 2000, you were asked if the message of the secret could be extended beyond the assassination attempt against John Paul II to other sufferings of the popes. Could it also be extended to put the suffering of the church today in the context of that vision, including the sins of the sexual abuse of minors?

First of all, I want to express my joy to go to Fatima, to pray before the Madonna of Fatima, and to experience the presence of the faith there, where from the little ones a new force of the faith was born. It's not limited to the little ones, but has a message for the whole world and all epochs of history, it illuminates this history. As I said in the presentation, there is a supernatural impulse which doesn't come simply from someone's imagination but from the supernatural reality of the Virgin Mary. That impulse enters into a subject, and is expressed according to the possibilities of the subject, who is determined by his or her historic situation. The supernatural impulse is translated, so to speak, according to the subject's possibilities for imagining it and expressing it. In this expression formed by the subject, there are always hidden possibilities to go beyond, to go deeper. Only with time can we see all the depth which was, so to speak, dressed in this vision, which was possible for the concrete person.

With regard to this great vision of the suffering of the popes, beyond the circumstances of John Paul II, other realities are indicated which over time will develop and become clear. Thus it's true that beyond the moment indicated in the vision, one speaks about and sees the necessity of suffering by the church. It's focused on the person of the pope, but the pope stands for the church, and therefore sufferings of the church are announced. The church will always be suffering in various ways, up to the end of the world. The important point is that the message of Fatima in its substance is not addressed to particular situations, but a fundamental response: permanent conversion, penance, prayer, and the three cardinal virtues: faith, hope and charity. One sees there the true, fundamental response the church must give, which each of us individually must give, in this situation.

In terms of what we today can discover in this message, attacks against the pope or the church don't come just from outside the church. The suffering of the church also comes from within the church, because sin exists in the church. This too has always been known, but today we see it in a really terrifying way. The greatest persecution of the church doesn't come from enemies on the outside, but is born in sin within the

church. The church thus has a deep need to re-learn penance, to accept purification, to learn on one hand forgiveness but also the necessity of justice. Forgiveness does not exclude justice. We have to re-learn the essentials: conversion, prayer, penance, and the theological virtues. That's how we respond, and we can be realistic in expecting that evil will always launch attacks from within and from outside, but the forces of good are also always present, and finally the Lord is stronger than evil. The Madonna for us is the visible maternal guarantee that the will of God is always the last word in history.

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