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Transcript from papal plane en route to Mexico

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NCR Today

On Friday en route to León, Mexico, Pope Benedict XVI met briefly with reporters covering his 23rd foreign trip, and his first to Spanish-speaking Latin America. The Vatican released a transcript of that session in Italian over the weekend, and the following is an *NCR* translation.

The first round of media coverage highlighted the pope's words blasting the "false promises, lies and deception" of the drug trade in Mexico, which has claimed an estimated 50,000 lives since a crackdown on the narco-traffickers was launched in 1996.

The transcript, however, contains other points of interest, including:

- Benedict denounced what he called the "schizophrenia" of Catholics who distinguish between their private morality and public ethics, insisting that public morality too, including a country's political choices, should be informed by the values of the Gospel.
- The pope called the glaring contrast between wealth and poverty in much of Latin America "anti-social," and said the Catholic church must be committed to "overcoming this social division."
- Benedict said that a "Christianity of the essentials" is the heart of the New Evangelization, meaning in part the capacity to show that the majestic God of the cosmos is also a "small God" who stands close to each individual person.

Three of the five questions put to Benedict XVI aboard the papal plane came from women, including two veteran members of the Vatican press corps from Mexico and Spain.

Benedict XVI today travels to Cuba before returning to Rome on Wednesday.

TEXT OF THE INTERVIEW

Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, Vatican Spokesperson: Your Holiness, thank you for being with us, at the beginning of this beautiful and important trip. As you can see, our travelling assembly is large; there are more than 70 journalists following you with attention, and the most numerous group, apart from the Italians, are, naturally, the Mexicans, with at least 14, and the representatives of Mexican television that will follow and cover the entire trip. There's also a good group from the United States, a good group from France, and from other countries. We are, therefore, a bit representative of the entire world. As usual, we collected in recent days different questions from the journalists and we selected five which more or less express the general expectations. This time, since we have more space and a bit more time, I won't ask them, but the journalists themselves who formulated them or who are, anyway, distributed among us. Let's begin with a question that was put to you by Maria Collins for the television service "Univision," which is one of the television services following this trip; she's a Mexican who will ask the question in Spanish, and then I'll repeat it in Italian for everyone.

Collins: *Holy Father, Mexico and Cuba are lands in which the trips of your predecessor made history. With what state of mind, and what hopes, do you place yourself today in his footsteps?*

Benedict XVI: Dear Friends, before anything else I'd like to say welcome and thanks for your accompaniment in this trip, which we hope will be blessed by the Lord. On this trip, I feel myself in total continuity with Pope John Paul II. I remember very well his first trip to Mexico, which was really historic. In a legal situation which was still very confused, it opened the doors and began a new phase of collaboration among church, state and society. I also remember well his historic trip to Cuba. Thus, I seek to follow his footsteps and to continue what he began.

Since the beginning, I've felt the desire to visit Mexico. As a cardinal I went to Mexico, with great memories, and every Wednesday I hear the applause and the joy of the Mexicans. To come here now as pope is a great joy for me, and responds to a desire I've felt for a long time. To explain what I'm feeling, the words of the Second Vatican Council come to mind: *Gaudium et spes, luctus et angor* "joy and hope, but also suffering and anguish. I share the joys and hopes, but I also share the suffering and the difficulties of this great country. I go to encourage and to learn, to comfort in faith, hope and charity, and to bring comfort to the commitment in the struggle against evil. I hope that the Lord will help us!

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Fr. Lombardi: Thank you, Holiness. Now we'll give the floor to Javier Alatorre Soria, who represents Tele Azteca, one of the grand Mexican television services that's following these days.

Alatorre: *Your Holiness, Mexico is a country with marvelous resources and possibilities, but in these years we know it's also been a land of violence because of the problem of narco-trafficking. The estimate is that 50,000 people have died in the last five years. How does the Catholic church confront this situation? Do you have any words for those responsible, for the traffickers who sometimes declare themselves to be Catholics and even benefactors of the church?*

Benedict XVI: We know well all the beauties of Mexico, but also this great problem of narco-trafficking and violence. It's certainly a great responsibility for the Catholic church in a country in which 80 percent of the population is Catholic. We have to do everything possible against this evil, which is destructive of humanity and our youth.

I would say that the first act is to proclaim God ? God who is judge, God who loves us, but who loves us to draw us toward good and truth, against evil. Therefore, it?s a great responsibility of the church to educate conscience, to educate about moral responsibility, to unmask evil, to unmask this idolatry of money which enslaves human beings for this reason alone. We must also unmask the false promises, the lies, and the deception, which stand behind drugs. We have to see that the human person needs the infinite. If God?s not there, if the infinite isn?t available, the human person creates its own paradises, giving the appearance of ?infinitude? that can only be a lie. Thus it?s so important that God be present and accessible. It?s a great responsibility before God, the judge who guides us, who draws us to truth and good, and in this sense the church must unmask evil, rendering present the goodness of God, rendering present his truth, the truly infinite for which we are thirsty. It?s a great duty of the church. We all together must do everything possible, more and more.

Fr. Lombardi: Holiness, the third question comes from Valentine Alazraki of Televisa, one of the veterans of our trips, whom you know well and who?s happy that you?re finally able to go to her country.

Alazraki: *Holiness, we truly welcome you to Mexico, and we?re all happy that you?re going to Mexico. The question is the following: Holy Father, you?ve said that you want to address all of Latin America from Mexico in the bicentennial of its independence. Latin America, despite its development, continues to be a region marked by strong social contrasts, where one finds extremely rich people and the extremely poor. Sometimes it seems that the Catholic church is not sufficiently encouraged to involve itself in this field. Can one still speak of a ?theology of liberation? in a positive way, after certain excesses concerning Marxism and violence have been corrected?*

Benedict XVI: Naturally the church must always ask itself if it?s doing enough on behalf of social justice in this great continent. This is a question of conscience which we must always ask ourselves. That means asking what the church can and must do, and also which it can?t and shouldn?t do. The church is not a political power, it?s not a party, but it?s a moral power. Since politics fundamentally should be a moral enterprise, the church in this sense has something to say about politics. I repeat which I?ve already said: the first thought to the church is to educate conscience, thereby creating the necessary sense of responsibility. That means educating conscience in individual ethics as well as in public ethics, and perhaps that?s where the problem lies.

One sees in Latin America, and also elsewhere, among many Catholics a certain schizophrenia between individual and public morality. Personally, in the individual sphere, they?re Catholics, believers, but in public life they follow other paths that don?t correspond to the great values of the Gospel which are necessary for the foundation of a just society. Thus it?s essential to educate people in order to overcome this schizophrenia, educating not only about individual morality but also public morality. We try to do this with the social doctrine of the church, because, naturally, this public morality must be a rational morality, shared and capable of being shared also by non-believers. It must be a morality of reason. Certainly, in the light of faith we can see many things more clearly that reason can also see, but it?s precisely the faith that also serves to liberate reason from false interests and the obscurity imposed by those interests, thereby creating in the social doctrine the substantive models for political collaboration, above all for overcoming this social division ? which is truly anti-social ? that unfortunately exists. We want to work in this sense.

I don?t know if the term ?liberation theology,? which can be interpreted in a very positive sense, will help us much. What?s important is the common rationality to which the church offers a fundamental contribution, and which must always help in the education of conscience, both for public and for private life.

Fr. Lombardi: Thank you, Holiness. Now for the fourth question. It comes from one of our "deans," of these trips, but one who is always young, Paloma Gómez Borrero, who represents Spain on this trip, which is naturally of great interest to the Spaniards.

Gómez: *Your Holiness, let's turn to Cuba. We all remember the famous words of John Paul II: "Let Cuba be open to the world, and the world be open to Cuba." Fourteen years have gone by, but it seems those words are still relevant. As you know, in the run-up to your trip, many voices of both dissidents and supporters of human rights have been heard. Your Holiness, are you planning to take up the message of John Paul II, thinking both of the internal situation of Cuba and the international situation?*

Benedict XVI: As I've already said, I feel in absolute continuity with the words of the Holy Father John Paul II, which are still extremely relevant. That visit of this pope inaugurated a path of collaboration and constructive dialogue, a path which is long and demands patience, but which goes forward. Today it's evident that the Marxist ideology as it was conceived does not correspond to reality, and thus a society cannot any longer be built upon it. New models must be found, with patience and in a constructive way. In this process, which demands patience but also determination, we want to help in a spirit of dialogue, in order to avoid new trauma, and to serve progress towards a fraternal and just society which we desire for the whole world. We want to cooperate in this sense.

It's obvious that the church will always be on the side of liberty: liberty of conscience, liberty of religion. We make a contribution in that sense, including the simple faithful who contribute to this progress going forward.

Fr. Lombardi: Thank you, Holiness. As you can imagine, all of us are looking forward to your speeches in Cuba. Now for the fifth question we give the floor to a Frenchman, because there are also other peoples present here. Jean-Louis de La Vaissière is the Rome correspondent for France Press, who has proposed several interesting questions about this trip, and hence it's only right that he give voice to our questions and our expectations.

La Vaissière: *Your Holiness, after the [2007] conference [of the Latin American bishops] in Aparecida, the idea was for a "Continental Mission" of the church in Latin America. In a few months, the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization will take place, and a "Year of Faith" will begin. In Latin America, too, there are challenges from secularization and from the sects. In Cuba, there are the consequences of a long-standing propaganda by atheism, as well as a widely diffused Afro-Cuban spirituality. Do you think this trip will encourage the "New Evangelization," and what are the points closest to your heart in this regard?*

Benedict XVI: The period of the New Evangelization began with the Council. This was fundamentally the intention of Pope John XXIII, and it was greatly underlined by Pope John Paul II. Its necessity in a world undergoing great transitions is ever more evident. It's necessary in the sense that the Gospel must be expressed in new ways; it's also necessary in another sense, which is that the world needs a word amid all the confusion and the difficulty of orienting oneself today.

There's a common situation throughout the world - secularization, the absence of God, the difficulty of finding access to God and of seeing God as a reality that concerns my own life. On the other hand, there are also specific contexts. You mentioned that of Cuba, with its Afro-Cuban syncretism and many other challenges, but every country has its own specific cultural situation. We have to begin with the common problem, which is how today, in this context of our modern rationality, it's possible to once again discover God as the fundamental orientation of our life, the fundamental hope of our life, the foundation of the values which truly build a society. Then we can take account of the specificities of different

situations. This first challenge seems to me to be very important: to proclaim a God who responds to our reason, because we see the rationality of the cosmos, we see that there's something behind it, but we don't see how close this God is, how God concerns me too. This synthesis of the great and majestic God, as well as the small God who's close to me and who shows me the values of my life, is the nucleus of evangelization. That's a "Christianity of the essentials," where one really finds the fundamental basis for living today amid all the problems of our time.

On the other hand, we must take account of the concrete reality. In Latin America in general, it's very important that Christianity not be simply a thing of reason, but also of the heart. The Madonna of Guadalupe is recognized and loved by all, because they understand that she's a Mother for all and that she's been present since the beginning in this new Latin America, after the arrival of the Europeans. In Cuba we have the Madonna of the Cobre, who touches hearts, and everyone knows intuitively that it's true, that this Madonna helps us, that she exists, that she loves us and helps us. But this intuition of the heart must be connected with the rationality of the faith, and with the profundity of the faith which goes beyond reason. We must seek not to lose the heart, but to connect heart and reason so they can cooperate, because only in this way is the human person complete, and capable of really helping to work for a better future.

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