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Poor Clare Colettine Community  
Newarden, Wales GB

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***These are Pope Benedict's answers given at a free Q and A session  
with young people for  
World Youth Day 2006 in Rome.***



### **The Word of God**

*“Your Holiness, I am Simon from St Bartholomew's Parish. I am 21 years old and am studying chemical engineering at Holy Wisdom University in Rome. ... In the face of anxieties and uncertainties about the future, and even simply when I find myself grappling with the daily routine, I also feel the need to be nourished by God's Word and to know Christ better in order to find answers to my questions. ... How can I understand that what I read is the Word of God which calls my life into question? Thank you”.*

To begin, I shall answer by stressing a first point: it must first of all be said that one must not read Sacred Scripture as one reads any kind of historical book, such as, for example, Homer, Ovid or Horace; it is necessary truly to read it as the Word of God, that is, entering into a conversation with God.

One must start by praying and talking to the Lord; "Open the door to me". And what St Augustine often says in his homilies: "I knocked at the door of the Word to find out at last what the Lord wants to say to me", seems to me to be a very important point. One should not read Scripture in an academic way, but with prayer, saying to the Lord: "Help me to understand your Word, what it is that you want to tell me in this passage".

A second point is: Sacred Scripture introduces one into communion with the family of God. Thus, one should not read Sacred Scripture on one's own. Of course, it is always important to read the Bible in a very personal way, in a personal conversation with God; but at the same time, it is important to read it in the company of people with whom one can advance, letting oneself be helped by the great masters of "*Lectio divina*".

For example, we have many beautiful books by Cardinal Martini, a true master of "*Lectio divina*", who helps us enter into the life of Sacred Scripture. Nevertheless, one who is thoroughly familiar with all the historical circumstances, all the characteristic elements of the past, always seeks to open the door to show that the words which appear to belong to the past are also words of the present. These teachers help us to understand better and also to learn how to interpret Sacred Scripture properly. Moreover, it is also appropriate in general to read it in the company of friends who are journeying with me, who are seeking, together with me, how to live with Christ, to find what life the Word of God brings us.

A third point: if it is important to read Sacred Scripture with the help of teachers and in the company of friends, travelling companions, it is particularly important to read it in the great company of the pilgrim People of God, that is, in the Church.

Sacred Scripture has two subjects. First and foremost, the divine subject: it is God who is speaking. However, God wanted to involve man in his Word. Whereas Muslims are convinced that the Koran was verbally inspired by God, we believe that for Sacred Scripture it is "synergy" - as the theologians say - that is characteristic, the collaboration of God with man.

God involves his People with his Word, hence, the second subject - the first subject, as I said, is God - is human. There are individual writers, but there is the continuity of a permanent subject - the People of God that journeys on with the Word of God and is in conversation with God. By listening to God, one learns to listen to the Word of God and then also to interpret it. Thus, the Word of God becomes present, because individual persons die but the vital subject, the People of God, is always alive and is identical in the course of the millennia: it is always the same living subject in which the Word lives.

This also explains many structures of Sacred Scripture, especially the so-called "rereading". An ancient text is reread in another book, let us say 100 years later, and what had been impossible to perceive in that earlier moment, although it was already contained in the previous text, is understood in-depth.

And it is read again, ages later, and once again other aspects, other dimensions of the Word are grasped. So it was that Sacred Scripture developed, in this permanent rereading and rewriting in the context of

profound continuity, in a continuous succession of the times of waiting.

At last, with the coming of Christ and the experience of the Apostles, the Word became definitive. Thus, there can be no further rewriting, but a further deepening of our understanding continues to be necessary. The Lord said: "The Holy Spirit will guide you into depths that you cannot fathom now".

Consequently, the communion of the Church is the living subject of Scripture. However, here too the principal subject is the Lord himself, who continues to speak through the Scriptures that we have in our hands.

I think that we should learn to do three things: to read it in a personal colloquium with the Lord; to read it with the guidance of teachers who have the experience of faith, who have penetrated Sacred Scripture: and to read it in the great company of the Church, in whose liturgy these events never cease to become present anew and in which the Lord speaks with us today.

Thus, we may gradually penetrate ever more deeply into Sacred Scripture, in which God truly speaks to us today.

## **Living in love**

*"Holy Father, I am Anna. I am 19 years old, I am studying literature, and I belong to the Parish of St Mary of Carmel.... It is easy to confuse love with selfishness, especially today when most of the media almost impose on us an individualistic, secularised vision of sexuality in which everything seems licit and everything is permitted in the name of freedom and individual conscience.... Knowing well that so many of us are striving to live our emotional life responsibly, could you explain to us what the Word of God has to tell us about this? Thank you."*

This is a vast question and it would certainly be impossible to answer it in a few minutes, but I will try to say something.

Anna herself has already given us some of the answers. She said that today love is often wrongly interpreted because it is presented as a selfish experience, whereas it is actually an abandonment of self and thus becomes a self-discovery.

She also said that a consumer culture falsifies our life with a relativism that seems to grant us everything, but in fact completely drains us.

So let us listen to the Word of God in this regard. Anna rightly wanted to know what the Word of God says. For me it is a beautiful thing to observe that already in the first pages of Sacred Scripture, subsequent to the story of man's Creation, we immediately find the definition of love and marriage.

The sacred author tells us: "A man will leave his father and mother and will cleave to his wife, and they will become one flesh", one life (cf. Gn 2: 24-25). We are at the beginning and we are already given a prophecy of what marriage is; and this definition also remains identical in the New Testament. Marriage is this following of the other in love, thus becoming one existence, one flesh, therefore inseparable; a new life that is born from this communion of love that unites and thus also creates the future.

Medieval theologians, interpreting this affirmation which is found at the beginning of Sacred Scripture,

said that marriage is the first of the seven sacraments to have been instituted by God already at the moment of creation, in Paradise, at the beginning of history and before any human history.

It is a sacrament of the Creator of the universe, hence, it is engraved in the human being himself, who is oriented to this journey on which man leaves his parents and is united to a woman in order to form only one flesh, so that the two may be a single existence.

Thus, the sacrament of marriage is not an invention of the Church; it is really "con-created" with man as such, as a fruit of the dynamism of love in which the man and the woman find themselves and thus also find the Creator who called them to love.

It is true that man fell and was expelled from Paradise, or, in other words, more modern words, it is true that all cultures are polluted by the sin, the errors of human beings in their history, and that the initial plan engraved in our nature is thereby clouded. Indeed, in human cultures we find this clouding of God's original plan.

At the same time, however, if we look at cultures, the whole cultural history of humanity, we note that man was never able to forget completely this plan that exists in the depths of his being. He has always known, in a certain sense, that other forms of relationship between a man and a woman do not truly correspond with the original design for his being.

And thus, in cultures, especially in the great cultures, we see again and again how they are oriented to this reality: monogamy, the man and the woman becoming one flesh. This is how a new generation can grow in fidelity, how a cultural tradition can endure, renew itself in continuity and make authentic progress.

The Lord, who spoke of this in the language of the prophets of Israel, said referring to Moses, who tolerated divorce: Moses permitted you to divorce "because of the hardness of your hearts". After sin, the heart became "hard", but this was not what the Creator had intended, and the Prophets, with increasing clarity, insisted on this original plan.

To renew man, the Lord - alluding to these prophetic voices which always guided Israel towards the clarity of monogamy - recognised with Ezekiel that, to live this vocation, we need a new heart; instead of a heart of stone - as Ezekiel said - we need a heart of flesh, a heart that is truly human.

And the Lord "implants" this new heart in us at Baptism, through faith. It is not a physical transplant, but perhaps we can make this comparison. After a transplant, the organism needs treatment, requires the necessary medicines to be able to live with the new heart, so that it becomes "one's own heart" and not the "heart of another".

This is especially so in this "spiritual transplant" when the Lord implants within us a new heart, a heart open to the Creator, to God's call. To be able to live with this new heart, adequate treatment is necessary; one must have recourse to the appropriate medicines so that it can really become "our heart".

Thus, by living in communion with Christ, with his Church, the new heart truly becomes "our own heart" and makes marriage possible. The exclusive love between a man and a woman, their life as a

couple planned by the Creator, becomes possible, even if the atmosphere of our world makes it difficult to the point that it appears impossible.

The Lord gives us a new heart and we must live with this new heart, using the appropriate therapies to ensure that it is really "our own". In this way we live with all that the Creator has given us and this creates a truly happy life.

Indeed, we can also see it in this world, despite the numerous other models of life: there are so many Christian families who live with faithfulness and joy the life and love pointed out to us by the Creator, so that a new humanity develops.

And lastly, I would add: we all know that to reach a goal in a sport or in one's profession, discipline and sacrifices are required; but then, by reaching a desired goal, it is all crowned with success.

Life itself is like this. In other words, becoming men and women according to Jesus' plan demands sacrifices, but these are by no means negative; on the contrary, they are a help in living as people with new hearts, in living a truly human and happy life.

Since a consumer culture exists that wants to prevent us from living in accordance with the Creator's plan, we must have the courage to create islands, oases, and then great stretches of land of Catholic culture where the Creator's design is lived out.

## **Life for the world**

*"Most Holy Father, I am Inelida. I am 17 years old, an assistant to the Scout Cub Master in the Parish of St Gregory Barberigo, and I am studying at the "Mario Mafai" senior secondary art school. In your Message for the 21st World Youth Day you said: "There is an urgent need for the emergence of a new generation of apostles anchored firmly in the Word of Christ" ...what in your opinion are the greatest challenges to face in our time; what does the Lord expect of us, Your Holiness?"*

We all ask ourselves what the Lord expects of us. It seems to me that the great challenge of our time - this is what the Bishops on their *ad limina* visits tell me, those from Africa, for example - is secularization: that is, a way of living and presenting the world as "si Deus non daretur", in other words, as if God did not exist.

There is a desire to reduce God to the private sphere, to a sentiment, as if he were not an objective reality. As a result, everyone makes his or her own plan of life. But this vision, presented as though it were scientific, accepts as valid only what can be proven.

With a God who is not available for immediate experimentation, this vision ends by also injuring society. The result is in fact that each one makes his own plan and in the end finds himself opposed to the other. As can be seen, this is definitely an unliveable situation.

We must make God present again in our society. This seems to me to be the first essential element: that

God be once again present in our lives, that we do not live as though we were autonomous, authorised to invent what freedom and life are. We must realize that we are creatures, aware that there is a God who has created us and that living in accordance with his will is not dependence but a gift of love that makes us alive.

Therefore, the first point is to know God, to know him better and better, to recognize that God is in my life, and that God has a place.

The second point - if we recognize that there is a God, that our freedom is a freedom shared with others and that there must consequently be a common parameter for building a common reality - the second point, I was saying, presents the question: what God? Indeed, there are so many false images of God, a violent God, etc.

The second point, therefore, is recognizing God who has shown us his face in Jesus, who suffered for us, who loved us to the point of dying, and thus overcame violence. It is necessary to make the living God present in our "own" lives first of all, the God who is not a stranger, a fictitious God, a God only thought of, but a God who has shown himself, who has shown his being and his face.

Only in this way do our lives become true, authentically human; hence, the criteria of true humanism emerge in society. Here too, as I said in my first answer, it is true that we cannot be alone in building this just and righteous life but must journey on in the company of good and upright friends, companions with whom we can experience that God exists and that it is beautiful to walk with God; and to walk in the great company of the Church, which presents to us down the centuries God who speaks, who acts, who accompanies us.

Therefore, I would say: to find God, to find God revealed in Jesus Christ, to walk in company with his great family, with our brothers and sisters who are God's family, this seems to me to be the essential content of this apostolate of which I spoke.

## **How I, your Father, Came to Follow Jesus**

*"Your Holiness, I am Vittorio, I am from the Parish of St John Bosco in Cinecittà. I am 20 years old and am studying educational sciences at the University of Tor Vergata.... You invite us not to be afraid to respond to the Lord with generosity, especially when he suggests following him in the consecrated or priestly life.... Can you tell us how you yourself came to understand your vocation? Can you give us some advice so that we can really understand whether the Lord is calling us to follow him in the consecrated or priestly life? Thank you."*

As for me, I grew up in a world very different from the world today, but in the end situations are similar.

On the one hand, the situation of "Christianity" still existed, where it was normal to go to church and to accept the faith as the revelation of God, and to try to live in accordance with his revelation; on the other, there was the Nazi regime which loudly stated: "In the new Germany there will be no more priests, there will be no more consecrated life, we do not need these people; look for another career". However, it was precisely in hearing these "loud" voices, in facing the brutality of that system with an



inhuman face, that I realised that there was instead a great need for priests.

This contrast, the sight of that anti-human culture, confirmed my conviction that the Lord, the Gospel and the faith were pointing out the right path, and that we were bound to commit ourselves to ensuring that this path survives. In this situation, my vocation to the priesthood grew with me, almost naturally, without any dramatic events of conversion.

Two other things also helped me on this journey: already as a boy, helped by my parents and by the parish priest, I had discovered the beauty of the Liturgy, and I came to love it more and more because I felt that divine beauty appears in it and that Heaven unfolds before us.

The second element was the discovery of the beauty of knowledge, of knowing God and Sacred Scripture, thanks to which it is possible to enter into that great adventure of dialogue with God which is theology. Thus, it was a joy to enter into this 1,000-year-old work of theology, this celebration of the Liturgy in which God is with us and celebrates with us.

Of course, problems were not lacking. I wondered if I would really be able to live celibacy all my life. Being a man of theoretical and not practical training, I also knew that it was not enough to love theology in order to be a good priest, but that it was also necessary to be always available to young people, the elderly, the sick and the poor: the need to be simple with the simple. Theology is beautiful, but the simplicity of words and Christian life is indispensable. And so I asked myself: will I be able to live all this and not be one-sided, merely a theologian, etc.?

However, the Lord helped me and the company of friends, of good priests and teachers especially helped me.

To return to the question, I think it is important to be attentive to the Lord's gestures on our journey. He speaks to us through events, through people, through encounters: it is necessary to be attentive to all of this.

Then, a second point, it is necessary to enter into real friendship with Jesus in a personal relationship with him and not to know who Jesus is only from others or from books, but to live an ever deeper personal relationship with Jesus, where we can begin to understand what he is asking of us.

And then, the awareness of what I am, of my possibilities: on the one hand, courage, and on the other, humility, trust and openness, with the help also of friends, of Church authority and also of priests, of families: what does the Lord want of me?

Of course, this is always a great adventure, but life can be successful only if we have the courage to be adventurous, trusting that the Lord will never leave me alone, that the Lord will go with me and help me.

## **Faith and Knowledge**

*Holy Father, I am Giovanni, I am 17 years old, I am studying at "Giovanni Giorgi" technological and scientific secondary school in Rome, and I belong to Holy Mary Mother of Mercy Parish. I ask you to*

*help us to understand better how biblical revelation and scientific theory can converge in the search for truth.*

We are often led to believe that knowledge and faith are each other's enemies; that knowledge and technology are the same thing; that it was through mathematical logic that everything was discovered; that the world is the result of an accident, and that if mathematics did not discover the theorem-God, it is because God simply does not exist.

In short, especially when we are studying, it is not always easy to trace everything back to a divine plan inherent in the nature and history of human beings. Thus, faith at times vacillates or is reduced to a simple sentimental act.

"Holy Father, like all young people, I too am thirsting for the truth: but what can I do to harmonise knowledge and faith?

The great Galileo said that God wrote the book of nature in the form of the language of mathematics. He was convinced that God has given us two books: the book of Sacred Scripture and the book of nature. And the language of nature - this was his conviction - is mathematics, so it is a language of God, a language of the Creator.

Let us now reflect on what mathematics is: in itself, it is an abstract system, an invention of the human spirit which as such in its purity does not exist. It is always approximated, but as such is an intellectual system, a great, ingenious invention of the human spirit.

The surprising thing is that this invention of our human intellect is truly the key to understanding nature, that nature is truly structured in a mathematical way, and that our mathematics, invented by our human mind, is truly the instrument for working with nature, to put it at our service, to use it through technology.

It seems to me almost incredible that an invention of the human mind and the structure of the universe coincide. Mathematics, which we invented, really gives us access to the nature of the universe and makes it possible for us to use it.

Therefore, the intellectual structure of the human subject and the objective structure of reality coincide: the subjective reason and the objective reason of nature are identical. I think that this coincidence between what we thought up and how nature is fulfilled and behaves is a great enigma and a great challenge, for we see that, in the end, it is "one" reason that links them both.

Our reason could not discover this other reason were there not an identical antecedent reason for both.

In this sense it really seems to me that mathematics - in which as such God cannot appear - shows us the intelligent structure of the universe. Now, there are also theories of chaos, but they are limited because if chaos had the upper hand, all technology would become impossible. Only because our mathematics is reliable, is technology reliable.



Our knowledge, which is at last making it possible to work with the energies of nature, supposes the reliable and intelligent structure of matter. Thus, we see that there is a subjective rationality and an objectified rationality in matter which coincide. Of course, no one can now prove - as is proven in an experiment, in technical laws - that they both really originated in a single intelligence, but it seems to me that this unity of intelligence, behind the two intelligences, really appears in our world. And the more we can delve into the world with our intelligence, the more clearly the plan of Creation appears.

In the end, to reach the definitive question I would say: God exists or he does not exist. There are only two options. Either one recognizes the priority of reason, of creative Reason that is at the beginning of all things and is the principle of all things - the priority of reason is also the priority of freedom -, or one holds the priority of the irrational, inasmuch as everything that functions on our earth and in our lives would be only accidental, marginal, an irrational result - reason would be a product of irrationality.

One cannot ultimately "prove" either project, but the great option of Christianity is the option for rationality and for the priority of reason. This seems to me to be an excellent option, which shows us that behind everything is a great Intelligence to which we can entrust ourselves.

However, the true problem challenging faith today seems to me to be the evil in the world: we ask ourselves how it can be compatible with the Creator's rationality. And here we truly need God, who was made flesh and shows us that he is not only a mathematical reason but that this original Reason is also Love. If we look at the great options, the Christian option today is the one that is the most rational and the most human.

Therefore, we can confidently work out a philosophy, a vision of the world based on this priority of reason, on this trust that the creating Reason is love and that this love is God.

*Taken from a Q & A session with Young people. Saint Peter's Square. 6 April 2006*