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Pope speaks to international space station

Sarah Delaney Catholic News Service | May. 23, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- Pope Benedict XVI reached out to outer space to ask astronauts how their unique perspective from the frontier of the universe makes them think about difficult questions back on earth.

In a video hookup May 21 between the Vatican and the International Space Station (ISS) in orbit around the earth, Pope Benedict asked the astronauts how science can help in the pursuit of peace and the need to protect a fragile planet.

Seated at a desk in front of a video screen, the pope could see the 12 astronauts huddled before the camera and trying not to float away from lack of gravity inside the super technological space station. The group included space station crew and members of the final mission of the U.S. shuttle Endeavour.

The pope praised the space travelers for their courage and commitment, and reminded them that after their extraordinary experience, they "must eventually come back down to earth like all the rest of us."

His first question dealt with violence and war, and was addressed to the Endeavour mission commander, U.S. astronaut Mark Kelly, whose wife, Arizona Rep. Gabrielle Giffords, was still recovering after being critically injured in a shooting in January.

Acknowledging the attack and wishing her a full recovery, the pope said, "When you are contemplating earth from up there, do you ever wonder about the way nations and people live together down here, about how science can contribute to the cause of peace?"

Kelly said that because the space station itself was up and running only as a result of the efforts of many countries, it was itself a good model for international cooperation. And because it is operated entirely on limitless solar power, he said, better development of that technology on earth could reduce the struggle over energy resources, which is the cause of much of the violence and war in the world now.

Pope Benedict noted that he often spoke of humanity's responsibility to protect the earth in an ethical manner, and to guarantee the survival of future generations. He asked Endeavour crew member Ron Garan what he could see on earth from his perch in space that needed attention.

Garan said that what was most evident is the fragility of earth and the atmosphere. "To think that this paper-thin layer is all that separates every living thing from the vacuum of space and is all that protects us, is a really sobering thought," he said.

The pope asked Mike Fincke, mission specialist for the shuttle, what advice he would pass on to children "who will live in a world strongly influenced by your experiences and discoveries?"

The astronaut said that he hoped the space mission would "let the children of the planet know ... that there is a whole universe for us to go explore. And when we do it together, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish."

Pope Benedict reminded Roberto Vittori, an Italian member of the Endeavour team, of the medallion decorated with the image of the creation of man, as painted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, which the pope had given him before this mission. He asked Vittori if he remembered to pray while out in space.

Vittori let the weightless medallion float in front of the screen and said, "I do pray: for me, for our families, for our future." He added that the beauty of the earth from his extraordinary vantage point "is capturing my heart."

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