

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

September 14, 2012 at 11:23pm

Transcript of pope en route to Lebanon

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NCR Today

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Beirut

As is normal practice during trips, Benedict XVI came back to the press compartment of the papal plane yesterday shortly after takeoff from Rome's Ciampino airport to respond to five questions. These questions had been collected in advance from journalists covering the trip by the Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, and were read aloud by Lombardi before the pope gave his reply.

The following is an NCR translation of the exchange, which lasted approximately 13 minutes. The first two questions and answers were in French, with the other three in Italian.

Text of the Interview

Lombardi: Holy Father, welcome and thank you for being with us. There are a little more than 50 journalists traveling with you, with different languages and nationalities. Naturally there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, waiting in Lebanon, and all are very interested in this trip knowing its commitment and importance. We're grateful for your being with us to respond to the challenging questions that the journalists themselves have formulated in the preceding days. I'll offer the first two questions in French. The Holy Father will respond in French, as the more or less official language of the trip, and the other three in Italian.

Question: Holy Father, terrible anniversaries fall in these days, such as that of September 11, or that of the massacre of Sabra and Chatila; on the borders of Lebanon there's a bloody civil war, and we see that in other countries the risk of violence remains very real. Holy Father, what are your feelings as you face this trip? Were you tempted to cancel because of the insecurity, or did someone suggest canceling it?

Benedict: Dear Friends, I'm very happy and grateful for this chance to speak with you. I can say that no one advised me to cancel this trip and for my part I never contemplated that idea, because I know that if the situation is complicated, it's even more necessary to offer this sign of fraternity, or encouragement and of solidarity. This is the meaning of my trip: an invitation to dialogue, an invitation to peace rather than violence, to go forward together to find solutions to the problems. Therefore, my feelings for this trip are, above all, gratitude for the possibility of going in this moment to this great country, this country that as Pope John Paul II said is a message at multiple levels, in this region, of encounter and of the origins of the three Abrahamic religions. I'm grateful above all to the Lord, who has given me this possibility; I'm grateful to all the institutions and persons who have collaborated, and who are still collaborating, for this possibility. I'm grateful to all those persons who are accompanying me with prayer. In this protection formed by prayer and collaboration, I'm happy and I'm certain that we can offer a real service to the good of the human person and to peace.

Question: Many Catholics are voicing growing concern regarding the growth of fundamentalism in different regions of the world, and the aggressions which afflict numerous Christian victims. In this difficult and often bloody context, how can the church respond to the imperative of dialogue with Islam, upon which you've insisted many times?

Benedict: Fundamentalism is always a falsification of religion. It goes against the essence of religion, which wants to reconcile and create the peace of God in the world. Thus, the duty of the church and of the religions is that of pacification; a further purification of religion from these temptations is always necessary. It's our duty to illuminate and purify consciences, and to make it clear that every human being is the image of God; and we have to respect the other not only in his or her otherness, but because in that otherness is the real common essence of being the image of God; and we must treat the other as an image of God. Hence the fundamental message of religion must stand against violence, which is a falsification, like fundamentalism, and must be an education, an illumination and the purification of consciences, to render them capable of dialogue, reconciliation and peace.

Question: In the context of the wave of desire for democracy that began in many countries of the Middle East with the so-called "Arab Spring," and given the social reality of the majority of these countries, where Christians are a minority, isn't there the risk of an inevitable tension between majority rule and the survival of Christianity?

Benedict: I would say that in itself the Arab Spring is a positive thing. It's a desire for greater democracy, for greater liberty, greater cooperation and a renewed Arab identity. This cry for liberty comes from youth with a strong cultural and personal formation who want greater participation in political and social life, and that's in itself a very positive and healthy thing, also for us Christians. Naturally, from the history of revolutions we know that the cry of liberty, which is important and positive, is always at risk of forgetting an aspect, a fundamental dimension of liberty, which is tolerance of the other. The fact is that human liberty is always a shared liberty, and that only in sharing and solidarity, living together with determined rules, can it grow. Forgetting that is always a risk, and it's a risk also in this case. We have to do everything possible to ensure that the concept of liberty, the desire for liberty, moves in the right direction, not forgetting tolerance, togetherness, reconciliation, as a fundamental dimension. In the same way, I think a renewed Arab identity implies also the renewal of the centuries-long, millennium-long, coexistence of Christians and Muslims, in tolerance, as a minority and a majority, who built these lands and can only live together. We need to emphasize the positive elements of these movements and do everything we can to make sure that "liberty" is understood in the right way, in the sense of a dialogue and not domination of one over the other.

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Question: Holy Father, in Syria just like in Iraq recently, many Christians feel compelled to leave their country heave-hearted. What does the Catholic church intend to say or to do to help in this situation, in order to arrest the disappearance of Christianity in Syria and other Middle Eastern nations?

Benedict: I have to say, first of all, that it's not just Christians who are fleeing, but also Muslims. Naturally, the risk that Christians will leave and lose their presence in this land is great, and we have to do everything possible to help them stay. The most essential kind of help would be ending the war and the violence, because that's what's creating this exodus. We have to do everything possible to end the war, which will allow people to stay together also in the future. What can we do against the war? Let's say, first, that we must always promote the message of peace, making it clear that violence never resolves problems, and reinforce our efforts for peace. In this sense, the work of journalists is very important in showing how violence destroys rather than builds, it's not useful to anyone. Then, I'd say Christian gestures, days of prayer for the Middle East, for Christians and Muslims, demonstrate possibilities of dialogue about the search for solutions. I would say also that importation of arms must finally end, because without this import of arms, the war couldn't go on. Instead of importing arms, which is a grave sin, we need to import ideas of peace, creativity, to find solutions toward accepting others as they are. We thus have to make visible in the world respect of religions, one for the other, respect for the human person as a creature of God, and the love of one's neighbor as fundamental for all the religions. In this sense, with all the possible gestures, and also with material help, we can help so that the war ends, the violence, and everyone can reconstruct the country.

Question: You're carrying an "Apostolic Exhortation" addressed to all the Christians of the Middle East. It's a suffering population today. Beyond prayer and feelings of solidarity, do you see concrete steps that the churches and Catholics of the West, above all in Europe and America, can take to support these people?

Benedict: I'd say we have to influence political opinion, and politicians, to really commit themselves, with all energies and all possibilities, with real creativity, for peace and against violence. No one should hope to take advantage of violence, and everyone must contribute. In this sense, a work of warning, of education, of purification is very necessary on our part. In addition, our charitable organizations ought to help in a material way and do everything possible. We have organizations such as the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre, which in itself is only for the Holy Land, but similar organizations can help materially, politically, and humanly in these countries. I would say, once again, that visible gestures of solidarity, days of public prayer, and similar things that can recall the attention of public opinion, are real factors. We are convinced that prayer has an effect; if done with great trust and faith, it will have its effect.

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