



Benedetto XVI

Bologna, 20 April 2005

Dearest...

The election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, after less than 24 hours of Conclave, and most of all after his Homily at the Mass “Pro eligendo romano Pontifice [For the Roman Pontiff to be elected]”, is a clear evidence of the present single-mindedness of the College of the Cardinals in their determination to confirm the “fundamental values” of Catholicism in front of all the believers who follow the guidance of the Church of Rome. The most important words uttered by Cardinal Ratzinger in this regard are as follows:

Having a clear faith, based on the Creed of the Church, is often labelled today as fundamentalism. Whereas, relativism, which is letting oneself be tossed and “swept along by every wind of teaching”, looks like the only attitude (acceptable) to today’s standards. We are moving towards a dictatorship of relativism which does not recognise anything as for sure and which has as its highest goal one’s own ego and one’s own desires An “adult” faith is a faith which does not follow the waves of today’s fashions or the latest novelties. A faith which is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ is adult and mature. It is this friendship which opens us up to all that is good and gives us the knowledge to judge true from false, and deceit from truth. (Homily at the Mass “Pro eligendo romano Pontifice” [18 April 2005])

Most observers said his straightforward taking of a stand would have driven the Cardinals not to vote for him in the Conclave. It happened exactly the opposite. There are many reasons why the Cardinals supported a Pope whom most observers label as fundamentalist. I think that the most evident are as follows:

1. The dictatorship of materialism, which has kept the Christian world in its grip during the second half of the 20th century, is still powerful. However, its failure to fulfil its promises has weakened its popularity. The Cardinals seem to think that the

time is propitious for them to attack it directly, opposing a return to the safe haven of the fundamental verities of Catholicism to the uncertainties of relativism upheld by materialism.

2. The expansion of Islam is evident today in the streets of all European cities. These cities have always been almost exclusively inhabited by Christians (and some Jews). Today, their streets see growing numbers of Muslims, often inspired by a deeply rooted faith in the verities of their religion, which the aged Westerners have seemingly lost. The Cardinals seem to think they will be able to withstand this expansion through a Pope who will summon the Catholics to their responsibility of bearing witness to the fundamental values of their faith in their daily lives. (Besides, the presence at the funeral of Pope Wojtywa of many eminent non Catholic Christian personages, comprising three Protestant American Presidents, may be evidence that the Christian political world wants to present itself as a united body to their Muslim antagonists.)

3. Many observers said Wojtywa's pontificate has seen crowded squares and disconsolately empty churches and seminaries. The Cardinals seem to think that the squares were crowded because people search for an authentic moral leadership, which they do not find in a divided and undecided Church of Rome. They think that their Church will be able to offer this moral leadership through a Pope who will summon the Catholics to the fundamentals of Catholicism.

4. The Cardinals feel that the Church of Rome is in danger; they complain that their Church is repeatedly and violently criticised and that no voice is raised in its defence, whereas criticism against other religions is almost always met with a general disapproval. Therefore, they want a Pope who will defend the Catholics with a strong voice, drawing from the fundamentals of Catholicism.

5. In the eyes of the Cardinals, their return to the fundamentals of Catholicism does not close the doors to the separated Christian Churches, at which they look with a particular favour in the hope of a not distant reunion.

I think that the Cardinals had no other choice. In 1981, Pope Wojtywa wanted Cardinal Ratzinger to be Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. For more than 20 years, Cardinal Ratzinger has been the highest officer responsible for the theological ideology of the Catholic Church. He was the ideal candidate for a Pope who was expected to summon back the Catholics to the fundamentals of their

faith. Cardinal Ratzinger is so staunch in his ideas that in a March 2005 interview with the leading Italian journalist Bruno Vespa—twice broadcast on Italian Television the day after he was elected the Pope—he said that those who define him as a fundamentalist implicitly refuse any dialogue with him.

The results of this election on interfaith dialogue will depend on the true interests of the various interlocutors. Any person of faith, really convinced that his belief is true, considers this belief as absolute, that is, as deserving of an absolute and unqualified acceptance and invested with a total and indisputable value for all human beings. Pope Ratzinger believes that the message of Christ, as interpreted by the Church of Rome, deserves an absolute and unqualified acceptance and is invested with a total and indisputable value for all human beings. The human right to freedom of belief and thought obliges everyone to recognise Pope Ratzinger's freedom to profess this belief, and the human right to freedom of speech obliges everyone to recognise his freedom to express his belief. The only condition is that he should do the same with all the other persons of faith. And he seems determined to adopt this attitude of respect. He clarified his position in this respect in his Homily at the funeral of John Paul II, on 8 April 2005, when he quoted the following words by St. Peter:

“I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation, anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him. You know the message he sent to the people of Israel, preaching peace by Jesus Christ—he is Lord of all” (Acts 10:34-36).

Moreover, in his Homily at the Mass “Pro eligendo romano Pontifice” of 18 April 2005, he said, quoting St. Paul, that Christians should “make truth in love, as the basic formula of Christian existence,” because “love without truth would be blind; truth without love would be like ‘a resounding gong or a clashing cymbal’ (1 Cor 13,1).”

I learn an important lesson from his words. Interfaith dialogue cannot be a hypocritical act. The major representatives of organised religion do not seem ready at the present moment to talk of one common faith, as many lesser representatives and many ordinary believers want to do. The major representatives want to find a way to live in peace, one beside the other, without making war on each other, and using their right and/or duty to teach their respective beliefs according to specific rules of reciprocal respect. In former years, the attitude of the Church of Rome was

ambiguous in this respect. On the one hand, the openness of the Congress at the Vatican at the end of the second millennium, with its exalting, implicit, but deceptive promises of unity. On the other hand, the clear exclusivist theological statements of “Dominus Iesus”. Today, Ratzinger finally unites the two souls of the Church of Rome, whose official position becomes thus very clear. We will see how the other organised religion will respond. As to us, as Bahá’ís, we must accept quietly and undisturbed that, for the time being, the Church of Rome does not agree with us on our idea of one common faith. From the Catholic perspective, this idea is guilty of relativism and syncretism, and thus it is irreconcilable with their doctrine. However, we can agree on many other shared ideas, for example, the present need to diminish the secular ideology’s hegemony.

Love

Julio