



Kerk moet orientatie aan bioethiek geven

Address Of His Holiness Benedict XVI To The Participants In The Plenary Session Of The Congregation For The Doctrine Of The Faith



31 January 2008
Pope Benedict XVI

Your Eminences, Venerable Brothers in the Episcopate and in the Priesthood, Dear and Faithful Collaborators,

It gives me great joy to meet you on the occasion of your Plenary Assembly. I can thus express to you my sentiments of deep gratitude and cordial appreciation for the work that your Dicastery carries out at the service of the ministry of unity, entrusted in a special way to the Roman Pontiff. It is a ministry expressed primarily in terms of the unity of faith, resting on the “sacred deposit” whose principal custodian and defender is the Successor of Peter (cf. Apostolic Constitution *Pastor Bonus*, n. 11). I thank Cardinal William Levada for expressing your common sentiments and for recalling the themes that have been the subject of some Documents published by your Congregation in recent years, as well as the topics that are still under examination by the Dicastery.

Last year, in particular, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith published two important Documents which offered doctrinal clarification on essential aspects of the Church’s teaching and on evangelization. These clarifications are necessary if the ecumenical dialogue with the world’s religions and cultures is to progress as it should. The first Document is entitled “Responses to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church” (29 June 2007). In its formulation and language, it repropose the teaching of the Second Vatican Council, in full continuity with the doctrine of Catholic Tradition. Thus, it confirms that the one and only Church of Christ, which we confess in the Creed, has its subsistence, permanence and stability in the Catholic Church, and that therefore, the unity, indivisibility and indestructibility of Christ’s Church is in no way annulled by the separations and divisions of Christians. Alongside this fundamental doctrinal definition, the Document repropose the correct linguistic use of some ecclesiological terminology that risks being misunderstood. To this end, it calls attention to the difference that still endures among the different Christian denominations with regard to the understanding of being Church in the proper theological sense. Far from preventing authentic ecumenical commitment, this difference will encourage a realistic and fully informed discussion of the issues that still separate the Christian denominations; it will also encourage joyful recognition of the truths of faith professed in common and the need to pray without ceasing for a more deeply committed advance towards greater and ultimately full Christian unity. The consequence of fostering a theological vision which holds the unity and identity of the Church to be gifts “hidden in Christ”, reconcilable only in an eschatological perspective, would be that the Church in history would exist *de facto* in multiple ecclesial forms, and ultimately hinder and paralyze ecumenism itself.

The Second Vatican Council’s assertion that the true Church of Christ “subsists in the Catholic Church” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, n. 8), does not exclusively concern the relationship with the Churches and Christian Ecclesial Communities but also extends to the definition of relations with the religions and cultures of the world. In the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae* on Religious Liberty, the Second Vatican Council affirmed that “this one true religion continues to exist in the Catholic and Apostolic Church, to which the Lord Jesus



entrusted the task of spreading it among all men" (n. 1). The Doctrinal Note on Some Aspects of Evangelization – the other Document, published by your Congregation in December 2007 -, confronted by the risk of persistent religious and cultural relativism, reaffirms that in the age of interreligious and intercultural dialogue the Church does not dispense with the need for evangelization and missionary activity for peoples, nor does she cease to ask men and women to accept the salvation offered to them all. Recognition of elements of truth and good in the world's religions and the seriousness of their religious endeavours, together with dialogue and a spirit of collaboration with them for the defence and promotion of the person's dignity and the universal moral values, cannot be understood as a limitation of the Church's missionary task, which involves her in ceaselessly proclaiming Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life (cf. Jn 14: 6).

I also ask you, dear friends, to pay special attention to the difficult and complex issues of bioethics. In fact, new biomedical technologies, do not only involve certain specialized doctors and researchers but are disseminated through the modern means of social communication, giving rise to expectations and questions in ever broader sectors of society. The Church's Magisterium certainly cannot and ought not address every scientific innovation, but has the task of reaffirming the important values at stake and of suggesting to the faithful and to all people of good will the ethical and moral principles and guidelines for new and important issues. The two fundamental criteria for moral discernment in this field are: a) unconditional respect for the human being as a person from conception to natural death; b) respect for the originality of the transmission of human life through the acts proper to spouses. After the publication in 1987 of the Instruction *Donum Vitae* which spelled out these criteria, many levelled criticism at the Magisterium of the Church for being an obstacle to science and to the true progress of humanity. However, the new problems associated, for example, with the freezing of human embryos, with embryonic reduction [selective abortion of medically implanted embryos], with pre-implantational diagnosis, with research on embryonic stem cells and with attempts at human cloning, clearly show that with extra-corporeal artificial fertilization, the barrier that served to protect human dignity has been violated. When human beings, in the weakest and most defenceless stage of their lives are selected, abandoned, killed or used as mere "biological material", how can it be denied that they are no longer being treated as "someone" but rather as "something", hence, calling into question the very concept of human dignity?

Of course, the Church appreciates and encourages the progress of the biomedical sciences which open up unprecedented therapeutic prospects until now unknown, for example, through the use of somatic stem cells, or treatment that aims to restore fertility or cure genetic diseases. At the same time, she feels duty-bound to enlighten all consciences to the only authentic progress, namely, that scientific progress truly respect every human being, whose personal dignity must be recognized since he is created in the image of God. The study of these themes, which has involved your Assembly in a special way in these days, will certainly help to encourage the formation of the consciences of a large number of our brethren, in accordance with what the Second Vatican Council stated in the Declaration *Dignitatis Humanae*: "In forming their consciences the faithful must pay careful attention to the sacred and certain teaching of the Church. For the Catholic Church is by the will of Christ the teacher of truth. It is her duty to proclaim and teach with authority the truth which is Christ and, at the same time, to declare and confirm by her authority the principles of the moral order which spring from human nature itself" (n. 14).

As I encourage you to persevere in your demanding and important work, on this occasion I also express my spiritual closeness to you and I warmly impart the Apostolic Blessing to you all, as a pledge of affection and gratitude.