Tot de Internationale Theologencommissie

Address of his Holiness Benedict XVI to members of the International Theological Commission

Website Vatican, 5 October 2007
Vatican's Hall of Popes

Your Eminence, Venerable Brothers in the Priesthood, Distinguished Professors and dear Collaborators,

I welcome you with special pleasure at the end of your Annual Plenary Meeting. I would like first of all to express my heartfelt gratitude for the tribute which, as President of the International Theological Commission, Your Eminence has addressed to me on behalf of all. The work of this seventh "quinquennium" of the International Theological Commission, as you recalled, Your Eminence, has already born fruit in practice with the publication of the Document "The Hope of Salvation for Infants Who Die Without Being Baptized". The subject is treated here in the context of the universal saving will of God, the universality of the one mediation of Christ, the primacy of divine grace and the sacramental nature of the Church. I am confident that this Document will be a useful reference point for Pastors of the Church and for theologians, as well as a help and source of consolation to members of the faithful who have suffered in their families the unexpected death of a child before he or she could receive the bath of baptismal regeneration. Your reflections will also be an opportunity for further study of, and research into, this subject.

Indeed, it is necessary to penetrate ever more deeply into the comprehension of the various manifestations of God's love for all human beings, especially the lowliest and the poorest, which was revealed to us in Christ.

I congratulate you on the results you have already achieved and encourage you at the same time to persevere with commitment in the examination of the other themes proposed for this quinquennium, on which you have already worked in previous years as well as at this Plenary Meeting. They, as Your Eminence has recalled, are the basis of natural moral law, theology and its method. At the Audience on 1 December 2005, I presented certain fundamental approaches for the work that theologians must carry out in communion with the living voice of the Church under the guidance of the Magisterium. I would like here to reflect in a special way on the theme of natural moral law.

As you probably know, at the invitation of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, symposiums or study days were held or are being organized by various university centres and associations in order to find constructive pointers and convergences for an effective deepening of the doctrine on natural moral law. So far, this invitation has met with a positive reception and aroused considerable interest. The contribution of the International Theological Commission, aimed above all to justify and describe the foundations of a universal ethic that is part of the great patrimony of human knowledge which in a certain way constitutes the rational creature's participation in the eternal law of God, is eagerly awaited. It is not, therefore, a theme of an exclusively or mainly denominational kind, although the doctrine on natural moral law is illuminated and developed to the full in the light of Christian revelation and the fulfilment of man in the mystery of Christ.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church sums up well the central content of the doctrine on natural moral law, pointing out that it "states the first and essential precepts which govern the moral life. It hinges upon the desire

for God and submission to him, who is the source and judge of all that is good, as well as upon the sense that the other is one's equal. Its principal precepts are expressed in the Decalogue. This law is called "natural', not in reference to the nature of irrational beings, but because reason which decrees it properly belongs to human nature" (n. 1955). With this doctrine two essential goals are reached: on the one hand, it is understood that the ethical content of the Christian faith does not constitute an imposition dictated to the human conscience from the outside but a norm inherent in human nature itself; on the other hand, on the basis of natural law, in itself accessible to any rational creature, with this doctrine the foundations are laid to enter into dialogue with all people of good will and more generally, with civil and secular society.

Yet, precisely because of the influence of cultural and ideological factors, today's civil and secular society is found to be in a state of bewilderment and confusion: it has lost the original evidence of the roots of the human being and his ethical behaviour. Furthermore, the doctrine of natural moral law conflicts with other concepts that are a direct denial of it. All this has far-reaching, serious consequences on the civil and social order. Today, a positivist conception of law seems to dominate many thinkers. They claim that humanity or society or indeed the majority of citizens is becoming the ultimate source of civil law. The problem that arises is not, therefore, the search for good but the search for power, or rather, how to balance powers. At the root of this trend is ethical relativism, which some even see as one of the principal conditions for democracy, since relativism is supposed to guarantee tolerance of and reciprocal respect for people. But if this were so, the majority of a moment would become the ultimate source of law. History very clearly shows that most people can err. True rationality is not guaranteed by the consensus of a large number but solely by the transparency of human reason to creative Reason and by listening together to this Source of our rationality.

When the fundamental requirements of human dignity, of human life, of the family institution, of a fair social order, in other words, basic human rights, are at stake, no law devised by human beings can subvert the law that the Creator has engraved on the human heart without the indispensable foundations of society itself being dramatically affected. Natural law thus becomes the true guarantee offered to each one in order that he may live in freedom, have his dignity respected and be protected from all ideological manipulation and every kind of arbitrary use or abuse by the stronger. No one can ignore this appeal. If, by tragically blotting out the collective conscience, scepticism and ethical relativism were to succeed in deleting the fundamental principles of the natural moral law, the foundations of the democratic order itself would be radically damaged. To prevent this obscuring, which is a crisis of human civilization even before it is a Christian one, all consciences of people of good will, of lay persons and also of the members of the different Christian denominations, must be mobilized so that they may engage, together and effectively, in order to create the necessary conditions for the inalienable value of the natural moral law in culture and in civil and political society to be fully understood. Indeed, on respect for this natural moral law depends the advance of individuals and society on the path of authentic progress in conformity with right reason, which is participation in the eternal Reason of God.

Dear friends, with gratitude I express to you all my appreciation for the dedication that distinguishes you and my esteem for the work you have done and continue to do. As I offer you my best wishes for your future commitments, I impart my Blessing to you with affection.