



JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER

GOD AND
THE WORLD

A Conversation with Peter Seewald

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God and the World

Believing and Living in Our Time

A Conversation with Peter Seewald

Translated by Henry Taylor

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Contents

[Preface by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger](#)

[Preface by Peter Seewald](#)

[Prologue: FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE](#)

[An Image of God](#)

[The Crisis of Faith](#)

[Doubt](#)

[Lamenting like Job?](#)

[Moving Mountains](#)

[God and Reason](#)

[A Contradiction](#)

[Mystery](#)

[Is Everything Already Written?](#)

[Are Miracles Real?](#)

[God, Yes—Church, No?](#)

[Part I: GOD](#)

[1. MAN](#)

[The Breath of God](#)

[Men and Women](#)

[Beyond Eden—The Fall](#)

[The Soul](#)

[Freedom](#)

[2. GOD](#)

[Is God Male or Female?](#)

[What Is God Like?](#)

[Where Is God?](#)

[What Does God Want?](#)

3. CREATION

In the Beginning Was the Word The Crown of Creation So-
Called Evil

Heaven and Hell

The Tree of Life

4. ORDER IN CREATION

The Fundamental Evidence of the Universe 5. THE TWO
TESTAMENTS

The Old Covenant

The Book of Books

6. THE LAW

The Four Laws

The Ten Commandments 7. LOVE

The Meaning of Life

How Do We Learn to Love Aspects of Love

Part II: JESUS CHRIST

Jesus—An Invention?

8. REVELATION

Prophets and Heralds Did God Correct Himself?

9. THE LIGHT

The Most Important Moment in History Light of the World

II. What Did Christ Bring to Earth?

Good News

10. THE WAY

Gospels and Gospel Writers The Way, the Truth, and the Life

Who Was Jesus Really?

The Multiplication of Loaves Jesus and Women

The Meeting

The Wilderness

Power and Possessions 11. THE TRUTH

Son of God

The Trinity

Our Father

The Father-Son Principle 12. LIFE

The Life of Man

The Jesus Principle

True and False Cares Judging The Two Ways

The False Prophets

13. THE MOTHER OF GOD

Ave Maria

Dogmas

The Miracles

Mercy

The Rosary

14. THE CROSS

INRI—The Passion of the Lord The Resurrection

Part III: THE CHURCH

15. THE SPIRIT

How It All Started

The Essential Nature of the Church The Heart of the Church
The Task of the Church God and the Church

16. SPIRITUAL GIFTS

The Primitive Church Paul

Mission

The Pope

The Network of the Church 17. THE SACRAMENTS

The Design for Life

Enlightenment

Maturity

The Most Sacred Action at the Most Sacred Place The Liturgy

Guilt and Reconciliation Marriage

Priests

Dying

18. THE FUTURE

National Church or Minority Church?

John Paul II

The Universal Church in the Future Christian Unity

New Dangers for Faith A Renaissance of Spirituality Honesty

Preface

By Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger

In 1996 Peter Seewald suggested we have a conversation about the questions that people today put to the Church and that are often for them an obstacle on the path to faith. That was the origin of the book *Salt of the Earth*, which many welcomed with gratitude as a practical help in getting their bearings.

Because of the widespread and surprisingly positive response to this book, Mr. Seewald was prompted to suggest a second session of conversations, with a view to illuminating the inner questions of faith, an area that strikes many Christians as an impenetrable jungle in which one can hardly find one's way. Much of this, even what is important for the Christian, seems in the light of modern thought difficult to understand or to accept.

The overwhelming demands of my official work prevented this at first. What little free time I had at my disposal, I wanted to devote to writing a book about the spirit of the liturgy, which I had had in mind since the beginning of the eighties but had never been able to get down on paper. This work was finally put together in the course of three summer holidays and appeared at the beginning of this year [2000]. So at last I had time free for the second conversation with Seewald, for which he had suggested we meet in the richly symbolic abbey of Monte Cassino, motherhouse of the Benedictine order. There, strengthened by the Benedictine hospitality, we held our new interchange, which Mr. Seewald had prepared with great care. I had to rely on the inspiration of the moment.

The quiet of the monastery, the friendliness of the monks and of their abbot, the atmosphere of prayer, and the reverent celebration of the liturgy helped us a great deal;

and as it turned out, we were able to celebrate with appropriate splendor the feast of Saint Scholastica, the sister of Saint Benedict. So the monks of Monte Cassino have the thanks of both authors, who experienced this venerable site as a place of inspiration.

I probably do not need to point out that each of the two writers speaks for himself and makes his own contribution. Just as in *Salt of the Earth*, so too here—it seems to me—a real dialogue developed from the differing backgrounds and ways of thinking, in which the unsparing directness of the questions and answers proved fruitful. Mr. Seewald, who tape-recorded my answers, undertook the work of transcription and any necessary editing. For my part, I read through my answers with a critical eye and although, where this seemed necessary, I have smoothed out the language or here and there made minor additions, as a whole I have left the spoken word as it stood, just as the challenge of the moment called forth. I hope this second book of dialogue will find just as friendly a reception as *Salt of the Earth* and that it will be of some help to many of those people who are seeking to understand the Christian faith.

Rome, August 22, 2000

Preface

By Peter Seewald

Monte Cassino, early in the year. The road snaking up to the Abbey of Saint Benedict was steep and narrow, and the higher we climbed, the colder the air became. No one said anything, not even Alfredo, the Cardinal's chauffeur. I don't know—winter was definitely past, but somehow we seemed to be worrying about the cold nights that were still to come.

When, together with Cardinal Ratzinger, I published the book-length interview *Salt of the Earth*, many people took the opportunity to go into a subject they had hitherto found inaccessible. The name of God was indeed more current than it had ever been, but actually people no longer knew what they were talking about when they talked about religion. I experienced this when talking with friends or among the staff of the magazine for which I worked. Within a short period of time, something like a spiritual nuclear attack had befallen large sections of society, a sort of Big Bang of the Christian culture that was our foundation. Even if people did not deny the existence of God, no one still counted on the fact that he had any power in the world, or could actually do anything.

At this period I used to visit a church every now and then. Although I had doubts and mistrusted messages of salvation, it still seemed to me beyond contradiction that the world was no accident nor the result of an explosion or something like that, as Marx and others maintained. And certainly not the creation of man, who can neither cure the common cold nor stop a dam from breaking. I became aware that behind the web of worship, prayer, and commandments there had to be some truth. "We have not followed some cleverly concocted story", it says in one of the Letters of the apostles. But it would have seemed stupid

to me to start making the sign of the cross or some gesture of humility such as people usually make during Mass. And whenever I looked around inside a church, I could no longer read the meaning of all that was there. The essential thing, the meaning of it all, seemed to be hidden as if behind a veil of fog.

Leaving the Church, which for many years seemed to me hollow and reactionary, had not been exactly easy; returning to her, however, is much more difficult. You do not want only to believe what you know; you want to know what you believe. Great mountains of insoluble questions bar the way. Is Christ truly the Son of God, who brought us salvation? And if he is, then what kind of a God is that? A good God, who helps us? A cynical, bored God, writing on, line by line, in his Book of Life? What does he want with people who are liable to fall prey to the power of evil? What are we here for at all? What about the Commandments? Are they still valid? And what do the seven sacraments mean? Is the master plan for the whole of existence hidden within them, as we are told? Can believing and living still be combined at all, in the twenty-first century, so as to enable us to make some use in the modern world of the basic knowledge drawn from man's heritage?

Well, you cannot answer very many questions or put the answers in a form easily grasped in just a short time. There is much that can never be fully expressed in words. But when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger sat there opposite me in the Abbey, one of the Church's great wise men, and patiently recounted the Gospel to me, the belief of Christendom from the beginning of the world to its end, then, day by day, something of the mystery that holds the world together from within became more tangible. And fundamentally it is perhaps quite simple. "Creation", said the scholar, "bears within itself an order. We can work out from this the ideas of God—and even the right way for us to live."

Munich, August 15, 2000

Prologue

FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE

Your Eminence, do you ever feel afraid of God?

I wouldn't exactly say "afraid". We know from Christ who God is and that he loves us. And he knows what we are like. He knows we are flesh. We are dust. Because of that he accepts us in our weakness.

In any case, again and again I am keenly aware of how I fail to live up to my calling. To live up to the idea that God has of me, of what I could and should give.

Do you have the feeling, at such times, that God sometimes criticizes you or disapproves of some of your decisions?

God is not like a policeman or a prosecuting counsel, who tells you off and hands out a punishment. But in the mirror of faith and of the charge I have received, I have to consider every day what is right and when something is wrong. Naturally I then likewise feel that, with regard to myself, something is not as it should be. And that is what the sacrament of confession is for.

People always say that Catholics are full of guilt feelings toward God.

I believe that Catholics are animated above all by a great sense of God's forgiveness. Take baroque or rococo art. There you can see a great joyfulness. Thus, typically

Catholic nations like Italy or Spain have a reputation, and with good reason, for being light-hearted.

Perhaps there have been, in particular areas of Christianity, certain forms of education, distortions, in which frightening, burdensome, rigorously strict elements have predominated, but this is not Catholicism properly speaking. My own feeling is that, in those very people whose lives draw upon the faith of the Church, a sense of redemption prevails: God will not abandon us!

Is there some particular language that God uses sometimes to say to us, in quite a concrete way, "Yes, do that." Or, again: "Hold on, there—last warning! Just leave it alone!"

God speaks quietly. But he gives us all kinds of signs. In retrospect, especially, we can see that he has given us a little nudge through a friend, through a book, or through what we see as a failure—even through "accidents". Life is actually full of these silent indications. If I remain alert, then slowly they piece together a consistent whole, and I begin to feel how God is guiding me.

When you yourself talk with God, is that something that has become as easy and obvious as making a phone call?

In some respects one can make the comparison. I know that he is always there. And he knows in any case who I am and what I am. Which is all the more reason for me to feel the need to call on him, to share my feelings with him, to talk with him. With him I can exchange views on the simplest and most intimate things, as well as on those that are weightiest and of great moment. It seems, somehow, normal for me to have occasion to talk to him all the time in everyday life.

On these occasions, does God always behave respectfully, or does he let you see he has a sense of humor?

I believe he has a great sense of humor. Sometimes he gives you something like a nudge and says, Don't take yourself so seriously! Humor is in fact an essential element in the mirth of creation. We can see how, in many matters in our lives, God wants to prod us into taking things a bit more lightly; to see the funny side of it; to get down off our pedestal and not to forget our sense of fun.

Do you also get cross with God?

Naturally I, too, think, from time to time: Why doesn't he give me more help? And sometimes he remains puzzling to me. In those cases that annoy me I can also feel the presence somewhere of his mystery, his strangeness. But getting really angry with God would mean that we had dragged God too far down to our level. Very often, quite superficial things give rise to this anger. And in those cases where anger is really justified I have to ask myself whether there isn't something important being communicated to me in the things that annoy me and the people who annoy me. I never get cross with God himself.

How do you begin your day?

Before I get up, I first say a short prayer. The day looks different if you don't just stumble straight into it. Then come all the things you do first thing in the morning, washing, breakfast. After that there is the Holy Mass and the breviary. Both of these, for me, lay the foundations of the day: Mass is the entirely real meeting with the presence of the risen Christ, and the breviary is a way into the great prayer of the whole history of salvation. The Psalms stand at the heart of

it. Here we pray together with the millennia, and we hear the voice of the Fathers. All of this opens a door onto the day for us. Then comes ordinary work.

How often do you pray?

Fixed prayer times are at noon, when in accordance with Catholic tradition we pray the Angelus. In the afternoon there is Vespers, and in the evening Compline, the Church's evening prayer. And in between times, whenever I feel I need help, I can fit in a quick prayer.

Does the prayer before you get up always vary?

No, that is a fixed prayer—in fact, it's a collection of various little prayers, but as a whole a fixed form of prayer.

Have you anything to recommend?

Each of us can surely find something for ourselves out of the Church's treasury.

At night, when one cannot settle down. . .

. . . I would recommend the Rosary. That is a form of prayer that, besides its spiritual meaning, has the power to calm the inner self. If we hold fast here to the actual words, then we are gradually freed from the thoughts that so torment us.

How do you personally deal with problems—that is, supposing you have any problems at all?

How could I not have problems? In the first place, I always try to bring my problems into my prayer and to find for myself there a firm interior foothold. And then, I try to do something challenging, really to give myself entirely to some task that is demanding and at the same time gives me satisfaction. Finally, through meeting with friends I can to some extent distance myself from everything else. These three elements are important.

I believe that everyone, at some time or another, is tired and shattered and drained of energy, and despairing and raging, too, over what seems their quite twisted and unfair fate. Bringing problems into one's prayer, as you were saying—how can that be done?

Perhaps one must start as Job did. One must, I would say, first of all cry out to God, inwardly, putting it quite plainly, and say to him: What are you doing with me?! The voice of Job remains an authentic voice, which also tells us that we may do the same—and perhaps even should do the same. Although Job stood before God truly complaining, God admits in the end that he is right. God says he has acted rightly, and the others, who have explained everything, have not spoken truly of me.

Job enters into a struggle and unfolds his complaint before him. Gradually, then, he hears God speaking; things turn around; they move into a different perspective. That way I emerge from the position of simply being tortured and know that although I cannot at that moment comprehend the Love, which is what he is, yet nonetheless I can rely on it; that whatever it is really like, it is good.

Perhaps we should, simply, deal more strictly with our problems, not allow them to arise in the first place.

Problems just do arise. Certain decisions, failure, human inadequacies, disappointments, all these get to us—and indeed should get to us. Problems are meant in fact to teach us how to work through things like that. If we became steel-hard, impenetrable, that would mean a loss of humanity and sensibility in dealing with other people. Seneca the stoic said: Sympathy is abhorrent. If, on the other hand, we look at Christ, he is all sympathy, and that makes him precious to us. Being sympathetic, being vulnerable, is part of being a Christian. One must learn to accept injuries, to live with wounds, and in the end to find therein a deeper healing.

Many people were able to pray as children, but at some time or other they lost this ability. Do you have to learn to talk with God?

The organ of sensitivity to God can atrophy to such an extent that the words of faith become quite meaningless. And whoever no longer possesses a faculty of hearing can no longer speak, because being deaf goes together with being mute. It's as if one had deliberately to learn one's own mother tongue. Slowly one learns to spell out God's letters, to speak this language, and—if still inadequately—to understand God. Gradually, then, one will become able to pray for oneself and to talk with God, at first in a very childlike way—in a certain sense we always remain like that—but then more and more in one's own words.

You once said: If a person believes only what he can see with his own eyes, then really he is blind. . .

. . . because in that case he is limiting his horizon in such a fashion that the essential things escape him. He cannot after all see his own understanding. Precisely those things that are of real moment are what he does not see with the

mere physical eye, and to that extent he cannot properly see if he cannot see beyond his immediate sensory perceptions.

Someone once said to me that having faith is like leaping out of an aquarium into the ocean. Can you recall your first great experience of faith?

I would say that in my case it was more like a silent growth. Naturally there have been high points, when something opened up for me in the liturgy, in theology, in first formulating a theological insight—points at which faith became broad and momentous and no longer merely passed on from someone else. The great leap that you were talking about, a particular event, is something I would be unable to point to in my own life. It was rather as if one were to venture out, slowly and cautiously, a little farther each time, out of the very shallow water, and slowly begin to feel a little of the ocean that is coming in toward us.

I also think that one has never achieved complete faith. Faith has to be lived again and again in life and in suffering, as well as in the great joys that God sends us. It is never something that I can put in my pocket like a coin.

An Image of God

My little boy asks me sometimes: Tell me, Daddy, what does God really look like?

I would answer him that we can think of God as being as we know him through Jesus Christ. Christ says in one place, "Whoever sees me, sees the Father."

And then, when we look at the whole story of Jesus—beginning with the manger, then carrying on through his public ministry, his great and moving words, right up to the Last Supper, to the Cross, the Resurrection, and his sending out the apostles—then we can see something of God's face. On the one hand, this face is great and serious. It stretches far beyond our vision. But its characteristic trait, in the end, is benevolence, acceptance, goodwill toward us.

Is it not said that we should not make any image of God?

This commandment has been transformed, insofar as God himself has given us his image. The Letter to the Ephesians says of Christ: "He is the image of God." And what is said about man in the creation story is fully realized in him.

Christ is the prototype of man. We cannot see in him the image of God in his eternal infinity, but we can see the image in which he chose to portray himself. From that point, we are no longer *making* an image, but God himself has *shown* us an image. Here he looks at us and speaks to us.

The image of Christ is of course not just a photo of God. In this picture of him who was crucified we see the whole life story of Jesus, above all the story of his inner life. That leads

us into a way of seeing him in which our senses are opened up and then surpassed.

How could one give an outline of Jesus in a few words?

This always makes our words seem inadequate. Basically, Jesus is the Son of God, who comes from God and is at the same time true man. In him we meet not merely human genius and human heroism, but God, who becomes visible through him. One might say that in the body of Jesus, torn open on the Cross, we can see what God is like, that is, one who opens himself to us to this extent.

Was Jesus a Catholic?

We can't talk about him in that way, since he stands above us. Today people use the opposite way of speaking, when they say that Jesus was not a Christian but a Jew. That is true only in a limited sense. He was one of the Jewish people. He was a Jew, in that he accepted and lived out the Law, and indeed, in spite of all criticism, he was a pious Jew who observed the Temple regulations. And nonetheless he broke out of the Old Testament mold and went beyond it—on his authority as Son.

Jesus understood himself as being the new and greater Moses, who thus does not merely interpret but actually renews the Law. In that sense he went beyond what already existed and created something new, expanding the Old Testament dispensation into the universality of a people who cover the earth and who will grow and grow forever. He is the one, then, who gives the starting point for faith, whose will, as the Catholic Church knows well, brought it into existence; but who is not simply one of us.

How and when did you personally know just what God wanted from you?

I think one always has to learn that anew. God always wants something more. At any rate, if you are referring to my original vocation, to the basic direction I was meant to take and wanted to take—that was an intensive process of maturing, which in my time as a student was also in part a complicated process. This path led me to turn toward the Church, to priestly guides and companions, and of course to Holy Scripture. A whole tangle of relationships was gradually sorted out.

You once said, anyway, that in your decision for the priesthood there was “a real meeting” between you and God. How should one picture this meeting between God and Cardinal Ratzinger?

Not, at any rate, as you would picture an appointment between two human beings. Perhaps one might describe it as something that gets right past your guard and burns its way into your inmost being. You feel that that just has to be, that it's the right path. It was not a meeting in the sense of a mystical illumination. I cannot claim to have any experience of that type. But I can say that the whole struggle led to a clear and demanding perception, so that the will of God presented itself to my inner vision.

“God loved you first!” it says, in the teaching of Christ. And he loves you without respect for your origin or standing. What does that mean?

One should take this sentence as literally as can be, and I try to do that. For it is truly the great power in our lives and

the consolation that we need. And it's not seldom that we need it.

He loved me first, before I myself could love at all. It was only because he knew me and loved me that I was made. So I was not thrown into the world by some operation of chance, as Heidegger says, and now have to do my best to swim around in this ocean of life, but I am preceded by a perception of me, an idea and a love of me. They are present in the ground of my being.

What is important for all people, what makes their life significant, is the knowledge they are loved. The person in a difficult situation will hold on if he knows, Someone is waiting for me, someone wants me and needs me. God is there first and loves me. And that is the trustworthy ground on which my life is standing and on which I myself can construct it.

The Crisis of Faith

Cardinal, people are interested in the Christian faith, on most continents of the earth, as never before. In the last fifty years alone, the number of Catholics worldwide has doubled to over a billion. In many countries of the so-called "Old World" we are experiencing a widespread secularization. It seems as if large sections of European society want to cut themselves off entirely from their own roots. Opponents of the faith talk of a "flight from Christianity", from which we must finally set ourselves free.

In our first book, Salt of the Earth, we dealt with this subject at length. Many people are ready to accept the antichristian or anti-church stereotypes without further thought. The reason for this is often quite simply that we have lost hold of the signs and the content of the faith. We no longer know what they mean. Has the Church no more to say about this?

There is no doubt that we live in a historical situation in which the temptation to do without God has become very great. Our culture of technology and welfare rests on the belief that basically we can do anything. Naturally, if we think like that, then life is restricted to what we can make and manufacture and demonstrate. The question about God leaves the stage.

If this attitude becomes generalized—and the temptation to do this is very great, because being on the lookout for God means in fact moving out onto another level of life, which seems in the past to have been more easily accessible—then the obvious thing is to say: What we have not made ourselves does not exist.

There have been enough attempts, meanwhile, to construct an ethic without God.

Certainly, and the calculus here is to find what is said to be most appropriate for man. On the other hand, we have attempts to manufacture man's inner fulfillment, his happiness, as a kind of product. Or, again, there are deviant, esoteric forms of religion on offer that seem to do without faith, that are often no more than techniques to achieve happiness.

All these ways of wanting the world to be measurable and to make do with one's own life are very closely related to the pattern of life and of existence in our time. The Word of the Church, on the other hand, seems to be coming from the past, whether because it is from long ago and no longer belongs to our time, or because it springs from a quite different kind of life that no longer seems to exist in our day. Certainly, the Church has not yet quite achieved the leap forward into the present day. The great task before us is so to fill with living experience the old, truly valid and great sayings that they become intelligible for people. We have a great deal to do there.

An image of God that draws on esotericism suggests a quite different God, who in these new "gospels" appears farther and farther from what is taught by Jews and Christians. Its message is not based, so we are told, on what is said by rabbis or priests or even by the Bible. Rather than on these sources, people are supposed to rely on their feelings for guidance. They are supposed to rid themselves finally of the oppression of these outdated and indeed absurd religions and their priestly castes, so obsessed with power, and are supposed to become once more whole and happy, just as people were meant to be from the beginning. Much of this sounds very promising.

It corresponds to the need we feel nowadays for religion and likewise to our need for simplification. To that extent, there is something obvious about this option, something that seems promising. One must of course ask this: Who or what authorizes this message? Does it carry sufficient authority simply because it sounds plausible to us? Is plausibility a sufficient criterion by which to accept a message about God? Or could it not be that this very plausibility is a nattering temptation? It shows the easier way forward, but at the same time prevents our getting onto the track of the truth.

In the end, we are making our feelings the measure for knowing who God is and how we should live. But feelings are changeable, and quite soon we come to realize for ourselves that we are building on treacherous foundations. However obvious as a way forward that may seem at first—there, again, I come across mere human ideas, which in the end remain dubious. The essence of faith, however, is that I do not meet with something that has been thought up, but that here something meets me that is greater than anything we can think of for ourselves.

Objection: That's what the Church says!

It is substantiated by the history that has grown out of it, in which God both has repeatedly verified his identity and will continue to do so. I think we will discover a great deal about that in this book.

But ultimately it is not enough for man that God is supposed to have said this or that to us, or that we can imagine this or that about him. Only if he has *done* something and is something for us, then what we need has come about upon which we can base our life.

In that case, we can recognize that there are not only words about God, but that the reality *of God* exists. That not

only have people thought something up, but something has happened; something has happened to someone [*passiert*] in the literal sense, in the Passion. This reality is greater than any words, even if it is less easily accessible.

For many people, of course, it is not just incredible but presumptuous, a monstrous provocation, to believe that one single person, who was executed around the year 30 in Palestine, should be the Chosen and Anointed One of God, the "Christos", or Christ. That a single being should stand in the center of history.

In Asia there are hundreds of theologians who say that God is far too great and too inclusive to have incarnated himself in a single person. And is not faith in fact lessened thereby if the salvation of the whole world is supposed to be built upon one small point?

This religious experience in Asia regards God as being so immeasurable, on one hand, and, on the other, our ability to conceive him as being so limited that in this view God is only able to represent himself to us in ever-changing aspects, in an unending myriad of reflections. Christ is then perhaps a more conspicuous symbol of God, but still just a reflection, which certainly does not comprehend the whole.

This is apparently an expression of the humility of man toward God. It is held to be quite impossible for God to enter into a single human being. And, thinking about it purely from the human point of view, we could perhaps expect nothing more than that we should only ever be able to see a little spark, a small section of God himself.

Sounds not unreasonable.

Yes. Being reasonable, one would have to say that God is far too great to enter into the littleness of a man. God is far too

great for one idea or a single book to comprehend his whole word; only in many experiences, even contradictory experiences, can he give us reflections of himself. On the other hand, the humility would turn to pride if we were to deny God the freedom and the power and the love to make himself as small as that.

The Christian faith brings us exactly that consolation, that God is so great that he can become small. And that is actually for me the unexpected and previously inconceivable greatness of God, that he is able to bow down so low. That he himself really enters into a man, no longer merely disguises himself in him so that he can later put him aside and put on another garment, but that *he* becomes this man. It is just in this that we actually see the truly infinite nature of God, for this is more powerful, more inconceivable than anything else, and at the same time more saving.

If we took the other view, then we would necessarily have to live always with a mass of untruth. The contradictory fragments that are there in Buddhism, and likewise in Hinduism, suggest the solution of negative mysticism. But then God himself becomes a negation—and has in the end nothing positive or constructive to say to this world.

On the other hand, this very God, who has the power to realize Love in such a way that he himself is present in a man, that he is there and introduces himself to us, that he associates himself with us, is exactly what we need in order to escape from having to live to the end with fragments and half-truths.

That does not mean that we have nothing more to learn from other religions. Or that the canon of what is “Christian” is so firmly fixed that we cannot be led any farther. The adventure of Christian faith is ever new, and it is when we admit that God is capable of this that its immeasurable openness is unlocked for us.

Is faith, in principle, always present in man?

So far as we can learn about the history of mankind, through excavations right back into prehistory, we can see that there has always been an idea of God. The Marxists had predicted the end of religion. With the end of oppression we would no longer need the medicine of God, we were told. But even they have had to recognize that religion never comes to an end, because it is present in man as such.

This inner sensor does not, in any case, work automatically, like some piece of technology, but is a living thing that can either develop with the person or, on the other hand, become desensitized and almost dead. With a progressive inner fulfillment the sensor becomes ever more acute, more alive and interactive. In the opposite case, it becomes dull and, as it were, anaesthetized. Nonetheless, even in an unbelieving person there remains somehow a vestigial question of whether there is after all something there. Without taking this inner sensitivity into account we just cannot understand the history of mankind.

There are, on the other hand, whole libraries of books and powerful theories that aim at confuting this faith. A belief against belief seems likewise to be present in principle, and even to have a missionary character. The greatest social experiments of history thus far, National Socialism and Communism, were concerned to show that belief in God was absurd and to root it out from men's hearts. And that will not be the last attempt.

That's why faith in God is not a form of knowledge that can be learned like chemistry or mathematics, but remains a belief. That is, it has a perfectly rational structure—we will come to that. It is not just some dark mystery or other with which I have dealings. It gives me insight. And there are

perfectly comprehensible reasons for accepting it. But it is never simply knowledge.

Since faith demands our whole existence, our will, our love, since it requires letting go of ourselves, it necessarily always goes beyond a mere knowledge, beyond what is demonstrable. And because that is so, then I can always turn my life away from faith and find arguments that seem to refute it.

And there are, as you know, whole rafts of counterarguments. We only have to look at the monstrous suffering in the world. This alone seems to prove there is no God. Or let's take the incidental matter of God's invisibility. For those able to see with the eyes of faith, that is his very greatness; but for anyone who cannot or will not make the leap, it makes God somehow refutable. One can also lose the whole in a mass of details. One can read Holy Scripture, the New Testament, in such a way as to see in it no more than a kaleidoscope of fragments, so that some learned man can say that the Resurrection story was made up later, that everything was added afterward, that none of it holds together.

That is all possible. Simply because history and faith are human. To that extent, disputes about faith will never end. This dispute is always at the same time a man's struggle with himself and a struggle with God, which will last until the end of history dawns.

In modern society people question whether there is such a thing as truth. That is turned against the Church, which still holds fast to this concept. You once said that the deep crisis of Christianity in Europe essentially originates in the crisis concerning its claim to truth. Why?

Because no one any longer trusts himself to say that what faith asserts is true. People are afraid they might be acting

intolerantly toward other religions or creeds. And Christians say among themselves that we have become afraid of the absolute quality of a claim to truth.

On one hand, that is in a way healthy. For if we lash out too readily, too casually with a claim to truth, or if we rest too comfortably upon it, we run the risk not only of becoming authoritarian, but also of elevating some secondary and temporary factor to the status of absolute truth.

A certain circumspection with regard to any claim to truth is entirely appropriate. But it ought not to lead us as far as dropping all claims to truth. That leaves us merely blundering about among various types of tradition.

At any rate, boundaries are becoming genuinely less clear. Many people dream of a kind of casserole religion, with the most palatable ingredients carefully selected. People increasingly differentiate between "good" and "bad" religion.

What is interesting is that the concept of tradition has to a great extent made redundant that of religion, and that of confession or denomination—and, thereby, that of truth. Particular religions are regarded as traditions. They are then valued as being "venerable", as "beautiful", and people say that whoever stands in one tradition should respect that one; another person, his own tradition; and everyone should respect each other's. At any rate, if traditions are all we have, then truth has been lost. And sooner or later we will ask what in fact traditions are for. And in that case a revolt against tradition is well founded.

I always recall the saying of Tertullian, that Christ never said "I am the custom", but "I am the truth". Christ does not just lend his weight to custom or tradition; on the contrary, he leads us right out of the customary way. He wants us to

depart; he urges us to seek out what is true, whatever will bring us into the reality of the One who is the Creator and Redeemer of our own being. To that extent, we must regard circumspection as a serious obligation with respect to any claim to truth, but we must also have the courage not to lose hold of the truth, to stretch toward it and to accept it humbly and thankfully, whenever it is given to us.

Doubt

You once recounted a story told by Martin Buber about a Jewish rabbi. In this story the rabbi is visited one day by a man who believes in enlightenment. The bringer of enlightenment is a learned man. He wants to prove to the rabbi that there is no such thing as a truth of faith, that indeed faith itself is obsolete, the relic of a past age. As the learned man enters the rabbi's room, he sees him walking up and down, a book in his hand, meditating. The rabbi takes no notice of the champion of enlightenment. But after a while he stands still for a moment, glances at him, and says only: "But perhaps it is true." That was enough. The learned man's knees were shaking, and he practically fled from the house. A nice story, but even so: again and again, even priests leave their Church; monks leave their abbeys. You yourself spoke once of the "oppressive power of unbelief".

Belief is never simply there, in a way that would enable me to say at a certain point in time: I have it, and others do not have it. We have already talked about that. It is something living, which is inclusive of the whole person in all his dimensions—understanding, will, and feelings. It can then fasten its roots ever deeper into my life, so that my life becomes more and more nearly identical with my faith; but for all that it is never just a possession. A man can always still give way to this other tendency within himself and thus fall away.

Faith is always a path. As long as we live we are on the way, and on that account faith is always under pressure and under threat. And it is healthy that it can never turn into a convenient ideology. That it does not make me hardened

and unable to follow the thoughts of my doubting brother and to sympathize with him. Faith can only mature by suffering anew, at every stage in life, the oppression and the power of unbelief, by admitting its reality and then finally going right through it, so that it again finds the path opening ahead for a while.

How is it for you? Are you personally acquainted with this "oppressive power of unbelief"?

Of course. If one is trying to share the faith with others in the spiritual situation of our century, as a professor or a teacher of the faith, then one must take particular care to be open oneself to the questions that make faith hard. And then, obviously, one encounters the various life-styles that are offered to us with the promise that they can replace faith, or make faith unnecessary. To that extent, accepting the impact of everything that speaks against faith today, its inner strength, and feeling myself oppressed by it is all an essential part of my work.

But even if I did not wish to, one encounters it anyway in news bulletins, in current affairs, and in every kind of life experience that opens up to us. All that, on the one hand, makes the path of faith laborious to tread. But then when you come out into the light again, you can also see that you have climbed higher, that it is in this way that we get nearer to the Lord.

Is that ever a thing of the past?

Never quite past.

Can one imagine that even a pope might be attacked by doubt or indeed unbelief?

Not by unbelief, but we can and should picture him as likewise suffering under the questions that make faith hard. I shall never forget a meeting I had in Munich when I was a curate. My vicar at that time, Father Blumscheid, was friends with the pastor of the neighboring Lutheran parish. One day Romano Guardini came to give a talk, and the two vicars had a chance to chat with him. I don't know the actual course of the conversation, but Blumscheid told me—lie was deeply shocked—that Guardini had said that as you grow older faith does not get easier, but harder. Guardini may have been between sixty-five and seventy at the time. That, of course, is the specific experience of one man, who was in any case of a melancholy cast of mind and had suffered greatly. But, as I was saying, this business is never entirely settled. On the other hand, it does get easier in a way, because the flame of life is burning less fiercely. But so long as we are on the journey, we are traveling.

Does the Catholic Church know with absolute certainty, then, what God is really like, what he is really saying, and also what he really wants from us?

The Catholic Church knows in faith all that God has said to us in the history of revelation. Our understanding of it, of course—even the understanding of it that the Church enjoys—remains greatly inferior to the magnitude of what God has spoken. On that account there is a development of faith. Each generation, from the point of view of its own circumstances, is able to discover new dimensions of faith that even the Church did not know before. The Lord predicts this in the Gospel of John: “The Holy Spirit will lead you into all truth, so that you will come to know those things which would be too much for you now.” That means there is always a surplus, something anticipatory in revelation—not only with respect to what any individual may hitherto have

understood, but also with respect to what the Church knows. This surplus provides each generation with a new adventure of faith.

What does that mean?

It is never the case that we can say, Now we know everything; now the knowledge of Christianity is complete. There are unfathomable depths both in God and in human life, so that there are always new dimensions to faith. What has at least been vouchsafed to the Church is a certitude about what can *not* be reconciled with the gospel. She has formulated her most essential perceptions of this in her creed and her dogmas. They are all conceived in negative terms. She points out the borderline beyond which one would stray into error. The area within the borders, so to speak, remains both wide and open. On this account, the Church can give the general directions for human life and can say what direction I certainly should *not* take, if I want to avoid a fall. It remains for each person to discover the manifold possibilities on his own path and to explore them.

Many people say, in any case, that Christianity is less a practical religion and more something for the next life, that is to say, a way of collecting good marks for a register kept in the next world.

It is true that a life beyond this one is part of the Christian way of looking at things. If you were to take that away, then it dwindles to a perspective that is still remarkable but fragmentary and incomplete. If one were to look at human life merely within the dimensions of the seventy or eighty years permitted us to live here, then it would appear brutally truncated. In this way there arises this remarkable greed for life. If this present life is the only one there can be,

then naturally I must look to it to grab and get as much out of it as I can. I cannot afford to consider other people.

The life beyond gives me the criteria and gives this life the importance and seriousness that I need in order to live, not just for the moment, but in such a way that in the end my life means something, has some value—and not only for me, but more generally. The God who grants our prayers does not take away our responsibility but in fact teaches us to be responsible. He leads us to live out what is set before us in responsible fashion and thereby to become worthy in the end to stand before him.

Christ says, "Ask, and it will be given unto you. Seek, and you shall find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you." On the other hand, when my son for instance is about to do a piece of schoolwork he asks God for help. But, to be quite honest, it doesn't always help.

We ask, for instance, for good health; a mother does that for her child, a man for his wife; we ask that a people as a whole may not fall into great error—and we know that what we ask is by no means always granted us. In the case of someone for whom it is a matter of life and death, this can become a serious problem. Why has he had no answer, or at least nothing like the answer he had asked for? Why is God silent? Why does he withdraw? Why is it that just the opposite of what I wanted is happening?

This distance between what Jesus promised and what we experience in our own lives makes you think, every time—it has that effect in each generation, for each single person and even for me. Each one of us has to struggle to work out an answer for himself, so that in the end he comes to understand why God has spoken to him precisely like that.

And what answer is there?

Augustine and other great Christians say that God gives us what is best for us—even when we do not recognize this at first. Often, we think that exactly the opposite of what he does would really be best for us. We have to learn to accept this path, which, on the basis of our experience and our suffering, is difficult for us, and to see it as the way in which God is guiding us. God's way is often a path that enormously reshapes and remolds our life, a path in which we are truly changed and straightened out.

To that extent, we have to say that this "Ask, and you will receive" certainly cannot mean that I can call God in as a handyman who will make my life easy every time I want something. Or who will take away suffering and questioning. On the contrary, it means that God definitely hears me and that what he grants me is, in the way known only to him, what is right for me.

To come back to the particular case in question: It may also be beneficial for your son to learn that God isn't simply going to jump in when he has not learned his vocabulary properly, but that he has to do that for himself. It may sometimes mean that he is not spared the little discipline that lies in failure. For perhaps he really needs precisely this discipline in order to find the way he should go.

Lamenting like Job?

The writer Joseph Roth, in line with ancient Jewish tradition, well and truly disputes with his God. "In your meaningless fecundity you have given life to millions of others like me", he wrote, under the impact of the horror of the First World War. "I don't want your grace!" he cries to heaven in desperation, "Send me to hell!"

Perhaps in Jewish tradition that is more strongly pronounced, if only because Christ, the God who enters into misery, who suffers with us and who saves souls, has not yet made his appearance: a God who comes face-to-face with us, no longer merely as the great Unknowable Being, as he appears to Job in the end, but as someone who has been down to the uttermost depth, so that he can say of himself, in the words of the psalm, "I am a worm, and no man", someone who has been trampled underfoot.

At just those times when we are in trouble the question always comes, "Why are you doing this?" We talked at the beginning about how in many circumstances this telling God quite openly that we do not understand can already be the starting point for personal prayer and for overcoming trouble. We say that with an underlying certainty that I will get the right answer, because he who was crucified, whose experience was just as miserable and just as dreadful, is always there before me.

Perhaps I am mistaken, but Christians have a more reverent attitude to God. Augustine says, "Lord, I do not dispute with you, for you are truth . . . I do not call you to account . . . But in your mercy permit me to speak, I who am dust and ashes."

This question greatly troubled Augustine, who was always a suffering and struggling man. To start with, he thought that once one had converted one was on the high road to heaven. Later on he noticed that even this high road can be terribly difficult and that there are some very dark valleys. He was of the opinion that even Saint Paul, to the end of his life, suffered temptation, which is certainly something he read into Paul's story from his own experience. But precisely because Augustine was so oppressed, it was essential for him to be able to talk to God as the merciful One, to seek

refuge in him, to see his loving face and not to have to dispute with him.

In that sense I believe that in fact the figure of Christ takes something of the bitterness out of our conflict. The answer that only begins to be suggested in the Book of Job with the appearance of the Creator has in the meantime been developed a good bit further.

Once again, it is in times of trouble that many people look to their faith for help. Sometimes it works, but sometimes we have the feeling, My God, where are you? Why aren't you giving me more help when I need you?

The Book of Job is the classic cry of the man who experiences all the misery of existence and a silent God. And an even apparently unjust God. Job is despairing and angry, so that he really pours out before God everything that has brought him down and makes him doubt that life is worth living.

There are the questions: Is it good to be alive? Is God good, and is he really there, and does he really help? We are not spared these dark nights. They are clearly necessary, so that we can learn through suffering, so that we can acquire freedom and maturity and above all else a capacity for sympathy with others. There is no final or rational answer, no formula of life in which we could explain these things. For in those instances when it gets under our skin and goes to our heart there are other factors in play that can't be explained by a universal formula but in the end can only be worked through by undergoing personal suffering.

"I have assigned to me", says Job, "nothing for my own but nights of grief. Lying in bed, I wonder 'When will it be day?' Restlessly I fret till twilight falls. . . . My eyes will never again

see joy." If a person is not even spared this bitterness of the soul, then what is faith actually doing for him?

It's quite proper to put this question, since if I am doing something, then it should have some point, some meaning. One wants to know: is this really right? Does it mean something, or is it really just self-deception? The question is only wrong if you look at everything there is solely from the point of view of *self*, on the principle of "What do I get out of it?" You are then seeing things from the perspective of a greed in relation to life as a whole, a perspective closed up within oneself, which prevents one understanding anything any more and will eventually ruin one's life.

Christ once said: Anyone who wants to save his life will lose it. And only the person who loses his life, who is ready to give it up, can manage to see things in true perspective and will thus find his life. That means that in the end I just have to drop the question as to what I get out of it. I have to learn to recognize that it is important to just let myself go. I have to be ready to give myself.

That's easy to say.

But a part of every human love is that it is only truly great and enriching if I am ready to deny myself for this other person, to come out of myself, to give of myself. And that is certainly true of our relationship with God, out of which, in the end, all our other relationships must grow.

I must begin by no longer looking at *myself*, but by asking what *he* wants. I must begin by learning to love. That consists precisely in turning my gaze away from myself and toward him. With this attitude I no longer ask, What can I get for myself, but I simply let myself be guided by him, truly lose myself in Christ; when I abandon myself, let go of myself, then I see, yes, life is right at last, because

otherwise I am far too narrow for myself. When, so to speak, I go outside, then it truly begins, then life attains its greatness.

Now it will no doubt be said that this business can take a long time.

Well, of course it isn't a journey you can make from one day to the next. If you're interested in quick happiness, then faith doesn't work. And perhaps that is one of the reasons for the crisis in faith nowadays, that we want our pleasure and our happiness at once, and not to take the risk of a lifelong venture—a venture made in the trust that this leap will not end in nothingness, but that it is by its nature that act of love for which we were created. And which alone gives me what I want: loving and being loved and thereby finding true happiness.

Moving Mountains

But Jesus himself says, "If you have faith, even no greater than a mustard seed, then you will be able to say to this mountain, 'move over there!' And it will move. Nothing will be impossible for you."

That is indeed, for me at any rate, one of the most mysterious sayings in the New Testament. Even the Fathers, the great theologians, the saints, have struggled with this saying. We cannot here—any more than with the saying, "Ask, and you will receive"—tie ourselves down to a prosaic understanding that says, Right, now I really and truly believe, so I ought to be able to say to the mountain of Monte Cassino, Go away. What is actually meant are those mountains that obstruct our lives. And they are usually far more massive than the mountains you can point to on the map. Those mountains I can in fact overcome if I let myself go toward God.

Is that a kind of auto-suggestion?

The act of believing is not about talking oneself into some notion, or about ascribing some active power to faith. The act of believing consists in trusting that God is there, that I can put myself in his hands. And then even the mountain will go away.

In this connection the Lord uses the image of the mustard seed, as being the smallest of all grains or seeds, out of which in the end a tree will grow in which all the birds of the air will be able to nest. The mustard seed comprises, on the one hand, smallness—wherein I am wretched—but at the

same time the potential for growth. In that way there is in this mustard seed a profound depiction of faith. Faith is seen thereby not as the mere acceptance of certain propositions, but is the seed of life within me. I am only a true believer if faith is present within me as a living seed, from which something is growing and which then truly changes my world and, in doing so, brings something new into the world as a whole.

Jesus made us a great promise. He said, "What I teach I do not have from myself but from the One who sent me. Whoever does the will of God will come to know whether this teaching is from God or whether I teach from what I know myself." And even the Pharisees cried out then, "Never has any man taught like this man."

That corresponds exactly to what we have been reflecting on. The truth of Jesus' word cannot be tested in terms of theory. It is like a technical proposition: it is shown to be correct only by testing it. The truth of what God says here involves the whole person, the experiment of life. It can only become clear for me if I truly give myself up to the will of God, so far as he has made it known to me. This will of the Creator is not something foreign to me, something external, but is the basis of my own being. And in this experiment of life it does in fact become clear how life can be put right. It will not be comfortable, but it will be right. It will not be superficial or pleasant, but it will in a profound sense be filled with joy.

That is indeed the real meaning of the saints for us, that they are people who have ventured upon this experiment of the will of God. To a certain extent they are lights for mankind, signposts who show us what happens, how life can be put right. I believe that is fundamental for the whole question about the truth of Christianity.

God and Reason

The Church and her saints emphasize that one can grasp the truth of Christianity by reason, that one can demonstrate its reasonableness and give reasonable arguments in its favor. Is that true?

Yes, but within limits. It is true that the faith is not just a kaleidoscope of images, so that we could arrange it this way, or perhaps that. Faith speaks to our reason, our understanding, because it expresses truth—and because reason was created for the sake of truth. To that extent, faith without understanding is no true Christian faith. Faith demands to be understood. We, in this conversation, are seeking to find the way in which all of this—from the idea of creation to Christian hope—can be seen as a meaningful whole that embodies something reasonable. To that extent one can show that faith is appropriate material for understanding.

Again and again, scientists have taken God and faith as their theme. I have brought a few quotations with me. Isaac Newton, for instance, the founder of theoretical physics, says: “The wonderful arrangement and harmony of the universe can only have come into being in accordance with the plans of an omniscient and all-powerful Being. That is, and remains, my most important finding.” Augustin-Louis Cauchy, the French mathematician, remarked: “I am a Christian, that is, I believe in the divinity of Christ just as Tycho Brahe, Copernicus, Descartes, Newton, Leibniz, Pascal did . . . like all great astronomers and mathematicians of the past.” And the Italian Guglielmo Marconi, the Nobel prize

winner whom we have to thank for wireless telephones and thereby for a mobile culture, expresses it thus: "I declare with pride that I am a believer. I believe in the power of prayer. I believe in it not only as a believing Catholic but also as a scientist."

Certainly, we are not plunging ourselves into a superstitious venture when we become Christians. But I would only bring two reservations: faith cannot be understood in the same sense that a mathematical formula might be for me entirely comprehensible, but reaches into ever deeper levels of being, into the eternal nature of God, into the mystery of love. In this area there is a limit to what one can understand by merely thinking it out. Above all, to what, as a limited man, one can understand and work through with complete clarity.

We are unable even to understand another man, because his person reaches down into depths more profound than our ability to conceptualize. We cannot, in the end, understand the structure, of matter, but can only conceive of it up to a certain point. It is thus the more obvious that what meets us in God, and in God's Word, cannot in the end be made subject to our understanding, because it far surpasses it.

In this sense faith cannot be rationally demonstrated. I cannot say, Whoever does not accept this is just stupid. Faith has its own way of life, in which what we believe is gradually substantiated by experience and is shown to be meaningful as a whole. There are therefore convergences, from the point of view of reason, that make it right for me to enter into it. They give me the certainty that I am not merely handing myself over to some superstition. But an exhaustive demonstration, such as can be given for natural laws, does not exist.

Can we say that it is necessary to broaden one's mind in order to come to know God better?

Even a simple person can know God quite well. It is not necessarily the case that a broad acquaintance with the scientific and historical knowledge we now have will make someone capable of understanding God better.

You can drown understanding in facts. Anyone who fails to perceive the *mystery* at work within the facts of nature or of history is just stuffing his head and his heart with a lot of things that may even make him incapable of any breadth or depth of perception.

A great amount of scientific knowledge can, on the one hand, lead to someone's being no longer able to see beyond the facts, so that he is hemmed in by facts. Because he knows so much, he is now only capable of thinking on a factual level and can no longer bring himself to make the leap into mystery. He sees only what is tangible. And, from a metaphysical point of view, in this way a person becomes more stupid. The other side of it is that sometimes, precisely by the breadth of our vision, in that we can see so many glimpses of divine reason in reality, this really does add breadth and scope to our image of God, and we stand before him with greater reverence and even with humility and awe.

A particular example of the way our image of God may change: the earlier idea that God sees each person, that he knows exactly what everyone is doing each second of the day, was at one time abandoned. It was said to be a childish fantasy, if not a threatening gesture intended by the Church to instill fear. Today, through the advance of technology, this image has in a strange way returned to us. In the meantime we have not only put satellites into space, which broadcast television images to us all, but likewise navigation systems,

which can locate any single car anywhere in the world and can guide us to our destination. Furthermore, computer technology and the Internet show us that by means of certain stimuli, millions upon millions of corresponding impulses and motions can be controlled and distributed worldwide, whether in Oslo or in Kapstadt. At any rate, by means of this expansion of man's ability to conceptualize, an image of God that had already been banished to cold storage because it seemed too naive now returns, looking quite new and interesting.

Yes, that is something we should be grateful for, that this helps us to new ways of seeing things. In this way doors are opened that had previously been shut. As we understand more about the world, so our image of God looks greater and more intelligible. But that does not happen automatically.

A Contradiction

On one side, we find the commandments of God—on the other side, our own human nature. Both are created by God. Nevertheless, anyone can see that the two are often very badly mismatched. Thinking wrong things and doing wrong things are both obviously quite human. Through this paradox we often find ourselves in a situation that seems beyond us.

The Christian faith holds that the creation has been damaged. Human existence is no longer what was produced at the hands of the Creator. It is burdened with another element that produces, besides the innate tendency *toward God*, the opposite tendency *away from God*. In this way man is torn between the original impulse of creation and his own historical inheritance.

The possibility of this is already built into the nature of finite creatures, but has only developed in history. On one hand, man is created to love. He is there in order to lose himself, to give himself. But it is also easy for him to withhold himself, to want to be just himself. This tendency is built up to the point where, on one hand, he can love God and, on the other, can be angry with him and say, I want to be independent, I just want to be myself.

If we observe ourselves carefully, we can see this paradox, this inner tension of our existence. On one hand, we recognize that what the Ten Commandments say is right. That's what we want and what we like doing. That is to say, being good to other people, being grateful, respecting other people's property, finding great love in a sexual relationship so that this becomes a lifelong mutual responsibility, telling the truth, not lying. In some sense that is indeed a trend

that is not merely *contrary* to our nature and lying on our shoulders like a yoke.

On the other hand, we forever feel an itch to get out from underneath it.

That is the love of contradiction, the convenience of lying, the temptation to mistrust—all this is present in man because of an impulse toward destruction, a wish to say No.

This paradox points to a certain inner disturbance in man, so that he can no longer simply be the person he wants to be. I see what is good and approve it, said Ovid, a Roman poet, and then still do the other thing. And Paul, in the seventh chapter of the Letter to the Romans, insisted, likewise: The good that I wish to do, I do not do; and the evil that I do not wish to do, that is what I do. In Paul's case, this gives rise to the cry: Who will release me from this inner contradiction? And that is the point at which Paul truly understood Christ—and the point from which he then carried Christ, as the answer that releases us, out into the contemporary pagan world.

There is, though, an external contradiction, too. It is the contradiction between the good news of this supposedly good and "loving" God and the actual condition of the world. The result is a disappointment with God. Many people can see nothing of the alleged healing at work. And sometimes I, too, think that faith can perhaps no longer hold its ground against our more advanced ideas. It can not bear scrutiny in the full light of the facts.

Here the inner contradiction of which we were speaking a moment ago is reinforced by collective momentum. There is a collective consciousness that sharpens the contradiction—that agrees with the selfish tendencies, the turning away

from God, and always prefers the momentarily easier choice in life. Each person doesn't merely live for himself, he is lived, he is shaped, or even led astray and distorted, along with others.

There are various stages in the rise or decay of societies. Communities may be supportive and help me along the road, so that the inner contradiction is gradually weakened and dissolved. But, on the other hand, there is a collective unity of being average, where one says, Well, the others are doing the same. Those are societies in which theft has become normal, bribery is no longer seen as improper, and lying is the normal way of carrying on.

Societies can either drag a man down—or help him farther up. In the first instance, material things are dominant and habits of thought are so tied to material considerations that any ideas that reach out beyond this are seen as antiquated, as foolish and inappropriate for man. In the second case God is truly present in some visible manner, and it is easier to move toward him.

But why should life not be just easy and pleasant and fun?

Of course it is easier for the moment to take pleasure in material things, in what is tangible, in things that bring us happiness and can be directly bought and accessed. I can go into a pleasure shop; for the price of entry I can experience a sort of ecstasy and thereby buy release from all cares, from the difficult path of self-development and of self-transcendence. This is a dreadfully strong temptation. In this way happiness becomes a commodity that can be bought and sold. That's easier; it's quicker; we seem to have bypassed the inner contradiction—because the question concerning God now seems quite unnecessary.

One might regard it, however, as the civilized way of life, the sophisticated way, and the one absolutely suited to our modern world.

But we also know that this quickly turns out to be a disappointment. The individual notices that, in the end I am still empty, burned-out, and when I come back down to earth after the ecstasy I can no longer stand myself or the world. And at this point at least I know I have been cheated.

It is true that we are never alone with our inner world but are always collectively on stage. This collective identity can make things either harder or easier. Because of this, in the early Church the catechumenate was developed. The aim was to create a kind of alternative society in which each person could be oriented toward God and through living together with others could eventually come to the point of learning to see him. In the time leading up to baptism, which indeed was called *illumination*, the moment arrived when this perception came to life within each one, and along with it, autonomy of faith.

I think this has once more become necessary in societies based on atheistic or agnostic materialism. Earlier, it seemed as though Church and society were largely identified one with the other. Now the Church must once more make an effort to create social spaces in which people find on offer not only that burdensome collective identity that drags us down, but also a collective identity that opens up possibilities, that supports the individual and brings him into the process of learning to see.

The question is whether faith really makes us so much better, more merciful, more caring toward our neighbor, less covetous, less vain. Let's take those people whom God himself has called to faith, those people who, from the point of view of their whole purpose in life, should have nothing

else in their minds but to please God and to become, as it were, perfect people. Why is it that among clergy, among monks and nuns, we meet so much bearing of grudges, so much envy and jealousy, so many lies and such a lack of willingness to help? Why was their faith not able to make them better persons?

That is indeed a most pressing question. There we can see once again that faith is not just there, but that it either withers or grows, that it either rises or falls on the graph. It is not just a ready-made guarantee, something one can regard as accumulated capital that can only grow. Faith is always given only in the context of a fragile freedom. We may wish it were otherwise. But just therein lies God's great gamble, which we find so hard to understand, that he has not given us stronger medicine.

Even if we are bound to notice inadequate patterns of behavior (behind which, of course, there is always a weakening of faith) within the world of those who believe, we cannot ignore the positive side of the account. In the stories of so many simple, kindly folk whom faith has made good, we see after all that faith has a very positive effect. I'm thinking especially of elderly people in quite ordinary parishes, who through their faith have matured to great goodness. When we meet them we feel something warm, a kind of inner light.

And, conversely, we must note that, with the dimming of the light of faith, society has become harder, more violent, and more corrosive. Even a theologian so committed to the critical stance as Vorgrimler has said that the climate has become not better, but more noxious and inflamed.

Mystery

The Christian world is one in which invisible things are as much taken for granted as visible ones. Christians are surrounded by angels and guardian angels. They can call on the help of the Holy Spirit. They can, if they wish, call on the Virgin Mary for aid and consolation. The great Catholic scholar Romano Guardini talks about making spiritual mysteries visible. The method he suggests is to fix your attention on some holy thing or practice, and then to concentrate all your thoughts and all your heart in this symbol. Then you would be able to feel right away how it sets you in order and sanctifies you. For non-Catholics that sounds strange, of course or even downright naïve.

Once again, we should not understand this in a superficial way, which could, in the end, even be superstitious. As if we were to see ourselves in a universe full of friendly powers that take care of half our lives for us. But it is right that we should be aware in faith of a reality that goes beyond tangible things. The great saints are indeed still living. This great family is here, and noticing their presence means that I am loved and cared for.

In order truly to appropriate these things, as Guardini has it, I must of course make myself familiar with this whole matter *from the inside out* and take them to myself through understanding them—and then I can recognize the way they point out for me. This is not just a means to make myself comfortable by offloading half my life, but a direction. Recently on the news here in Italy a woman told what had happened to her. She was expecting a baby, and the heart operation she was going to have was high-risk. She told the reporter quite serenely that she had simply said to Padre Pio,

“Padre Pro, help me and my baby”, and then she knew that nothing would happen. Perhaps that is very childish and simple, but it reflects something of a basic trust that we enjoy when we know that we have brothers and sisters in the other world. They are close; they can help me; I can call on them in all trust.

In any case, fewer and fewer people seem to be aware of the mysteries of faith. How can this be?

Perhaps our faith had in some ways become too mechanical. Perhaps there was also too much outward show, too little inner reality, in Guardini’s terms.

Faith has to be rediscovered and relived in every generation. On the other hand, we see how a generation that is no longer aware of the Christian faith and its saving powers turns elsewhere to look for such things in esoteric forms, turning to stones and heaven knows what else for help. That is to say, they look for new forms by which to call on the help of unseen powers, because man feels that he could or should have some other help. To that extent, we Catholics, and above all those in positions of responsibility in the Church, must ask ourselves why we have been unable to proclaim our faith in such a way as to offer answers to today’s questions. So that people would once again see and feel that there is something in this faith that is just what they are after.

Is Everything Already Written?

In Arabic there is an expression that is meant to express one of the great mysteries of this world: Maktub. Translated, it is something like: “It is written”. Perhaps everything has

already been written down, the whole history of the world, the story of my birth and my death. I once heard in the course of a Mass, Blessed are they whose names are already written by God, that is to say, in the great Book of Life. Does God show us the way we have to go, so that I have only to recognize what is signposted for me?

I believe—though I am no specialist in Islam—that in this matter there is an opposition, or at least a clear distinction, between Islam and the Christian faith. Islam seems to proceed from a strict notion of predestination; everything is predestined, and I live in a ready-woven web. As against that, Christian faith always reckons with the freedom factor. That is to say, on one hand, God embraces everything. He knows everything. He guides the course of history. Nonetheless he has so arranged it that freedom has its place. That I can deviate, so to speak, from what he had planned for me.

Can you explain that further?

It is very mysterious and difficult. In Christianity, too, the so-called teaching on predestination was developed. According to this teaching, it is already settled that those for whom it is planned will go to hell, and the others to heaven; it has been decided from all eternity. The faith of the Church has always rejected this. For the idea that as an individual I can do nothing one way or the other—that if I am bound for hell, then I just am, and if I am going to heaven, then that's the way it is—is certainly not consistent with the faith.

God has created true freedom and allows his own plans to be confounded (even if he does so in such a way that he can then make something new out of them). History shows this. First the sin of Adam upsets God's plans. And God answers

this by giving himself more powerfully, by giving himself in Christ.

That is, so to say, the one great example. There are many other lesser ones. Let's take the people of Israel. They were supposed to live in a theocracy, an arrangement whereby there were no human rulers, but only judges who applied the divine Law. But the Israelites wanted a king. They wanted to be like other people. And they wrecked the plan. God gave way. He gave them Saul, then David, and from that point he built the road to Christ again, to the King who overthrew all monarchy by dying on the Cross.

We have here models by which Scripture would have us understand that God fully accepts freedom, on the one hand—and, on the other, is greater than we and is able to make a new beginning out of failure, out of destruction, a new beginning that in some way improves on the original and appears greater and better. How that can be—that God knows everything but that other plans are still possible—the greatest theologians and philosophers have racked their brains over it. At some point it is beyond us, simply because we are not God and because our horizons are in the end extremely limited.

But I think we can understand what is obvious: God holds history in his hand, holds me in his hand, but leaves me the freedom to become a loving person for myself—or to refuse love. God has not absolutely programmed me but has built in those possibilities for variation that we call freedom.

Are Miracles Real?

Faith sees miracles as being always possible, and within their own lifetimes the apostles were offered a lot of money for the secret of their miraculous powers.

There are plenty of provocative accounts of inexplicable events, which move some people to mockery and others to awe. In the great basilica of Padua, for instance, you can see in a shrine the tongue of Saint Anthony, who is said to have been a great preacher. In Nevers the body of Bernadette is preserved, and in Ars that of Saint John Vianney; both are incorrupt. And they are not embalmed, as was the case with the Communists' saint, Lenin. How can that be? If we could ask God himself, what would he say about these miracles?

I certainly don't feel qualified to tell you what God would say. But the question of miracles is there, and a part of what Christians believe is that God has power in the world and really can do things.

To what extent natural laws are broken in this, or whether these laws already have implicit within them a degree of variation that God can make use of, is not the primary question. We can see nowadays, with increasing clarity, that we know the laws of nature only as rules of thumb. What nature is, how universally applicable the laws of nature are, in the end we cannot say with certainty. What is important is to notice that God, after he made creation, did not retire. Retire, in the sense of: Now the machine can go on running in the way it's been set up. No, God can do things. He is still the Creator and is still able to intervene.

Is every intervention a miracle?

We can't twist that into a superstitious view of miracles, as if we could have miracles available on order. We can't make cheap miracle recipes. But we cannot, either, in a rationalistic way know better than God and presume to tell God what he can and cannot do.

I read a very interesting remark on this point. It comes from a book about the Protestant theologian Adolf Schlatter,

who was a very firm believer. Schlatter was given an appointment in Berlin, at the time when Adolf Harnack, the great liberal theologian, was teaching there. The Lutheran church intended thereby to balance the liberalism of Harnack to some extent.

Harnack was a truly noble man. Although this appointment was a move against him, he welcomed Schlatter in a most positive manner and said, This is quite right, we will be able to understand each other. And indeed they worked well together. On one occasion, at some session or discussion, when someone alluded to the points of opposition between the two theologians, Harnack said, The two of us, Herr Schlatter and I, are divided only on the question of miracles. Upon which Schlatter called out, No, on the question of God! for the question of miracles poses the question of God. Anyone who does not recognize miracles has a different idea of God.

I think that hits the nail right on the head. It's not a matter of whether or not we recognize this or that unusual event as a miracle. It's whether God remains God. And whether he is still able to make himself known in the world as Creator and Lord.

John Paul II said once: "If you concern yourself with God, then you can receive some of his light, light that shows you the way of the Lord and reveals a little of God's plan." Does that mean that with faith we can even see into the future?

We can indeed recognize something of God's plan. This knowledge goes beyond that of my personal fate and my individual path. By its light we can look back on history as a whole and see that this is not a random process but a road that leads to a particular goal. We can come to know an inner logic, the logic of God, within apparently chance happenings.

Even if this does not enable us to predict what is going to happen at this or that point, nonetheless we may develop a certain sensitivity for the dangers contained in certain things—and for the hopes that are in others. A sense of the future develops, in that I see what destroys the future—because it is contrary to the inner logic of the road—and what, on the other hand, leads onward—because it opens the positive doors and corresponds to the inner design of the whole. To that extent the ability to diagnose the future can develop.

It's the same with the prophets. They are not to be understood as seers, but as voices who understand time from God's point of view and can therefore warn us against what is destructive—and, on the other hand, show us the right road forward.

If Jesus Christ is the Son of God and God himself almighty and omniscient, then we would perhaps also have to say: Yes, at that hour, two thousand years ago, when he hung in agony on the Cross, he knew me. Through his divine foreknowledge, he already knew my name.

In the Letter to the Galatians, Paul says: "He knew me and gave himself up for me." From a purely empirical standpoint, of course, he did not know Paul. But Paul knew that he had been called by the risen Christ, that the eyes of the Lord had sought him out.

We ought not to try to imagine how Christ could, as a man, run his eye over all the infinite number of persons in history; but that when all is said and done, in that moment of agony in the garden, in the moment of his Yes to the Cross, he had us in mind, that he knew me as well, we can say that. This action comprehends the decision of love that was made in eternity and that is formative and determinative in the temporal life of Christ. Thus I know that

I am not just someone born later, standing outside the circle of light, but that there is a personal relationship with me, whose vital root is in Christ's very act of self-giving.

God, Yes—Church, No?

The original meaning of the Greek word Church is: "Those belonging to the Lord". Does that mean that the Church belongs to God himself?

Exactly. *Ekklesia* means *called out*, those who are called out. The word in its technical sense refers to the "assembly", and in the Greek-speaking area people thought of the democratic assemblies of that time. But in Christian usage its reference was to the assembly at Sinai, the assembly of the people of Israel. In that way it refers to "those called together by God", those who have gathered together with him, who belong to God and who know that he is in their midst.

The underlying notion is, as you said, that the Church has been appropriated by God to be his particular possession in the world, something that especially belongs to him, the living temple. The Christians took quite seriously the idea that God does not live in stone but is alive. Those people in whom he is alive and who belong to him, accordingly, form his true temple. The expression *people of God* also signifies belonging to God in a special way—and living on the basis of being owned by him.

In the course of two thousand years of Christian history, the Church has divided time and again. In the meantime, there are around three hundred distinguishable. Protestant, Orthodox, or other churches. There are way over a thousand

Baptist groups in the United States. Over against these there is still the Roman Catholic Church with the pope at her head, which claims to be the only true Church. She remains at any rate, and despite every crisis, indeed the most universal, historically significant, and successful Church in the world, with more members today than at any time in her history.

I think that in the spirit of Vatican II we ought not to see that as a triumph for our prowess as Catholics and ought not to make much of the institutional and numerical strength we continue to enjoy. If we were to reckon that as our achievement and as our right, then we would step outside the role of a people belonging to God and set ourselves up as an association in our own right. And that can very quickly go wrong. A Church may have great institutional power in a country, but as soon as faith is no longer there to back it up, the institution will break down.

Perhaps you know the mediaeval story of a Jew who traveled to the papal court and who became a Catholic. On his return, someone who knew the papal court well asked him: "Did you realize what sort of things are going on there?" "Yes," he said, "of course, quite scandalous things, I saw it all." "And you still became a Catholic", remarked the other man. "That's completely perverse!" Then the Jew said, "It is because of all that that I have become a Catholic. For if the Church continues to exist in spite of it all, then truly there must be someone upholding her." And there is another story, to the effect that Napoleon once declared that he would destroy the Church. Whereupon one of the cardinals replied, "Not even we have managed that!"

I believe that we see something important in these paradoxical tales. There have in fact always been plenty of human monstrosities in the Catholic Church. That she still holds together, even if she groans and creaks, that she is still in existence, that she produces great martyrs and great

believers, people who put their whole lives at her service, as missionaries, as nurses, as teachers, that really does show that there is someone there upholding her.

We cannot, then, reckon the Church's success as our own reward, but we may still say, with Vatican II—even if the Lord has given a great deal of life to other churches and communities—that the Church herself, as an active agent, has survived and is present in *this* agent. And that can only be explained by the fact that *he* grants what men cannot achieve.

Guardini once described the purpose of the Church thus: "She must steadily hold out to man the final verities, the ultimate image of perfection, the most fundamental principles of value, and must not permit herself to be confused by any passion, by any alteration of sentiment, by any trick of self-seeking." A difficult requirement.

Yes, but one that is right. Even if in this case it is expressed with strictness. Guardini, who was such a very understanding man, loved to set out requirements uncompromisingly, and that is also important. We must not drown the requirements in compromise until they gradually disappear from view. The Church cannot act according to the motto: What is going to be possible; what is not? She is not there in order to discover the most acceptable form of compromise, but to hold out to people, without distortion, the whole magnitude of God's Word and his will—even if this speaks against herself and against her own spokesmen.

I am always impressed by what Paul says in his farewell speech to the presbyters at Ephesus (he already knew that he would be made prisoner when he reached Jerusalem). I have told you, he said, about the *whole* will of God. I have not kept anything back from you, nor have I sought to make it easier for you. Nor have I given you my own version, but

have proclaimed to you the whole will of God! And that is what the Church is for.

Presumably it has never occurred to you to leave the Church. Isn't there anything about the Church that annoys or irritates you?

Leaving the Church would indeed never have entered my head. I feel so much at home in her, my life has been bound up with her from my birth, that leaving her would maim or even destroy me.

Of course there are things about her, big and little, that are annoying. From the local Church, right up to the Church's overall leadership, within which I now have to work. People are always involved, and this always gives rise to annoyance. But you don't leave your family because you're annoyed; and certainly not if the love that binds you together is stronger, if that is what upholds you in life.

And so it is with the Church. Here too, I know that I am not here on account of this or that; I know that there have been so many mistakes in history, that there may be concrete irritations. But I know also that none of these things can take away the essential quality of the Church. Simply because that comes from a quite different source—and will always reassert itself.

Joseph Roth writes in his novel, The Radetzky March: "In this decaying world the Roman Church is the only thing left to give shape to life, to help life to keep its shape. Yes, we could even say, that she dispenses shape. . . . In instituting sin, she is already forgiving it. She does not allow the existence of any faultless human beings: this is the really human thing about her. . . . Thereby the Roman Church demonstrates her most eminent characteristic, that of

pardoning, of forgiving.” Is the Church in essence a Church of sinners?

Quite obviously! We have just seen how the Church is upheld by God in spite of sinners. This quotation articulates a particular way of looking at the Church, which sees her as being good and useful on purely secular grounds. One quite essential aspect of the Church is that she gives shape to life, that she upholds a certain shape, that she is not blurred in a mist of uncertainties, that she can say what God’s will is. If we understand her purely as a historical entity, then we put God at the service of human ends. In that case we begin to see people wanting to have some kind of religion, but regarding God himself merely as a useful construct for the purpose of keeping people together and bringing them close to you.

On the other hand, I would criticize what was said about the Catholic Church having instituted sin and then forgiven it straightaway. The Church does not invent sins but recognizes the will of God and has to declare it. Of course, the great thing in this quotation is that upon the Church, which has to declare the will of God in its full magnitude, in its unconditional rigor, so that man should know his true measure, is bestowed as a gift, at the same time, the task of forgiving.

In practice, the Church can say to people: Whoever tries to be in the right on the basis of his own resources, whoever believes he can live in such a way as to need no forgiveness, commits an offense. There is an arrogance in that, a pride in one’s own achievement and in being self-made, which in the end is inhuman.

The point really is that we should not have this kind of vanity at all. And I should never reach the point of not needing to be forgiven. On the contrary, if I am trying to live more and more according to the will of God, to identify his will with my own, then I know, too, that I shall always be

forgiven, I am a being who has the humility to accept the fact that I need forgiveness. In this respect, humility and trust are what make a man truly human.

“Yes to God, No to the Church” has become a popular slogan. Saint Cyprian, bishop of Carthage (200-258), said on this point: “Outside the Church there is no salvation”, since “Whoever does not have the Church for his Mother, does not have God for his Father.” Is that still true today?

It is not true in the sense that implies that all non-Christians are destined for hell. But it does mean that we need our mother, even if we don't know her; the community, which brings us to birth in the faith and which presents us to God.

Cyprian is talking about the relationship between God and the Church in the context of persecution. He is thinking of people who leave the Church because of their fear of being martyred and who think that they will, of course, still keep on with Christ and God. He is telling them that whoever leaves the living community, the living body, is climbing out of Noah's ark and will drown in the flood. It is in this sense that he is showing them how the Church and faith in Christ are indivisible.

I cannot just make Christ my private possession and try to keep him for myself. To a certain extent, the discomfort of belonging to his family goes along with Christ himself. Faith has been bestowed on us in this community context; it is not otherwise available. Cyprian did not invent any theory concerning what God will do about those who did not know the Church. Even Saint Paul, who so insists on the importance of the Church, tells us that we must behave as we should *within* the Church; *God* will do whatever he is going to do about those outside; *he* will judge them. Thus Paul, too, does not evolve any theory about how God will settle the business about those others. But he does tell us

that whoever has come face-to-face with Christ cannot separate him from the Church; it is within her that he must live the life of Christ,

This has remained a pressing question for two thousand years.

Perhaps I may add one more thing: Nowadays the situation has changed a little further. Johann Baptist Metz once said that the formula today is: No to God, Yes to religion. People want to have some kind of religion, esoteric or whatever it maybe. But a personal God, who speaks to me, who knows me personally, who has said something quite specific and who has met me with a specific demand, and who will also judge me—people don't want him. What we see is religion being separated from God. People don't want to do without this sensation of the Wholly Other, this special religious feeling, entirely; they want it available in many shapes and forms. But there is in the end no guarantee of its continuing to be there, unless the will of God and God himself are also present. In that sense we are not so much in the middle of a religious crisis—religions are springing up; all over the place—as in the middle of a God crisis.

This morning I wanted to go to the Mass of the Benedictine community in the church here at Monte Cassino. I was late getting there, and I was in a real hurry. But to my misfortune there was no one to be seen anywhere who might have helped me. I wandered around like a blind man in this monastery, which is as big as a town, almost swearing, but I could not find the blooming way to get there. There were innumerable doors, and I knocked on them, but they all led nowhere in particular, at any rate not to the place I was so

desperately searching for. Is it ever possible to find one's way to God, to the Church, alone?

Certainly not completely alone. Part of the essence of Christianity—and this is included in the concept of the Church—is that our relationship to God is not just an inner one, one made up of my “I” and his “Thou”, but is also a matter of being spoken to, of being led. A meeting is part of every path to conversion. The Church is there so that people who have searched for the door and found it can be in her. Among all the variety of temperaments, there will always be someone who suits me and who has the right word to say to me.

As human beings we are there so that God can come to people by way of other people. He always comes to people through people. So we, too, always come to him through other people who are being led by him, in whom he himself meets us and opens us up to him. If we could lift ourselves up to the ultimate degree simply by reading Holy Scripture, then this would be just another philosophical movement, without this element of community that is such a vital element in faith.

The emperor demanded of Saint Lawrence in Rome that he should hand over the treasures of the Church. A little while later Lawrence, who was to die as a martyr on this account, came into the presence of the emperor and showed him the great army of poor people in the city, with these words: “This is the greatest treasure of the Church.”

Holy Scripture tells us, indeed, that Christ came from among the poor of Israel. On the fortieth day after his birth, his Mother brought the gift of the poor and showed us thereby that among these simple people the inner vision had remained clear. They had not lost sight of the whole by

splitting it with a thousand distinctions, but had conserved an inner simplicity, a purity, truthfulness, and goodness that can see clearly.

Of course, the Church needs intellectuals too, absolutely. She needs people who will put their spiritual powers at her disposal. She also needs generous wealthy people, who want to place the power of wealth at the service of what is good. But she still lives also on the enormous strength of those people who are humble believers. In this sense the great host of those who need love and who give love is indeed her true treasure: simple people who are capable of truth because, as the Lord says, they have remained children. Through all the changes of history they have retained their perception of what is essential and have kept alive in the Church the spirit of humility and of love.

With the coming of Christ, so we are taught, the "end time" has already begun. Along with it, the "Age of the Church" has dawned, which will last until the Lord comes again. What does that mean? In other words, is the fortune or misfortune of the earth, and of all its people, inseparable from the fortune or misfortune of the Catholic Church? Or, to put it even more pointedly: If it hadn't been for the prayer and the activity of the Church, would God quite possibly have long since allowed the world to perish?

Let us leave what God would have done, and what he could have done, an open question. But even by purely empirical criteria it is quite evident, it seems to me, that the Catholic Church has a quite fundamental part to play in the movement of history. If her faith collapsed and she were to declare herself, so to speak, spiritually bankrupt and say, We have been mistaken, then a fracture would run through the whole of history and of mankind, the implications of which would be quite unimaginable.

We have already seen how the postconciliar crisis, if it did not trigger the crisis of '68, without doubt enormously reinforced it. In any case, one cannot conceive that particular drama without it. And that is merely what we can, so to speak, comprehend and see. You have quite rightly spoken of deeper things, the power of prayer, of faith, of love. God is brought into this world by those means, so that something of his light can spread abroad among mankind. If this power were to disappear, that would be a historical catastrophe.