

Talk to the Participants at the 27th Annual Meeting of the
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Pope Benedict XVI: The Conscience of Our Age

The “delusion of innocence”, i.e. the inability to recognize guilt, is a destructive sickness, a sleeping-sickness of the conscience. Where, however, conscience falls asleep – we have seen it happen in the last century – man destroys both himself and the world. Hence the sleeping-sickness that can affect man’s conscience mustn’t be ignored; rather his conscience must be awakened so that he can seek forgiveness. This is, in fact, an essential manifestation of love. Whereas to allow one’s neighbour to become religiously forgetful, or to let his conscience wither and die, is to show a lack of love towards him. In other words, it is a sign of love for one’s neighbour to harass him, so that that he wakes up to God, so that he himself can once again become a loving person. Pope Benedict XVI.¹

The first evening on my arrival in Rome, a cover of the weekly Catholic magazine, *Famiglia Cristiana*, caught my eye: a picture of the Pope in the USA with the title: “Conscience of the World”. Someone, I thought, has robbed me of my best line! Nonetheless, it made me reread the text of the Holy Father’s address to the UN, which, like many here present, I had heard live, thanks to Mother Angelica’s EWTN. It was typical Ratzinger, the Professor I have known for 37 years, now become the Teacher of the nations. He spoke quietly and persuasively. His words, as usual, hit the solar plexus. The assembly was stunned; the applause was prolonged; the acting President of the assembly responded: “An important and inspiring presentation”. No more. He too, it seems, was stunned. Why?

¹ Sermon in Castel Gandolfo for the members of his Schülerkreis on September 4, 2004, translated by Martin Henry and published in D. Vincent Twomey, SVD, *Pope Benedict XVI; The Conscience of Our Age. A Theological Portrait* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007), pp. 178-84; quotation from pp. 182-3.

Many Vatican observers were disappointed that the Pope did not rail at the assembled diplomats about the many hot-spots in the world today and urge them to do something about them. Instead, he gave, as one German commentator described it, a kind of inaugural lecture in a language worthy of the great German philosophers. And in so doing, he went to the root of the many crises affecting the world today, as is his wont. And what is at the root of these crises? The loss of the Transcendent in public life. But he also indicated the only way to solve these crises: namely the restoration of the centrality of religion in public life, the place of God in personal and social life, and a rediscovery of the primacy of the moral order God has written into creation, which all peoples and religious traditions to some extent recognize. It is these values which found their modern expression the *UN Declaration of Human Rights* promulgated 60 years ago.

The real crisis of the world today is the denial of the existence of objective morality, Pope Benedict pointed out in so many words. This is a direct result of the exclusion of God from the public square. Because of the reduction of morality to subjective preference, there is no agreed consensus about values and moral principles which are non-negotiable. Adhesion to such non-negotiable moral principles and values alone can give the world's leaders a framework and a measure by which they can solve the world's problems. In the absence of such a moral framework, which is a direct consequence of the denial of Transcendence, and so of a human nature created by God, might becomes right. The weak are sacrificed on the altar of progress or the happiness of others, or indeed to placate the economic powers that dominate the world.

In his whole speech, which I have tried to summarize in my own words, the visible Head of the Church on earth was speaking not just on behalf of Christianity but in the name of all religions. Only at the end of his speech, did the Pope mention Our Lord explicitly, when he said: "For Christians, this task [of engaging anew in the arduous search for the right way to order human affairs] is motivated by the hope drawn from the saving work of Jesus Christ. That is why the Church is happy to be associated with the activity of this distinguished Organization, charged with the responsibility of promoting peace and good

will throughout the earth.” In parenthesis, one might ask: When was the name of our Lord and Saviour last uttered in that assembly and uttered with such reverence?

Addressing the UN, the Pope must have had at the back of his mind the dark picture of humanity’s future painted by Samuel P, Huntington which has caught the imagination of many: namely a clash of civilizations based on religious differences which would result in havoc around the world. The terrorist attack on 9/11 seemed to have confirmed this theory. The Pope argued softly and persuasively the very opposite: only religion can and will save the world, religion can and will promote peace, once its centrality and indispensable nature is publicly recognized and once the world religions themselves engage in that dialogue which has truth as its object or motivating force. In an article in *Newsweek* (25 April 2008), George Weigel’s comment on the Pope’s talks in general also applied in particular to his address to the UN: “The non-believing minority experienced a religious leader who took care to speak in a language non-believers could understand.” And he added: “In a season of increasingly adolescent political cantankerousness, it was refreshing to be in the presence of an adult – an adult who treated his hosts as adults by paying them the compliment of making serious, sustained arguments.” In other words, he was appealing to his audience’s capacity to know the truth, to their conscience.

Reminding people of the truth: that, in a sense, sums up the thrust of all the writings and speeches of Joseph Ratzinger, Professor, Bishop, Cardinal Prefect and now Pope. That is what I meant when I entitled my book: *The Conscience of Our Age*. The title refers both to Joseph Ratzinger, Professor, Archbishop, Cardinal Prefect and Pope as the embodiment of that conscience in our day as well as his own remarkable philosophical and theological contributions over many decades to clarifying what in fact is meant by the term “conscience”. This is a term that, as we heard from Fr Thomas Tham yesterday, has taken on an entirely new meaning in the wake of *Humanae Vitae*, one that is in sharp contradiction with its original meaning first adumbrated by reason (I refer to the Greeks) and finally clarified by revelation. (I will outline that original meaning below.) As Ratzinger in one of his essays points out, it was above all the great saints: Basil the Great, Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and Thomas More, not to mention John Henry Newman,

who deepened that understanding. According to them, conscience is that primordial sense of right and wrong that is implanted in us by God, which needs help from outside to realize itself, ultimately from the divinely assisted teaching authority of the Church founded on Peter and the Apostles. The German philosopher, Robert Spaeman, compared this primordial conscience to our capacity to speak, which can only develop within a human community that has developed a language. [A child who grows up among wolves will bark like them.] So too, our capacity to know right and wrong needs the community of a religious tradition – the most complete being the Catholic community with its divinely constituted teaching authority – to become operative in human behaviour.

In their dissent from *Humanae Vitae*, some theologians understood conscience to mean in effect that it does not matter what one does provided that one is sincerely convinced that it is right. *Sincerity* now becomes the criterion of morality. Taken to its logical conclusion, as Ratzinger once pointed out, it would be impossible to condemn a Hitler or a Stalin, since it could be claimed that they too acted according to their ‘lights’, according to their sincere convictions. The traditional insistence on the primacy of following your conscience, even if erroneous, led to a new notion, that of the ‘infallible conscience’. This amounts to the claim that conscience cannot err, that what you think is right is in fact right. This, Ratzinger pointed out, is to reduce conscience to an excuse mechanism. It is sometimes claimed today that each one can adopt whatever moral principles he or she, “in conscience”, decides is best for them. These principles would be the fruit of their conscientious choice, having looked at all the options open to them – including the Church’s “official position”, as it was often called, thereby reducing the Church’s authoritative teaching to one opinion among others. This is indeed a seductively attractive theory. But it amounts to the claim that each person can determine for himself or herself what is right or wrong; this was the temptation to which Adam and Eve succumbed in the Garden. Often, it is given the title ‘a-la-carte’ Catholicism, picking and choosing what suits us. Morality is reduced to an (ultimately irrational) personal preference. This prevailing notion of conscience has had a devastating effect on the Church and Christian living.

This notion receives its persuasiveness, if not its inspiration, as we heard from Professor Hilgers this morning, from the prevailing moral relativism which Cardinal Ratzinger decried on the eve of the conclave that elected him Pope. It is at the core of the crisis facing the contemporary world he mentioned in his address to the UN. Professor Hilgers reminded us that the crisis in moral theology triggered by the publication of *Humanae Vitae* and its immediate rejection by dissident theologians – as Cardinal Stafford dramatically recalled last Wednesday – reflects a deeper crisis of civilization, whose philosophical and theological roots are centuries old. Pope John Paul II pointed out in *Familiaris Consortio*, as we heard this morning, that the difference between contraception and natural family planning is more radical than is generally thought: it is based on two irreconcilable understandings of the human person. Ratzinger in various writings regularly returned to address this deeper crisis, which I cannot go into here in any detail – though at the end I will return to it briefly. It is of crucial importance for any evaluation of the Pope as the conscience of our age.

It was an appeal to conscience falsely understood as a subjective, personal preference, which enabled theologians and some Bishops' conferences to justify their dissent from the Pope's teaching on contraception, as we heard yesterday. But the primordial sense of right and wrong, which Ratzinger in his writings recovered, remains, even though suffocated by cultural disvalues. It is precisely this deeper level of conscience to which all of Ratzinger's writings appeal, when, as Weigel puts it, he "gently" reminds us of truths we may have forgotten or misunderstood. The adjective "gentle" is significant. It recalls the nature of God's power: the Holy Spirit is likened to the dew that falls on the grass in the morning. The adjective "gentle" reminds us that when God speaks to the individual, He does so in the small still breeze as he did to Elijah hidden in the cave, as we heard in today's reading at Mass. The gentle reminder is a good way of describing the way Pope Benedict speaks the truth in love, as St Paul urges all Christians to do. It also points to the interconnection between faith and reason. Conscience is our capacity for truth; and so reason, argumentation, confirmed by divine authority and illuminated by the truths of revelation, is needed, if people are to come to know with certainty the truth that makes us free.

If Joseph Ratzinger in his writings is capable of reminding his readers of forgotten truths, it is because he himself has discovered these truths for himself and lives by them. That is what theology is all about, at least as he understands it. Truth is not fabricated by us. It is something we must discover. In his own memoirs, he refers to 1 Pet 3:15, which exhorts the early believers to give reasons for the hope that is in them. This, he tells us, provided him with his motivation, when he embarked on his theological studies immediately after the War. Germany had come out from under the menacing shadow of the Nazi totalitarian regime into the light of freedom made possible by the Allied victory. His brush with the evil of totalitarianism had a profound effect on him. In an interview in 1995, he said that “as a result [of living through the Nazi period], I learned to have a certain reserve with regard to the reigning ideologies.” As a result, he has the courage to stand up and be counted – and to oppose publicly the reigning ideologies, be they of a political or of a theological nature.

Celebrated as a young progressive theologian during the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger was not afraid to be called a conservative, even a reactionary, when some years later he applied his sharp, critical mind to the centrifugal forces released by the way the Council was one-sidedly interpreted by some of his theological colleagues. Later as Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he took on the wrath of his fellow theologians, in particular liberation theologians, as well as the gay and lesbian lobby, the advocates of New Age pseudo-spirituality, and, with the publication of *Donum Vitae*, the medical, economic and political forces that want to use human embryos as raw material, ultimately for their own financial gain. At one stage, the whole Protestant world was up in arms with the publication of *Dominus Iesus*, which dared to affirm that the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church subsists in the Catholic Church united under the Successor of St Peter. He was publicly reviled as the Rottweiler, Panzerkardinal, Grand Inquisitor, even the enemy of humanity. How did he react? With equanimity: he calmly and gently continued to write, to argue, to persuade gently but forcefully. One example will suffice: I happened to be doing supply in Berlin after the storm that broke out over his head after the publication of *Dominus Iesus*, and so could

read in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* his carefully crafted, respectful, full-page reply to various criticisms of the document. It was a masterpiece of patient persuasion.

At a more profound level, his distrust of ideologies of any kind, even theological, was rooted in his fundamental option for the truth, which is personal in the most profound sense. Truth is personal in such a way that it transforms the one who encounters it. But truth is at the same time communal or social, in that it can only be discovered within the contemporary academic and public discourse, and when that truth is uttered in speech or writing, it can and does change the world. Truth of its nature demands public witness, which can call forth the opposition of what St Paul calls the powers and principalities of this world. Thus public witness to the truth often ends in the ultimate witness, namely martyrdom. Martyrdom (Greek for “witness”), correctly understood, is the mark of the divine nature of Truth. Truth, in the final analysis, is Jesus Christ, He who said “I am the Truth, the Way and the Life.”

Truth is like the pearl hidden in the field: it is not always obvious. We must search for it. Ratzinger’s life has been marked by that fearless search. Every scholar enters into that stream of questions and partial answers that constitutes the intellectual tradition of humanity, where various currents intermingle, and every serious thinker enters into the contemporary debate that rages in the academic and political communities. Every genuine scholar is attentive to what his critics are saying, including those who reject Christianity, since, as Ratzinger has pointed out, every genuine, i.e. the truly humble, scholar knows that some kernel of truth is to be found wherever someone honestly tries to make sense of the human condition, even if their conclusions are, in our view, inadequate or even seriously erroneous.

On November 7th 1999, Cardinal Ratzinger was inducted into the French Academy to replace the Soviet dissident, Andrej Sakharov. By doing so, the French Immortals were in fact paying tribute to the greatest living “dissident” in Western Europe: Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. His election to the Academy was a public recognition of the unique scholarly contribution he made – and continues to make – to political thought

through his writings on contemporary moral and political developments. His is an independent and original contribution that is rooted in a profound theological vision. But it seems to me that by electing him to the Academy, the leading French intellectuals wished to grant public recognition to one of the few voices of sanity in a world that denies the very possibility of truth, that can no longer distinguish between right and wrong – that in fact denies that any such distinction can legitimately be made. Paradoxical as it may seem, it was not the theologians he disciplined, including Charles Curran and Hans Küng, who are the real dissidents – though they rejoiced in the title – but the rather shy, not very robust German who dared to say to them and to the rest of the world: sorry, but you are wrong.

In January 1971, the then Professor Joseph Ratzinger first interviewed me in his home in Pentling, near the University of Regensburg, to see if he would accept me as his doctoral student. What struck me most during that interview was the way he listened. Attentive listening is the mark of the truly humble. Later, when I joined his doctoral colloquium and attended his seminars, the same concentrated listening characterized the way he conducted his discussions. I have never met anyone who could provoke a genuine discussion like Ratzinger. Why? Because everyone knew that what they had to say was taken seriously, was noted, and was remembered. Further, he allowed us to discover the truth for ourselves and never once imposed his answers on us. The result is that his doctoral students represented the most diverse opinions in theology, from left to right of the spectrum. His lectures were marked by the same listening to the questions raised by the world we live in – this was usually the starting point of his lectures – then paying careful attention to the various attempts to answer these questions by philosophers and theologians, indeed any serious thinker of whatever discipline or provenance. Only then would he attempt to articulate his own reply, which always began by listening attentively to the Word of God found primarily in the words of Scripture and echoed in the writings of the great Church thinkers of all time. He was never afraid to tackle any question or to face any objection, confident as he was that the truth alone was what mattered, the truth that sets us free.

And of course it is conscience that makes us capable of knowing the truth. To repeat what I said above, truth is not an abstraction, as found in ideologies, but, to put it in my own words, the personal recognition of what makes sense of reality while enabling us to transcend the visible, what gives secure direction to one's own life, and, most importantly, what enables people to live together with others, because truth is what binds people together as human beings, as persons. It very often involves an excruciating search – such as the one Pope Paul VI engaged in before his conscience was clear as to his own unique responsibility as Successor of St Peter for what the divine law demanded in this crucial matter, as Giovanni Battista Cardinal Re pointed out in his keynote address – a search that ends in a clear conscience, an inner calm and certainty, though the world may be in uproar against him and his teaching. Pope Paul VI made this clear a few days after promulgating the encyclical: “After imploring the light of the Holy Spirit, We placed Our conscience at the free and full disposal of the voice of truth” (General Audience, July 31, 1968),

Writing on the character of ecclesiastical authority, Ratzinger stressed that the authoritative decisions and convictions that give unity to the Church were those which arose from the exercise of conscience on the part of those who share in the Apostolic Succession – the bishops – in union with the Successor of St Peter. For this reason, they are binding in conscience on all Catholics. In the absence of unanimity among the bishops, then it is the conscience of the Pope as successor of St Peter that is binding. Paul VI was acutely conscious of exercising precisely this Petrine authority, as Cardinal Re pointed out, and as can be found by reading the text of HV ## 4 & 6. Dissent was justified by claiming that the Pope did not make an *infallible* teaching; such a justification is just a form of narrow legalism. Much of what we believe has not been defined infallibly, but that does not mean that it is not binding in conscience. It is.²

In his writings, Ratzinger also expressed his scepticism about Bishops' conferences, based mostly on his own personal experience as Archbishop of Munich and on the

² The Church's teaching on the Mystery of the Holy Trinity, for example, was binding in conscience long before it was defined by the great Church Councils in the fourth century.

experience of how the German bishops in the Nazi period were hampered by the need to find a common denominator – usually the lowest common denominator – and so were largely ineffective. (The most trenchant public opposition came from individual bishops like von Galen). Benedict seems to have modified his views of Episcopal conferences somewhat in the meantime, but his main criticism remains: they should not replace the primacy of the individual bishop’s personal responsibility (conscience) and his personal public witness to the truth, which is the fruit of his own wrestling to find the truth. Episcopal conferences, Ratzinger suggested, should help the individual bishops in the formation of their own consciences, rather than – I might add – sign documents prepared by others and read by few, since such documents lack the conviction of a purified conscience.

May I recall my own experience with *Humanae Vitae*? I was still a seminarian in 1968, and had just completed that section of the theology course in Maynooth which included the tract on conjugal morality. Contraception was *the* issue up for discussion. The leaked majority reports the previous year encouraged us in the belief that the teaching would change – just as so many things apparently so sacred and unchanging (like the Liturgy) had changed with Vatican II. I too was hoping for a change. Most of our professors seemed to be preparing us for a change, which they saw as inevitable and logical and, above all, “pastoral”. Though their theological arguments did not always convince me personally, in the end compassion for the hard cases always won out. The news that the Pope had said “no”, initially came as a blow to me. But before forming a judgement based on second-hand information, I resolved to read the text, as soon as I got my hands on it. I remember vividly the afternoon (on the 1st or 2nd August), when I took up the text of *Humanae Vitae* to read it. I was visiting our Divine Word Missionary house in a suburb of Dublin, Booterstown, the former town-house of the great Irish tenor, John McCormack. From the bay window, I could see the sun shining on the vast expanse of blue-green water that is Dublin Bay. I sat down, took up the text, and read it from start to finish in one session. I put down the paper in amazement. Two things struck me, almost with the force of an inner light: this is the truth – and, secondly, the Pope is the successor of St Peter, the Vicar of Christ. From that moment on, I never doubted, though it was

several decades later before I had the opportunity to deepen my appreciation of the richness of *Humanae Vitae*, when I began to teach sexual ethics – and also to deepen my understanding of the nature of the Petrine Primacy, which Ratzinger in his writings clarified for me.

I will in a moment illustrate the nature of this deeper crisis by giving you a short account of an article the then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, presumably as part of his own homework in preparation for the publication of *Donum Vitae*. This is the document that deals with the ethical implications of the biotechnological revolution, which made it possible for the first time in history to separate the generation of children from the conjugal act, and now regularly produces babies in the laboratory. *Donum Vitae* is, as it were, the completion of the teaching of *Humanae Vitae*. Thanks to the fact that Cardinal Ratzinger was at the helm of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the document, which explored the Pandora's box opened up by the attempt to make babies in a Petri dish, the Church's reaction was relatively swift and decisive: nine years after the first test-tube baby was born, the Congregation issued *Donum Vitae*, its *Instruction on Respect for Human Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation: Replies to certain Questions of the Day*, on 22 Feb. 1987.³ Part of Ratzinger's homework for this document seems to have been an article that was published in 1989 (*Communio*): “Der Mensch zwischen Reproduktion and Schöpfung” [Man between reproduction and creation].

His starting point is the effect of the new biotechnologies on language; the preferred term today being “reproduction”. This change in common discourse marks a profound shift, he claims, in our understanding of what it is to be human. Up to now the origin of man found its linguistic expression in such terms as begetting, conception, generation, and above all procreation, with its built-in reference to the Creator to whom everyone is ultimately indebted for his or her existence. “Reproduction”, by way of contrast, describes most succinctly the biological transmission of human beings. Both terminologies need not necessarily exclude each other. They correspond to different

³ Some basic principles had already been articulated by Pope Pius XII, as Professor Hilgers pointed out, and by Blessed Pope John XXIII.

perspectives. And yet, a change in language usually indicates a more fundamental change of attitude. In fact, two different conceptions of what it is to be human are beginning to emerge.

“Reproduction” is the characteristic of living organisms, which according to the great French biologist, Jacques Monod, share three characteristics: they have an inbuilt goal (teleonomy), they are self-constructing (autonomous morphogenesis) and they display reproductive invariance (they are self-reproducing). Monod lays special stress on invariance. Once given, the genetic code will always be reproduced. Reproduction expresses genetic identity: the individual only ever produces what is common. On the other hand, the word “reproduction” refers to the mechanical process by which such a copy is made. In general terms, we can say that the reproduction of the human species is brought about by the union of two strands of information originally contained in sperm and ovum.

Ratzinger asks pointedly: is this an adequate description of what happens? Is the human being so reproduced just another individual instance of the human species, or is it something more, namely a person who shares the common characteristics of the human species, something new, something unrepeatable? And if so, what is the source of that uniqueness? Another question is: how do these two strands of biological information come together? It is remarkable that today we no longer take the answer for granted: namely through the union of man and wife, through their becoming one flesh, as Scripture puts it. The biological process of reproduction has, since the dawn of time, been enveloped in the personal process of the body-soul encounter of two human beings.

IVF has forced us to ask the question: to what extent is such a context necessary? Is it just a trick that nature uses the sexual instinct to achieve its purpose, as the plants use the wind to carry their seed or the bees to fructify the flowers? Is the emotional attraction of man and woman just a trick of nature, as a result of which they act not as persons but only as individual specimens of the species? Or should one rather say that, with the love of two persons and the freedom out of which that love emerges, a new dimension of

reality appears which corresponds to the fact that the child is not just the repetition of invariant information but a person, a new and free “I” that emerges in the world as a new centre?

It is clear that today it is possible to isolate the biomedical process in the laboratory and bring the two strands of information together. Admitting that the connection with the personal sphere does not have the same characteristics as the “necessity” that marks the biological sphere, Ratzinger asks: is there perhaps another type of “necessity” other than the mere laws of nature? Even though the personal and the biological spheres can be separated today, is there not a deeper kind of inseparability, a higher necessity for the connection between them, namely an ethical necessity? What are the implications for humanity, if we dispute the ethical necessity, if we deny that “ought” which addresses our freedom and recognizes only the necessity arising from the dynamics of nature? Is it not the denial of what is specifically human?

This then leads to the central question for Ratzinger: why is the coming into existence of a new human being more than “reproduction”? What is this more? And what are the ethical consequences of this “more”? The nature of that “more”, Ratzinger later shows, has been revealed by God in Scripture, and the consequences have been spelt out over the centuries in the Church’s moral teaching. On the other hand, what happens in the laboratory is the fruit of a diametrically opposite, fundamental vision of the world and humanity. That vision is rooted in modernity’s denial of metaphysics and its reduction of reality to what can be made, and so the reduction of man to *homo faber*, the producer of things, who is valued because of what he does not because of what he is. This vision has long been at the object of Ratzinger’s critical, theological reflections, since it is the vision that characterizes the modern world.

Here Ratzinger points out that, though the ability to make human beings is new, the aspiration to acquire this power is ancient. The notion of making a human being occurs first in the medieval, Jewish, quasi-mystical speculations known as the Kabbala, with the concept of the Golem. Behind it lay the speculations found in the Book of Jezira (ca. AD

500) concerning the creative power of numbers. By means of the ordered recitation of all conceivable creative combinations of letters, it would be possible finally to produce an homunculus, the Golem. Already in the 13th century, the idea of the death of God emerges in association with the Golem. On his forehead, he bears the inscription: “God is dead”, which is explained in a parable. The point of the parable is that, once man possesses the power to create, he replaces God, God no longer features on man’s horizons. At this stage, Ratzinger asks the rhetorical question: Will the new wielders of power, who have discovered the key to the language of creation and can themselves combine its building blocks, remember that what they do is only possible because numbers and letters are at hand, are givens, whose information they know how to combine?

Ratzinger examines a variation of the notion of the homunculus in Goethe’s masterpiece, *Faust*, where Faustus’s assistant, the fanatical scientist Dr Wagner, creates a little man in a test tube. The little man recognizes Mephistopheles as Wagner’s cousin. Goethe, in other words, sees the intrinsic relationship between the artificial, self-made world of positivism and the spirit of negation or nihilism. Goethe warns us that behind the attempt to produce human beings artificially are two powerful driving forces: the desire to uncover secrets, to see through the world and reduce it to banal rationality on the one hand, and, on the other, contempt for nature and its larger mysterious reason.

Finally, he discusses the negative utopia of George Huxley’s *Brave New World*, which Huxley later described as a plea for freedom and sanity.

To conclude. At the start of this paper, I discussed the Pope’s appeal to the nations of the world to see religion not as the source of future disaster but as humanity’s salvation. It was an appeal to let God be God and so allow humanity discover its true nature and moral compass. The living God who speaks to and from each person’s conscience has always been at the centre of Joseph Ratzinger’s theological and pastoral concerns. Let me end with a comment he once made at one of the annual gatherings of his former doctoral and postdoctoral students, if I remember correctly. The context for the comment was the astonishing fact that, for the first time in the history of humanity, fertility in the 1960s

was not seen as a supreme value, one that has been and still is the object of worship in some religions. What then was the deepest reason for the widespread acceptance of contraception in the 1960's and with it the glorification of infertility? Nihilism: people feel that they no longer have a real future. How can you bring children into the world, if there is no future for them? It was the time of the cold war and the threat of an atomic war. But Ratzinger was thinking more profoundly about something he articulated most eloquently in his second encyclical, *Spe salvi*, on hope: in a world without God, there can be no future, no hope. God is not only fruitful love, His providence assures that the fruit of human love will flourish and will experience the joy that God has prepared for us. Let me end with a quotation from Pope Benedict XVI's homily during the Mass to inaugurate his Pontificate:

And only where God is seen does life truly begin. Only when we meet the living God in Christ do we know what life is. We are not some casual and meaningless product of evolution. Each of us is the result of a thought of God. Each of us is willed, each of us is loved, each of us is necessary. There is nothing more beautiful than to be surprised by the Gospel, by the encounter with Christ. There is nothing more beautiful than to know Him and to speak to others of our friendship with Him. The task of the shepherd, the task of the fisher of men, can often seem wearisome. But it is beautiful and wonderful, because it is truly a service to joy, to God's joy which longs to break into the world.

And that service to joy, Professor Hilgers, is precisely what you and your fellow-doctors and nurses, scientists and practitioners, have rendered to countless couples by remaining faithful to the teaching of the Successors of St Peter on the question of birth control. Thank you.

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