



Third Annual Crossroads Cultural Center  
Advisory Board Meeting

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The American Bible Society

**Key Note Address by Msgr. Lorenzo Albacete, Chairman**

**Comments on “The Pope Benedict XVI’s Address at the Meeting with  
Representatives from the World of Culture at the Collège des Bernardins,  
Paris, 9/12/2008”**

I read this address the next day after it was given. As you know, it is a speech given by the Pope to the men and women of culture in France during his visit to France, and even I thought that it could have something that we could use, material that we could steal, so I read it and I liked it, and that’s that. Since then I think I may have read it ten times and I have come to the conclusion that this is one of the most important addresses to come from a pope at any time within modern times. Perhaps Pope Leo’s letter on Chalcedon was a little bit more important. But since then because it is, once you get through the words which may be unfamiliar, what this presents to you is a method, a way of life that defines Christianity. What the Pope has been able to offer here is that, is what defines Christianity, what it means to be a Christian for all times. It is defined by a method of reacting to the real, a method of looking at reality. That is at the heart of Fr. Giussani’s work and charism, and one of the uses I have made of this is precisely to give a few talks comparing both methods, arguing that it is only the one method, or comparing both languages—the one used by the Pope and the one used by Fr. Giussani. It’s not of interest to us here, but every time I become more convinced that this is the defining reality of Christianity. The application of this to people who are concerned about the relation between our faith and culture, which I guess defines us in a broad sense, is crucial. After all, the original audience were people of culture and I think therefore there is no time to do justice to this text. I hope to underline the most important parts and points, and then I do hope you read it for yourselves.

For example it contains the papal response to the most recent disputes Paolo has been facing, and we have all been facing, with the President’s visit to Notre Dame University for the graduation. What is a Catholic university? What is a Christian university? What is the point of departure? How do we judge these events? I think this offers to you a method which is, in fact, *the* Christian method.

Based on that, here we go. The first point, the Pope says, he’s going to claim now that the way the monastic culture was born, the way the monasteries were put together in the Middle Ages, is revealing of how Christianity is defined. They obviously were responding to their own set of circumstances. We have a different particular set, although we have the same underlying background, and that is what? The collapse of certainties. These people are brought together by the experience of the confusion that is experienced in the cultural atmosphere of the time. And the first thing that moves them is: How do you live through this? What is the way of facing and dealing with this ideological and cultural confusion?

Another way of seeing it is that they are in this context motivated by what we would call a desire for truth. Not long ago, to say that would have made this obsolete because the desire for truth is not a popular thing; in the dominant culture, relativism is. But yet if you just watch, for example, the present discussion on torture. I just sit there watching the news, and it is an amazing thing this dispute, pro and

con, as to the need to know the truth. This is not an abstract truth; this is the truth of what happened and in a sense both sides are pursuing the same ideology, but I am not willing to say that the question of desire for truth is that obsolete. I think people can still respond to this desire in the human heart.

In any case, in the midst of this confusion, what can you depend on? The underlying experience is whatever gives rise to that question. And he insists upon this, its intension. First of all, therefore, what is occurring is what Fr. Giussani would call “the formation of a movement.” The beginning of a monastic culture has the shape today of a movement, of people coming together to pursue this, the search together. In any case, the intention is not to create a new culture. The moment you start with that point of view you have detached yourself from the method that defines Christianity. At the end you will be lead to nothing. Nothing really serious can be created that way. So when you are active in the area of faith and culture, as we are, I think the first point to learn is that we watch out that we don’t fall into this temptation to create a culture that will substitute the present one.

“Their intention was not to create a new culture,” says the Pope, “nor even to preserve a culture from the past.” Both ends of the spectrum are rejected—to be involved to create a new culture or to protect the one that seems to be collapsing. “Its motivation,” says the Pope, “is much more elementary.” I love that word! Its motivation is a human need; it’s “elementary.” Namely their goal was: *quaerere Deum*—to search for God. The search for God, the danger with that term is that it may appear pious or escapist. So the Pope says, “What does it mean to search for God?” I think these words of his in reply are fantastic:

Amid the confusion of the times, in which nothing seemed permanent, they wanted to do the essential – to make an effort to find what was perennially valid and lasting, life itself. They were searching for God. They wanted to go from the inessential to the essential, to the only truly important and reliable thing there is. It is sometimes said that they were “eschatologically” oriented. But this is not to be understood in a temporal sense, as if they were looking ahead to the end of the world or to their own death, but in an existential sense: they were seeking the definitive behind the provisional.

In the midst of confusion in which everything is falling down, these guys sought the essential, namely that which has value and remains, that you could trust enough, something whose value you can experience and that remains there. It’s not going to go away. What is trustworthy, what is important in the midst of these confusing circumstances, is to find life, life itself. What is life? Human life. So looking for God was not a pious goal or to somehow escape into the unchanging mystery that offers protection from the waves of confusion around us; it was rather to enter into these waves of confusion and there find out what remains, what survives, what has value, what is worthwhile to live for, etc..This the Pope calls, following the tradition, an eschatological orientation. But the problem with that term is that eschatology had come to mean *after the end, the end or after*. First the end of the world or the end of one’s individual lifetime. The Pope says, these guys in no way were interested in that. They were interested in their lives now, not after death, not after the end of the world. They were looking for (and I love this phrase) “the definitive in the midst of the provisional.”

Reading this I can see this point. This is a good way to describe what we are doing together here, why we do what we do is, in a sense, our version in today’s situation of what was these guys there. They could have started a cultural center, if you wish. Instead they started monasteries. We are not going to do that. I don’t know if Angelo has any intention of putting on some kind of habit, but what I want to underline is that we are responding to the same thing that these people responded to, so we want to see how they responded so that we can follow the same method or path today in our terms.

The first point is interesting. Though they are motivated by this search, by this experience of unrest, this desire for truth, their point of departure is not this experience. This experience motivates them, but they are Christians, says the Pope. They believe that God has revealed the method to find Him, and cleared the path to Him. So the first search is to understand revelation well, to understand well the faith, their faith. They arrive at this end, deal with this as people of faith. To the degree their faith is weak, they will attempt to look for alternate methods, but they are convinced that the faith is true, only they want to see what it implies, what it means in terms of how they are to judge the present situation in which they live, and how to respond to it.

For them, this faith is centered on the Word, the Logos. Important point to update this view—the Logos is not at all merely an intellectual concept, but a word, namely like “hi.” It is a reality that catches your attention, that is addressed to you. It is, in Fr. Giussani’s term, an encounter. So this is very important. It is a call; it is therefore a vocation. Human life itself, experienced as a call, as a word, as a response to a word addressed to you—human words. The question is now: What is it revealing to you? How do you respond to this encounter experience with the Word—the recognition of it is faith? How do you respond to that? You need to establish what he calls “a culture of the word”; that is to say, revelation occurs through communication among humans. So therefore you want to study that reality known as human communication. In this case, how do human beings use words? If the Divine Word is experienced as coming through human words, how are human words used? Do you understand the point? So they studied as best they could with the knowledge of the time human language—the words human beings speak in narratives, in poetry, in myths, in all kinds of things. They want to study that, to study, the Pope says, “the secret of language,” the structure of human language, the models, the modes of expression that human beings have. I would expand it further beyond language to communication because it’s not just a question of language. And even further they become interested in the human reality as such, the understanding of what humanity means because unless they do that they will not be able to recognize the impact of the presence of the Divine Logos and how it is that it is speaking to them and what it is saying. Understood?

He has a lovely expression in French that if everything else fails today, you can take home and stun people by speaking of *L’amour des lettres*, love for letters. It kind of has a little sexy tone. You can write little memos like, “Dear Cynthia, Meet me at the Cafe Des Artistes, the usual table. We will discuss *L’amour des lettres*. Ercole.” And then you have justified coming here today because this will be of great use. The culture of the word, *L’amour des lettres*, love for the human—let’s put it in those terms.

*Letters* here stands for everything. The reason *letters* is being used is because revelation is seen in terms of words. For Fr. Giussani, for example, revelation is seen in terms of a different kind of humanity. You encounter a diverse humanity. It starts with that. In the midst of your search for meaning, big or small, suddenly something occurs that strikes you. This diverse humanity is a word, a logos. For that reason you are curious. In what does this diversity consist? Hey, what’s going on here? What does it mean to be human?, etc... It’s exactly the same thing here. We should not restrict it to just words. The reason it’s in those terms is because of the logos, the point of departure.

Therefore this creates a need to know the human sciences. Again these people did not have the technology, the studies, the advantages that we have. But as best they could they studied what sciences were saying about what it means to be human. Another reality that springs from it—a library. You collect as much of the written wisdom as you can. What would be the equivalent of it today? Well certainly a library too. But can you imagine today? Well you have the human sciences, the study of communication and a library, what you have established is, in a certain sense, a school. The monastic movement becomes a school of God’s service-- *dominici servitii schola*. A school in which you are

taught how to find the truth in the midst of confusion, how to find the truth of life. The school serves what was called *eruditio*. Perhaps this is the best expression of all—it was a matter of a school for the formation of reason. Again, for those of us who follow Fr. Giussani, it is not unrelated to the School of Community because again and again this task of searching for how it is that the Divine Logos is present through the human logos, how that is possible and what it implies is for these people a task of reason, absolutely.

This search started with an unexpected personal provocation. Today we would say an encounter with Christ, but while it remains always intensely personal because in the end you are trying to make sense of life, of your own existence, while it remains that way, the Word, the Logos when it enters into human words, into the human reality, the word that is being sought will point you towards a community; that is to say, this is, if you wish, the first consequence of following this method. You understand this aspect about the word—it is going to say that the rest of your search has to be conducted within a community, not by yourself. That is the very nature of the word. The Holy Father's words are: "The word [logos] does not lead to a purely individual path of mystical immersion, but introduces us to a communion with those walking by faith, to the pilgrim fellowship of faith." This is because of the very reality—for those who care, behind it all is the question of the Trinity and of the secret life of the mystery being love, etc., so it is not surprising that no further progress in recognizing the word, the logos in human words can be made except by entering into this community.

Another point that's interesting, to set you up now, so you have to say, where do I find an expression of this community? Where is it? What is it? Well, for these people obviously it was the Church without any problem. But what does it mean? Where is the Church present? You have all those questions to deal with.

Here's another hint. This search cannot be purely intellectual. It requires what the Pope calls "corporal acts." It's an amazing thing. Here I suppose, at least in my case, is where we find perhaps one of the most offensive statements or claims that Christianity is like this because I would prefer if it was intellectual. This little corporal acts...what the heck's going on? What should I do? Well, it can get as silly as standing, sitting, walking. A mental operation is not enough. He says, look at the rabbinic schools. Then the Pope zeros in on two such corporal works—writing, and then his favorite, singing. Of course that immediately excludes me from any further discovery of the truth if I have to go around singing, and it can be in poor taste, which is actually if you saw the Easter Vigil sermon this year of the Pope, it was an astounding thing. He says the resurrection, trying to figure out what that means, communicates its reality through liturgical symbols. There is no other way because it is an event that surpasses the categories in which it could be explained, so therefore it can only come to you through an engagement with a symbol. You see the idea of corporal acts. And he says, there are three here right now in this liturgy. Number one, the Easter candle. So he discusses candles and what they are made of, how they give light by dying, the meaning of light. He's appealing all the time to your total involvement of experience by an Easter candle sitting there; you're not imagining it, so therefore if you're in a nice parish, you should not have a cheap Easter candle because it weakens your awareness of the resurrection, and I mean it. You can see the harm done by our liturgical cheapness. It weakens the understanding of what the resurrection means.

The second one was the baptismal water, and you can go on forever with water—the sea, the river's death, new life, freshness, thirst—and he goes on. He's in heaven himself because he loves all that stuff. But you cannot baptize someone by saying, "Imagine that you are sinking in that water," and standing up. Why do I have to do it? At one point he says the Church requires pure spring water for baptism otherwise the baptism was not done. Unless you have that kind of water, because of its symbolic...I mean it just goes on like that.

Again, we don't really believe this. At least in my case this is the most serious difficulty with the Christian reality because what does it matter? God can do whatever he wants. What does it matter whether I jump in there or not? It seems to be a nice thing, but we tend to move away to an intellectual path. Instead we have to be engaged with ritual, if you wish.

You know the origin of this is right in Judaism. I was reading this book by Abraham Joshua Heschel, given to me by one of our friends here, one of our most promising...Dr. Pollack at Columbia University. I was astounded reading this kind of thing and how these people live, the search for the logos in their own terms through gestures. We tend to look down at the enslavement to the instruction that says, "Put on the left shoe first." All of these things in the law we tend to think, thank God we are free from that! Just like we can eat food sacrificed to idols because idols don't exist. Well remember how in early Christianity this was a problem of St. Paul and how did he deal with it? What did it mean to be beyond the law? In any case, here you see that this isn't just a matter of blind following of meaningless gestures. That's our problem. Here, for these people, these gestures had a very specific appeal to their experience of what we would call revelation.

The third one is singing. Again, I tried it in my parish and Jesus went back into the tomb. But the concern about singing, about singing correctly, about the beauty of song has to be there, it has to be there. This is not optional. The word teaches us how to speak with God and for them the paradigm of this was the Psalms, and remember the Psalms begin with singing instructions. These singing instructions are not arbitrary, says the Pope, to the meaning of the Psalm. We can dismiss it. We might not even be in the...from where we get the Psalms, but not here. The music is required to pray, to converse with the Word of God. Pronouncing it is not sufficient. What can that mean for us today? The monks had the time to worry about this in their monastery. What do we do? It's interesting but we do promote ourselves activities with music, and beauty in general because it moves on to that. That really is the ultimate point here—the dimension of beauty. And he goes wild about the Christian liturgy, the Gloria, the angels singing, the Sanctus, the Seraphim, and we join them in the Eucharist. "In the presence of the angels, I will sing for you, O Lord." (Psalm 138). "The earthly community is therefore a presence of the celestial court." This goes on and on. It's good stuff, only obviously the man has not been in my parish on Sunday. Most of our angels leave.

The confusion outside now, remember the one that is the underlying motivation, if you wish, (remember point one), this confusion is seen as a disharmony. Music is important because it conveys the experience of harmony which is something that allows you to escape or to see better the disharmony around you. He quotes St. Augustine who speaks of his life before his conversion as "living in the region of disharmony." In this case redemption is experienced as the reestablishment of harmony. Culture of singing, culture of being, beauty, etc...The big thing is to learn how to (this is good stuff) sing along with the music of creation itself. This is good material! I mean, right there you're there with all the big names—Gregory of Nyssa, Ephrem the Syrian dealing with the blind.

The underlying problem here is always creation. It always is. Here is where it all comes together at that level because revelation is the restoration of the harmony of creation. And as you know in Scripture itself, and in the Fathers, this extends even to nature. You think this is something we make up? Listen to this statement. This is from *The Life of the Eastern European Jews*:

Even the landscape became Jewish. In the month of Elul, during the penitential season, the fish of the streams trembled. On Lag Ba'Omer, the scholars' festival in the spring, all the trees rejoiced. When holiday came, even the horses and dogs felt it, and the crow, perched on a branch, looked from a distance as though

it were wearing a white prayer shawl with dark blue stripes in front, and it sways and bends as it prays, and it lowers its head in intense supplication.

Harmony, the song of creation. Again, what does this experience indicate, especially when we go way beyond the knowledge of the logos to the knowledge of Christ and the Trinity, etc...?

Now these were the tools to be applied to the text of Scripture because that indeed is the source of the proclamation of what, in this case, Christianity is all about. These are the tools that will allow you to make sense of what otherwise appears an impossible problem, namely to find the principle of unity in the Scriptures themselves because you are dealing with texts that are a thousand years in the making. Each book in the Scriptures is difficult to relate to some kind of interior...relate one to the other. Is there an interior unity among them? In what does it lie? What about the path from the Old Testament to the New Testament? What is the principle of unity that somehow or other does not destroy the discontinuity between the two? Again this is a serious search of reason. This is the point. It is of reason, armed by all the community, the gestures, the singing, etc...helping reason along to make sense of this because reason is trying to find out the presence of the Divine in the human. And then listen to these observations: “The divine dimension of the word and the human words is not naturally obvious.” This is the crucial part: “The unity of the biblical books and the divine character of their words cannot be grasped by purely historical methods.” You cannot just sit there and create this unity or in these ways—looking for it in purely historical terms or in terms of human communication because human communications are human communications. How can the divine be present in human communication? “The historical element is seen in the multiplicity and the humanity.” And that’s all you grasp. You cannot grasp the divine presence that way. “The letter indicates the facts and events,” says St. Augustine. The message, “what you have to believe is indicated by allegory,” by immersion into a world of symbols. It’s amazing. The Christological and pneumatological dimension of Scripture can be discovered only after an adequate “exegesis,” an interpretation, a work of reason, and for this the community is essential because you must operate from within the community in which this was formed. A community was formed precisely by the word within the words, and it’s by you entering this community that allows you, gives you, releases the capacity of your reason to do an adequate exegesis because what the divine word does when it enters the world of human words is to create this community. Christianity, therefore, he says, is not a religion of the book. Christianity captures the Word, the Logos in the words, captures the Logos itself, to spread this mystery only through this multiplicity, only the reality of a human history, the history of this community. In that sense the structure of the Bible is a challenge to each generation. This is the answer against the reason why any fundamentalism is not allowed, is not a solution. Another way of saying it is the Word is not already present in the literalness of the Bible. You just read the text, study the text, apply the text—ain’t no Divine Word in there! It is not already kind of locked in there so that just reading it releases it. To reach it, he says, a transcending process of comprehension is necessary, guided by an interior movement, a process of living. “Only within the dynamic unity of the whole are the many books really *one* book.” The method includes the text, the words, the community, its history, how it has lived this revelation. Without this we will not grasp the Word, the logos, and therefore will miss what we were looking for to begin with—the valuable, the trustworthy, the essential, etc...

Finally, all of this is the first component. The second really starts as a second one, but it ends up as an expansion of part of the first, namely work, the famous “ora” and “labora” of monasticism. In a sense, work is an essential part of this search (this is point one). “Unless you are working you cannot find God.” That is as radical as that, okay? Obviously...which is itself an astounding thing. The Greek world view of manual labor was in exactly the opposite direction. The truly free person was the one who detaches from labor to have time to devote himself to the things of the spirit. The Greco-Roman world had no creator God making of the world with the cooperation of human work. The creation of

the world was done by a demiurge. The Christian God is the Creator who in Christ “enters personally into the laborious work of history.” He cannot be found outside of this. “Creation is not yet finished. Human work gives us a special resemblance to God; it is a share in God’s activity as creator.” The realization of this aspect goes to create now “a culture of work.”

There’s more stuff, but you can read it yourselves. Again, I believe that we embark on this in our own way. What the hell! It seemed like a good thing to do and here we are. You listen to the email that Angelo read and you can see an unrest that this creates, a positive one. Whoever this person is right there at the center of the total confusion and disharmony suddenly responds just by looking at a Web page. He hasn’t even attended one of our events. Just seeing the breadth of interest... In my opinion that is happening because we, in our own stupid, ignorant way, have been following this method. And those of us who learned it...again I have another routine in which I compare this using now only the language of Fr. Giussani so you can see it’s exactly the same thing, but here we use the language of the Pope, and I think it outlines a path, it explains, I think I understand better our own interest, why we have done what we have done; it guides us in selecting where to go to make sure we are following our own version of this path, but still this path because any other path would be fruitless; we would miss the presence of the Logos, the definitive, the worthwhile, the valuable, in the midst of this disharmony. That’s all I have to say.