



JOSEPH CARDINAL RATZINGER AND THE BRUDERHOF: *A Conversation*

On 24 June 1995, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger met with representatives of the Bruderhof, an Anabaptist community that traces its spiritual roots to the Hutterites of the sixteenth century. At that time, approximately two thousand men and women were executed for heresy by Catholic and Protestant authorities because of their practice of adult baptism. Participating in the meeting were members of the "Katholische Integrierte Gemeinde," a German Catholic community, including Catholic theologians Rudolf Pesch and Ludwig Weimer.

This meeting began with reading together from Revelations 6:9-11 and from several stories of Anabaptist martyrs as recorded in The Chronicle of the Hutterian Brethren. An excerpted transcript follows:

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD (*senior pastor of the Bruderhof*): There is real hatred among some Anabaptists toward the Catholic Church, and it is a great gift for us that we are gathered here today. If we could convey this to them in the hope that the hatred may disappear from as many hearts as possible, that would be a grace. I would like to add that in these past years I have read many Catholic writings, for instance the book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* [by Pope John Paul II], and the new catechism, and I was very much impressed. Wonderful things are happening. If with God's help we could bring about reconciliation between the two groups, it would be a great gift.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: When hatred can be overcome and forgiveness can be given, that is the work of the Holy Spirit. Then we know that we are in Christ.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: The stories we have read are two examples of the hundreds who gave their lives at that time. Actually they wanted to be catholic in the true sense, to be faithful Catholics. We are Anabaptists; that means, we believe in adult baptism, and we try to live a radical life. Jesus says, we should be salt and a light on the hill.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: Yes. What is truly moving in these stories is the depth of faith [of these men], their being deeply anchored in our Lord Jesus Christ, and their joy in this fact, a joy that is stronger than death. We are distressed, of course, by the fact that the church was so closely linked with the powers of the world that she was able to deliver other Christians to be executed because of their beliefs. This should be a deep challenge to us, how much we all need to repent again and again, and how much the church must renounce worldly principles and standards in order to accept the truth as the only standard, to look to Christ, not to torture others but to go the way of witnessing ourselves, a way that the world will always oppose, a way that will always lead to some form of martyrdom. I believe it is very important for us not to adopt worldly standards but to be ready to take upon ourselves the opposition of the world and to learn that his truth is expressed above all in love and forgiveness, and that this is truth's most trustworthy sign. I believe

this is the point at which we all have to learn anew, the only point through which he can truly lead us together.

I think, too, that it is important [to realize] that we cannot bring about unity in the church by diplomatic maneuvers. The result would only be a diplomatic structure based on human principles. Instead, we must open ourselves more and more to him. The unity he brings about is alone true unity. Anything else is a political construction, which is as transitory as all political constructions are. This is the more difficult way, for in political maneuvers people themselves are active and believe they can achieve something. We must wait on the Lord, that he will give us unity, and of course we must go to meet him by cleansing our hearts....

This is how I would see such a gathering, that we don't try to negotiate how the Integrierte Gemeinde and the Hutterites can unite in the Catholic Church, but that together we allow the Lord to cleanse us and learn the truth from him, the truth that is love, and that we let him work so that he brings us together....

It would be interesting, if we could manage it in the course of our discussion, to take up the question of what these symbols of the leaven, the salt, and the light signify. They don't mean that all the others are nothing; on the contrary, that is actually the service to the others. Because of the light, others can see. The light is not on the hill for its own sake but in order to shed light for others. That is why the Lord expressly tells us that one does not put the light under a bushel, where it would be by and for itself and would have lost its meaning. It is there for the others, for everybody. The same with the salt. It has to penetrate the dough. On the one hand the fact that not everybody can be, not everybody should be salt: If there were nothing but salt, the meaning of creation would be missed, the meaning of salvation would be missed. On the other hand, if the salt remains by itself, it cannot do its work. I think this relationship between the awaking that takes place in the individual, and the task for the whole, for the others and how they relate to each other; that is something very important. In other words, the special service – salt, light, leaven – does not mean a rejection of the others but a task done for all, for the whole. And not all have this task, this service, but in some way they all live by this service. In this sense the question about universality, catholicity if you will, [on the one hand], and the special calling to live in brotherly community [on the other] – the two complement each other, they do not contradict each other. I believe that is an important point, which we learn from the parables of Jesus and should seek to understand more deeply still.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: My grandfather Eberhard Arnold [founder of the Bruderhof] had a wonderful way of challenging each person he met, Catholic or Protestant. To a Catholic he would say: Be a more faithful Catholic. Try to understand what the Catholic Church is. If you become a more faithful Catholic and I become a more faithful Hutterite, we will find each other deeply. We don't need to say, you have to be a Hutterite, but: Do what you are doing and try to do it more deeply. There was something from God in everything, and he always tried to encourage and awaken this part of a person, to bring it to life. Isn't that our purpose, that we encourage each other to seek what God wants for each one, something that is different for each person?...

CARDINAL RATZINGER: I would like to know how you lead the children and young people to faith.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: That is very important. Of course the parents have the main responsibility to bring the Bible to life for their children, for instance the Christmas story, the Easter story, the story of Pentecost, and so forth. I have ten grandchildren, and already at age three you can tell them a great deal about Jesus, of course in a childlike way. And that can grow. In the community we have meetings that are geared especially to the children or only to the children, where a servant of the Word brings Jesus' message in such a way that they can understand it. As the children grow up, this will also grow. And once a week, or more frequently, a servant of the Word teaches religion.

The children are an important part of the community. They are the best we have. They are our future. We do not expect our children to become Hutterites. Just like [people coming] from the outside, they have to make their own decision. When they have reached a certain age, we feel it would be good for them to go out and meet other people, other Christians, for instance the Integrierte Gemeinde. We have sent many young people there, and we also send them to other groups. Jesus wants voluntary disciples not compelled disciples, so that, when they decide to join it comes from a real faith and not because their parents joined. And we also try to give them an education, training, so that they can find their way in the world if they should not decide to join us.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: And at what age do you generally baptize?

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: I would say earliest at age eighteen, but I would feel that is young for us. The usual is twenty to twenty-five. Of course it varies. Some come sooner to faith than others. For us eighteen is the youngest.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: So the children don't necessarily become Hutterites, but they should become Christians.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: That is our main concern. And if they do go out, that they [keep to] the moral values, that they apply outside what they learned in the community. And the contact with the children is kept up, even if they decide for a different way.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: And does it also happen the other way around, that people from outside want to become Hutterites?

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: Many.... Jesus' command, to "go into all lands and teach everything I have taught you," we take very seriously. We feel a great responsibility for the church, and I don't mean just the Bruderhof but all those who want to do Christ's will. The church is called to hasten because Jesus said he would only return when this has happened. The more we do it, the sooner, I believe, Christ will return. And that is what we all long for most of all, that he returns. So, as Ludwig [Weimer, Catholic theologian] said, we take it very seriously, and we go to Africa, New Zealand, to Israel, to Russia.... It is very important for us that when we go out on mission that we do not want to proclaim the Bruderhof; we want to proclaim the kingdom of God

CARDINAL RATZINGER: I want to come back to what you said. As a Catholic one should wish that a Hutterite becomes a better Hutterite, and the other way around, a Hutterite can wish that a Catholic becomes a better Catholic, as long as one is convinced that in both cases it is the center that actually matters. To become fully Catholic means to enter fully into communion with Christ; if becoming fully Hutterite means the same thing, if it does not mean the canonization of relativism –

each to his own – but on the contrary the deepest unity of truth, which is Christ himself. He is the source of the unity, and from this source it will go out into the world.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: If a united church – as Rudolf [Pesch, Catholic theologian] has defined it – sends out a missionary and really stands behind him, we believe that, just as Jesus sent out his disciples with apostolic powers to "heal the sick, drive out the demons," these things could happen again today if we really go out only for the sake of Jesus and to the glory of God, and not to make oneself great. It would be so wonderful. It doesn't matter at all where it happens, the main thing is that it happens somewhere on this earth, that the apostolic powers are given to any group the way we read it in the New Testament. As a church we must believe that Jesus' words apply to our time and not only 2000 years ago, when he sent his disciples out. I don't know if I made myself clear.

A question is asked about children's education. Christoph Arnold describes the Christian pedagogy of the Bruderhof schools.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: I have used this concept of anticipation in connection with infant baptism because today there is a widespread theory that children should grow up neutrally, as it were, so that later on they would be able to make their own decision. I have tried to say that this is a fiction, because we determine the children's life without asking them. We don't ask them: do you want to live? We can't do that. They come into this world without being asked whether they want this physical life. But by giving them life without asking them, we owe it to them to give them a preparation that makes life worth living in the first place. If I merely give them life without giving them the spiritual foundation on which I can live at all, then I have failed. I remember a confirmation I had in Munich, in an asocial part of town. There was one young boy who had been especially rebellious. His parents were terrible, and the teacher had told him, "At least be thankful to your parents that they gave you life." The boy, twelve years old, said, "I don't want to live! I don't feel it is a gift, I don't think it is good to live, it would be better not to live." From that point of view I think it is reasonable to say that the gift of life in itself is a questionable gift. I can only say Yes to life and accept it gratefully as a gift, if life is something good. In other words, together with mere life I have to provide, to anticipate, a spiritual content that will make life livable. Even if allegedly I don't give him any preparation, if allegedly I allow the child to grow up quite neutrally, I am giving him an empty world, as it were, and I will be preparing him with a negative anticipation. It is impossible to put the child into an environment that is a spiritual vacuum, spiritually indifferent; I will always be preparing him. If I really believe that Christ is the truth and the life, then not only is Christ the only preparation I can legitimately point him to, but I am duty-bound, along with the physical life I have given him, to point him to the true life.

I believe this far we are in agreement, quite apart from the question: adult baptism or infant baptism; for you, too, are preparing the child by raising him in the faith. The duty to prepare [the child] by [pointing him to] Christ, whom he will later have to accept voluntarily, is clear. But whether or not to anticipate baptism already at this point – my position, in the Catholic faith is this: We do not anticipate faith as something conscious, but it is the Lord himself who goes ahead. We justify the anticipation of baptism (and I don't want to convince you of this!) by saying, He himself goes ahead, grace goes ahead. In this sense the sacrament is a going ahead, and then the child is prepared, not in a human way but in a way that comes from Him [the Lord] and gives him the freedom to comprehend it and to accept it. That, in a few words, is the central idea, as we see it.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: Isn't part of the question that very few children nowadays have two parents? That is a gift in the Bruderhof, that most children have both parents and grow up in a real family. That is an important factor in the hopelessness of young people who consider committing suicide, simply because they don't grow up in a proper family.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: And they don't see life as something good. That is why I find it is a very important, new sign in our time that these communities exist, where families live together as an example to others. Something has come into the world that wasn't there before, that marriage and family are felt to be meaningless and many people say, marriage is nonsense – in this life it is impossible to enter into any permanent relationship and have children – on what basis? I don't even know into what kind of a world I am casting them, perhaps into a world of atomic warfare, of destruction, and the like. In short, the concept of human life and the general mood are so profoundly changed that the individual actually exists like a nomad and develops changing relationships for himself, while the character of man and woman as ordained by the Creator is no longer understood. That is why I feel it is very important to live accordingly, to affirm this character, and thereby to make it understandable again.

A question is asked about the possibility of a meeting of reconciliation between the Bruderhof and the Pope.

CARDINAL RATZINGER: Well, I think I will first have to experience and learn more about it, to absorb it myself in it. To begin with I have to take it in myself, and I have to condense it to what is essential, because I can't take so much of the Pope's time. I have to see to it that I can speak straight away of what is essential, and do it in a simple way, not that it looks like a complicated affair but that it comes across as something really significant, something that ultimately is simple but deep. And then to think about setting up a meaningful and fruitful encounter so that it doesn't turn out to be one of the many conventional interviews but an encounter where he may not know all the details, but he knows essentially what it is about, what is at work here, so as to be able to speak a meaningful word and to be able to hear a meaningful word from you. Then it would have a point, beyond the level of mere protocol, of a merely social event, where we would say in worldly fashion: for this person we have to give a reception and for that person – we don't want any of that. Neither do we want to get into the headlines, but we want to be a presence for Christ. In other words, that is the level on which we want such an encounter to take place, not that we want to go on record in the eyes of the world, but [we want to call attention] to the Lord. So that has to mature a little, I feel, but it should not be delayed too long.

CHRISTOPH ARNOLD: We would appreciate that very much.

The meeting ends with a song and a prayer. ♦