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FREIBURG IM BREISGAU - 24.09.2011 - 18:15

Seminary - Hörsaal

Meeting with the Council of the Central Committee of German Catholics (ZDK)

Official translation

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I am grateful for this opportunity to come together, here in Freiburg, with you, the Council Members of the Central Committee for German Catholics (*ZdK*). I gladly express to you my appreciation for your work in publicly representing the concerns of Catholics and in giving impetus to the apostolate of the Church and of Catholics in society. I also thank the President of the *ZdK*, Herr Alois Glück, for his kind greeting.

Dear friends, for some years now, development aid has included what are known as “exposure programmes”. Leaders from the fields of politics, economics and religion live among the poor in Africa, Asia, or Latin America for a certain period and share the day-to-day reality of their lives. They are exposed to the circumstances in which these people live, in order to see the world through their eyes and hence to learn how to practise solidarity.

Let us imagine that an exposure programme of this kind were to take place here in Germany. Experts from a far country would arrive to spend a week with an average German family. They would find much to admire here, for example the prosperity, the order and the efficiency. But looking on with unprejudiced eyes, they would also see plenty of poverty: poverty in human relations and poverty in the religious sphere.

We live at a time that is broadly characterized by a subliminal relativism that penetrates every area of life. Sometimes this relativism becomes aggressive, when it opposes those who claim to know where the truth or meaning of life is to be found.

And we observe that this relativism exerts more and more influence on human relationships and on society. This is reflected, among other things, in the inconstancy and fragmentation of many people’s lives and in an exaggerated individualism. Many no longer seem capable of any form of self-denial or of making a sacrifice for others. Even the altruistic commitment to the common good, in the social and cultural sphere or on behalf of the needy, is in decline. Others are now quite incapable of committing themselves unreservedly to a single partner. People can hardly find the courage now to promise to be faithful for a whole lifetime; the courage to make a decision and say: now I belong entirely to you, or to take a firm stand for fidelity and truthfulness and sincerely to seek a solution to their problems.

Dear friends, in the exposure programme, analysis is followed by common reflection. This evaluation must take into account the whole of the human person, and this includes – not just implicitly but quite clearly – the person’s relationship to the Creator.

We see that in our affluent western world much is lacking. Many people lack experience of God’s goodness. They no longer find any point of contact with the mainstream churches and their traditional structures. But why is this? I think this is a question on which we must reflect very seriously. Addressing it is the principal task of the Pontifical Council for the New Evangelization. But naturally it is something that concerns us all. Allow me to refer here to an aspect of Germany’s particular situation. The Church in Germany is superbly organized. But behind the structures, is there also a corresponding spiritual strength, the strength of faith in a living God? We must honestly admit that we have more than enough by way of structure but not enough by way of Spirit. I would add: the real crisis facing the Church in the western world is a crisis of faith. If we do not find a way of genuinely renewing our faith, all structural reform will remain ineffective.

Let us return to the people who lack experience of God’s goodness. They need places where they can give voice to their inner longing. Here we are called to seek new paths of evangelization. Small communities could be one such path, where friendships are lived and deepened in regular communal adoration before God. There we find people who speak of these small faith experiences at their workplace and within their circle of family and friends, and in so doing bear witness to a new closeness between Church and society. They come to see more and more clearly that everyone stands in need of this nourishment of love, this concrete friendship with others and with the Lord. Of continuing importance is the link with the vital life-source that is the Eucharist, since cut off from Christ we can do nothing (cf. *Jn* 15:5).

Dear brothers and sisters, may the Lord always point out to us how together we can be lights in the world and can show our fellow men the path to the source at which they can quench their profound thirst for life.