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## Plenary on Church and Society

Video Message

by

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Dear sisters and brothers,

In the last days of my presidency of the general assembly I regret that I cannot join you personally at the Central Committee Meeting of the World Council of Churches in Geneva. I do, however, want to contribute in some small way to your discussion of the role of the churches of different faith in the transformation of our troubled societies.

As you know, there are a few challenges I feel more strongly about:

- Our responsibility to inject, after a long lapse, a renewed sense of compassion, responsibility, solidarity, and accountability into the daily political and economic lives of people around the world;
- the lapses in judgment;
- the astonishing ascension of greed and plunder as accepted measures of success in our daily lives;
- the abandonment of solidarity with those who have not enjoyed the privileges that come with the prosperity of globalization have created a black hole that threatens to devour our economies, our environment and our very humanity.

We ask: how do we resist this self-destructive downward spiral? How do we convey alternative messages? How do we counter the pervasive hopelessness that is so evident in the social discourse of a disillusioned world?

I think that, for one thing, we church people need to more courageously, and unequivocally, proclaim from the house-steps God's call to brotherhood and sisterhood. If we do this the way we should, by word and deed, many won't like it and many won't like us, and in fact, would like to silence us in any way they can. But, are we not the followers of a crucified Lord? It is imperative that the cross remains always central in our lives. The world is in desperate need of prophetic voices that have practically disappeared. No wonder the world is in such dire state of affairs, and that the underlying cause is the lack of moral orientation in contemporary society. Are we being the salt of the earth as we should be?

The global economic and financial meltdown that has unfolded in the year since my appeal has created a new and far more receptive environment for ethical and spiritual values. Our financial bankruptcies have revealed an even more insidious and corrosive moral bankruptcy. We must seize this opportunity, which won't last long, to do all we can to sustain the momentum behind the search for ways to renew our values and sense of stewardship for our world. When I say we, I am referring to us, church people. It is not right to leave this all-important task to politicians; we must lead the way to the moral well-being of humanity.

There is a new receptivity to appeals to stop polluting the environment, to stop being irresponsible predators of nature that we have become, to love all of our brothers and sisters without exception or exclusion. People are heeding the call that we urgently need to return to the values that are based on our faith and on our ethical, philosophical traditions. People are also increasingly aware of the fact that we have rebelled against our mission to act as stewards of creation and have arrogantly declared ourselves its proprietors, arrogating to ourselves the right to squander and abuse the marvels of nature. By being those unfaithful to our most sacred values and principles, it is recognized that we have also endangered not only the survival of our own species but also the very capacity of the earth to sustain life.

In spite of all our current difficulties, our earth is fortunate to have been blessed with the presence of a host of great spiritual prophets, saints, sages, who have offered their values to human society over the millennia. This divine wisdom of faith-based values are embodied in texts such as the Torah, the Bible, the Koran and the Vedas; and the noble teachings of the Buddha, Lao Tzu and Confucius; and in the wonderful beliefs and values of our indigenous peoples of all the continents of our earth.

The great spiritual values posed in these teachings can be seen as constituting the spiritual assets of humankind. Today we must acknowledge these values and recommit ourselves to respecting them. Without the inclusion of these spiritual assets even the best planned programmes for the eradication of hunger and poverty in the world, and for the attainment of peace on earth, cannot succeed. We need the inner strength, the moral energy, and the inspiration that we can get from our ethical values to overcome our selfishness and individualism. We have these powerful spiritual assets at our disposal.

We have an opportunity to integrate these values into the work of the United Nations, which can instill in us the moral strength and conviction that we can take action that is capable of ensuring the success of our efforts to eradicate poverty, guarantee genuine human security for all, take seriously our commitments to human rights, and become faithful stewards of our long suffering planet. This appeal reflects a fundamental concept of justice, solidarity and representative democracy, which must be applied at the international level just as it is so passionately defended at the national level.

The ongoing financial and economic crisis has been a central concern of the 63<sup>rd</sup> session of the General Assembly and provided the opportunity to address these values head-on. Last June we organized a world conference on the crisis and its implications for developing countries, and the reform of our dysfunctional international financial architecture. It represented an opportunity for all countries to participate in the search for immediate and long-term solutions to this deadly economic melt-down. As you may know, the G20 countries largely boycotted this opportunity, and even many members of the G77 expressed their skepticism that we could take collective action for the benefit of all humanity and not just the privileged few. I must admit that I was dismayed by this response, but to my surprise there was one bright light that illuminated the importance of this event to much of the world: on the eve of the conference, Pope Benedict XI made the following appeal, I quote, *"I invoke upon all of the conference participants, as well as those responsible for public life and the fate of the planet, the spirit of wisdom and of human solidarity, so that the current situation may become an opportunity capable of favoring greater attention to the dignity of every human being and the promotion of an equal distribution of decisional power and resources, with particular attention to the unfortunately, ever-growing number of poor."*

It gives me great pleasure to want to echo the words of the Holy Father. Let us regain our confidence in our strong collective support as people of faith, and as a testimony of our love of God and of our neighbor. Solidarity must be the star that guides us to the peace that we must strive our utmost to attain.

May the compassionate, all-loving, and merciful God enlighten our minds in our deliberations, and strengthen our hearts, so that, as people of faith, and of deep ethical-philosophical convictions, we may rise to the occasion, and take the courageous and heroic actions that are needed to save us from the grave consequences of the crises that threaten all of us, especially our dispossessed brothers and sisters throughout the world.

I look forward to learning of the fruits of your wise deliberations in the days ahead.

Thank you.