



The Holy See

VIA SATELLITE CONNECTION WITH THE CREW
OF THE INTERNATIONAL SPACE STATION (ISS)

***TALK OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
WITH THE ASTRONAUTS IN ORBIT***

*Foconi Hall
Saturday, 21 May 2011*

Introduction

Dear astronauts,

I am very happy to have this extraordinary opportunity to converse with you during your mission. I am especially grateful to be able to speak to so many of you, as both crews are present on the Space Station at this time.

Humanity is experiencing a period of extremely rapid progress in the fields of scientific knowledge and technical applications. In a sense, you are our representatives – spear-heading humanity's exploration of new spaces and possibilities for our future, going beyond the limitations of our everyday existence.

We all admire your courage, as well as the discipline and commitment with which you prepared yourselves for this mission. We are convinced you are inspired by noble ideals and that you intend placing the results of your research and endeavours at the disposal of all humanity and for the common good.

This conversation gives me the chance to express my own admiration and appreciation to you and to all those who collaborate in making your mission possible, and to add my heartfelt encouragement to bring it to a safe and successful conclusion.

But this is a conversation, so I must not be the only one doing the talking.

I am very curious to hear you tell me about your experiences and your reflections.

If you don't mind, I would like to ask you a few questions...

First Question

From the Space Station you have a very different view of the Earth. You fly over different continents and nations several times a day. I think it must be obvious to you how we all live together on one Earth and how absurd it is that we fight and kill each other. I know that Mark Kelly's wife was a victim of a serious attack and I hope her health continues to improve. When you are contemplating the Earth from up there, do you ever wonder about the way nations and people live together down here, or about how science can contribute to the cause of peace?

Mark Kelly, USA

Well, thank you for the kind words, Your Holiness, and thank you for mentioning my wife Gabby. It's a very good question: we fly over most of the world and you don't see borders, but at the same time we realize that people fight with each other and there is a lot of violence in this world and it's really an unfortunate thing. Usually, people fight over many different things. As we've seen in the Middle East right now: it's somewhat for democracy in certain areas, but usually people fight for resources. And it's interesting in space ... on Earth, people often fight for energy; in space we use solar power and we have fuel cells on the Space Station. You know, the science and the technology that we put into the Space Station to develop a solar power capability, gives us pretty much an unlimited amount of energy. And if those technologies could be adapted more on Earth, we could possibly reduce some of that violence.

Second Question

One of the themes I often return to in my discourses concerns the responsibility we all have towards the future of our planet. I recall the serious risks facing the environment and the survival of future generations. Scientists tell us we have to be careful and from an ethical point of view we must develop our consciences as well.

From your extraordinary observation point, how do you see the situation on Earth?

Do you see signs or phenomena to which we need to be more attentive?

Ron Garan, USA

Well, Your Holiness, it's a great honour to speak with you and you're right: it really is an

extraordinary vantage point we have up here. On the one hand, we can see how indescribably beautiful the planet that we have been given is; but on the other hand, we can really clearly see how fragile it is. Just the atmosphere, for instance: the atmosphere when viewed from space is paper-thin, and to think that this paper-thin layer is all that separates every living thing from the vacuum of space and is all that protects us, is really a sobering thought. You know, it seems to us that it's just incredible to view the Earth hanging in the blackness of space and to think that we are all on this together, riding through this beautiful fragile oasis through the universe, it really fills us with a lot of hope to think that all of us on board this incredible orbiting Space Station that was built by the many nations of our international partnership, to accomplish this tremendous feat in orbit, I think ... you know, that just shows that by working together and by cooperating we can overcome many of the problems that face our planet, we could solve many of the challenges that face the inhabitants of our planet ... it really is a wonderful place to live and work, and it's a wonderful place to view our beautiful Earth.

Third Question

The experience you are having right now is both extraordinary and very important – even if you must eventually come back down to Earth like all the rest of us.

When you do return, you will be much admired and treated like heroes who speak and act with authority. You will be asked to talk about your experiences. What will be the most important messages you would like to convey – to young people especially – who will live in a world strongly influenced by your experiences and discoveries?

Mike Finchke, USA

Your Holiness, as my colleagues have indicated, we can look down and see our beautiful planet Earth that God has made, and it is the most beautiful planet in the whole Solar System. However, if we look up, we can see the rest of the universe, and the rest of the Universe is out there for us to go explore. And the International Space Station is just one symbol, one example of what human beings can do when we work together constructively. So our message, I think - one of our many messages, but I think one of our most important messages – is to let the children of the planet know, the young people know that there is a whole universe for us to go explore. And when we do it together, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish.

Fourth Question

Space exploration is a fascinating scientific adventure. I know that you have been installing new equipment to further scientific research and the study of radiation coming from outer space. But I think it is also an adventure of the human spirit, a powerful stimulus to reflect on the origins and on the destiny of the universe and humanity. Believers often look up at the limitless heavens and,

meditating on the Creator of it all, they are struck by the mystery of His greatness. That is why the medal I gave Robert (Vittori) as a sign of my own participation in your mission, represents the Creation of Man – as painted by Michelangelo on the Sistine Chapel ceiling. In the midst of your intense work and research, do you ever stop and reflect like this – perhaps even to say a prayer to the Creator? Or will it be easier for you to think about these things once you have returned to Earth?

Roberto Vittori, Italy

Your Holiness, to live on board of the International Space Station, to work as an astronaut on the shuttle Soyuz of the Station, is extremely intense. But we all have an opportunity, when the nights come, to look down on Earth: our planet, the blue planet, is beautiful. Blue is the colour of our planet, blue is the colour of the sky, blue is also the colour of the Italian Air Force, the organization that gave me the opportunity to then join the Italian Space Agency and the European Space Agency. When we have a moment to look down, beauty which is the three-dimensional effect of the beauty of the planet is capturing our heart, is capturing my heart. And I do pray: I do pray for me, for our families, for our future. I took with me the coin and I allow this coin to float in front of me to demonstrate lack of gravity. I shall thank you very much for this opportunity and I'd like to allow this coin to float to my friend and colleague Paolo: he will make return to Earth on the Soyuz. I brought it with me to space and he will take it down to Earth to then give it back to you.

Fifth Question – in Italian – for Paolo Nespoli

La mia ultima domanda è per Paolo. Caro Paolo, so che nei giorni scorsi la tua mamma ti ha lasciato e quando fra pochi giorni tornerai a casa non la troverai più ad aspettarti. Tutti ti siamo stati vicini, anche io ho pregato per lei...Come hai vissuto questo tempio di dolore? Nella vostra Stazione vi sentite lontani e isolati e soffrite un senso di separazione, o vi sentite uniti fra voi e inseriti in una comunità che vi accompagna con attenzione e affetto?

Paolo Nespoli, Italy

Santo Padre, ho sentito le sue preghiere, le vostre preghiere arrivare fino qua su: è vero, siamo fuori da questo mondo, orbitiamo intorno alla Terra ed abbiamo un punto di vantaggio per guardare la Terra e per sentire tutto quello che ci sta attorno. I miei colleghi qui, a bordo della Stazione – Dimitri, Kelly, Ron, Alexander e Andrei – mi sono stati vicini in questo momento importante per me, molto intenso, così come i miei fratelli, le mie sorelle, le mie zie, i miei cugini, i miei parenti sono stati vicini a mia madre negli ultimi momenti. Sono grato di tutto questo. Mi sono sentito lontano ma anche molto vicino, e sicuramente il pensiero di sentire tutti voi vicino a me, uniti in questo momento, è stato di estremo sollievo. Ringrazio anche l'Agenzia spaziale europea e l'Agenzia spaziale americana che hanno messo a disposizione le risorse affinché io abbia potuto parlare con lei negli ultimi momenti.

Final greeting

Dear astronauts,

I thank you warmly for this wonderful opportunity to meet and dialogue with you. You have helped me and many other people to reflect together on important issues that regard the future of humanity. I wish you the very best for your work and for the success of your great mission at the service of science, international collaboration, authentic progress, and for peace in the world. I will continue to follow you in my thoughts and prayers and I willingly impart my Apostolic Blessing.