

(April 12, 2008) The President and Laura Bush plan to be waiting on the tarmac of Andrews Air Force Base in Washington DC when the plane carrying Pope Benedict XVI lands in the United States on April 15. Just days before the historic trip, President Bush sat down with EWTN Anchor Raymond Arroyo for a candid interview about his faith, Iraq, freedom of religion, why he believes the pro-life position is in our nation's interests and why he's still planning to attend the opening of the Olympic games.

INTERVIEW WITH THE PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

By Raymond Arroyo, News Anchor, EWTN Global Catholic Network

Q Mr. President, this is the first head of state, Pope Benedict the XVI, you will ever greet on a tarmac. I was stunned to learn this. Why are you going and greeting him at an airstrip? Usually the heads of states come here.

THE PRESIDENT: Because he is a really important figure in a lot of ways. One, he speaks for millions. Two, he doesn't come as a politician; he comes as a man of faith. And, three, that I so subscribe to his notion that there are -- there's right and wrong in life, that moral relativism has a danger of undermining the capacity to have more hopeful and free societies, that I want to honor his convictions, as well.

Q You read his book on Europe, I'm told.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, I read parts of it, yes.

Q What do you take generally from his appraisal of Europe and the world? And why is this relationship between the United States and the Holy See so important to you?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, first of all, it's important to me because the Holy Father represents and stands for some values that I think are important for the health of the country, and when he comes to America, millions of my fellow citizens will be hanging on his every word. And that's why it's important.

I really don't want to get into -- spend time being critical of Europe. My main objective is to make sure our country is strong and solid and remains in the lead. One of the tenets of my foreign policy is that there is an Almighty, and a gift of that Almighty to every man, woman and child is freedom. And, you know, His Holiness speaks with that kind of clarity.

I'm also, as you know, a believer in the value of human life for the -- whether it's -- you know, the most vulnerable amongst us. And he speaks clearly to that, as well.

Q Yes, I want to talk about that a little bit later, because you -- you know, he has commended, and no doubt will again, for your bold stance on pro-life issues. I want to touch on some of the points he will no doubt raise.

One of them is Africa. I watched with great interest your visit to Africa. You looked like the Pope of Tanzania when you arrived. (Laughter.) I mean, the whole town erupted. People I don't think have given you just desserts or credit for what you've done there. You've quadrupled aid to Africa. Your President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief is now treating 1.4 million people. The malaria treatment is unbelievable -- something like 50 million people now being helped. When you look at that -- I was told by a group of people who came here to meet you at the White House, you said, to whom much is given, much is expected. Is there a compulsion of faith here, personally --

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q -- with this aid?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, it's a combination of faith and practicality. From the practical perspective, hopelessness is the only way for ideologues who murder the innocent to be able to recruit their followers. No one who's got a vision as dark and dim as al Qaeda can possibly say to somebody, follow me, my vision is hopeful or positive. It's like, you're so hopeless, this is your only out. And therefore, dealing with disease and hunger and despair helps defeat this -- these bunch of ideologues.

And then, secondly, I believe it's in our individual and collective interests to use our great blessings to help others, whether it be at home or abroad. And so, "to whom much is given, much is required" is a part of my belief. And I say to people all the time that it's in our national -- it's in our moral interests. It invigorates our soul to know that we have saved a baby that could be dying of a mosquito bite.

And I'm looking forward to talking to His Holy Father, and I will remind him this isn't a George W. Bush deal; this is America. This is America at its best. But, yes, it was amazing to see the great appreciation that the citizens share for -- with us -- or about us.

Q Let's talk a moment about Iraq. The Pope will no doubt raise this.

THE PRESIDENT: Sure.

Q I think his perspective is going to be very different from what we're reading in the newspapers this week. I think what he'll primarily talk about, and if my sources at the Vatican can be believed, he will probably talk about the 40 bombed churches --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- 40 percent of the refugees being Christian --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- he's very concerned about that Christian minority in Iraq.

THE PRESIDENT: Absolutely.

Q When he spoke to you in 2007 he raised this. What is the administration prepared to do for this fledgling remnant of Christianity -- an ancient community there?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, absolutely. You know, it's something we have been doing all along, is urging the government to understand that minority rights are a vital part of any democratic society. And by the way, my concern isn't just for minority rights in Iraq; it's for minority rights throughout the Middle East.

And I have dealt with the Holy Father about -- with not only the issue of Iraq, but also the issue of Catholics in -- and Christians in the Holy Land. I can remember very well, early in my presidency, I think it was Cardinal Egan or maybe Cardinal McCarrick came to see me about the mosque encroaching on the Catholic -- the great Catholic Church, and would I use my influence with the Israelis to convince them to be mindful of the need for minority rights? And I said, absolutely. In my visit to the Holy Land, this recent time, there's a lot of concern about the kind of, the -- I guess, non-acceptance. I met Sisters that were in the Galilean area that were just serving mankind so beautifully, and yet their leadership was concerned about minority rights.

So my view is like -- Iraq is important, but I've used our influence all throughout the region. And I've used our influence all throughout the world to promote rights for all religious minorities, including China.

Q We saw that Archbishop Raho, he was murdered in Iraq. This past weekend --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, yes.

Q -- an Orthodox priest slain on the doorstep of his home. Is the administration -- do you believe that this is religiously motivated violence?

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I do. I believe they're -- I believe what they're trying to do is trying to send messages -- "they" being the killers -- trying to send messages that it's not worth your time, that you must abandon the efforts of helping this free society deliver. I don't think this is government-sponsored. I think these are a bunch of thugs and killers who have this kind of dark, dim view of the world, and are willing to kill anybody who's willing to stand up to them.

And it's not just these religious figures. There are a lot of innocent men, women and children who are being killed by them, as well. This is their techniques, this is their tactics, and it's the same type of mentality that caused people to fly airplanes into our buildings to kill 3,000 of our citizens.

Q What can we tangibly do? What can the administration tangibly plead with the Iraqi government to do to protect this fledgling minority? Is there anything we can do --

THE PRESIDENT: Well, one thing we can do is to keep our troops there long enough to have a civil society emerge, and go after them, and go after these killers, and bring them to justice so they quit killing people, including our own troops, because this is a war.

Q Would you commit our troops to protecting those communities where they're endangered?

THE PRESIDENT: I commit our troops to helping the Iraqis provide safety for all innocent Iraqis. In other words, I -- you got to understand that what you're witnessing is not just an assault on innocent Christians; you are witnessing assault on innocent people of all faiths by a group of cold-blooded killers who want to drive the United States out of the Middle East because they hate free societies.

Q Even here on Capitol Hill, we're hearing talk of withdrawals. They want this drawdown. General Petraeus is at this very hour saying we shouldn't be doing this, we should have a pause. What is your take? Now, even members of your own administration

in the Defense Department are saying we might not be able to respond to other events if we have our troops spread this thin.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, I disagree with those people. There's nothing -- the real threat for the 21st century is dealing with these thugs and killers. They're the ones who attacked us. We got to defeat them overseas so we don't face them here. And our people are very well trained to take on these threats.

And so, therefore, my answer is, is that whatever it takes to help succeed. And to answer your question, the best thing we can do for minorities, particularly Christian minorities, in Iraq, or any minority in Iraq, is to help this society develop into a peaceful society, where minority rights are respected.

Q Even your critics say they are amazed by you, and baffled by you, because you remain so positive, so upbeat -- (laughter) -- so on point. How much of that is a function of your faith?

THE PRESIDENT: Well, that's a very good question. You know, I don't think you can disassociate your faith with how you live your life. I mean, I think it's all engrained. And I am optimistic because I happen to believe in certain universal principles, and I do believe that freedom is universal, and if just given a chance, people will live in a -- will self-govern and live in a peaceful, free society.

And history is my witness. I mean, after all, one of my best buddies in the international community was Prime Minister Koizumi. My dad fought the Japanese. Prime Minister Koizumi and I worked to keep the peace. It's an amazing -- it's one of the great ironies.

And my faith has -- you know, my faith has been so sustaining in the midst of -- in the midst of what is a pretty hectic life, full of flattery and criticism. And faith keeps a person grounded. Faith reminds people that there's something a lot more important than you in life. I've been inspired by the prayers from ordinary citizens. And I have come to realize one -- more clearly the story of the calm in the rough seas.

Q Let's talk for a moment. You had Cardinal Zen, who is a freedom fighter --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- in Hong Kong. You invited him to a private meeting here at the White House, which was totally unexpected. You are now planning on going to the Olympics there in --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- to be at the opening ceremonies at the Olympics. You just said earlier, freedom is a gift from the Almighty. Considering the human rights record --

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q -- of that regime, how can you in good conscience go to that ceremony, Mr. President?

THE PRESIDENT: Because I -- you know, I'm going to the Olympics, for starters. And I've -- my plans aren't -- haven't changed. And the reason why is because I can talk to him about religious freedom prior to the Olympics, during the Olympics and after the Olympics -- which I have done. I don't need the Olympics to express my position to the Chinese leadership on freedom. I just don't need them -- because that's all I have been doing as your President. In other words -- if people say, well, you need to express yourself clearly about freedom of religion, my answer is, what do you think I've been doing?

Q Angela Merkel boycotted it --

THE PRESIDENT: I don't think she boycotted it, necessarily.

Q She's not attending the Opening Ceremonies, it appears.

THE PRESIDENT: She's not attending the games, period. She's not going to -- I don't think she's going to Beijing at all, at least that's what she told me. But, look, I hear all this rhetoric. I want to be an effective President. And I don't think it -- as I say, I'm going to Beijing. And I'm -- we're talking about the Chinese people, as well. And the question is, does the American President

take [sic] decisions that will enable the next President to be effective or not – because I've made my case; these Chinese leaders know exactly my position.

I've talked about freedom of religion every time I visited with them. I've talked about Darfur. I've talked about Burma. I've talked about the Dalai Lama. As a matter of fact, I'm the only President to ever stand up in public with the Dalai Lama here in the United States. So they know my position.

And my question that I think about is, if I politicize the Olympic Games, will that make it less effective for me to deal with them, or more effective? But nobody needs to call old -- tell old George Bush what to -- that he needs to bring religious freedom to the doorstep of the Chinese, because I've done that now for -- I'm on my eighth year doing it.

Q This stick-to-it-iveness that I just saw in your eyes here I think animated this stem cell decision that you looked at, prayed over, spent a long time considering with experts from across the field. In 2001 you met with then-Pope John Paul II; he encouraged you not to endorse federal funding. You didn't; you restricted the federal funding of embryonic stem cell research.

THE PRESIDENT: Right.

Q As a result of that move, alternative technologies were analyzed; adult stem cells have now produced 80 -- cures for 80 different diseases. Do you feel vindicated?

THE PRESIDENT: That's an interesting question. I don't take these things personally, nor am I that concerned about my own personal standing based upon an issue. I feel like it was the right decision to begin with, and we'll let history judge whether or not vindication is the right word.

Q Or confirmed in your decision, certainly.

THE PRESIDENT: Well, yes, I do feel -- I feel like it was the right decision then, and obviously the data has now shown that -- I hope it shows to people it's the right decision. But, you know, I think it's going to be -- by the way, I think this is the beginning of what is a very interesting debate that future Presidents are going to have to deal with, and that is science versus ethics, the value of life versus saving life -- supposedly. And it's -- I believe -- I've obviously drawn the line in the sand that honoring life in all forms is a touchstone for good science.

Q Do you think in your lifetime you might see a pro-choice Republican nominee for President?

THE PRESIDENT: I don't know. That's an interesting question. No telling what you'll see in my lifetime when it comes to American politics -- from both sides.

Q Do you think it's important, though, to have a pro-life President on the Republican ticket? What might be the ramifications?

THE PRESIDENT: I think it's important for people to understand that a culture of life is in our national interests and that -- it's also important to understand that the politics of abortion isn't going to change until people's hearts change, and fully understand the meaning of life and what it means for a society to value life in all forms -- whether it be the life of the unborn, or the life of the elderly; whether it be the life of the less fortunate among us, or the life of the rich guy. I mean, it's a moral touchstone, I think, that will speak to a healthy society in the long run.

And I don't know what's going to happen in American politics, I really don't. I do know that in order for a President to be effective he better bring a set of principles from which he will not deviate, and articulate them as clearly as he can -- or she can -- and then not worry about immediate popularity, because popularity comes and goes, but what doesn't change are solid principles. And I'm going to remind His Holy Father how important his voice is in making it easier for politicians like me to be able to kind of stand and defend our positions that are, I think, very important positions to take.

Q Mr. President, final question.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes, sir.

Q You said, famously, when you looked into Vladimir Putin's eyes you saw his soul.

THE PRESIDENT: Yes.

Q When you look into Benedict XVI's eyes what do you see?

THE PRESIDENT: God.

Q Good way to end the interview.

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you, sir.

Q Thank you, sir. My pleasure.