

Benedict XVI Makes Historic Call to Space

Blesses Astronauts, Praises Their Courage

VATICAN CITY, MAY 22, 2011 ([Zenit.org](http://www.zenit.org)).- Benedict XVI held an historic teleconference over the weekend with the crew of the International Space Station, during which he asked five questions, praised the astronauts for their courage and extended to them his apostolic blessing.

During the 20-minute teleconference, which took place on the occasion of the last mission of the shuttle Endeavour, the Holy Father could see the 12 American, Italian and Russian astronauts on a large screen television in the Foconi Room of the Vatican Library. The crew aboard the space station could only hear the Pope.

Accompanying the Pontiff were Enrico Saggese, president of the Italian Space Agency, Thomas Reiter, Director of Human Spaceflight and Operations at the European Space Agency, and General Giuseppe Bernardis of the Italian Air Force. The call was coordinated by the Johnson Space Center and Houston, with the help of the Vatican and the European Space Agency.

The Pope was originally scheduled to address the crew earlier this month, but the Endeavour's launch was pushed back twice before the shuttle finally took off last Monday for a 16-day mission.

The Holy Father addressed in particular shuttle commander Mark Kelly, whose wife, Representative Gabrielle Giffords, is recovering from a gunshot wound to the head, and Italian Paolo Nespoli, whose mother died during the current mission.

Benedict XVI told the crew that he was grateful for the "extraordinary opportunity" to speak with them, and briefly offered a short reflection before asking the astronauts a series of questions.

"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," he said, "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," the Pontiff continued, "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 endeavors at the disposal of all humanity and for the common good."

In his first question, the Pontiff asked if the astronauts "ever wonder about the way nations and people live together down here, or about how science can contribute to the cause of peace?"

Kelly answered, "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."

Teamwork

Benedict XVI asked in another question what is the "most important messages you would like to convey" upon returning to earth.

Mike Finchke of the United States reflected that he'd like let "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."

The Holy Father asked the Italian astronaut Roberto Vittoria, who brought a bronze medal given to him by the Pope to the Space Station, if the astronauts reflect during their mission "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," the Pontiff stated. "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?"

Vittori responded: "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. [...]"

"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."

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