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+ Brendan Leahy

## The Gospel of Jesus Christ, Church Reform and Tradition: A glance at Some Aspects of Pope Benedict's Writings

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It is reported that the last words of the dying Pope Emeritus Benedict were: "Lord, I love you". Whether this is true or not, the short prayer is certainly in tune with the focus of his theological work as a theologian and bishop, cardinal and Pope – to elaborate on the primacy of the love of God revealed in Jesus Christ. His writings, sometimes described as a symphony, return repeatedly to the theme of the gift God has made in giving himself to us in Jesus Christ through the Spirit of truth, freedom and love. In this brief article, written shortly after his death, I want to highlight just a few points that struck me from the theological and magisterial writings of Ratzinger/Benedict. I do so gratefully calling to mind his gracious demeanour, clarity of thought and humour that I experienced during annual seminar days with him in the late '90s and early 2000s.

## SEEKING THE FACE OF JESUS CHRIST

The Italian theologian Piero Coda has written that for Ratzinger/Benedict, renewal in the Church happens in direct contact with the living nucleus of the Gospel of Jesus and in the context of the ecclesial Tradition. He also suggests the underlining of this perspective will be Pope Benedict's most important and long-term contribution to the Church. If the Church wants to serve humanity in new ways, it must interpret with creative fidelity its identity transmitted in Tradition. This conviction grounded his method of approaching issues and it was the key to his engagement with other churches and ecclesial communities.

Ratzinger considered the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on Divine Revelation *Dei Verbum*, with its focus on God and how

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we come to know God, to be the Council's fundamental text (even if he also suggested that in the long run the document on religious freedom, *Dignitatis humanae* and that on dialogue with other religions *Nostra Aetate* would be very significant). As a theologian and man of God, Ratzinger/Benedict wanted to communicate how Jesus Christ is not an event to be relegated to two thousand years ago. The Crucified-Risen Jesus, the Lord of History, is always at the heart of the Church on her pilgrim way through history. Our primary task is to seek the face of Christ, get to the heart of him who is Truth in person, and let his face and message radiate in ever new ways. With Jesus Christ's paschal mystery as the key to liturgy, a theme greatly loved by him, Ratzinger/Benedict underlined how the Vatican II document, *Sacramentum Concilium* viewed liturgy as the world of God entering our world and our world entering the heart of God.

Viewing his personal, theological and ecclesial mission as centred on faith in Jesus Christ, it's no surprise that even with his gruelling schedule as Pope, Pope Benedict dedicated himself to completing and publishing the three-volume series, *Jesus of Nazareth*, that received acclamation across the spectrum of the Christian traditions. It's a mature fruit of Benedict/Ratzinger's life work of research, writings and prayer. As he put it in the foreword, this series is an expression 'of my personal search "for the face of the Lord' (cf. Ps 27:8) and "to help foster the growth of a living relationship with him"'.<sup>68</sup>

He wrote four encyclicals (technically he only wrote three as Pope but Pope Francis published an encyclical that had been begun by Pope Benedict). It is noteworthy that they were dedicated to the three theological virtues, faith, hope and charity that ground our following of Jesus Christ on a personal and social level. While the relationship of faith and reason is a theme repeatedly found in Ratzinger/Benedict's writings, nevertheless he recognises the Gospel primacy of charity (*agape*). The very name of God revealed in Jesus Christ is love, and it is charity poured into our hearts by the Spirit, a theme central in Augustine's writings that so greatly influenced Ratzinger, that brings to blossom the universal human *eros* in its drive towards the true, good and beautiful.

For Ratzinger, what we see and experience in Jesus Christ is that God is an *event* of love. Addressing young people in Cologne in 2005 he asked: "what could ever save us apart from love?" In his first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, we hear the often-quoted sentence: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" (n.1) *The event of love, revealed in Jesus Christ, is the Trinity. So many of the*

building blocks of Ratzinger/Benedict's theology, themes such as relatedness, communion, fraternity, dialogue, giftedness as well as his approach to social and cultural themes, flow from his conviction that Trinitarian doctrine marks our faith in ways we have yet much to realise. In discovering who God is, we discover who we are. Indeed, we discover "a new understanding of reality". To be is to relate, to receive and to give. The recognition of the Triune God brings a spiritual newness and opens up avenues of thought and action.

In Christianity, the profession of faith in the oneness of God is just as radical as in any other monotheistic religion; indeed only in Christianity does it reach its full stature. But it is the nature of Christian existence to receive and to live life as relatedness and, thus, to enter into that unity which is the ground of all and sustains it .... [T]he doctrine of the Trinity, when properly understood, can become the reference point of theology that anchors all other lines of Christian thought (188).

His social teaching encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* took up some of the themes mentioned above and, on these bases, reflected on contemporary social issues, market dynamics and practices in business and enterprise, underlining particularly the category of fraternity. He noted that while the explosion of worldwide interdependence certainly brings great opportunities, it also contains risks in terms of new social political, economic and cultural divisions. True to his ever-present reflection on faith and reason, in this encyclical he issued an invitation to broaden our concept of reason, precisely in terms of relatedness, and its application in order to provide deeper cultural, political and economic foundations for a civilisation of justice, peace and fraternity. The opening line of the encyclical again focuses on the charity in Jesus Christ who is Truth in Person:

Charity in truth, to which Jesus Christ bore witness by his earthly life and especially by his death and resurrection, is the principal driving force behind the authentic development of every person and of all humanity. Love – *caritas* – is an extraordinary force which leads people to opt for courageous and generous engagement in the field of justice and peace. It is a force that has its origin in God, Eternal Love and Absolute Truth.

In short, for Ratzinger/Benedict, faith in Jesus Christ, Messiah and Lord, the Son of God, makes us children of God, sisters and brothers of one another, through the gift of his Spirit and communion. Faith

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brings us into a new realm of life and action. And all of this is directed towards universal sister- and brotherhood. The Church's mission centred on faith in Jesus Christ is to respond to Christ and generously share its divine-human life of communion.

### REFORM IN CONTINUITY

Ratzinger/Benedict understood only too well that faith in Jesus Christ involves a journey that is not only personal to each believer, but, also social and cultural. He recognised that each continent has its journey of faith in welcoming and receiving the Incarnation of the Word of God, Jesus Christ. In other words, the Christ event becomes culture in ever-new ways in successive generations and contexts. Given his great knowledge of the Patristic and Medieval eras, he was keen also to underline the dimension of continuity.

In a key address to the Roman Curia in December, 2005, marking the fortieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict reflected on the interpretation of the Council and underlined the dynamics both of Reform and of continuity. The Second Vatican Council was, he explained, an experience of launching a Reform in the Church but one that is in continuity with the Church's two thousand year life-giving sources. He realised this is not easy task. Recalling Pope John XXIII's famous address at the opening of the Council with his call for *aggiornamento* and presenting the faith in new ways, Pope Benedict commented:

It is clear that this commitment to expressing a specific truth in a new way demands new thinking on this truth and a new and vital relationship with it; it is also clear that new words can only develop if they come from an informed understanding of the truth expressed, and on the other hand, that a reflection on faith also requires that this faith be lived. In this regard, the programme that Pope John XXIII proposed was extremely demanding, indeed, just as the synthesis of fidelity and dynamic is demanding.

As a young theologian Ratzinger felt a call to present the Truth of faith in a way that was new and attractive. That also meant reading and interpreting the hope and joys, griefs and sorrows of our, at times, bewildering world. He was convinced that in order to respond to contemporary challenges, we need to draw from the patrimony of the Faith. Nothing solid or long-lasting will be developed without remembering the rock from which we are hewn, the heritage of wisdom, truth and experience that has been transmitted throughout the centuries. This conviction can be seen

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in his interventions as the Cardinal Prefect of the Doctrine for the Faith in the areas of liberation theology, the ecclesiology of communion, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue.

While advocating fidelity to Tradition, Ratzinger/Benedict never understood it as a collection of assertions simply to be transmitted without any newness. Fidelity to our heritage should never mean that faith be reduced to a question of static repetition (initially he was somewhat reluctant to tackle the project of developing what turned out to be an incredible achievement, the elaboration of the Catechism of the Catholic Church). Theology is not archeology, as he put it. He understood Tradition as a dynamic process involving a progressive assimilation through the faith of the Church of the event witnessed in Scripture. He recognised that in order to remain identical the Church's faith has to be thought and expressed in ways that are new.<sup>1</sup>In a recent publication, Pope Francis has noted that a central theme in Pope Benedict is that God is always new: "Yes, God is always news because He is the source and reason of beauty, grace and truth. God is never repetitive, God surprises us. God brings newness".<sup>2</sup>

### LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In terms of how Ratzinger/Benedict viewed the future of the Church, there are two aspects worth highlighting also because they resonate today in our own contemporary ecclesial experience in Ireland. The first is the often-quoted remarks he made in a 1969 German radio broadcast. They are worth reading in full.<sup>3</sup> While recognising the limits of any prognostication of the future, Ratzinger spoke of how he saw the future directions of the Church.

The future of the Church can and will issue from those whose roots are deep and who live from the pure fullness of their faith....From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge – a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members.

- 1 See Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Nature and Mission of Theology*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1995.
- 2 Pope Francis, Preface to a book edited by Luca Caruso, *Dio è sempre nuovo*. Vatican Editors, 2023.
- 3 Joseph Ratzinger, *Faith and the Future*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009.

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In his view the future of the Church will be made up of smaller faith communities. She will no longer be the dominant social power she was in the past. Nevertheless, in all of the changes, of course, “the Church will find her essence afresh and with full conviction in that which was always at her centre: faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, in the presence of the Spirit until the end of the world”. Ratzinger proposes that there will be a fresh blossoming and the Church will come again to be seen as “home”, where people will find life and hope beyond death.

The Church will be a more spiritual Church ... It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed ... But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. People in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely ... Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.

One particular way he understood the Church was being renewed was in terms of the continuing work of the Holy Spirit through creative communities, little flocks, rooted in Gospel life. Pope Francis has called Benedict the “Pope of creative minorities”. His vision was very much linked to the theological significance of “charism” in the life of the Church. He shared his vision in a key note address at a symposium held in Rome in 1998 on movements and ecclesial communities, Ratzinger offered a reflection on the “theological locus” of these movements.<sup>4</sup> He noted that the Church has a permanent basic episcopal/sacramental structure that provides organizational continuity, but “ever renewed irruptions of the Holy Spirit” revitalize and renew this structure:

If we now look at the history of the Church as a whole, we see that the local church, as that ecclesial form whose defining mark is the episcopal office, cannot but be the supporting structure that permanently upholds the edifice of the Church through all ages. On the other hand, the Church is also crisscrossed by successive waves of new movements, which reinvigorate the universalistic

4 “The Theological Locus of Ecclesial Movements”, *Communio* 25 (Fall 1998): 480-504.

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aspect of its apostolic mission and precisely in so doing also serve the spiritual vitality and truth of the local churches.

In describing five waves of renewal through the Church's history, he referred to the Irish monks, in particular, Columbanus as well as the great movements of renewal around figures such as Francis and Dominic, Ignatius of Loyola and Teresa of Avila, and then too the great female congregations of the nineteenth century. In synergy with the apostolic structure of the Church, charisms renew the evangelising energy of the Church, the Spouse of Christ.

### IRELAND, EUROPE AND THE WORLD

Ratzinger/Benedict had a high regard for the Irish Church. While his 2011 letter to the Catholics of Ireland regarding sexual abuse was strong in its reproach of the Irish Bishops, we can also read in that letter his esteem for the contribution of the Irish to the Church worldwide. Aware of "the rapid transformation and secularization of Irish society", nevertheless he wrote, 'As you take up the challenges of this hour, I ask you to remember "the rock from which you were hewn" (Is 51:1). Reflect upon the generous, often heroic, contributions made by past generations of Irish men and women to the Church and to humanity as a whole...'

He referred again to Celtic monks like Saint Columbanus who spread the Gospel in Western Europe and laid the foundations of medieval monastic culture found expression in the building of churches and monasteries and the establishment of schools, libraries and hospitals "all of which helped to consolidate the spiritual identity of Europe." He was well aware of the era of persecutions in the history of the Catholic Church in Ireland, but he also pointed to the new missionary zeal that arose after those persecutions:

[G]enerations of missionary priests, sisters and brothers left their homeland to serve in every continent, especially in the English-speaking world. They were remarkable not only for their great numbers, but for the strength of their faith and the steadfastness of their pastoral commitment. Many dioceses, especially in Africa, America and Australia, benefited from the presence of Irish clergy and religious who preached the Gospel and established parishes, schools and universities, clinics and hospitals that served both Catholics and the community at large, with particular attention to the needs of the poor.

Pope Benedict underlined the Irish link with Europe. In a weekly catechesis on June 11, 2008, he dedicated his talk to Columbanus,



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“the best known Irish man of the Middle Ages and a great European”. Indeed, he pointed out, “With the Irish of his time, he had a sense of Europe’s cultural unity”. Paying tribute to how the Irish nurtured the Christian roots of Europe, he noted how the expression “*totius Europae* - of all Europe”, with reference to the Church’s presence on the Continent, is found for the first time in one of Columbanus’ letters, written around the year 600, and addressed to Pope Gregory the Great.

## CONCLUSION

Pope Benedict’s resignation in February 2013 came as a shock. But in many ways it sealed his pontificate and expressed his central conviction that the Church belongs to Jesus Christ. In his final General Audience before retirement on 27 February, 2013, he reaffirmed his faith in the presence of Christ:

I have felt like Saint Peter with the Apostles in the boat on the Sea of Galilee: the Lord has given us so many days of sun and of light winds, days when the catch was abundant; there were also moments when the waters were rough and the winds against us... and the Lord seemed to be sleeping. But I have always known that the Lord is in that boat, and I have always known that the barque of the Church is not mine but his. Nor does the Lord let it sink; it is he who guides it, surely also through those whom he has chosen, because he so wished. This has been, and is, a certainty which nothing can shake.

He went on then to witness to his faith in the charism of Peter present in his successor when he wrote in a collection of interviews with the journalist Peter Seewald, published in 2016 as *Last Testament in his own Words*: “Yes, there is suddenly a new freshness in the Church, a new joy, a new charism that addresses the people, which is something beautiful. Many are thankful that the new pope now approaches them in a new style”. He continued to accompany the Pope with prayer and offering his life right to the end.

The end of time, death and eternal life were also themes profoundly developed in his theological works.<sup>5</sup> He underlined how the dialogical nature of our humanity and our cosmos will blossom ultimately, in God’s mercy, in heaven, in our participation in the Triune God. For Ratzinger/Benedict, communion will be the last word of history.

5 Joseph Ratzinger, *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Washington: CUA, 2007.