



Being a man of faith in the teaching of Pope Benedict XVI¹

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Abstract: Before Benedict XVI became Pope, he was often referred to as an armoured cardinal. As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he served the Church as a theologian protecting dogma and orthodoxy. Present in the great wealth of texts and speeches he left behind is his personal, but also the foundation of his own theology, answer to the question of what it means to be a believer. This article is an analysis of the speeches of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI, and their guiding idea, namely faith in God, which transforms man and makes him “new” according to the biblical understanding of this concept, determines the method of reading and interpreting the texts. The analytical-critical method used makes it possible to extract the most condensed contents and convictions of the author in relation to his vision of faith. From the selected passages, a model of a Christian emerges, consisting of Joseph Ratzinger’s characteristics and predispositions developed and transformed through his personal experience of faith, set on the foundation of the Tradition of the Catholic Church.

Keywords: personalism, faith, Benedict XVI, humanity

Introduction

Before Benedict XVI became Pope, he was often referred to as an armoured cardinal. As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he served the Church as a theologian protecting dogma and orthodoxy. Present in the great wealth of texts and speeches he left behind is his personal, but also the foundation of his own theology, answer to the question of what it means to be a believer. This article is an analysis of the speeches of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger–Benedict XVI, and their guiding idea, i.e. faith in God, which transforms man, making him “new” according to the biblical understanding of this concept, determines the method of reading and interpreting the texts (Ratzinger, 1999; 2000). The analytical-critical method used makes it possible to extract the most condensed contents and convictions of the author in relation to his vision of faith. From the selected passages, a model of a Christian emerges, consisting of Joseph Ratzinger’s characteristics and predispositions developed and

transformed through his personal experience of faith, set on the foundation of the Tradition of the Catholic Church.

1. The spiritual foundations of Benedict XVI

On October 2011 Benedict XVI issued an apostolic letter in the form of the motu proprio *Porta fidei*. Its publication was linked to the announcement of the Year of Faith, scheduled to begin on 11 October 2012, the fiftieth anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council (SWII, 1964; 1965). This linking of themes and anniversaries alone says much about the spiritual foundations of this Pope. The General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops was convened by Benedict XVI for October 2012, the theme of which was *The New Evangelisation for the Transmission of the Christian Faith*. The Pope’s personal idea thus gained

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space to develop in the reflection of the entire ecclesial community. The pope's initiative was aimed at ensuring that the whole Church renews its awareness of its faith and that the Christian benefits from its fruits in every situation in a real way. For Ratzinger, faith was not something external to the person, but a reality that shapes individual choices and decisions and makes man read the meaning of his existence.

In his classic work, *Introduction to Christianity*, Cardinal Ratzinger concentrated on analysing the words of the Creed from the first *I believe* to the last *amen*. The most important, the most obvious, but at the same time the most difficult aspect of the Christian faith is that it has a personal character. For it is not uncommon to say that even the most declared Christians are able to believe culturally, by virtue of custom and upbringing, rather than from the level of conversion and the experience of encounter. The essential formulation of this deepest level is: I believe in you. Faith understood in this way is an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ and, through him, with the personal God, in the Trinity one.

2. Faith entering into communion with God

The personal character of faith means that what happens during the God – human relationship has real consequences in the other spaces in which man participates: the family, the community of the Church, society. Faith introduces the virtue of love into these relationships. The Cardinal writes that faith even demands a relationship with love. In the search for answers to the questions of what love is, Benedict XVI proposed a three-step path. The first is to understand that God not only loves man, but is love (Benedict XVI, 2022, p. 152).

Implicit in this statement is the conviction that love is not just a term for God. It is not one of His many attributes. It means that He is this reality and that it is not subject to change, to prescription, that it is not defined in terms of *more* or *less*, that it is not divided into increasing and decreasing love. It is permanent, unchanging and all-encompassing. The signs of God's love are visible in the work of cre-

ation. However, the first moment of manifestation of this love is the mystery of the incarnation, when God became man. Love becomes embodied. This is, the Pope explains, the meaning and realism of the New Testament (Benedict XVI, 2005, no. 12). The personal acceptance of this truth makes one understand that everyone's life is not useless and of little value (Benedict XVI, 2022, p. 153). The third level is the realisation of how "necessary and urgent it is to bestow the same love on Him" (Benedict XVI, 2022, p. 154). Love is an extraordinary power that gives people the strength to commit themselves courageously and selflessly to justice and peace, the German Pope says (Benedict XVI, 2009, Introduction).

Thus, authentic faith, based precisely on a personal encounter with Love, leads to a witness given in faith. The Pope sees here the need to accentuate the personalistic feature of faith (Burgos, 2010; Gacka, 2014). He is concerned with reviving it as a personal encounter in Jesus Christ with God, who embraces man with his faithfulness, unending closeness and love. Authentic faith does not enclose man in the space of his private affairs. It should not be considered a private matter of the believer. The believer comes to a mature faith in the community of the Church. He needs the community in order to properly develop a personal relationship with God, because it is itself founded on participation in the life of others (Wojtyła, 1979, appendix), never in egotistical closure to the world (Ratzinger, 2018, p. 89). The "we" of the believer is not an add-on, but the content of the personal relationship with God. Therefore, the essence of faith includes service to and coexistence with others. This key truth that faith is personal thus has social implications. Pope Benedict XVI, however, had to remind us that Christians too often act in conviction, mistakenly assuming that those belonging to the Church already have a personal relationship with God built up, and instead of caring about this, they strive for the social, cultural and political consequences of faith. Meanwhile, the renewal of the Church, and of the reality around it, takes place through the witness of personal faith. This is no different. The idea that man is a person shapes the whole vision of the world (Ratzinger, 2018, p. 99). Even more so, faith in the resurrection changes the optics of functioning.

“The faith that works through love” (Galatians 5:6) becomes a new criterion of thought and action that transforms the whole of human life (cf. Romans 12:2; Colossians 3:9-10; Ephesians 4:20-29; 2 Corinthians 5:17) (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 6). The profession of faith cannot therefore be a recitation of words. It is not the acceptance of a religious theory. I believe, Ratzinger writes could be translated as I give myself over. Faith is grounded in the turning of the whole person towards the person of God, thus in an act of conversion (Ratzinger, 2018, p. 86). The task of the believer is to recognise the signs of the times in the present. It is a commitment belonging to each of us to become living signs of the presence of the Risen One in the world (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 15).

The personalist model of faith also presupposes that it can be deepened and that it will grow when it begins to be lived as an experience of love and grace. It is then strengthened, perpetuated. It begins to have an impact through practical consequences in life’s decisions and choices (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 7). For this reason, faith cannot be considered a private matter. It becomes an act of freedom, and this in turn also means taking social responsibility for what one believes. For this reason, Benedict XVI emphasised that the profession of faith is both a personal and a communal act (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 10).

In order to get to what is essential and fundamental in faith, the Pope proposed to return in reflection to the original version of the apostolic symbol based on the two-sidedness of question and answer: *Do you believe? I believe*. The dialogical form of this version reveals much more precisely the essence of the relationship that is born and that existentially transforms man (Ratzinger, 2018, p. 88). It leads to a transformation of attitudes, including, above all, a change of attitude towards human existence. What happens when I become a Christian. When I take on the name of Christ? (Ratzinger, 2018, p. 88). Cardinal Ratzinger answers by stating that *He [Christ] is the model of man and the measure of humanity* (Ratzinger, 2018). And this measure of humanity defines the way and obliges.

The act of faith, however, is not a situation of a single decision, but a process. In addition, especially in modern times, where the field of what is certain and right is narrowing, faith is faced with a series

of questions. Pope Benedict XVI, as a man of religion but also as a scientist and researcher, believed that the Church not only can, but should, show the relationship between science and faith. There can be no conflict on this plane, because both realities, striving for truth (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 12). The Christian is aware that the cooperation of science and faith will be fruitful and developing only if faith is an encounter with the person of Jesus Christ. The realisation of this Creed truly. Catholicism must therefore be a personal encounter and experience of the person, and not merely an attitude of abiding and mindlessly celebrating rituals, cultural patterns, family or national traditions.

3. Reference to St Thomas Aquinas

In explaining the meaning of the word I believe, the Cardinal referred to the formulation proposed by St Thomas Aquinas. In his *Introduction to Christianity*, he considered it crucial to understand the content of what is said in relation to God. The three levels of trust are formulated in the concepts: I believe that there is a God, I believe in God and I believe in God (Thomas Aquinas, 1975, 2-2, q.11, a; Salij, 2021, 78-83).

The first level is expressed in the confession *I believe that there is a God*. This notion includes the conviction that it is not just a matter of knowing that there is an absolute. It is the beginning of a personal encounter with the person of God, a turning towards the Living God, an inner confidence that not only can we experience him, but that he himself can communicate with man and give signs of his presence. The second level, *I believe God*, determines the direction of the personal turn towards God and the human commitment. In this dimension, faith is revealed as the realisation of works of love on a daily basis and in this way the making present of the love experienced is realised.

The third level *I believe in God*, an expression that is uttered in the Creed, is a turn towards faith shaped by love. It is only this level that opens up and initiates an authentic knowledge of God. It transforms the relationship from the position of observer to the role of active participant in the encounter (Thomas Aquinas, 1975, 2-2, q.11, a.).

Jesus, by giving his life for man, made faith extend to the level of topics such as the meaning of life and its value. Pope Benedict XVI believed that the attitude of the believer is that it is in his space that man encounters answers about the meaning of existence. The Pope warned not to treat faith as one of the elements that make up the order and order of life such as the space of family, work and leisure. True faith permeates all these realities, because if it is true it includes an encounter with the person of God (finding some You) who bestows the promise of an indestructible love, total, boundless.

In faith, trust and love are fused into one. Faith is, in other words, the awareness of God's love. And since this love does not cease, the whole of life should be seen as a response to love and as a time shaped by it. The specific attitude that arises from trust, these questions of doubt we should ask not only for the sake of honesty of thought and the responsibility of reason, but of the law of love, which wants persons to know each other. What we have here is a classic personalist relationship, two-sided and not one-sided.

Joseph Ratzinger subordinates all considerations to the question: Is it really you God? Faith, therefore, implies neither a mindless nor a rational certainty. These are natural doubts that are posed from the level of love and from the level of the personalistic encounter with the person. It presents an attitude of looking at faith as the beginning of knowing God. To believe is to explore, to extend one's cognition in order to come closer to the perfect view of God, towards God's reality. Therefore, believes the Cardinal, the true believer does not remain at the level of *I believe there is a God* or *I believe God*. Trust and love elevate him to the level of *I believe in God*, I believe in the person of God (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 6).

Through faith, this new life shapes the whole of human existence, based on the radical newness of the resurrection. To the extent that man voluntarily shows readiness, his thoughts, feelings, mentality and behaviour are slowly purified and transformed, in a process that is never fully completed in this life.

Therefore, in point 2 of *Porta fidei*, he made a diagnosis of the contemporary situation and set out the necessary directions for the spiritual and intellectual development of Christians. He noted that

it is all too often the case today that Christians are more concerned with the social, cultural and political consequences of their commitment, thinking that faith is still the self-evident premise of communal life. In fact, this premise has not only ceased to be self-evident, but is often even denied. For this reason, the question of faith has wrongly been allowed to be treated as a private matter (Benedict XVI, 2011, no. 10). A social contract or agreement or tolerance of religious issues as part of social diversity is far too little. The contemporary role that Benedict XVI gave Christians in the world, as it were, their task, is that of a public witness of faith that reveals all the richness that lies at the level of *I believe in God*. Man at this level of faith possesses the strength capable of acting effectively for justice, because he lives with the certainty of his encounter with God and the experience of his presence.

In parallel, Cardinal Ratzinger formulated a well-founded concern that societies are not composed exclusively of believers, but more often of communities that are growing in number and that do not consider either the presence of transcendence in their lives or the norms of natural law. They are left, as he wrote, with only *the rules of the road* of human behaviour, which can be projected and justified from the point of view of their use value. And since, increasingly, people with such convictions dominate a group, a community, they also determine the social order, the norms and rules between people. The danger, as the Pope saw it, is situations and choices in which so-called use-value, what a person needs at a given moment or rather thinks he needs, limits the social order.

4. The two dimensions of humility

As a proposal and at the same time a perspective for breaking out of the useful and seemingly practical life, Benedict XVI proposes to return to the questions relating to humility: Can God stoop so far above man? To lower himself to man? Can man go through life without marvelling at the fact that God can do such great things to man, and is it possible not to thank God because of this? (Benedict XVI, 2006). If, writes Benedict XVI, we accept and acknowledge

that Christ is not God, we ourselves close off the path of encounter. The faith of Christians, the faith of the Pope, is the certainty that God cannot fail to interact with man (Ratzinger, 1985, 1999). If I believe in God, I know that He comes among people constantly. He is a contemporary God, not a historical God.

So to believe today, according to the Pope, is to trust in meaning, it means to conceive of our existence as a response to the Word of the Logos that keeps everything going. To remain at the level of faith that what we do not see is more real than what we do see. Thus, if faith permeates all choices and decisions, the Christian must never consider that what he believes is a private matter. It also requires social responsibility for what one believes.

Conclusion

For this reason, concludes the Pope, the profession of faith is both a personal and a communal act. The theology that he himself practised, but also taught, is close to the life experiences and needs of man. It flows from experiencing God's love, which manifests itself in a life of awareness and commitment to witness to it (Benedict XVI, 2005). This also justifies Ratzinger's interest

and participation in discussions about the social order, the role of the Church and the laity in the functioning of the state, so-called political communitarianism (Ratzinger, 2010). This was also shown in the Habermas – Ratzinger discussion, in which non-believers and believers discussed the place and role of religion in social and cultural space and in science (after: Teinert, 2006). In this context, it is also important to draw a line between natural and supernatural faith, which our author differentiates and which should be reflected in social consciousness. Knowing, trusting and being able to verify what one believes is a common feature of both (Ratzinger, 2006, 79-82, 101-105). In contrast, the difference arises at the point of knowledge, the source of which is different for both. In the space of natural faith, knowledge arises through a process of learning. In supernatural faith, on the other hand, this source is the encounter with the person of God.

Thus, in order to realise the postulate of perfect faith, in order to truly be a believer, it is necessary to bear in mind these three aspects discussed here, which start from openness to the encounter with the person, and rise to the level of *I believe in God*. In parallel, only a faith shaped by love allows a person to authentically know and become more mature.

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