

Rev. Pablo Blanco Sarto
Universidad de Navarra

Faith in the Year Of Faith

Ratzinger's proposal

In his *Introduction to Christianity*, written while he was living in a revolutionary Tübingen, professor Ratzinger examines the problem of faith in contemporary society. He was writing in the famous year of 1968, surrounded by the student riots, and in a context of polemic and scepticism that today is almost ancient history. The three “M’s” – Mao, Marx, and Marcuse – were put up against Kierkegaard, Heidegger and Barth, names that were already gathering rust. The question addressed in the book was how to understand faith in that turbulent world. Ratzinger turned to a story once told by Kierkegaard: “a travelling circus in Denmark had caught fire – related Ratzinger, in front of a numerous public – The manager thereupon sent the clown, who was already dressed and made-up for the performance, into the neighbouring village to fetch help [...]. The clown hurried into the village and requested the inhabitants to come as quickly as possible to the blazing circus and help to put the fire out. But the villagers took the clown's shouts simply for an excellent piece of advertising, meant to attract as many people as possible to the performance; the applauded the clown and laughed till they cried”¹.

¹ Benedict XVI, *Introduction to Christianity*, transl. J. R. Foster, New York 1970, p. 15. On this topic, see also: B. Hidber, *Umkehr im theologischen Denken von J. Ratzinger*, “PATH” 6 (2007/1) 199–220; R. Tura, *La teologia di J. Ratzinger. Saggio introduttivo*, “Studia Patavina” (1974) 150–161; A. Nichols,

1. Conversion and encounter

They applauded and laughed: belief can be expressed as an attitude, a wager, risk. The professor of Tübingen puts this in existential terms: “belief signifies the decision that at the very core of human existence there is a point which cannot be nourished and supported on the visible and tangible, which encounters and comes into contact with what cannot be seen and finds that it is a necessity for its own existence”². In spite of the inevitable doubt that can assail us, faith reveals itself in the invisible, he says. And he continues along these lines: we can arrive at this attitude through what the Bible calls “reversal”, “con-version”. A person needs to change in order to become conscious that he is blind when he believes only in what he can see with his own eyes. Faith always has something to do with breaking free and leaping. “It has always been a decision calling on the depths of existence, a decision that in every age demanded a turnabout by man that can only be achieved by an effort of will”³. On the other hand, this faith cannot be understood alone: “Ratzinger has always been interested – summarizes Rowland – in the topic that God is love, in

The theology of Joseph Ratzinger: an introductory study, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1988, 110–111, 225–234; V. Pfnür, *Mitte des Glaubens und Konturen des konstitutiv Christlichen*, AA. VV., *Vom Wiederauffinden der Mitte. Grundorientierungen. Texte aus vier Jahrzehnten*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 1997, p. 17–24; P. Blanco, *Joseph Ratzinger: Razón y cristianismo*, Madrid 2005, p. 57–105; *Fe, persona e Iglesia según Joseph Ratzinger*, “Scripta Theologica” 37 (2005/3) 911–927; “Montealegre” 894–895 (2005/12) 1–16; id., *La transmisión de la fe según Joseph Ratzinger*, [in:] C. Palos – C. Cremades (eds.), *Perspectivas del pensamiento de Joseph Ratzinger*, Valencia 2006, p. 197–214; S. Hartmann, *Joseph Ratzinger – kirchliche Existenz und existentielle Theologie*, „Klerusblatt“ 85 (2005/6) 162–163; M. Schulz, *Subjektivität der Offenbarung. Mensch und Kirche als Grundgedanken der Fundamentaltheologie Benedikts XVI*, Katholisches Säkularinstitut Cruzadas de Santa María, *Kriterien der Wahrheit christlicher Glaubenserfahrung. Aussagen von Theologie und Philosophie über die religiöse Erfahrung im Christentum*, Pasinger Philothea 1, St. Ottilien 2006, 105–130; E. Dirscherl, *La figura conceptual teológica y antropológica de Joseph Ratzinger a partir de la cristología*, F. Meier-Hamidi – F. Schumacher (eds.), *El teólogo Joseph Ratzinger*, Barcelona 2007, 99–105; J. Murphy, *Christ our joy. The theological vision of Pope Benedict XVI*, San Francisco 2008, 62–66; U. Casale, *Introduzione a Fede, ragione, verità e amore. La teologia di Joseph Ratzinger. Un’antologia*, Lindau, Torino 2009, 57–58; L. Boeve, *Theological foundations: revelation, tradición and hermeneutics*, L. Boeve – G. Mannion, *The Ratzinger Reader*, New York 2010, 28–33; id., *Chirst, humanity and salvation*, *ibid.*, 51–79; J. Alonso, *La belleza de creer* [in:] P. Blanco (ed.), *Benedicto XVI habla sobre fe y nueva evangelización*, Madrid 2012, p. 119–143.

² Introduction to Christianity, p. 24.

³ *Ibid.*, 25.

the relationship between faith and love, and between faith and reason”⁴
We will see this in the words that follow.

Faith, doubt and conversion

Faith is not a leap in the dark, but the believer will have the impression – which also carries potential risks – that he can walk over firm land. Ratzinger spoke about the necessity of conversion for arriving at faith. Doubt is a stage prior to the act of faith; the latter exists only when we overcome the temptation of doubt, through conversion to Christ and the message that he offers to us. Speaking about the dialogical structure of the act of faith, Ratzinger adds: “We saw earlier that the Creed is pronounced in the framework of baptism as the triple answer to the triple question, «Do you believe in God- in Christ- in the Holy Spirit?» We can now add that it thereby represents the positive corollary to the triple renunciation that precedes it: «I renounce the devil, his service, and his work.» This means that faith is located in the act of conversation, in the shift of gravity from worship of the visible and practicable to trust in the invisible. The phrase ‘I believe’ could here be literally translated by «I hand myself over to» [...] to use Heidegger’s language, one could say that it signifies an «about-turn» by the whole person which from then on constantly structures one’s existence [...] it is a conversion, an about-turn, a shift of being.”⁵

The German theologian reminds us repeatedly that conversion is an obligatory intermediate stage before arriving at any act of faith, included our own. If we wish to consider what we ought to do to communicate the faith, we must ask ourselves about our own and others’ conversion. Ratzinger presents a beautiful psychological and phenomenological

⁴ T. Rowland, *La fe de Ratzinger. La teología del papa Benedicto XVI*, Granada 2008, 22.

⁵ *Introduction to Christianity*, 55; he develops the relationship between baptism and confession of faith in *Taufe und Formulierung des Glaubens* (1972) en *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, Barcelona 1985, p. 119–131. Cf. B. Hidber, *Umkehr im theologischen Denken von J. Ratzinger*, “PATH” 6 (2007/1) p. 199–220. The topic of the conversion was studied before in my *Los Karamazov discuten. Dios y el mal en Dostoievski*, “Espíritu” LIII (2004) p. 77–85; versión revisada: *Los Karamazov discuten. Dostoievski vence a Nietzsche*, [in:] J. Borobia – M. Lluch – J.I. Murillo – E. Terrasa, *Cristianismo en una cultura postsecular. V simposio internacional - Fe cristiana y cultura contemporánea*, Pamplona 2006, p. 421–434.

analysis, making use of a biblical example, in which we see how a common experience can convert firstly into a religious experience and, later, into a true act of faith. He refers to the episode of the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well (John 4). The encounter between Jesus and the woman takes place in the context of an ordinary human requirement: thirst. The dialogue that follows begins from the simple fact that thirst demands many daily trips to the well, and here a transition is made to something more transcendent: the thirst for life. The woman is thus made aware of something she has always known: that nothing she has access to is able to quench that essential thirst within her. "Thus the phase of the «empirical» experience that was in the foreground is overcome"⁶. The woman understands that even though she may drink from the well, she will nevertheless still be thirsty.

Jesus talks for a while with the woman, but soon he takes her out of her comfort zone and helps her to come face to face with herself: "Call your husband" (4: 16). This petition is intentional and necessary: it is here that the call to conversion begins. "Thus the real dilemma appears in the most natural of ways as an existential dilemma: the woman is in front of herself"⁷. After this first, merely empirical encounter, the woman faces an "existential experience". Now the subject of the conversation is not simply mundane and material, but it touches on the most intimate and deep dimensions of the being oneself. In that moment she faces the essential point: the question about oneself becomes a question about God. Now the woman discovers the real thirst that she has. And now she can, finally, understand why she is thirsty". The experience of God is now reached through conversion and faith: "The *conversio* is in the way in which the person finds herself and addresses the fundamental question: how can I adore God? It is the question about her own salvation". Ratzinger notes that this question arrived at by the Samaritan woman is the same one that must be asked by every Christian and by anyone to whom we transmit the faith.⁸

⁶ *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, p. 425.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 426-427.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 427. Cf. R. Tura, *La teologia di J. Ratzinger. Saggio introduttivo*, p. 152-153.

2. Faith, reason and relationship

Ratzinger also employs the concept of person to explain and deepen in the nature of the act of faith. It will be, on the one hand, gift and task, receptivity and activity, giving and receiving, a gift from God that we have received, never something produced or invented. Faith must be found using our freedom and initiative. The theological and personalist background of this idea is evident, but at the same time he assumes the atmosphere of the *Existenzphilosophie*.⁹ In this way the German theologian describes the personal character of the act of faith: “we have not yet spoken – he says – about the most important characteristic of the Christian faith: its personal character. His key formulation is not «I believe in something», but «I believe in you»”. It is an encounter with Jesus, in which we experience the sense of the world and the person. The faith is, then, to find a “you” that holds me and “feels that the intelligence does not exist in a pure state, but that it knows and love me; that I can trust him with the same security with which a baby finds its problems solved in the you of its mother”¹⁰. Faith is the fruit of a personal relationship: it is – as we will see – a friendship, a confidence that brings us knowledge.

To the whole person

“Faith is an orientation in the totality of our existence – wrote the then prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in the 1990s – it is a fundamental option which spreads out in all the dimensions of our existence and, as such, it can be reached only if it brings all the force of our existence. The faith is not only an intellectual event, neither is it something strictly voluntary, neither (nor) something merely emotional,

⁹ Cf. L. Pareyson, *Esistenza e persona* (1950), Genova 1985⁴, p. 184–185, 214–215.

¹⁰ *Introducción al cristianismo* (1968), 71; there are quoted J. Mouroux, *Je crois en Toi. Structure personnelle de la foi* (Paris 1949); C. Cirne – Lima, *Der personale Glaube*, Innsbruck 1959; H. Fries, *Glauben – Wissen*, Berlin 1960. About Jean Mouroux (1901–1973): J. Alonso García, *Fe y experiencia cristiana: la teología de Jean Mouroux*, Pamplona 2002. About the influence of Mouroux in Ratzinger, can be seen D. Kaes, *Theologie im Anspruch von Geschichte und Wahrheit*, p. 45–46, 51. See also R. Tura, *La teologia di J. Ratzinger. Saggio introduttivo*, p. 153–156.

but all of these at the same time: is an act of the «I» in its totality, of the whole person in his or her complete unity. In that sense, the Bible calls it an act of the «heart» (Rm 10: 9)”¹¹. Intelligence, freedom, feelings, the “heart” and the whole of life play a role in every conversion and act of faith. We have just spoken about the personal character of the act of faith, how it consists in establishing a relationship with God in Jesus Christ; now we are going to examine how this act implicates the totality of the person. In a conference held in 1997 at the Academy of Moral and Political Sciences in Paris, Ratzinger spoke of the universality of the Christian faith as *vera religione*, also in relation with the “unitotality” of the person. Faith in the one God implies necessarily the recognition of God’s will: adoration of God is not an abandonment of our nature, but it requires all the energies of the intelligence, of the sensibility and of the will.

“Faith in God does not renounce to truth, to a truth which can be defined in its contents, although the importance of the apophatical element”¹². It brings us to know in an incomplete way; although it is a relationship that generates positive knowledge, it is not an exhaustive one and does not account for all the truth. In a similar vein, Ratzinger wrote in a 1975 article that aside from leading us to conversion and a change in our conduct, faith illuminates our knowledge. Lights and shadows always appear together. “Ignorance of God, atheism, is expressed – concretely – in a lack of respect and reverence from man to man; knowing God means to see the man with other eyes”¹³. As Ivan Karamazov said, following the premises of an atheist intellectual, “if God does not exist, everything is allowed to me”, even if it’s harmful to myself or others. Faith has a series of eminent practical manifestations, including in the *ethos* of the person; it implies *praxis* and theory, action and knowledge, ethics and noetics. The faith involves all the potentialities of the human being.

¹¹ *Evangelio, catequesis, catecismo*, Valencia 1996, p. 20–21. See also *Fede e teologia*, “Sacra Dottrina” 1/38 (2003) 10; *Convocados en el camino de la fe*, Madrid 2004, p. 295; *Cooperadores de la verdad*, Madrid 1991, p. 299.

¹² *La Chiesa, Israele e le religioni del mondo*, Cinisello Balsamo 2000, p. 65.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78; there Ratzinger remembers the Pauline testimonies: 1 Ts 4, 3ss.; Ga 4, 8ss.; 1 Rm 18–32. Cf. A. Bellandi, *Fede cristiana come stare e comprendere*, p. 182–186.

Experience and knowledge

We have mentioned the necessity of the cognitive dimension of the act of faith; now we will take a deeper look at this idea which the theologian Ratzinger emphasizes constantly. In an article published in the *Deutsche Tagespost*, the Prefect readdresses this ever-present theme of his writings and preaching. The love for God and for the others, which we have discussed, has implications for the entire person. To highlight the intensity of this demand, the Old Testament speaks about the heart, the soul and the strength as bearers of this love to God (cf. Dt 6: 5). Jesus adds a fourth element: the mind (cf. Mt 22: 37; Mk 12: 30; Lk 10: 27). Using this passage, Ratzinger underlines that reason takes part in our relationship with God and in our love for Him. “Faith is a matter not only of the feelings: something that, as consequence of a religious aspiration in the human existence, we develop as a private matter juxtaposed to the rational purposes of the private life. The faith is – first of all – the order of the reason, something without that it loses the measure and the capacity of the purposes”¹⁴. Once again, the faith is directed to the reason and based on it, at the same time that it goes further. Faith will also become knowledge, we have repeated, at the same time that it is a privileged encounter: it is a relationship that engenders and generates knowledge. In both cases they come of indispensable.

It is a mediated knowledge, but knowledge nevertheless, as Ratzinger has insisted repeatedly. On the occasion of his receiving an honorary doctorate at the University of Wroclaw in the year 2000, the theologian-prefect attempted a new approach to the question of faith as rational knowledge, which can be useful to us as a recompilation. In ordinary language it is said: “I believe that tomorrow will be a good day”, or: “I believe that this or that news is not true”. The word “believe” here means to have an opinion; it expresses an imperfect way of knowing. In this context faith would mean something that has not yet reached the status of knowledge. “Many people think that this meaning of faith is also valid in the religious area and that, therefore, the contents of the Christian faith are at a preliminary [and] imperfect level

¹⁴ *Colaboradores de la verdad*, Madrid 1991, p. 274; cf. E. Dirscherl, *La figura conceptual teológica y antropológica de Joseph Ratzinger a partir de la cristología*, F. Meier-Hamidi – F. Schumacher (eds.), *El teólogo Joseph Ratzinger*, p. 103–104.

of knowledge”¹⁵. But this is not the intended meaning of the word we use repeatedly in the creed. “In fact, for Christian believers, the expression «I believe» indicates an *absolute peculiar certainty*, in some respects greater than that which is obtained by science; but, of course, it brings with it a moment of «shadow and image», an instant of «not yet»”¹⁶.

In brief, the new evangelization and the transmission of faith require a consideration of all the dimensions and faculties that play a role in the act of faith. They can be achieved neither with spiritualist nor with secularist and purely horizontal outlooks. They are required to move and stimulate the will and the intelligence, the heart and the reason; they call us both to adoration and to rational reflection. Can we achieve faith without asking for it; without kneeling? Faith comes not only from rational understanding, but also from listening. It is a gift, something received. At the same time, this assent will be united to the unavoidable task of thinking. This task never reaches its conclusion, its resting place. Faith is a pilgrimage of thought that is always on the road. “From here [Saint Tomas] concludes that, in faith, despite the strength of the assent, a contrary movement can emerge (*motus e contrario*): it remains as thought that struggles and asks, that must look for once and again its light according with the essential light that shines in the heart of the word of God. Assent and reflexive movement are «in some way» (*quasi*) equilibrated, *ex aequo*”¹⁷. Confidence and knowledge, belief and doubt remain in equal conditions for the act of faith, which is sure and uncertain at the same time. The shadow of doubt is combined again with the light of the act of faith.

3. “I believe in the Church”

We cannot forget that Ratzinger is also an ecclesiologist; this is evident in much of his writings beginning with his first work on Saint Augustine. In his *Introduction to Christianity*, while insisting on the above-mentioned personal dimension of the act of faith, he spoke also about the social, ecclesial

¹⁵ *Convocados en el camino de la fe*, p. 18.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 25; *De veritate*, q. 14 a.1 co., which sends to 2 Co 10,5.

and communitarian dimensions. It is evident that faith is not simply the result of solitary deep thought in which my fantasy takes wing and, free from all restraints, considers exclusively the truth; the act of faith “is the result of a dialogue, the expression of a hearing, receiving and answering which guides man through the exchanges of «I» and «You» to the «We» of those who all believe in the same way. «Faith come from what is heard», says St Paul (Rm 10: 17)”¹⁸. *Fides ex auditu*: “faith is not something thought up by me but something that comes to me from outside, its word cannot be treated and exchanged as I please; it is always foreordained, always ahead of my thinking. The positivity of what comes towards me from outside myself, opening up to me what I cannot give myself, typifies the process of belief or faith”¹⁹. Faith is a personal and interpersonal gift: it depends on something – someone – who is outside of myself²⁰.

The Church, place of faith

It is true that faith comes from outside, but it also something that is profoundly interiorized. It is only when we exercise at the same time obedience and the expression of our own personality, that we have real faith. Faith is born from the union of the two freedoms: God’s and ours. Ratzinger explained the social and communitarian dimension of the act of faith using the etymology of the word “symbol”. *Symbolum* comes from *ymballein*: a Greek verb that means fusion, put together. The background of the image is an ancient rite: the two parts of a ring or of a seal that could be joined together were the signal through which guests, messengers or parties to a contract could be identified. “The *Symbolum* requires another to be complete, generating in this way unity and mutual recognition: it expresses the unity and, at the same time, makes it possible”²¹. For this reason

¹⁸ *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 57; cf. *Palabra en la Iglesia*, Salamanca 1976, p. 20.

¹⁹ *Introduction to Christianity*, p. 57–58; cf. *Evangelio, catequesis, catecismo*, p. 23.

²⁰ About the importance of the Church and what Ratzinger calls the *Wir-Struktur*, can be seen A. Bellandi, *Fede cristiana come stare e comprendere*, p. 220–227, 361; D. Kaes, *Theologie im Anspruch von Geschichte und Wahrheit*, Dissertationen Theologische Reihe, St. Ottilien 1997, p. 53ss. The guardinian inspiration of this idea was developed in F.-X. Heibl, *Theologische Denker als Mitarbeiter der Wahrheit - Romano Guardini and Papst Benedikt XVI*, “Mitteilungen des Institut Papst Benedikt XVI” (2008/1) p. 72–82.

²¹ *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, p. 84; cf. R. Tura, *La teología di J. Ratzinger. Saggio introduttivo*, p. 154–155.

faith is expressed in a prayer, in the Symbol, in the communal recitation of the Creed. “It is not merely an dogmatical expression, but an aspect of our divine cult and conversion; it is a glance in direction to God and the others”²². From the “I believe” we arrive at the “we believe”: we believe always in the Church and with the all the Church.

Faith, liturgy and the sacraments

In faith, the believer goes beyond a mere intellectual or sentimental monologue and arrives at a true dialogue with Jesus Christ in the Church. This is also achieved through the sacraments. In *Baptism, faith and belonging to the Church* (1976), Ratzinger arrives to the question of the sacramental origin of incorporation in the Church and, as a result, in faith. After some preliminary considerations on the existential value of the sacraments, it is reminded to us that these signs come before faith and belonging to the Church. Thus “baptism establishes the community in the Name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. In this perspective, it is very similar to the process of the celebration of marriage, which creates a community between two person founded in the word; the word which expresses the fact that, from now on, the two constitute a new unity”²³. Faith is the meeting of two free wills, we have said. Thus, insists Ratzinger, the reception of the faith requires a long learning process, a continuous catechumenate: “The baptismal formula, which is a creed in the form of a dialogue, presupposes a long path of instruction. It demands not only to be learnt and understood as a text, but it must be exercised as expression of an existential orientation”²⁴. Faith and works, theory and existence, orthodoxy and orthopraxis are requisites for receiving baptism in adults, and are necessary for all wishing to live Christian life in its fullness²⁵.

²² Ibid., 85; regarding the history and the importance of the Creed, Ratzinger has published *Noch einmal: “Kurtzformeln des Glaubens”* (1973) and *Das I Konzil von Konstantinopel 381* (1981), in *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, p. 143–153, 131–143.

²³ *Teoría de los principios teológicos*, p. 34.

²⁴ Ibid., 39.

²⁵ The problem of the baptism of children is studied in an appendix in *ibid.*, 46–49; see also *Evangelio, catequesis, catecismo*, p. 24–26.

To illustrate these ideas, we can look at an image that the Prefect takes from the Gospel, which expresses the love and knowledge that is born in the encounter with Christ in the Church through the sacraments; the encounter that is faith. We have said that God is known not only with the intelligence, but at the same time with the will and the heart. That knowledge of God, the encounter with Christ, requires the totality of our being. Luke explains this in the passage of the disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. 24: 13–35). “This journey of the disciples of Emmaus is a description of the Church, a description of how the knowledge that brings us to God matures”²⁶. Faith comes to these disciples when they are with Christ “in the breaking of the bread”, as it comes to us in the Church. The true transmission of faith must respect the method that Christ used in Emmaus: faith and relationship, experience and knowledge, Church and communion, conversion and sacraments. It is then that the believer goes to Jesus Christ and exclaims with total freedom: “stay with us” (Lc 24: 29). And God remains and give us faith. This could be a worthwhile reflection for us in the Year of Faith.

Faith in the year of faith. Ratzinger’s proposal

J. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI as a pope and author of the idea promulgating the Year of Faith is presented in the paper with his concept of faith. The striking element of Ratzinger’s theology is a personal approach to faith. Faith as an encounter triggering conversion is a fully positive and existential experience of God, who engages the whole person and personality (*unitotality* of faith), the reason and love. This attitude of faith builds human praxis and shapes interpersonal relations. Here comes the phenomenon of the Church, which the Pope treats as a source and place of faith, especially with reference to liturgy, owing to which the true relation with the Trune God is established and developed.

Keywords: faith, person, relation, conversion, reason, Church, sacraments.

²⁶ *Convocados en el camino de la fe*, p. 301–302.