

## POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI PASSED ON TO THE ETERNAL LIFE. SOME REMARKS ON HIM FROM THE EARTHLY LIFE

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On 28 December 2022, at the end of the last general audience on Wednesday, Pope Francis stated: »I would like to ask you all for a special prayer for Pope Emeritus Benedict, who is supporting the Church in silence. Remember him – he is very ill – asking the Lord to console him and to sustain him in this witness of love for the Church, until the end.«<sup>1</sup> That was a clear message that his predecessor, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, has approached the end of his life.

The history of the Catholic Church has not recorded a situation in which two legitimate successors of Peter living at the same time; one active in the office and the other »in peace«, or so-called emeritus, who announced his abdication from the papal office during the Consistory of Cardinals on 13 February 2013: »I have convoked you to this Consistory, not only for the three canonizations, but also to communicate to you a decision of great importance for the life of the Church. After having repeatedly examined my conscience before God, I have come to the certainty that my strengths, due to an advanced age, are no longer suited to an adequate exercise of the Petrine ministry. I am well aware that this ministry, due to its essential spiritual nature, must be carried out not only with words and deeds, but no less with prayer and suffering. However, in today's world, subject to so many rapid changes and shaken by questions of deep relevance for the life of faith, in order to govern

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<sup>1</sup> Pope FRANCIS, Special Greetings at the General Audience (28.XII.2022), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2022/documents/20221228-udienza-generale.html>.

the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfil the ministry entrusted to me. For this reason, and well aware of the seriousness of this act, with full freedom I declare that I renounce the ministry of Bishop of Rome, Successor of Saint Peter, entrusted to me by the Cardinals on 19 April 2005, in such a way, that as from 28 February 2013, at 20:00 hours, the See of Rome, the See of Saint Peter, will be vacant and a Conclave to elect the new Supreme Pontiff will have to be convoked by those whose competence it is.«<sup>2</sup>

Casting doubt on whether this decision by the Pope was justified is not only unnecessary, but also inappropriate. He made it, in his own words, »with full freedom«. However, it is justified to wonder about the main motives of this decision. He stated that »in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary, strength which in the last few months, has deteriorated in me to the extent that I have had to recognize my incapacity to adequately fulfil the ministry entrusted to me«, which immediately brings to mind his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who had spent the last few years of his pontificate – evident to all – disabled, but who also endured until the end. Did Pope Benedict XVI, thus, also send a message with his decision to abdicate on the manner in which Peter's barque was governed during the last few years of the pontificate of Pope John Paul II? As a closest associate of John Paul II for many years, why had he then not suggested abdication to him in the circumstances of an obvious illness and overall weakness?

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One often comes across the fact that the last person who abdicated in the history of the Catholic Church was Pope Celestine V on 13 December 1294, after only five months in the papal office. Pietro da Morrone (1215-1296) was elected to Peter's See at the age of eighty and after *sede vacante* that had lasted for two years. By choosing his name, the humble Benedictine, Pope Celestine V, sent a message about a different vision of a genuinely »heavenly pope«, as opposed to then, and subsequent, more common and dramatic tendencies of secularised

<sup>2</sup> Pope BENEDICT XVI, *Declaratio* (10.II.2013), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20130211\\_declaratio.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130211_declaratio.html).

papacy in a constant struggle for strengthening its worldly power and influence. It should also be noted that his successor, Boniface VIII, immediately imprisoned him in Lazio, so as to prevent him from proclaiming himself the anti-pope. Thus, the obsession with the worldly power found its next victim in a person of acknowledged humble and holy life. The fascination with power is a blindness that could not recognise the holy character of abdication but saw in it only a threat of return. In the end, holiness nevertheless triumphed. Pope Clement V canonised Pope Celestine V as early as 1313.

It is paradoxical to observe that no one again assumed the name of one of the rare, canonised popes in the second millennium of the Catholic Church. This includes Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger who was elected to the Petrine See on 19 April 2005. He took the papal name of Benedict XVI that aimed at recognising the greatness of the Benedictine tradition of *ora et labora* and the formation of the European continent under the influence of Christianity. With his decision on abdication from the papal office, however, Ratzinger confirmed the best of the Benedictine tradition. In this he followed another Benedictine monk by the name of Celestine V, the only person who had left behind an official explanation of the right to abdicate from the papal office. His successors not only avoided his name, but also none of them followed him in his decision to abdicate freely in more than seven-hundred years, until Pope Benedict XVI. In the millennial atmosphere of the Catholic Church, the abdication from the papal office of Benedict XVI is truly being confirmed as a unique and extraordinary sign that spontaneously evokes the thought of holiness.

Pope Francis had publicly asked the faithful to pray for the dying Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI and only three days later, on Saturday morning on 31 December 2022, the Pope Emeritus passed on from this earthly life to the eternal life at the age of 95. We should point out that Pope Benedict XVI was pope emeritus longer (9 years and 10 months) than he had been an active pope on the Petrine See (7 years, 10 months, and 11 days). Consequently, not only because of the free abdication, but also because of the aforementioned chronological fact, his name will be written with bold letters in the history of the Church.

However, precisely this, seemingly unique when seen in light of the Gospel, and worthy of mentioning in the life of Pope Benedict XVI, has been interpreted by the majority of his uncritical followers as an act of inscrutable weakness and cowardly retreat in the face of crises and ecclesiastical conflicts that, one ought to state clearly, have been additionally strengthened by some decisions and mes-

sages of the same Pope.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of what one could hear and read from those who saw in him an unrelenting »guardian of the tradition« and, consequently, a proponent of the »return to the old ways«, which consisted of glorification of pre-conciliar liturgy and theology, one could have gained an impression that Pope Benedict XVI was not only the 265<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Peter, who is, as he himself stated during his first appearance on the balcony of the Basilica of St. Peter immediately after being elected, »a simple and humble labourer in the vineyard of the Lord«<sup>4</sup>, but that in his person he was embodying precisely that vineyard, i.e., the Catholic Church as it should be, according to the wishes and expectations of, dare one say, conservative believers.

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What has been held against the Blessed Pope Pius IX, who had wanted to secure the unity and power of the Catholic Church by means of spiritual absolutism and dogmatism of the papal office in the atmosphere of historical threats of secular absolutist pretensions of modern national sovereign states, thereby unintentionally leaving the impression that the Catholic Church and the Pope are one and the same, once again resurfaced in the phenomenon of the papacy of Benedict XVI; this time, however, in close connection with the phenomenon of the papacy of his immediate predecessor, the long-serving Pope St. John Paul II. Specifically, we should remember, that in his absolutist struggle with the members of nobility in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the French monarch, Louis XVI stated, *L'État, c'est moi!* (I am the state!). Similarly, at least according to legends, in his spiritual struggle in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Pope Pius IX said to his opponents, *L'Eglise, c'est moi!* (I am the Church!).

As the time went on, Pope Benedict XVI must have surely realised the scope and weight of the burden on his shoulders; namely, that many perceived him as an embodiment of the completed Catholic Church, which instead – amidst rarely seen escalation of many horrible and sinful scandals of ecclesiastical officials

<sup>3</sup> See BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter Given »Motu Proprio« *Summorum Pontificum* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970, (7.VII.2007), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html); BENEDICT XVI, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre, (10.III.2009), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2009/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20090310\\_remissione-scomunica.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2009/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20090310_remissione-scomunica.html).

<sup>4</sup> BENEDICT XVI, First Greeting of His Holiness Benedict XVI, (19.IV.2005), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/april/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20050419\\_first-speech.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2005/april/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20050419_first-speech.html).

on all levels of the hierarchy, including the papal court itself – managed to raise to awareness that in its two-millennia long history the Church has never been completed. Similarly, in times of the deepest moral and spiritual crises during the Renaissance, the saying *ecclesia semper reformanda* gained citizenship rights within the Catholic Church.

By his election to the Petrine See, the renowned, acknowledged, and versatile theological work of Joseph Ratzinger – that at the beginning of the 1970s had started to adopt the characteristics of conservative and past-oriented theological thought – was officially confirmed by the Church. As a skilled theologian with refined professorial style and rigorous scientific approach to every relevant topic, Ratzinger was finally elected the head of the Catholic Church, which had been preceded by an impressive climb in the ecclesiastical hierarchy. The pope-professor could have held from then on theological lectures at the Chair of St. Peter daily. His scientific rigour merged with the authority of the papal magisterium. He had become the symbol and synonym of the theologically strengthened Catholic orthodoxy. The Chair of St. Peter was occupied by a versatile and thoughtful theologian and this development could not but strengthen the correctness of his theological position and insights.

Two German contemporaries of Ratzinger, Karl Cardinal Lehmann (1936-2018) and Walter Cardinal Kasper (1933-), had also been bright stars on the German theological sky, but they had quite different theological views than those of Ratzinger. Their theology was, however, not canonised as Ratzinger's was by being elected to the Petrine See. Luckily, *Ecclesia semper reformanda*, which means, in this context, that his successor Pope Francis could consult theological views of the other two Germans in dealing with the piled up ecclesiastical crises. This fact confirms that in the Catholic Church even the fate of theology as an ecclesiastical science is tied to the fate of the ecclesiastical government. What remains, one might ask, of the lawful autonomy of theology and the freedom of theological research in circumstances in which theological work is evaluated by members of the Church magisterium with clearly expressed theological interests and strivings, such as was Joseph Ratzinger? Unfortunately, he will also be remembered as a person who had taken away the reputation of many theologians and caused them psychological harm. A different theological opinion is, however, not an invention of the modern times, but of the New Testament.

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On 19 April 2005, the Cardinals elected Joseph Ratzinger as the successor of Peter, while counting on advantages of clarity of thought of his theological

mind amidst the secularised world that is progressively moving further away from the institutional forms of ecclesiastical life. Through this election, the Cardinals also revealed the state of their own souls in relation to the inevitable changes that the Catholic Church has to initiate within herself and that it already had outlined for herself at the Second Vatican Council. In our opinion, this has to do with a deeper problem that might be expressed theologically in the words of the First Epistle of John: »In love there is no room for fear, but perfect love drives out fear, because fear implies punishment and no one who is afraid has come to perfection in love. Let us love, then, because he first loved us« (1 John 4:18-19).

The Cardinals reached the conclusion that there was no one better than Cardinal Ratzinger to preserve the boat of Peter in truth and purity of the Creed of the Church. They were also confirmed in their conviction by Ratzinger's sermon at the beginning of the conclaves on 18 April 2005: »How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves – flung from one extreme to another: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (Cf. Eph 4:14) comes true. Today, having a clear faith based on the Creed of the Church is often labelled as fundamentalism. Whereas relativism, that is, letting oneself be 'tossed here and there, carried about by every wind of doctrine', seems the only attitude that can cope with modern times. We are building a dictatorship of relativism that does not recognize anything as definitive and whose ultimate goal consists solely of one's own ego and desires.«<sup>5</sup>

It is questionable whether Ratzinger's diagnosis of the spiritual situation of our times correctly identifies the situation, or if it rather represents a black-and-white view of reality. In other words, when we take a look at the current inner crisis of the Catholic Church, it becomes quite evident that the Church is called first and foremost to confess its own sins, as we regularly do – honestly? – at least in the Eucharistic liturgy, as opposed to pointing out sins of others outside and around the Church. It is, however, difficult to resist the impression that Benedict's decision to abdicate from the papal office was largely based on

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER, Homily at the Mass »Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice« (18.IV.2005), [https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice\\_20050418\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html).

pondering the sins of ecclesiastical structures. Explicitly, he announced that he had done so only and exclusively because of human frailty, stating that »in order to govern the barque of Saint Peter and proclaim the Gospel, both strength of mind and body are necessary«. Nevertheless, human frailty can also be a rhetorical figure for the depth and gravity of the crisis of ecclesiastical structures that demands more strength and decisiveness in finding solutions and that Pope Benedict XVI obviously lacked. He only manifested such strength and decisiveness when it came to disciplining theologians, but not in disciplining problematic members of the hierarchy.

But that was Joseph Ratzinger. He did not use power to discipline members of the hierarchy, because this would run counter to his view of ecclesiology. This view of his held back each justified critique and self-critique of ecclesiastical structures that he might have harboured. He was, of course, quite aware that an open, self-critical discourse would have meant drawing attention to himself from two different directions. Firstly, the attention of people and secular media outside of the Church, who would have ruminated on those contents for days and through that would have raised tensions. Secondly, the attention of conservative parts of the Catholic Church, who saw in him the last defence of the Catholic Church and whose critique they would observe with disbelief and consternation. In other words, he had to be vigilant about his own image within and without the Church.

However, what Cardinal Ratzinger said at the Way of the Cross at the Colosseum in 2005, just before he was elected to the Petrine See, reveals a curious side of Ratzinger. On that occasion, he stated: »What can the third fall of Jesus under the Cross say to us? We have considered the fall of man in general, and the falling of many Christians away from Christ and into a godless secularism. Should we not also think of how much Christ suffers in his own Church? How often is the holy sacrament of his Presence abused, how often must he enter empty and evil hearts! How often do we celebrate only ourselves, without even realizing that he is there! How often is his Word twisted and misused! What little faith is present behind so many theories, so many empty words! How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him! How much pride, how much self-complacency!«<sup>6</sup>

It is, indeed, worthwhile to reflect on how much Lord Jesus suffers in his Church. It is precisely this we had expected to hear from theologically well-

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<sup>6</sup> Cardinal Joseph RATZINGER, *Meditations and Prayers on the Way of the Cross at the Colosseum*, (Good Friday, 2005), [https://www.vatican.va/news\\_services/liturgy/2005/via\\_crucis/en/station\\_09.html](https://www.vatican.va/news_services/liturgy/2005/via_crucis/en/station_09.html).

versed Ratzinger – Pope Benedict XVI, but he failed to utter a single word on this issue. One could hear from him a little on repentance for the total moral fall of the Church in Ireland after the scope of priestly abuse of children and young people in ecclesiastical educational and school institutions had been revealed; but even that repentance was clothed in a well-balanced clerical ecclesiology.<sup>7</sup> The public, let us remind, found out about this only in 2009, while Ratzinger was the Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith since 1982. This Congregation, furthermore, had jurisdiction in all penal proceedings related to paedophile priests since 2001. Hence, while it might be credible to hold that he was not aware of the full scope of the problem, but to hold that he had not known anything or that he just heard some rumours is beyond belief and belongs to the category of fairy tales. Ratzinger's theology sprung out of his ecclesiology, however the latter held back the blade of his critique from those responsible in the Church hierarchy who also embody the Church. *Ubi episcopus, ibi Ecclesia!*

We also expected to hear from him, as an experienced Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, how often and in which ways had the sacrament of Eucharist been abused, but he left us in the dark on that point as well. We wanted to hear from him when and how had it happened that we had been celebrating ourselves in the Church and without Lord Jesus, but he left that issue wide open. We were eager to learn when and how much had the word of our Lord Jesus been twisted and misused in the Church, but he left us, again, to wonder about that. We wanted to hear precisely from him how much and what kind of filth there was among Church officials, but nothing more was said on this. We also wished to hear from him how much pride and how much complacency was there among Church officials and what were the ways in which they manifested themselves, but we did not. Even after he had been elected to the Petrine See, he did not speak on any of these issues and, therefore, it is hard not to think that it was precisely his inability to deal with the deep spiritual and moral crisis within Church structures that finally led him to abdicate. Apart from that, one of the things on which he was, however, very clear since he had taken the chair of the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1982, concerned theologians whom he publicly denounced and disciplined because they had transgressed, according to him, against the Creed of the Church.

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<sup>7</sup> See BENEDICT XVI, Pastoral Letter to the Catholics of Ireland, (19.III.2010), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_let\\_20100319\\_church-ireland.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20100319_church-ireland.html).

The reader should also be reminded of his public prayer at an occasion that had a deep impact: »Lord, your Church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side. In your field we see more weeds than wheat. The soiled garments and face of your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray you time and time again, after all our lofty words and grand gestures. Have mercy on your Church; within her too, Adam continues to fall. When we fall, we drag you down to earth, and Satan laughs, for he hopes that you will not be able to rise from that fall.«<sup>8</sup> To our knowledge, nobody among the high ranks of the Roman Church hierarchy ever dared to utter such an open critique of the ecclesiastical structures. That has been done only by Cardinal Ratzinger. Unfortunately, the strong self-critique of the Church remained only an isolated incident clothed in liturgical garments of the moment and without – as had been expected of him – a systematic theological reflection and especially without a systematic dealing with the crisis after he was elected to the Petrine See. And that was Joseph Ratzinger; a person always ready for criticism of others, but never for self-critique, a person always ready to criticise other people's opinions and theories, but never for a self-critical reflection on his own – ecclesiastical – theological opinions and theories.

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We are pointing all this out because Joseph Ratzinger was not just anybody. He was not just one among a host of theologians, but a theologian who had risen to the rank of archbishop, and then cardinal and prefect of the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in which he had been creating the »theological atmosphere« in the Church for more than two decades. After that, he had become the successor of Peter with the fullness of power at his disposal, which he could have used to deal with and solve the piled up problems he addressed in his prayer at the Colosseum in 2005. It is simply inconceivable to us that Ratzinger could not have or would not have accepted that ideas such as the inviolable dignity of women and children, financial transparency, transparency and efficiency of judicial proceedings and generally the notion of human rights and freedoms ripened outside of the Catholic Church and that a part of the solution to its current state of crisis consists in a consequent ecclesiastical acceptance and implementation of these ideas, provided they are first set in the correct theological-biblical perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

Specifically, if our love for the Church makes us blind to the sins of ecclesiastical structures, then it needs to be said that this is not the healthy kind of love that comes from the Holy Spirit. Additionally, we maintain that his personal qualities of humbleness, reticence, and self-deprecation, acknowledged by all who knew him personally, could not have been an excuse for inaction. If they had posed any kind of excuse, then they should have been taken into account in decisions on (non-)acceptance of the most responsible offices in the Church, which would have allowed him to stay in the calm waters of theological work and professorial appointment.

With the impression that he left as an impeccably orthodox theologian and bishop, he also brought about another identification. Apart from the identification between the Catholic Church and the pope, one could now identify the Deposit of the Faith and Church teaching, on the one hand, with Ratzinger's theology, on the other. In this way, a great burden and enormous expectations had been laid on the back of an already weakened and aged seventy-eight-year-old Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, when he was elected to the Petrine See. He had humbly accepted the election out of obedience to and love for the Church and with unquestionable respect for the sublimity of the papal office in the Catholic Church. However, he had quickly realised that he was daily addressed as »Holy Father« also by mouths that are full of lies and wickedness, by persons with »empty and evil hearts«, with whom he was surrounded. It is hard to believe that Ratzinger was not aware of all courtly intrigues of the Roman Curia. It is even harder to believe that he was not aware of the scope of the crisis caused by financial and paedophilia scandals throughout the Catholic Church. For, if he had known, he was obliged as the successor of Peter to take Peter's boat to the harbour and to begin with the necessary repairs, i.e., the reforms.

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However, the Cardinals had obviously believed that, after a long pontificate of John Paul II – what was needed, in terms of many external characteristics, different from all previous pontificates – was both a short period of consolidation and assurance of continuation of the clearly set course of doctrinal purity, and canonical strictness towards those who dared to express publicly their disagreement with some parts of the Church teaching or papal magisterium. They had believed that this task could have been carried out by the only person among them, who was not only the first among the equals, i.e., the Dean of the College of Cardinals, but also a long-standing and loyal »guardian of orthodoxy« and an associate of Pope John Paul II; that is, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger.

Between these two, at least as far as it is publicly known, there had never been a fundamental disagreement.

It is, nevertheless, fairly known that Cardinal Ratzinger was not delighted with the World Day of Prayer for Peace on 27 October 1986 in the city of St. Francis of Assisi, where Pope John Paul II had gathered representatives of all Christian churches and communities, world religions and religious cults so that they may all pray for peace in the world.<sup>9</sup> While many in the Catholic Church had rejoiced over that event and recognised in it an important encouragement for the ecumenical rapprochement of churches and for interreligious dialogue, Cardinal Ratzinger observed from a distance and thought that many were misinterpreting this event in Assisi. A few years later he signed the statement *Dominus Iesus* on the unicity and salvific universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, that many interpreted as an open critique of the events in Assisi.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, this did not hinder a new gathering in Assisi in 2002<sup>11</sup>, nor the third gathering in 2011 that he himself, as Benedict XVI, organised on occasion of the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first prayer meeting in Assisi.<sup>12</sup>

Be that as it may, Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger had emerged with inner spontaneity as a logical and coherent choice for the successor of Pope John Paul II. The Cardinals had, however, overseen one perhaps unimportant fact that later showed itself as decisive for his pontificate; that the complex machinery of papacy, i.e., while the Roman Curia, needs the least humble and withdrawn person and a scholarly theologian, it instead demands the most skilled and slightly arrogant manager and a great diplomat and perhaps even an actor, able in this time of media, to handle all intricacies of that complex machinery under the constant watch of the public, and able find his way through ecclesiastical hallways in which opposing forces and counter-forces clash. Taking stock of the Catholic Church today, one notices precisely this; that the impression of a good

<sup>9</sup> See Pope JOHN PAUL II, Address to the Representatives of the Christian Churches and Ecclesial Communities and World Religions Gathered in Assisi for the World Day of Prayer (27.IX.1986), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_19861027\\_prayer-peace-assisi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/1986/october/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_19861027_prayer-peace-assisi.html).

<sup>10</sup> See CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, Declaration »*Dominus Iesus*« on the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church, (6.VIII.2000), [https://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20000806\\_dominus-iesus\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20000806_dominus-iesus_en.html).

<sup>11</sup> See Pope JOHN PAUL II Address to the Representatives of the World Religions in Assisi, (24.I.2002), [https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf\\_jp-ii\\_spe\\_20020124\\_discorso-assisi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/speeches/2002/january/documents/hf_jp-ii_spe_20020124_discorso-assisi.html).

<sup>12</sup> See Pope BENEDECT XVI, Address at the Meeting for Peace in Assisi, (27.X.2011), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/october/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_spe\\_20111027\\_assisi.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20111027_assisi.html).

arch/bishop is not left behind by his theological scholarship and noticeable holiness, but by his media savviness, managerial resourcefulness, and the pose he is expected to take in relation to the secular centres of power. In view of that, it is even more curious that Pope Benedict XVI, who had lived and worked in that milieu since 1982, sent the message in the act of his abdication – like Celestine V – that there is something incurable in that ecclesiastical milieu. By this he had in mind many things that the public did not know about, as the Vatileaks scandal showed at the beginning of 2012.<sup>13</sup>

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Looking at events biblically, all this had to have happened so that through his abdication Benedict XVI might allow the election of a new – different – pope who will be able, unencumbered by curial interest, to deal with many scandals and inner challenges that have plagued the Catholic Church and the Roman Curia for many years now. The Cardinals had decided that this should be Argentinian Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio, the Archbishop of Buenos Aires, who took, for the first time in history, the name of Francis and, thus, sent a clear and powerful message about his fundamental inspiration and directedness. Namely, at the beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, St. Francis of Assisi heard the voice of Christ: »Go, rebuild my church which is falling down.«

The phenomenon of the scandal of the so-called priest paedophilia had been, in our opinion, one of the heaviest and most malignant weights on the pontificate of Benedict XVI, passed on to him like a lighted torch from his predecessor.<sup>14</sup> All previous and later detailed investigations of that phenomenon among the local Churches around the world have shown that the problem does not concern only a particular arch/bishop or a particular pope; instead, it has to do with the closed and conspiratorial clerical culture that embodies one particular model of the Church that not only diverges from the Gospel, but also from contemporary anthropological and moral sensibilities. The scandal of sexual abuse of children, youth, and vulnerable persons by the Catholic clergy for decades has brought to light the structures of the Catholic Church imprisoned by the mentality and spirituality that are asynchronous in a two-fold manner.

<sup>13</sup> See Gianluigi NUZZI, *Sua Santità. Le carte segrete di Benedetto XVI*, Roma, 2012. See also Gianluigi NUZZI, *Ratzinger was afraid: The secret documents, the money and the scandals that overwhelmed the Pope*, E-book Adagio, 2013.

<sup>14</sup> One could read more on this from an unusual report of the Secretariat of the State of the Holy See. See SECRETARIAT OF STATE OF THE HOLY SEE (Ed.), *Report on the Holy See's institutional knowledge and decision-making related to former Cardinal Theodore Edgar McCarrick (1930 to 2017)*, Vatican City State, 2020.

They are asynchronous with the fundamental demands and messages of the Gospel, and they are asynchronous with the moral demands of the inviolable human dignity and inalienable human rights and freedoms, especially of the weak and vulnerable persons.

With great sorrow, we have to state that Pope Benedict XVI had also contributed greatly to this culture, despite the fact that many do not want to admit this and appeal to his immense love for the Church. One cannot deny that as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to which Pope John Paul II entrusted the complete canonical jurisdiction over the cases of priest paedophilia, Joseph Ratzinger tried to establish good penal procedures and that the Congregation came up with numerous canonical measures and reached verdicts. However, time has shown that all of this took place under the veil of untouchable clerical culture of cover up.

This is all the more curious, since at the time while he headed of the Congregation, Cardinal Ratzinger was systematically developing his theological thought on culture and brought forward many personal insights within that research.<sup>15</sup> In this way, he took the mantle of a critic of the modern culture, leaving an impression that even the less developed Christian culture is better than the well-developed modern culture that is progressively sliding into relativism, secularism, and technocracy. It seems that his complete immersion into the ecclesial structures prevented him from realising that in the atmosphere of the modern culture big parts of the traditional Catholic culture progressively reveal themselves as imprisoned by clericalism, triumphalism, and self-complacency, i.e., the external causes of the sexual abuse in the Catholic Church. As opposed to the scholarly theologian, Benedict XVI, who had not critically reflected on those causes, his successor, Pope Francis, is ruthless towards them and has been attempting to root them out, although not without encountering open resistance.

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After the news about the death of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI reached the Catholic world, what followed was an avalanche of media reviews of his life and work from well-known and less well-known authors. These reviews created an impression that loyalty and love for the Church, or even for our Lord Jesus, will from now on be measured by one's relation towards the life and

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<sup>15</sup> See Joseph RATZINGER, *Glaube – Wahrheit – Toleranz: Das Christentum und die Weltreligionen*, Freiburg no. 2003. See also Joseph Cardinal RATZINGER, *Truth And Tolerance: Christian Belief And World Religions*, San Francisco, 2009; Joseph RATZINGER, *L'Europa di Benedetto nella crisi delle culture*, Siena, 2005.

work of the deceased Pope. Of course, there were also a lot of critical reviews, both from those who did not agree with his theology, and from those who suffered in some degree because of him.

Among all those headlines and statements, the most explosive one was launched by his personal secretary, who has assumed this role in 2003 and in 2012 became a curial Archbishop, Georg Gänswein. On the day of the funeral of Pope Benedict XVI on January 5, 2023, the Italian publisher of Gänswein's book, titled *Nient'altro che la verità. La mia vita al fianco di Benedetto XVI*<sup>16</sup>, was handing out first copies to journalists who were there, while the publication was announced for 12 January. What was announced has also happened.<sup>17</sup> Of course, the speculations about true motives and intentions behind the publication of the book on the long-standing close cooperation with Cardinal Ratzinger and Pope Benedict XVI of the German curial Archbishop on the day of his funeral soon followed. Whether one wants to admit it or not, the choice of the moment of publication is significant. One cannot but wonder, was it not more appropriate to wait a little, in order to allow personal memories and impressions to settle and a clearer image on that long-standing close relationship to emerge?

Far be it from us to belittle or relativise the greatness and depth of the long-standing personal relationship between the two Germans in Vatican, however the issue of the office of Archbishop Gänswein and the personal responsibility that belongs to it should not be neglected. Among other things, Gänswein's book *Nient'altro che la verità* describes in detail how he managed to serve faithfully to, figuratively speaking, two masters, i.e., popes.<sup>18</sup> It would serve little purpose to discuss the differences in personality, character, style, gestures, theology, tradition, and in the understanding of the Second Vatican Council, the crises in the Church, women, priesthood, curial apparatus, and the contemporary world between the two popes. It is enough to state that the current pontificate has so far shown Pope Francis to be a very different pope from his immediate predecessor. Unfortunately, many in the Church did not know how to deal with these very legitimate differences. One ought to evaluate appropriately the unique and unheard-of historical situation in which Pope Francis had to carry on through almost ten years of his pontificate next to his living and present predecessor, Benedict XVI, who was, at least symbolically, portrayed as an uncompromising guardian of faith and tradition. There were also situations in which some

<sup>16</sup> Our translation: *Nothing but the Truth. My Life Beside Benedict XVI*.

<sup>17</sup> See Georg GÄNSWEIN, *Nient'altro che la verità. La mia vita al fianco di Benedetto XVI*, Milano, 2023.

<sup>18</sup> See *Ibid.*, 231-269.

expected him to intervene publicly in order to »direct« the course of ecclesiastical events.<sup>19</sup> In the atmosphere of the escalation of the crisis of paedophilia in relation to laicized American Cardinal McCarrick, Benedict XVI had published, according to him with the permission of the Holy See, a text in German on the causes of the scandal of priest paedophilia in which he, yet again in his style, identified the influence of the evil world as its main cause.<sup>20</sup>

Journalists highlighted two things in Gänswein's book that have been discussed for days incessantly. One of these concerns Gänswein's dismissal from the position of the Prefect of the Papal Household in 2020, apparently somehow linked with the publication of the book on Catholic clergy of the African curial Cardinal from Guinea, Robert Sarah. In that book, the Cardinal named Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI as the co-author.<sup>21</sup> It is of lesser importance if Pope Francis was afterwards angry at Archbishop Gänswein for abusing the name of Pope Emeritus in such a way. What is more important is that the book is far from the spirit of »Go, rebuild my church which is falling down«, but instead offers a conservative apology of the *status quo*. Commentators have drawn attention to the shock and disbelief with which Gänswein received the news from Pope Francis about his dismissal from the position of the Prefect of the Papal Household and speculated that the dismissal was a punishment for omissions with regard to the unauthorised usage of the name of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI. However, Pope Francis explained to him personally that this was not a punishment, but simply a part of the regular personnel rotation.<sup>22</sup> Sarah's book sent a clear message on ecclesiology and the concept of Catholic clergy to Pope Francis, at the same time when the public speculated that in the upcoming post-synodal exhortation *Querida Amazonia* he might allow the ordination of married *virī probati* in difficult-to-reach areas of Amazonia.<sup>23</sup>

The second issue that the journalists highlighted concerns the reaction of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI when in July 2021 Gänswein told him the news

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<sup>19</sup> We should remind ourselves of the events pertaining to the two Synods of Bishops on the Family in 2014 and 2015.

<sup>20</sup> See BENEDIKT XVI, *Die Kirche und der Skandal des sexuellen Mißbrauchs*, In: *Klerusblatt*, 99 (2019) 4, 75-81.

<sup>21</sup> See BENEDIKT XVI – Robert Cardinal SARAH, *From the Depths of Our Hearts: Priesthood, Celibacy and the Crisis of the Catholic Church*, San Francisco, 2020.

<sup>22</sup> See Georg GÄNSWEIN, *Nient'altro che la verità*, 268.

<sup>23</sup> The fact remains that the majority of synodal fathers had advised Pope Francis to make that decision, but he did not follow that advice in the official document. See Pope FRANCIS, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Querida Amazonia*, (2.II.2020), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20200202\\_querida-amazonia.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20200202_querida-amazonia.html).

that Pope Francis promulgated the apostolic letter in the form of a *motu proprio*, titled *Traditionis custodes*, on the usage of the Roman liturgy from the time before the reform in 1970. In the document Pope Francis pronounces the reformed post-conciliar liturgy as the only regular form of *lex orandi* of the Roman rite, and the pre-conciliar as an extraordinary form, permitted only in rare occasions and subject to the approval of a local bishop.<sup>24</sup> In this matter, Francis's decision was the opposite of what Pope Benedict XVI had decided on 7 July 2007.<sup>25</sup> The decision reportedly saddened Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI who acknowledged Francis's right to decide on the matter, but still expressed his disagreement with what he considered was a wrong decision.<sup>26</sup>

It seems that this unusual gesture of Archbishop Gänswein did not sit well with Pope Francis, since many realised to whom was his message directed in the words that he spoke in *Angelus* on Sunday, 8 January: »Brothers and sisters, we are afraid to think of such a merciful justice. Let us move forward: God is mercy. His justice is merciful. Let us allow him to take us by the hand. We too, disciples of Jesus, are required to exercise justice in this way, in relationships with others, in the Church, in society: not with the harshness of those who judge and condemn, *dividing* people into good and bad, but with the mercy of those who welcome by *sharing* the wounds and frailties of their sisters and brothers, so as to lift them up again. I would like to put it like this: *not dividing, but sharing*. Not dividing, but sharing. Let us do as Jesus did: let us share, let us carry each other's burdens instead of gossiping and destroying, let us look at each other with compassion, let us help each other. Let us ask ourselves: am I a person who divides or shares? Think a little: am I a disciple of Jesus' love or a disciple of gossip that divides. Gossip is a lethal weapon: it kills, it kills love, it kills society, it kills fraternity. Let us ask ourselves: am I a person who divides or a person who shares? And now let us pray to Our Lady, who gave life to Jesus, immersing him in our frailty so that we might receive life again.«<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> See Pope FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter Issued »Motu Proprio« *Traditionis custodes* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970, (16.VII.2021), [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/20210716-motu-proprio-traditionis-custodes.html).

<sup>25</sup> See BENEDICT XVI, Apostolic Letter Given »Motu Proprio« *Summorum Pontificum* on the Use of the Roman Liturgy Prior to the Reform of 1970, (7.VII.2007), [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu\\_proprio/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_motu-proprio\\_20070707\\_summorum-pontificum.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/motu_proprio/documents/hf_ben-xvi_motu-proprio_20070707_summorum-pontificum.html).

<sup>26</sup> See Georg GÄNSWEIN, *Nient'altro che la verità*, 288.

<sup>27</sup> Pope FRANCIS, *Angelus* on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, (8.I.2023), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/angelus/2023/documents/20230108-angelus.html>.

In the centre of this message of Francis, as well as in the remaining text of this address, is the key term of his pontificate: mercy. This is also followed by a theological explanation that God's justice is realised through mercy. Hence, the whole life and mission of the Church need to reflect this logic of God's justice in mercy that excludes the strictness of condemnations and punishment, as these lead to divisions among people. One needs to, therefore, avoid divisions, gossiping, and destruction of interpersonal relations. Instead, we ought to gather, share, and carry burdens of each other.

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What comes to mind at the end of this contribution is the fact that on Sunday of the Divine Mercy, on 27 April 2014, Pope Francis canonised together Pope John XXIII and Pope John Paul II. We hope that one day, known only to the Divine Providence, Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis will also be canonised together, thus confirming again that the Catholic Church cannot be equated with only one human person and his heritage. Independently of all visible and invisible differences between Francis and Benedict – since, after all, each of them is a unique person – they both incorporated themselves into a long and, naturally, turbulent history of papacy, which, despite all crises, does not cease to be a living sign of unity and communion of the Universal Church. Nevertheless, if one were to take another look at this issue under the magnifying glass of the centuries-old Catholic tradition, then one would have to admit that it was Pope John Paul II who introduced a precedent by canonising Mother Theresa without waiting for the prescribed 50 years after death. Pope Francis then followed suit in the case of canonisation of John Paul II in 2014 and Pope Paul VI in 2018. Hence, if Pope John Paul II had not interrupted centuries-long Catholic tradition, perhaps Pope Francis might not have been encouraged to do the same in the case of canonisation of the two popes. Be that as it may, we fully agree with the opinion of American theologian of Italian heritage, Massimo Faggioli, who argues that it would be wiser to cease with the speedy and irregular canonisations of popes.<sup>28</sup> The reason for this is simple; there is nothing worse than a subsequent suspicion and questioning of whether such ecclesiastical judgements on someone's holiness were justified. In recent times, more and more voices have been raising such suspicions with regard to responsibility of certain individuals for the scandal of the so-called priest paedophilia.

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<sup>28</sup> See Massimo FAGGIOLI, Benedict XVI »santo subito«? The need for a moratorium on canonizing popes, In: *La Croix International*, (12.I.2023), <https://international.la-croix.com/news/signs-of-the-times/benedict-xvi-santo-subito/17163>.

In conclusion, as we express deep gratitude for the life and service of deceased Pope Benedict XVI and recommend him in prayers, we are reminded of a statement of the Second Vatican Council that offers light and inspiration for a deeper understanding of the theological heritage of Pope Benedict XVI: »Since the Church has a visible and social structure as a sign of her unity in Christ, she can and ought to be enriched by the development of human social life, not that there is any lack in the constitution given her by Christ, but that she can understand it more penetratingly, express it better, and adjust it more successfully to our times. Moreover, she gratefully understands that in her community life no less than in her individual sons, she receives a variety of helps from men of every rank and condition, for whoever promotes the human community at the family level, culturally, in its economic, social and political dimensions, both nationally and internationally, such a one, according to God's design, is contributing greatly to the Church as well, to the extent that she depends on things outside herself. Indeed, the Church admits that she has greatly profited and still profits from the antagonism of those who oppose or who persecute her.«<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et spes*, (7.XII.1965), 44, [https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html).