

Pope Benedict XVI's Legacy: Faith and Future

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Six essential and enduring themes of the pontificate of the Pope Emeritus.

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Pope Benedict XVI waves as he leaves his final general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican Feb. 27. (CNS photo/Paul Haring)

The new springtime for the Church hoped for by Blessed John Paul II has found its great advocate and defender in Benedict XVI. He has been an indefatigable defender of Tradition and renewal in the light of both the Second Vatican Council and the crisis that has been its aftermath. Perhaps one may call him a transitional pope. However, work that he has done will prove pivotal to future of the Church willed by Christ. Joseph Ratzinger was the guardian of the doctrine of the faith under Blessed John Paul II, and his resignation has given us the extraordinary conclave that elected Pope Francis.

But what he did in this transition was to make clear once again to the naysayers that, even in crisis, the Church is the only viable future, just as it was at the beginning when it was small and persecuted.

Prophetically, Joseph Ratzinger pronounced the keynote of his coming pontificate at the Mass *Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice* just before the conclave that elected him began. He contrasted the relativism of our age, the “being carried about by every wind of doctrine,” with the standard by which the Church judges a truly humane society, namely, the person of Jesus Christ. Against what he famously called the “dictatorship of relativism” he pitted a faith fully embraced as a deep encounter with Christ:

An “adult” faith is not a faith that follows the trends of fashion and the latest novelty; a mature adult faith is deeply rooted in friendship with Christ. It is this friendship that opens us up to all that is good and gives us a criterion by which to distinguish the true from the false, and deceit from truth.

Friendship with Christ

For Benedict, to encounter the truth is to encounter a Person. In his Christmas greetings to the Roman Curia in 2012 he said we do not so much possess the truth, as we are possessed by it. “Christ, who is the truth, has taken us by the hand, and we know that his hand is holding us securely on the path of our quest for knowledge.”

Thus, Pope Benedict has proposed as a solution to the relativism of our age the life of faith as friendship with Christ, and the reform of the Church in the modern age, not merely as a structural adjustment, but as an extension of the life of Christ in the world. In 1997 Joseph Ratzinger wrote that the mystery of Christ in the Church cannot be reduced to a thing, a program of action, or what he called a “Jesus Program.” The Church can only be reduced to Christ. This perhaps explains why this pope chose to write a trilogy on the person of Jesus of Nazareth, because, as he says in the introduction to the first volume, the person of Christ becomes “self-contradictory” and “unintelligible” unless we appreciate that He alone can reveal God to us. He is not just the friend of God, but His Son, and He *who is nearest to the Father’s heart who has made him known* (Jn 1:18).

This pope, named after one the great patrons of Europe, St. Benedict, the father of western monasticism, has been deeply concerned about the decline of Christianity in the West and so

committed to the New Evangelization. In a like manner, he has urged a Church in crisis to live with the convictions of the early Christians, who did not spread the faith through power or programs, but by means of the force of their own convictions lived out through a deep communion with the Lord.

God is Love

In his first encyclical letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, “On Christian Love” (December, 25, 2005), Pope Benedict began his exposition on the three theological virtues, and there distinguishes the love of God from its counterfeits in relativistic society. Modern secular society has exalted erotic love, or desire, and has accused the Church of destroying it. But Pope Benedict directs our attention toward Jesus Christ and His friendship and proclaims that it is the Church, and only the Church, that saves desire from being closed off from the highest values of the soul. Desire is purified, exalted and fulfilled when man, like Christ, becomes a gift to another in an act of oblation. This kind of love is not simply an instinct or intuition, much less is it merely spontaneous passion. It is not a love that revolves around the ego. This kind of love is shaped by faith in Jesus Christ and is the result of communion with Him.

Indeed, Pope Benedict’s pontificate followed upon that of the great pope of love, Blessed John Paul II, who through his pastoral ministry to the nations, his teaching on human dignity, and his *Catechesis on Human Love* showed forth the compelling truth and beauty of Christian charity. Three days before Pope Benedict promulgated *Deus Caritas Est*, he held up to the members of the Roman Curia the words and example of John Paul II, who has left us an interpretation of suffering that is not a theological or philosophical theory but a fruit that matured on his personal path of suffering which he walked, sustained by faith in the Crucified Lord.

According to Pope Benedict, in the words and deeds of Blessed John Paul II, especially in his suffering, we have been given an example of the power of Divine Mercy, of suffering joined to redemptive love. When Pope Benedict beatified his predecessor he said of the new blessed that as his strength failed his message became more eloquent: “In this way he lived out in an extraordinary way the vocation of every priest and bishop to become completely one with Jesus, whom he daily receives and offers in the Church.”

Adoring the God of Love

Pope Benedict's continued "reform of the reform" in respect to the liturgy should also be seen in the light of his commitment to put communion with Christ at the center of all reform and renewal. By the lifting of the excommunication of the bishops of the Society of St. Pius X and the motu proprio *Summorum Pontificum*, Pope Benedict gave an example of charity toward the marginalized and also made it clear once and for all that the sacred liturgy must have God at its center. Some would count the dialogue of the Society of St. Pius X with the Holy See a failure, but what Pope Benedict has done is to place the proper emphasis on reverence, adoration, and charity. That is a success.

All of Pope Benedict's liturgical dispositions had as their purpose the salvaging of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II from the grip of those who would try to manufacture the liturgy and deform it into a kind of celebration of ourselves. Again, desire must be subordinated to sacrificial love, nowhere found or experienced in a greater way than in the redemptive mystery enshrined in the sacred liturgy. The liturgy above all is where egoism should recede and place of Christ increase. Joseph Ratzinger had indicated 10 years after the Lefebvrist schism that those on either extreme of the liturgical spectrum fail to understand what is truly essential to the sacred liturgy, namely, that through it we enter into a communion of love with Christ, by a deep contemplative participation in the mysteries we celebrate. The different but complementary liturgical dispositions of Pope Francis indicate such an interpretation is correct: whether the liturgy is carried out in as magnificent a way as possible or otherwise, God must be its center and adoration its primary purpose.

Saved by hope

In his second encyclical letter, *Spe Salvi*, "On Christian Hope" (November 30, 2007), Pope Benedict urged the modern world and modern Christianity to confront the present state of affairs in the light of what constitutes true progress. Here again, Pope Benedict directs our attention back to friendship with Christ. For Benedict, the world is not governed by "the elemental spirits of the universe, the laws of matter, and evolution," but by "reason, will, love—a Person." We are not "slaves the universe" but are free persons who are known and loved by God. "Life is not a simple product of laws and the

randomness of matter, but within everything and at the same time above everything, there is a personal will, there is a Spirit who in Jesus has revealed himself as Love.” Pope Benedict says that hope is a consequence of faith. Christians know they have a future and this, the Holy Father says, is essential to living the present well. In this way the knowledge of Christ is not only “informative,” but “performative,” that is, “life-changing.” This was part of Joseph Ratzinger’s perspective on the “new springtime” of the Church. In an interview given less than a year before he became pope, he said that the new springtime consisted in the power of the faithful’s convictions to proclaim that there is indeed a future and that it lies with the Church.

In the light of what Pope Benedict had to deal with in terms of the crises in the Church—such as the child abuse problems with the clergy, corruption within the Vatican, the continued assault on the dignity of human life, the sanctity of marriage and the family—this message of hope has a particular eloquence. In 2010, calls from the atheist Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens to arrest Pope Benedict when he entered England on pilgrimage for alleged “crimes against humanity” fueled media outrage. But once in England Pope Benedict brought hope. In his homily for the beatification of the great John Henry Newman he quoted the new blessed:

I have my mission. I am a link in a chain, a bond of connection between persons. He has not created me for naught. I shall do good, I shall do his work; I shall be an angel of peace, a preacher of truth in my own place...if I do but keep his commandments and serve him in my calling.

In the light of this teaching one can understand the overwhelmingly positive reception of Pope Benedict in England, and its subsequent fruitfulness with the establishment of the Ordinariate of Our Lady of Walsingham, which received converts from Anglicanism.

This reminds us of what the Holy Father teaches in *Spe Salvi*, that salvation has a social dimension. Those who are the friends of Christ have a special role to usher in the future and to deliver to the world the message of hope. Throughout history those who were committed to reform, not only were persecuted, but they were also full of the joy that is rooted in message of salvation and the promise of a blessed future. This message, Pope Benedict says, is particularly

important in the modern age, which suffers under the illusion that it can control the future through science and technology. We must not put our “faith in progress,” but view the progress toward a future full of hope through the lens of faith. Hope is transformative. Thus we cannot forget also Pope Benedict’s contribution to the social doctrine of the Church with his other encyclical letter, *Caritas in Veritate*, “On Integral Human Development in Charity and Truth,” where he details in the way in which hope provides the “service of integral human development” with the necessary impetus to transform society in law and justice.

This theme of hope, as experienced in the present and oriented toward the future, is exemplified also by Pope Benedict’s Wednesday audience catechesis on Apostolic Tradition, as it was deposited with the Apostles and handed on by the Great Christian thinkers of the ages. We must hold onto what we have received without repudiating the past, but still be oriented toward the future. In one of these audiences about the great Franciscan, St. Bonaventure (March 10, 2010), Pope Benedict pointed out that, in respect to the future, the temptation to the extremes—namely, that the Church is in a state of inexorable “decline,” or that it will escape the trials of the present in a kind of “utopian spiritualism”—has always been present. So in hope, Pope Benedict cuts a path between the extremes. That middle path can be characterized as “innovation in continuity.”

The hermeneutic of continuity

In a sense, Pope Benedict is a transitional pope who has straddled the two halves of the postconciliar century and has sorted out for us in very clear terms the differences between the “Council of the Media,” as he called it one of his last addresses (March 14, 2013), and the “Council of the Fathers,” or between the “Virtual Council” and the “Real Council.” It is along these lines that he has pointed out that the future lies—not along the lines of decline or utopia, but of Christian hope.

Pope Benedict, the great teacher, who is not disposed to programmatic adjustments to the Church, again, has cut a middle path. Amid all the furor that erupted concerning the address he gave to the representatives of science at the University of Regensburg (September 12, 2006), in which he quoted a derogatory remark about Islam, the real point was lost. Both fundamentalism and rationalism

suffer from the same defect: they fail to see that faith and reason work in harmony and keep each other from becoming inhuman. Ideology is never the answer.

In respect to the Second Vatican Council, both progressives and traditionalists have to realize that only the Church in its communion with Jesus Christ and under the visible headship of Peter can navigate the waters of the future without rupturing with the past. Pope Benedict has famously called this a “hermeneutic of continuity” (December 22, 2005).

The Year of Faith

It may be hugely providential, in the end, that Pope Benedict did not complete his trio of encyclicals on the theological virtues. He intended to publish the encyclical on Faith during this Year of Faith, which commemorates the dual anniversaries of the opening of the Second Vatican Council and the promulgation of *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Instead, Pope Benedict has given us the gift of his prayer as he withdraws from ministry, and the gift of a new Successor of St. Peter, Pope Francis. Some, instead, have seen this act as an abandonment of the Church and a departure from Tradition. But true to form, Pope Benedict shows himself committed to renewal in continuity, and his hope is not in calculations and well-designed programs, but in the communion that the Church grants to Christians with Christ Himself.

Both Popes Benedict and Francis have commented on the fact that this papal transition was the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, and while these two men are very different in style and temperament, they have been both committed to renewal and reform according to the mind of the Church in fidelity to apostolic Tradition. Both of them have said that the Year of Faith cannot remain only an anniversary, and in particular, Pope Francis, remembering the contribution of Pope Benedict, has warned us against attempting to “tame the Holy Spirit” (April 16, 2013).

Both popes have also been committed to bringing forth the effects of the Marian principle of the Church. Pope Benedict has stated that the Marian principle of the Church is “even more fundamental” than the Petrine, and said that the choice of the Council Fathers to place the treatment of Our Lady at the end of the Constitution on the Church was “a felicitous decision,” because it

emphasized the “connatural relationship” between Our Lady and the Church (March 25, 2006). But this perhaps is the key to what Pope Benedict has envisioned for the renewal of the Church.

Why? Because the new springtime of the Church is neither a return to the past or a utopian future but a spontaneous and free choice to live and die for Christ. As Joseph Ratzinger said years ago, the person of Mary not only as model of the Church but as its personal form and mother guarantees that the Church will not be reduced to a thing, or a program of action, but only to the Person of Christ. According to Joseph Ratzinger, she is the “vanquisher of all heresies,” because in her the Church will never be manipulated or hijacked by ideologues.

Pope Benedict, the great contemplative and thinker, has helped to clarify and promote the principles that will continue to guide us out of the crisis of modernity. He has recaptured the lost past and oriented it toward the future, so that we can live out of the depths of our convictions in faith, hope and love. The Church is the future and Pope Benedict, in his last papal act of humility, has entrusted it—in that faith which is hope—to Christ who is Lord of the future and Master of the new springtime. It is up to us, by the force of our convictions and the freedom of our choices, to follow the lead that we have so providentially been given in Benedict XVI.