

*Fr. Perozich comments —*

*Joseph Ratzinger is more than a great “thinker” or “philosopher”. He is a man with a deep faith in Jesus, filled with grace, and thus his reflections are profound unlike so many churchmen today who merely parrot the political agenda of those who feed them.*

*Politics will not save the church. Only faith with deep roots in Jesus, Scripture, and Tradition.*

*The church is not ours: neither mine, nor the pope’s, nor any bishop’s church. We are called to relationship with Jesus to pass on HIS teachings, not those of George Soros, the UN, any political movement, and so on.*

*Catholics do that in private prayer, morally upright lives, and then together in worship and evangelization: announcing the person of Jesus Christ and His salvation through clear doctrine and charity.*



# **The Crystallized Church & the Technological Society**

**POPE BENEDICT XVI'S 1969 PROPHECY  
REVISITED**

By Brian M. Torro | April 2021

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In 1969, amid the wave of cultural conflagrations that upended longstanding norms in Western societies, Fr. Joseph Ratzinger delivered a message that was broadcast on German radio. Always a perceptive cultural critic, Ratzinger recognized that the answer of the postwar West to the totalitarian movements that defined the first half of the 20th century was the idea of the “technological” society underpinned by scientific progress and its anthropological corollary, eroticism, as manifested in the sexual revolution. Science, it was believed, coupled with personal liberation from oppressive moral norms, would deliver us from the temptations of fascist and communist ideologies. Today, Ratzinger’s address is occasionally noted as a prophecy heralding a “smaller” but more “crystallized” Church as a result of the transformational changes of the 1960s.

The current cultural upheavals afflicting the Western world provide us with an opportunity to revisit Ratzinger’s message. As relevant as it was then, it is more so now. After all, the social transformations of our day are largely an acceleration of processes that began to gain traction five decades ago, the metaphysical roots of which stretch back at least 500 years to the Protestant Reformation. We are simply witnessing their logical conclusion.

The common denominator of these transformations is a technological understanding of the human person, according to which man is devoid of any prior “givenness”:

He is nothing more than matter, spirit, and will, all of which lack any inherent meaning or order. The changes share an instrumentalist concept of reason, according to which what is good and true is whatever allows me to be my most authentic self — whatever that might be — and anything that precludes me from expressing my authenticity is a violation of my freedom. **The idea of Logos, a God who personally calls man to cooperate with grace in order to realize his telos, is excluded outright as an oppressive and arbitrary power play.** Finally, the transformations limit what counts as knowledge to the empirically verifiable, restricting reason's scope to science and technology, effectively rendering religion, ethics, and philosophy matters of mere personal preference with no intrinsic connection to reality. We are left with a society full of isolated and lonely individuals living in a technocratically planned society who cannot find love or friendship due to the lack of transcendent bonds. Our unconscious metaphysical presuppositions dispose us to use others, not to love others, and to disintegration, not unity. The only solidarity on offer is a solidarity of radical individualism, in which we stand together in affirming our right to live as we please.

Let us examine four critical excerpts from Ratzinger's radio broadcast and, drawing on the thought of the late Italian philosopher Augusto Del Noce — whose own critique of the postwar technological society closely

parallels Ratzinger's — highlight this society's internal contradictions and utter incompatibility with Christianity.

### **The Need for Roots**

**The future of the Church can and will issue from those whose roots are deep and who live from the pure fullness of their faith.** It will not issue from those who accommodate themselves merely to the passing moment or from those who merely criticize others and assume that they themselves are infallible measuring rods; nor will it issue from those who take the easier road, who sidestep the passion of faith, declaring false and obsolete, tyrannous and legalistic, all that makes demands upon men, that hurts them and compels them to sacrifice themselves. To put this more positively: The future of the Church, once again as always, will be reshaped by saints, by men, that is, whose minds probe deeper than the slogans of the day, who see more than others see, because their lives embrace a wider reality. — Joseph Ratzinger, 1969

**The technological society is a society without roots.** It is best defined in terms of its rejection of what Del Noce calls the “religious dimension,” or the eternal and unchangeable order of truths that reason presupposes — in short, our capacity for God and the transcendent. The technological society brackets the transcendent and limits what we can really “know” to the empirically verifiable. According to Del Noce, French philosopher and political activist Simone Weil was the interpreter par excellence of today's world because she saw through the inherent

contradiction underpinning Marxist revolutionary thought. Marxism's underlying technological worldview, as expressed through its dogmatic rejection of the transcendent, coupled with a revolutionary impulse for justice, must necessarily crumble. How can we speak coherently of justice and progress in a world governed by materialism and devoid of transcendent truths? Del Noce considers Weil's turn to Christianity and the classical Greek tradition — after she eschewed the revolutionary spirit and the technological dystopia it leaves behind — as emblematic of today's task: recovering tradition, the Logos, and the duties to which they bind us. In *The Need for Roots*, published posthumously in 1949, Weil writes:

**The notion of obligations comes before that of rights, which is subordinate and relative to the former.... Obligations alone remain independent of conditions.** They belong to a realm situated above all conditions, because it is situated above this world. The men of 1789 [the French Revolutionaries] did not recognize the existence of such a realm. That is why they started off with the idea of rights. But at the same time, they wanted to postulate absolute principles. This contradiction caused them to tumble into a confusion of language and ideas which is largely responsible for the present political and social confusion. The realm of what is eternal, universal, unconditioned is other than the one conditioned by facts, and different ideas hold sway there, ones which are related to the most secret recesses of the human soul.... This obligation is an eternal one. It is coextensive with the eternal destiny of human beings.

**Ratzinger echoes Weil's emphasis on the need for a solid metaphysical foundation.** Procedural rights and procedural liberalism are not enough. Ratzinger's thought and corpus of writings center around the primacy of the Logos, restoring the scope of reason from scientism's arbitrary empirical limitations. His September 2006 Regensburg Address is perhaps his most prominent explication of the need to rediscover the "God of the Philosophers." For modern Catholics, there is also the need to rediscover the richness of our tradition. In order to keep the faith alive in our hearts and in our homes, to pass it on to our progeny, we must heed Ratzinger's and Weil's advice by welcoming the richness of the faith in its fullness: liturgically, intellectually, and metaphysically. Unless we do so, we will continue to fall prey to the "slogans of the day."

### **A Church That Has Lost Much**

*From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members. — Joseph Ratzinger, 1969*

Perhaps the most poignant aspect of Pope Benedict's radio address was his foretelling "a Church that has lost much." More than 50 years later, nobody can deny the plummeting rates of Mass attendance, infant baptisms, and Catholic marriages in the Western world — especially in Benedict's own Germany and Europe in general. The Church has indeed become smaller. She has quite understandably lost standing in a society that has grown distrustful due to decades of continuous scandals. Catholic millennials are intensely cognizant of this reality, perhaps unlike our parents' and grandparents' generation, who were accustomed to bishops and cardinals wielding power and commanding respect even from societal elites outside the Church. Our generation, with a few notable exceptions, understands there will be no "Catholic moment" in America anytime soon, in which the Church is restored to some idealized version of her former glory in the public square.

Despite the many reasons for the Church's present crisis — and they are legion — perhaps we should be grateful that **Christianity-by-osmosis is dead. The Catholicism that enjoyed political and social privileges produced too many complacent Catholics who easily fell prey to the secularism that underpinned the cultural revolution that began in the 1960s.** In this regard, Benedict is an especially appropriate model for Catholics who are keenly aware of how much "filth" remains in the Church, to borrow one of his own expressions. **The Church of tomorrow will indeed comprise an increasing**

**number of Catholics who enter only by free decision — both converts and reverts — who have tasted the bitter emptiness of what our technological society has to offer and who have instead placed their hope in Christ.** This post-critical experience may even spur us to educate our children in the true faith and thereby plant the seeds for the Church's future. COVID-19 may act as a solvent; those who went to Mass simply out of routine may not return, having been away from the sacraments for so long. Those of us who remain must be prepared to undertake those “bigger demands” that a smaller society requires.

### **Politics Will Not Save Us**

*The Church will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right. It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrowmindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed. — Joseph Ratzinger, 1969*

**Perhaps the most significant temptation today's Catholics face is the idea that politics will be our salvation. Politics have colonized the faith lives of too many of us, so much so that we increasingly adapt our faith to our politics, and not vice versa.** On issues over which Catholics should clearly be united, we are divided. The temptation to regard

politics as salvific is especially strong today, as daily American life becomes ever more polarized and more politicized. Anecdotes abound of political differences driving wedges between friends and family, sometimes permanently, as a new puritanism threatens to “cancel,” “de-platform,” or “shun” those not in lockstep with the latest pseudo-intellectual fads.

According to Del Noce, **the absolutization of politics is paradoxically consistent with the technological society’s having disintegrated the very conditions for true politics.** The classical notion of politics presupposes a shared conception of the common good, a given order of reality. Absent this dimension, our political arguments increasingly take on a pseudo-religious character detached from reason and the common good, and are, therefore, increasingly unsharable. Politics degenerates into war by other means, fueled by tribalism and the will to power, the nihilism of which is disguised by an all too familiar moralistic, self-righteous lexicon.

Ratzinger’s idea that the Church of the future will “flirt as little with the Left as it will with the Right” may seem bizarre in the context of our current political climate, in which the Left seems to have abandoned any pretense of accommodating faithful Catholics. Nevertheless, Ratzinger recognizes that it would be a mistake for Catholics to cast their lot with the Right, as this side of the political spectrum poses its own problems. Ratzinger’s point is more fundamental: Politics today takes place almost entirely within the domain of the technological society.

Even the arguments we deploy in the public sphere to defend the sanctity of human life or to protect religious freedom must adhere to the terms of debate set by this society; hence the difficulty in advancing these arguments within a liberal context, the currency of which is one of “rights” and in which Weil’s pre-political “obligations” hold no place.

Yet therein lies the crux of the matter. As Ratzinger emphasized, **the Church’s most pressing task is to form the consciences of her members so that they might resist the temptation to subscribe uncritically to the naked tribalism of our current politics, even if that entails suffering and becoming a “Church of the meek.”** Only in this manner will we be able to hand down the faith in its full integrity, free from partisan distortions, to our children.

### **Discovering the Church as Something New**

*When the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret. — Joseph Ratzinger, 1969*

Ratzinger’s prophecy ends with a vision of hope: a Church that has rediscovered and fully embraced her

roots, a Church that has been purified by losing worldly prestige. A Church that has eschewed political power might make for a smaller, meeker Church, but she will be more capable of speaking to and welcoming those who have experienced the emptiness and existential horror of our age. Persecuted and bereft of esteem, we may learn to manifest our love for one another in a way more reminiscent of the early Church of the first centuries.

The dual crises of our day — the COVID-19 pandemic and explosive racial unrest — will undoubtedly exacerbate the loneliness, atomization, and lack of forgiveness on offer, all of which have always underpinned the technological society. The *divertissement* of entertainment, eroticism, and inebriation, which encourages us to avert our eyes to this reality, is increasingly failing as evidenced by the rise in crime, addiction, and deaths of despair. Perhaps this is why renowned French novelist Michel Houellebecq, whose *œuvre* plumbs the depth and emptiness of our “totally planned world” in which everything and everyone has been rendered a commodity, may be the most insightful cultural critic of our time.

What happens to us once this disillusion and radical existential angst are realized? What happens when we see through the emptiness of the revolutionary fervor of our age, which rightly diagnoses something amiss in our society but does not have the metaphysical roots or conceptual vocabulary adequate to address the problem? What choices do we have? Del Noce, commenting on the life of Weil, is again illustrative:

The spiritual situation of the post-war years and of today is characterized by two opposite possibilities: pushing the scientific spirit to its extreme consequences, or returning to Platonism and Christianity. It is important to recognize that they are irreconcilable, tearing off the many masks that have been deployed to cover up their opposition.

**Weil's "process of conversion," Del Noce writes, "illuminates the conditions for a religious rebirth, and demonstrates that the greatest obstacle it faces is the Modernist will to conform to the present world."** Del Noce's hope mirrors Ratzinger's: The Church of tomorrow, which is entrusted to us today, has the opportunity to emerge from the technological society as an oasis purified by loss and suffering, crystallized by the pressures of a hostile scientism. Our current moment of cultural conflagration contains the seeds of a religious rebirth precisely because it is the logical endpoint of our society's metaphysical and anthropological first principles. Perhaps the silver lining of this moment is that it is clarifying the choice between scientism and the absolutization of politics on the one hand, and a return to Christianity and the classical tradition on the other. As Scottish philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre famously noted, the only real choice is between Nietzsche and Aristotle.

**The Church is not ours. It is Christ's Church, first and foremost.** As He tells us, "It was not you who chose Me, but I who chose you" (Jn. 15:16). Our role as Catholics in today's technological milieu is to receive and

not squander our inheritance. It is to cooperate with God's grace in rebuilding the Church in accord with tradition, encompassing both reason and revelation. Our role is to build families — domestic churches — capable of resisting “the will to conform” to the spirit of the times. Only then will the Church be rediscovered as a true field hospital, to cite our current pontiff, where the cure to the spiritual casualties of modernity can be found. Only then will the Church be rediscovered as the true hope and answer for which man has been “searching in secret” throughout history.

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