

BENEDICT XVI : Sheperd, Colleague, and Friend

When I entered the Conclave last year on april 18th, I did not know what to expect from the Conclave in terms of length and outcome. Nobody could anticipate the result since no conclave had been held for almost 27 years. But in the back of my mind, I was thinking : « If it is to be Joseph Ratzinger, it must be quick and clear, otherwise the reaction could be disastrous ». The first reaction after the election, on our side of the Atlantic and here in Quebec, was clear enough to confirm my prognostic ; but after almost a year now, I must confess that my assessment had undervalued Benedict's capacity to adapt to his new ministry and the media's capacity to revise some assumptions in his regard. Everything went better than expected : the Conclave, the reception and the performance of the new Shepherd, Benedict XVI.

I can say at the outset that the main reason for this felicitous outcome is the performance of the man or rather, the charisma of Pope Benedict which embodies in a new way the mission of the successor of Peter. Peter's charisma and mission is to confirm his brothers in the faith and to be the visible sign of unity in the Catholic Church. Such a charisma is a God given grace for a specific service in the Church. It depends upon an election by his peers, but once designated, Peter's successor holds his authority from Christ himself and not from the consensus of his peers. Such charisma is so to speak from above but it has been prepared at length during many years of prayer, meditation,

teaching ministry, Episcopal ministry and ministry as Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith. What strikes me first in Ratzinger's long journey is not his theological achievement which is really impressive, but his faith, his intelligence and his courage to bear witness to the truth. Remember that his motto reads : *Cooperatores veritatis*, Co-operator of the Truth, a task that is not easy today since speaking of truth is almost banished from the modern vocabulary and sensitivity.

I would like to share with you some reflections around these three aspects of his personality, drawing from my personal contacts and experience with Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger now Benedict XVI. Faith, intelligence and courage, are traits of the man who grew up in a typical Bavarian catholic family. He received the faith from his family who boldly resisted the influence of the Nazis. After the Second World War, the tragedy of Germany left him facing ruins everywhere but with the conviction that the rebuilding of his country would have to rest on living faith and authentic Christian values.

In 1967, the year before my ordination, Ratzinger was a young professor at the University of Tübingen with Hans Küng, his colleague, who later took an opposite stance on the relationship between catholic faith and modernity. Ratzinger was invited to teach *An introduction to Christianity*, to the University students of all faculties. Such an endeavour was a great challenge in those days and was crowned with extraordinary success. We can appreciate even

today the freshness and accuracy of his original presentation of the Catholic faith. While Küng became a strong critic of the Church with heavy statements against the leadership of Pope John Paul II, Ratzinger became a main pillar of the Church under the Polish pope and the main opponent of contemporary relativism. What an achievement, not to say a miracle, that the two men could meet and talk for many hours in Castel Gandolfo last summer, opening up a new dialogue and maybe paving the way for serious and sincere reconciliation.

Ratzinger's success with the students was due to his genuine faith but also to his acute intelligence and broad culture. He belongs to the prestigious German intellectual tradition, where names like M \ddot{o} hler, Scheeben, Casel, Guardini and Schmaus mean renewal and continuity with biblical sources and patristic exegesis. Ratzinger is open to modernity but deeply rooted in Saint Augustine and Saint Bonaventure. His theological style reveals a way of thinking close to Newman, de Lubac and Hans Urs von Balthasar. His thinking has a metaphysical underpinning but is characterized by a theological sense of history and development of doctrine. While assessing the legitimate plurality of theological approaches, he remains very much aware of the unity of the faith which allows but also transcends new expressions of the mystery.

When I was teaching eschatology in South America in the early eighties, I remember using his book on this subject and I found a very balanced approach of new insights matched with traditional doctrine coming from patristic and medieval times. He shares with Balthasar the assessment according to which the doctrine of the ultimate state of human destiny need a deeper Christological integration. Cosmological representations of hell, purgatory and heaven need to be revisited and relativized according to modern image of the world and to Vatican II's Christocentric theological perspective. I was inspired for example by the way he understands the eschatological dimension of the Holy Eucharist together with the Pauline concept of *parousia*, understood as manifestation of the Kingdom of God.

I remember hearing him preach in the Cathedral of Munich when he was Archbishop between 1977 and 1981. I was struck by his courage and his capacity to tackle difficult issues in a way that would both inspire and provoke decisions in favour of or against his magisterial teaching. Liberation theology was then on the rise with subtle ambiguities between earthly political projects like socialism and some confused visions of the kingdom of God. Ratzinger would address the issue with clarity of vision, intellectual sharpness and a firm call to unambiguous theological and pastoral commitment. He would never hide behind sophisticated language and political correctness. I remember him speaking from the logic of the faith and thus

denouncing theological rationalism as much as he denounces today dictatorship of relativism.

Ratzinger is one of the co-founders, with Balthasar and de Lubac, of the Catholic Theological Review COMMUNIO, in which I have been involved since 1990 as member of the North American Editorial Board. When the Review COMMUNIO started in 1972, the Second Vatican Council was being interpreted in a distorted way, threatening the continuity of the Catholic Tradition. COMMUNIO was an attempt to offer a deeper understanding of the novelty of Vatican II within the context of the whole tradition. Pope Benedict clarified the point last December in his Address to the Roman Curia, stating that the Council had been sometimes jeopardized by a hermeneutic of discontinuity at the expense of the proper continuity of Catholic Tradition. I think that here in Quebec, we should meditate deeply on this solemn statement and reread our own Conciliar interpretation in the light of this clarification. It is not rare in our midst to hear people and even clergy and religious speak of the Council in a way that falls precisely under this wrongful interpretation. In some areas such as Liturgy, marriage, collegiality, religious life we have identified too much with a so called progressive interpretation which neither does not corresponds to the Spirit nor the letter of Vatican II.

I particularly remember his intervention on the 20th anniversary of COMMUNIO at the Gregorian University in Rome in 1992.

Concerned by what he called the low relevance of our publication, he advocated the need to refrain from theological sophistication and to turn to tackle issues pertinent to the contemporary crisis of faith and culture. He was then concerned by biblical interpretation and the domination of historical critical exegesis. I admired his courage facing the issue in New York City during a famous conference which stirred up harsh controversy. Once again, Ratzinger put the finger on the wound and allowed people to recover freedom from an excessive rationalistic interpretation of Scripture. I had the privilege to work with him at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith precisely on searching an adequate Church interpretation of Scripture. As Prefect, he promoted an important Roman Symposium in 1999 followed by a second one later in 2002, aiming at fostering dialogue between exegetes and theologians on Biblical interpretation. This dialogue is still going on at the top level with the international participation of outstanding authors not only among Catholics but also among other confessions.

My experience of theological dialogue with him took also a more informal dimension during my years at the Lateran University as professor of Dogmatic Theology in the area of Marriage and Sacraments. I was asked by him and some colleagues to coordinate a yearly gathering of about 25 theologians interested in discussing with him issues and insights deemed important for the future of the Church. We knew that on several questions, he would have important

contribution to make, without being able to bring his thoughts to final expression in a written form. As he was called to Rome to rule the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger left behind many manuscripts and projects which would probably remain unfinished and unpublished. We wanted to invite him to share with us in open and informal discussion among friends in order to keep at least some theological insights for our own personal growth and inspiration. I treasure a number of notes and comments from this dialogue touching upon faith and reason, Metaphysics, Mariology, Eucharistic Mystery, etc.

On a different level of involvement, I had another experience of collaboration with him in the foundation of an Association aiming at promoting the spirituality and theology of Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac and Adrienne von Speyr. With some friends working together under his personal patronage, we opened up in Rome in 1990 a house of discernment and training for young men interested in the priesthood and religious life. Very much conscious of the precious Balthasar legacy, Ratzinger supported this initiative and visited the Casa Balthasar almost every year, during the General Assembly of the Associates. We enjoyed very much sharing with him the findings and problems of our students. Our best memories stem from the session of questions raised by the students and answered by him with great care for their education. As in many other occasions, I admired his capacity

for adaptation to his audience, speaking always with clarity and simplicity.

In this regard, I remember quite vividly his conversation with the children on Saint Peter's square last October during the Synod on the Eucharist. It was a huge gathering of 100 thousand youngsters who had celebrated their first communion during the Eucharistic year. For 25 minutes, Pope Benedict welcomed their questions on the Holy Eucharist, answering without any notes. Once more I could appreciate his extraordinary talent for catechesis and dialogue. As I stood close to him with a cardinal who had probably not voted for him at the Conclave, I remember hearing this cardinal utter with amazement and awe an eloquent comment: « the right man at the right place ! ». I dream to realize some day the same experience with the Young people of my own diocese in preparation of the International Eucharistic Congress of 2008 in Quebec city.

Before going further in remembering my experience of Pope Benedict's papal ministry, I would like to recall our contacts in the realm of ecumenical dialogue. As I was appointed Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, a controversy was going on in Rome between Cardinal Walter Kasper and Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger on ecclesiology, and to be precise about the relationship and priority between Universal Church and local Churches. I found myself squeezed, so to speak, between two great theologians for whom I had

high esteem and respect. I remember chairing the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Unity, where Cardinal Ratzinger and Cardinal Kasper discussed the matter again and agreed on their interpretation of the famous *subsistit in* of the One Church in the Catholic Church. Ratzinger praised Kasper for rewording there more positively what the One Catholic Church has in common with other Churches and ecclesial Communities without reaching with them full unity in all the means of salvation.

I remember that event as a moment of authentic dialogue within the Curia itself, leading to a better collaboration between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Pontifical Council for Christian Unity, which had previously had significant tensions concerning the document *Dominus Jesus*, published in the year 2000. After the failure of the Baltimore Conference between Orthodoxy and the Catholic Church in the year 2000 and the creation of four catholic dioceses in Russia in 2002, the relationship between the two Churches entered, as you probably know, a cold winter. No official meeting of the Commission was held, no visit of John Paul II to Russia, no cordial response to Catholic gestures like the sending of Relics or of the Icon of Our Lady of Kazan, held for years in the Pope's chapel with the dream of carrying it himself to Moscow. Benedict reaffirmed his will to follow the ecumenical endeavor of the Catholic Church in the wake of Vatican II and succeeded in a few months in restarting the official dialogue with Orthodoxy. We owe him a great debt of

gratitude for this rewarding of our relationships and I think that future perspectives of significant progress have now become possible.

My experience with Cardinal Ratzinger as a colleague was to recognize him as a person of great wisdom, which would be always manifest in his openness to listen, in his ability to summarize and reformulate the issues at stake and his prudence in drawing a conclusion when he felt that a question was not mature enough to be finalized. I remember some previous drafts of the encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* published in 2003 in the final form. To avoid an excessive juridical approach, he managed to reach a consensus on the doctrinal aspect of the Eucharist in the Encyclical, while reserving for a separate document *Redemptionis Sacramentum*, the disciplinary aspects. This wise decision allowed a better reception of the Encyclical without overlooking the need for correction of liturgical distortions and abuses.

World Youth Day in Cologne was perhaps the apex of Benedict's challenge during his first year of petrine ministry. I knew the expectations of Archbishop of Cologne Cardinal Meisner, with whom I had shared several conversations before the Conclave. He was facing the coming event with some understandable anguish after the death of John Paul II. After Benedict's election, I remember him walking in procession to greet his friend now Pope Ratzinger and coming back to his place in tears before the extraordinary reversal of situation. For

Germany, Ratzinger's election meant not only good news for the youth and the World Youth Day, but put bluntly in a word, it meant the redemption of the country, the end of the sad era of the Second World War and a forward vision for a new horizon of hope and spiritual renewal.

The papal trip was an extraordinary success in spite of some failures in the local organization. As I had anticipated, Benedict passed the test with the youth, speaking to them with clear and uplifting words of faith and love. He was listened to carefully and greeted by them with enthusiasm. I will never forget the panorama of Marienfeld on Saturday night, with a million youth holding high their candle and celebrating their faith in the risen Lord. At the end of the evening, Pope Benedict concluded the delivery of the Eucharistic Blessing in silence and quickly left the stage afterwards. I remember an Italian Cardinal saying: « He should have added something personal to help these youth to spend the night ! ». But many others were saying: « What an appropriate nice ending ! » No other comment to distract the attention from the main purpose of our gathering, namely Jesus Christ whose divine presence we adore in the Blessed Sacrament and in whose footsteps we are called to follow in faith and love. In so doing Pope Benedict announced his own style, more discreet and reserved but very much aware that papacy or petrine ministry is there to bear witness to Jesus Christ, avoiding the temptation of self-glorification or Ecclesiocentrism. Pope John Paul, while blessed with

other talents, was also very clear in bearing the same witness to the Lord.

The Pope's visit to Germany left many people moved by his non formal and straight forward way of relating to people. I remember how deeply touched the Jews were in the Synagogue of Cologne after hearing his speech and shaking hands with him. And how enthusiastic the leader of the Lutherans was after meeting him and sharing thoughts upon future directions of ecumenical dialogue. One of the highlights for me was the celebration of Vespers with a group of more than 5000 seminarians where I was asked to share a brief testimony of my own vocation in the presence of the Holy Father. While greeting him immediately after my five minute intervention, I was struck to see him so moved by some details of my personal story. We had shared part of it before in personal conversations but he was happy to indicate in a couple of words what he did not know. This is more than the courtesy of the friend, it is the sign of his genuine sense of spiritual paternity.

Pope Benedict is not at all a cold intellectual as previously painted in the media, utterly concerned with academic orthodoxy. He never was such a person. He is a humble man of the Church, now clearly exposed to all people, very much blessed with artistic sensitivity and exquisite courtesy, while empowered by extraordinary intelligence and the capacity of intellectual and spiritual discernment. We had an

extraordinary demonstration of his talent and competence at the last Synod when he opened the first session with a beautiful personal meditation. Some days later at the end of the free afternoon session, he improvised a theological speech of 15 minutes which was a masterpiece of wisdom and leadership.

His first Encyclical follows the same inspiration calling us to deepen the essence of our Christian Faith and justifying in a new and fruitful way the charitable activity of the Church. God is Love and we are the Community of Love entrusted with the mission of announcing concretely the Good News to the nations. I thank God everyday for the gift of this pope Benedict XVI, who is certainly the right man at the right place at this hour of the Church and the World. I feel called to walk with him not only for being a friend but first and foremost for being the One chosen by Christ to bear witness to His truth and Life. I think we are blessed by God in the gift of this successor of Peter who could happily take up the challenge of following John Paul II, the Great. May we welcome and embrace what he says for our own edification since we very much need his wisdom to be confirmed in our faith and to be nurtured in our search for Happiness, Unity and Peace.

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