

The Gift of Benedict XVI

As we farewell Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, it's naturally a moment of sadness – yet blended with thanks to God for the life and work of Joseph Ratzinger, who gave so much to the Church. This was first as a priest in Germany, then as a theologian, and a prominent expert at the Second Vatican Council (1962-65); he was Cardinal Archbishop of Munich from 1977, until Pope John Paul called him to Rome to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1982-2005). (This is the department of the Roman Curia charged with safeguarding the orthodoxy of Catholic doctrine – recently renamed the *Dicastery* for the Doctrine of the Faith.) As well as his impact through all the Congregation's documents, Cardinal Ratzinger had special influence as chair of the commission overseeing the writing of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

Commentators in recent days have spoken about so many aspects of his legacy; I'll highlight just a few. His first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est* ('God is love') (2005), gave a powerful positive presentation of the joy of Christian faith, against the negative caricature that Christian life basically means obeying a series of prohibitions. Rather, being a Christian is, at its heart, our response of love to God, who loved us first.

Another focus for Benedict was the battle against relativism. In his last homily to the cardinals before the 2005 conclave that elected him pope he warned of a 'dictatorship of relativism' in society, which sidelines anyone claiming to know any religious or moral truth universally valid for everyone. For relativism, there is no absolute truth; instead, everyone supposedly has his or her own truth. It presents itself as very 'tolerant' – and yet, what increasingly happens is that those who *do* believe and proclaim (as Christians must) that there is absolute religious and moral truth are marginalised or even silenced.

A guiding theme for Pope Benedict was the 'hermeneutic of continuity' – a phrase he used to speak about the correct way of understanding Vatican II. (cf. *Sacramentum Caritatis* 3, fn. 6) 'Hermeneutic' means a way of interpreting something; so he contrasted a hermeneutic of continuity (more fully, a 'hermeneutic of *reform in continuity*') with a 'hermeneutic of rupture'. (*Address to the Roman Curia* 22/12/2005) What he meant was that some people had interpreted Vatican II as a rupture – a sharp break with the Church's past teaching and practice, that supposedly set up a virtually new 'post-Vatican II Church'. Those holding this interpretation might either condemn the rupture (if 'traditionalists') or praise it (if 'progressives').

But in line with St John XXIII, St Paul VI and St John Paul II, Benedict XVI emphasised the impossibility of this interpretation of rupture (which neglects the actual Council documents). We recall the words of John XXIII as he opened the Council: 'The greatest concern of the Ecumenical Council is this: that the sacred deposit of Christian doctrine should be guarded and taught more effectively... The Council... wishes to transmit Catholic doctrine, whole and entire, without alteration or deviation... The deposit of faith itself, or the truths which are contained in our venerable doctrine, are one thing; another thing is the way in which they are expressed, with however the same meaning...' (*Address*, 11/10/1962)

And Paul VI, when promulgating Vatican II's keystone document on the Church, the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, said this: 'This promulgation really changes nothing of the traditional doctrine. What Christ willed, we also will. What was, still is. What the Church has taught down through the centuries, we also teach.' (*Allocution*, 21/11/1964)

Those words of Pope Paul, ‘What Christ willed, we also will’, remind us that even had it wanted to, the Council had in any case no power to change the fundamental constitution of the Church, because that was given by Christ himself. But actually, the ‘hermeneutic of rupture’ didn’t much appeal to Council texts anyway, because no texts existed that truly supported it. So people spoke instead of a supposed ‘Spirit of Vatican II’, that really meant whatever someone wanted it to mean – often enough contradicting actual Council teachings, but pretending to derive authority from the Council. The real texts agreed on by the Bishops and confirmed by the Pope, carefully composed to be accurate and faithful to the Gospel and Catholic Tradition, were replaced in the popular mind by a few one-sided progressivist ‘general themes’, naively understood.

Pope Benedict showed the emptiness of this false ‘Spirit of the Council’, emphasising that there was no ‘pre-conciliar’ or ‘post-conciliar’ Church (understood as two separate entities). A ‘hermeneutic of continuity’ remembers that there is only one Church of all ages, always being led by the Holy Spirit deeper ‘into the complete truth’ (*Jn* 16:13). All the essential teachings and practices of the one Church of Christ are in continuity before and after Vatican II, but as at any Council, within the continuity there is not *rupture* but *reform*: more detailed explanation and understanding, and new approaches on the level of non-essentials so that the Gospel shines through more clearly as we strive to present it to today’s world.

The hermeneutic of rupture, by contrast, would imply that the Holy Spirit was at some period not fully with the Church, whether before Vatican II (according to extreme ‘progressives’) or after it (according to extreme ‘traditionalists’). (Each extreme group tends therefore to be dismissive of Church teachings either before 1962 (progressives) or after 1962 (traditionalists).)

Pope Benedict’s hermeneutic of continuity isn’t merely an ‘option’. He has given it magisterial authority; and really, anyone who believes (as we must) that the Holy Spirit of Truth is *always* with the Church (cf. *Jn* 14:16, 26) necessarily believes in this fundamental continuity.

Far from being negated by Pope Francis’ different emphases, a hermeneutic of continuity shows its value anew precisely when superficial differences arise. In truth, the supposed clashes put forward by critics between Pope Francis’ magisterium and that of his predecessors vanish on close examination; and just last month, Francis himself reaffirmed: ‘Pope Benedict helped us to interpret the conciliar documents in depth by proposing a “hermeneutic of reform and continuity”...[his] theological contributions...offer a solid theological basis for the Church’s journey.’ (*Address*, 1/12/2022) Benedict’s life-work has given the Church a deeper integrated understanding of all Catholic teaching, old and new.

I’ll conclude with some words of Pope Benedict on our Blessed Mother from the end of his Encyclical *Spe Salvi* (2007), that take on new meaning now that he has made his final journey home to God, guided safely by Mary, the ocean star. He wrote (49-50):

‘For over a thousand years, the Church has greeted Mary, the Mother of God, as “Star of the Sea”: *Ave maris stella*. Human life is a journey. Towards what destination? How do we find the way? Life is like a voyage on the sea of history, often dark and stormy, a voyage in which we watch for the stars that indicate the route...Jesus Christ is the true light, the sun that has risen above all the shadows of history. But to reach him we also need lights close by – people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way. Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us?...Holy Mary, Mother of God, our Mother, teach us to believe, to hope, to love with you. Show us the way to his Kingdom! Star of the Sea, shine upon us and guide us on our way!’