

A Rare Pope: With a Sense of Humor

Contributed by Andrea Monda
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On April 16, 2012, Benedict XVI turns 85. And three days later he marks the sixth anniversary of his pontificate. A writer sketches a profile of him. It's a surprising one.

"The profound joy of the heart

is also the true precondition for 'humor';

and so 'humor,'

under a certain aspect,

is an indicator,

a barometer of faith."

(Benedict XVI)

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I have not made a careful check, but I am willing to bet that if one were to analyze word frequency in the texts of Benedict XVI, the word used most often would be "joy."

Let's begin with one of his many affirmations of the importance, for the Christian, of joy, and try to apply it to this pope who just after his election presented himself as a "humble laborer in the vineyard of the Lord." It is a passage taken from the book-interview "Light of the World," and, placed almost at the very beginning, sounds categorical:

"That Christianity gives joy and breadth is also a thread that runs through my whole life. Ultimately someone who is always only in opposition could probably not endure life at all."

First point: joy and reason are connected. And the connection is found in this strange religion that "expands the horizon." As Gilbert K. Chesterton wrote of his conversion, "becoming a Catholic broadens the mind," and further on, "becoming Catholic does not mean leaving off thinking, it means learning how to think."

Second point, a surprising one: we were perhaps accustomed to the idea of a revolutionary pope, of a pope "against," and yet the denial comes immediately, because one cannot live "always only in opposition."

Obviously the contrast is only apparent. Further on in the same passage, in fact, the pope clarifies: "But at the same time the fact was ever-present, albeit in varying doses, that the Gospel stands in opposition to powerful constellations. . . . Enduring hostility and offering resistance are therefore part of it - a resistance, however, that serves to bring to light what is positive."

A resistance, then, that means abandoning all resignation, complaint, or resentment, and walking in a patient and tenacious search for "what is positive," for that goodness which is hidden in the furrows of human history. This is the courage of Benedict, the courage of joy:

"Simple, genuine joy has become more rare. Joy is today in a certain way more and more freighted with moral and ideological baggage. [...] The world does not become better if it is deprived of joy, the world needs persons who discover the good, who are capable of feeling joy because of it and in this way also receive the prompting and the courage to do good. [...] We need that original trust which ultimately only faith can give. That, in the end, the world is good, that God exists and is good. From this stems also the courage of joy, which becomes in turn a responsibility, so that others may also rejoice and receive the glad tidings."

Joy and humility advance or retreat in lockstep. Chesterton captured this well in his brief but dense 1901 essay on humility:

"The new philosophy of self-esteem and self-assertion declares that humility is a vice. [...] It follows with the precision of clockwork every one of the great joys of life. No one, for example, was ever in love without indulging in a positive debauch of humility. [...] If humility has been discredited as a virtue at the present day, it is not wholly irrelevant to remark that this discredit has arisen at the same time as a great collapse of joy in current literature and philosophy. [...] When we are genuinely happy, we think we are unworthy of happiness. But when we are demanding a divine emancipation we seem to be perfectly certain that we are unworthy of anything."

Joy and humility, then. The two stand or fall together. But one piece of the puzzle is still missing, which however is very much present in the man and pope from Bavaria: humor.

For Benedict XVI, joy and humor are closely intertwined. As he writes at the conclusion of his essay on dogmatic theology "The God of Jesus Christ":

"One of the fundamental rules for the discernment of spirits could therefore be the following: where joy is lacking, where humor dies, there the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Jesus Christ, is not present either. And vice versa: joy is a sign of grace. The one who is profoundly serene, who has suffered without losing joy, that one is not far from the God of the Gospel, from the Spirit of God, who is the Spirit of eternal joy."

Jacques Maritain once said that a society that loses its sense of humor is preparing its own funeral.

Humor as a conduit for joy; the "sense of humor" as an entertaining (in the soundest sense of the term) way of living life, starting from the fundamental point: the essence of Christianity is joy. In the words of Chesterton, a master of humor, "joy is the gigantic secret of the Christian." As Benedict XVI writes in "The Salt of the Earth":

"Faith gives joy. When God is not there, the world becomes desolate, and everything becomes boring, and everything is completely unsatisfactory. . . . To that extent it can be said that the basic element of Christianity is joy. Joy not in the sense of cheap fun, which can conceal desperation in the background."

If the world turns its back on God, the pope-theologian and former prefect of the Holy Office tells us, it is not condemned

to falsehood, to blasphemy, and not even to heresy, but to boredom. There comes to mind the quip of Clive S. Lewis from before he converted from atheism to Christianity: "Christians are wrong, but all the rest are bores."

(s. m.) The page presented above is taken from the last chapter of the author's recently published book on Benedict XVI:

Andrea Monda, "Benedetta umiltà. Le virtù semplici di Joseph Ratzinger", Lindau, Torino, 2012, pp. 192, euro 14.00.

In sketching the pope's profile, Monda decisively places two of his virtues at center stage, humility "and its most delectable fruit," humor:

"They are two words that find in 'humus,' earth, a common etymological root. The one who is 'earth earth,' who does not become arrogant, is at the same time humble and endowed with humor, because he realizes that there is a world greater than his own ego, and beyond this world, Someone even greater. Humility and humor are the secret of life, above all for a Catholic, and they are two traits that place in the highest ranks the man Joseph Ratzinger-Benedict XVI, no less than his work."

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