

Philip McDonagh, 1 January 2023

Helping humanity in its hour of trial: reflections on the historical vision of Pope Benedict XVI

I served as Ireland's ambassador to the Holy See during the conclave that elected Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope in 2005. As the conclave met, contrasting ideas were in play. A common critique of the church was that a new beginning was needed in institutional and ethical terms. This would mean more democracy and accountability in the church and a greater readiness to accommodate "mainstream" values in relation to sexual morality. Another important topic was whether electing a Pope from outside Europe would send an important signal.

As we know, the conclave of 2005 adopted a different set of criteria, leading to the election of an elderly European Cardinal who had been close to his predecessor and was seen almost everywhere as a conservative. But Cardinal Ratzinger was a deeply original thinker who was looking to the future as much as anyone else. Taking into account the many works he published throughout his life, Pope Benedict XVI is the most prolific writer in the history of the papacy, by a wide margin. Therefore, these reflections, attempting to "essentialise" (as he himself might say) his philosophical thought, and in particular his historical vision, is at best an initial exploration of a huge field.

As ambassador to the Holy See, I had practical experience of engaging with the Secretariat of State and other departments of the Vatican, and to a small extent with Pope Benedict himself. In July 2005, the Irish Taoiseach (Prime Minister), Bertie Ahern, became the first overseas political leader to meet the new Pope. Pope Benedict wanted to give every possible support to the Good Friday Agreement as an example of reconciliation. He also wanted to acknowledge the role of Bertie Ahern in pioneering a structured dialogue between public authorities and religious confessions. An initiative in Ireland was announced at the time of the 2005 visit and is still in place. Within the European Union, Mr. Ahern played an important part in supporting the inclusion in the Treaties of Article 17, TFEU, which provides for a similar form of dialogue at the European level. The President of Ireland, Mary McAleese, visited the Holy See more than once during my period as ambassador. In the summer of 2007, with my British counterpart, I arranged a meeting with the Pope to brief him on progress in the implementation of the Good Friday Agreement. However, I will not examine the policies of the Holy See on specific subjects. I am concerned instead with the philosophical preamble to politics which

runs like a thread through so many of Pope Benedict's writings, including, of course, his writings before he became Pope. In my opinion, the "definite service" of Pope Benedict XVI, "committed to him and not to another" (to borrow phrases from Newman), was to return to the roots of our culture to help lay intellectual foundations for a political transformation at the global level. In the context of this project, those of us who are followers of Jesus can renew our understanding of our vocation by taking on "citizenship" responsibilities. In theological terms, we can become "the salt of the earth." In his book *On Conscience*, Ratzinger writes: "One might go so far as to say the Church will survive only if she is in a position to help humanity overcome this hour of trial."

In his book *In the Beginning* Ratzinger quotes the question, "*Wie spät ist es?*" addressed by a small boy to a famous German writer. It is intended as a simple enquiry about the time of day. But Ratzinger notes playfully that "*Wie spät ist es?*" could also be understood to mean, "What point have we reached in human history?" Situating the events of own time and place in the longer trajectory of the human story is essential if we are to formulate rational responses to common problems. I believe that Cardinal Ratzinger was elected Pope in 2005 largely because the cardinals trusted his sense of European and world history. In this perspective, I will touch briefly on what I consider to be six key aspects of his historical vision, namely: (i) his reading of the world situation at the beginning of the 21st century; (ii) openings to inter-religious and intercultural dialogue; (iii) support for the role of reason in politics; (iv) a theological focus on hope or "faith-hope" as a resource in community life; (v) a sense of the possibilities and limits of political change; and (vi) respect for the witness of all those who on grounds of conscience challenge prevailing orthodoxies. I will conclude with some suggestions for building on the legacy of Pope Benedict XVI.

In his famous dialogue with Jürgen Habermas in January 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger's diagnosis of the state of humanity is expressed in terms of two main interlocking trends. First, we are experiencing the rapid formation of a global community, or global political space, in which everyone's decisions impact strongly on everyone else. Second, we are constantly increasing productive and destructive capacity without there being an equivalent development in the realm of conscience and mutual understanding. Among new forms of power unregulated by law, Ratzinger focusses on weaponry. His own life had been overshadowed by NATO and Soviet "doctrines" of mutually assured destruction; but "mankind does not need a large-scale war in order to make the world uninhabitable." As a second illustration of his point, Ratzinger turns

to emerging sciences that offer the prospect of what we call today “human augmentation.” “Man has descended into the very well-springs of power, to the sources of his own existence.”

The second pillar of Cardinal Ratzinger’s worldview concerns inter-religious cooperation. One of the most important milestones of Ratzinger’s time at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was the decision to allow the India-based Jesuit Fr. Jacques Dupuis to publish his major work, *Towards a Theology of Religious Pluralism*, as a work of Catholic theology. The Holy See asked Fr. Dupuis to incorporate a “health warning” in his book, drawing attention to the tentative nature of his research. However, what was remarkable was not this qualification, rather it was the recognition given to Fr. Dupuis as Catholic theologian. In Istanbul in 2006, Pope Benedict XVI became the first Pope to pray in a mosque (as opposed to just visiting). In his two-volume work on the person of Jesus, Pope Benedict writes eloquently about the values of indigenous peoples and the contempt shown to indigenous or tribal peoples by European colonisers. Against this background, it is not surprising that in his dialogue with Habermas, Cardinal Ratzinger makes the following forthright statement: “If we are to discuss the basic questions of human existence today, the intercultural dimension seems to me absolutely essential – for such a discussion cannot be carried on exclusively either within the Christian realm or within the Western rational tradition ... De facto, they are obliged to acknowledge that they are accepted only by parts of mankind, and that they are comprehensible only in parts of mankind”

Pope Benedict’s endorsement of the role of reason in politics and social life is the third pillar of his public theology. Once we abandon “theocratic” models of political organisation, we fall back on the principle of verification. At all times we must ask whether our political structures address the most consequential issues and whether they have the scale, expertise, and authority to effect solutions. To answer these questions, we need experience and expertise of all kinds. We also need frameworks of engagement within which to seek answers together. Pope Benedict, referring to St. Justin and others, points out that the followers of the Way of Jesus in the first centuries found common ground with philosophers even when a wide gulf separated them from the Roman state religion, the neo-Platonists, and the so-called mystery religions. The role of reason is further affirmed when we acknowledge what Ratzinger terms “pathologies in religion” and “pathologies of reason.” Pathologies in religion are forms of fundamentalism for which there is no corrective mechanism within the religious traditions themselves. Pathologies of reason are a form of “hubris” (Ratzinger’s chosen term) in which science loses

sight of the whole picture, which can never be the domain of a single academic discipline. In his dialogue with Habermas, Ratzinger brings these arguments to a beautifully clear conclusion: “Accordingly, I would speak of a necessary relatedness between reason and faith and between reason and religion, which are called to purify and help one another. They need each other, and they must acknowledge this mutual need.”

Benedict’s encyclical *Spe Salvi* states that “all serious and upright conduct is hope in action.” This brings us to my fourth theme, which is Pope Benedict’s focus on hope or “faith–hope” as the principal resource of politics. *Spe Salvi* is constructed around a number of interconnected meditations. The first meditation arises from the sequencing of Benedict’s three principal encyclicals, *Deus Caritas Est*, *Spe Salvi*, and *Caritas in Veritate*. To come to believe in God’s love, the theme of *Deus Caritas Est*, is “performative”: that is, it gives us faith and hope. In *Spe Salvi*, faith and hope are almost indistinguishable. At one point, “faith–hope” appears as a hyphenated word. Love and “faith–hope”, taken together, imply action in the world, as described in *Caritas in Veritate*. *Caritas* comes first. In following the love that is in our hearts, we discover the truth of situations. I would suggest that Pope Benedict has reshaped the triad “faith, hope, and charity” as “love, hope, and action,” placing action-in-hope at the centre of our life and mission.

The second meditation that I find in *Spe Salvi* concerns the inner nature of hope. Earlier theologians analyse hope as the mean between presumption and despair. Hope is then a virtue, the virtue of man or woman as pilgrim. *Spe Salvi* offers a different perspective. The focus has switched from inner equilibrium to engagement with an outer reality. For Pope Benedict, the main point about hope is that it represents “the impossibility that the injustice of history should be the final word.” This implies a readiness to act where possible, even in the face of steep odds. An important part of this second meditation on hope is the use that Pope Benedict makes of the Letter to the Hebrews. For Aristotle, a virtue is a disposition that can be developed by repeated actions having a similar character. The Letter to the Hebrews takes a different approach, employing two striking images to capture the essence of faith–hope. The first of these images is “substance”, an image drawn from the sphere of economics. The second is “argument” or “proof”, an image drawn from the sphere of law. In other words, “faith–hope” is not primarily a virtue or an acquired disposition. Nor is it primarily a subjective conviction. It is more like an inner resource. In part, it is a gift. To say that hope is given does not mean that it is detached from reason. In the Hebrew prophets, genuine hope comes with an ethical

dimension and a certain kind of realism. Jeremiah opposes the wishful thinking, false optimism, and empty hope of his rival Hananiah.

I turn now to a third meditation in *Spe Salvi*. In the encyclical, we find the following statement about human agency: “we can uncover the sources of creation and keep them unsullied.” If we are co-workers of God in a project whose overall design and logic is not our own, a number of things follow. First, our actions have an intrinsic or objective value. They are true in themselves. Second, if we are co-workers of God, we do not need to determine on our own the ultimate significance of our actions. We are not, and do not need to be, the masters of cause and effect. Third, it follows from this that there is a convergence between action, suffering, and prayer. Appraising the truth of a situation, and acting or suffering in consequence of this, are bound up together. Finally, actions that conform with hope will be in harmony with other similar actions, including other people’s actions. There is an “in-built” consistency, compatibility, and coherence among all actions that “uncover the sources of creation.” This is not just about shaping coalitions. That can happen, certainly. But the point is deeper. A common criterion of evaluation – let us call it the “standard of hope” – links one situation to another and enables a variety of actors to give the future a definite shape or character, even before the overall picture becomes clear.

In the 21st century, planetary ecology and the need for a just transition in the organisation of the economy depend on numerous individual decisions linked together by a common criterion of evaluation. This common criterion cannot be the standard of mere self-interest, which by definition pushes us in different directions. Any common criterion of evaluation at the global level will resemble the “standard of hope,” as defined by Pope Benedict in *Spe Salvi*. Hope, if restored to its full meaning in our culture, can inspire and bring together all those who face the future determined to be “part of the solution.”

Pope Benedict’s willingness to start from “the given context of our world” (as he puts it in the dialogue with Habermas) and to involve all major strands of human culture in the development of a global civilisation characterised by hope, are closely linked to further insights into how change happens. I would identify Pope Benedict’s understanding of the limits and possibilities of progress as a fifth pillar of his philosophy. As to the limits, the present generation cannot establish institutions that will definitively liberate our descendants. Nor can the rule of reason take root once and for all. Pope Benedict notes that Kant changed his opinion of the French

Revolution in response to the emerging facts. However, Pope Benedict places more emphasis on *hopeful possibilities* than on *inevitable limits*. In response to the question whether we can act for the benefit of future generations, his strongest criticism is of those who aim too low, failing to understand our human capacity to create and transform. “Modern Christianity, faced with the successes of science in progressively structuring the world, has to a large extent restricted its attention to the individual and his salvation. In so doing it has limited the horizon of its hope and has failed to recognise sufficiently the greatness of its task.” (*Spe Salvi*, 25)

The sixth and final pillar of Pope Benedict’s historical vision, according to my schematic summary, is that when we act in hope we often go against the current of prevailing opinion. In 1992, Cardinal Ratzinger wrote as follows of Andrey Dimitriyevich Sakharov: “... he was more than a great scientist: he was a great man. For the sake of the humanity of man, of his ethical dignity and his freedom, Sakharov accepted the price of suffering and of persecution...” In his book *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict interprets the Sermon on the Mount as a “hidden biography” of Jesus. That is, it tells us what to expect if we challenge political orthodoxies. The Pope shows how Isaiah, Hosea, Amos, Micah, and the prophets criticised aspects of the Torah, namely its concrete, historically conditioned legal provisions, in the light of a more fundamental norm implicit in the Covenant itself, namely faith in the one God whose option is to defend the poor and all those who cannot secure justice for themselves.

During my Rome posting, people close to Pope Benedict told me at different moments of the Pope’s personal admiration for Socrates, Gandhi, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, and Franz Jägerstätter. Benedict had, of course, promoted the beatification of Jägerstätter. Socrates, Gandhi, Bonhoeffer, and Jägerstätter have in common with Andrey Sakharov that they suffered for trying to speak truth in the public sphere. In his sermon for the Epiphany in 2007, Benedict pictures the modern counterparts of the Magi making their journey to the crib: “Who then are the “Magi” of today, and what point has their “journey” and our “journey” reached?” The Pope goes on to ask what we must do to ensure that the Magi of today will find Jesus when they come to look for him. Pope Benedict wants Christianity “to renew its self-understanding setting out from its roots.” (*Spe Salvi*, 22)

I conclude by sketching out some ways in which we can honour the life’s work of Pope Benedict by building on his ideas. First, we should continue to apply our reason to the understanding of political processes. In *Deus Caritas Est*, Pope Benedict shows us that all

forms of love, including working for justice as the only valid criterion of politics, are facets of the one goodness. Subsequently, in *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict draws out the political relevance of this insight very plainly, stating that love is present both in direct interpersonal relationships and in “macro-relationships, social, economic, and political.” The love exercised in macro-relationships, “civic and political love,” invites us to enter deeply into a number of investigations: how does life in society work and why is it important? How does a path for evil open up in human affairs and how does evil spread and metastasize? Where does reconciliation begin?

My second project to honour the memory of Pope Benedict is to continue work on the great insight of *Caritas in Veritate*: “... the traditionally valid distinction between profit-based companies and non-profit organizations can no longer do full justice to reality, or offer practical direction for the future.” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 46). Aristotle had already noted that the use of money as a means of exchange is in tension with the use of money as a means of accumulation. Jürgen Habermas, in the 2004 dialogue referred to above, conceded that his would-be secular or “post-metaphysical” justification of political rule, based on open communication and the taking of decisions in common by equal citizens, is increasingly contradicted by the operation of market forces, both within the nation State and transnationally. Habermas refers to the “discouraging processes whereby the democratic formation of a common opinion and will loses its functional relevance.” We can promote a dialogue around the thinking of Aristotle, Habermas, and others to develop further what seems to me the core message of *Caritas in Veritate*: “The *earthly city* is promoted not merely by relationships of rights and duties, but to an even greater and more fundamental extent by relationships of gratuitousness, mercy, and communion.” (*Caritas in Veritate*, 6).

The Centre of which I am Director, acting with the support of the churches and faith communities on the island of Ireland, has written to the First Vice- President of the European Parliament with responsibility for dialogue under Article 17 expressing the hope that the European Parliament might undertake specific steps to consolidate the Article 17 dialogue. This could be announced as a natural follow-up to the recent Conference on the Future of Europe. If the European Parliament can be persuaded, this could be a third project to honour the memory of Pope Benedict. We can nurture the “soul of Europe” through acknowledging the dialogical relationship between high-level values and practical politics and making this dialogical relationship more transparent and more substantive.

Shortly after his election, Pope Benedict told a group of German pilgrims that he had chosen the name Benedict in honour of Pope Benedict XV. Benedict XV was elected in early September 1914, just as the First World War was beginning. Against the bitter opposition of the belligerent countries, Pope Benedict XV sought a negotiated end to the war in the interests of European and world civilization. My fourth and last suggestion to honour the memory Joseph Ratzinger, the reconciler of Germany and Poland, is to support the peace efforts of Pope Francis and the Holy See, in the war in Ukraine and elsewhere. Osip Mandelstam understood and respected the efforts of Pope Benedict XV. In his poem “Encyclical” of 1915, the great Russian poet and future political martyr states flatly, “the priest in Rome has stayed sane.” Pope Francis deserves the same recognition from us.