

THE DEATH OF THE POPE EMERITUS

Benedict led mankind and the Church back to the centrality of God

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Perhaps for the first time in the history of the Church, an entire pontificate has been dedicated to leading mankind, and the Church itself, back to the centrality of God. Benedict XVI's was an essential pontificate, a pontificate that went straight to the heart

of the deadly disease of our time, without getting lost in sociological, political, or economic analyses. Not that he ever despised them, but he did give them the place they deserve by judging them in light of their scope to respond to the mystery of mankind, which is to be a worshipper of God.

"If you transfer the centre of gravity of life not into life, but into the hereafter - into nothingness - you have taken the centre of gravity away from life in general". The long travail of modernity has given birth to a world whose centre of gravity is in the world itself, as Friedrich Nietzsche advocated in *The Antichrist*. But, contrary to what the prophet of the death of God predicted, the removal of the centre of gravity from the 'afterlife', which is not nothingness but the fullness of God, has caused humanity to implode. Everywhere the signs of this implosion are multiplying: fear, despair, misery, violence, reification of man, delirium.

Pope Benedict wanted to stand beside this lost and dying humanity, to re-orient it back to its centre of gravity. And yet, precisely because of this, his pontificate has been one of the most contested and misunderstood, even within the Church. The Catholic world has become intoxicated by the wine of the antichrist, by the flavour of a Christianity 'of values', of which our Lord Jesus Christ is nothing more than a testimonial and in which God is the One with whom or without whom faith remains as it is. Benedict XVI understood this like few others and made the extreme gesture of once again placing God at the centre.

At the centre of the centre, first and foremost. The heart of the Church's life is the liturgy. But the liturgy has lost its centre, ending up folding in on itself and dancing around the golden calf, as Ratzinger memorably explained. The Church has thus found itself tragically disoriented, because the meaning of its earthly and eternal existence, namely the worship of God, has failed precisely in the liturgy. "The Church exists for worship", Cardinal Robert Sarah said at the close of the last Giornata della Bussola; everything the Church does is for the purpose of praise, thanksgiving, and adoration of the Most Holy Trinity, in the temporal today and the eternal today. Benedict XVI was lucidly aware that the Church was becoming dispersed in the many things to be done, that is, it had lost its latreutic purpose, because it no longer had a liturgy oriented *ad Deum*: "I am convinced that the ecclesial crisis in which we find ourselves today depends largely on the collapse of the liturgy", he explained in his autobiography *A Life*.

The first victims of this loss of the centre of the centre were priests and consecrated persons. He reminded the former, by word and example, of the essence of their life: *astare coram te et tibi ministrare*. From this standing before God and serving

Him, the priest becomes "one who watches. He must be on his guard against the pressing powers of evil. He must keep the world awake for God. He must be one who stands: upright before the currents of time. Upright in truth. Upright in the commitment to good" (**Homily**, Chrism Mass, 20 March). Upright before God, so as not to be prone before the world. To monks and consecrated persons he recalled the angelic life, which is nothing other than "a life of adoration. This should also apply to monks. They pray first of all not for this or that thing, but simply because God deserves to be worshipped. [...] Such prayer without a specific purpose, which is meant to be pure divine service is therefore rightly called '*officium*'. It is the 'service' *par excellence*, the 'sacred service' of monks. It is offered to the triune God who, above all else, is worthy "to receive glory, honour and power" (*Rev 4:11*), because He created the world in a wonderful way and in an even more wonderful way He renewed it" (**Address** to the Abbey of Heiligenkreuz, 9 September 2007).

Having lost God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit from the centre and from *the centre of the centre*, it is therefore the family and mankind who lose awareness of their own identity. In the **Angelus** of 27 December 2009, the Pope captured the heart of the reality of the family: "God wanted to reveal Himself by being born into a human family, and the human family thus became an icon of God! God is the Trinity, He is a communion of love; so is the family despite all the differences that exist between the Mystery of God and His human creature, an expression that reflects the unfathomable Mystery of God as Love. In marriage man and woman, created in God's image, become "one flesh" (*Gen 2: 24*), that is a communion of love that generates new life. The human family, in a certain sense, is an icon of the Trinity because of its interpersonal love and the fruitfulness of this love",

Without this horizon, family morality becomes a petty game of mortifying now interpersonal love, now fruitfulness. In turn, mankind created in the image and likeness of God, if it loses the sense of God, if it is separated from Him, it is "reduced to a single dimension, the horizontal one, and it is precisely this reductionism that is one of the fundamental causes of the totalitarianisms that have had tragic consequences in the last century, as well as of the crisis of values that we see in today's reality. [...] Were God to lose His centrality, mankind would lose its rightful place, he would no longer fit into creation, in relations with others" (General **Audience**, 14 November 2012) and thus falls into the delusion of considering himself god, master of life and death, of truth and goodness.

The Church is in turn the centre of the world, the mountain of the Lord's temple

, "erected on the top of the mountains" and "higher than the hills", to which all peoples flock, that they may know the ways of the Lord and "walk in His paths" (*Is, 2, 2-3*). But an "off-centre" centre has deprived the world of its centre of gravity, whatever Nietzsche might think; it has plunged the whole world into disorientation and disintegration. In his recent *Notes*, the Pope Emeritus once again issued a lament and a warning: "A society without God - a society that does not know Him and treats Him as non-existent - is a society that loses its measure. In our day, the catchphrase of 'God's death' was coined. When God dies in a society, it becomes free, we are assured. In reality, the death of God in a society also means the end of freedom, because what dies is the purpose that provides orientation. And because the compass disappears that points us in the right direction by teaching us to distinguish good from evil. Western society is a society in which God is absent in the public sphere and has nothing left to offer it. And that is why it is a society in which the measure of humanity is increasingly lost".

Pope Benedict took us by the hand, pointing out the only solution for human happiness and the new flowering of the Church: God at the centre of the liturgy, the liturgy at the centre of the Church, the Church at the centre of the world. His pontificate was a flash of light that Heaven granted to our world of darkness, and the darkness did not welcome it. But it remains the essential teaching for the essential mankind; therefore, it will never pass.