

LEGACY

## Benedict XVI: beauty opens the heart to God

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In spite of the intellectual profundity that rightfully places Benedict XVI among the "greats" of contemporary thought, as well as - in perspective - among the de facto "doctors" of the Church, his was also a "little way" - for some verses comparable to that of the "little" Saint Teresa of Lisieux - able to marvel at beauty, as a privileged way to find (or rediscover) faith. Definitely in contrast with the label of the panzerkardinal or the

"German shepherd", which could only convince those who have never made the effort (however pleasant) to consider his speeches, preferring to drink that unjust and unjustly widespread vulgate among many Catholics (more inclined to a cheap sentimentality compatible with the sirens of the mainstream).

**Benedict does not oppose the sense of wonder with lucidity of thought**, on the contrary they integrate into the perspective of what he himself has defined on several occasions as "enlarged reason", that is, capable of also understanding beauty, love, all those realities which are not "measurable" and yet whose existence and necessity certainly cannot be denied. On the contrary, "a reason that in some way wanted to strip itself of beauty would be halved, it would be a blinded reason". This complementarity is inherent in Christianity, since "the creative "Logos" is not only a technical "logos", but "it is love and therefore as such expresses itself in beauty and good", he affirmed in the summer of 2008 in Bressanone (resuming in part the lectio of Regensburg). For this reason, the pope emeritus was convinced that "art and the saints are the greatest apologia of our faith".

**If it is really necessary to give him a label, in some way, Benedict XVI was notably the Pope of beauty**, who defined «mankind's great necessity; it is the root from which the trunk of our peace and the fruits of our hope arise»: this is what he said on the occasion of his apostolic journey to Spain in November 2010, to Santiago de Compostela and Barcelona, where he went to consecrate the basilica of the Sagrada Familia. He underlined the link between the beauty of the building and the spirituality of the architect Antoni Gaudí, who was not an archistar, but «a brilliant and coherent Christian architect, whose torch of faith burned until the end of his life, lived with dignity and absolute austerity. From the three books of Creation, Scripture and Liturgy, Gaudí gave life to the "architectural miracle" of the Sagrada Familia, "a space of beauty, faith and hope, which leads mankind to an encounter with the One who is the Truth and Beauty itself.

**Since he was a child, Joseph Ratzinger considered beauty as a privileged path to God.** From his festive and very Catholic Bavaria, he brought with him «the perfume that emanated from carpets of flowers and verdant birches; the ornaments present in all the houses, the flags, the songs also belong to these memories; I can still hear the wind instruments of the local band.' A jubilation that had its foundation on Easter morning, or rather on Holy Saturday: the very day of his birth (which took place on April 16, 1927), a coincidence that for him - as he recalled in his autobiography *Milestone*, published in 1997 by Ignatius Press- constituted a "premonitory sign" on a personal level but also "a

characteristic of our human existence, which is still awaiting Easter, is not yet in full light, but confidently moves towards it". And it does so also through art, the beauty of the landscape and the woods, and the music, which had nourished the Ratzinger house since childhood (after all, they lived on the border with Mozart's Salzburg), in a natural continuity with the liturgy . And it was their father who played and explained the readings to prepare them for Sunday Mass: then, "when the Kyrie began it was as if heaven opened up".

**These memories are also important for identifying an "aesthetic" leitmotif** that was far from irrelevant in his eight years of pontificate and perhaps also in his subsequent "monastic" life as Pope Emeritus. There is one audience in particular, on November 18, 2009, entirely dedicated to the masterpieces resulting from the faith in the medieval centuries, evoking the famous image of the "white mantle of churches" with which Rudolf Glaber described the artistic and religious ferment of the time. A "white mantle" still able to speak today, since "the strength of the Romanesque style and the splendor of the Gothic cathedrals remind us that the *via pulchritudinis*, the path of beauty, is a privileged and fascinating path for approaching the Mystery of God" . A few days later, on November 21, he specifically invited artists not to be "afraid to confront the first and last source of beauty".

**The pontiff's "liturgical magisterium" can also be read in the same light**, aimed at recovering the amazement and sacredness of a liturgy that is too often trivialised or experienced as a nuisance with respect to the "social commitment" or worse still disfigured (his words) by "empty dances around the golden calf that we are ourselves", in the self-celebration of a community that forgets God. Trends that have sharpened in recent decades and arisen on the trunk of what he himself (in conversation with Vittorio Messori) had defined the Konzilsungeist, the "bad spirit of the Council". The Pope preferred to speak once again the language of beauty that conveys the truth of liturgical gestures, favouring (with his own example) a celebration also visually oriented ad Deum, at least with a cross on which the gaze of priest and faithful would converge, and an art of preaching capable of indicating eternity rather than commenting on current events. And finally (but not in order of importance) the coexistence of the old and the new, also by reopening that precious casket of the traditional liturgy because - he recalled in the letter that accompanied the motu proprio Summorum Pontificum - "it is good for everyone to preserve the riches that have grown in faith and in the prayer of the Church". Riches hidden for decades, which are not the heritage of nostalgics (as those who would like to close them think) but which continue to speak to the hearts of many young people, also grateful to Benedict XVI for this reason.

**If it is true that art sharpens sensitivity, Benedict XVI was one of the most refined and elevated personalities** in at least recent history. A sort of Mozart of faith who for eight years touched the "keyboard" of the Church with the same delicacy with which his fingers skipped over the piano keys in moments of relaxation. Perhaps with too much delicacy - who knows? - but his "music" continues to rise above easy slogans and pundit recipes, since there resonates the "certainty that it is good to be a person, because we saw that the goodness of God was reflected in parents and brothers". A certainty - recalled at the Meeting of Families in 2012 - that blossomed from the earliest years, in that little "Bavarian idyll" that Joseph Ratzinger may now have found beyond this world, as he confided at the time: «If I try to imagine, for a moment, what Paradise will be like, it always seems to me like the time of my youth, of my childhood».