

THE POPE EMERITUS SPEAKS OUT AGAIN

Benedict XVI shows the Church the way (not just in Germany)

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Benedict XVI's barbs at the Church in Germany in his recent interview written for *Herder Korrespondenz* (8/2021) have already been relayed world wide. The most popular passages are taken from the end of the interview dedicated by the Pope emeritus to the

recollection of the year he spent as chaplain in the parish of the Precious Blood in the Bogenhausen district of Munich (1 August 1951 - 1 October 1952).

In his final words, Ratzinger drew the conclusions of what he had been able to learn from that experience seventy years ago to the present day. As a young priest on his first pastoral adventure, he had already noticed how the life of faith was gradually fading, leaving structures standing that were gradually becoming less capable of nourishing and sustaining the faith. A not so slow but inexorable process, that has led to the so-called *Amtskirche*, an “institutional church”, of apparatus, of bureaucracy, that remains standing like a facade without a soul and that is not only sterile, but so cumbersome as to suffocate the germs of authentic Christian life that try to live and expand. “The word ‘Amtskirche’ was coined to express the contrast between what is officially demanded and what one personally believes in. The word ‘Amtskirche’ insinuates an internal contradiction between what faith actually requires and means and its depersonalisation”.

This phenomenon is not only referred to the German Church by Ratzinger, but to a more general situation, which certainly finds particularly significant expression in “a large part of the institutional texts of the Church in Germany”. Ratzinger/Benedict XVI has always insisted that the true reform of the Church and its authentic rebirth depend on the holiness of its members, on the strength of their witness. But in this interview there is a particular emphasis on a now radicalised tension between the office and the spirit. Tension in the documents produced: “As long as only the office speaks in the institutional texts of the Church, but not the heart and the spirit, so will the exodus from the world of faith continue”. Tension in decisive positions: “In Church institutions - hospitals, schools, Caritas - many people are involved in decisive positions that do not support the internal mission of the Church and thus often obscure the witness of this institution”.

Not that *in itself* there is a contradiction between office and spirit; but it is as if Benedict XVI wants to return to this point again and again, because by now the *Amtskirche* has produced a beyond tolerable number of documents and works without “heart and spirit”. An autobiographical key to these latest statements of his should not be underrated: he, the Pope who stepped aside; who chose to climb the mountain, like a new Moses, while our age is deteriorating (because *ingravescente aetate* also means this); who left not the Church, but the *Amtskirche*, made up of offices, positions, procedures, without however abandoning that white habit, and insisting on maintaining the title of Pope Emeritus.

He does not claim in this way “to separate the good from the bad”, as Donatism intended to do in the Augustinian era; however, this does not mean that there is not a pressing need to “separate believers from misbelievers”. A problem that today, according to him, “has become even more evident”. It is certainly no coincidence that Benedict came out of his silence to talk about that year and a bit of pastoral experience at the beginning of his priestly life. Between one memory and another, recounted with that subtle sense of humour and self-irony that has always distinguished him, Ratzinger drops important clues into the reader’s heart and mind. He describes the outstanding figure of the parish priest of Bogenhausen, Fr Max Blumschein, who taught him the importance of being in the confessional (every day from 6 to 7 am, and on Saturday afternoons, from 4 to 8 pm), because “it was better to spend an hour there without confession, rather than to drive someone away from confession because of an empty confessional”. He says he experienced “very closely how much people wait for the priest, how much they wait for the blessing that comes from the power of the sacrament [...] They saw in us men touched by Christ’s commission and capable of bringing Him close to people”.

The simple but laborious life of the chaplain and the parish priest made the presence of Christ and the life of the Church much more tangible than the plethora of documents with a wooden, if not iron, tongue, like a sword (see the recent motu proprio *Traditionis Custodes*), which have been paralysing the life of the Church for years. Language, content and mentality that do not come from Christ, but from the world. This is why Benedict XVI recalls the speech he gave in Freiburg, in which he spoke of the need for a “detachment from worldliness”. It is not true, as some have written, that Ratzinger has backtracked. On the contrary, he affirmed that the necessary process of purging oneself from the world and its logic is the negative, but still necessary, aspect of a true reform of the Church: “*Entweltlichung*, or ‘detachment from worldliness’,

indicates the negative part of the movement that I mean, i.e. escaping from discourse and the limitations of an era, towards the freedom of faith". One cannot expect to fly without cutting the ties that bind us to the ground.

The Bogenhausen experience also marked him for another reason, barely hinted at in the interview, but more widely highlighted in Peter Seewald's biography. His predecessor in the parish of the Precious Blood was Fr Alfred Delp, who was hanged by the Gestapo in 1945 in Plötzensee prison. Delp had left a diary and some sentences, such as this one he had carved on the wall of his cell, while his hands were tied: "The hour of the birth of human freedom is the hour of the encounter with God. The bent knee and the outstretched empty hands are the original gestures of the free man. We must have confidence in life, because we do not live it alone, but God lives it with us".

Expressions that were indelibly engraved in the young Ratzinger's soul and that reveal the anthropological significance of his insistence as Bishop, Cardinal, and Pontiff on the primacy of God in the life of the world and the Church. Because God alone - wrote Fr Delp - is the last bastion of defence against that "despotic pressure of the masses [...] that prostitutes even the last most intimate space, devours conscience, violates judgement and finally blinds and suffocates the spirit". Woe, then, to that age "in which the voices of those who cry out in the wilderness are silenced, drowned out by the noise of the day in the streets, or forbidden, or sunk in the intoxication of progress, or held back or made weaker by fear and cowardice".

Benedict XVI has not simply launched a broadside against the Church in Germany; he is trying, for the umpteenth time, to point the only way out of what is increasingly emerging as the deadliest totalitarianism in history. Only God, only the Crucified One is the one real dyke against the rising evil.