

BENEDICT XVI, DOCTOR OF REASON

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Monday, April 18, 2005. Thousands of people are lingering in Rome after flocking there to honor the memory of Pope John Paul II, who had gone to the house of the Father on April 2. A little over two weeks had been spent mourning and, in a way, trying to digest the historical, pastoral, and doctrinal significance of Pope John Paul II, whose papacy had lasted almost 27 years and had borne fruit in many monumental works, including encyclicals like *Veritatis splendor* and *Fides et ratio*, as well as his 129 Wednesday addresses that became known as the “theology of the body.”

On this Monday, though, it was time to look forward in hope, not backward in grief. The Catholic Church began this forward-looking process with a *Missa Pro Eligendo Romano Pontifice*, that is, a “Mass for the Roman Pontiff To-be-elected,” a Mass prayed for the one who was to fill John Paul II’s shoes; for the process of electing the next Pope was set to begin the next day. This Mass was celebrated in a packed St. Peter’s Square, and its principal celebrant, alongside his fellow Cardinal-electors, was Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger. Since the death of John Paul II, Ratzinger had been serving as Dean of the College of Cardinals, which means he was the one arranging all the events related to the Pope’s death as well as preparing for the election of the next Pope. The responsibility fell upon him, moreover, to offer a homily during this Mass prior to the papal election, and the words he preached quickly became “viral,” as we say nowadays. One provocative phrase in particular was infectious, namely, “the dictatorship of relativism.” In his homily, Cardinal Ratzinger said this:

To have a clear faith, in accord with the creed of the Church, often comes to be labeled “fundamentalism.” Meanwhile, relativism, that is, letting oneself be carried “here and there by every wind of doctrine” [quoting Paul in *Ephesians* 4:14], appears to be the only attitude that measures up to today’s times. Indeed, a dictatorship of relativism is being established that recognizes nothing as definitive and that leaves only one’s own self and its desires as the ultimate measure.¹

In these words Ratzinger offered a stark and somber assessment of the situation facing the next Pope, thereby warning the next Pope, at least implicitly, to prepare to shepherd a flock who are searching for spiritual sustenance in an intellectual and cultural pasture desiccated by relativism, an ideology that poisons that most basic of human activities, truth-seeking.

¹ “Avere una fede chiara, secondo il Credo della Chiesa, viene spesso etichettato come fondamentalismo. Mentre il relativismo, cioè il lasciarsi portare ‘qua e là da qualsiasi vento di dottrina’, appare come l’unico atteggiamento all’altezza dei tempi odierni. Si va costituendo una dittatura del relativismo che non riconosce nulla come definitivo e che lascia come ultima misura solo il proprio io e le sue voglie” (https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_it.html, my translation).

A “dictatorship of relativism”: this is how Ratzinger diagnoses the intellectual and cultural illness of our day. In the remainder of the homily, by way of prescribing a remedy, he encouraged a mature faith – an “adult faith” [*fede adulta*], he called it – which is “a faith deeply rooted in friendship with Christ” [*una fede profondamente radicata nell’amicizia con Cristo*]. Only a fully human, fully personalized faith like this will be able to withstand the dictatorship of relativism. Ratzinger concluded his homily, moreover, by naming again his recently deceased friend, John Paul II, and petitioning God for a suitable successor to him. He said:

At this moment, however, above all let us pray with insistence to the Lord that after the great gift of Pope John Paul II, he will once again give us a shepherd after his own heart, a shepherd who will guide us to knowledge of Christ, to his love, to true joy. Amen.²

Now, according to Archbishop Georg Ganswein, Cardinal Ratzinger’s personal secretary at the time, by means of this homily this 78-year-old Cardinal was in no way campaigning for the papacy. Ratzinger, in fact, was bent on retiring in order to take up a more scholarly life; he had actually asked John Paul II to allow him to retire on a few occasions, a request that was obviously and prudently denied. Over a decade later, when reflecting on his election as John Paul II’s successor, Ratzinger himself said, “If the bishops stop at 75 [the age that a bishop has to submit a letter of resignation], you cannot hoist a 78-year-old onto the chair of Peter.” “I thought it couldn’t happen,” he added. “[I thought] that it was unreasonable.”³

It appears, however, that the Holy Spirit thought it eminently reasonable. And so, just a day after his “dictatorship of relativism” homily, the Cardinals elected Ratzinger himself as the very Roman Pontiff To-be-elected for whom Ratzinger himself had prayed. He was to be “a shepherd after [the Lord’s] own heart” to take up the pastoring of that worldwide flock called the Catholic Church. Ratzinger may not have known it at the time, but in his homily the day before, he was warning himself to prepare to face the “dictatorship of relativism.” And, as I hope to show in what follows, Benedict XVI was up for the challenge; for he did much during his papacy to address the dictatorship of relativism. In so doing, moreover, I think he has earned a title – a title that I, of course, have no authority to bestow, but one that I consider altogether fitting – namely, the title *Doctor Rationis*, “Doctor of Reason.”

I intend this title “Doctor of Reason” to be bivalent, as it were; it serves double duty. Firstly, it names something central to Christianity about which Benedict XVI taught; it names one of the central “objects” illuminated by his teaching, similar to the way that Augustine is called the “Doctor of Grace.” Benedict XVI illuminated *reason*, both human and divine. Put more precisely, he taught profoundly about reason, about *logos*, as a natural power of human persons whose source is the Divine *Logos* through whom all of creation comes into existence. In this sense, Benedict XVI is the

² “Ma in questa ora, soprattutto, preghiamo con insistenza il Signore, perché dopo il grande dono di Papa Giovanni Paolo II, ci doni di nuovo un pastore secondo il suo cuore, un pastore che ci guidi alla conoscenza di Cristo, al suo amore, alla vera gioia. Amen” (*ibid.*, my translation).

³ Benedict XVI, *Last Testament: In His Own Words* (London: Bloomsbury, 2016), 183.

Doctor of Reason, the teacher about reason.

But Benedict is not just a Doctor of *Reason*, but also a *Doctor* of Reason. The second meaning of this phrase captures Benedict XVI's work as a spiritual physician, as it were, a theologico-medical doctor who diagnoses with precision the ills besetting reason in our age and provides potent prescriptions for reason's recovery, that is, prescriptions for the convalescence of reason. In the remainder of my remarks, I will focus on this aspect of Benedict XVI's thought, although it would be well worth considering in some other talk how Benedict XVI is also the "Doctor of Reason," i.e., the teacher about reason.

In order to approach Benedict XVI as a doctor or physician of reason, it is helpful to reflect briefly on his diagnosis of reason's current situation, namely, that it is living under a "dictatorship of relativism." Why is the oppressive milieu of relativism so dangerous, so concerning, so *unhealthy*, for human reason? To put it concisely, relativism both poisons the soil in which reason is planted and excessively prunes its flowers. This is because a dictatorship of relativism makes it socially unacceptable to adhere to primary truths upon which reason must build and to aim for ultimate truths toward which human reason aspires. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this makes for a rather deadened and ugly version of reason – which in fact appears to be reason's current condition in the culture-forming institutions of the West. As Pope, moreover, Benedict XVI points out that under a "dictatorship of relativism," one is usually left with only empirical-scientific reason – or simply "science," as many are apt to call it these days – a disincarnate, objectifying reason that, at its best, accepts as true only what is verifiable through sense-perception and controlled experimentation. This extremely diminished profile of reason turns out to be a caricature of this awesome capacity that defines us as human. And, as we have learned quite painfully during the past few years, this caricature of reason – as "science" – has no power to withstand new winds of doctrine or novel opinions that blow its way. Indeed, reason understood solely as "science" is altogether susceptible to capricious cultural winds.

In light of this diagnosis of human reason, what did Benedict XVI prescribe in order to assist its healing? We find an answer to this question in a set of addresses that Benedict XVI gave to what I would call "culture-forming institutions." I am referring, more specifically, to five addresses that he delivered as Pope between 2006 and 2011: two in university settings (the well-known Regensburg address as well as the not-as-well-known address to La Sapienza University in Rome), two in political settings (in the Bundestag in Germany and in Westminster Hall in England), and one in a global setting (an address given in France to representatives of the world of culture, i.e., representatives of UNESCO, i.e., the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization). In each case, Benedict XVI engages in a deliberate act of recollection regarding human reason, doing so in a sort of Augustinian or Bonaventuran key. Each address delves into the roots of human reason's Providential growth and diminution throughout history, bringing to light *both* the wholesome contexts and nourishing influences that have contributed to its health *and* the bad nutrition and toxic environments that have resulted in its illness. By recounting this "medical history," so to speak, of human reason, Benedict XVI implicitly outlines a treatment plan for its convalescence. In fact –

presuming you can put up this medical analogy a little longer! – Benedict XVI prescribes a “diet,” a certain sort of “exercise,” and even a “drug” for human reason.

The prescribed diet for human reason’s convalescence is *the nourishment drawn from tradition*. It is senseless, of course, for reason to go hungry or even to starve itself by failing to avail itself of the food of tradition, a chock-full pantry of insights, conversations, and arguments that can be assimilated by us and even enriched by our own partaking in them. Benedict articulates this well in the Regensburg Address by calling attention to the “inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry.” This rapprochement, Benedict says:

was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history.... Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity ... took on its historically decisive character in Europe.... [T]his convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe.⁴

Human reason becomes malnourished to the degree to which it rejects this European synthesis of traditions. Overcoming the ill effects of relativism, then, calls for a steady diet of the intellectual sustenance bequeathed to us by the Jews, Greeks, and Romans, epitomized in the great cities of Jerusalem, Athens, and Rome. These three traditions – these three traditional cuisines, as it were – can provide the lasting energy that reason needs to rebuild confidence in its own capacity for truth.

When it comes to exercise, to put it most simply, the Doctor of Reason prescribes *truly ethical inquiry*. Benedict calls attention to this especially when speaking in a political setting, recognizing that in such a setting the temptation runs deep to suppress the ethical in favor of the efficient and to focus on the short-term at the cost of the long-term. In his address in Westminster Hall, therefore, Benedict speaks of “[t]he inadequacy of pragmatic, short-term solutions to complex and ethical problems.” Then he adds, offering a compelling example to his British listeners:

Just as “every economic decision has a moral consequence” [citing his own encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, §37], so too in the political field, the ethical dimension of policy has far-reaching consequences that no government can afford to ignore. A positive illustration of this is found in one of the British Parliament’s particularly notable achievements – the abolition of the slave trade. The campaign that led to this landmark legislation was built upon firm ethical principles, rooted in the natural law, and it has made a contribution to civilization of which this nation may be justly proud.⁵

To regain and maintain its health, Benedict suggests, human reason requires a regimen of exercise in ethical thinking, deliberation, and decision-making. In such exercises, often undertaken in the

⁴ “Faith, Reason, and the University: Memories and Reflections,” Lecture of the Holy Father, University Regensburg (September 12, 2006), §8 [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2006/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20060912_university-regensburg.html].

⁵ Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI, Westminster Hall (September 17, 2010), §5 [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2010/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20100917_societa-civile.html].

political arena, efficiency and the art of compromise cannot be the dominating measures; rather, principled visions of the good of human persons and human communities, as well as the requirements to maintain authentic civilization, must be deliberated and argued about in order to arrive at the right measures of truly human success. For the contesting of political issues on a genuinely ethical scale provides the requisite weightiness for reason to regain its strength.

Finally, human reason's convalescence also requires pharmaceutical assistance; it requires, one could say, some sort of steroid by which the exercise of reason can be assisted and catalyzed. In keeping with the medical analogy, this helps us understand Benedict XVI's counsel that *religious wisdom and faith* are needed as aids for human reason. Historically, we witness this in the rise of universities in the West, the establishment of which was inspired by the revelation of "the God who is creative Reason, God who is Reason-Love," as Benedict says. "This is why," he goes on to say in his address to La Sapienza University:

reasoned enquiry concerning the truly great God, and concerning the true nature and meaning of the human being, did not strike [Christians] as problematic, as a lack of due religious sentiment: rather, it was an essential part of their way of being religious. Hence they did not need to abandon or set aside Socratic enquiry, but they could, indeed were bound to accept it, and recognize reason's laborious search to attain knowledge of the whole truth as part of their own identity. In this way, within the context of the Christian faith, in the Christian world, the university could come into being – indeed it was bound to do so.⁶

Once the West drank the healing draught of a Creator-God who is simultaneously Reason-Love, *Logos-Agape*, it was no wonder that human inquiry into the universe of created reality blossomed into an unparalleled institutional form, the university, in which human reason, strengthened by faith, aspires toward a comprehensive and integrated knowledge of the whole.

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It seems to me, then, that Benedict XVI can rightly be called *Doctor Rationis*, the "Doctor of Reason." His diagnosis of reason's current weakened state, and the diet, exercise, and drugs that he prescribes for its convalescence, are medically sound. To be sure, more could be said concerning both the diagnosis and the prognosis of human reason that he outlines, and certainly we could speculate about the likelihood of reason's recovery. At this point, however, it suffices to say that when it comes to the health of human reason as expressed in culture-forming institutions, there always exist causes for despair as well as reasons for hope. Fortunately, moreover, human reason always shows itself hardier and more vigorous than we are prone to imagine. Moreover, given that, as Benedict often emphasized, this distinctively human power of ours exists as a participation in the

⁶ Lecture by the Holy Father Benedict XVI, La Sapienza University (scheduled for January 7, 2008), §6 [https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080117_la-sapienza.html].

powerful *Logos* through whom all reality exists, we would do well to continue to articulate reasons for the hope that is in us.