

Ongoing Formation 11/2018

Ratzinger's forgotten prophecy on the future of the Church

A restructured Church with far fewer members that is forced to let go of many places of worship it worked so hard to build over the centuries. A minority Catholic Church with little influence over political decisions, that is socially irrelevant, left humiliated and forced to “start over.”

But a Church that will find itself again and be reborn a “simpler and more spiritual” entity thanks to this “enormous confusion.” This was the prophecy made [nearly 50 years ago] on the future of Christianity by a young Bavarian theologian, Joseph Ratzinger. Digging it out again today perhaps provides us with another key to understanding Benedict XVI's decision to resign, because it traces his gesture back through the course of his interpretation of history.

His prophecy concluded a series of radio preachings which the then professor of theology gave in 1969 at what was a decisive moment in his life and the life of the Church. These were the turbulent years of the student revolts and the landing on the moon but also of the disputes over the Second Vatican Council which had only recently come to a close. Ratzinger, who was one of the Council's protagonists, had left the riotous university of Tübingen seeking refuge in the calmer city of Regensburg.

He found himself isolated as a theologian, having split with liberals Küng, Schillebeeckx and Rahner over their interpretations of the Council. It was in this period that he consolidated new friendships with theologians Hans Urs von Balthasar and Henri de Lubac, with whom he founded Catholic theological journal, *Communio*. *Communio* soon became a training ground for young “Ratzingerian” priests who are now cardinals (...): Angelo Scola, Christoph Schönborn and Marc Ouellet.

In five little known radio speeches made in 1969 and published again a while ago by *Ignatius Press* in the volume “Faith and the Future”, the future Pope gave his vision of the future of man and the Church. His last teaching, which he read out on “Hessian Rundfunk” radio on Christmas day, had a distinctly prophetic tone.

Ratzinger said he was convinced the Church was going through an era similar to the Enlightenment and the French Revolution. “We are at a huge turning point – he explained – in the evolution of mankind. This moment makes the move from Medieval to modern times seem insignificant.” Professor Ratzinger compared the current era to that of Pope Pius VI who was abducted by troops of the French Republic and died in prison in 1799. The Church was fighting against a force which intended to annihilate it definitively, confiscating its property and dissolving religious orders.

Today's Church could be faced with a similar situation, undermined, according to Ratzinger, by the temptation to reduce priests to “social workers” and it and all its work reduced to a mere political presence. “From today's crisis, will emerge a Church that has lost a great deal,” he affirmed.

“It will become small and will have to start pretty much all over again. It will no longer have use of the structures it built in its years of prosperity. The reduction in the number of faithful will lead to it losing an important part of its social privileges.” It will start off with small groups and movements and a minority that will make faith central to experience again. “It will be a more spiritual Church, and will not claim a political mandate flirting with the Right one minute and the Left the next. It will be poor and will become the Church of the destitute.”

The process outlined by Ratzinger was a “long” one “but when all the suffering is past, a great power will emerge from a more spiritual and simple Church,” at which point humans will realise that they live in a world of “indescribable solitude” and having lost sight of God “they will perceive the horror of their poverty.”

Then and only then, Ratzinger concluded, will they see “that small flock of faithful as something completely new: they will see it as a source of hope for themselves, the answer they had always secretly been searching for.

by Marco Bardazzi - Vatican Insider - La Stampa.it
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See here an extract of the speech given by Father Joseph Ratzinger

First of all, Ratzinger tempered his initial remarks with this disclaimer:

“Let us, therefore, be cautious in our prognostications. What St. Augustine said is still true: man is an abyss; what will rise out of these depths, no one can see in advance. And whoever believes that the Church is not only determined by the abyss that is man, but reaches down into the greater, infinite abyss that is God, will be the first to hesitate with his predictions, for this naïve desire to know for sure could only be the announcement of his own historical ineptitude.”

And then Father Joseph Ratzinger would offer his thoughtfully considered answer to the question, “What will become of the Church in the future?”

“The future of the Church can and will issue from those whose roots are deep and who live from the pure fullness of their faith. It will not issue from those who accommodate themselves merely to the passing moment or from those who merely criticize others and assume that they themselves are infallible measuring rods; nor will it issue from those who take the easier road, who sidestep the passion of faith, declaring false and obsolete, tyrannous and legalistic, all that makes demands upon men, that hurts them and compels them to sacrifice themselves.

To put this more positively: The future of the Church, once again as always, will be reshaped by saints, by men, that is, whose minds probe deeper than the slogans of the day, who see more than others see, because their lives embrace a wider reality. Unselfishness, which makes men free, is attained only through the patience of small daily acts of self-denial. By this daily passion, which alone reveals to a man in how many ways he is enslaved by his own ego, by this daily passion and by it alone, a man’s eyes are slowly opened. He sees only to the extent that he has lived and suffered. If today we are scarcely able any longer to become aware of God, that is because we find it so easy to evade ourselves, to flee from the depths of our being by means of the narcotic of some pleasure or other. Thus our own interior depths remain closed to us. If it is true that a man can see only with his heart, then how blind we are!

“How does all this affect the problem we are examining? It means that the big talk of those who prophesy a Church without God and without faith is all empty chatter. We have no need of a Church that celebrates the cult of action in political prayers. It is utterly superfluous. Therefore, it will destroy itself. What will remain is the Church of Jesus Christ, the Church that believes in the God who has become man and promises us life beyond death. The kind of priest who is no more than a social worker can be replaced by the psychotherapist and other specialists; but the priest who is no specialist, who does not stand on the [sidelines], watching the game, giving official advice, but in the name of God places himself at the disposal of man, who is beside them in their sorrows, in their joys, in their hope and in their fear, such a priest will certainly be needed in the future.

“Let us go a step farther. From the crisis of today the Church of tomorrow will emerge — a Church that has lost much. She will become small and will have to start afresh more or less from the beginning. She will no longer be able to inhabit many of the edifices she built in prosperity. As the number of her adherents diminishes, so it will lose many of her social privileges. In contrast to an earlier age, it will be seen much more as a voluntary society, entered only by free decision. As a small society, it will make much bigger demands on the initiative of her individual members. Undoubtedly it will discover new forms of ministry and will ordain to the priesthood approved Christians who pursue some profession. In many smaller congregations or in self-contained social groups, pastoral care will normally be provided in this fashion.

Along-side this, the full-time ministry of the priesthood will be indispensable as formerly. But in all of the changes at which one might guess, the Church will find her essence afresh and with full conviction in that which was always at her center: faith in the triune God, in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, in the presence of the Spirit until the end of the world. In faith and prayer she will again recognize the sacraments as the worship of God and not as a subject for liturgical scholarship.

“The Church will be a more spiritual Church, not presuming upon a political mandate, flirting as little with the Left as with the Right. It will be hard going for the Church, for the process of crystallization and clarification will cost her much valuable energy. It will make her poor and cause her to become the Church of the meek. The process will be all the more arduous, for sectarian narrow-mindedness as well as pompous self-will will have to be shed. One may predict that all of this will take time. The process will be long and wearisome as was the road from the false progressivism on the eve of the French Revolution — when a bishop might be thought smart if he made fun of dogmas and even insinuated that the existence of God was by no means certain — to the renewal of the nineteenth century. But when the trial of this sifting is past, a great power will flow from a more spiritualized and simplified Church. Men in a totally planned world will find themselves unspeakably lonely. If they have completely lost sight of God, they will feel the whole horror of their poverty. Then they will discover the little flock of believers as something wholly new. They will discover it as a hope that is meant for them, an answer for which they have always been searching in secret.

“And so it seems certain to me that the Church is facing very hard times. The real crisis has scarcely begun. We will have to count on terrific upheavals. But I am equally certain about what will remain at the end: not the Church of the political cult, which is dead already, but the Church of faith. It may well no longer be the dominant social power to the extent that she was until recently; but it will enjoy a fresh blossoming and be seen as man’s home, where he will find life and hope beyond death.

The Catholic Church will survive in spite of men and women, not necessarily because of them. And yet, we still have our part to do. We must pray for and cultivate unselfishness, self-denial, faithfulness, Sacramental devotion and a life centered on Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI, *Faith and the Future* (Ignatius Press 2009)