

Reason in search of the true: a discourse refused?

10 years on from the visit of Benedict XVI to *La Sapienza* University of Rome – a visit that never was

International Academic Conference: *In search of the truth. From Nicolaus Copernicus to Benedict XVI.*
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Distinguished professors, students and friends,

I am very grateful for the honor you do me by welcoming me to this important conference and giving me the floor first. In fact I am aware that to speak first does not mean that my speech is the most important, but that, since I cannot participate in all your work owing to my serious limits in your language, it is good that my speech should be the first. This way, you will be freer, sooner, to continue your work in the beautiful Polish language.

My remarks have a twofold purpose.

First to offer a contribution to the record of a speech by Pope Benedict XVI, which is quite significant for those who, like you, work in the university, but which has remained less known than others. Just three months ago, in January of this year, was the 10th anniversary of this speech. So I chose it as the subject of these remarks.

The second aim, inspired by this speech, is to express some ideas on the programmatic line of the Ratzinger Foundation, which I represent, and which is pleased to cooperate with you on this occasion and if possible also in the future.

The speech of Pope Benedict of which I speak is a speech that in reality was never delivered — at least, not by its author. Very briefly, things went like this. Benedict XVI had been officially invited by the Rector of the oldest and largest university in Rome, called *La Sapienza* — founded by Pope Boniface VIII in 1303 — to visit the University and to give a speech in the Great Hall. Some professors, mostly ideologically oriented to the left, appeared to be opposed. They were very few thus opposed. The date was set for January 17, but in the days prior to the visit, a group of students occupied the Rectorate in protest and began to demonstrate in very harsh tones against the visit, saying Pope Benedict was an exponent of obscurantism contrary to culture and that the University, as a place of freedom of research and thought, could not accept this visit. It was a tiny minority, but the noise they made was great. To avoid tensions, Benedict XVI cancelled the visit two days before the scheduled date. He sent the text of the speech, however, which was read and applauded by many present. In reality, the episode remains one of serious intolerance on the part of those who wanted to present themselves as the standard-bearers for reason and freedom. Many Italian intellectuals, even non-Catholics, were deeply ashamed. I will not dwell on that aspect. I think that today we need more reflection on the content of the discourse itself, which is part of the series of many speeches Benedict XVI devoted to the nature and purpose of the university, and is probably one of the most important of these.

Benedict XVI begins by expressly stating that the university “must be tied exclusively to the authority of truth” and therefore autonomous, free “from political and ecclesiastical authorities”. So he asks himself

what a pope might have to say when he meets his city's university. In answer, he reflects first of all on the nature and mission of the papacy and then on the nature and mission of the university.

Benedict naturally recognizes that the mission of the papacy is above all to guide the community of believers, but notes that this community lives in the world and therefore its conditions and its doings bear on the entire human community. Therefore the Pope "is also increasingly becoming a voice for the ethical reasoning of humanity." (In the light of the international authoritativeness gained by the recent popes, especially John Paul II before and Francis today, this seems to correspond to our experience).

After pronouncing the words, "ethical reason of humanity," Benedict poses a very interesting question for study. Can we speak of ethical "reason", if the Pope's judgments come from faith? What validity can they have for those who do not share this faith? Benedict asks himself therefore: "What is reason? How can one demonstrate that an assertion – especially a moral norm – is 'reasonable'?" He refers in answer to the famous American political philosopher John Rawls, who recognizes the doctrines of the great religions as having the character of "reasonableness" insofar as they "derive from a responsible and well thought-out tradition in which, over lengthy periods, satisfactory arguments have been developed in support of the doctrines concerned." For his part, Benedict agrees and highlights that "down through the centuries, experience and demonstration – the historical source of human wisdom – are also a sign of its reasonableness and enduring significance." Reason must not be a-historical. "[H]umanity's wisdom – the wisdom of the great religious traditions – should be valued as a heritage that cannot be cast with impunity into the dustbin of the history of ideas."

Benedict then concludes the answer to the first question by saying that the Pope speaks to the university "as the representative of a community that preserves within itself a treasury of ethical knowledge and experience important for all humanity: in this sense, he speaks as the representative of a form of ethical reasoning."

Turning then to the question about the nature of the university, the pope thinks that "at the most intimate level, the true origin of the university lies in the thirst for knowledge that is proper to man. The human being wants to know what everything around him is. He wants truth."

Benedict XVI discovers in Socrates' self-questioning the clearest manifestation of this desire to know, and stresses the fact that Socrates exerts his maieutic force precisely in the critique of the ancient mythical religion and in the search for a higher and truly divine God. For Benedict, it is basic and necessary to understand that the Christians of the first centuries recognized themselves as participating in this Socratic exercise: for them "reasoned enquiry concerning the truly great God, and concerning the true nature and meaning of the human being, did not strike them as problematic, as a lack of due religious sentiment: rather, it was an essential part of their way of being religious." They had to "accept [Socratic inquiry], and recognize reason's laborious search to attain knowledge of the whole truth as part of their own identity."

Benedict also takes another step here. "Man desires to know – he wants truth," and "[t]ruth in the first instance is something discerned through seeing, understanding, what Greek tradition calls *theoria*. Yet truth is never purely theoretical." He goes on to say, "Yet truth means more than knowledge: the purpose of knowing the truth is to know the good. This is also the meaning of Socratic enquiry: What is the good which makes us true? The truth makes us good and the good is true." Christians also recognize themselves in this direction, indeed in this direction their reflection flourishes beautifully. The Fathers stress that "this faith fulfils the demands of reason in search of truth; that faith is the 'yes' to the truth, in comparison with the mythical religions[.]" Thus, the dissolution of mythological religion makes room for "discovery of the

God who is creative Reason, God who is Reason-Love.” Benedict sees that Christian faith is profoundly optimistic “because this faith has been granted the vision of the *Logos*, of creative Reason which, in God’s incarnation, revealed itself as the Good, as Goodness itself.”

Because reason’s search for truth is a proper part of the Christian identity, Benedict XVI is convinced that “within the context of the Christian faith, in the Christian world, the university could come into being – indeed it was bound to do so.”

At this point the discussion turns to the structure of the medieval university and how the search for knowledge and truth develops in its four fundamental faculties: Medicine, Law, Philosophy and Theology. Benedict does not say much about medicine: he limits himself to stressing that at the time medicine was not conceived as “science” but as “the art of healing”. Nevertheless, its inclusion in the university means that it is “removed from the realm of magic” and “placed within the realm of rationality.” It meant “that the art of healing was under the guidance of reason.”

His discourse on Jurisprudence is much broader, since at stake in law “[the] matter of giving the correct form to human freedom.” Here Benedict takes a “leap into the present” to pose one of the issues debated today that is close to his heart: “[H]ow can a juridical body of norms be established that serves as an ordering of freedom, of human dignity and human rights?” Fully aware of the problems arising from the continuous multiplication of “human rights” and the conflicts that arise among those claims, along with ideological and religious fundamentalism, Benedict considers this a crucial issue for modern democracy and for the future of humanity. (There is a reason Benedict XVI dealt with this question on several occasions, such as the great public speeches of Westminster Hall in London or the Reichstag in Berlin). On this question, he always wanted to dialogue constructively with today’s great thinkers. In the speech we are considering now, he points to his significant interlocutor Jürgen Habermas (with whom — as we know — he had in 20014 a famous public dialogue at the *Katholische Akademie* in München). He welcomes the fact that Habermas sees the foundations of the legitimacy of a state order not only in “the equal participation of all citizens in the political process,” but also “from the reasonable manner in which political disputes are resolved.” Above all, he appreciates that this “reasonable manner” is not identified by Habermas only with the arithmetic calculation of majorities, but as “a process of argumentation sensitive to the truth” (*wahrheitssensibles Argumentationsverfahren*). Benedict concludes the part of the speech dedicated to this topic with two important observations. On the one hand he highlights with great realism that in the reality of political debate, “Sensibility to the truth is repeatedly subordinated to sensibility to interests.” On the other hand, it is significant that Habermas, by talking about “sensibility to the truth as a necessary element in the process of political argument,” reintroduces “the concept of truth into philosophical and political debate.”

During the dialogue — first with Rawls, then with Habermas, two of the greatest contemporary political philosophers — the concepts of “reasonableness” and “truth” resurfaced as inevitable concepts if we want to try to find legitimate ground and foundation for our coexistence — for the human right of freedom, beyond a mere composition of interests according to the rules of calculation and determination of the majority. What are reasonableness and truth, though?

Here Ratzinger returns to the structure of the medieval university and to the function of the other two faculties: “philosophy and theology, which were entrusted with the task of studying the human being in his totality, thus safeguarding sensibility to the truth.” This is still true. Not only then, but even today, this is “the permanent and true purpose of both faculties: to be custodians of sensibility to the truth, not to allow man to be distracted from his search for the truth.”

What seems particularly significant to me, however, is what Pope Benedict immediately says, manifesting an extraordinarily humble and respectful spirit, truly open to dialogue with the great culture of history and the world. In fact, after having said that the faculties of philosophy and theology must not allow man to be diverted from the search for truth, he makes what to me is one of the most exciting and striking statements of the whole speech: “Yet how could the faculties measure up to this task? This is a question which must be constantly worked at, and is never asked and answered once and for all. So, at this point, I cannot offer a satisfactory answer either, but only an invitation to continue exploring the question – exploring in company with the great minds throughout history that have grappled and researched, engaging with their answers and their passion for the truth that invariably points beyond each individual answer.”

The title of this Conference reads: “In search of the truth: from Nicholas Copernicus to Benedict XVI.” Indeed, Benedict XVI is not at all — as those who prevented him from pronouncing these words would have had him be — a person who forcefully imposes his possession of the truth. He is someone who feels sympathy with all the great passionate seekers of the truth, knowing as he does that no one shall ever possess her totally on this earth.

In the medieval university of Christian Europe, and especially in Saint Thomas Aquinas, Benedict recognizes the merit of having highlighted the autonomy of philosophy, that is, “the laws and the responsibility proper to reason, which enquires on the basis of its own dynamic.” The mythical religions had disappeared. The philosophical writings of Aristotle, on the other hand, had become fully accessible. The Jewish and Arab philosophies were “available as specific appropriations and continuations of Greek philosophy.” In this context “Christianity, in a new dialogue with the reasoning of the interlocutors it was now encountering, was thus obliged to argue a case for its own reasonableness. The faculty of philosophy, which as a so-called ‘arts faculty’ had until then been no more than a preparation for theology, now became a faculty in its own right, an autonomous partner of theology and the faith on which theology reflected.”

Benedict goes on to present the relationship between philosophy and theology in analogy with the famous formula of Chalcedon on the two natures of Christ: “without confusion and without separation”.

Without confusion: “[E]ach of the two must preserve its own identity. Philosophy must truly remain a quest conducted by reason with freedom and responsibility; it must recognize its limits and likewise its greatness and immensity.”

Without separation: Because philosophy must not isolate itself but move in the great dialogue of historical wisdom, which also includes the wealth brought by religions and especially by Christianity. While theology — and Church authorities as well — must accept the purification of rational critique and at the same time constitute a purifying force for reason itself, in particular freeing it from the pressures of power and interests. (This theme of mutual purification between faith and reason returns with great force in other of Benedict’s great discourses, such as the one at London’s Westminster Hall, where it was applied to the positive contribution of the Christian faith and religions to public life and modern society.)

Benedict knows, of course, that the modern university embraces other dimensions of knowledge that have grown dramatically and marvelously. He speaks above all of two areas, that of the natural sciences and that of the historical and humanistic sciences.

The discussion here becomes much more concise, but continues to be full of fundamental food for thought.

“[N]ot only has an immense quantity of knowledge and power been made available to humanity, but knowledge and recognition of human rights and dignity have also evolved, and for this we can only be

grateful,” he says. Benedict sees and admires the positive, but he perceives the ambiguities and risks with clarity and courage, something that is evident in the dramatic events of contemporary history. Since the speech we are talking about is addressed to the world of the university, that is to say, to the world of those who are fully committed to the study, enlargement and deepening of knowledge, Benedict comes to his conclusion focusing on the risks related to this dimension of our historical circumstances.

“The danger for the western world – to speak only of this – is that today, precisely because of the greatness of his knowledge and power, man will fail to face up to the question of the truth. This would mean at the same time that reason would ultimately bow to the pressure of interests and the attraction of utility, constrained to recognize this as the ultimate criterion.”

From the point of view of the life of the university, this means that philosophy degrades into positivism and that theology is confined to the private sphere of more-or-less numerous, but always tightly circumscribed group. It means that reason becomes deaf to the wisdom offered by the Christian faith. It becomes impoverished and parched. “It loses the courage for truth,” he says, “and thus becomes not greater but smaller.”

From the point of view of European culture, this means for Benedict that, “if our culture seeks only to build itself on the basis of the circle of its own argumentation, on what convinces it at the time, and if — anxious to preserve its secularism — it detaches itself from its life-giving roots, then it will not become more reasonable or purer, but will fall apart and disintegrate.”

The conclusion of the speech, at this point, is clear: the Pope does not come to the university to impose an authoritarian faith — for faith cannot be imposed but only given. Rather, “It is the Pope’s task to safeguard sensibility to the truth; to invite reason to set out ever anew in search of what is true and good, in search of God; to urge reason, in the course of this search, to discern the illuminating lights that have emerged during the history of the Christian faith, and thus to recognize Jesus Christ as the Light that illumines history and helps us find the path towards the future.”

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Those who know the thought of Joseph Ratzinger and the great discourses of Benedict XVI’s pontificate will easily recognize certain familiar and characteristic reflections and themes. These remarks could easily be enriched and enlarged with innumerable quotations and references. That is obviously not what I intend to do. Instead, as I mentioned at the beginning, and in the wake of what I have already mentioned, I want now only to offer a brief explanation of the spirit in which our Foundation is moving and proposes to operate.

Applying an almost brutal simplification, one might say that Joseph Ratzinger’s great thought has developed along two main complementary lines. We might call one of them “vertical”: the call of the primacy of God, of the God revealed by Jesus Christ, along with all that follows for the Christian life and the life of the Church. The other we might call “horizontal” or “transversal”: the dialogue with contemporary culture, founded on trust in reason, considered capable of seeking and finding reasonable and true answers to its questions.

The speech of Benedict XVI that I have sought to remember in these remarks is typical of this line of dialogue: the confident exercise of reason, which looks with optimism and with *gusto* to the mutual enrichment of the different dimensions of knowledge — from the natural sciences, to the human sciences, to philosophy, to theology. Precisely because of this, however, reason must not be closed within the

narrow limits of positivism. It must remain open to the question of truth, of goodness, of the meaning of life, of God. It must also remain open to that fascinating dialogue with the great history of which Benedict's remarks spoke to us: from Socrates and Greek philosophy, to the witnesses of the wisdom of the Old Testament and of the great religions, to the Gospel and the Fathers of the Church, to the medieval philosophers and theologians, to Copernicus to modern scientists, up to Rawls and Habermas, the political philosophers of our day.

The speech to *La Sapienza* touched on several crucial problem nodes that have come to light for the humanity of our time, to which Benedict has dedicated a great deal of attention. Let me mention two in particular: the foundations of law and of a legitimate legal and political order in today's world; the foundations of a responsible use of the immense knowledge and power given to man by the development of science and technology. There is no question of these being in any way abstract problems. They are of evident common interest. They are at the center of the Church's concern, as was clear from the last two great social encyclicals, *Caritas in veritate* by Benedict XVI and *Laudato si'* by Pope Francis. These are also problematic nodes that, in order that we should face them in all their complexity, naturally require interdisciplinary approaches and therefore appeal to the world that, owing to its vocation, is called to interdisciplinary dialogue: the world of the university.

For all these reasons our Foundation, while conserving itself in its institutional aims to attentiveness for and encouragement of the initiatives and directions of the broad theological project and of more widely cultural work, today feels called to promote in particular efforts that are oriented rather towards the exercise of "open reason", of interdisciplinary dialogue that deals with responding to the great challenges of today's humanity. In a sense, we want to continue the Benedict XVI's commitment to dialogue with modern culture, as one of the great services to contemporary humanity, even if it is sometimes a difficult dialogue, which can be faced with closures or prejudices, as the refusal Benedict at the University of Rome reminds us.

Thus, the annual Symposium held last year in Costa Rica with our contribution and support dealt with the challenges of human ecology brought into focus by Pope Benedict and explored further in *Laudato si'*. Instead, the Symposium being prepared for next autumn will deal specifically with the problems of the foundations of law and human rights, in the year of the 70th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In collaboration with the Francisco de Vitoria University of Madrid, the second edition of the "Expanded Reason" Prize is being held, which aims to promote specific university research and teaching initiatives that concretely translate that dialogue between the various disciplines — the natural and human sciences, communication, arts, philosophy, theology etc. — a dialogue in the common spirit of the search for truth for which Joseph Ratzinger has always hoped and sought, so that knowledge should not break and disintegrate into non-communicating sectors, but retain the courage and the *gusto* it needs to respond to the great questions of man and of society, without excluding the final ones on the origin and end, on meaning and on God.

If in these perspectives we succeed in identifying realistic lines of collaboration and promotion in research, our Foundation will be very happy to collaborate and make whatever contribution it can.

Thank you for your attention!