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The Priority of the Person

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Person as the Opening to the Secular World

Benedict and Francis

The call for a new evangelization was issued by Benedict XVI and put into practice by his successor, Pope Francis. They share a powerful sense of the challenge that the secular world represents. How can the Church speak to a world that has not only lost its faith but is no longer even searching for it? Where John Paul II could counter the false faith of communism with the true faith of the gospel, Benedict faced the less dramatic situation of a world from which all forms of faith had ebbed away. One could argue with a false faith, but what could one say to a world that no longer asked the question of faith? The militant atheism of Eastern Europe had called forth the heroic resistance of the dissidents who eventually overcame it. But what is the response when God is not so much rejected as simply ignored? This is the world of Benedict XVI, a world whose traumas lie in a distant past now almost forgotten.¹ How can one reach a society of “last men,” as Nietzsche so presciently described it? Something more than marketing

is required to meet a crisis that goes to the core of both the Church and the world. A genuine meeting must take place, one in which the deepest in each is fully encountered. The Church must go beyond merely being the Church to really become the bearer of Christ; the world must move beyond the self-satisfaction that seems to enclose it. That is the challenge that at the deepest level has informed the teaching life of Benedict XVI.

Behind all the pastoral and organizational and diplomatic initiatives of his papacy is the purpose by which they are defined. New evangelization is more than a slogan and is certainly not reducible to a program. It is the conviction that the Church must meet the modern world where it is, and at the same time open itself to the vulnerability of rejection. Nothing can be held back if the meeting is to have Jesus in its midst. For such a radical adventure of faith a new theological language would be needed to overcome the stale conventions of the past. In many ways the whole life of Joseph Ratzinger seemed to prepare him for that moment when as Benedict XVI he would pull together all of the possibilities the new evangelization must contain. Far from merely conserving the tradition, Benedict has been on the mission of revivifying it.² In many respects he has extended the profound theological renewal that preceded and culminated in Vatican II, and this had become abundantly evident in the philosophical personalism that informed the life and thought of John Paul II. But it was only as pope that Benedict seems to have found the daring to push forward his own theological personalism. As yet the intellectual achievement of his papacy has scarcely been noticed, let alone recognized. But it will become evident as the only viable foundation on which his successors can build. Some sense of its effect can be gained from an examination of the unity that pervades the three encyclicals issued under his own name, and the fourth virtually completed encyclical that was issued by Francis. To anticipate the major point, we may place them in relation to those of his predecessor. Where John Paul II had made the person central to his whole intellectual framework, often quoting the council's remark that the Church is an expert in humanity,³ Benedict began to work out what this more personalist emphasis would mean for the way Christianity understands itself in the heart of the secular world. The Church would change the world, neither by separating from it nor submitting to it, but by revealing the eschatological secret buried within it. Outwardly nothing is changed, but inwardly all would be different. That would be enough to leaven the whole.

Some sense of what that would entail is evident in the conversation with Jürgen Habermas in which Ratzinger too concedes that the secular

world must first be understood on its own terms.⁴ Yet both of them converge on the admission formulated by Habermas that we also live in a “postsecular” age. That is, the secular world, they agree, not only has difficulty in finding the spiritual resources for its own survival, but cannot fully comprehend itself in purely immanent terms. The secular world has reached its limits when it concedes that it requires more than its own bounded rationality. Finding an adequate formulation of what might sustain the life of reason within modern civilization, however, is a goal that largely eluded the interlocutors. Progress had been made in identifying the problems, but the path toward a perspicuous solution proved more daunting. What is notable is that Ratzinger concedes that natural law can no longer provide the philosophical foundation on which the exercise of reason in such diverse realms as human rights and empirical science can rest securely.⁵ Modern reason, as John Paul II had declared in *Fides et ratio*, had reached a dead end. Incapable of justifying itself and unable to restrain its self-critique, reason seemed to endanger the very achievements its development had made possible. Habermas’s concession was a significant and defining moment, but equally Ratzinger’s refusal to press the advantage was also crucial. It demonstrated that the Church is ultimately on the side of reason, for it knows that reason cannot be supported fideistically. The life of reason can only be sustained through its own autonomous enlargement. Reason must reach up to the horizon of faith, and faith must include reason within its own unfolding. A more extended reflection on the same topic was provided in the first year of Benedict’s pontificate in the famous Regensburg Address (2006). There he emphasized his agreement with the Byzantine emperor that to go against reason is to go against God.⁶ The Greek discovery of reason, Benedict insisted, was not a culturally relative event but of universal significance. The biblical encounter with the Greek world, as reflected in the Septuagint translation and the wisdom literature of the Old Testament, was not just incidental. It formed part of the unfolding of revelation.

The occasion of other addresses to parliaments and assemblies provided the opportunity for the political elaboration of this point. Within the context of contemporary human rights discourse, Benedict drew attention to the most critical issue of their foundations. In the absence of any philosophical or rational justification, human rights have most commonly been derived from the irresolvable plurality of viewpoints. In a world without truth, everyone is entitled to pursue his or her own conception of truth. But as most observers sense, and many openly admit, agnosticism provides an uncertain basis for the protection of inviolable

dignity and respect. If everything is relative, then it is difficult to maintain an exception for human rights. Tolerance may undermine itself if it is extended to the intolerant. Again, Benedict never attempted to score points or highlight the confusion that overwhelms liberal self-interpretation. He sought to remedy and repair as best he could. This, he knew, would entail finding a solution within the liberal political framework itself. His political addresses are notable for the extent to which they rigorously eschew any theological or philosophical presuppositions not universally shared. The identification of the right to religious liberty as the point of access to the system of rights served the important practical function of calling attention to the numerous abrogations of it on the contemporary scene. The pope most of all has a primary responsibility to speak out on behalf of persecuted Christians, and of believers of all faiths, wherever they may be. His interventions in such arenas were not, however, limited simply to defending the defenseless. They also served the larger purpose of grounding a regime of rights on the only philosophical foundation on which they can be rendered coherent. Human rights cry out for a transcendent basis, for they express the unconditional right of every human being in the world. If everything in existence has only a finite value, how can human beings turn out to be of infinite worth? How can a person outweigh the whole world?

Even the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights cannot say why it must be so. But that does not mean that it does not indicate what it fails to explicate. Benedict homes in on the right to religious liberty as the most crucial such point where a regime of rights says more than it can say. In addressing the UN General Assembly (2008), he highlights the centrality of religious liberty, which, far from being an incidental right, is crucial to the entire conception of rights: “When presented purely in terms of legality, rights risk becoming weak propositions divorced from the ethical and rational dimension which is their foundation and their goal. The *Universal Declaration*, rather, has reinforced the conviction that respect for human rights is principally rooted in unchanging justice, on which the binding force of international proclamations is also based.”⁷⁷ This is why it is “inconceivable” that the full exercise of rights might be conditioned on the suppression of religious liberty. The argument Benedict mounts is not simply directed at protecting believers from persecution, but also at establishing the primacy of religious liberty within the order of rights. He grasps, even if he does not always highlight it, that it is the acknowledgment of religious liberty that establishes rights as a more than secular regime. The acknowledgment of the right to religious liberty

is the acknowledgment of the transcendent destiny of the human person. The secular world may not be capable of comprehending the purpose of such a right but it is capable of intuiting its significance. It is the point at which secular reason affirms its own limit. The confession of mystery is already an opening toward it. A poignant illustration of that connection is adduced by Benedict in his address to the German Reichstag (2011). There he singles out the change of heart evinced by the famous legal positivist, Hans Kelsen, whose pure theory of law seemed to disavow any principle beyond it. Toward the end of his life, Kelsen seemed to modulate away from the notion of law as mere legality to consider that it may be grounded in the will of a creator. Benedict welcomed the concession, which, even if it was not conclusive, suggested a softening of what had previously seemed so inflexible.⁸

The incident is indicative of the overall approach. Unwilling to crush a bruised reed, Benedict was ever ready to invite the enlargement of the heart by which the invisible foundations might be glimpsed. Even the most hardened relativists can begin to see that there is more to the convictions that underpin rights than arbitrary choice. The problem is that the traditional language of a human essence, the immortality of the soul, and natural law served only to obscure what should be made transparent within them. Human rights is a discourse we cannot explain. What is needed is the willingness to revisit the genesis of our philosophical and theological language with a view to rendering it more transparent. This is a task on which Benedict, along with many others, has been engaged for quite a long time. Without tackling the issue centrally, Joseph Ratzinger had consistently remarked on the defectiveness of the language of substance, including its introduction through the Trinitarian formulation of three hypostases, for the relations that define what it means to be a person. In his *Introduction to Christianity* he takes note of the challenge:

Therein lies concealed a revolution in man's view of the world: the sole dominion of thinking in terms of substance is ended; relation is discovered as an equally valid primordial mode of reality. It becomes possible to surmount what we call today "objectifying thought"; a new plane of being comes into view. It is probably true to say that the task imposed on philosophy as a result of these facts is far from being completed—so much does modern thought depend on the possibilities thus disclosed, without which it would be inconceivable.⁹

It may well be that it was his elevation to the papacy that gave Ratzinger the boldness to attempt that massive reorientation of Greek and Christian thought he had pronounced as a desideratum. What is clear is that the encyclicals soar with a new-found freedom that could well be attributed to a spiritual breakthrough. Generally missed in the public dissection, typically confined to the policy adumbrations, is the far more consequential shift of theoretical perspective underway within his encyclicals. Not only do they build on the person-centered philosophy of his predecessor, but they advance it by installing it as the viewpoint from which they are written. Instead of simply talking about the primacy and inexhaustibility of persons, Benedict has carried out his own suggestion of thinking within the category of relation. In many respects they fulfill the promise, contained in the development of the Church's social teaching, to find a way of speaking to the world while looking toward the movement beyond it.

Even discourse about transcendence can assume an objectifying quality if it is not located within the interiority of the person. This is the breakthrough Benedict achieves in these luminous reflections. He goes beyond merely talking about the relationship with God, to focus on the inner life within which it is disclosed. There is no relationship with God but the one that is accessed in interiority. Indeed, it is the relationship with God that discloses our interior life. We are called back from the rush of external preoccupations to discover what really counts, the still point of the turning world in which the encounter takes place. Without the meeting there would hardly be the place of its possibility or it would scarcely be intuited, except as the possibility of meeting. Within that meeting of persons we discover that interiority is what persons are. It is where we exist. But even more it is where God is, for God too holds everything inwardly. It is love that is the juncture, as Benedict marvelously explains in *Deus caritas est*. God does not first exist and then decide to love, for love is his being, and all that is in being exists within that love. To share in the being of God is to share in love. Theological personalism has reached its goal when it has found the horizon for its thought. There is no higher viewpoint than love; love is the life of God. To be a person is to love, for we are scarcely persons except to the extent that we love. There is no life beyond the life of love. Our love is not as limitless as the love of God but we are similarly defined by it. To the extent that we have failed to love we have failed to become what we are. We have fallen short of what it means to be a person. This is why all love points toward God.

Even *eros*, Benedict recalls, was "celebrated as divine power" (*Deus caritas est*, para. 4). Starting from that beginning he builds toward the

realization that God is love and that all love is a participation in the life of God. Eros finds its fulfillment in *agāpe*, the New Testament term for the utterly selfless love that was to characterize the Christian community. The transition takes us by surprise since they are conventionally juxtaposed,¹⁰ but Benedict's intention is not so much to discourse about love as to find the path to its inner reality. Eros brings us into that immediate realm of experience because it is the love that simply overwhelms us. We have no choice but to love the one with whom we are in love. His point is to emphasize that Christian love is like that, a love we cannot help and a love that aims at the heart of the other. We are seized by love because we know it is not ours and does not come from us. It befalls us from beyond ourselves. We cannot help but love. Christian charity is thus not a duty but an invitation we rush to accept. It is only in this way that the neighbor whom we serve knows that it is undertaken, not for the sake of duty, but for his or her own sake. We can love only if we love the other person and the other knows it as a love destined solely and uniquely for him or her. It is no accident that the Church, as Benedict suggests, has always looked to the Song of Solomon to capture the relationship between God and the soul. Lover and beloved turn a gaze of love toward one another from which all others are excluded. Each one must be for us the whole world. The mystery of *agāpe* is that, although it is impossible for us to look upon every person with that gaze of total love, it is possible for God who is love. This is why Christian charity is an opening toward a universal love that reaches each one in his or her singularity. It is a love beyond the human to which we are called. Eros points the way, but only the gift of divine *agāpe* makes it possible.

In this way Benedict feels he has answered the complaint of Nietzsche that "Christianity had poisoned eros" (*Deus caritas est*, para. 3)," for it has shown the way to save eros from its debasement into merely physical passion. Eros finds its fulfillment when it discovers that its passion is the invitation to discover the other as lovable without limit or end (para. 6). In words that echo Nietzsche's own aspiration for the "eternal return," Benedict insists that "love looks to the eternal." It can never remain a merely human love. That is the great flash of transcendence the Church brings into the world. The humanitarian impulse of service to others, especially as it is organized by the great modern states, is never sufficient for the human heart. Service without love is hardly even a service. What matters to each of us in need is the healing touch of the other who reassures us that we alone are what counts in the whole world. To be loved is to be loved as only God can love us. The second half of *Deus*

caritas est is dedicated to following out the practical implications of this discovery. He notes that the distribution of goods to the poor was seized upon in the early Church as one of its primary obligations. Its centrality was noted by the emperor Julian the Apostate, who regarded it as the only aspect worth retaining, a perception that is often repeated within our secular humanitarianism. But true love cannot be merely copied. It is love only if it is true to the truth most deeply held within it, namely, that it is from God who is love. The self-outpouring of Christ is that definitive revelation of love. This is what the Church brings to the contemporary world in the form of its social teaching: “Love—*caritas*—will always prove necessary, even in the most just society” (para. 28). It is only love, according to Benedict, if it follows that path of Christ in giving all. Giving what is needed is good but it is not enough, unless it is given in love. We must give our very selves to those we serve. “I must be personally present in the gift” (para. 34).

Externally perhaps nothing very different occurs, but the inner reality is transformed. What is given carries the meaning of a transcendent love. Meditating on how that is possible is the burden of Benedict’s next encyclical, *Spe salvi* (2007). In hope we are saved. It is through hope that what we do not yet possess and, for that reason, cannot really give is nevertheless received and given. Hope is the eschatological dimension within which our lives are lived. This is what the Church brings to a world often imprisoned within the finitude of its own self-definition. The love that transcends all that is given is glimpsed as the hope that makes it possible. What is impossible for us is made possible by hope, not as an expectation of a future that never arrives, but as the present possession of that for which we long. This is no idle dream of utopia but the fulfillment already present. The self-giving of Christ, nowhere more lovingly expressed than in the Eucharist, has completed the journey of time. Benedict does not explicitly refer to the convergence of this fulfillment with the deepest aspirations of the secular world, but he might well have presented his reflections on hope in this way. The Church brings the message of true hope to a world that has sought to incorporate hope within its structure. It has failed to see that hope is what makes its structure possible and therefore always remains beyond it. If we think of the energy our modern civilization pours into the progress of human society, then it is only natural to assume that the aspiration will reach its fulfillment within time. But this is to overlook the difference between the condition and what it conditions. The truth of our dynamic civilization, with all of its successes and disappointments, is that it is driven by a longing

that cannot finally be satisfied within it. Far from dooming it to futility, that perpetual postponement is what guarantees its vitality. Satisfaction would rob it of life. The great modern thinkers had intimations of this but they could never quite express them. What they lacked was the account of hope as Benedict unfolded it, a way of seeing the irresolvable tension of existence as their own best hope. They would have to discover that persons are not the source of hope, but rather hope is what constitutes the life of persons. To be a person is to live within the eschatological tension of the already and the not yet.

Clarification of the meaning of eschatology had been a long-standing occupation of Ratzinger the theologian.¹¹ Now as Benedict he would find the words to evoke what he sought. In *Spe salvi* he affirms that hope is eschatology. We do not hope for the eschaton but live within its assurance. That is the meaning of the famous definition of faith in Hebrews 11:1. "Faith is the substance [*hypostasis*] of things hoped for; the proof of things not seen." Benedict devotes considerable attention to the way the meaning of the formula has been handled over the course of the tradition. The presence of the term "substance/hypostasis" seems to alert him to the core difficulty. That is, that we are dealing with what is constitutive of the interior life in language derived from the world of things. This had been a fateful move in the Trinitarian and Christological dogmas where "hypostasis" had acquired the status of a technical term. Benedict reminds us that the result has been our inability to access the interior life in any language other than that of subjectivity. If truth is assigned to things, entities, substances, or objects, then our grasp of it must be from a wholly private perspective. We cannot understand ourselves as continuous with the movement of reality itself. That is the problem in Luther's heavily subjective interpretation of Hebrews 11:1, where "proof" has now been replaced with "the conviction of things not seen." This is no longer tenable in the view of later exegetes: "Faith is not merely a personal reaching out towards things to come that are still totally absent: it gives us something" (*Spe salvi*, para. 7). Benedict goes on to examine the rich terminology of the Letter to the Hebrews in which it is this sense of already possessing what we await that is the central point. Just as in the story of the Prodigal Son where "substance" is the usual translation of *ousia*, we see that substance is that from which we live.¹² It cannot therefore be the same as life itself, which has already gone beyond what sustains it. Hope lays hold of its goal. It has already, Benedict explains, gone beyond this life. That is why we do not hope for endless life.¹³ Even death can be seen as a blessed release by which we finally apprehend our true end. Death,

as St. Ambrose suggested, is a remedy by which we gain eternity rather than mere endlessness.

This is the answer to the modern world that has looked toward the future, whether reached through progress or revolution, as its defining feature. For too long the Christian churches, including the Catholic, have thought they must serve the world by assisting in its project of civilizational advance. But the contribution of Christian social teaching is to hold forth the true goal of the modern aspiration, so that it neither pursues an illusion nor lapses into despair. Like St. John Paul II, Benedict made the Church the guarantor of all that is good in the contemporary world. That requires the clarification of hope as eschatological rather than merely temporal. Making the world a better place is still making a world that also passes away. The goal of our hope must be eternal, not merely endless. This is the subject of the second main section of *Spe salvi*, titled “Action and suffering as settings for learning hope.” It begins with prayer, especially the prayer of the contemplatives who have withdrawn completely from the world and yet hold it more deeply within. In the same way, suffering can be the way we unite ourselves with others, whether suffering with them or bearing our own suffering for them. Consolation (*con-solatio*), “suggests *being with* the other in his solitude, so that it ceases to be solitude” (para. 38). But it is in the demand for justice, for a redress of all the shocking assaults on humanity requiring an absolute redress, that the meaning of eschatological hope is most fully displayed. Rather than put ourselves in place of God, we must yield ever-more fully to the divine judgment that includes the divine grace. What is interesting is that Benedict, after referencing Dostoevsky and Plato on judgment, dwells on the story of the rich man and Lazarus. There he emphasizes that this is not an account of the final judgment but only of the intermediate stage before it has taken place. We pass through a fire in which all that is evil in us is burned away. That fire is the love of Christ. “The judgment of God is hope, both because it is justice and because it is grace” (para. 47). It is in that eschatological event that the contradictions of existence are resolved, the unrequited demand for justice is requited in divine love. Earthly justice cannot compensate for all that is lost in the damage inflicted on human beings; it can only agree that reparation is owed in whatever paltry form we happen to have available. Nowhere in this world is justice finally done. Yet we cannot abdicate our responsibility for justice without yielding to an even greater abyss of injustice. Fidelity to the path of justice requires a perseverance, in the face of its worldly incompleteness, that is only possible through faith in judgment as such. The eschatological hope underpins temporal existence.

What is decisive is that the eschatological horizon is not a mere spiritual ideal. Benedict does not engage in wishful thinking in suggesting that the final judgment is the truth of all judgment. Rather he is saying that God's judgment is the reality sought in every human judgment. We cannot even begin to exercise our human judgment if we are not convinced that its requirement outweighs every other consideration, including our ability or inability to realize it. Inexorable judgment matters more than the frailty of the judges. The truth is, as Dostoevsky noted, we cannot judge one another, because we cannot see into the innermost self of the other.¹⁴ Even the person does not have definitive access to who he or she is. All judgment therefore is a participation in the eschatological moment in which justice and grace intersect. We affirm that final transparency while recognizing our distance from it. But this means that no person has yet determined him or herself completely. There always remains the possibility of bringing about a change that has so far eluded us: "It is never too late to touch the heart of another, nor is it ever in vain" (*Spe salvi*, para. 48). To the extent that we recognize the truth of that observation we acknowledge the extent to which we live within eschatological hope. What a human being is is revealed not in what they have said or done but in the undisclosed possibility that can never be fully contained within this life. The flash of transcendence in every person is glimpsed, not in what is manifest, but in what always exceeds manifestation. This is why even death is not an impermeable barrier to their communication: "The belief that love can reach into the afterlife," Benedict notes, has been a part of Christianity from its beginning (para. 48). It is in hope that the eschatological structure of existence is opened. Hope does not disappoint, because the end is present in the beginning. This, Benedict concludes, was true preeminently of Mary, who said yes to the message of the angel and brought forth all that was contained in that promise. The invitation made possible the response, but it could only be laid hold of in the event of response: "Who more than Mary could be a star of hope for us?" (para. 49).

It is the capacity to become more than we are that is the truth of the person. That is what Benedict comprehensively unfolds in the final encyclical under his own name, *Caritas in veritate* (2009), where it is the full development of the person that is held before us as "the truth-filled love, *caritas in veritate*, from which authentic development proceeds" (para. 79). Resuming the theme of integral human development that has been at the heart of the Church's social teaching, notably in Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*, Benedict goes beyond the customary admonition that material development is not enough. He agrees that it is the

development of the person, reaching full stature as a sharer of the divine life, that structures all talk of the distribution of the benefits of modern civilization. Innovations that diminish the inexhaustible mystery that each human being is can hardly be considered a gain to humanity. Yet how to resist them has proven to be a considerable challenge. It is not enough merely to call for “integral humanism,” for it must be shown to be the only humanism worthy of the name.¹⁵ This is the truth that Benedict articulates in his last encyclical. It is a truth centered on what it means to be a person. He evokes the reality of self-transcendence as the authentic meaning of progress. In this way Benedict has provided a vision of what a person-centered civilization would look like. The call for a civilization of love is fulfilled when it is understood to be the only appropriate way of addressing persons, who are always more than all they have said or done. Human development entails the recognition that it is sustained and directed by persons who from the beginning exceed their role in the process. Persons as the only genuine ends-in-themselves are, thus, the only adequate end of civilization itself. This may not be a departure from what the Church has always taught, indeed it is the good news of God’s love for each one of us that Jesus announced, but the discovery of a language that renders it transparent for the contemporary world is a signal achievement. That is what Benedict accomplished in bringing his theological personalism to bear on the larger tradition of Catholic social thought.

“*A humanism which excludes God is an inhuman humanism*” (*C Caritas in veritate*, para. 78). This italicized sentence may state the conclusion, but it is the path toward it that is decisive. After two introductory chapters in which the effect of globalization on development, with its own attendant challenges, has been noted, Benedict turns to the more theoretically profound reflection on economics itself. Not only is an economy sustained by virtues of honesty and responsibility, but it is itself an instance of the self-transcendence that marks a community of persons. Over and above the economy, the exchange of things, there is the mutual self-giving of persons. This is why “in *commercial relationships the principle of gratuitousness* and the logic of gift as an expression of fraternity can and must *find their place within normal economic activity*” (para. 36). John Paul II had aimed at the same thought in elevating civil society to the level where fraternal solidarity is exercised. But Benedict insists that gratuitousness, the generosity that sustains an order beyond the interests of the parts, is the basis also of the market and the state. He suggests that “today it is clear that without gratuitousness, there can be no justice in the first place” (para. 38). He is aware that this involves a

new way of understanding business enterprise, but the suspicion that few businessmen had glimpsed the human reality of what they do is perhaps a bit overstated. When he considers the different kinds of businesses, not only for-profit and nonprofit, but also the hybrid type that pursues profit in light of social responsibility, the misperception is corrected. A high point is reached in the acknowledgment that each generation is only a steward rather than the owner of the Earth's resources and that we bear a responsibility for their preservation for the human beings of the future. Benedict seems to take particular satisfaction in declaring that "when 'human ecology' is respected within society, environmental ecology also benefits" (para. 51).

The crucial connection is underlined by Benedict in "Chapter Five: The Cooperation of the Human Family" of *Caritas in veritate*. He does not merely exhort a more selfless concern but shows that it is inherent in who we are. The recognition that we are all members of one human family requires a new way of thinking that he locates in "the category of relation." Over and above concrete proposals, development requires a metaphysical understanding of the relation between the individual and the community by which they are seen as "the relation of one totality to another."¹⁶ This is the way the individual is valued in the family and the Church, which exist for no other purpose than to succor their members: "The theme of development can be identified with the inclusion-in-relation of all individuals and peoples within the community of the human family" (para. 54). Its analogue is "the relationship between the Persons of the Trinity within the one divine Substance." A community of persons is one in which each, far from losing his or her identity, finds it enhanced immeasurably. "The Christian revelation of the unity of the human race presupposes a metaphysical interpretation of the 'humanum' in which relationality is an essential element" (para. 55). That sentence is surely the theoretical highpoint of the document. It grounds solidarity and subsidiarity in a wholly novel way that encourages Benedict to think about their practical elaboration. He even suggests that "fiscal subsidiarity" might take the form of allowing us to individually allocate how our taxes are expended, thereby creating a form of "welfare solidarity" with those whom they benefit. The impracticality of such a proposal is hardly a barrier to its truth, for, in a sense, that is what we do in authorizing the state to support the neediest. Even the concluding assertion of an "urgent need of a true world political authority" (para. 67) may be taken in the sense that we already form such a moral community inclining us toward collective action. How such persons might transmit their consent to a

world government is one of the limitations of a teaching that focuses only on the social while neglecting the properly political. The oversight is not, however, insuperable since the emphasis on the person already guards the central political principle.

It may not be a fully developed political theory, but Benedict and the wider social teaching do aim at defending the person from the devaluation that technological mastery poses. This is the final chapter of *Caritas in veritate*. Development requires the acknowledgment that “we all build our own ‘I’ on the basis of a ‘self’ which is given to us” (para. 68). We create and we do not create ourselves. That is why technology, with its dream of extending control limitlessly, is such a seductive blind alley, for it easily suggests that we are free to make ourselves in any way we choose. We are the supreme masters of our fate. But this is to overlook the extent to which the masters are themselves mastered from somewhere else. There is no mastery; there is only acceptance or rejection of responsibility. Technology is wielded within a web of mutual responsibility. What makes it possible for us to enjoy its power is that we have been given such a possibility. The problem Benedict confronts is that under the reign of technology there seems to be no realm immune to its invasion. We know that an absolute limit to control must be the interiority of the person in him- or herself. The problem is that we have difficulty defending the notion of the soul when even consciousness is reduced to its neurological substratum. What do freedom and dignity mean when the words have no tangible referent? We are left with the moral intimations that restrain us from the worst aspects of dehumanization and, Benedict suggests, this is how faith works to save reason from its own excesses. But we still need some means of explaining this to a world consumed with the allure of technological reason. In a coda to the discussion, Benedict points to a way that might yet loosen the constraints that instrumental reason imposes on us. He reminds us that even reason has something mysterious and inexplicable about it: “All our knowledge, even the most simple, is always a minor miracle, since it can never be fully explained by the material instruments that we apply to it” (para. 77). In the end it is the mystery of the person that encompasses the mystery of knowledge and of love. There is no higher reality than the person for there is nothing higher than God.

The only difficulty is that we still talk about persons as if they are part of the order of things. In Benedict’s perceptive formulation we use the language of substance to identify persons who have already sacrificed their substance. Knowledge and love is a movement of pure relation where the person has forgotten him- or herself. It is thus difficult to say

what the person is who has always disappeared in what each has said or done. The development of an adequately personalist language sought by Benedict and others cannot be attained through their solitary efforts. It requires a recognition of the modern philosophical convergence with it. A proper humility would even entail the admission that the language of human rights, by which each person is acknowledged as an inexhaustible center of the universe, developed largely outside of the influence of the Church. It is enough that the Church came eventually to recognize it as coincident with its own deepest intuition of the person.¹⁷ But some such admission is required if the Church is to take the best of the modern philosophical developments and make them flower within the evocative theology of the person.

Benedict's instincts have led him to pay attention to the great modern thinkers, but he has usually ended by accepting conventional characterizations of them as falling short of the Christian horizon. As a consequence, neither he nor his predecessor has been able to exploit the full potential of the modern philosophical revolution. Tantalizing suggestions as to what might be possible, however, do become visible. It is remarkable, for example, how frequently Benedict returned to Kant to probe the Christian core of the "rational" faith the latter puts in place of "ecclesiastical" faith. Yet Benedict does not quite see that this implies, whatever Kant's mischaracterization of historical Christianity, that Kant nevertheless sought its purer, more interior, affirmation.

Something similar applies to the intriguing references to the Frankfurt School in *Spe salvi* (para. 42). Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno in different ways engage in a "negative dialectic," which denies them the possibility of finding God in anything within the world. At the same time they cannot affirm any image of God beyond it. The result may be a strange ambivalence whereby they insist on the need for a transcendence they can never attain. But is this not a mode of transcendence? Benedict seems unwilling to push the meditation to that next step that would suggest that the longing for an unattainable God is itself a mode of attainment. There is a reluctance to grasp the potential of the personalist language that has been introduced. Instead he is content to rest with the conventional espousal of positions that, in truth, are no longer as fixed as they appear to be. The loss of God may be stated, but it can only be stated because God has not been lost. This is the great drama of modern atheism that the Church has often come aching close to grasping.¹⁸ What is needed to overcome the tendency to dismiss it as mere artifice is the realization that it arises from within the Christian experience itself. The God

who is absent is the one who is held with the deepest inwardness. “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” is not only the cry in which God is lost most completely. It is also the one in which God is loved most completely. Can the transcendent be held in any other way than through transcendence? This is the opening that Benedict finally lays before us in *The Light of Faith (Lumen fidei)*, the encyclical he had virtually completed when he stepped down from the papacy and that was subsequently issued by Francis in 2013.

Within that bridge encyclical, Benedict/Francis no longer talk about the person and the imperative of conceiving human life within the category of relation. Now that perspective is implemented as a meditation on the light of faith that makes all faith possible. The circuit that had begun with the opening reflection on God, *Deus caritas est*, and then taught us we are saved by hope, *Spe salvi*, reaching what seemed a conclusion in locating charity within truth, *Caritas in veritate*, now looks back on what has made the whole reflection possible. *Lumen fidei* thereby gains a higher viewpoint on the whole meditation, for it not only completes the trilogy of theological virtues, but discloses the movement of knowledge through love from which they arise. Faith formed by love, and the hope that love sustains, now emerges as the very structure of the relationship in which God and man are united. Rather than beginning with faith as the conventional starting point, Benedict has made it the end point. His strategy must surely have something to do with the suspicion under which any profession of faith falls in a secular age. Love and hope are far less burdened, for even in the absence of God they remain viable features of human life. Faith, because it emerges as a truth claim, already strains against the presumption that there is no truth. Here at last Benedict reaches the target of his lifelong struggle against relativism. The question of truth on which all else ultimately turns is confronted. The great breakthrough is that where previously Ratzinger-Benedict had felt compelled to defend truth, even faith in truth, now he could unfold truth as its own movement of faith. The shift to the relational perspective of the person had been completed. And that meant that faith could be contemplated entirely from within the movement by which it is constituted, without the slightest concession to the subjective character of its conviction. Interiority had been banished when the transition has been made to the reality within which it is located. We do not keep faith, for faith is what keeps us.

The light of faith is not our light but the light by which faith itself is reached. It is a gift that, contrary to Nietzsche’s admonition, does not preclude seeking, for it is what sustains it.¹⁹ An age that has begun to concede

the limits of autonomous reason is already opening toward “a luminous vision of existence” (*Lumen fidei*, para. 5) as its deepest condition of possibility. The light by which we see all things cannot itself be seen, but it can be apprehended as we enter upon the path of faith. The sequence of steps is not laid out in advance. Yet in looking back from its end point we can see the journey that has been undertaken. It consists of taking the search for truth as a quest that carries its own dimension of faith within it from the very start. Truth cannot be declared impossible if it is to be sought. But that faith in truth must be derived from something more than a longing that may prove to be groundless. If faith is to be relied upon, then it must arise from a source that is utterly faithful. Initially it is only a faith in the trustworthiness of the call that draws us into the search for truth. Only gradually does it become apparent that that trust is most appropriately placed in a person who is trustworthy, who is trustworthiness as such. Then the searcher begins to discern the full dimension of the quest on which he or she has been launched. Even its beginning, we see more clearly, is not our own. There would be no search unless we had first been called to enter upon it. The question, or what stirs the question to life within us, must come from beyond ourselves. It is the self-revelation of that source that is the pivotal moment in the unfolding of the quest. Faith is confirmed in the encounter with the Other who thereby assures us of his faithfulness. The quest of faith heads toward the One who has all along been the source of its call. Benedict intuitively reaches toward this conclusion that the reality in which we find ourselves is inescapably personal, rather than explicating the steps through which he passes. For him it is the disclosive character of existence that stands out most prominently. We are at every point drawn toward the One who continually draws us through the materiality of things. Meaning points ultimately toward the person who comprehensively reveals it. If reality is a love letter, then the love it discloses is always just about to surprise us.

Chapter One of *Lumen fidei*, “We have believed in love” (1 John 4:16), begins with the call of Abraham. Faith is thus not a general possibility but the possibility for a specific individual. It is the call of each person by God, who reveals himself as a person. The call of Abraham consists of hearing the word of God, while the vision of the future is seen only by the response of believing it. Call and response unfold through the bond of fidelity (*fidelitas*), by which the man of faith is drawn into relationship with the God who is faithful. The promise is what opens time as its underlying relationship. Idolatry is the arresting of the moment into the present that scatters time into a multiplicity without coherence. By contrast, faith

opens into the We of the community that is constituted for the journey of faith in time. Moses mediates his faith to the community that participates in his encounter with God. Everything in the Old Testament points toward that culminating moment when the perfect mediator becomes present in Christ. His perfect love extends beyond the natural limit of death to confirm the utter reliability of God. It is the Resurrection that reveals the fidelity of God's love, who is now seen through the eyes of Jesus. Faith is thus the eye of love. It is the moment in which the primacy of God's gift comes into view. Drawing on the Pauline formulation that it is not I who live but Christ who lives within me (Eph. 3:17), Benedict shows the full relational character of that understanding: "The self-awareness of the believer now expands because of the presence of another; it now lives in this other, and thus, in love, life takes on a whole new breadth. Here we see the Holy Spirit at work" (*Lumen fidei*, para. 21). As such a personal relationship, faith is necessarily an opening to all other persons, especially in the ecclesial setting of those who are united in Christ.

In Chapter Five of *Lumen fidei*, Benedict broadens the relationship of love to show how faith apprehends the truth that it thereby understands. The title of the chapter is taken from his preferred rendering of Isaiah 7:9 as "Unless you believe, you will not understand." In a fascinating aside he lays out the alternative versions of the verse in the Septuagint and the Hebrew text. The latter has "be established," whereas the Greek emphasizes the more intellectual "understand." The apparent difference in formulations, Benedict explains, disappears when we realize that "established" derives from the understanding of God's fidelity. Faith is therefore not a projection of our yearning or a lofty sentiment. If it were a merely subjective event, King Ahaz would have been right to dismiss the prophet's admonition to trust only in God rather than in his own rational calculation of the safety of an alliance. The superiority of faith lies not in its subjective conviction but in the connection with truth that is built into it. As a relation to God faith is a participation in the certainty that is the reality of God. It is this "intrinsic link to truth" (para. 24) that makes faith of such signal importance in a world that has lost faith in truth. "The question of truth is really a question of memory, deep memory, for it deals with something prior to ourselves and can succeed in uniting us in a way that transcends our petty and limited individual consciousness. It is a question about the origin of all that is, in whose light we can glimpse the goal and thus the meaning of our common path" (para. 25). We do not simply think about the whole order of things, Benedict seems to be trying to say, but find ourselves already a part of it. Our mind is a part of

the reality it contemplates. We thus know it from within, and, like all that is known within relationship, it is glimpsed more fully the more we open toward it in love. As a personal relationship, the relationship to truth is one that derives from a personal response. The truth we seek is already there before we begin, for it is the condition of our seeking it. We must have faith in truth if we are to arrive at truth.

Faith is prior and more certain than knowledge because it is a knowledge of what is sought. It is the knowledge born of love. Benedict quotes the observation of Wittgenstein that believing is like falling in love and therefore something entirely subjective. But that on Benedict's reading is to deny the nature of love that aims at union with the beloved. Contrary to a merely subjective apprehension of the other, it aims at the truth of the other: "One who loves realizes that love is an experience of truth, that it opens our eyes to see reality in a new way, in union with the beloved" (*Lumen fidei*, para. 27). It is a relational form of knowledge, for it sees with the eyes of the other. In the biblical setting this means seeing through the mind of God whose covenantal love is what opens up the path of history. The truth of God's love, conclusively revealed in the complete self-giving of Christ, is finally recognized as the culmination of love itself. All our loves are seen as a sharing in its inexhaustibility. The personal encounter with the Other opens to all others who are loved in the same way, without limit or condition, and thereby moves definitively away from anything merely singular or private. The truth of love and the love of truth underpin the common good. It unites all who are seeking, whether in science or other religions or in theology itself, for it is a subordination to the call of truth that each has heard in his or her own uniquely personal way. The search that each must personally undertake now reaches its goal in the disclosure of God as a person who has all along been present in the call. Interpersonal knowledge as the culmination of faith affirms the validity of knowledge. "God cannot be reduced to an object. He is a subject who makes himself known and perceived in an interpersonal relationship" (para. 36). The prompting that had all along sustained the movement toward its goal is now reached in the person who stands as its overarching warrant. Like the woman who suffered from a hemorrhage in the gospel, we can only truly touch Christ if we do so with our whole being. Faith is the personal encounter with the Lord (para. 31).

It very much depends on the readiness to open oneself fully to the One who calls, for the revelation cannot be received by anything less than the whole person: "Faith transforms the whole person precisely to the extent that he becomes open to love" (*Lumen fidei*, para. 26). Quoting

Paul, “One believes with the heart” (Rom. 10:10), Benedict links all of our searching, including the rational path opened through Greek philosophy, with the ultimate horizon of the person in whom it is located. The path of faith that Isaiah opens for Ahaz, “Unless you believe, you will not understand,” is the invitation available to every man, for each carries the capacity for a personal opening within. Even when they do not know for whom they search, they still attest to the ineradicable openness out of which their seeking comes. It is the inherently personal dimension of questioning that Benedict wishes to highlight in his ever-deepening meditation on faith: “This discovery of love as a source of knowledge, which is part of the primordial experience of every man, finds authoritative expression in the biblical understanding of faith” (para. 28). He is convinced that the opening to love through faith is the answer to the crisis of truth in our time, for he repeatedly references the dismissal of the claim to truth as either a totalitarian imposition or a retreat into subjectivism (para. 34). The location of truth within a reality that “establishes” it depends on contact with that which is enduring beyond all possibility of decline. But where is that to be found? Only one who searches with the whole self will open to the encounter with another self that has already given all. It culminates in the encounter with the God who is love and who loves to the point of his own extinction. There may be a certain dissatisfaction that this does not provide a sufficient answer to those who, like Ahaz, are not quite prepared for the complete self-surrender to God. Benedict seems aware of this hesitation, but he does not explicitly address it, even by way of explaining why the encounter with God cannot take place with anything less than our whole being. Intuitively, however, he knows that the meeting of persons entails a complete self-giving. “I and Thou” cannot be said in half measures.

We begin to see this when we include the role of the Church in transmitting the life of faith. Benedict is careful to avoid the implication that this is a solitary enterprise. It is through the Church that we encounter the chain of witnesses that go all the way back to the apostles who first encountered Christ and who resolved to devote themselves to handing it on to us: “Persons always live in relationship. We come from others, we belong to others, and our lives are enlarged by our encounter with others” (*Lumen fidei*, para. 38). In Chapter Three, “I delivered to you what I also received (1 Cor. 15:3),” Benedict describes how it is through the Church that we become contemporaries with Christ meeting him today. He goes on to detail the way this occurs through the teaching and sacraments of the Church, emphasizing the extent of our dependence on others for

hearing the Word and for receiving the material signs of its transformative effect. In this way faith is broadened to include the whole community of the faithful. It is through others that we enter upon the dialogue with God that culminates in love, and we in turn play our part in building the unity that assumes visible form in the concrete reality of the Church. Even here, Benedict returns to his theme of the compatibility of a communitarian vision with individual autonomy. Far from a conflict between them, he sees the unity of truth as their mutual confirmation: "We tend to think that a unity of this sort is incompatible with freedom of thought and personal autonomy. Yet the experience of love shows us that a common vision is possible, for through love we learn how to see reality through the eyes of others, as something that does not impoverish but enriches our vision" (para. 47). It is resort to private viewpoints that ruptures the unity of the Church and thereby invalidates the claim to truth that is asserted. Departure from the universality of the Church's vision of the Lord attests to the distorting effect of individual perspectives. Faith, Benedict emphasizes, rests on the unity and universality of the community that transmits it: "For this reason, the magisterium always speaks in obedience to the prior word on which faith is based; it is reliable because of its trust in the word which it hears, preserves, and expounds" (para. 49).

That theme of the broadening of faith to the community that sustains it provides the opening to the final chapter, on the city: Chapter Four, "God prepares a city for them (cf. Heb. 11:16)." Faith calls forth the community that journeys toward God through history, but it also provides the basis for the building up of community within history. Benedict connects his meditation with the social teaching of his public addresses and of the preceding encyclicals. He continues the personalist shift in his reflection on how the community of faith underpins the temporal community: "Precisely because it is linked to love (cf. Gal. 5:6), the light of faith is concretely placed at the service of justice, law, and peace" (*Lumen fidei*, para. 51). Faith grounded in love is a disclosure of the deepest bond of all human relationships, which must now be seen in a new light. The justice that underpins the publicly common good may not reach the full amplitude of divine love, even though that remains its foundation. "Without a love which is trustworthy, nothing could truly keep men united" (para. 51). This is seen most clearly in the family where the upbuilding of faith is most needed. There we are called to make a pledge of fidelity that our finite resources seem ill-equipped to bear. It is only possible, Benedict explains, if we see our pledge of mutual love as sustained by a pledge that derives from beyond us. In this way faith also enables us to glimpse the

meaning of the begetting of children, “as a sign of the love of the Creator who entrusts us with the mystery of a new person” (para. 52). Through faith our horizons are enlarged and we become aware of “the vocation of love” as the calling for each of us. From there love broadens into the brotherhood of all human beings. The gaze of Christian faith illumines the unique dignity of every person, as opposed to the reductionist perspectives that were present in the ancient world as much as in our own. In this light, nature is no longer material, appearing only in the framework of utility, but a gift from God to be revered and preserved. Even forms of government come to reflect their divine authorization and are sustained by a willingness to forgive that attests to the priority of goodness over evil. That requirement might even entail, Benedict suggests, acknowledgment of God in a world that is no longer comfortable with such public affirmation. In the end, it is the light that faith brings in the hour of trial that is its most convincing witness. Just as Mother Teresa did not eliminate the suffering of the dying whom she lifted off the streets of Calcutta, so faith does not change the condition in which we find ourselves. But it does offer an accompanying presence: “In Christ, God himself wishes to share this path with us and to offer us his gaze so that we might see the light within it” (para. 57). This is preeminently presented to us in the gaze of Mary, who unites herself with Jesus in a prayer that joins Benedict and Francis.