

Benedict XVI : The Yes of Jesus Christ – spiritual exercises in Faith, hope and love

by **Joseph Ratzinger**, tr Robert Nowell, Crossroad 1991 (first pub 1989)
first written as talks for a CL retreat at the invitation of Don Giussani in 1986
Notes Alison Morgan Nov 06

1. Faith

Is faith an attitude worthy of a modern and mature human being? 'Faith' seems to us sth temporary and provisional that one ought really to be able to get beyond. Every day we rely on faith of this kind, as we use products of technology the scientific basis of which we don't know; we just rely on experience. Human life becomes impossible if one can no longer trust other people and is no longer able to rely on their experience, on their knowledge... Most people can only rely on the entire mechanism of the technological world because some people are there who have gone into the matter and know all about it. So the desire to move from faith to knowledge is valid.

'Everyday faith' has 2 characteristics:

- It's provisional and insufficient, a preliminary stage of knowledge that whenever possible we will strive to pass beyond
- It's a mutual trust, a common sharing in understanding & mastering the world, essential for the organization of human life. A society without trust cannot live.

This everyday faith has 3 elements:

- It's directed towards the expertise of qualified & trustworthy people
- It's the trust of the majority in their daily use of things
- It's based on verification in everyday experience

In this kind of everyday faith we remain in the field of human knowledge that in principle we are capable of acquiring. With religious faith we move beyond that boundary. Should we wait till science has the answers? This is the basic response of the agnostic. The agnostic goes further and claims to 'know' that there is no God – which is a dogma. We can try and explain the universe as if there were no God; but to go further and claim a 'scientific atheism' is an absurd presumption.

Should we stay humbly as agnostics? The difficulty is that the thirst for the infinite seems to be an essential part of human nature; our boundaries are not the boundaries of science, they go beyond it, and to claim that science exhausts the boundaries of human knowledge is to be unscientific. The choice is between living as if there is no God and living as if God did exist and were the determining reality for my life. To choose the first is to live in practice as an atheist; to base your life on a possibly false hypothesis. To choose the second is to be subjective. Pascal recommending the second, on the basis that experience might then provide the missing information. So agnosticism seems attractive, but in fact finds it cannot actually avoid the choice it wants to avoid. *We are not allowed neutrality when faced with the question of God. we can only say yes or no, and this with all the consequences extending right down to the smallest details of life.*

Luke 12, the parable of the farmer with the barns, is a picture of our average modern attitude.

Our technical and economic capabilities have grown to an extent that could not have been imagined earlier. The precision of our calculations is worthy of admiration. Despite all the ghastly things that have happened in this age of ours the opinion is continually becoming stronger among many people that we are now close to the point of bringing about the greatest happiness of the greatest number and finally ushering in a new phase of history, a civilization of humanity, in which at last all will be able to eat and drink their fill and all can enjoy themselves to their heart's content. But precisely when we seem to be coming close to humankind's redemption of itself, frightening explosions erupt from the depths of the unsatisfied and oppressed human soul to tell us: 'Fool, you have forgotten yourself, your soul and its unquenchable thirst –its longing for God. The agnosticism of our age that seems so reasonable, that lets God be God in order to turn human beings into human beings, turns out to be shortsighted foolishness.

To refuse to address this question of God is to shut oneself in on oneself; it is to forget the inner call of one's being. Newman says people are too often inclined to wait, as if the great proofs of revelation would walk in through their front door, as if they were in the position of judges rather than suppliants. If we make ourselves

lords of truth, we end by leaving it on one side when it won't be dominated; and place power above truth. Big mistake.

We have learned all the things that can be done with nature. *To be able to do and make is one thing, to be able to be another: being able to do and make is no use if we do not know what it is for, if we no longer ask who we are and what the truth of things is.* To think critically about everything except human beings themselves is pride, to close ourselves to the infinite and to the One who is infinite. To be open to the infinite in this way is not to do with credulity, but the opposite – it demands the keenest self-criticism. It's more open and critical than that limitation to the sphere of the empirical in which human beings make their desire for mastery the final criterion of knowledge.

Back to faith, then. *Just as every science and art requires persistence and practice, things cannot be different in approaching God.*

Romans. Paul found himself before the same complex of problems, in a society where no norm or value was absolute, and only the ego and the moment counted. What answer does he give? That in reality they know very well about God – Romans 1.19-20: they can see the evidence. Truth is available. Start somewhere else and you are on the slippery slope which leads to death. If you don't worship God, you worship the images, appearance, prevailing opinion that wins domination over people. For Paul there is no real atheism – we can see God if we listen to the voice of our essential nature, to the voice of creation, and allow ourselves to be led by it.

In Paul's time, Gk philosophy had reached the point of recognizing the one spiritual foundation of the world, the only thing that deserved the name of God. But the Roman empire demanded the worship of a pantheon of gods and the power of the state. There's always been a knowledge about God; throughout history we find a division between knowledge of the one God and turning towards other powers that are seen as more dangerous, closer, and therefore more important. The whole of history is marked by this dilemma between the silent, gentle claim of truth and the urgent pressure of utility. It's where we are today – the silent evidence for God is still there; but more than ever obstructed by power and utility.

So throughout history there have been 2 opposed tendencies – inner openness for God of the human soul, vs the stonger force of immediate needs and experiences.

How can we make knowledge of God accessible to people? *God's speaking to us reaches us through men and women who have listened to God and come into contact with God; .. for whom God has become an actual experience and who as it were know him at first hand.* So the element of trust works here too; faith forms a network of mutual dependence, solidarity, where we rely on others who have direct experience of God. 'He who has seen me has seen the Father' (Jn 14.9) applies to us all. Jesus was the first to come with such experience, and invite such trust; but there have been many others since. Faith is anchored in the vision of Jesus and the saints.

Jesus is the true mediator between God and human beings. But saints, recognised and not, also have actual real experience of God. Cp Exod 33.23, where it says if we cannot see God full in the face we do nonetheless see his back. Aquinas then says theology is secondary to this real experience of the saints on which it rests; otherwise it becomes an empty intellectual game. *Believers who let themselves be formed and led by the faith of the Church should in all their weaknesses and difficulties be windows for the light of the living God.* Faith that is just beginning should rest on that kind of person. The faith of those who believe is a point of reference for the search for God in the darkness of a world that is largely opposed to him. *The conversion of the ancient world was not the result of any planned activity on the part of the Church but the fruit of the proof of the faith as it became visible in the life of Christians and of the community of the Church.* The missionary strength of the early church was an invitation from experience to experience. This is our role as Christians today – to be reference points of faith as people who know about God, and who can become signposts for others.

Evangelism today won't work as clever ideas cunningly elaborated, but as the interaction of truth with its proof in people's lives. This is the door through which the Holy Spirit enters the world. Faith by definition involves other people; it is a collective act, a breaking out of the isolation of my ego that is its own illness.

2. Hope

Account of the church in Holland in the 70s, full of optimism but with decline everywhere. Was the optimism a cover for despair? Camouflage by those who wanted to build a totally different Church by dismantling the

present one – an optimism in the presence of a deliberate strategy to liberate ourselves from the claim of the living God over our life? Or merely the bourgeois substitute for the lost hope of faith? There is no worse sin against the spirit of the age than to show oneself lacking in optimism. Optimism is in itself a virtue, irrespective of truth.

The modern ideology of optimism:

- is not a temperamental thing
- can exist on a liberal foundation (as faith in progress through evolution) or a Marxist one (as faith in the scientifically guided development of human history)
- has as its goal the utopia of the liberated world, as opposed to Christian hope which has as its goal the kingdom of God.

Ideological optimism is the façade of a world without hope that is trying to hide from its own despair with the sham – the sham is that there is nothing to hope for, because what we are awaiting we must bring about ourselves, and we can't.

Christian hope

Three examples from the Bible of the difference between optimism and hope:

1. Jeremiah the pessimist vs Hananiah, the prophet of success who defended the official optimism. Jeremiah offers God's promise and its unconquerable hope in the midst of disaster. Realism and true hope are inseparable; and stand against superficial optimism.
2. Revelation of St John. The version of history displayed here is the antithesis to faith in perpetual progress. The hope is that despite all the horrors, human history will not be drowned in the night of self-destruction; God will not let it be torn from his hands.
3. Sermon on the Mount. What the phrase 'blessed are' is saying is 'do not be afraid in your distress; God is close to you, and will be your great comfort'.

Bonaventure

Said that the movement of hope was like the flight of a bird; in order to fly it stretches its wings out as far as possible and applies all its energies to the movt of flight. To hope is to fly, said Bonaventure; it demands a radical commitment, asks us of us that our limbs become movement, to lift off from the pull of gravity and rise to the true heights of our being.

3. Hope and love

Hope is the fruit of faith, and it approaches love, a love which opens everything up to me and becomes paradise. Hope is the certainty that I shall receive the love which is indestructible; and that I am already loved with this love here and now.

The two attitudes opposed to hope are despair (accidie) and presumption.

- Accidie, or metaphysical inertia, is a sorrow which stems from an incapability of believing in the greatness of the human vocation designed for us by God. Today people hate their own real greatness. During the exodus people wanted to go back to Egypt, normality, and be like all the others, rather than enter into God's promises. Being loved by God makes a claim on us; we are chosen. Many people don't want to be.
- Presumption assumes we don't need God – he's not as demanding as all that, and I'm no worse than the others; or, I'm religious and good and deserve reward not forgiveness.

Fear comes from lack of hope. We have removed anxiety about salvation and sin from man, but the result is not freedom from fear but worse fear, in the form of collective psychoses – fear of illness, of the consequences of our technological power, anxiety about the meaninglessness and emptiness of existence. Suppressed fear produces hysterical reactions to things going wrong.

Love is an act of fundamental assent to another, a 'yes' to the person towards whom the love is directed; 'it is good that you exist'. This yes is a creative act, carrying the power of approval, bringing a rebirth which makes us complete. Real love isn't the enchantment of the moment, but directs itself to the truth of the person.

Self love is to respond to the love which God offers. *To be called to the love of God is to have a vocation for happiness. To become happy is a 'duty that is just as human and natural as it is supernatural.*

Self love?

Defective asceticism rummages through one's own conscience, perpetually searching for one's own perfection, and becomes religious egoism. The opposite danger is a denial of oneself that becomes a repudiation, oppresses the ego and thus prevents it from loving.

John Eudes invites us to remember that Jesus is our true head, and we are one of his members – which he will need to use. Likewise, all that is his is ours – his spirit, heart, body, soul, faculties.

The challenge of the cross demands that I give my ego into Jesus' hands; the yes of Jesus that I hand on is really only his if it has also become mine. *It is not a headlong leap into heroism that makes someone a saint but patiently and humbly walking with Jesus, step by step. Holiness does not consist in adventurous achievements of virtue, but in joining him in loving.*

If we lose sight of God's eternity, all that remains as a guiding thread is egoism – grabbing as much as we can out of life for ourselves, seeing others as enemies who prevent us. so a first rule is, live not for yourself alone, but in the sight of God. through faith we must all learn a kind of Copernican revolution – he discovered the earth went round the sun, not vv. We all see ourselves as a tiny earth round which the sun turns; faith teaches us to join our brothers and sisters as earths moving round the sun. If God exists, he becomes the centre, and everything is held together by love.

www.alisonmorgan.co.uk