

## **A Great Theologian?**

Pope Benedict XVI died on the 31st of December 2022, aged 95. Shortly after this was announced tributes began to pour in from world leaders across the globe, mourning the loss of a “great theologian.” This is certainly the case, but the accolade felt somewhat insincere. It was as if, terribly busy people were informed by their slick advisors that it would be politic to offer some comment on the death of the Pope Emeritus before moving on to the next item on the agenda. What was meant by the term “great theologian” in this setting? And in the largely secular West, what currency does the label “theologian” carry with it anyway? What does that term mean in the parlance of popular culture? Is the word a veiled way of saying Benedict was given to entertaining flights of fancy? Or is it a politically expedient means of praising Pope Benedict without being seen to pass comment on the more controversial aspects of his papacy? In an attempt to form a more sincere tribute, let us begin by asking simply: “what is a theologian?” - let alone a great one.

Speaking from a Christian perspective, a theologian is someone who thinks and cares very deeply about belief in God; and continually reflects on what religious faith means for the ways we relate to the various contexts and communities we inhabit. As an academic discipline, professional theologians are often distinguished scholars who have both studied and taught at prestigious institutions. But the task of theology belongs properly, and fundamentally, to everyone who has ever thought to apply their hearts and minds in the pursuit of the religious impulse that is common to all people. While undoubtedly an imperfect definition, we use it now to consider what made Joseph Aloisius Ratzinger an outstanding figure in this field.

On the connection between faith and reason, and the relationship between theology and wider society, Pope Benedict was a gifted reader of culture. He could interpret and articulate the significance of current affairs in real-time. He himself grew up, and taught, in the years following the Second World War. He was attentive to the challenges of this new era, and was quick to warn of the lessons to be learned from the Cold War, and in the democratic West, of the morphing of capitalism into an untrammelled consumerism. Ratzinger thus highlighted the precarious situation of the human species, which now wielded the power to annihilate the planet, coupled with an insatiable appetite sufficient to exhaust the earth’s resources. In the face of such a ubiquitous threat, Ratzinger nonetheless remained a theologian of hope. He championed the inherent and inviolable dignity of the human Person in a theological vision that sought to benefit all, not just the Catholic communion. In defending the fundamental nobility of human life, Ratzinger tried to present a rational principle that was truly universal. He did so in the hope that the

religious foundations that made such a claim intelligible in the first place, might one day be rediscovered.

Ratzinger also offered an important methodological critique. As a professor, he lent his considerable talents to an intellectual renaissance that would challenge the very way the Catholic Church taught theology. From the mid 19th Century, the process of thinking and speaking about God in the Catholic tradition had become dominated by the philosophical system called *Neo-Scholasticism*. Neo-Scholasticism organised theology into neat syllogisms, presenting God as the ultimate metaphysical reality whose existence could be demonstrated through deductive reasoning. While the philosophical rigour of this movement had much to commend it, it went beyond the teaching of Thomas Aquinas, to proffer a closed system that did little to encourage the theological imagination or to inspire dialogue across disciplines. Instead, Ratzinger rallied behind the *Ressourcement* movement, which reclaimed the place of the Scriptures as the primary source of theology; and secondarily, advocated a rediscovery of the writings of the early Church Fathers. This was a significant development in both the Church and the Academy in which Benedict, as a devoted teacher, played his part.

While there is much more to be said of the intellectual legacy of Benedict XVI, not least of his contribution as *peritus* (advisor) at *Vatican II*, these two points remind us of Ratzinger's yearning both to teach, and to connect theology with the secular world. His significant imprint on the 20th Century, stands before us as both an encouragement and a challenge. As we consider our own thinking and speaking about God, we too should be attentive to the social and intellectual milieu which both shapes and receives our message. Benedict's example also challenges us to be clear about our own sources, to ensure that we continually return to the Scriptures, and treat the inheritance of faith which has been passed down to us with the greatest of care.

While the world continues on its course, facing a complex of challenges, it does so without the counsel of one of the last great minds of the 20th Century. Thus, we really are bereft of a great theologian.

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