Pope Benedict XVI's *Regensburg Address*, after ten years

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Pope Benedict XVI's *Regensburg Address* is remembered especially for the violent protests that followed his quotation from Emperor Manuel II about the violent nature of Islam: even though His Holiness made clear that he had not quoted the emperor's words in order to endorse them. Nevertheless in reading it ten years later, one sees that the author's desire was not as such to consider the respective natures of Christianity and Islam, but much more to re-awaken the sense of *reason*, within the heart of 'Western' man himself. The pope emeritus is profoundly conscious that Christianity took shape in the world thanks to a providential meeting of the faith of the prophets and apostles with all that was best and purest in the Socratic tradition. In this regard we are reminded of the start of *Veterum Sapientia*, the apostolic constitution of St John XXIII: "The wisdom of the ancient world, enshrined in Greek and Roman literature, and the truly memorable teaching of ancient peoples, served, surely, to herald the dawn of the Gospel which God's Son, 'the judge and teacher of grace and truth, the light and guide of the human race', proclaimed on earth."

This Socratic tradition may be summed up as the desire to follow the argument wherever it leads; and doing so not merely as an exercise for the intellect, or as a means of earning one's living, but in order constantly to re-orient one's life in the light of reason. For human reason was wounded, not entirely corrupted, by the Fall; and hence even those living outside the ambit of public revelation were able by the use of reason to gain some hold of the great truths of human life, even though not without an admixture of error and uncertainty. Pope Benedict presents Socrates himself as one whose devotion to *logos* was such that we may speak of an analogy – though only, of course, an analogy – between his endeavour to overcome myth by truth and the scriptural revelation of God as "He who is", a name that separates the God of Israel from the pagan divinities with their many names. One might perhaps object to this that Socrates's last words were a charge to Crito to offer a sacrifice to the god Asclepius, but such an objection would be rather superficial. It is obvious that Socrates did not escape altogether from the pagan shadows in which his society was covered; but it is equally obvious that he was one who sought to follow reason insofar as he understood its demands, and who thus practised to an eminent degree what the German philosopher Dietrich von Hildebrand refers to as "the natural watchful waiting of mankind before the coming of Christ".

Pope Benedict XVI spoke at Regensburg of an "inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry", insofar as Greek philosophy was convinced that to act "unreasonably", without *logos*, was contrary not just to the nature of man, but also to that of God. Its intuition was confirmed by the revelation contained in the first verse of St John's gospel, that the Word was in the beginning with God, and that the Word is God. His Holiness adds these striking words: "Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe. We can also express this the other way around: this convergence, with the subsequent addition of the Roman heritage, created Europe and remains the foundation of what can rightly be called Europe."

These words of the pope emeritus recall an epigram of deliberately provocative terseness which the Anglo-French historian Hilaire Belloc proposed a century ago: "The Faith is Europe and Europe is the Faith". This epigram has been frequently misunderstood. Belloc's meaning was not that the Catholic Church could only flourish in the Western world; he was ascribing a property not to the Church, but to Europe, namely that the continent had the Catholic faith as its soul, and that separated from this faith it must first die and then decay. Although using, of

course, very different language, it appears that His Holiness is in fundamental agreement with the historian.

The pope stated that the modern world, for several centuries, has been marked by "dehellenization". Since the Greek contribution to the Church and the world is the natural love of the *logos*, this process of dehellenization is clearly something very grave. For Benedict XVI, it may be said to have occurred both in the Church and in the Academy. Within the Church, he notes three stages. The first is that which took place at the so-called Reformation of the 16th century, with the rejection of Scholastic philosophy. In this regard one has only to think of the crude language which Martin Luther used in speaking of reason (by which, incidentally, he placed himself spiritually with those who voted for the execution of Socrates). Although this rejection of philosophy had been anticipated by "nominalist" trends within later mediaeval thought, it is only with the Reformers that it becomes capable of generating widespread religious enthusiasm.

A second stage of dehellenization, according to the pope emeritus, occurred with the outbreak of so-called liberal theology, in the 19th and 20th centuries. He mentions the name of Adolf von Harnack, while noting that behind him lay the figure of Immanuel Kant. This second stage consisted in a rejection not simply of scholasticism, but of the very categories, refined in the Greek-speaking world, in which the early councils had defined the mysteries of the Holy Trinity and the Incarnation. In this way the fundamental dogmas of the faith were rejected and replaced by mere moralism.

The pope sees a third stage of dehellenization in the modern claim that the "synthesis" of Hellenism with faith accomplished in the early centuries was something valid, doubtless, for its time and place, but not binding on other cultures; a claim implying that every culture must begin again from the "simple Gospel message" in order to make a synthesis of its own. His Holiness describes this idea as "coarse (*vergröbert*) and imprecise". He writes that: "the fundamental decisions made about the relationship between faith and the use of human reason are part of the faith itself". One might say that we see here what has been called "the scandal of particularity". Just as there is only one Bethlehem, so also, *toute proportion gardée*, there was only one Attica.

Dehellenization, however, has not affected the Church alone. The pope emeritus implies that it also afflicts the modern university, inasmuch as the empirical sciences are considered as alone worthy to be called knowledge in the proper sense of the word. Yet if they deny the higher knowledge of metaphysics and theology, the empirical sciences would be denying the sovereignty of the *Logos:* they would be refusing to seek the reason of "the rational structure of matter and the correspondence between our spirit and the prevailing rational structures of nature", even though these are the things on which they themselves are based. So he writes: "The West has long been endangered by this aversion to the questions which underlie its rationality, and can only suffer great harm thereby."

Such, we may say, is the principal message of the Regensburg address, and it is certainly no less urgent today than ten years ago. There are, however, some other thoughts within the address which are not developed, and where a Catholic theologian might make so bold as to seek clarifications from His Holiness. Thus he affirms that "the positive aspects of modernity are to be acknowledged unreservedly" and that his critique has nothing to do with "putting the clock back to the time before the Enlightenment". Very few people, no doubt, would deny this, if it simply a reference to technical progress. Yet one may seriously and respectfully wonder in what the spiritual or philosophical gains of modernity might consist. One may wonder whether a world in the process of turning away from the *Logos* is able to acquire gains of great spiritual value.

The pope emeritus also writes: "For theology, listening to the great experiences and insights of the

religious traditions of humanity, and those of the Christian faith in particular, is a source of knowledge." One may, again, respectfully ask what the truths are which are to be conveyed to the theologian by the non-Christian religions; are they simply truths which are also found within Christianity, or are they the proper possession of these other religions? Here we may note that while history and philosophy have traditionally been counted among the extraneous *loci theologici*, non-Christian religions have not been so reckoned.

Finally, Benedict XVI ended his address with what one may call an appeal for the rediscovery of the Socratic spirit: "It is to this great logos, to this breadth of reason, that we invite our partners in the dialogue of cultures." Yet one may wonder whether it is possible for those living in formerly Christian lands to answer this appeal independently of receiving the grace of faith. Dietrich von Hildebrand raised this question in an essay entitled "Co-operation with Atheists?", and wrote these striking words:

> Here we touch upon the question of whether the natural watchful waiting of mankind before the coming of Christ, is still possible after He has come? Is a Socrates still possible today? Is this high natural humanity still possible today after Christ has illuminated the world with a completely new light? "He who is not with me is against me": Socrates did not yet face this alternative. Can we hope today to attain even a natural rehumanization without Christ? (Kierkegaard has expressed all this in distinguishing between the pagan and the apostate.) It is in this light that the question of co-operation with non-believers and with those who do not accept Christian morality, must be considered.