

Cardinal Ratzinger in Toronto

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

In April 1986 the then Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger visited Toronto. The event anticipated in important ways ideas and projects that have gained prominence since his election to the papacy in 2005 as Benedict XVI. The following account of his visit was published in The Canadian Catholic Review in May 1986. The Mass described in the opening paragraphs was celebrated on the third Sunday of Easter, which this year falls on 18 April: today.

THE FIRST PUBLIC EVENT of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's visit to Toronto was a Eucharist held on Sunday afternoon, 13 April 1986, at Saint Basil's Church. The Mass was an epitome of his message to the Church in Toronto, *viz.*, that the Church of today is, as it must be, in continuity with the Church of the past. The traditional qualities of the Roman liturgy are simplicity, gravity, and brevity. Despite the presence of three cardinals and a number of concelebrants, the lucidity, even sparseness, of the liturgy was striking; a gesture, a cloud of incense, a short procession to the lectern, a quiet blessing, the brief exhortation of the penitential rite (which the Cardinal delivered in a French much more fluent than his English) all combined to give the celebration deliberateness and beauty. In the music these characteristics of the Roman liturgy were especially manifest. The congregation sang two fine Easter hymn, the organ playing was excellent, and the choir, of Saint Michael's Cathedral, drew upon the musical heritage of Latin Church by the use of Gregorian chant and the grand, but restrained polyphony of Lassus, Palestrina, and Mozart. One experienced tangibly that the Mass is the major vehicle of Tradition, the means by which we are united to Christ and so to the Church across the centuries.

The Gospel described the miraculous draught of fishes that the Apostles caught that morning when the risen Jesus appeared to them on shore of the Lake of Galilee. In his homily the Cardinal drew our attention to the sacred action we were engaged in. The Eucharistic symbolism of the broiled fish Jesus had prepared for the disciples is apparent when one recalls that the fish is an ancient symbol for Christ. And the number of fish in the net—precisely 153—is connected with the number of nations in the world, so that the wonderful catch represents the Church universal which contains all mankind; “and the net was not torn.” Earlier that Sunday Cardinal Ratzinger had presided at another Eucharist, at Saint Augustine’s Seminary. I wasn’t present; in fact it was closed to all but seminarians, but I heard some of them talking about the Mass and the question period afterwards. Comments were positive: he was intelligent, warm, sincere, prudent. That Cardinal Ratzinger opened his visit to Toronto by celebrating Mass witnesses to his conviction that the proclamation of the Word of God is the essence of the Church’s mission.

There were other question-and-answer periods besides that with the seminarians. On Monday morning Cardinal Ratzinger met with the press and on Tuesday afternoon with the faculty of the Toronto School of Theology. Given the limitations of his spoken English, the organizers of the press conference adopted a sensible procedure. Written questions were handled beforehand. After some delay—during which, one presumes, he mastered the precise meaning of each question—the Cardinal entered the room. The questions were then read aloud, and the Cardinal answered them. In his more informal, private colloquy with the theologians the Cardinal replied, with remarkable fluency, to questions as they were presented from the floor. All the expected issues were raised: the procedures of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; episcopal conferences; the role of the laity; liberation theology; dissent from non-infallible Church teaching; priests in politics; the Curran case; the implications of changes in the Church’s teaching about usury, religious liberty, and Scripture; women’s rights; the

pessimist tone of *The Ratzinger Report*; and even, during a final open-question period, whether the Cardinal thought that Armageddon would take the form of a nuclear war.

I shall not here summarize the careful replies these questions received; nor can I, unfortunately, refer you to the press for a copious and accurate report. Judging from the poor coverage of Cardinal Ratzinger's public address in *The Globe and Mail*—"Canada's National Newspaper"—the press is apparently incapable of comprehending anything subtler than a slogan. It would not surprise me if Cardinal Ratzinger's half amused "no" to the question about Armageddon were reported as "Cardinal Laughs at Nuclear Holocaust." A complete transcript of his dialogue with the faculty of TST, however, will be available in a forthcoming issue of *The Toronto Journal of Theology*.

What is worthy of note is that all the Cardinal's replies to the members of the press and to the theologians had the same starting point: that it is the mission of the Church to proclaim the revelation of God in Jesus Christ. It follows directly from this principle that the Church is essential to the work of Jesus Christ. This is why Cardinal Ratzinger emphasized continuity in the teachings of the Church rather than discontinuity, assent rather than dissent, a positive attitude towards the common teachings of the Church rather than a negative one. Thus, in discussing usury, Cardinal Ratzinger suggested that we might examine this tradition of the Church for guidance in lessening the intolerable burden that loans and the interest on them are imposing on countries of the Third World.

The questions addressed to the Cardinal, on the other hand, were virtually all about dissent from standard Catholic teachings, about the discontinuity between what the Church says now and what it once said. Without dismissing the historical difficulties involved, including a magisterium that sometimes exceeded its mandate, Cardinal Ratzinger stressed that our modern understanding of religious liberty, for example, has grown out of the Gospel teaching about the freedom that is ours in Jesus Christ.

While there is development—and here the Cardinal acknowledged the great work of John Henry Newman—there can be no radical discontinuity between the teachings of Vatican II and what preceded it. The Cardinal has a facility for finding apposite examples. He pointed out that the person most convinced that the Council represents a rupture with traditional Catholic teaching is the schismatic Bishop Lefebvre. The implication, which he Cardinal tactfully left unstated, is that one who really believes that there is a radical break in Catholic teaching, or who would want to create one, is simply not Catholic.

There was a wonderful cordiality and mutual respect in these dialogues. The Cardinal spoke to the press as a public figure, to the scholars as a fellow theologian, to those at the Mass as a pastor. In his replies to questions, the Cardinal came back again and again not to his authority as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, but to the essential point that there is an objective element to our faith without which we lapse into sentiment, relativism, or wishful thinking.

What was implicit in the dialogues with the press and the theologians was made explicit in the public address the Cardinal delivered as the first of the President's Lecture Series sponsored by Saint Michael's College. Six thousand people gathered in Varsity Arena, a skating rink converted for the evening into a lecture room because Convocation Hall at the University of Toronto proved to be too small. The title of the lecture was "The Church as the Essential Dimension of Theology," and its gist was simple and compelling: that there is no theology without revelation. He chose a striking incident from Nazi era to open with. A Lutheran theologian named Heinrich Schlier opposed the Nazi movement in Germany during the early 1930s. In his lonely, ineffective struggle he discovered the need for an authoritative teaching Church. Without it, revelation is reduced to various opinions jostling among themselves with no claim beyond what happens to be popular and no power to oppose blatant error.

In referring to the teaching Church Cardinal Ratzinger used

the word “Church” in its most obvious sense, as representing the community of all those who can say with Saint Paul, “It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me” (Gal 2.20). The ecclesial dimension of this experience of conversion is essential to it in order to assure that we have received God’s revelation rather than constructed one for ourselves. The proclamation of the Gospel, therefore, includes a mother instructing her child in the faith, a theologian communicating his insights to his students, and a priest delivering a homily at Mass, as well as the more obvious exercise of the magisterium by the bishops and the pope.

In his meeting with the press the Cardinal pointed out that the distinction sometimes made between infallible teaching, and “ordinary” Catholic teaching, as if the former were binding and the latter were not, is really a form of what he called “juridicization,” i.e., limiting the Christian way of life to what is legally prescribed. In fact relatively few teachings of the Church have been infallibly proclaimed, and none of them concern moral matters. It would be truly absurd to conclude that the Church has no binding moral teaching. The proper conclusion is, rather, that the message of Christ Jesus is to be found in the ordinary teaching of the Church and, consequently, that this is the material that the theologian works with. A necessary implication is that it is possible to recognize opinions that are not in harmony with the fundamental teachings of the Church and, further, that it is part of the episcopal ministry to disallow that such opinions to be presented as Catholic. A professor who cannot accept what the Church teaches must obviously abandon any claim of being a Catholic theologian simply because he has altered his field of study.

There have been instances, as Cardinal Ratzinger pointed out, of the magisterium’s overextending its power to rebuke, but less adverted to is the abuse of power a theologian’s using his prestige and position to advance a doctrine contrary to Catholic teaching. Each of these is a scandal, but in different ways. The former makes belief in the divine origin of the Church difficult because of sinfulness of its members, but the latter destroys theology, and

even religion itself, by substituting private opinion for divine revelation. ❧