

Pope Benedict XVI., Saint Eugene de Mazenod and his Oblates

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Pope Benedict XVI on a visit to Marseille. What would have happened if Pope Benedict and Bishop Eugene de Mazenod had met? An ideal subject would have been put on the table - "the Church of the poor" - initiated, of course, by Eugene, once Benedict had taken his seat at the table with delicate restraint and allowed his lively counterpart to lead the conversation. Bishop Eugene would have plunged into his topic without much ado, digesting vast amounts of facts during the meal and producing long sentences that, once set in motion, would have been difficult to stop. The human, the all-too-human, is abundant in Eugene. On the other hand, such a pastoral discussion about the "poor church" in all its facets seems more harmless than, for example, the debate about the existence of God and the compatibility of faith and reason, especially when the guest is called Josef Ratzinger / Pope Benedict. But of course, the pressing issue of the "poor church" could not be avoided in Eugene's home.

So, a table talk in the bishop's house in Marseille with soupe au pistou and fish á la Provence at a table set with fine Veuve Perrin china which Eugene had quickly borrowed from his distinguished relative, the Marquis Dedons de Pierrefeu. The scene sounds like something out of an overdramatic chamber play. On one side, Benedict's inhibited, stiff atmosphere; on the other, the fiery bishop of Marseille and his urgent theme. One must have delved deeply into the life, work and thought of the protagonists to invent such a bizarre table conversation between Benedict and Eugene. Yes, one must even speak of a passion for Benedict and Eugene.

Theological spaces with the power of faith and missionary fire that fit the respective characters: on the one hand, the „rumbling hooligan“ Eugene, on the other, the intellectual Benedict, who contemplates the signals that speak to the situation of modern man in view of the question of God. But there are also many parallels: both were animated by a great love for the Church, both suffered from their beloved homeland which was never able to embrace them. In Benedict's case, the desertification of the theological landscape in Germany; in Eugene's, the France of the Revolution, with Napoleon as its consequence, and the general decline of the faith. Joseph Ratzinger always remained the aesthetic intellectual who seemed rather brittle compared to the charismatic and visionary Eugene de Mazenod.

In order to connect the two paths of life, let us now take a look at some of the themes that preoccupied these two great men of the Church, Pope Benedict XVI and Saint Eugene de Mazenod.

A Church of the Poor

As the faithful and onlookers bid farewell to Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI in St. Peter's Basilica, the bickering over his theological and ecclesial legacy is already in full swing. In anticipation of his imminent death, people have been busy writing memoirs, television reports, newspaper articles, and essays. Many still had a personal score to settle with the dying man, so that within a few days of his death the Catholic people were inundated with publications. The devastating judgment of the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff (84), according to which Benedict XVI has shown himself to be "an enemy of the friends of the poor," must wake even

the last Oblate from his sleep. Are we Oblates not "friends of the poor", or at least do we want to be? Were we really enemies of the German Pope Benedict or are we even enemies of the poor themselves? Leonardo Boff is convinced that Joseph Ratzinger never understood the central meaning of liberation theology. His attitude toward the "option for the poor" will go down negatively in the history of theology, the liberation theologian believes. While he praises the late former Pope Benedict XVI as a brilliant thinker, he said he had little understanding of non-European views of Christianity. "Ratzinger's strength was to formulate in a different language the traditional theological views, especially those of Augustine and Bonaventure. Non-European perspectives, however, remained alien and suspect to him," Boff wrote in an article for the German magazine *Publik-Forum*. Concentrating on the European heritage had blinded the former pope to a plural, broader understanding of Christianity. He had also understood the Church "as a kind of bulwark against the errors of modernity". As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger was "extremely harsh and unrelenting," reprimanding numerous theologians. Boff names, among others, Hans Küng, Jacques Dupuis, Gustavo Gutierrez, Jon Sobrino and Ivone Gebara, all of whom were "friends of the poor."

How one-sided Boff's view is can only be understood by those who take the trouble to carefully study the writings of Benedict XVI. For decades, the media landscape and the academic theology in Germany have been fanning the one-sided image of the professor, Cardinal and Pope Benedict XVI/Joseph Ratzinger as an arch-conservative theologian, while Pope Francis has emerged as a figure of light from the darkness of his predecessor's Middle Ages. Meanwhile, Pope Francis has also fallen out of favor with German theologians because he does not enthusiastically meet the demands of the "Synodal Way" in Germany. Boff, who studied in Germany in the 1960s with Karl Rahner, Leo Scheffczyk and Josef Ratzinger / Pope Benedict, has been swimming in the wake of the German tabloids for some time and is in turn eagerly quoted by them.

The farewell of Pope Benedict XVI gives reason to review his convictions and the resulting church policy. What did he mean by the "detachment of the Church from the world" (*Entweltlichung der Kirche*)? Anyone who wants to understand what Joseph Ratzinger meant by the "detachment of the Church from the world" cannot get past his *Freiburg speech of September 25, 2011*. In a meeting with committed Catholics, the then Pope spoke about the mission of the Church, its mission in our time. Benedict XVI demanded: "In order to fulfill its true mission, the church must make the effort again and again to break away from [...] its secularization and to open itself again to God." The target of Benedict's criticism in the *Freiburg speech* was certainly the Catholic Church in Germany in particular: "[The Church] not infrequently gives greater weight to organization and institutionalization than to its vocation to openness to God, to opening the world toward the Other." In this context, Ratzinger even praises the secularization movements of the past centuries, because they have "contributed significantly to the purification and internal reform" of the Church. Numerous parallels can be observed between Pope Benedict XVI and his current successor Pope Francis. Both church leaders, for example, share a "look to the margins." Both popes have also called for a "Church of the poor." They are thus in line with Pope John XXIII, who already spoke of a "Church of the poor" in his peace encyclical "Pacem in terris" of April 11, 1963. Like his successor, Pope Francis, Benedict speaks of a poor Church "that has opened itself to the world in order to free itself from its material ties" and whose "missionary action becomes credible again." Ratzinger sketches the image of an *Incarnational Church* that "opens itself ever anew to the concerns of the world to which it itself belongs," because it is part of the "Savior's turn" to the world.

These thoughts of Benedict find a counterpart in Eugene de Mazenod. To be "always open to the concerns of the world," as Benedict says, „requires new ideas and strategies“. Eugene recognized that conventional pastoral care and confinement to parish pastoral ministry were insufficient. Through popular missions in the language of the poor, faith and Church life were to be renewed, especially in the small towns and villages of Provence. Benedict may have taken directly from Eugene the idea of a "poor Church, free from its material ties so that its missionary action becomes credible again" (Pope Benedict). Eugene's pastoral concept is determined by his view of the poor, which he sees through the eyes of faith. It is therefore logical that he gave his help primarily to the simple people, to the working class and to the destitute in the urban peripheries and in the countryside. His motto "Evangelizare pauperibus" refers to the poor, who for him are always first the pastorally neglected, to whom no one brings the Good News and makes them aware of their dignity as human beings. For Eugene, the missionary is a "truly apostolic person" who carries out his ministry of evangelization in and through the apostolic community. Eugene followed his vision that pastoral ministry should take on a communal form, not only for the purpose of more effective cooperation, but also for mutual support in each one's own vocation to lead people to God. In order to stabilize community life, the missionaries wished to live according to a rule that would express the communal character of their mission and mandate. It goes without saying that Eugene paid special attention to poverty, the "detachment from material ties," as a sign of the credibility of missionary action in the following of Jesus (CC&RR 19-23).

To accuse Benedict XVI of having done too little to make his Church more and more like the ideal image of a "church of the poor" is painful for those who have studied his writings and his biography. His modest lifestyle and genteel restraint serve as a model for a servant Church and speak otherwise in this regard. Another accusation is that Benedict built himself up too much on the beauty of glamorous liturgies, that is, he was ultimately too committed to a Christology that shaped not the image of the poor itinerant preacher and Jesus humiliated on the cross, but that of the risen Christ. For Benedict, the church in its accomplishments was above all a reflection of eternal splendor - an "ekklesia triumphans". But it must be countered that the "option for the poor" did not only find its place in the Church with Pope Francis, as many think, but was already a concern of the popes before him - including Benedict XVI.

The Church as a Holy Family

"For Joseph Ratzinger / Pope Benedict, family is a key concept in his theology, but also in his human life," Archbishop Georg Gänswein, Benedict's longtime private secretary and head of the papal family (famiglia pontificia), explained in an interview. As a person, Joseph Ratzinger was searching for a Church that would become a home for him, and in this he was no different from people who are also searching for an authentic place of faith today. The German theologian Hermann Häring criticizes Ratzinger's search for an ideal family world as an "unreflected childhood". Cheap criticism, one might say to Häring. But every human being is profoundly shaped by his childhood and youth and by the experience of security in a family. Eugene de Mazenod experienced crises in his childhood that threatened his very existence: the growing isolation of the family due to the flight from the French Revolution and the increasing estrangement of his parents which led to the breakup of their marriage - these were the circumstances that accompanied Eugene's youth. Growing up in exile in Italy, he never got over the shame of his expulsion and tried in vain to restore his family's honor. The divorce of his

parents and thus the breakup of his family was a traumatic experience for the young Eugene. The high ideal he cherished for his family is shown by his written statements: "I adore my family. I would let myself be cut to pieces for certain members... I would give my life without hesitation for my father, my mother, my grandmother, my sister, and for my father's two brothers" (*Écrits spirituels XIV, 77*). It can be assumed that Eugene later projected his high family ideal onto his religious community. He regarded his confreres as his family and, as Superior General, saw himself in the role of a "pater familias" - often very strict, but at the same time kind and caring. Eugene always took the departure of a member of his congregation personally and showed himself deeply hurt.

Like Eugene, Benedict XVI cultivated a high ideal of family. For all his seclusion, however, he also loved to be together. As Archbishop of Munich, he was known to spend his free time at a Bavarian Benedictine monastery. After the death of his sister Maria, who had cared for him when he was a professor, bishop and prefect, Ratzinger's housekeeping, and later also the care of the Pope Emeritus, was taken over until the end by sisters of the community "Memores Domini", belonging to the movement "Comunione e Liberazione". In personal encounters with the New Spiritual Movements, Benedict XVI always felt as if he were in the circle of his family and was able to open up as a whole person behind closed doors, as associates close to him describe him. Joseph Ratzinger was as receptive to human closeness and attention as any other human being. For someone who, like Pope Benedict, saw the Church as a "holy family," the betrayal of that family by individual members must have been tremendously painful. Here, as in the case of abuse by clergy, for Ratzinger it was always individual perpetrators who, through their abuse, betrayed above all their actual spiritual vocation. In the *2011 Freiburg speech*, Benedict lamented that the message of faith was being obscured by the "scandals of the heralds of the faith." As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Joseph Ratzinger was, according to psychiatrist and papal adviser Manfred Lütz, the one in the Curia who most resolutely advocated consistent action against abusers and help for victims. Lütz suggests that Ratzinger only became sensitive to the abuse issue during his time as prefect. After his election as Pope, Benedict XVI acted in an exemplary manner, according to Lütz.

Benedict, the Children and the Youth

There is a "Pope Benedict School" in Josef Ratzinger's Bavarian homeland. It is worthwhile to see how Benedict met children as an active Pope. Witnesses confirm that the Pope, who otherwise seemed rather shy, was completely devoted to children, listened to them and answered their questions. There was a little boy who wanted to know if Jesus was really in the host, even if you couldn't see him. "There are many things we do not see," Pope Benedict replied. "We do not see our mind, and yet we have it. But we can see and feel the effects." Benedict explained to the children how they are able to recognize when Jesus is there - such as when people change, mend their ways, forgive one another. When asked what the point of going to Mass and Communion was in the first place, Benedict summed it up quite simply: The Eucharist and Communion serve to "find the center of life from which I live. If God is not there in my life, then the most important friendship is missing, I also miss joy, which is very important in life." Taking the youngest seriously and answering their questions in a childlike and personal way - this is what the late Pope gave parents and teachers to take with them for their everyday lives.

It is testified several times that Eugene de Mazenod must have been a successful catechist who looked for didactically sophisticated ways to awaken the interest of children and young people for religious topics. Like Benedict, Eugene chose dialogue as a didactic tool with children - and this at the beginning of the 19th century. Eugene wrote: "We attach importance to the fact that the children do not only learn by heart. Every effort is made to arrange the teachings in such a way that religion can develop in the children, and we are careful to ensure that our teaching encourages the children to take an active part in it. This method is excellent because it challenges the children to think and search for appropriate answers. The catechists also benefit because they learn a simple teaching style that includes all aspects of religion...The children are the poorest in the parish, children of tavern keepers, etc..." (*Écrits spirituels XIV, 110f*).

The letter written to Eugene by a Mr. Gaston, looking back on his school days, testifies to the enormous influence Eugene had through his catechism lessons: "I will never forget that - after God - it was you to whom I owe my little knowledge of the faith...Yes, let me say it again, in this respect you were an enormous help to me, and be assured that I appreciate the enormous value...I ask you to pray for me, for I know the efficacy of your prayers with God..." (*Transcribed in A. Rey, Histoire de Monseigneur de Mazenod, vol I, 112f*).

Pope Benedict's didactics for the transmission of the faith can be reduced to a short denominator: Encouragement and aspiration. At the World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, Pope Benedict preached to a million people about the nature of the Eucharist. While, as is so often the case in Germany, some church workers grumbled about a perceived missed opportunity, there was thunderous applause from the young people with shouts of „Benedetto“. "The Pope put us through something and took us seriously," one youth told astonished journalists. Benedict never pandered to the youth. He remained completely himself. The young people sensed that. For some he may have seemed a bit awkward and stiff, but he was always authentic when he opened up the religious promises of Christianity to the young people and trusted them to use them to develop their personalities and improve the world. (*Heike Helmchen-Menke, Liturgie im Leben, CIG, 2023/4, 8; 2023/3, 8.*)

The Youth Congregation founded by Eugene produced many fruits. Frank Santucci, professor of Oblate Spirituality at OST in Texas, has studied the subject in more detail. He writes in his book *Eugene de Mazenod* (pp 62-63): „The OMI General Archives in Rome have the originals of 238 letters written by members of the Youth Congregation to Eugene. They give a glimpse, albeit very incomplete, of what was communicated to them. What characterised these letters was the warmth and affection that these young men expressed. They thanked him for being a tender father, for his fatherly advice, and for the friendship that existed between them. Of the letters we have, the most prolific of these writers was Adrien Chappuis, of whom we have 79 letters addressed to Eugene between 1817 and 1859. He had been a member of the Congregation since 1813, an constantly referred to to Eugene as a respected friend...He recalled how from the age of 12 he had leant on Eugene...He expressed regret that he could not live close to Eugene so as to follow in his steps. The correspondence and friendship was to last until Eugene's death.“

"Leave nothing undared for the Gospel"

In his message for the 44th World Communications day on Sunday, May 16, 2010, Pope Benedict XVI. writes:

„The theme of this year’s World Communications Day - The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word – is meant to coincide with the Church’s celebration of the Year for Priests. It focuses attention on the important and sensitive pastoral area of digital communications, in which priests can discover new possibilities for carrying out their ministry to and for the Word of God... Yet the recent, explosive growth and greater social impact of these media make them all the more important for a fruitful priestly ministry. All priests have as their primary duty the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and the communication of his saving grace in the sacraments... Responding adequately to this challenge amid today’s cultural shifts, to which young people are especially sensitive, necessarily involves using new communications technologies. The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul’s exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16)... Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis... At the same time, priests must always bear in mind that the ultimate fruitfulness of their ministry comes from Christ himself, encountered and listened to in prayer; proclaimed in preaching and lived witness; and known, loved and celebrated in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation.“

Pope Benedict implies in his message that priests are called to an apostolic versatility that impels them to adapt to new situations by becoming “all things to all people” (1 Cor 9:22). The alternative is to remain living anachronisms, whose pastoral ministry will be stunted by self-imposed limitations, and misleading icons, who seem to advertise that the Church’s message and life are somehow incompatible with the new age. To take advantage of cyberspace, the Pope says, is a clearly Catholic enterprise, insofar as pastoral outreach here easily embodies the universality of the Church’s mission (*cf. Fr. Roger J. Landry, The Anchor, February 5, 2010*)

The 2022 General Chapter of the Oblates gives several principles to guide the Oblates of the world fulfill their responsibilities as they initiate, continue or expand their missionary presence in today’s world and thus declare their willingness to comply with Eugene's request to „leave nothing undared for the Gospel“ in the future.

In their address to the Oblate world, the capitulars of the 37th General Chapter write: The cries of the poor demand of us a different way of living and a revisiting of the way we do our mission, in the footsteps of St. Eugene. This mission retains its original identity of evangelizing the poor with their many faces (C.5) but in a bolder way.

At the end of this 37th General Chapter, we have made some commitments to life and action: We are missionaries, like the disciples of Emmaus, on the road with a burning heart.

- a. Following Christ, the first pilgrim and missionary, we commit ourselves to a true personal and communal conversion.
- b. We will work to reorganize the structures of the Congregation for a better mission at the service of the poor.

c. We commit ourselves to work united as a body but also as Units and persons, for the protection of our common home.

d. We want to console and support all those who feel abused or offended in their being and in all aspects of their life, and to be reconciled with them. We give the first place to minors and vulnerable adults but also to all those who, through our actions and behavior, have been offended.

e. We make a commitment to go to the aid of the poor with their many faces. They are disfigured by suffering. They are marked by the stigma of war. They are traumatized by abuse and exploitation at work. They are alienated from their own original history. They are scorned in the land of welcome and exile. They are humiliated because of their color, culture, or language.

f. We take the responsibility to do much more to promote justice and peace. The earth belongs to God, but the fruits of the earth belong to all.

g. We commit ourselves to promote the Oblate charism in communion with the lay associates (R 37a).

As Eugene de Mazenod said, “how vast the field that lies before us!”

11. The Virgin Mary, our Mother, the pilgrim of the Visitation, walks with us. On Monday, October 3, 2022, the Holy Father also recommended that we always be accompanied on our pilgrimage by our Mother Mary.

12. May St. Eugene, our Founder, continue to intercede for us and for the poor we serve, and may his intercession renew us each day in the love of Christ, the first missionary and pilgrim.

*Praised be Jesus Christ and Mary Immaculate!
Nemi, Italy, October 14, 2022.
The Capitulars of the 37th General Chapter.*

We have studied certain aspects of Benedict’s and Eugene’s way of faith and thinking, touching upon themes that preoccupied these two great men of the Church. There are certainly parallels to be found. The charism of Saint Eugene de Mazenod lives on in his sons, the Oblates of Mary Immaculate, and in the entire Mazenodian family, even today in the 21st century, as the General Chapter 2022 showed. The course for the future has also been set. For Pope Benedict XVI, it is much too early to place his life's work in the history of the Church. It remains to be seen if and how his pontificate will prove itself, which interpretations will emerge and prevail, how the whole thing will develop.

An appreciation of Pope Benedict XVI cannot do without a brief mention of the writings he has left us. The Catechism, promulgated in 1992, of which he had been its leading editor, is a clear and profound eloquent „footprint“ of Joseph Ratzinger's spirit. The deposit of faith can be brought to the point in an understandable way, comprehensively and for people of all cultures: this is what the Catechism expresses. Other works, such as his easy-to-read „*Faith, Hope, and Charity*“ (Einübung in Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe), as well as countless homilies and documents published while still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for example on

moral teaching, also underline the greatness of his theology. I enjoy reading Ratzinger, if only because of his writing style. He was a guarantor of truth, even if it was inconvenient, and he wanted to communicate it through dialogue, from reason to reason. Courage and humility combined, that's what made him likeable.

His *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*, in which he opened up the lasting treasure of a beautiful and reverend divine service to the Church and above all to a generation growing up in the midst of liturgical distortions, could and will still bear much fruit.

Anyone who delves into Joseph Ratzinger's trilogy on *Jesus of Nazareth*, his *Introduction to Christianity*, or his reflections on the *Spirit of the Liturgy* enters theological spaces that can certainly be compared with the works of Augustine and Thomas Aquinas.

Benedict's resignation in 2013 did not seem to fit his theology. He was certainly aware of the implications of this. He was also aware that he had taken the splendor off the papacy. Did his theological concept fail at this point, or was it rather through this that his self-image as a modest worker in the Lord's vineyard came to the fore?