

In Just Two Images

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In these days, when we are taking stock of a pontificate, I wanted to pause and look at two images that chronologically enclose the almost eight years of Benedict XVI's teaching and that contain something paradigmatic. The first image comes from his visit to his former university, Regensburg, during one of his first voyages outside the Vatican. The second is still fresh in our memories: his first speech at the Synod on the New Evangelization last October. In the first, he was surrounded by the German academic world, and he addressed Western reason. In the second, he was surrounded by Cardinals and Bishops, and he addressed the whole Church, explaining the nature of faith. We can say that we have seen the end of a historic parabola, which extends from an 18th century that claimed to free reason from the "chains" of faith, to the late 20th and early 21st centuries, which have witnessed a weak, post-modern reason that quickly retreats, ceding its place to the affirmation of reactivity, sentiment, or the right to an opinion. And the image that seals this arc, inaugurating a new era, is that of Benedict XVI among German intellectuals, challenging the West (a Pope!) to regain reason, to "broaden its limits," blowing apart the "modern self-limitation" that reduces the range of reason to what is scientifically measurable. The Pope's entire speech in Regensburg (as then happened with the great speeches that followed it: before the Bundestag, before the British Parliament, for La Sapienza in Rome, at the Collège des Bernardins in Paris) was an example of a reason broadened by faith, able to take in all of reality without censoring anything—and, therefore, capable of real dialogue. The second image seems to follow the script of the best pages of the *Acts of the Apostles*, in which Peter stood up in the midst of his brothers to explain the miracles that they had all witnessed. Like Peter, Benedict XVI also stood up in the midst of a synodal assembly that was preparing to begin its discussions about methods and instruments, words and initiatives, that would be able to communicate the faith. And, to the surprise of all, he indicated One who was present: "The first word, the true initiative, the true activity comes from God (...). God is always the beginning." It's almost as if he were saying to his fellow Bishops, "Don't worry, He is present, and this is the most interesting thing that we can communicate." How many Bishops had to change their speeches? Two gestures—one before the world and the other before the Church—to teach what reason is and to show what faith is. Two gestures with one origin: the humanity of Benedict XVI, broadened by the encounter with Christ. "The Lord has done great things for us; how happy we are," we can repeat with the Psalmist. And from now on? Saint Paul instructs us: "If God is for us, who can be against us?"

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