



A PASTORAL LETTER

On the Death of Pope Benedict XVI

To be read at all Masses on Sunday 8th January 2023

My dear brothers and sisters,

On New Year's Eve we received news of the death of Pope Benedict XVI and this week witnessed the funeral rites for a man who became as Saint Peter's Successor, a Holy Father for us all. Pope Benedict will be long remembered on these shores for the unforgettable days of his visit to Britain in September 2010. The British people quickly saw beyond distorted images and media voices, to recognise a gentle pastor who sought to communicate the precious inheritance of the faith, with clarity and simplicity. In the words of our then Prime Minister, Pope Benedict *"Challenged the whole country to sit up and think."* In those same days we shared with Pope Benedict not only the challenge of our Catholic faith, but we celebrated its joy on the streets of our cities.

The Liturgy at the end of Christmastide speaks of Christ revealed to all peoples, the One whom the voice of the Father declares is *"My Son, the Beloved"*ⁱ, the same *"Jesus (who) went about doing good and curing all who had fallen into the power of the Devil"*ⁱⁱ. In his last Spiritual Testament, Pope Benedict urges us to *"Stand firm in the faith!"* and *"Do not be confused!"* He speaks of the reasonableness of the faith emerging anew in our time because *"Jesus Christ is truly the Way, the Truth, and the Life – and the Church, with all her shortcomings, is truly His Body."* The shortcomings which Pope Benedict speaks of are our sins, which leads him to make a final request: *"I humbly ask you to pray for me, so that the Lord may admit me to the eternal dwellings, despite all my sins and shortcomings."* This is our final duty of charity for all who have died, and we must not fail to pray for the soul of a man who became the Pope for us.

Through his 95 years Joseph Ratzinger used his immense learning to engage not merely in the intellectual world where his writings will long endure, but to support the faith of all believers, which led him to speak with striking simplicity in his preaching. I remember at *World Youth Day Madrid*, during a violent thunderstorm, he encouraged the millions of young people present to draw this lesson for a life-time, that through every storm, we must keep our eyes fixed on Jesus Christ present with us in the Holy Eucharist. Pope Francis reflected that his predecessor had lived his vocation with total dedication because, *"His gaze (was) always on Christ, the risen Christ, present and alive in the Eucharist"*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Looking to Christ, Pope Benedict never lacked courage nor feared unpopularity. As a 16-year-old from a family opposed to the pagan ideology of the Nazis, he was confronted by an SS Officer seeking to recruit him into that criminal organisation with its vitriolic hatred of the Church and the Catholic Priesthood. The teenage Joseph Ratzinger had the courage to speak up and insist in the face of a torrent of threats and ridicule, that he wanted to dedicate his life as a Catholic Priest. In one who was reserved by nature, the same supernatural courage would manifest itself throughout his life. Joseph Ratzinger emerged as one of the outstanding minds of his generation, yet he accepted with courage the call to leave academic life to become a diocesan bishop; then to serve long years beside Saint John Paul II as his close co-worker; and finally with failing health, in his 78th year, courage still did not fail him when called to bear the immense responsibility of becoming the Successor of Saint Peter. We might recognise this same courage in his momentous decision to relinquish the Petrine Office, when advancing age and failing strength led him to conclude he could no longer fulfil this service to the whole Church.

In meeting Pope Benedict when first appointed Bishop of Shrewsbury, I remember his serene insistence in the face of the challenges we face to have courage. *“Courage, courage, courage”* was the word he repeated to me. As we pray for the eternal repose of the soul of this great servant of the Church, let us ask that in our different vocations, we may share this same courage in responding to all the Lord asks of us and so give witness to our Catholic faith in Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday, today and forever^{iv}.

In a letter written by Pope Benedict less than 12 months ago, he reflected that *“Quite soon, I shall find myself before the final judge of my life.”* Looking back at his long life, he said he had reason for fear and trembling yet *“In light of the hour of judgment, the grace of being a Christian becomes all the more clear to me. It grants me knowledge, and indeed, friendship, with the judge of my life, and thus allows me to pass confidently through the dark door of death.”* We know Pope Benedict passed through that door with the last words: *“Jesus, I love You.”* May the same be true for each of us. And may this gentle, courageous *servant of the servants of God* go accompanied by our gratitude and our prayers, that he may rest in peace.

+ Mark

Bishop of Shrewsbury

ⁱ Mt. 3:17

ⁱⁱ Acts 10:38

ⁱⁱⁱ Address to Cardinals 15th March 2013

^{iv} Cf. Heb. 13:8