

# Benedict XVI: Prolegomena to a Magisterium for Life

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ABSTRACT: During his tenure as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981-2005), Benedict XVI delivered several key addresses dealing with the problem of abortion. In these addresses he analyzes the anthropological dispute that constitutes the background of the abortion controversy. Criticizing the concept of freedom-as-autonomy that justifies abortion, he limns a relational and self-donatory concept of freedom that protects the lives of the vulnerable.

THE ELECTION OF Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI on April 19, 2005 caused a sudden media scrutiny of the prolific writings of the new pope. Predictably the media analyzed and criticized the documents according to its own preoccupations: church authority, religious pluralism, sexuality, and the interface between religion and politics. Little attention has been given so far to the approach of the new pope to human life issues, especially the neuralgic issues of abortion and euthanasia. The purpose of my paper is to explore the treatment of human life questions by Benedict XVI during his tenure as the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1981-2005). It is my contention that in several major addresses, Cardinal Ratzinger made a central contribution to the cause of human life by illuminating the background anthropological disputes, especially those concerning the nature of human freedom, that have made the case for the comprehensive right to life unintelligible in elite sectors of the Western world.

## LEGACY AS CDF PREFECT

During his tenure as its Prefect, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith issued several major documents defending the right to life of the

innocent from the moment of conception. Prominent among them are *Donum Vitae*, the *Instruction for Respecting Life from its Origins* (1987)<sup>1</sup> which criticizes certain techniques of assisted procreation, and the *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (2002),<sup>2</sup> which insists on the duty of all politicians—Catholics especially—to oppose legalized abortion and euthanasia out of a respect for human rights. The disciplinary actions taken by the Congregation during Cardinal Ratzinger's direction also reflect a concern to defend the life of the innocent. The censures of the moral theologians Charles Curran (1986)<sup>3</sup> and Marciano Vidal (2001)<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), *Donum Vitae*, "Instruction on Respecting Life in its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation" (1987), [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_198](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_198).

<sup>2</sup> See CDF, *Doctrinal Note on some Questions regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life* (2002), [www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_200](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_200).

<sup>3</sup> See CDF, *Letter regarding the Suspension of Charles Curran from the Teaching of Theology*, AAS 79 (1987): 116-18.

<sup>4</sup> See CDF, *Notification regarding certain Writings of Fr. Marciano Vidal*, C.Ss.R., AAS 93 (2001): 545-55.

explicitly cite errors and ambiguities in their statements on abortion as matters of grave ecclesiastic concern.

Beyond the corporate documents and actions of the congregation he headed, the future Benedict XVI delivered numerous addresses on the controversial doctrinal issues of the day. A revered professional theologian, Cardinal Ratzinger often analyzed the cultural forces that have made the church's teaching on faith and morals literally absurd to certain educated publics and that have eviscerated the content of this teaching in many culturally assimilated institutions of the church itself. These addresses are of particular interest to the pro-life logic of the new papacy since they explicitly relate the church-culture chasm, ultimately an anthropological crisis, to the contested right to life. Two addresses in particular, *The Problem of Threats to Human Life* (1991)<sup>5</sup> and *Truth and Freedom* (1996),<sup>6</sup> illustrate these concerns of the future Benedict XVI.

#### ANTHROPOLOGICAL DISTORTIONS

An address to the Extraordinary Consistory of Cardinals in 1991, which studied the increasing assaults on the right to life of the innocent, *The Problem of Threats to Human Life* studies the contemporary mentalities that have created a culture that paradoxically proclaims an ever-expanding list of human rights while it increasingly violates the right to existence of the most vulnerable members of society. Cardinal Ratzinger detects several strands of the distorted mentality that has provoked the emergence of such a lethal paradox.

First and primary is a distorted concept of freedom, in which subjectivism has triumphed over every attachment to an objective order of truth: "In a world in which every moral conviction lacks a common reference to truth, such a conviction has the value of a mere opinion. It would be an expression of intolerance to seek to impose that conviction

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Problem of Threats to Human Life* (1991), [www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc\\_view.cfm?recnum=187](http://www.catholicculture.org/docs/doc_view.cfm?recnum=187). Hereafter, PTHL.

<sup>6</sup> Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Truth and Freedom* (1996), [www.ewtn.com/library/theology/truefree.htm](http://www.ewtn.com/library/theology/truefree.htm). Hereafter, TF.

on others through legislation, thus limiting their freedom. Social life, which cannot be established through a common, objective referent, should be thought of as the result of a compromise of interests, devoted to guaranteeing the maximum freedom possible for each one."<sup>7</sup> In such a polity, the voiceless minority is doomed to destruction since it cannot signal its interests in the civic concertation. Human rights disappear, since the state, no longer bound to recognize an antecedent objective order of rights and goods, becomes the sole arbiter of who counts as a subject of rights. The assertion of power and might submerges the earlier recognition of the rights intrinsic to the human person.

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<sup>7</sup> PTHL, IV.1.

Allied to the subjectivist distortion of freedom is a new view of conscience. Opposed to the traditional concept of conscience, which considered the human agent as responsive to an objective moral demand that he or she does not create, the new view conceives conscience as the power of the individual to accept only those moral principles that he or she freely endorses. In this new autonomous view of conscience, Cardinal Ratzinger detects the influence of Kantian ethics: "In the new conception, clearly Kantian in origin, conscience is detached from its constitutive relationship with a content of moral truth and is reduced to a mere formal condition for morality. Its suggestion, 'Do good and avoid evil,' would have no necessary and universal reference to the truth concerning the good, but would be linked only with the goodness of the subjective individual."<sup>8</sup> Just as the omnipotent state considers itself the creator of human rights, the contemporary conscience considers itself the creator of the moral duties that it must obey. Rather than recognizing objective claims to respect and support by the other, such an autonomous conscience believes itself only bound by those obligations that it has freely agreed to assume. In the area of abortion and euthanasia, the decision to protect, destroy, or ignore the claims to life rests uniquely on the particular set of duties that the human agent has chosen to endorse.

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<sup>8</sup> PTHL IV.2.

A specifically anthropological factor makes the perception, let alone the acceptance, of the right to life of the innocent problematic in our society. Cardinal Ratzinger refers to this as the new dualism with which contemporary society conceives the relationship of the person to his or her body: "Western culture increasingly affirms a new dualism, where some characteristic traits converge: individualism, materialism, utilitarianism, and the hedonist idea of self-fulfillment for oneself. In fact, the body is no longer perceived naturally by the subject as a concrete form of all his relations with God, other persons, and the world, that is, as that datum in the midst of a universe being built, a conversation in course, a history rich in meaning, one can participate in positively only by accepting its rules and its language. Rather, the body appears to be a tool to be utilized for one's well-being, worked out and implemented by technical reason, which figures out how to draw the greatest profit from it."<sup>9</sup> This new dualism distorts sexual ethics by viewing the body as an instrument for pleasure; the divorce between the unitive and procreative meanings of sexual intercourse is celebrated as a liberation. This instrumentalization of the body turns abortion and euthanasia into simple matters of subjective choice, since the decision whether to bear another human being or to support the body of one touched by serious illness is firmly in the hands of the self-conscious and the self-expressive, who may dispose of unconscious or barely conscious corporeal matter as they will.

#### FIGURES OF FREEDOM

In *Truth and Freedom* (1996), Cardinal Ratzinger explicitly analyzes the relationship between the contemporary distortion of freedom and the problem of abortion. The shifting moral and legal status of abortion in the affluent nations of the West is not an exception to those societies' new understanding of freedom; on the contrary, it dramatically expresses the lethal consequences of a freedom understood as the autonomy of the powerful to conduct their lives as they will.

At the heart of the new apology for abortion is a concept of

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<sup>9</sup> PTHL V.1.

freedom as personal autonomy: “In the radicalization of the individualistic tendency of the Enlightenment, abortion appears as a right of freedom: the woman must be able to take charge of herself. She must have the freedom to decide whether she will bring a child into the world or rid herself of it. She must have the power to make decisions about her own life, and no one else can—so we are told—impose from the outside any ultimately binding norm. What is at stake in the right to self-determination.”<sup>10</sup> This narrative of the abortion decision as one of self-determination poses an obvious problem, since the freedom here consists in the power to destroy the freedom of another by obliterating the existence of the other.

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<sup>10</sup> TF III.1.

The distorted treatment of abortion in contemporary society raises the broader question of the nature of the freedom promoted by contemporary social elites. Cardinal Ratzinger argues that this freedom has destroyed the relationship between the individual and the rest of society.

Freedom is no longer from or for anything; as a result, it conceives the other as an enemy or burden to be destroyed: "Now let it not be said that the issue of abortion concerns a special case and is not suited to clarify the general problem of freedom. No, it is the very example which brings out the basic figure of human freedom and makes clear what is typically human about it. For what is at stake here? The being of another person is so clearly interwoven with the being of this person, the mother, that for the present it can survive only by physically being with the mother, in a physical unity with her. Such unity, however, does not eliminate the otherness of this being or authorize us to dispute its distinct selfhood.

However, to be oneself in this way is to be radically from and through another. Conversely, this being-with compels the being of the other—that is, the mother—to become a being-for, which contradicts her own desire to be an independent self and is thus experienced as the antithesis of her own freedom. We must now add that even once the child is born and the outer form of its being-from and -with changes, it remains just as dependent on, and at the mercy of, a being-for."<sup>11</sup> In the context of pregnancy, the unborn child's existence and nascent freedom spring from the being and choices of the parents and indeed of the broader society. The finality of this incipient freedom is to give life and other basic goods through sacrificial love. The mother finds herself in the context of giving existence and freedom to another.

The context of pregnancy is not different from that of the human condition in general. Every human person at every stage of maturation bears a freedom that has come from somewhere and someone and that can fulfill itself only as a sacrificial gift somewhere to someone. It is this relational anthropology, the necessary framework of authentic freedom, that been destroyed by a concept of freedom as the autonomy

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<sup>11</sup> TF III.1b.



of the self-conscious, an autonomy that recognizes neither its debt to those who have given it existence nor its obligation to those whose imperiled existence calls for sacrificial service.

Cardinal Ratzinger argues that this arelational freedom is an offshoot of the radical individualism of the Enlightenment, especially of the disciples of Rousseau, who conceive social institutions as the enemy of personal freedom. But he argues that at a deeper, theological level this will to autonomy is ultimately a species of idolatry: "To be totally free, without the competing freedom of others, without a 'from' and a 'for'—this desire presupposes not an image of God, but an idol....The real God is by his very nature entirely being-for (Father), being-from (Son) and being-with (Holy Spirit). Man, for his part, is God's image precisely insofar as the 'from,' 'with,' and 'for' constitute the fundamental anthropological pattern. Whenever there is an attempt to free ourselves from this pattern, we are not on our way to divinity, but to dehumanization, to the destruction of being itself through the destruction of the truth."<sup>12</sup> The motor of the culture of death is the desire to create and destroy human life at will. This is the ancient desire to be divine, but the divinity here, in which omnipotence is divorced from the other divine attributes, is a lethal caricature of the living God. The Trinitarian truth of the divine persons who eternally exercise their freedom in the generation, reception, and nurturing of existence is replaced by an idol of sacral violence.

#### CONCLUSION

The analysis of the background anthropological disputes concerning abortion offered by Cardinal Ratzinger in *The Problem of Threats to Human Life* and *Truth and Freedom* indicates certain directions for the teaching on human life issues that one might expect from Benedict

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<sup>12</sup> TF III.1c.

XVI's papal magisterium. What is most striking about the pope's earlier analysis of human life issues is his insight that the culture of death conceives itself as a culture of freedom, but that the freedom celebrated by such a culture is particularly defective. The case for a comprehensive right to life will remain unintelligible unless one challenges the illusions and contradictions of a freedom that conceives the will and autonomy of the self-conscious adult as absolute. The case for the right of the unborn child, the disabled infant, and the elderly patient to live must be founded on a relational concept of freedom that conceives personal freedom as indebted to the many persons who have given it existence and history and as destined to the sacrificial service of the many needy persons who will cross its path. Both theoretically and politically the struggle to promote the right to life is an anthropological struggle that celebrates a social and self-donatory freedom that contests the freedom-as-autonomy that has increasingly captured the imagination of Western society's elites. The most important contribution of Benedict XVI's magisterium on human life issues may well be his arguments against the distorted concepts of human freedom that have fueled the collapse of legal defenses for the rights of the vulnerable at the dawn and dusk of life and his defense of authentic concepts of human freedom that consider sacrificial respect for such vulnerable human beings as a matter of second nature.