

Moral Reorientation through the Emulation of Christ in the Teachings of Joseph Ratzinger – Pope Benedict XVI

Reorientacja moralna poprzez naśladowanie Chrystusa
w nauczaniu Josepha Ratzingera – Papież Benedykt XVI

MAREK KLUZ

The Pontifical University of John Paul II in Cracow, Poland
marek.kluz@upjp2.edu.pl
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2255-1431>

Abstract: The aim of this publication is to outline a moral reorientation through the emulation of Christ based on the teachings of Josef Ratzinger – Benedict XVI. The study used the method of source analysis and synthesis of the researched content, which provided an insight into the fundamental thoughts of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI. In a contemporary society which is undergoing dehumanisation, individuals who are receptive to values can often become disoriented and struggle to find their rightful place in the world. Therefore the moral state of modern humanity requires a fundamental change. An individual capable of providing healing to human beings challenged in their development, and reinstating a sense of purpose to their existence on Earth is needed. Responding to the demands of the modern era, Pope Benedict XVI identified Christ as the cornerstone for the conversion of human hearts and minds. The relationship with Christ, which is central to the concept of emulation, is essential for being a genuine Christian. Emulating Christ within the temporal continuum of a Christian's life necessitates addressing personal problems and the surrounding reality through the lens of the Gospel's principles.

Keywords: moral reorientation; emulating Christ; teachings of Joseph Ratzinger – Benedict XVI; service, conversion; conscience; testimony; Mary

Abstrakt: Celem niniejszej publikacji jest zarysowanie reorientacji moralnej poprzez naśladowanie Chrystusa na podstawie nauczania Josepha Ratzingera – Benedykta XVI. W pracy wykorzystano metodę analizy źródeł i syntezę badanych treści, która dała moż-

liwość zapoznania się z fundamentalnymi myślami Josepha Ratzingera – Benedykta XVI. W ulegającej dehumanizacji cywilizacji współczesnej człowiek otwarty na wartości często się gubi i nie może odnaleźć swojego miejsca w świecie. Sytuacja moralna współczesnego człowieka domaga się zatem głębokiej przemiany. Potrzeba kogoś, kto mógłby uzdrowić zagrożonego w swoim rozwoju człowieka i ukazać mu na nowo sens ziemskiej egzystencji. Odpowiadając na to zapotrzebowanie współczesności, papież Benedykt XVI wskazał na Chrystusa jako fundament przemiany ludzkich serc i umysłów. Związek z Chrystusem, który leży u podstaw idei naśladowania, jest warunkiem koniecznym bycia prawdziwym chrześcijaninem. Naśladowanie Chrystusa w wymiarze doczesnym życia chrześcijanina zobowiązuje do rozwiązywania problemów własnego życia i otaczającej rzeczywistości w świetle wymogów Ewangelii.

Słowa kluczowe: reorientacja moralna; naśladowanie Chrystusa; nauczanie Josefa Ratzingera – Benedykta XVI; służba; nawrócenie; sumienie; świadectwo; Maryja

It is a universally acknowledged fact that the present era is the period of great change in almost all areas of life. Contemporary individuals bear witness to political transformations, transformations in education and technology, and those most closely related to the reference to God, that is, religious and personal transformations, as well as very visible changes in the family environment and in the ethical and moral sphere. Undoubtedly, the rapid pace of global change and changes in the environment in which people live has an impact on their existence.

In this context, today's world requires a comprehensive transformation in its functioning style more than ever before. Regrettably, this metamorphosis is frequently devoid of any moral transformation and is merely a fashionable catchphrase designed to excite and captivate individuals. In contrast, as Benedict XVI emphasised in one of his speeches, changing the world requires the transformation of people. However, genuine transformation necessitates sincere conversion and a change of heart within the individual because the advancement and prosperity of the world hinge on this internal dimension occurring within humankind (Benedict XVI 2009a, 26-27).

The primary mission of the Church in reaching out to all people is therefore the transformation of their hearts and moral lives based on the encounter with God in a person's life. Pope Benedict XVI was cognizant of this fact; hence in his teachings he frequently affirmed that despite multiple noticeable changes in the contemporary world, the Church's pursuit of unity resulting from the emulation of Christ remains constant and unchanging until the end of the existence of the world and humanity (Benedict XVI 2007c, 54-55; Benedict XVI 2006b, 11-13).

According to the Pope, as detailed in this article, the Triune God is the source of the likelihood of transforming human hearts, minds, actions, and moral dispositions, which is the foundation of the unity of all people. The foundations are possible through the love revealed by Jesus Christ. Being an authentic Christian does not begin with an ethical decision or a great idea, but with an encounter with an Event, with Jesus Christ, as Benedict XVI clearly emphasised in the first point of his encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*. This Person alone unveils fully the sense and direction of the journey of life and history to every individual, providing a fresh outlook and thereby a definitive goal (Benedict XVI 2006a). Consequently, for each Christian, the redemptive act of Christ is a salvific source of moral transformation and obliging him or her to emulate Jesus and to follow Him every day (Kiełbasa 2021, 49).

I. The Eucharistic Jesus Being ‘The Standard’ for Human Life and Behaviour.

Individuals who are unfamiliar with the concept of Christianity often perceive it as a mere set of rules, regulations and orders, akin to an ordinary ethical or moral system. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church persistently emphasises that the roots of Christianity lie neither in such a system of laws, nor in a moral-human sense. Pope Benedict XVI underlined this in his teaching on Maundy Thursday, which commemorates the institution of the Eucharist. During his sermon on this significant day, the Pope emphasised that Christianity is essentially bestowed upon humanity as a gift from God. The Triune God grants humanity the most perfect gift of Himself and invites them to participate in His own life. Moreover, the presence and gifts of God can be experienced not only at the time of conversion, but also at every Eucharist, the Pope affirmed. God’s boundless gift, present in every Eucharist, always precedes humanity and serves as the focal point of Christian life. Christianity centres on encountering and experiencing God’s presence in one’s life, rather than on moral law. This inspires gratitude towards the Lord God for the gift of new life and a closer relationship with the Creator (Benedict XVI 2008a, 8-10). Recognising the benefit of God’s gift and guided by gratitude, the individual is motivated to reorient his or her moral life towards aspects that strengthen the bond with Christ.

In this manner, God has shown humankind the way to proceed with the inner transformation of a person. This way is found in the person of Jesus Christ. He is the example that is renewed every day in the Churches throughout the

world. The Son of God is thus the source of all human attitudes that lead to personal moral reorientation. Pope Benedict XVI strongly linked the moral conversion of people to the act of transformation that takes place in every Eucharist (Benedict XVI 2007a). He understood that from the Eucharist comes a divine power for human beings to overcome their daily struggles and to make wise choices in the inner conversion of their hearts (Benedict XVI 2005, 26-28).

The duty of every Christian is to emulate their Master, Jesus Christ, who is present in the Eucharist in the form of Eucharistic bread and wine. Inasmuch as the Holy Spirit transforms the bread into the Holy Body of the Saviour and the wine into His most precious Blood, so should the individuals strive to transform themselves by orienting their lives towards God. In so doing, these followers reaffirm their desire to become true disciples of Christ in a world plagued by violence, and to transform it into a world of love, replacing the spreading culture of death with the joy of life. The transformation of humanity and of the world, said Benedict XVI, must not be sluggish, but definitely dynamic. All those who eat the same bread become, as it were, one organism, and this should be reflected in the close union of these people in their daily lives. The disciples of Christ must spread the love of God throughout the world and strive to ensure that evil does not prevail, but that wickedness is transformed into true love, which is a gift from God (Benedict XVI 2005, 27).

It is widely acknowledged that changing personal habits and lifestyles is not an easy task. For this reason, as Pope Benedict XVI noted, true personal transformation requires “prior adoration before any action or change”. Adoration is crucial for any transformation to take place. It is the only factor that can truly liberate us, because it provides us with the necessary criteria to guide our actions. Given that in our time the criteria of orientation are gradually being eroded, and that there is a growing danger of each person setting himself up as the standard, it is crucial to stress the significance of adoration” (Benedict XVI 2006d, 16; Benedict XVI 2009b, 49-51). Benedict XVI, having observed the transformative influence of adoration on human life, often urged the faithful to visit Christ present in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar on a regular basis.

2. An Attitude of Service Characteristic of a Follower of Christ

During adoration, people are strengthened by the Lord and inspired to serve others selflessly, contended Pope Benedict XVI. It is impossible to emulate Christ if one does not have love for others. A correct understanding and love of oneself is also crucial, for love of others is based on a foundation of self-love. What is needed is conscious love, properly directed towards good in order to cultivate a relationship of love with one’s neighbour. The life of Jesus Christ

serves as a model for the ideal attitude and behaviour, and in spite of His total self-sacrifice for others; His life demonstrates a proper balance between self-love and love for the whole Trinity (Ratzinger – Benedykt XVI 2005, 88).

Emulating Christ's example therefore involves showing selfless service to others. Such acts are only possible, Benedict opined, if a person models their life entirely on their Saviour and entrusts their life completely to Him. Service to others, as recommended by Christ in the Gospel of St John (cf. Jn 13:15), not only brings a person closer to God and transforms them inwardly but also eradicates from the heart any selfish attitude towards those who are cared for (Benedict XVI 2016a, 193; Kluz 2017, 193; Ide 2011, 103-104).

Yet, following Christ cannot be limited to serving others and following Christ in human form. For those who wish to transform their lives, the way requires unification with Christ and an emulation of His nature in order to attain absolute oneness with God the Father. It's worth noting that following Christ is a matter of divine intervention and human response, rather than solely a moral issue. Therefore, emulating Christ involves carrying one's cross every day in the emulation of the Master and uniting oneself with His love, resulting in spiritual rebirth and alignment with God's intended plan (Babiński 2020, 41).

Authentic emulation of Christ is ensured by continuously accompanying Him and following His paths. Only by following Christ's example in the everyday aspects of life can one be certain that, by transforming oneself, one is emulating the One with whom one spends one's life, namely, Jesus Christ. Experiencing the mystery of the Saviour's life, death, and resurrection enables a person to fully accept the changeability of their life. Luke the Evangelist recounts the tale of disciples on the road to Emmaus (cf. Lk 24:13-35). As they travelled with Jesus, His divine presence transformed their mindset and behaviour, bringing them into unification with Jesus Christ and propelling them to preach the Good News (Szymik 2020, 111-112).

In a brief address, Pope Benedict XVI reflected on the transformation of life and the following of the Saviour, noting that "following Christ involves adopting His affections more and more and accepting His lifestyle as our own. The Epistle to the Philippians states, 'Let the same mind be in you that [was] in Christ Jesus' [...]. In considering Jesus as the great Master of life, the Church has identified three characteristics of His attitude. These characteristics, known in the Tradition as the evangelical counsels, are the decisive elements of a life entirely dedicated to the emulation of Christ. They are poverty, chastity and obedience" (Benedict XVI 2010, 30-31). The Pope explicitly outlined the attitudes that people who consider themselves to be disciples of Jesus should adopt.

Benedict XVI, who had a special insight into the heart of today's man, addressed an appeal to everyone, asking them to be open to Christ. He urged

people to have faith in Christ, and to follow Him with courage, not fear. Such a decision requires a certain effort, which means breaking with oneself, relinquishing one's own thought patterns, human wisdom, apathy, self-sufficiency, established habits, and frustrations that are often not related to Christianity, said the Pope (Ratzinger – Benedykt XVI 2005, 57).

3. The Process of Conversion as a Lifestyle of a Person Living in Christ

Modern man often stresses that he must constantly endure losses in order to achieve a particular goal. Yet, disappointment is the all-too-common outcome, as the accomplished objective frequently falls short of expectations and fails to bring true happiness. True happiness is only attainable, Pope Benedict XVI proclaimed, when a man appreciates the value of losing something for God, as that is an essential condition for following Jesus Christ wholeheartedly. Only then will man's losses be compensated by the satisfaction of having achieved his goal and the joy that comes with it (Ratzinger 2005, 67).

Emulating Christ, therefore, entails accepting conversion as a way of life. Despite not shielding one from life's difficulties and misfortunes, Benedict XVI contended, conversion enhances an individual, enabling them to endure adversity while retaining their faith in God. The primary objective of conversion, according to the Pope, is to stymie the propagation of evil in the world, thereby preventing the proliferation of numerous hazards to humanity and the soul. Furthermore, evangelical conversion has the power to conquer evil not only with evil but with the good that stems from God (Benedict XVI 2022; Benedict XVI 2012, 7-8).

Therefore, conversion holds immense significance in the lives of individuals as it purges the root cause of evil, also known as sin.

It is noteworthy, as Pope Benedict XVI frequently emphasised, that the Greek term for *convert* means to change one's mind-set; to question one's usual and widely acknowledged way of life; to allow God to take part in the principles of one's life; to refrain from living as others do and to refrain from behaving as others behave; if one's actions are problematic, ambiguous or wrong, eschew justifying them by citing others' similar actions; examine one's life from God's perspective and pursue morality, even if it is uncomfortable; place trust in God's judgement, rather than that of the majority; in other words, the objective is to pursue a distinct way of living and a new beginning. This is not a matter of imposing morality. Those who reduce Christianity to a moral code overlook the essence of Christ's message, which is to offer a new friendship and a way to connect with Jesus and, through Him, with God. Those who

convert to Christ do not seek to develop their own independent morality or establish goodness through their own efforts” (Ratzinger – Benedict XVI 2013, 1145). For this reason, the individual who genuinely wishes to convert endeavours to draw nearer to Jesus Christ and pledges to follow the Master of Nazareth, without becoming a slave to the law.

Pope Benedict XVI, speaking about Christian conversion, also stated the purpose of this action. He emphasised firmly that “following Christ involves not only emulating His virtues and living in this world as closely as possible in His image according to His word but also embarking on a journey towards a particular destination. The destination of this journey is to attain a place at the right hand of the Father. This path of Jesus, this following of Jesus, ends at the right hand of the Father” (Benedykt XVI 2012, 194). The principle evident in this statement is that, through adhering to the example of Christ, an individual seeks a relationship with the Triune God. In this context, it should be added that “a life devoted to following Christ necessitates the integration of one’s entire personality whereas the indifference and detachment that are present in the environment of cold rationalism obstruct a joyous commitment to God” (Szymik 2018, 259).

4. The need to shape the conscience of man clothed in Christ

For a profound moral transformation to be fruitful, it must be grounded in a sound conscience. Once clothed in Christ, the baptized individual bears the responsibility of shaping their conscience in a manner that motivates them to emulate Jesus in their thoughts, choices and everyday conduct. Keeping this notion in view, Pope Benedict XVI frequently emphasised the issue of conscience in his teachings (in more detail: Benedict XVI 2011d, 8-9; Benedict XVI 2011b, 15; Benedict XVI. 2007d; 44; Ratzinger – Benedict XVI 2007, 130-131; Seewald 2001, 83; Szymik 2016; 27-51). In his 2006 Lenten message, the Pope stated: “The first contribution of the Church to human development [...] is not material means or technical solutions, but rather the proclamation of the truth of Christ which shapes the conscience of individuals.” (Benedict XVI 2006c, 22; Szymik 2016, 40). Through one’s conscience which measures human behaviour against moral standards, an individual defines oneself before God as a personal ‘You’ and makes a choice for or against Christ. This decision establishes the emulation of Jesus Christ as the standard code of conduct for the baptized individual. Subsequently, man is obligated to shape their conscience based on the tenets of the teachings of Jesus Christ (Lubiński 2020, 77).

Therefore following Christ leads to the appropriate formation of conscience. Benedict XVI acknowledged that “the formation of a true conscience,

based as it is on truth, and of a right conscience that is ready to listen to its precepts with consistency, avoiding betrayal and compromise, is today a difficult and delicate task, but an indispensable one” (Benedykt XVI 2007, 44).

Remaining loyal to Christ necessitates guarding one’s conscience and protecting it from distortion by moral relativism or utilitarianism. This is vital because the law of sin, which “has entered” human nature, persists in making its presence known, inciting people to choose evil. Man embarks on a path leading him to God or damnation, depending on whether the main orientation of the moral life is to live “according to the Spirit” or “according to the flesh”. The person, as a rational and free individual, is responsible for their choices. Therefore, it is crucial to make conduct choices based on moral truth and free will (John Paul II 1993, 57-68).

In this context, the teachings of Joseph Ratzinger, who later became Pope Benedict XVI, hold significance. He contended that “conscience, when correctly understood, is not the ultimate expression of unquestionable subjectivity. It instead showcases humanity’s ontological reliance on God and the consciousness in each individual. Therefore, it is primarily a fundamental instrument of human freedom as it involves a direct relationship with God. Its connection with the concept of man’s creation by God and with God’s will, which provides significance to all things, establishes boundaries for any external authority. At the same time, it embodies the distinctive nature of created freedom, representing the non-coincidental aspect of human existence and its ontological commitments. At this point, in the depths of the human psyche, the concepts of freedom and its limits merge into a singular entity.” (Ratzinger – Benedykt XVI 2013, 409; Benedict XVI 2006f, 10; Benedict XVI 2008b, 27; Benedict XVI, 2009c, 17). In this way, “the issue of conscience delves into the core of moral questions and human existence itself.” (Ratzinger – Benedict XVI 2009, 25; Ratzinger 1999, 48). Conscience is accountable for choices that pertain to pursuit of self-truth, interactions with others, and the proper relationship with the Creator.

In this view, the prerequisite for a sound Christian formation is not the imposition of beliefs, but rather the independent and deliberate selection of truth and righteousness, principles inherent to human nature and upheld by divine grace and the light of faith. These values are found in their entirety in Christ. Therefore, choosing to follow Christ means embarking on a journey towards self-realisation and finding oneself in God, who is the ultimate destination of humankind (Benedict XVI 2011, 8-9; also: Benedict XVI 2008c, 50).

5. Testimony as a Moral Category: Following the Path of Christ

Regrettably, it is concerning that in modern society the Lord God is becoming increasingly marginalised in human life. A rapid decline in the treasured gift of faith that humanity has received as an undeserved gift from God is observed. But despite these disturbing facts every Christian, according to Benedict, is obliged to provide a convincing testimony to their faith and personal experience of God. It appears that the contemporary world, possibly now more than ever before, requires the affirmation of individuals who are followers of Christ (cf. Benedict XVI 2011, 12-13).

It should be emphasised here that Christians have numerous ways to emulate Christ. They can bear witness to the eschatological kingdom of truth and goodness whilst endeavouring to transform temporal reality in the spirit of the Gospel. By living the Gospel every day, individuals ensure that they discern the direction they need to take to conform themselves to Jesus Christ and emulate Him in an exemplary manner. Pope Benedict XVI accurately noted that “the Gospel is the most significant force in the transformation of the world; it is neither a utopia nor an ideology. The first generations of Christians explicitly referred to it as ‘the path’, meaning the way of life that Christ lived first and now encourages us to follow. One can reach “the most vibrant” city by following the path of truthful love, understanding that, as the Council reminds us, ‘the love should not only be sought in grand gestures but above all in the daily conditions of our lives’ and in emulation of Christ ‘man must also carry the cross that the flesh and the world impose on those who pursue peace and justice.’” (Benedict XVI 2011a, 45-46).

Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged the significant connection between authentic Christian testimony and the continuous reorientation of individual morality. Observing the direct correlation between the two, Benedict emphasised the importance of testimony and stated that “in light of the considerable moral challenges, we are truly united by a common Christian foundation. Obviously, it is vital to bear witness to God in a world that struggles [...] to recognise God’s presence. It is important to present the God of the human face of Jesus Christ, allowing individuals to access sources vital for morality to avoid dwindling and loss of reference points. Expressing joy in the reality that humans are not alone in the world is also essential as it enables a more profound appreciation of human greatness as the genuine image of God, not mere products of failed evolution. It is necessary to show the significant ethical points of reference on these two levels. Only by starting from them and due to them can we bring forth the presence of God, the concrete God. When this is done, and particularly when individual groups of believers endeavour to live the faith not in their own way, but always by delving into its deepest roots, immediate

external and visible unity may not be attained, but internal unity will evolve which, with God's grace, will one day also display external forms." (Benedict XVI 2006e, 43).

6. Marian Moral Life Style as a Model for Disciples of Christ

Mary is the incomparable model for the believer in following Her Son and transforming Her life. By humbly following the way of Jesus, Mary fully embodies and responds to the call "Do not be afraid!" (Luke 1:30). The call begins and completes the work of Redemption (Benedict XVI 2007b, 4-50). As the first and most distinguished disciple of Christ, Mary fully embodies the ideal of emulating the holiness of Christ Himself. Her devotion to Christ and God serve as an example of how one can become a reflection of God in human life. Her greatness is only evident in relation to Christ, and as such, one can learn to follow Him by looking to Mary. She is not only a model of total obedience but also a teacher of a truly Christian life (Francis 2013, 285-288).

Benedict XVI consistently encouraged people to embrace the attitude that characterised the Blessed Mother. The Pope recognised that "where Mary is, Jesus is also present. Anyone who opens their heart to the Mother encounters and accepts the Son, and is filled with His joy. True service to Mary never overshadows or downplays faith and love for Jesus Christ, our Saviour, the sole mediator between God and humanity. Moreover, relying on Our Lady is a dependable method, as affirmed by many saints, for achieving a more faithful following of the Lord. Let us therefore place our trust in her with filial devotion!" (Benedict XVI 2009d, 31). Additionally, Benedict XVI clarified that "emulating Christ is a risky venture, as there is always the possibility of sin, the hazard of losing our freedom, and the temptation of discouragement. Thus, we all require his grace – like Mary, who received it in entirety. Let us constantly strive to focus on Christ, and let Him, like He was for Mary, be the accurate standard of reference for us" (Benedict XVI 2010, 25-26).

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Based on the above considerations, it must be acknowledged that the teachings of Pope Benedict XVI have raised the awareness of modern society that only by embracing to Christ as the cornerstone for the transformation of human hearts and minds can individuals transcend the current state of moral fragility in which both the human person and civilisation are ensnared. Ac-

According to Benedict XVI, the Gospel leads man to the conviction that only in Christ, the perfect God-Man, can one find the light to comprehend oneself, reality and discover the true meaning of life. This discovery, made through varying ways and means, leads to a personal encounter with Christ and the decision to follow Him, as per His invitation “Follow me” (Mt 9:9; cf. Mk 2:14; Lk 9:59; Jn 1:43). This invitation is closely related to the call to emulate Christ, to the extent that both encompass the same ethical obligation for Christians (cf. Mt 16:24; Mk 8:34; Lk 9:23). By accepting Jesus’ invitation to “Follow me”, individuals establish their lives not on sand, which signifies fleeting values but instead build their foundations upon the rock, which epitomises the teachings of Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI believed that following Christ was the only way for lost humanity to be salvaged from the intricacies of the modern world. Christians must unite with Christ, become morally stronger, and grow in the power of truth and love. They should also work toward transforming the temporal reality in accordance with the principles of the Gospel. Furthermore, for followers of Christ, Jesus is not just a guide in faith, a model to be emulated, but also the ‘measure’ for their moral lives. This is particularly significant as following Christ does not simply entail mimicking the actions of the Master, but one’s innermost being. From this, it can be inferred that following Christ is the paramount moral obligation and entails fulfilling the will of the Heavenly Father.

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MAREK KLUZ – ks. dr hab., prof. UPJPII, zastępca dziekana Wydziału Teologicznego Sekcja w Tarnowie Uniwersytetu Papieskiego Jana Pawła II w Krakowie, kierownik Kierunku Teologia WTST UPJPII w Krakowie, kierownik Podyplomowych Studiów z Teologii ze specjalizacją w Eklezjologii na WTST, profesor uczelni UPJPII. Autor kilku książek i około 200 artykułów naukowych poświęconych moralności małżeńsko-rodzinnej, wychowaniu moralnemu, etyce cnót, moralności życia społecznego, bioetyce i działalności socjalno-charytatywnej.