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**CLASSICAL CULTURE AND EUROPEAN IDENTITY:
PAGAN ANTIQUITY IN THE WRITINGS
OF POPE BENEDICT XVI**

SUMMARY: The paper analyses the attitude of Joseph Ratzinger, pope Benedict XVI, towards classical culture and tradition. A careful analysis of the pope's writings makes it obvious that he addresses Europe's classical heritage with respect and deep understanding. A number of case studies analysed in the paper allows the reader to see a variety of perspectives on classical antiquity, present in the writings of Benedict XVI.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, Christianity, Catholicism, theology, classical tradition, reception of classics, Plato

INTRODUCTION

Joseph Ratzinger, pope Benedict XVI, has been often pictured as the most "intellectual" among the bishops of Rome in our times. This "intellectual" pope, however, began his pontificate with an encyclical about love. Others emphasized his "conservative" attitude (in the sense of clinging to the past and opposing *Vaticanum II*), and yet his public discussion with Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, Ratzinger 2005) did not sound like a debate between Joseph de Maistre and Voltaire (which, in reality, of course, never took place). Besides easy stereotypes, Benedict

XVI is as much an intriguing thinker as he is a complex one. Tracey Rowland in her recent book has showed how misguided are attempts to pigeonhole Joseph Ratzinger into popular categories like “right” vs. “left”, or “conservative” vs. “progressive” (Rowland 2008: 45).

In this paper I would like to draw attention to Benedict XVI’s reverence for classical languages and culture. Most of people, more or less interested in the life of the Catholic Church, would probably recognize Joseph Ratzinger as a great defender of traditional, Roman liturgy. But this is only one aspect of his attitude towards the ancient heritage of Christianity. In this article I will show, first, in what way Benedict XVI uses ancient Pagan tradition in his works. In order to do that I will limit my analysis to the encyclicals and to the three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* only. Taking into consideration the whole corpus of Ratzinger’s theological writings would go, obviously, beyond the scope of an article.

I chose encyclicals and *Jesus of Nazareth*, because those works seem to be quite representative of the author’s intellectual and spiritual world. The first are public documents of the Church as well as a direct expression of the Pope’s teaching as the head of the Catholic Church. The latter is, according to Benedict himself, a very personal book, stemming from his life of prayer and study, deliberately not designed to be a “magisterial” statement of the Church’s teaching, but a more personal voice of Joseph Ratzinger in the debate about the founder of Christianity. Those two different types of works – public (and published in Latin) documents of the head of the Church and personal reflections of a great theologian – will hopefully give some insight into the general attitude of Benedict XVI towards classical antiquity.

By “classical antiquity” I mean here “Pagan” and “Greco-Roman”, even though I do not want to exclude ancient Christian culture from classical antiquity by any means. However, a plethora of references to Augustine, Origen and other Church Fathers would, again, confuse the clarity of this short presentation, so I deliberately did not take into consideration ancient Christian writers in the selected works of Benedict XVI.

After the presentation of the references to Pagan antiquity in those works, I will give two interpretations of this presence of classical tradition. The first one will be based on the Pope’s own theological ideas, while the second will be based on other, non-theological premises. In

concluding remarks I will try to show the meaning of Benedict XVI's respect and use of classical antiquity for the present-day debate on the European identity.

THE LOGOS MADE FLESH

In his first encyclical (*Deus caritas est*) the Pope emphasizes the importance of the ancient notion of the divine Logos for Christianity. Benedict writes: *The ancient world had dimly perceived that man's real food – what truly nourishes him as man – is ultimately the Logos, eternal wisdom: this same Logos now truly becomes food for us – as love* (Ratzinger 2005: 13).¹ In the last part of *Jesus of Nazareth (The Infancy Narratives)* we can find a similar statements: *It was in him [scil. Jesus] that the Logos, the creative logic behind all things, entered the world. The eternal Logos became man* (Ratzinger 2012: 63).

In the same book Benedict XVI discusses the story of the Magi from the Matthew Gospel in very similar terms. First, the Pope admits that in the New Testament there are mentioned two types of "Magi" – those who side with demons (like Simon Magus from the Acts 8: 9-24) and Magi in Matthew's story, where *religious and philosophical wisdom is obviously an incentive to set off in the right direction, it is the wisdom that ultimately leads people to Christ* (Ratzinger 2012: 93).

Benedict XVI repeatedly emphasizes that the wise men represent those two things – religion and philosophy. This is interesting, since, as we will see, the Pope tends to stress the difference between philosophy and non-Christian religions. However, commenting on Magi he says that they were *custodians of religious and philosophical knowledge* (Ratzinger 2012: 93) and that they symbolize *the dynamism of religions and human reason toward him [scil. Jesus]* ((Ratzinger 2012: 96). The second aspect contains both what we would describe as "philosophy" and "science", but it seems that for Benedict XVI the religious and philosophical aspect also overlap. He writes:

¹ While referring to the encyclicals I refer to a chapter, since the division into chapters is the same regardless of the language in which an encyclical is published.

The men of whom Matthew speaks were not just astronomers. They were “wise”. They represent the inner dynamic of religion towards self-transcendence, which involves a search for truth, a search for the true God and hence “philosophy” in the original sense of the word. Wisdom, then, serves to purify the message of “science”: the rationality of that message does not remain at the level of intellectual knowledge, but seeks understanding in its fullness, and so raises reason to its loftiest possibilities (Ratzinger 2012: 95).

The true value of religion therefore is based on reason. We might say that the more a religion is philosophical, the closer it is to God (who is the Logos). But Benedict XVI does not seem to want to simply say that it is only philosophy within non-Christian religions that might be thought of as invaluable, since he says that the wise men represent not only the *self-transcendence of science toward him [scil. Jesus]*, but also *the religions moving toward Christ*. The Pope calls them “the successors of Abraham” and “the successors of Socrates”. The complex attitude of Benedict XVI towards non-Christian religions is revealed in his concluding remark, where he says of Socrates that he, as well as Magi, symbolizes *questioning above and beyond conventional religion toward the higher truth* (Ratzinger 2012: 95-96). The problem of relationship of Christianity towards religion and philosophy will be explained later in the paper and then this question will be hopefully clarified.

The problem of Christianity vs. ancient philosophy is raised also in the second Pope’s encyclical: *Spe salvi*. Benedict XVI uses a powerful, traditional, but forgotten, image of Christ as philosopher.

Towards the end of the third century, on the sarcophagus of a child in Rome, we find for the first time, in the context of the resurrection of Lazarus, the figure of Christ as the true philosopher, holding the Gospel in one hand and the philosopher’s travelling staff in the other. With his staff, he conquers death; the Gospel brings the truth that itinerant philosophers had searched for in vain. In this image, which then became a common feature of sarcophagus art for a long time, we see clearly what both educated and simple people found in Christ: he tells us who man truly is and what a man must do in order to be truly human. He shows us the way, and this way is the truth. He himself is both the way and the truth, and therefore he is also the life

which all of us are seeking. He also shows us the way beyond death; only someone able to do this is a true teacher of life (Ratzinger 2007a: 6).

Benedict refers also to the ancient idea of philosophy as the art of life (studied by Pierre Hadot and recently increasingly popular²): *the philosopher was someone who knew how to teach the essential art: the art of being authentically human – the art of living and dying* (Ratzinger 2007a: 6). The view of Christianity as true philosophy was quite common in Church Fathers from Origen to Augustine, but Benedict points out not only to an intellectual and truth-oriented nature of Christianity (contrary to those who nowadays want to put it into a ghetto of “blind faith” against allegedly “scientific” and “rational” secular outlook), but also to its practical and therapeutic character.

This second aspect appears also in the Pope’s book on Jesus. In chapter six he interestingly interprets Gospel accounts of Jesus exorcising the world and casting out demons. He writes:

The world is now seen as something rational: It emerges from eternal reason, and this creative reason is the only true power over the world and in the world. Faith in the one God is the only thing that truly liberates the world and makes it “rational”. When faith is absent, the world only *appears* to be more rational. In reality the indeterminable powers of chance now claim their due... To “exorcise” the world – to establish it in the light of the *ratio* (reason) that comes from eternal creative reason and its saving goodness and refers back to it – that is a permanent, central task of the messengers of Jesus Christ (Ratzinger 2007b: 173-174).

Further on Benedict quotes Eugen Biser who claimed that Christianity is essentially a “therapeutic religion” (Biser 1997). However, it has nothing to do with the contemporary understanding of psychotherapy as something that aims at making us “feel better” or “self-realize”. On the contrary, Christian therapy is basically establishing the rule of reason both in human being and in the universe, by casting out demons who symbolize irrational forces, prejudices and superstitions, which, by

² See Hadot 1995; Hadot 1998; Hadot 2002; Nussbaum 1994; Martin 2000; Rappe 2000; Sorabji 2000; Foucault 2001; Stalnaker 2006; Stróżyński 2009; Stróżyński 2014; Stock 2010; Byers 2013: 153-171.

the way, did not come to an end along with the Enlightenment, but seem to thrive even more in our “scientific” era. Christianity is for Benedict much more “scientific” than secular culture, since it truly wants to establish the rule of human reason – through its harmony with the divine Logos – over the material reality (Ratzinger 2007b: 175-176).

One of the favorite classical authors, quoted and referred to by Benedict, is certainly Plato. In *Spe salvi* the Holy Father uses Plato’s *Gorgias* to speak about Christian eschatology. The Platonic myth, depicting judges who reward the just and punish the unjust in Hades (*Gorg.* 525a-526c), *expresses a premonition of just judgment that in many respects remains true and salutary for Christians too* (Ratzinger 2007a: 44).

Plato is used by Benedict also in *Jesus of Nazareth*. In chapter four of the second volume, when the Pope deals with the notion of eternal life, he recalls Plato’s view that the man becomes immortal by the adherence to the immortal reality of the Forms. Contemplation of the eternal truth fills us with immortality, because we cling to it and unite with it. In Christian context it is, of course, clinging to the person of Jesus who is the Truth (Ratzinger 2011: 84).

In chapter six, when describing the mocking of Jesus, the Holy Father shows interesting similarities between the biblical accounts and what Plato writes in the *Republic* about the suffering and death of the perfectly just man (*Resp.* 361e-362a). This passage from Plato was in antiquity commonly taken as a “prophecy” of the Passion, but Benedict claims also that the image of mocking of the divine Wisdom, that can be found in the Book of Wisdom (2: 10-20), could be directly influenced by the *Republic* (Ratzinger 2011: 209-210). Here historical and philosophical links enrich the traditional view of Plato as a “Pagan prophet”.

In the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* Benedict uses also *Plato redivivus*, namely, Plotinus, whose influence on Augustine and other Church Fathers is hard to overestimate. What Jesus says in the Gospel of John, about his coming from the Father and going back to Him, is compared by Benedict to the Plotinian pattern of *exitus/reditus* (*proodos/epistrophe*). The process of “emanation” of reality from the One, which ends in the fall of the soul, and the return of the whole reality to its Principle, by means of ascent and purification, is considered to be very close to what Jesus says. There is, however, an important

difference, since the *exitus* of Jesus and his Incarnation is not a fall, but an act of divine will, made out of love. Moreover, Jesus' return to the Father, his *anabasis*, is different from the Plotinian one also because he does not have to leave behind the body and the sensible, but, on the contrary, takes it with him. For Plotinus, purification of the soul is simply its detachment and separation from the sensible experience, whereas Christian *anabasis* is a fulfillment of the human nature as a whole as well as taking the whole humanity "up" to the Father, by "drawing everyone" to Jesus (John 12: 32; Ratzinger 2011: 54-56).

The notion of the Plotinian purification appears also in the scene of washing the feet of the Apostles by Jesus. Again, Plotinus speaks about purifying the soul from material accretions in order to become a pure intellect, pure spirit. Jesus, however, argues Benedict, transcends this Pagan view of purity as well as 19th century Christian idea of purity, limited to sexual life. It is neither Pagan ritual purity, nor Plotinian spiritual purity, nor even the distorted Christian sexual purity, which Benedict criticizes, but a radical openness to God, possible to attain only through the one who is truly pure, being God and Man at the same time. Purity means to be permeated by Jesus' presence and to remain in His Body (Ratzinger 2011: 59-61).

PAGAN CULTURE AS THE “DREAM OF HOPE”

In *Deus caritas est* Benedict XVI almost from the very beginning shows a great interest in ancient culture. He analyzes Greek notions of love – *erōs*, *philia* and *agapē*. He quotes Nietzsche³ who claimed that Christianity gave Greek *erōs* poison which made it not die, but become a vice (Ratzinger 2005: 3), and argues that on the contrary, Christianity healed and purified Pagan *erōs*, transforming it from being a mere instinct into an “ecstatic”, transcendental drive (Ratzinger 2005: 5).

For Benedict XVI *erōs* is a power which snatches human beings out of their limited existence. Interestingly, he quotes Vergil on this occasion:

³ Nietzsche 1886: § 168: *Das Christenthum gab dem Eros Gift zu trinken: – er starb zwar nicht daran, aber entartete, zum Laster.*

Omnia vincit amor et nos cedamus amori (*Buc.* 10.69). The Holy Father refers to a traditional view of *erōs* as an ascending drive, whereas *agapē* is a descending one. However, he also emphasizes a fundamental unity of those two ways (Ratzinger 2005: 7), “way up” and “way down”, to use a famous Heraclitean metaphor (fr. B60). For Benedict there is no deep contradiction between “natural” and “supernatural” in human being and the whole reality, but rather – a deep harmony:

And we have also seen, synthetically, that biblical faith does not set up a parallel universe, or one opposed to that primordial human phenomenon which is love, but rather accepts the whole man; it intervenes in his search for love in order to purify it and to reveal new dimensions of it (Ratzinger 2005: 8).

The Holy Father develops further this idea of basic congruence of human reality described by classical Pagan culture and supernatural reality revealed through biblical revelation by referring to Plato’s *Symposium*. He compares the famous myth from Aristophanes’ speech (*Symp.* 189c-193e) to the first account of the creation of man in *Genesis* (1: 26-31), that is, to the creation of the woman from the rib of the man (Ratzinger 2005: 11). Both accounts emphasize unity and complementarity of both sexes as well as the fact that love is the power that drives man and woman to their divinely designed unity and completeness. In the *Symposium* it is obviously not only man and woman complementarity, but also other “homosexual” couples (“the children of the sun” and “the children of the earth”), but this fact is omitted by Benedict XVI. This is, of course, not due to the Pope’s ignorance, but his silence in itself is an example of what he means by “healing” and “purification” of Pagan (=purely human) dimension of love. He does not accept everything in ancient view of love, but fully appreciates the idea that *erōs* is a power directed to the eternal reality (not only and not so much in Aristophanes’ speech, but particularly in Diotima’s speech).

Benedict’s reflections on love are not only supported by Plato, but also – perhaps incidentally – by Sallust. He quotes the sentence from the *De coniurazione Catilinae* describing friendship as wanting and not wanting the same things (*Idem velle atque idem nolle*, 20.4) and comments: *to want the same thing, and to reject the same thing – was recognized by*

antiquity as the authentic content of love: the one becomes similar to the other; and this leads to a community of will and thought (Ratzinger 2005: 17). Of course, Sallust is not a philosopher who dealt with the idea of love either through *muthos*, or through *logos*, so this reference has a symbolic meaning. The Roman historiographer stands for classical culture as such and the Pope wants to show his appreciation of this culture.

A somewhat less positive view of classical culture, however, is offered by Benedict XVI, when he focuses on the birth of Jesus in the third volume of his book. It is due to the fact that what he tries to show is the newness of the Gospel message and not the continuity of Christianity with the previous cultural formation. The Pope, describing virgin birth of Jesus, refers to well-known myths about the birth of the hero, which often contain a virgin-mother figure or otherwise miraculous birth. However, he emphasizes the difference between ancient Greek narratives about the birth of the hero on the one hand, and the Gospel narrative on the other. Jesus is not a demi-god, not a “son of god” in the same sense as Heracles, but he is completely transcendent, being God himself (Ratzinger 2012: 52).

In this context Benedict XVI mentions the traditional way of understanding Vergil’s *Eclogue Four*. It can be seen as a *possible intuition of the mystery of the virgin birth*, which is followed by *the birth of a new great world order from that which is ‘undefiled’ (ab integro)* (Ratzinger 2012:54). Therefore, even though Matthew’s and Luke’s narratives are not myths and Jesus is not a demi-god, the Pope does not reject totally classical myths about virgin birth. On the contrary, following the ancient Christian tradition, he says that

one could say that the figures of the virgin and the divine child belong in some sense to the archetypal images of human hope, which emerge at times of crisis and expectation, even without there being any concrete figures in view (Ratzinger 2012: 55).

In Benedict XVI’s eyes Pagan myths can be seen as “dreams of hope”, “silent and confused dreams of a new beginning” (Ratzinger 2012: 55), which finally came true in the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem.

What is also very interesting is that the Pope does not look in this way merely at Pagan myths, but also at historical events of Pagan antiquity.

There is a whole tradition of seeing the Roman Empire as an enemy of the Church, as the Whore of Babylon (especially, during persecutions, but not only then), but Benedict XVI chooses a different perspective. He emphasizes that for Luke in his narrative about Jesus' birth "the context in world history" is important (Ratzinger 2012: 58). The Roman Empire of Augustus represents the unity of the whole world, for the first time in history:

when there is a commonality of law and property on a large scale, and when a universal language has made it possible for a cultural community to trade in ideas and goods, only now can a message of universal salvation, a universal Saviour, enter the world: it is indeed the "fullness of time" (Ratzinger 2012: 58).

It is not only the Roman Empire that becomes the symbol of the unified world, but also Augustus himself is understood as a symbolic figure. The Pope uses Alois Stöger's reflections on the Luke's Gospel in order to stress the links between the *princeps* and Jesus. He writes:

Augustus did not want merely to be a ruler like any other, such as had existed before him and would come after him. The inscription at Priene, from the year 9 B.C., helps us to understand how he wanted to be seen and understood. [...] it is clear that Augustus was regarded not just as a politician, but as a theological figure – which shows that our distinction between politics and religion, between politics and theology, simply did not exist in the ancient world. In the year 27 B.C., three years after his assumption of office, the Roman Senate had already awarded him the title *Augustus* (in Greek: *sebastos*) – meaning 'one worthy of adoration'. In the inscription at Priene, he is called Saviour, Redeemer (*soter*). This title, which literature ascribed to Zeus, but also to Epicurus and Asclepius, is reserved in the Greek translation of the Old Testament to God alone. For Augustus too, there was a divine ring to it: the Emperor ushered in a changed world, a new era (Ratzinger 2012: 58-59).⁴

Benedict XVI links Augustus to Vergil's *Eclogue Four*, showing that he also can be understood as the "archetypal image of hope"

⁴ Cf. Stöger 1963: 74.

(Ratzinger 2012: 59-60). This strategy reminds us of Augustine's idea that all created things are symbols speaking about their Creator, put succinctly in the medieval poem, ascribed to Alain de Lille:

*Omnis mundi creatura
Quasi liber et pictura
Nobis est in speculum.*

Even human history can be read as a symbolic “text”, in this context – a somewhat prophetic text. The Pope emphasizes two aspects of the “self-understanding of Augustus”, which are particularly important in the Christian context. First, he is the σωτήρ who brings peace to the world, he is *natus ad pacem*. Second, he rules the whole earth and this universality of Augustus' peaceful rule is also a preparation for the universal kingdom of God (Ratzinger 2012: 60-61).

But Benedict XVI, following Marius Reiser, shows important differences between Augustus and Jesus, the two universal kings and bringers of peace. He points out that *Luke intends to say that what Caesar Augustus claimed for himself is realized in a loftier way in the defenseless and powerless child born in a Bethlehem cave and visited by poor shepherds* (Ratzinger 2012: 77). But – as Reiser claims – *the Pax Christi is not necessarily opposed to the Pax Augusti. Yet the peace of Christ surpasses the peace of Augustus as heaven surpasses earth* (Ratzinger 2012: 77).⁵ The difference lies not only in the fact that Christ, being God, can actually fulfill the promise of peace made by Augustus in the perfect way, but also in the fact that *Augustus belongs to the past, Jesus Christ on the other hand is the present and the future* (Ratzinger 2012: 78).

Here again we have a certain ambivalence of Benedict XVI's attitude towards Pagan culture. Augustus represents here the whole Pagan culture of antiquity, but also, to a certain extent, every culture and religion created by human beings. It all belongs to the past, it is doomed to pass in the face of the newness of Jesus Christ's birth. Pagan antiquity seems to be both a dream-like preparation for the coming of the true Saviour and something which has to go away. The question which we will later come back to is whether what passed away can still remain.

⁵ Cf. Reiser 2003: 460.

It is worth noting that in the texts which I analyze here only once Benedict XVI shows classical world in a negative perspective. It is in the chapter two of *Spe salvi* where the Pope quotes St. Paul who writes to the Ephesians that before their conversion they were “without hope and without God” (Eph 2: 12). The Pope continues to describe Pagan religion as devoid of hope and quotes an ancient inscription to corroborate that view: *In nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus.*⁶ What is, however, crucial here is that Benedict XVI condemns here Pagan *religion* and not classical culture as such. It is time to address the problem of the Pope’s ambivalence towards Pagan culture, which was visible also in his treatment of Magi in Matthew.

CULTURAL MARCIONISM AND *LA VOIE ROMAINE*

The examples of the presence of ancient Pagan motifs in Benedict XVI’s works demonstrate his great appreciation of the Greco-Roman tradition, even though, obviously, it is not an uncritical one. In his earlier works Ratzinger emphasized, for example, the difference between Pagan philosophy (or simply – philosophy) on the one hand, and Pagan culture, especially religion, on the other. Benedict XVI believes that Greek and Roman philosophy share an important core with Christianity which is also a philosophy, and this core is the reliance on the *logos*, on reason, not only as a human way of understanding the world, but also as a metaphysical Principle of the universe, which made this universe rational and thus understandable to us.

Benedict points out that various texts by Church Fathers, which since *Vaticanum II* are quoted to support ecumenism or even to argue that all great religions have salvific power, originally did not have in mind religion at all, but, in fact, philosophy (Ratzinger 2004b: 67-68). He analyzes Varro’s conception of religion, which Augustine sums up in the *De civitate Dei* (4.31, 6.2, 7.6), focusing particularly on the division between *res* and *mores*. For Varro religion was not a matter of true and false, but the matter of politics and morality. He distinguished

⁶ *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, VI, 26003, in: *Spe salvi* 2.

between three different “theologies” – *theologia mythica*, *civilis* and *naturalis* – the first being the stories that poets tell about the gods, the second, religion functioning as a foundation of political and moral order, and the third – philosophical, rational knowledge about the nature of the divine.

For Augustine, Christianity is *theologia naturalis*, by which he means no other than Justin the Martyr: Christianity is a school of philosophy, and, in fact, the best school of philosophy, *vera philosophia*.⁷ Since Christianity is not poetry or politics, but knowledge of the truth, philosophy is a natural ally of this religion in the battle against falsehood and superstition of polytheism (Ratzinger 2004b: 134-136).

But the relationship of Benedict to the Pagan culture as a whole is much more ambivalent. He refers to Christian Gnilka’s interpretation of St. Basil’s *Commentary on Isaiah*, where the Cappadocian Father uses a metaphor of the fruit of the sycamore tree⁸. Gnilka points out that the symbol of the sycamore tree conveys the richness and abundance of Paganism, but also its deficiency and uselessness. The transformation that Basil suggests does not destroy the substance of Pagan culture, but enhances it. It also contains an element of purification (Gnilka 1993: 85, [in:] Ratzinger 2004a: 49-50). Benedict comments that it is the Logos who can purify any culture and make it grow and mature, and that he does it with the help of his servants.

Another example of this is the way in which Ratzinger comments on a letter by St. Gregory the Great to an Anglo-Saxon king Ethelbert, in which the pope forbids the king to simply destroy Pagan temples and advises him instead to remove from them only the images of the gods. After this “purification” of the shrines it is possible and even advisable to continue old Pagan customs after giving them new, Christian meaning. Benedict says that the holy place can remain holy,

⁷ Cf. Iustinus Martyr, *Dialogus cum Trypho* 8.

⁸ In Is. 9.228 = PG 30, 516D-517A: ή δὲ συκάνιμος δένδρον ἔστι πολυφορώτατον καρπῶν οὐδεμίαν ποιότητα ἔχοντων, εἰ μὴ τις ἐξ ἐπιμελείας ἀμύξας, ὅπὸν τινα αὐτοῖς ἐπισπάσαιτο ἡδονὴν ἐμποιοῦντα τῇ γεύσει. οὗτον ἠγούμεθα σύμβολον εἶναι τῆς Ἐθνικῆς συναγωγῆς, πληθυνούσης μὲν, οἷονεὶ μεμιωαραμμένης, διὰ τὴν ἐν τοῖς Ἐθνικοῖς ἐπιτηδεύμασι συνήθειαν, ἥν εάν καταμόξῃ τις διὰ τοῦ λόγου δυνηθῇ, γλακυνθείσα τῇ μεταβολῇ, εἰς τὴν εὐχρηστίαν μεταβάλλεται. Cf. Ratzinger 2004a : 49-50.

but the idolatry must be transformed and given new meaning, by establishing a true worship of God. He also adds that the Pagan gods are no longer gods, they are deprived of their divinity, but, at the same time, the truth about them was revealed, the truth that those gods were merely a weak reflection or a premonition of true God (Ratzinger 2004b: 182-183).

When we take a look on the passages from Ratzinger papal books we can see that his view of antiquity has not changed and we can even trace down those two areas of Pagan culture with two different attitudes. First, when he refers to Plato's teaching on love in the *Symposium* or on afterlife in the *Gorgias*, or when he uses Plotinian notions of *proodos* and *epistrofe* to reflect on the Last Supper narrative in John's Gospel, he embraces totally the philosophical insight of those great Pagan authors. It is so, because this insight is born of solid, intellectual knowledge of reality and there is no problem in recognizing its value and truth, since everything that is true is immediately acceptable to Christians. Second, however, when he deals with other aspects of Pagan culture, such as mythology and poetry, while dealing with the birth of Jesus' narratives, he takes a "dresser of sycamore-figs" approach, namely, condemns what is false and unacceptable to Christians in order to find the "reflections" of the truth. Whereas the sentence in *nihil ab nihilo quam cito recidimus* is rejected completely, poetic, mythological descriptions of virgin birth of a hero are taken to be, to a certain degree, vague "prophesies" of the Bethlehem event.

Benedict provides the reader with a key to interpreting his own attitude towards ancient Pagan culture and, as I briefly showed, we can interpret, as it were, *Benedictum ex Benedicto*, or rather – *Benedictum ex Ratzinger*. However, I would like to show also another way to understand his approach to the un-Christian tradition. Whereas his own method is based on philosophical and theological perspective, I would like to suggest a perspective based on the philosophy of culture.

Benedict XVI is recognized to have used certain symbolic acts to emphasize the importance of the continuity of European civilization as well as the Christian character of this civilization. First and foremost, the very choice of his papal name was a conscious reference to St. Benedict of Nursia, the founder of Western monasticism, whose order

contributed a great deal to saving ancient culture from the aftermath of early Middle Ages, and who is a patron saint of Europe. Benedict was also the first pope who published a post on the Internet communicator, the Tweeter, and he did it in Latin: *Orare semper, iustitiam factitare, amare probitatem, humiles Secum ambulare* (BBC News Europe 2013). He also announced his resignation from papacy on 11th of February 2013 in Latin (The Holy See 2013). Those were symbolic actions, since Latin is a language that joins Western Christianity with its Pagan roots (in the East it is Greek, of course).

Rémi Brague, in his essay *Europe, la voie romaine* (Brague 2012), described European identity as “l’identité excentrique”, meaning by this that it is always rooted in some other identity and is not a center for itself. Such a type of identity is, for Brague, a “Roman way”, because Romans built their power and excellence by borrowing from other cultures. Europe, according to Brague, has to accept its inferiority *vis-à-vis* its sources and roots, while the worst thing it could do is to believe that it has an intrinsic value on its own (Brague 2012: 207-215). Europe, therefore, is a messenger and a servant.

Brague in his essay pointed out that Christianity (as a cultural phenomenon) has a similar nature. Christianity is secondary and “Roman”, because its relationship to the Jews is analogous to Romans’ relationship to the Greeks (Brague 2012: 67). He also criticized an opposing attitude towards the past and the roots, which he called “cultural Marcionism”, alluding in that way to Marcion’s heresy. Marcion was a Christian Gnostic who rejected and condemned, like many other Gnostic leaders, the Old Testament and the Jewish tradition. Cultural Marcionism means rejecting one’s roots and making oneself a center and a source of one’s greatness. It is a belief that we have to break up with the past, that the past has nothing to teach us (Brague 2012: 204-208).

From a cultural point of view, Benedict’s teaching emphasizes the “Romanness” of Catholicism and suggests a condemnation of cultural Marcionism. For the Holy Father, it is not only the Jews that are Christianity’s “Greeks”, but also the Greeks and the Romans are Christianity’s “Greeks”, in Brague’s sense. Benedict demonstrates that Christianity has its roots not only in the Old Testament and its revelation, but also, to a certain degree, in ancient Pagan culture of Greece and Rome. It is

a religion which does not want to break with the past and the roots, even though it cannot accept everything of its past. There are some things that has to be rejected, some things that has to purified and transformed, and some things which can be fully accepted in the various traditions which Christianity – again, as a cultural phenomenon – stemmed from.

Benedict XVI's acceptance of Greco-Roman philosophy and his cautious acceptance of ancient mythology, poetry, religion and art, can be interpreted not only as a theological stance, but also a certain view of the Western civilization as such. We live in times where “modernity”, despite of the “post-modernity”, seems to be very much alive and by modernity I mean a view according to which the past is either irrelevant, or – at best – it is the infancy we happily grew out of, as, for example, Immanuel Kant or Auguste Comte believed. We live in times where the projects to build Europe without the past, not only without the Christian past, but also without the classical, Greco-Roman past are very much alive. The Christian past is a heavy burden for some and the classical past seems to require too much study and effort, without a guarantee of it being somehow “useful”. In such times Benedict became a strong advocate of seeing Europe’s identity as continuous and “eccentric” (in Brague’s terms). This aspect of Benedict’s thought can be interesting not only to Christians, but also to non-Christian intellectuals who are convinced that rejecting or ignoring the past is not the best way to build a culturally fertile and creative Europe.

CONCLUSION

This paper intends to be a mere *parergon* and a short homage paid to the great contemporary intellectual, Joseph Ratzinger, pope Benedict XVI, by means of showing how he emphasized the importance of the classical, Pagan tradition for European identity during his papacy. Of course, as I mentioned, this was his goal during all his academic and pastoral career, but through becoming a pope – and the pope *Benedict*, especially – his message acquired more significance. In times where classical culture is becoming less and less important or even recognizable for Western elites, Benedict XVI, the Pope who “tweeted” in Latin

and knew his Plato and his Vergil, can become an important advocate of classical studies and an ally to anyone who is interested in cultivating those studies, regardless of their religious identity.

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