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Europe in the Prisoner's Dock? The Signposts of Joseph Ratzinger/ Benedict XVI's for the Old Continent

Europa na ławie oskarżonych?
Drogowskazy Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI
dla Starego Kontynentu

ABSTRACT: Harmony of the European ethos based on an appropriate system of values should be achieved as a historical necessity for the 21st century Europe. The current lack of this harmony, which can be brought down to a number of reasons, leads to an identity crisis and as such is a cause of concern for Christians. Therefore, Joseph Ratzinger asks a provocative question: “what are the essential mistakes of Europe that have brought it to the prisoner's dock today?” This is the main research question of this article posed in the context of reflections and teaching of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI. This question urges to make an examination of conscience and prompts questions to be further addressed, concerning the depreciation of Europe's Christian roots, the negation of natural law as a source of values or the dictatorship of ethical relativism that supports a social chaos. As a result, the idea of Europe today – according to Ratzinger – “has fallen into a strange twilight” and its ethos that has been the strength of the Old Continent for centuries is being destroyed. What is necessary and urgent is a re-Europeanisation of Europe based on strong and sound axiological foundations.

KEYWORDS: Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, ethos of Europe, European culture, European crisis, Christian humanism, ethical relativism, natural law, social principles, ethical values, social guidelines, Europeanization of Europe.

ABSTRAKT: Budowanie harmonii etosu europejskiego opartego na właściwym systemie wartości jawi się jako dziejowa konieczność dla Europy XXI wieku. Obecnie tej harmonicznej spójności brakuje z wielu powodów, co jest podstawą kryzysu jej tożsamości, a jednocześnie powodem chrześcijańskiego z troskania. W takiej sytuacji Joseph Ratzinger zadaje prowokujące pytanie: Jakie są najistotniejsze błędy Europy, z powodu których siedzi ona dziś na ławie oskarżonych? Jest to główne pytanie

problemowe artykułu postawione w kontekście przemyśleń i nauczania J. Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI. Jego pytanie skłania do rachunku sumienia i postawienia kwestii, zawartych w kolejnych częściach artykułu, a dotyczących deprecjacji chrześcijańskich korzeni Europy, negowanie prawa naturalnego jako źródła wartości czy dyktatury relatywizmu etycznego w służbie chaosu społecznego. W efekcie ideę Europy – zdaniem J. Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI – otacza dziś zastanawiający półmrok niszczonego etosu, który przez całe stulecia był siłą Starego Kontynentu. Konieczna i pilna jest ponowna re-europeizacja Europy oparta o mocne i sprawdzone fundamenty aksjologiczne.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, etos Europy, kultura Europejska, kryzys europejski, humanizm chrześcijański, relatywizm etyczny, prawo naturalne, zasady społeczne, wartości etyczne, wskazania społeczne, europeizacja Europy

During a pilgrimage to the United Kingdom in 2010, Benedict XVI made a presentation of Christian humanism, considered part of the humanism of all mankind, creative and with a complementary structure and power of influence. It points to values rooted in the natural law: truth as the foundation, rational freedom as its climate, justice as the rule of action, and love, which can, as it were, inspire all human social action. Asking for other, alternative proposals for a system of values to solve Europe's contemporary problems, he heard no response, not even from those who loudly protested in the streets against his presence in the homeland of Anglicanism and bastion of secularism.¹ This gives rise to the reflection: "What point have we reached today? In the violent upheavals of our time, is there a European identity that has a future and to which we can commit ourselves with all our might?"²

Recent years demonstrate that it has become necessary to adapt old ways of life to new times, while at the same time it is necessary to search for new forms of ethos in a rapidly changing world, and thus also in Europe. Joseph Ratzinger put it bluntly in a lecture given on the occasion of the celebration of the 2000th anniversary of the town of Speyer:

The idea of Europe has fallen into a strange twilight today. [...] Up to now we have contented ourselves with a kind of phenomenology of what is European, that is, with a look at how the idea of Europe works today and how it is seen by others. Now we must go somewhat more deeply and come to an examination of

¹ Cf. S. Babuchowski, *Papież podbija Wyspy* [The Pope Conquers the Islands], <https://www.gosc.pl/doc/803468.Papiez-podbija-Wyspy/2> [access: 21.05.2011].

² J. Ratzinger, *Joseph Ratzinger, Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2007, p. 30; cf. J. Ratzinger/Benedykt XVI, *The True Europe: Its Identity and Mission*, transl. M.J. Miller, San Francisco 2024 (J. Ratzinger/Benedykt XVI, *Prawdziwa Europa. Tożsamość i misja*, Lublin 2022, pp. 207–208).

conscience; we must ask: What are the essential mistakes of Europe that have brought it to the prisoner's dock today? How can one recognize these mistakes, and how can one distinguish them from Europe's greatness, its valid contribution to the history of mankind? The second step consists in the transition from the examination of conscience to the search for the path, that is, to the question of what Europe ought to be and to do.³

Ratzinger listed then the errors of today's Europe: ethical relativism, the depreciation of natural law, legal positivism, the exclusivity of technical reason, the destruction of traditional cultural roots or new forms of nationalism.⁴ His postulates seem to echo the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on Europe held in Rome in 1999, which is clearly noticeable in the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa* by John Paul II. The Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith also contributed to its final form:

In the process of transformation which it is now undergoing, Europe is called above all to rediscover its true identity. Even though it has developed into a highly diversified reality, it needs to build a new model of unity in diversity, as a community of reconciled nations open to the other continents and engaged in the present process of globalization. To give new impetus to its own history, Europe must "recognize and reclaim with creative fidelity those fundamental values, acquired through a decisive contribution of Christianity, which can be summarized in the affirmation of the transcendent dignity of the human person, the value of reason, freedom, democracy, the constitutional state and the distinction between political life and religion."⁵

Underlying this approach to the European question of the twenty-first century is Benedict XVI's hopeful, though unquestionably realistic, conviction that:

every generation has the task of engaging anew in the arduous search for the right way to order human affairs; this task is never simply completed. Yet every

³ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe: The Church in the Modern World*, transl. B. McNeil, San Francisco 1994, pp. 118, 124; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie. Miejsce Kościoła i świata*, Kraków 2001, pp. 103, 108–109.

⁴ J. Ratzinger, *A Turning Point for Europe...*, op. cit., pp. 124–130; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Czas przemian w Europie*, op. cit., pp. 109–117.

⁵ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, 2003, no. 109, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_20030628_ecclesia-in-europa.html [access: 10.03.2024].

generation must also make its own contribution to establishing convincing structures of freedom and of good, which can help the following generation as a guideline for the proper use of human freedom.⁶

The picture of contemporary Europe seems to confirm Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's diagnosis. To the discerning observer, Europe has indeed taken its place in the dock. The *status quo* of the European ethos, developed over centuries, has in recent decades gone through a series of social, economic and political perturbations, showing signs of crisis. On the one hand, there is the economic crisis triggered by the pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine, unparalleled for a long time in its history. As it seems, this crisis is complemented by a second, much deeper one, which is the crisis of its own identity and culture, which is the foundation of Western civilisation. This can be seen, for example, in its inability to cope with the influx of migrants from outside the Old Continent and its social ethos.

Whatever the crisis, however, it is not the final outcome, the final stop in the history of Europe, which appears as an unfinished journey. It is and should be the object of expert analyses so as to properly interpret the signs of the times and, ultimately, to find the starting point for a new and better reality, the starting point of a search for a just order of human things. Benedict XVI, exploring the reasons behind this crisis, identifies in the etymology of the word "crisis" an aspect of separation, and in the broad sense of evaluation and judgment.⁷ In times of crisis, therefore, it is possible to encourage critical reflection in order to delineate a path towards the future. A crisis such as Europe has experienced many times can and should be the starting point for finding new solutions for the Old Continent as Ratzinger put it bluntly in the above-quoted excerpt from the speech in Speyer in 2000.

⁶ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Spe Salvi*, 2007, no. 25, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20071130_spe-salvi.html [access: 10.03.2024].

⁷ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Address to Members of the Regional Board of Lazio, the Municipal Council of Rome and the Administration of the Province of Rome for the Traditional Exchange of New Year Greetings (January 12, 2012)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2012/january/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20120112_amministrazione-lazio.html [access: 11.03.2024].

Bibliographic search towards the essence of the problem

Father Jerzy Szymik, a professor of dogmatics, once said of Benedict XVI: “[...] I am impressed with the personality of the Pope, a professional scholar. Modesty, no special effects, potent words, trust in the truth...”⁸ However, Benedict XVI himself, as Pope Emeritus, in an interview with the agnostic Peter Seewald, when asked what he might consider to be his weakness, admitted: “Maybe clear, purposeful governance and the decisions that have to be made there. I am just in that aspect actually more a professor, someone who deliberates and reflects on intellectual matters. So practical governance is not my forte, and there, I would say, is a certain weakness.”⁹

In analysing the problem addressed in this article, it is necessary to look at this intellectual reflections made by Joseph Ratzinger on Europe precisely through the prism of “dealings with the Word of God [...], things which a professor does.”¹⁰ More than thirty of his books have been published in Poland, several of which deal directly with European problems: *A Turning Point for Europe: The Church in the Modern World* (San Francisco 1994), *Europa Benedykta w kryzysie kultur* [Benedict's Europe in the Crisis of Cultures] (Czestochowa 2005), *Europe Today and Tomorrow: Addressing the Fundamental Issues* (San Francisco 2007). From the axiological perspective, it is also worth mentioning *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions* (San Francisco 2004) and the only encyclical devoted to social issues, *Caritas in Veritate* (Vatican 2009). A compendium can also be found in the book *The True Europe: Its Identity and Mission* (San Francisco 2024), which includes important texts by Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI on Europe. It was published on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the European Union.

The question arises as to the validity of the above queries. A careful analysis of the texts, or at least a cursory examination of the table of contents, reveals some important conclusions and clues towards the clarification of the problem under study. Professor Joseph Ratzinger was not a Christian political scientist, he was a dogmatist, applying the Augustinian approach; therefore, the optics of his

⁸ T. Jaklewicz, *Idźcie w tym świetle. Rozmowa z księdzem profesorem Jerzym Szymikiem* [Go in This Light. A Conversation with Father Professor Jerzy Szymik], “Gość Niedzielny” 2006, no. 25, p. 22.

⁹ P. Seewald, *Benedict XVI. Last Testament in His Own Words*, transl. J. Phillips, London 2016, p. 235.

¹⁰ P. Seewald, *Benedict XVI. Last Testament...*, op. cit., p. 235.

European reflection included axiological issues of truth, based on natural law and the faculties of reason. The motto on the cardinal's coat of arms is eloquent: *cooperatores veritatis* – collaborators of truth. Starting from the dogmatic truth of the harmony of creation, Ratzinger's reflection oscillated around the philosophical understanding of the world *per causas ultimas* according to the Augustinian idea of *Civitas Dei*. He proved the Christian roots of Europe built on the philosophy of Athens, the law of Rome and the faith of Jerusalem. In another strand, he showed the axiological chaos that resulted from the separation of values from natural law and struck at the very core of Europe's "soul." Hence, deviations such as nationalisms or the dominance and dogmatism of technical reason appear. The third strand is the uncompromising fight against ethical relativism, which denies the existence of objective truth and introduces axiological degeneration into social life, destroying its foundations. The common denominator is the questions: what is the true identity of Europe and what should Europe be like? The analysis of social facts and the practical indications – in line with Ratzinger's self-reflection mentioned above – seem to occupy a secondary position, playing a role of exemplification in the indictment of Europe placed in the dock.

Depreciation of Europe's Christian roots

A few days before Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger's election as Pope, the German publishing house Herder published his *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen* [Values in Times of Upheaval. Challenges of the Future].¹¹ It repeatedly calls for Europe to draw anew the best from its heritage, thus serving the whole world. One of the chapters offers a general look at the civilisational roots of the Old Continent, which seems to be relevant to the analyses of the contemporary errors in the ethos of Europe.¹² This is in fact a schematic presentation of the emergence of a European identity rather than an accurate historical account. Starting from the first historiographer of Greece, Herodotus, Joseph Ratzinger described the milestones of the formation

¹¹ J. Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs. Die Herausforderungen der Zukunft bestehen*, Freiburg–Basel–Wien 2005.

¹² Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Werte in Zeiten des Umbruchs...*, op. cit., pp. 68–73. The presented text of the chapter was delivered in the form of speeches in two versions: at a conference in Berlin on 28 November 2000 and in the Senate of the Italian Republic on 13 May 2004. The differences concern the second part of the text on the Constitution for Europe. Cf. J. Ratzinger/Benedykt XVI, *The True Europe: Its Identity and Mission*, op. cit.; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, Kielce 2005, p. 9.

of Europe up to the present day. So when he appealed to respect the Christian roots, he referred Europeans not to a fictional world, but to historical and cultural truth:

Christianity, as a kind of animating force for moral progress, has slowly inscribed itself in the European culture. As a religion, however, Christianity did not originate in Europe, a fact of which Cardinal Ratzinger is unquestionably aware. In spite of this, in-depth analyses and studies of this aspect show that it is Europe that has infused this religion with its intellectual and cultural significance. Thus, the very idea of Christianity grew in strength throughout Europe. Therefore, the interpretation of these analyses shows that the history of Christianity and Europe are linked in a special way.¹³

In various speeches on cultural roots, Joseph Ratzinger referred to this Christian ability of entering into convergence with other vectors of European heritage. He saw Europe as

[...] a precious fabric woven by generations of Europeans, which must be preserved so that successive generations can add their golden threads to the European heritage. The structure of this fabric is woven from principles and values derived from the Gospel, while national cultures have embroidered it with a wonderful variety of perspectives expressing the religious, intellectual, technical, scientific and artistic capacities of Homo Europaeus.¹⁴

In this context attention must be paid to the present and future of Europe and the question must be asked whether and to what extent history can be a teacher of the future for the Old Continent? Oswald Spengler's thesis on civilisations that they have "the moment of birth, the gradual growth, then the flowering of a culture, its slow decline, aging and death" sounds ominous in this context.¹⁵ Is this a diagnosis for the Europe of tomorrow? Looking at

¹³ H. Czakowska, M. Kuciński (eds.), *Chrześcijańska koncepcja Europy i Polski w perspektywie nauczania Kardynała Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* [A Christian Concept of Europe and Poland in the Perspective of the Teaching of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI], Bydgoszcz 2017, p. 8.

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, *Occasione Diei quo studium peragitur de dialogo inter Culturam et Religiones*, [in:] H. Czakowska, M. Kuciński (eds.), *Chrześcijańska koncepcja Europy i Polski...*, op. cit., p. 8.

¹⁵ Cf. J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow...*, op. cit., p. 24; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej podwaliny dzisiaj i jutro*, op. cit., p. 22.

contemporary Europe, one gets the impression that it is internally burnt out. The values, the bond of this civilisation that sustained its identity for centuries, have been obscured or even rejected as anachronistic, as will be discussed later. Thinking about Europe from the global perspective, it seems that

the very world of European values – the things upon which Europe bases its identity, its culture and its faith – has arrived at its end and has actually already left the scene; that now the hour has come for the value systems of other worlds, of pre-Columbian America, of Islam, of Asian mysticism. [...] This invites a comparison with the decline of the Roman Empire: it was still functioning as a great historical context, but in practice it was already living off of those who would eventually break it up, because it no longer had any vital energy of its own.¹⁶

On many occasions, Europe has been in the heat of historical turmoil, as the milestones of its history depicted by Joseph Ratzinger show. Its coherent system of values proved to be an effective salvation, which was reflected even among the anticlerical authors of the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen* during the French Revolution.¹⁷ In this context, the words of John Paul II's appeal made in Santiago de Compostela at the beginning of his pontificate show their profundity:

I turn my gaze to Europe as the continent which has made the greatest contribution to the development of the world, both in ideas and in work, science and art. [...] I cannot pass over in silence the crisis in which Europe is on the threshold of the third millennium of the Christian era. [Old Europe,] find yourself! Be yourself! Discover your origins. Breathe life into your roots. Breathe life into those authentic values that have made your history glorious and your presence beneficent on other continents. Rebuild your spiritual unity in a climate of full respect for other religions and freedoms. Render to the emperor what is imperial, and to God what is divine! [...] Do not be discouraged by your diminishing importance in the world or by the social and cultural crises affecting you. You can still be a beacon of civilisation and a stimulus of progress for the world.¹⁸

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow...*, op. cit., pp. 23–24; cf. J. Ratzinger, *Europa. Jej fundamenty duchowe wczoraj, dziś i jutro* [Europe. Its Spiritual Foundations Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow], "Wokół Współczesności. Biuletyn OCIPE" 2004, no. 9, p. 5.

¹⁷ Cf. K.F. Papciak, *Kościół a prawa człowieka* [Church and Human Rights], "Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny" 16/2 (2008), pp. 133–144.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Akt Europejski. Santiago de Compostela, 9 listopada 1982* [European Act at the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, 9 November 1982], no. 3–4, [in:] S. Sowiński,

The times that Europeans are living through can be called a turning point, as in the title of Joseph Ratzinger's book, not so much because humanity has entered a new century and millennium, but above all other important events, such as the demographic recession in Europe, the migration crisis, the collapse of communism, the emergence of the Internet, the rise of global terrorism, the process of globalisation, the economic crisis. The transition to ever new realities implies the question of which ethos of the European home must now be particularly developed as a new model. The question of the new ethos for the Old Continent and its identity in the face of multicultural European societies thus becomes crucial. A reliable answer to this question is an urgent task for contemporary Europeans, as the shape of the continent's present and future depends on it, and ultimately its survival in a form in which it will still be possible to speak of a Europe identified by its specific and dynamic culture. As Remigiusz Sobański puts it:

Europe is more of an awareness than a geography. This awareness has an objective, historical basis, that is the common Greco-Roman-Judaic-Christian past. These four determinants of this past have caused tension, but the recognition and acknowledgement of the richness of each individual determinant has led to their interpenetration and resulted in Europe, and then Europeanness.¹⁹

The depreciation of Europe's Christian roots, briefly and somewhat colloquially, can be seen as an act of European stupidity that puts limits on human wisdom and historical experience. The diagnosis of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is unequivocal: either Europe will be a community of spirit based on universal values, shaped with a great influence of Christianity, or it will cease to be the Europe it has been for centuries.²⁰ Ominous in this context are the short-sighted actions of the Eurocrats drenched in cultural communism, which has already revealed and continues to reveal its destructive influence by trying to turn the

R. Zenderowski, *Europa drogą Kościoła. Jan Paweł II o Europie i europejskości* [Europe the Way of the Church. John Paul II on Europe and Europeanness], Wrocław-Warszawa-Kraków 2003, pp. 191–192.

¹⁹ R. Sobański, *Europa i Europejczycy* [Europe and Europeans], "Gość Niedzielny" 5 (2000), <https://opoka.org.pl/biblioteka/P/PS/GN/2000-05-4> [access: 21.05.2011].

²⁰ Cf. Benedict XVI, *To the Participants in the Congress Sponsored by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE) (March 24, 2007)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070324_comece.html [access: 21.05.2023].

Old Continent into a religiously uninhabitable land. It is worth reconsidering the Pope's words with "a listening heart":

At this point Europe's cultural heritage ought to come to our assistance. The conviction that there is a Creator God is what gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person and the awareness of people's responsibility for their actions. Our cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights. To ignore it or dismiss it as a thing of the past would be to dismember our culture totally and to rob it of its completeness. The culture of Europe arose from the encounter between Jerusalem, Athens and Rome – from the encounter between Israel's monotheism, the philosophical reason of the Greeks and Roman law. This three-way encounter has shaped the inner identity of Europe.²¹

Negation of natural law as a source of values

Christian social doctrine points to the Christian roots of Europe, but it also points to the natural law common to all people, inscribed in every human being. On its basis, a theory of fundamental, universal values has been built up, based on the concept of person. Fundamental human rights and social principles are rooted in it, i.e. all that makes up universal humanism, including Christian humanism with its specificity. However, the sphere of interpretation on the ground of social philosophy reveals great discrepancies. As a result, the concepts of person, freedom, justice, truth and social love may have a completely different interpretation, which will ultimately determine a different understanding of society and the principles that should guide it. Benedict XVI puts it as follows:

[...] precisely because of the influence of cultural and ideological factors, today's civil and secular society is found to be in a state of bewilderment and confusion: it has lost the original evidence of the roots of the human being and his ethical behaviour. Furthermore, the doctrine of natural moral law conflicts with other

²¹ Benedict XVI, *The Listening Heart. Reflections on the Foundations of Law. Visit to the Federal Parliament in the Reichstag Building (Berlin, 22 September 2011)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110922_reichstag-berlin.html [access: 12.03.2024].

concepts that are a direct denial of it. All this has far-reaching, serious consequences on the civil and social order.²²

The main threat to Europe's Christian legitimacy is not the clash of civilisations, but the civilisation of clashes or, more precisely, the fractures within European civilisation that make Europe sit in the dock. Perhaps this is why Benedict XVI stated with bitterness, speaking to Roman students, that "the so-called 'Western civilization' has also partially betrayed its Gospel inspiration."²³ Earlier, in 2007, speaking at a COMECE Congress in Rome, he stated: "Is it not surprising that today's Europe, while aspiring to be regarded as a community of values, seems ever more often to deny the very existence of universal and absolute values? Does not this unique form of "apostasy" from itself, even more than its apostasy from God, lead Europe to doubt its own identity?"²⁴

It is true that the question of identity is at the same time a question about the system of values respected and nurtured by a given community as its ethos. The essence of the problem lies in the so-called Cartesian error that the maxim of the Enlightenment, the age of reason and philosophers, contains: *cogito ergo sum*. This can be interpreted somewhat perversely as "man thought he is a god." Since thinking constitutes being, then that man is a god and, like a god, can create the world anew. Following the example of the Enlightenment, reason becomes a god, the sole source of law and morality and the basis for their evaluation and verification; reason thus becomes, as it were, a judge in their own cause. The consequence is the separation of values, such as the dignity of the person, freedom, truth or justice, from a juridical and natural basis, and the further disruption of the system and the absolutisation of selected values. The result, on the other hand, is their arbitrary interpretation at the service of various ideologies, tailored to the particular political situation. In other words, there is a rupture between the logos rooted in natural law and the ethos as a formula for the existence of society. This also results in ethical relativism, which will be discussed in the next section. It is worth giving the floor to Joseph Ratzinger/

²² Benedict XVI, *Address to Members of the International Theological Commission (October 5, 2007)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/october/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20071005_cti.html [access: 14.03.2024].

²³ Cf. Benedict XVI, *Meeting With the University Students at the End of the Recitation of the Rosary (March 1, 2008)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/march/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080301_rosary.html [access: 20.02.2024].

²⁴ Benedict XVI, *To the Participants in the Congress Sponsored by the Commission of the Bishops' Conferences of the European Community (COMECE)*, op. cit.

Benedict XVI. Speaking in the German Bundestag in 2011, Pope Benedict XVI explains the essence of the sin of Europe:

The idea of natural law is today viewed as a specifically Catholic doctrine, not worth bringing into the discussion in a non-Catholic environment, so that one feels almost ashamed even to mention the term. Let me outline briefly how this situation arose. Fundamentally it is because of the idea that an unbridgeable gulf exists between “is” and “ought”. An “ought” can never follow from an “is”, because the two are situated on completely different planes. The reason for this is that in the meantime, the positivist understanding of nature has come to be almost universally accepted. [...] A positivist conception of nature as purely functional, as the natural sciences consider it to be, is incapable of producing any bridge to ethics and law, but once again yields only functional answers. The same also applies to reason, according to the positivist understanding that is widely held to be the only genuinely scientific one. Anything that is not verifiable or falsifiable, according to this understanding, does not belong to the realm of reason strictly understood. Hence ethics and religion must be assigned to the subjective field, and they remain extraneous to the realm of reason in the strict sense of the word. Where positivist reason dominates the field to the exclusion of all else – and that is broadly the case in our public mindset – then the classical sources of knowledge for ethics and law are excluded. This is a dramatic situation which affects everyone, and on which a public debate is necessary. Indeed, an essential goal of this address is to issue an urgent invitation to launch one.²⁵

A positivist understanding of nature, based only on the natural sciences, is unable to create any correlation between ethics and law, between person and duty. Such a doctrine does not recognise natural law because it sees it as an unverifiable, specifically Catholic doctrine. Natural law is relegated to the position of a subculture of Christian milieu. For the positivist view of social life, any reference to natural law is considered an error, as is clearly evident in the case of the public awareness of Western civilisation.

Christianity has been a companion in Europe for centuries. It has been a historical co-creator on whom one can rely in times of the greatest turmoil. Europe has everything to arm itself with the courage of new, constructive thinking. In the words of Benedict XVI: “If something is wrong in our relationship with reality, then we must all reflect seriously on the whole situation and we

²⁵ Benedict XVI, *The Listening Heart. Reflections on the Foundations of Law...*, op. cit.

are all prompted to question the very foundations of our culture.”²⁶ Zbigniew Stawrowski aptly puts it:

[...] from the very beginning, there were people who contested the ethical foundation of the West, but as long as these were only individual outsiders, they were of little significance. For some time, however, there had been a growing sense of dissonance inside Western civilisation, which spread with great force with the outbreak of the French revolution, the mother of all future revolutions. They were the ones that turned the existing order upside down and in its place they applied a cultural pattern based on a new foundation of values. In recent years, the dynamics of revolutionary change have accelerated. The ethical capital on which Europe has grown, and which Europe has been able to present to the rest of the world for centuries as a universal civilisational model, is being devastated.²⁷

The aforementioned new foundation of values appears rather as a system of pseudo-values or even anti-values based on rationalism or, in other words, on the so-called Cartesian anthropological error and the acknowledgement of reason as the ultimate rationale for the creation of a world of values, including indisputable truth. The separation of values from natural law results in what John Paul II particularly emphasised: the denial of the inseparability of truth and freedom, “justice without freedom” in totalitarianism or “freedom without truth” in democracy.²⁸

Benedict XVI, speaking to the diplomatic corps during his pilgrimage to Austria in 2007, points to the coherence of the European value system and tradition: “The “European home”, as we readily refer to the community of this continent, will be a good place to live for everyone only if it is built on a solid cultural and moral foundation of common values drawn from our history and our traditions. Europe cannot and must not deny her Christian roots.”²⁹

²⁶ Benedict XVI, *The Listening Heart. Reflections on the Foundations of Law...*, op. cit. Cf. also: J. Węgrzecki, *W obronie rozumu politycznego. Myśl Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI* [In Defence of Political Reason. The Thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI], Warszawa 2019.

²⁷ Z. Stawrowski, *Niemoralna demokracja* [Immoral Democracy], Kraków 2008, pp. 165–166.

²⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Europa*, no. 98.

²⁹ Benedict XVI, *Meeting with the Public Authorities and the Diplomatic Corps at Hofburg Palace in Vienna (September 7, 2007)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070907_hofburg-wien.html [access: 12.03.2024].

The Church's social teaching, which, according to Benedict XVI, "argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being,"³⁰ is capable of creating a platform for constructive dialogue for those Europeans of good will who, motivated by a new courage of thought, want to take part in creating a better future for Europe and build the European house on rock, not on sand.

Ethical relativism in the service of chaos

The above two major errors of the European, contemporary ethos are closely related to a third one: ethical relativism, which denies the existence of objective truth and the impossibility of arriving at objective knowledge. Reading Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI's diagnosis of modernity, one gets the impression that this is the central point of his intellectual inquiries and reflections. Małgorzata Pagacz lists a whole catalogue of issues in the context of ethical relativism:

The Pope describes many currents in the world today that are either at odds with Christianity or are directly in opposition to it. He repeatedly draws attention to secularism, relativism, atheism, practical atheism, agnosticism, materialism, unbelief, nihilism, indifferentism, subjectivism, individualism, reductionism, conformity, hedonism and consumerism. The way in which the Pope addresses the issues of religion, faith, culture, truth and conscience, freedom and tolerance, reason and society, indicates that Benedict XVI's attention is focused on the importance of the phenomenon of relativism.³¹

For the topic of this study, those threads that refer to the European ethos are of interest, especially those that concern relativism in the spheres of culture, politics and religion, that is, the ethos of European society in general. The Pope warned against this dictatorship of relativism:

There is also something sinister which stems from the fact that freedom and tolerance are so often separated from truth. This is fuelled by the notion, widely

³⁰ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, 2005, no. 28, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20051225_deus-caritas-est.html [access: 12.03.2024].

³¹ M. Pagacz, *Życie konsekrowane wobec relatywizmu w świetle nauczania Benedykta XVI* [Consecrated Life in the Face of Relativism in the Light of the Teaching of Pope Benedict XVI], "Wrocławski Przegląd Teologiczny" 28/2 (2020), p. 136.

held today, that there are no absolute truths to guide our lives. Relativism, by indiscriminately giving value to practically everything, has made "experience" all-important. Yet, experiences, detached from any consideration of what is good or true, can lead, not to genuine freedom, but to moral or intellectual confusion, to a lowering of standards, to a loss of self-respect, and even to despair.³²

Indeed, relativism, which seems to be constantly on the rise, is becoming the cause of axiological degeneration and, as a result, chaos in the social sphere. If there is no objective truth, then neither can we be sure who man is, what is good or bad for people, what is just or not. Since in a culture of relativism, a culture of an infinite number of subjective truths, everything seems to be allowed, anyone who wants to live according to the truth and proclaim the truth is quickly labelled a fundamentalist, often with the attribute "Christian." Consequently, relativism becomes a dictatorship, marginalising those brave enough to proclaim the truth as a valid ethical imperative for all. Ultimately, a chaos of ideas, an axiological chaos, a social chaos is created, and people feel lost in it. In the public space, relativism degenerates into manipulation and democracy becomes an imitation, an unlimited and soulless territory of ruthless political and economic interests. For Benedict XVI, relativism, which takes various forms in individual and social life, is one of the main threats, also to the ethos of Europe.³³

How many winds of doctrine have we known in recent decades, how many ideological currents, how many ways of thinking. The small boat of the thought of many Christians has often been tossed about by these waves – flung from one extreme to another: from Marxism to liberalism, even to libertinism; from collectivism to radical individualism; from atheism to a vague religious mysticism; from agnosticism to syncretism and so forth. Every day new sects spring up, and what St Paul says about human deception and the trickery that strives to entice people into error (cf. Eph 4:14) comes true.³⁴

³² Benedict XVI, *Welcoming Celebration by the Young People at Barangaroo, East Darling Harbour of Sydney (July 17, 2008)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2008/july/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20080717_barangaroo.html [access: 12.03.2024].

³³ Cf. M. Tykfer, *Relatywizm, który dotknął serca* [Relativism that Touched the Heart], <https://www.przewodnik-katolicki.pl/Archiwum/2018/Przewodnik-Katolicki-42-2018/Wiara-i-Kosciol/Relatywizm-ktory-dotknal-serca> [access: 14.01.2021].

³⁴ J. Ratzinger, *Mass "Pro eligendo Romano Pontifice". Homily of His Eminence Card. Joseph Ratzinger, Dean of the College of Cardinals, Vatican Basilica, April 18, 2005*, <https://www>.

Conclusions

As it seems, minor tentative adjustments and retouches to the current European ethos may turn out to be a road to nowhere, like those fictitious bridges on the Euro currency notes. The European Commission notes: “New social realities require new responses. Change is rapid – and policies need to keep pace, responding innovatively and flexibly to the challenges of globalisation, technological advances and demographic developments.”³⁵

Europe is facing a new situation, marked by the inadequacy of both political and economic solutions. It has been confronted with new factors that give rise to anxiety and a sense of instability, provoke anti-system protests, opposition to the current shape of democracy, opposition to uncontrolled migration. The current directions of the construction of the common European home, drifting towards ideological confrontation and the dictates of cultural communism, call for a thorough revision of the values and principles on which Europe and its social, political and economic system are to be based.³⁶ In such a situation, it is worth giving the floor once again to Benedict XVI. In his first encyclical, he offered a succinct solution, containing words of encouragement. Expressing his desire to disseminate the social teaching of the Church, the Pope stated:

Building a just social and civil order, wherein each person receives what is his or her due, is an essential task which every generation must take up anew. As a political task, this cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her

vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-cligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html [access: 14.03.2024].

³⁵ European Commission, *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions. Renewed Social Agenda: Opportunities, Access and Solidarity in 21st Century Europe*, Brussels, July 2, 2008, <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2008:0412:FIN:EN:PDF> [access: 14.03.2024].

³⁶ Cf. I. Bokwa, *Zmagania o tożsamość i chrześcijańskiego ducha Europy. Refleksje na kanwie myśli Kardynała Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI o historii i przyszłości naszego kontynentu* [The Struggle for Identity and the Christian Spirit of Europe. Reflections on the Thoughts of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI on the History and Future of Our Continent], “Studia Nauk Teologicznych” 12 (2017), pp. 211–231.

own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically.³⁷

For centuries, certain groups of people have been fighting against God, religion, Christians and their social paradigms. Experience teaches that those who proclaim catchy slogans of building a bright Europe without God promise to build heaven on earth. In effect, they always build hell. In his novel *Chrystus ukrzyżowany po raz wtóry* [Christ Crucified for the Second Time], Nikos Kazantzakis wrote that an angel can only enter heaven, Satan can only enter hell, while man can choose (?!).

In conclusion, one can say that Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI believes that Europe deserves to be accused because of bad choices. To describe these choices as incorrect would be an infantile statement, since it concerns fundamental issues.

Here we notice a self-hatred in the Western world that is strange and that can be considered pathological; yes, the West is making a praiseworthy attempt to be completely open to understanding foreign values, but it no longer loves itself; from now on it sees in its own history only what is blameworthy and destructive, whereas it is no longer capable of perceiving what is great and pure. In order to survive, Europe needs a new—and certainly a critical and humble—acceptance of itself, that is, if it wants to survive. Multiculturalism, which is continually and passionately encouraged and promoted, is sometimes little more than the abandonment and denial of what is one's own, flight from one's own heritage. But multiculturalism cannot exist without shared constants, without points of reference based on one's own values. It surely cannot exist without respect for what is sacred.³⁸

This is demonstrated in the article as a series of interdependent errors in the construction of Europe's ethos. The first error consists in the separation of values from their objective legal and natural basis. Consequently, the denial of the existence of natural law itself. Another error is the construction of an ethical

³⁷ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est*, no. 28; Cf. also: Benedict XVI, *To the Participants in the Conference of the Executive Committee of Centrist Democratic International (CDI) (September 21, 2007)*, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2007/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20070921_idc.html [access: 10.03.2024].

³⁸ J. Ratzinger, *Europe Today and Tomorrow...*, op. cit., p. 33.

relativism that denies the existence of objective truth. In turn, the multiplicity of subjective truths leads to social chaos. This process is accompanied by the growing role of a sinister cultural communism in which ideology replaces truth. This separation of Europe from its axiological and cultural roots leads to an increasing internal weakness and a declining role of the Old Continent in the global ethos.

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