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Words and silence: the relationship between Benedict XVI and the media

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ABSTRACT

The relationship between Benedict XVI and the media could be called both tense and intense. In the following pages, I analyze four episodes especially demonstrative of this relationship: the publication of *The Ratzinger Report* (1985), the controversial Regensburg Address (2006), the subsequent Papal visit to Turkey and the 2010 visit to the United Kingdom—this last one ending, ironically, on an idyllic note. By examining these events, we can better understand Benedict XVI's reflections about the media and social networks, and the necessary relationship between reason, word, silence and truth.

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The relationship between Benedict XVI and the media has been classified as tumultuous. He who was the Pope of the *Logos*, known as the Pope of reason and the word due to the depth and eloquence of his addresses and homilies, chose silence at the end of his life as the best way to emphasize everything he had said. Like Guardini, the German Pope believed that truth has no need of special adornments to make itself felt. Truth speaks with its very beauty. It is clear that Benedict XVI reached the heart of his listeners on many occasions: for example, as Cardinal Ratzinger when he denounced the 'filth' within the Church during the *Via Crucis* a few days before the death of John Paul II, as well as in the homily at his predecessor's funeral and at the start of his own pontificate. Nevertheless, in the following text, we will analyze four encounters that we find especially indicative of the overall relationship between Joseph Ratzinger and the media, as they show an interesting balance between the eloquence of the word and the power of silence (Blanco 2010a, 499–509; Blanco 2010b, 9–44).

The specific events described and analyzed here – chosen among other possible examples – are the following: the publication of the book-interview *The Ratzinger Report* (1985), the controversial Regensburg address (2006), the subsequent Papal visit to Turkey, and his 2010 visit to the United Kingdom as an unusually idyllic moment

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with the media. Considering these four events, we also draw on the reflections of the German Pope himself, not only with respect to news coverage and social media, but also regarding the inherent relationship between reason and word, silence and truth. In short, Benedict always defended the persuasive value of reason, the beauty of the truth, and the need to alternate between words and silence. As John Allen recalls, when Benedict was asked how he wanted his official portrait to look, he showed a particular disinterest, prompting his spokesman to remind him that ‘a picture is worth a thousand words.’ The Pope’s response: ‘Yes, but a concept is worth a thousand pictures’ (Allen 2011). The communicative style of Benedict XVI has more to do with the rational than the emotional, with the word more than gesture, with silence more than loud controversy. What we offer here is just an initial analysis and review of the relationship between the media and the Bavarian Pope (Rodríguez Luño 2010, 57–70).

A controversial interview

I had a fixed idea in my mind, recalled Vittorio Messori, a journalist from Turin, with whom Ratzinger would do his first long interview. ‘The Bavarian cardinal was *the* man I needed to be able to complete my great series of testimonies on the faith!’ The few that I mentioned this to had looked at me with an ironic kind of smile; someone sarcastically advised me to take a break, since I was evidently starting to lose it. [...]

It was not going to be a little interview for a newspaper, but an all-inclusive conversation that would then be turned into a book: the publisher would obviously be Saint Paul, because (I willingly and thankfully admit it) the director, Fr. Totò had been one of the few people who did not think I was crazy—more than this, he had already tried to achieve my utopic objective. (Messori 2013; Guerriero 2016; Rodríguez Luño 2010; Ruiz 2016)¹

During his time as a theologian and as an archbishop in Munich and Frisinga, Ratzinger surely could not have avoided media interaction. Still, in this first ever book-interview, the cardinal tackled a plethora of hot topics. They ranged from the liturgy to Liberation theology, from the very concept of the Church to the existence of the devil. He also covered ecumenism and the Church’s relationships with other religions, as well as the centrality of the Eucharist and the role of the bishops’ conferences. It was an all-exclusive interview – ‘with no escape,’ as Messori himself put it. It presented his whole worldview and his diagnosis of the situation of the Church: unabashedly upfront about the problems, Ratzinger offered possible causes and solutions. In the first place, he analyzed the roots of schools of thought that arose at the end of the 20th century: skepticism, relativism, and the crisis of truth. He explained it as best he could, using the simplest words possible. The forecast was bleak, but despite the apparent negativity and pessimism surrounding his whole vision – as Balthasar put it, ‘Ratzinger is not a pessimist; he’s just a realist’ (von Balthasar 2007) – the Bavarian cardinal advised looking forward to the future while also returning to the sources, The ‘sources’ included a 20th century ecclesial event that would mark the onset of the Third Millennium: the Second Vatican Council (Cf. 1985 The Ratzinger Report (BAC), *passim*).

‘Not only did I receive criticism’, Messori recalled in an interview with *La Vanguardia*, ‘but also threats.’ When I wrote that book with Ratzinger, there was still a protest within

the Catholic Church from leftists, or so-called progressives. There was a great chaos, because some thought of Vatican II as a rupture, as the beginning of a new Church and, therefore, there was a desire to destroy the past. [...]

This book broke a taboo: it was the first time that a prefect of the Doctrine of the Faith had accepted an invitation to speak clearly with a journalist, and the big shock was that Ratzinger said something that seemed reactionary and scandalous. He affirmed the same faith as always: while Catholics should accept the new spirit of Vatican II, it didn't mean they should deny tradition. (Catalán 2005, 243)

The verdict of Hans Küng – a theologian of a progressive bent, who is very media-friendly – was devastating: 'Joseph Ratzinger is afraid. And like the Grand Inquisitor of Dostoevsky, all he is afraid of is freedom' (Küng 1986, 407). The Bavarian prefect's diagnosis of the Church became the target of every possible attack. In spite of this, his ideas remained sealed in print. Controversy won the day. Ratzinger had worked hard offering facts and arguments, accompanied by his eloquence, descending to the concrete and referring to specific examples. He had been able to express himself in a simple, almost lapidary way; he knew how to offer headlines, so to speak. He made reference to real things that could be found in the Church's daily life (Herranz 2007, 337–338). Hans Urs von Balthasar (1905–1988) recalled how it all unfolded, fueled by a certain anti-Roman complex common to Central Europe that, in this case, went global:

Almost every day, Balthasar described in 1986, 'we read violent attacks in the newspapers (better still, full of resentment) against the Pope [John Paul II], cardinal Ratzinger and everything that comes from Rome.' They are outraged in an almost hysterical way, like this man in the *Süddeutsche [Zeitung]* who claimed he was obliged to attack Ratzinger's interview, three weeks before the publication of the German translation.

There have been furious attacks, including from some French bishops—some of them lashing out with rage—and also from an entire chapter of the New Blackfriars in England. The list could go on and on and even more so if you include personal statements made by clergy, (Switzerland and Germany would probably hold first place). (von Balthasar 1905–1988, 51–52)

According to Ratzinger, his diagnosis was realistic more than pessimistic, but hard as a diamond. The text was eloquent, although he did not hold back from revising the German translation in detail, reminding readers that an interview of this kind left little room for nuances. In any case, the book sparked a debate that, in more reduced circles, had a decisive influence in the development of the Extraordinary Synod of 1982, on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of Vatican II. This was a clear example of how the media can also influence ecclesial events. (Blanco 2010, 270–280; Ratzinger 1985, 5–6; Rodríguez Luño 2010, 55)²

A notorious speech

We move to a second historical moment: Pope Benedict XVI's well-known 2006 visit to Regensburg, the city where he had previously spent eight years as a professor in the 1970s. The experience of local citizens was somewhat removed from the polemic that would follow later: in fact, an almost euphoric atmosphere, *Fuszball-*

Weltmeisterschaft, awaited the visit of the former-professor-turned-Pope. At the Mass celebrated in the Isling esplanade outside the city, Benedict XVI spoke of the simplicity of the faith, expressing himself in a less academic, more pastoral tone. People from the city and from the borders had come out, together with Austrians, Polish, and Czechs who had traveled to Germany for the occasion. A giant cross dominated the scene: 36-meters high and weighing 10 tons, it held the gaze of spectators for kilometers around. An army of altar servers was on hand, decked out in green and red cassocks. At night, candles and sleeping bags, adoration of the Blessed Sacrament and praying the rosary prepared the crowd for the Mass that would follow in the morning. The organization was seamless. Nothing hinted at the disaster that was about to happen (Biskup, Lorenz, and Biallowons 2006; Regensburg (Hg.) 2006, 30–31; von Reisswitz (Hg.) 2006).

Indeed, it all happened on a ‘9–12’, a September 12th that some would go so far as to interpret as a response to 9–11 (September 11th) of 2001. After the mega-Mass, Benedict XVI made his way to the overflowing *aula magna* of the university. The main theme of his address was ‘reason’ and its ups and downs throughout modernity, but a single unfortunate quote led many to think the topic was something else entirely. The text, directed to the country’s scientists and intellectuals, was long and complex. The controversial quote was this one: ‘Show me just what Mohammed brought that was new, and there you will find things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith he preached’ (Controversy VII, 2 c: Khoury, 142–143; Förstel, vol. I, VII. Dialog 1.5, 240–241; Gerl-Falkovitz 2005, 101–105).³ The context of the quote is that it was a critique made by the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaiologos (1350–1425) against extending the faith by use of violence and ‘holy war’, employed by some factions of Islam. The quote served Benedict XVI as a way to reiterate his condemnation of extremism and fanaticism, against the prejudice of pitting reason against religion. But as media dynamics would have it, a discourse intended above all for the German-speaking world globalized overnight. The German Pope recognized later on that he ‘had not considered the political meaning of the event’, to which he simply added: ‘no one brought to my attention anything worrisome about the text’ (Englisch 2011, 259–268; Benedict XVI 2016).⁴

What effect had Benedict XVI wanted to produce with his speech, before the controversy exploded? In his own words, he wanted to highlight how ‘this inner rapprochement between Biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history’ (Benedict XVI 2006; Torralba 2013, 56–79). What was Greek – once it was purified – became part of Christianity. This was an interesting and provocative thesis in the German context of the moment. From the very beginning, Christianity had found support for itself seemingly unlikely allies – reason, science, philosophy – and it had refused to seek refuge in the symbolism of oriental religions. This affirmation could also be extended to include other religions. The 1500 people present in the room applauded these words with enthusiasm; even the *Bild*, a German tabloid, declared, ‘Today we enjoyed a little piece of heaven’... It seemed like it was going to be, all in all, a successful day with the media. But the rapid translation and subsequent de-contextualization of a quote produced the explosive

reactions that we all remember (Regensburg (Hg.) 2006, 134–136; Hurnaus 2009, 134–136).⁵

‘We found out about the angry reactions to the speech,’ commented Georg Gänswein, then secretary of Benedict XVI, ‘when we arrived at the airport in Rome, following the trip to Bavaria.’

It was a great shock, including for the Pope himself. The real problem happened when some outlets took an isolated quote out of context, presenting it as the Pope’s personal opinion. (Gänswein 2007, 48; Collins 2010, 137–157; Rodari and Tornielli 2011, 32–33)⁶

The Vatican quickly published the complete text, in an effort to provide the best possible clarification, while at the same time translating the speech into the highest number of languages possible, including Arabic. But the text was too long for readers in the full dawn of the internet age. There was a serious misunderstanding that needed to be overcome, among other things because the next Papal visit was to none other than Turkey, a country of Muslim majority. In Regensburg, Benedict had spoken not only about reason but also about faith and love; few, however, really read his words (Blanco 2007, 762–782). He wanted to show how truth and love are compatible, as they are both present in the person of Jesus Christ, who is, in the words of Weigel, ‘a servant to truth and love’ (Weigel 2006, 302). The speech had such an impact that it literally shook the cultural world, whether reasonably so or not. According to the experts of geopolitical realism, Benedict XVI should never have pronounced such a speech in the Danube city: he should have had it revised by diplomatic experts. Some accused him of criminal behavior and he himself admitted a certain error of judgment: ‘I had conceived and delivered the lecture as a strictly academic address, without realizing that people do not read papal lectures as academic presentations, but as political statements’ (Benedict XVI, 2010, 110).

A tough ride to Turkey

Up until this point for Benedict XVI, his use of the word was more often characterized by ensuing controversy than by silence. The Pope was a deep and eloquent man whose discourse never lacked a certain poetic touch, but his words were not always well understood. Was it a problem of language or of his style of communication? Nevertheless, truth is stubborn and pushes through in the end. Leading up to his visit to Turkey, expectations for success were little to none, but the outcome proved these expectations wrong, a reversal of fortune just says later tells a different story. Benedict XVI himself described the visit to Turkey as the ‘hardest trip’, but also recalled, ‘Erdogan didn’t want to meet me at first. The atmosphere gradually warmed up, so that by the end there was genuine agreement there. [...] I am therefore very grateful to the loving God that hearts somehow opened up on both sides’ (Benedict XVI 2011, 61). A mission impossible could perhaps change course.

So how did such a reversal of fortunes take place? With just a few weeks remaining before the trip, a charged atmosphere presented a tough challenge. The main contributing factor was the recently controversial Regensburg address in which the Pope had appealed to reason, but which had garnered reactions that were anything but rational. ‘It became evident,’ he would say years later, ‘that Islam needs to clarify two questions

in regard to public dialogue, that is, the questions concerning its relation to violence and its relation to reason, (Benedict XVI, 2010, 98). Despite his rectification, it was clear that a critical question still demanded a decisive response. Additionally alive and well in the collective memory was the previous intervention of the then-Cardinal Ratzinger's opposition to Turkey's entry in the European Union, in November of 2004. The reasons included Turkey's dubious claim to be European, as well as its supposed lack of respect for certain fundamental freedoms. The Vatican had withdrawn this statement as an official position, but in any case, Benedict's 'letter of presentation' in Ottoman territory was not optimal. To top it off, someone was kind enough to point out that Ali Ağca, who had tried to assassinate John Paul II, was Turkish ... (Englisch and Benedict XVI, 2011, 280–293; Tornielli and Rodari 2011, 28).⁷

Despite all this, Benedict XVI held fast to his decision to make the trip for reasons well-known to himself. During the flight from Rome to Ankara, the Pope sought to build bridges when responding to journalists asking about Turkey's possible entry in the European Union. He brought up the fact that the father of modern-day Turkey, Mustafá Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938), took the French constitution as his model, implying that the very origin of modern Turkey included a kind of dialogue with Europe's way of reasoning, manner of thinking and living. It was a way of rectifying or of at least qualifying his previous message. 'This is why dialogue between Europe's reasoning and the Muslim tradition is written in the very existence of modern-day Turkey,' he continued, 'and in this dialogue, we share a reciprocal responsibility: for our part, we Europeans have to rethink our secular concept of reason, which excludes the religious dimension from public life and leads to a dead-end' (Zenith 2006a). It was not a diplomatic gesture: it was an attempt to build a bridge and to seek mutual understanding. The next day, at a site where both Christians and Muslims venerate Mary, Benedict XVI made an appeal to 'peace in that Land we call "Holy", and peace for all humanity' (Zenith 2006).

Later on, after praising the beauty and richness of Turkish culture, the German Pope repeated what his predecessor John XXIII (1881–1963) had left in writing when he came to Istanbul as a pontifical representative: 'I feel that I love the Turkish people, to whom the Lord has sent me. I love the Turks; I appreciate the natural qualities of these people who have their own place reserved in the march of civilization' (Ephesus 2006).⁸ Two days later, he added a gesture, something less usual for this Pope of verbal eloquence. Donning white slippers as a sign of respect, Benedict XVI prayed in silence in Istanbul's Blue Mosque, Islam's most sacred place in Turkey, facing the Mecca with his hands clasped on his chest. 'He prays like a Muslim,' declared the Turkish newspaper *Il Miliyet* in clearly positive terms. 'This visit will help us find the means, the paths towards peace for the good of all mankind,' the Pope said as he entered the Muslim temple. 'Those images are being seen all over the world,' Rodari observed, 'showing more clearly than many words or explanations that the Pope is a friend of Islam' (El Mundo 2006; Englisch and Benedikt XVI 2011, 292; Tornielli and Rodari 2011, 44). Here, an image was worth well over a thousand words. The Pope's relationship with the media received just as much commentary, indicating a change of strategy with respect to previous Popes:

‘Wojtyła leaned heavily on his skillful spokesman, Navarro,’ Italian Vaticanist Marco Politi observed, ‘an experienced journalist who pays frequent visits to the Papal apartment.’ Pope Ratzinger, meanwhile, has completely altered the role of the spokesman.

From the get-go, Benedict redirected his spokesman to the upper offices of the Secretary of State. Meetings between the Pope and Father Lombardi happen the day before a trip and before visits from heads of State, in addition to the post-trip lunch meeting. (Politi 2011, 170)

Against all odds, a bad start had yielded better fruits, in a somewhat paradoxical way. It showed a change of strategy and, perhaps in part, a logistical change of communication. José Luis Restán declared, ‘Some predict a long-term positive result from the Regensburg episode: the opening of a base of dialogue, built upon new foundations, between the Catholic Church and the Islamic world’ (Restán 2008, 91). The key lay in a serene and rational dialogue around truth.

In the Islamic world in fact, there had been a subset of those who had favorable reactions from the beginning, such as the more than 100 intellectuals and muftis who declared their agreement with the Regensburg address. What exactly were they saying? Reason is natural and human, they affirmed together with the Pope, because it has something of the divine. In contract, war, and especially terrorism, is irrational, inhuman and against nature. But above all, war is against God, who for Christians is love, and it is against all religion. There was more than one Muslim that understood this perfectly. The internal discussion within Islam about having recourse to reason was just getting started. Furthermore, there existed many areas in which Christians and Muslims could collaborate and dialogue, such as those concerning peace and ethical values; in fact, the official dialogue between Christians and Muslims increased in a significant way ever since (Blanco 2009, 199–225).

‘In a world threatened by terrorism of a fundamentalist strain,’ historian Roberto Regoli commented, ‘interreligious dialogue, as well as intercultural, is presented as a real and “vital” necessity’ (Regoli 2016, 312–313, 321) (cf. also 324–325). This dialogue should also include ethical issues in which one finds a greater consensus given the common substrate, a belief in one, common human nature: ‘The Regensburg address elevated the dialogue and improved the quality of the conversation,’ concluded Regoli. ‘It brought some uncomfortable topics out onto the table: topics whose presence is necessary for authentic dialogue’ (Regoli 2016) (cf. also 324–325). In this way, dialogue – made up of words and silence, speaking and listening – becomes a communications strategy. Despite initial frictions and a slow start, there has never been as much dialogue between Islam and the Catholic Church as during the time which has followed the infamous Regensburg address. Samir Khalil, a Jesuit and a Muslim scholar, offers this evaluation of the Pope’s words:

The master class given by Benedict XVI at Regensburg was viewed by both Christians and Muslims as a wrong move for the Pope, a low point, something to forget about and leave behind, lest we provoke another War of Religions. In reality, this Pope of balanced thought and courage, not trivial in the least, outlined the foundation stones for true dialogue between Catholics and Muslims, becoming the spokesman for many reformed Muslims and offering the next steps forward for both Islam and Christianity.

Even today, both in the West and in the Islamic world, people continue to react strongly to the speech. But many Muslim scholars have begun to ask themselves: “With the wave of misunderstandings aside, what was Benedict XVI ultimately saying? He said that we Muslims run the great risk of eliminating reason from our faith. The Islamic faith would thus become an act of submission to God that ultimately terminates in violence, apparently in God’s name or in His defense ...” (Tornielli and Rodari 2011, 45; Magister 2008, 165–166)

Another storm ends calmly

We come to the fourth and final episode, this time in the West. It is obvious that the pontificate of Benedict XVI experienced frequent difficulties with the media, not just regarding Islam. Not all of it was bad news, however, as proved the case with what would now take place on British soil in 2010. One journalist set the stage as follows: “This is the first State visit of a Pope to the United Kingdom. The visit made by John Paul II in 1982 was strictly pastoral. This time, Benedict XVI will be received by the Queen, although he will not sleep in Buckingham Palace as Heads of State normally do, because Elizabeth II will still be out of town in her Scottish residence in Balmoral” (El País 2010). The visit also had an official nature. As the Catholic Archbishop of Westminster, Monsignor Vincent Nichols, expressed in an article published in the English edition of the *L’Osservatore Romano*, the Pope’s visit to the United Kingdom was to be ‘historical, without a doubt.’ The Queen herself had extended the invitation: ‘The Pontiff and the Queen,’ he added, ‘share some deep concerns.’ The visit was to be surrounded by massive security, which included prohibiting pilgrims from using bicycles and whistles, or bringing candles or animals to any of the scheduled events. According to the visit’s official website, banners or flags would be permitted along with picnics, provided one brought plastic silverware and non-breakable plates (ABC 2010). Musical instruments would also be prohibited, and somebody asked if that included the vuvuzela, popular following the previous World Cup in South Africa. An organizing official responded ‘it should be’, leading to the headline: ‘The Pope Bans Vuvuzela’ ... (Allen 2010; Restán 2010).⁹

The opposition against Benedict’s visit to the United Kingdom was not based on religious fundamentalism but rather on Western secularism and relativism. There were also historical motives for controversy: Benedict was to beatify John Henry Newman (1801–1890) during the same trip. Newman was a contemporary of Marx and Darwin, in a century marked by ideological and agnostic ebullition. The Anglican-convert to Catholicism offered an alternative response to a world in full process of secularization, symbolized by the country the Pope would now visit. Newman, however, was thoroughly modern: he saw no contradiction between obedience to authority and following one’s own conscience. He said that he would toast to the Pope but only after toasting to his own conscience first, for they shared the same source. This approach had caught Ratzinger’s attention as a theologian. As Newman was arguably the most significant Anglican of the 19th century before he converted to Catholicism, his beatification could serve as a sign of hope for both Anglicans and Catholics. The Mass of Beatification for Cardinal Newman in Birmingham was to be the peak moment of the trip. Archbishop Nichols concluded:

The Beatification of Cardinal Newman places before the eyes of the Church a scholar of great stature, a writer and a poet of considerable merit, a parish priest deeply loved by all those who knew him... He ended the article expressing, ‘the general hope we all have regarding this visit.’ (Constien, Heibl and Schaller 2010, 107–111; Zenit 2010)

All of this would not let Britain’s collective subconscious forget the vicissitudes of World War II, alive and well in their memory. ‘A provocative advertisement and no picture of the Pontiff’ read one headline in a Latin American newspaper, describing Britain’s way of welcoming the Pope, a few days before his arrival (Clarín 2010). Meanwhile, the president of the Pontifical Commission for promoting the unity of Christians, Swiss archbishop Kurt Koch, claimed that Benedict XVI’s trip to the United Kingdom would testify ‘to the tight bond between the Catholic and Anglican communities, highlighting their common faith and mission’ (Zenit 2010). It was a strategic and meaningful visit. Vaticanist Robert Moynihan wrote, ‘Benedict XVI is coming to Great Britain to preach the gospel, to tell the British to return to the faith that lies at the roots of their culture, their laws, their art and their architecture, their hopes and dreams: faith in Christ and in His Cross’ (Moynihan 2010). But not everyone viewed this mission so clearly:

For days, British atheists have been creating havoc against the Pope, affirmed one narrative. ‘Firstly, by verbally attacking him on their blogs and making the usual accusations: masochist, anti-abortionist, homophobe. All of it organized through an online platform called *Protest the Pope* that is organizing conferences, protests and even selling defamatory memorabilia.’ (El Mundo 2010)

Pope Ratzinger, however, seemed fairly detached from the ruckus. On the flight to Edinburgh, he held the usual press conference for journalists: ‘Patience, reason, kindness, and some irony,’ was Restán’s synthesis. ‘Benedict did not avoid or censure any question. Worried about the trip? Absolutely’ (Restán 2010). He recalled that an anti-Catholic wave existed in Britain’s history, but so did a ‘tradition of tolerance and the search for meaning.’ He trusted more in the latter. Difficulties tended to loom large before papal trips, but in his respective visits to France and to the Czech Republic, the prior tensions ultimately resolved themselves. ‘I am going in good spirits and with joy,’ he added (Interview with the Holy Father Benedict XVI with Journalists during the flight to the United Kingdom 2010) (Restán 2010).¹⁰ Meanwhile, something was changing in the media, thanks to the initiative of Catholic Voices, a group of laypeople ready to speak in television programs, radio shows, and general media. Here is how they explained their approach some years after the fact: ‘By looking at the positive intention behind the criticism we were able to get out of the mind-set of, “How can I justify this?” and instead ask, “What is the real source of the disagreement here?”’ (Ivereigh 2016, 7–8; Valero and Ivereigh 2011) This exercise of communicative empathy was convincing, and the response of the British was slowly softening, tilting positive.

Shortly thereafter came a moment that would long be remembered by many British people and by Benedict XVI himself: his ride through the heart of London in the Popemobile. The Mall was decorated with large Union Jack and Vatican flags mixed together. As the Pope passed by, there was applause, albeit with the typical British reserve. Later on as the sun was setting, Benedict XVI presided over a prayer vigil in Hyde Park for the Beatification of Cardinal Newman. John Allen observed,

‘At roughly the same time that some 80,000 pumped-up youth thronged Hyde Park for a prayer vigil with Benedict XVI, an estimated 10,000–15,000 secularists and atheists, gay rights activists, victims of sex abuse and others marched through the city for a “Protest the Pope!” rally.’ Staunch atheist Richard Dawkins addressed protesters calling the Pope an ‘enemy of humanity.’ Banners proclaimed, ‘Benedict’s homophobia is costing us lives!’, ‘He supports deniers of the Holocaust!’ and ‘Justice for victims!’ The not-a-little obscene conclusion was drawn: ‘No Pope, No Grope!’ (Allen 2010). Which way would public opinion fall?

The very same British press, which for months had described the approaching Papal visit with increasing hostility, completely changed tone upon seeing the reality of the moment. ‘Rottweiler? No, he is the Holy Grandfather’ affirmed *The Times*, while *News of the World*, once the best-selling Sunday newspaper in Britain, chimed ‘Bene’s from Heaven’ with the subhead ‘People’s Pope leaves Britain with a Smile on its Face’, more than indicative of a media success for Ratzinger’s 17th international visit as Pope (Badde 2016, 167; Catholic Exchange 2010; The Guardian 2011). According to the trip coordinator, Monsignor Andrew Summersgill, ‘Everywhere the Pope has spoken of the importance of reason and faith: to civil society, he has spoken of the role of religion in public life, during the liturgies he has taught us faith, and with young and old, he has shown them his faith.’ They saw a faith that is reasonable, credible and – shall we say – a bit British for its humorous and empirical nature. Alluding to the Newmanian motto of the visit – ‘*Heart Speaks Unto Heart*’ – Summersgill said, ‘The Pope spoke to the heart, but above all he spoke from the heart,’ something inseparable from the head and intellect, in Ratzinger’s view (Allegrì 2010; Zenit 2010). The Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, a 70-year old Welshman and head of the Anglican Church, offered the following reflection in an interview with Vatican Radio:

I think one of the nice things about today and yesterday has been the sense of so many predictions being proved wrong. This has been an occasion greatly blessed and people have come out onto the streets in favour of faith.

... Clearly something has happened – and part of that something is a return to the roots, something about which the Pope and I spoke about privately (some of our theological enthusiasms in common there), the heritage of the Fathers, and praying together at the Shrine of Edward the Confessor, looking back to that age when the boundaries were not what they are now between Christians – all of that I think is part of a very positive picture.

I think it’s a pity the world only sees the quarrels. It’s as if that tiny 6 inches about the surface is what matters and the immense weight of routine prayer and understanding and love and friendship just goes unnoticed (Vatican Radio Interview after Evening Prayer with Pope Benedict XVI. (17.9.2010). (Badilla 2010)¹¹

The value of silence

‘*Irony, thy name is Benedict*’, concluded Allen once again, assessing the Pope in a Shakespearean tone. He was referring to the Pope’s shyness and discretion, contrasting with his equally quiet popularity. Maybe it was that he simply sought the truth above all, giving little importance to subsequent murmurs, media shocks, or communicative cross-winds. The most important thing for him was the revealing nature of both the

word and silence. ‘Silence and the word,’ commented Lucio Ruiz, ‘are two moments of communication that should balance each other out, alternating with each other and integrating with one another (Allen 2010; Ruiz 2016, 552; Sarah 2017; También id 2016).’ Without silence, it is hard to give words their sufficient emphasis. Orators know this well. And due to a possible technological ingenuity, he added: ‘Our obsession with the virtual,’ continued Ruiz, ‘isolates us as persons, because it interrupts social interaction and disrupts the rhythm of rest and silence’ (Ruiz 2016, 555).¹²

We need exterior silence, but above all we need interior silence to hush this noise – in one’s surroundings or in the media – because this noise prevents us from thinking, reflecting and, as a result, it keeps us from knowing the truth. But ultimately, if irony characterizes Benedict’s relationship with the media, it raises another question: Was Benedict XVI ignoring the media, or was he perhaps relying on them in an ingenious way? Or was it a result of his appreciation for the value of silence? In the years after these four examples (together with many others that could be examined), the Pope-theologian reflected on the value of words and the media. In his message for the 2012 World Communications Day, Benedict XVI spoke in a somewhat enigmatic terms: ‘Silence is an integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist.’ Both words and silence are thus necessary and complementary:

In silence, we are better able to listen to and understand ourselves; ideas come to birth and acquire depth; we understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others; and we choose how to express ourselves.

By remaining silent we allow the other person to speak, to express him or herself; and we avoid being tied simply to our own words and ideas without them being adequately tested.

With these anthropological considerations, we can recognize how silence can be just as revealing as the spoken word. Benedict XVI then offers a diagnosis of the current situation of the world of communication, which perhaps remains true today: ‘The process of communication nowadays is largely fuelled by questions in search of answers. Search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information, and answers’ (Saint Peter 2012). This means many questions and few answers, words but no silence, and much uncertain information. Communication thus becomes ‘words, words, words’, to borrow Hamlet’s expression, without content or truth. To forewarn against this empty and inhuman communication, Benedict XVI proposes a return to the basics of dialogue and human existence: ‘If we are to recognize and focus upon the truly important questions, then silence is a precious commodity that enables us to exercise proper discernment in the face of the surcharge of stimuli and data that we receive’ (Saint Peter 2012). Keeping quiet, listening, thinking, and perhaps praying, allows us to discover the reality behind the spoken word. Truth grows within a rational dialogue, but without silence there can be no dialogue, nor any possibility of discerning the nucleus of truth contained in the words expressed. Finally, the ‘Pope of the word’ offers the concrete example of a woman who was a model listener:

Word and silence: learning to communicate is learning to listen and contemplate as well as speak. This is especially important for those engaged in the task of evangelization:

both silence and word are essential elements, integral to the Church's work of communication for the sake of a renewed proclamation of Christ in today's world.

To Mary, whose silence "listens to the Word and causes it to blossom", I entrust all the work of evangelization which the Church undertakes through the means of social communication. (Saint Peter 2012)¹³

This attitude of silence and listening materialized itself with Benedict's resignation and subsequent quiet during the 'spring' of the papacy of Pope Francis (Aceprensa 2013; Beltramo 2013, 80; Frank 2015, 42; Franco 2013, 3; Regoli 2016, 412; cf. 397–398, 402–403, 407; 42; *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2013).¹⁴ His silence was eloquent and grabbed intense attention from the media, a real 'trending topic': never had an act of silence provoked so much commentary. The announcement also sparked a revolution in social media: minutes after the Pope announced his decision in Latin in the Vatican, his resignation was the dominant Twitter topic. Though he is the first Pope to have a social media presence, Benedict never formally mentioned his resignation on Twitter. His last tweet to his more than two million followers was, 'Let us always trust in the power of God's mercy. We are all sinners, but his grace transforms and renews our lives.'

Pope Ratzinger, however, never was a prophet in his own land. 'Benedict XVI retires: he is tired. Or is he a victim of a plot?' wrote the *Bild*, referring to the Vatileaks case, while the magazine *Der Spiegel* reproached him for not knowing how to be the 'Pontifex Maximus'. Nevertheless, there were also positive reactions. According to *Sddeutsche Zeitung*, the newspaper of Bavaria, 'this resignation jumps over a tradition spanning over two thousand years and the very image that the Catholic papacy has of itself. He has not changed the chain of tradition, but rather strengthened it. Rarely has the Church had so much need of reform as it does now.' Finally, *Die Zeit* responded to the event by offering the following insights: 'Two cardinals from Africa, one from Canada, one Italian. There are many possible successors, but there could also be a surprise' (Aceprensa 2013).¹⁵

Western media and academia also reflected in silence upon what had happened. 'It is not a coincidence,' commented Messori, 'that Benedict XVI is ending by giving an example: in his desire to continue serving the Church, he has chosen the ministry of prayer in solitude and silence, that is, the most concrete commitment that, in any case, only faith can understand' (Religión en libertad 2013). Once again, the emphasis fell on reason, underlined by a true professor: 'The gesture of Joseph Ratzinger,' affirmed the agnostic Claudio Magris, 'is a revolutionary act that breaks the rules, customs, and the expectations of the most prudent Roman curia and the caution that has become its DNA. To realize, openly, one's own weakness and inadequacy is one of the best proofs of freedom and intelligence' (Magris 2013).

Among the most surprising reactions to the Pope's resignations was a most peculiar editorial written in Latin in *Liberation*, the historical left-wing Parisian newspaper that gave Benedict front-page treatment for the occasion. There the director, Nicolas Demorand – signing as *Nicolaus Demorandis* – penned an editorial in Latin entitled *Cogitatio* that ironically outlined a leftist anti-clerical discourse: a response to the Pope's Latin announcement of his resignation (Religión digital 2013; Torielli and Rodari 2011, 363; *Avvenire* 2018).¹⁶

‘Silence and prayer,’ Salvatorre Mazza reminded us five years later, ‘go hand in hand. Silence is a constitutive element of prayer, if we can speak in these terms; it is almost impossible to conceive one without the other’ (Mazza 2018). During these years since his resignation, Benedict XVI has remained faithful to this Golden Rule, almost taking it as a monastic vow. Very rarely has he made use of the word during this time, which has been characterized above all by long periods of silence. Writing in the Afterword of the 2016 book *The Power of Silence* by Cardinal Robert Sarah, Benedict explains:

Ever since I first read the letters of Saint Ignatius of Antioch in the 1950s, one passage from his Letter to the Ephesians has particularly affected me: It is better to keep silence and be than to talk and not to be.

Teaching is an excellent thing, provided the speaker practices what he teaches. Now there is one Teacher who spoke and it came to pass. And even what He did silently is worthy of the Father. He who has truly made the words of Jesus his own is able to hear His silence, so that he may be perfect: so that he may act through his speech and be known through his silence. (15,1f.) (Sarah and Diat 2017)

Silence is the word’s echo: the word has a stronger impact when it includes opportune pauses. As Restán comments, ‘Benedict said that he wanted to live as a monk and that is what he has done, but monks speak on not a few occasions. Pope Francis himself has invited Benedict to let himself be seen and heard more frequently.’ The Argentinian Pope himself adds: ‘He watches my back with his prayers. I never forget the talk he gave to us Cardinals that February 28th: “One of you certainly will be my successor. I promise my obedience”. And he did... He is a man of his word, an upright, a completely upright man!’ (In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis From Armenia to Rome 2016) (Boo 2016, 210–211; Restán 2017, 210–211).¹⁷ Benedict has maintained silence after his successor’s election, and he continues doing it from his retirement in the Vatican gardens. It is an eloquent and fruitful silence that compliments perfectly the inspiring words he used to deliver us.

In the Old Testament, we read how, while fleeing from the persecution of Queen Jezabel, Elias took up the path toward the holy Mount Horeb, inspired by God. Hidden in a cave, the prophet saw the same signs of theophany as in *Exodus*: an earthquake, a hurricane, fire. But God was not there. The holy author tells us that after the fire, there was ‘a noise like a soft breeze.’ Elias covered his face with his mantle and went out to meet God. And that was when God spoke to him (cfr. 1 Kings 19, 9–18). The word *demama* – translated as ‘soft breeze’ – actually means ‘silence’. With this paradox, the holy author suggests that silence is not empty: it is full of God’s presence. Pope Francis says, ‘Silence guards the mystery,’ the mystery of God. Scripture invites us to enter into this silence if we want to find Him, and perhaps this reflection of Benedict XVI on the media and social networks can help us discover this echo of the word in silence (Izquierdo 2009, 945–960; Vanzini and Ayxelá 2018).

Notes

1. See V. Messori, 2013; E. Guerriero, 2016. In this article, I have found the observations made by A. Rodríguez Luño especially helpful: “Comunicare le proprie convinzioni.

- Riflessioni alla luce del Magistero di Giovanni Paolo II e Benedetto XVI”, pp. 51–63; L. Ruiz, 2016.
2. See J. Ratzinger, 1985. About the influence of this book on the synod, see P. Blanco 2010. On the other hand, personal freedom can influence the course of events. Thus freedom’s agency and individual initiative are necessary, without for this reason staying on the surface of mere politics or power struggles: the philosopher Rodríguez Luño observes, “It is a heartfelt conviction of Benedict XVI that the invitation to freedom is the treasure of humanity; nevertheless, he also notes the temptation to impose faith through power” (A. Rodríguez Luño, “Comunicare le proprie convinzioni. Riflessioni alla luce del Magistero di Giovanni Paolo II e Benedetto XVI”, 55).
 3. Controversy VII, 2 c: Khoury, 142-143; Förstel, vol. I, VII. Dialog 1.5, 240-241. Later on, the Pope added the following footnote to the text: ‘In the Muslim world, this quotation has unfortunately been taken as an expression of my personal position, thus arousing understandable indignation. I hope that the reader of my text can see immediately that this sentence does not express my personal view of the Qur’an, for which I have the respect due to the holy book of a great religion. In quoting the text of the Emperor Manuel II, I intended solely to draw out the essential relationship between faith and reason. On this point, I am in agreement with Manuel II, but without endorsing his polemic.’ An analysis can be found in H.-B. Gerl-Falkovitz, 2005.
 4. See Benedict XVI, 2016; A. Englisch, *Benedikt XVI*, 2011. The speech was not about Islam – Benedict spoke almost exclusively of Christianity – but rather the need for reason, ‘broadening our concept of reason’ within religions and in society: a reason that was more post-modern than modern, as Walter Kasper put it at the time. Reason that would be open to art and emotions, ethics and religion; a ‘breadth of reason’ of this kind was the best guarantee of peace: ‘Not to act reasonably is contrary to the nature of God’ was another citation from the speech. Further on, he quoted another one of his favorite texts, the prologue of St. John’s Gospel, observing, ‘Modifying the first verse of the Book of Genesis, the first verse of the whole Bible, John began the prologue of his Gospel with the words: “In the beginning was the *Logos*” ... *Logos* means both reason and word ... The encounter between the Biblical message and Greek thought did not happen by chance.’
 5. Bistum Regensburg (Hg.), 2006; C. Hurnaus, 2009. Some reactions in parts of the Islamic world were violent, to the point that a nun was murdered in Somalia (nine years later, because of the Charlie Hebdo comics, eight Christians would die in Niger, while 45 churches were destroyed). As we said, the Regensburg address was not about Islam, but was directed rather above all to German professors, making reference to the development of German thought in the last centuries. This local issue was difficult to understand in a global context, causing the focus to fall solely on the quote that was merely intended to capture the audience’s attention; evidently it did, but not exactly as *captatio benevolentiae* ... The rest of the address was too complicated for readers removed from the German historical-cultural situation to understand. This first misunderstanding or perhaps the manipulation of the message took care of the rest.
 6. G. Gänswein, 2007; M. Collins, 2010. According to Marco Politi, the Pope’s spokesman had been warned about the potential PR risk of the quote: ‘We insisted anyway on the inconvenience of that quote. As for the rest, we were coming off Benedict’s trip to Poland during which, prior to the speech made at Auschwitz, we had pointed out to Joaquín Navarro Valls, then the Papal spokesman, that nowhere in the text that the Pope was to pronounce that afternoon did the word *shoah* appear. Navarro intervened right away so that in the final text delivered by the Pope, the term *shoah* was used twice, plus a third time with Ratzinger’s improvisation’ (cited in P. Rodari, and A. Torielli, 2011).
 7. The atmosphere could not have been worse. During those days, two Muslim representatives from Kuwait, one Shiite and the other Sunni, accused Benedict XVI of ‘poor knowledge of Islam’; while the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahrām* affirmed that ‘the Pope attributes to all Muslims what an extremist minority is doing’; *Al Jazira*, an

important television show from the Islamic world, claimed, ‘The Pope criticizes Islam and cites an offense to the Prophet,’ while *Al Arabija* predicted a wave of ‘Islamic rage.’ And this rage did indeed explode, subsequently in Indonesia, Morocco, Egypt, Afghanistan, and Iraq: ‘Angry, fanatical mobs,’ described Politi, ‘occupy the squares. Violent slogans ring out. They are attacking churches and setting them ablaze.’ The foreign minister of Pakistan, Taslim Aslam, claimed that ‘the Pope’s declarations reveal an ignorance about Islam and its history,’ while the spokesperson of Al Fatah in the West Bank declared ‘this does not reflect Christian principles of tolerance.’ The Imam of the Mosque of Paris asked the Vatican ‘not to confuse Islam and Islamism.’ The head of the Muslim community of Germany, Aiman Mazyek, was the only one to state that he did not find ‘any attack on Islam in the Pope’s address.’ (A. Tornielli, and P. Rodari).

8. ‘Homily, Mass before the Shrine of Meryem ana Evi.’ *Ephesus*, November 29; the text from John XXIII pertains to his *Journal of a Soul*, n. 741.
9. Some saw a problematic trip ahead of them: ‘I don’t think I exaggerate,’ affirmed the aging Restán, ‘when I say that the upcoming visit of Pope Ratzinger to the United Kingdom is surely the hardest and most problematic test to which a Pontiff has submitted himself, when voluntarily leaving Rome to fulfill the office of confirming his brothers in the faith.’ (J. L. Restán, 2010). The Oxford scientist Richard Dawkins had denounced Benedict XVI before the international courts for his statements on AIDs, while a few days earlier, physicist Stephen Hawking (1942–2018) had published a book where he affirmed the world was made from nothing and for no reason: an interesting and paradoxical atheistic confession. After all, Allen added, ‘a German visiting a country that fought two wars against Germany in the 20th century; a pope travelling to a place where ambivalence about the papacy is part of the DNA; and the head of the Catholic Church visiting a culture where the main Catholic storyline of late has been about pedophile priests. All in all, it’s a tough room’ (J. L. Allen, 2010).
10. *Interview with the Holy Father Benedict XVI with Journalists during the flight to the United Kingdom* (16.9.2010). Later on, he spoke of a Church that shouldn’t look at itself so much, but rather to Jesus Christ; he referenced a priority that unites Catholics and Anglicans: to bring all people to Christ, according to the prayer of true ecumenism. Of course, the question about sexual abuse committed by priests and religious could not be lacking: the Pope became teary-eyed when he confessed that news of this kind constituted a real shock and trauma for him, causing ‘a great sadness’. ‘Above all, I must say that these revelations were a shock for me. They are a great sadness, and it is hard to understand how this perversion of the priestly ministry was possible.’ And our narrator concludes: ‘He recognizes (once again!) that the Church has not been sufficiently speedy in its response and vigilance’ to enact the necessary measurements, and he affirms that for this reason we should open a ‘time of penance and humility, for renovation and sincerity.’ As for the victims, he emphasized that they should be the first priority’ (J. L. Restán, 2010).
11. *Vatican Radio Interview after Evening Prayer with Pope Benedict XVI* (17.9.2010).
12. See L. Ruiz. Some data points offer a better picture: towards the end of 2012, Benedict XVI appeared again among Forbes’ list of the world’s most powerful people. Only three politicians (Barack Obama, Angela Merkel y Vladimir Putin) and one millionaire (Bill Gates) appeared above the Pope on this annual list. In 2012, Benedict XVI reclaimed the fifth spot which he had had in 2010, after having fallen to the seventh spot in 2011. In their presentation of the list, journalists David Ewalt and Michael Noer called the Pope ‘spiritual leader of a sixth of the world population’.
13. See Saint Peter, 2012; the quote comes from the *Prayer on the occasion of the agorá of Italian youth in Loreto* (1–2.9.2007).
14. See R. Regoli; M. Franco, 2013. Seldom has there been such a media shock for news that wasn’t the death of a Pope. As Marco Calabresi, director of *La Stampa* in Turin: ‘Incredible, historic news that is a total surprise’ And Tornielli added: ‘It was something that you could expect from Ratzinger as a remote possibility, but that nobody expected.

Nobody knew anything, and it caught everyone by surprise.” And Bardazzi: “The press conference seemed poorly organized, as if he had made this decision within the last couple of hours.’ *L’Osservatore Romano* described ‘disconcertedness, surprise, stupefaction, commotion’ among the cardinals, while *Tageszeitung* said good bye with an obstinate and agrarian *Gott sei Dank!*, ‘Thank God!’ following their ‘Oh My God’ on the day of his election (A. Beltramo, 2013; J. Frank, 2015). The press in the Arab world also devoted a lot of attention to the resignation, with the exception of media belonging to Saudis. The Lebanese *Annahar*, an expression of the Christian community in the country, published a big photo of Ratzinger on the front page, with the headline ‘Historic Decision.’ The same title appeared in the English-language edition of the *Kuwait Time*: ‘The Pope announces his resignation; a historic gesture’ The bishop-theologian Bruno Forte wrote in *Il Sole* that Benedict XVI acted on a ‘plane of the Western mystique of service’ (‘La renuncia de Benedicto XVI, vista por la prensa’, *Aceprensa* (12.2.2013); ‘La mistica della Croce e la mistica del servizio’, *Il Sole 24 Ore* (24.2.2013).

15. La renuncia de Benedicto XVI, vista por la prensa, *Aceprensa* (12.2.2013). The English-speaking world also had their opinions. In an article published in *The Telegraph* (<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/the-pope/9862770/Pope-resigns-The-pope-who-was-not-afraid-to-say-sorry.html>), Peter Stanford said Benedict’s decision to resign added to the list of surprises included in his papacy. ‘When Joseph Ratzinger was chosen by his fellow cardinals, he was universally billed as the continuity candidate’ which is why few could imagine Benedict as the first Pope to resign in 600 years. The conservative cliché had been dismantled by a revolutionary decision. Nor was it imaginable, Stanford added, that ‘God’s Rottweiler’ could be ‘The pope who was not afraid to say sorry’. In this sense, Stanford maintained it was the courage and humility with which Benedict XVI faced the sexual abuse crisis during his visit to the United Kingdom in 2010 that made British hearts soften, despite their natural aversion to Germans. Then there was the discovery of his personal charm: ‘The crowds warmed to this serious man, with his nervous smile and understated humanity’. The result was that ‘even skeptics responded positively to his determination to speak his mind about the marginalization of religion.’
16. “El Papa relanza el latín en los medios”, *Religión digital* (13.2.2013); P. Rodari, and A. Tornielli. Five years later, Mimmo Muolo confirmed the same view in “Cinque anni dopo. La speciale cattedra del Papa emerito”, *Avvenire* (28.2.2018).
17. In-Flight Press Conference of His Holiness Pope Francis From Armenia to Rome, (26.6.2016)

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