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Msgr. Ocáriz: "Let us thank God for Benedict XVI, a humble worker in the Lord's vineyard"

The Prelate of Opus Dei collaborated with Cardinal Ratzinger since he was appointed consultor to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1986. In this article, Msgr. Fernando Ocáriz recalls the figure of the late Pope Emeritus.

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With the death of Benedict XVI, we have lost a priest, theologian, bishop, cardinal, and pope who saw himself as "a humble labourer in the Lord's vineyard." Along with our grief, it is natural for us to thank God for his life and teachings. The discretion and sobriety with which the German pontiff lived since 2013, in an attitude of prayer, were his last lesson.

Since I first met him personally in 1986, when I began to collaborate with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as a consultant, I was struck by his readiness to listen to everyone. I had the opportunity to be alone with him on many occasions for questions related to the Congregation and other matters. In those encounters, he was never the

one to end the conversation or to point out that he had other issues to attend to. It was edifying to see his consideration for others' opinions, even when they differed from his. Contrary opinions could be put to him with ease; they did not bother him, even when they came from someone younger or with less training or experience. The truth was what really mattered to him, so he took his episcopal motto from some words of St. John: *Cooperatores veritatis* (3 Jn 8).

His love for the Church and the Pope was exemplary, going beyond sentiment. I remember, for example, when Msgr. Lefebvre accepted what was proposed to him and shortly after backed out. Witnessing this, Cardinal Ratzinger was moved to exclaim sorrowfully: "How can they not realise that without the Pope, they are nothing!"

His humility and love for the Lord made him capable of responding with a "yes" to what the Lord and the Church asked of him. It is well-known that he presented his resignation to St. John Paul II on several occasions so that he could be replaced by someone younger, with more physical vitality. When the Pope asked him to remain in office, Cardinal Ratzinger did so without hesitation.

Shortly after his election to the See of Peter, he said that when St. John Paul II died, he thought he would be able to retire to his native Germany and devote himself to prayer and study. But the Lord had other plans, and he had to hear the words of John 21 applied to himself: *"Amen, I say to you, when you were younger, you used to dress yourself and go where you wanted; but when you grow old, you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead*

you where you do not want to go." In the same way, he knew how to step aside when, in the presence of God, he saw that he could no longer adequately exercise the demanding responsibilities that come with the mission of the successor of Peter. Like everyone, I received the news of his resignation with a mixture of sorrow and affection for this great successor of St. Peter. In recent months, his physical strength visibly waned, but his mental lucidity, serenity of spirit, simplicity, and kindness did not.

Knowing how to disappear, serving the Church with silent prayer, was the characteristic note of the years following his resignation. I was able to visit him on a few occasions in his residence in the Vatican Gardens: he was noticeably interested in others and centred in prayer. As he said himself, he felt like a pilgrim on his way to the Father's house, to the

embrace of Christ, who was the object of his love and his long years of study.

In the nearly eight years of his pontificate, Benedict XVI left us a great spiritual and doctrinal heritage in the encyclicals *Deus caritas est*, *Spe salvi*, *Caritas in veritate*, along with many apostolic exhortations and homilies. The magisterium of his Wednesday audiences — like those related to the Church, the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, and the cycle of audiences on prayer, which form a beautiful and profound treatise on dialogue with God — is enormously rich.

His whole life could be summarized in one beautiful phrase he pronounced at the Mass at the beginning of his Petrine ministry: "There is nothing more beautiful than allowing oneself to be touched by the Gospel, by Christ." For him,

happiness "has a name, it has a face: that of Jesus of Nazareth, hidden in the Eucharist."

Benedict XVI steered the boat of the Church on the sea of history with his eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, on "days of sun and of light winds, days when the catch was abundant; there were also moments when the waters were rough and the winds against us, as throughout the Church's history, and the Lord seemed to be sleeping." But he knew that the boat belonged to Christ.

Benedict XVI has been one of those "lights close by—people who shine with his light and so guide us along our way," as he so beautifully described in the encyclical *Spe Salvi*. His work in the vineyard of the Church will have earned him the loving words of Christ: "*Come, good and faithful servant, share your master's joy.*"

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