

The Church: Community, Reality, and Pursuit

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Prompt: Using the writings of Pope Benedict, define the reality of the Church and explain how the Church is a beacon of hope for you personally, for your community, and for the United States.

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An ever present pursuit fills the lives of many in the United States today. Whether we are in pursuit of material possessions, a larger social network, or professional accomplishment, it is evident that expansion and inclusivity define our present culture. While these gains can provide some happiness, they fulfill a small portion of a universal human goal. This goal can only be reached through the Church, which channels our pursuit toward a truly fulfilling end. As Pope Benedict XVI shows in his writings, the Church transcends ephemeral connections, plunges us into an ocean of generations, cultures and perspectives, and delivers us to the source of all our desires.

While the modern world offers a host of ways to connect to the people around us and acknowledges the role of strong, growing communities, only the Church provides the essential community for which we long. Telephone companies and social networking websites promise to connect us to the ones we love. Young adults often feel that if they become more popular, they will feel more fulfilled. Business and politics stress the importance of connecting to others in the field for personal advancement. All of these examples — though transient, shallow, and even corrupt — exemplify the necessity of social expansion and inclusivity as a means of fulfillment. Throughout his writings, the Holy Father illustrates man's capacity to reach out to other persons and the profundity of such actions. In *Spe Salvi*, he shows that “being in communion with Jesus Christ draws us into his ‘being for all.’”¹ Like Christ, who gives the total gift of self to mankind, those who embrace His gift embark on the same journey. And while Christ embraces the whole world from the cross, those who put themselves in His reach achieve self-expansion through the pursuit of community. Only by “The openness of this universal subject,” as the Holy Father explains, “does our gaze open...to God.”²

Nothing could be more inspiring to me than this awareness that my everyday social interactions correlate to the expansion of Christ's mystical body, the Church. Even those in my community and nation who are not explicitly aware of the mystery of the Church live within Her framework by seeking unity with others.

In the same way that the Church unites the world, she binds together persons from across time and space to present a dynamic image of creation. Pope Benedict XVI explores this expansive theme in his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, saying that “in the Christian view of the world, the many small circles of the lives of individuals are inscribed within the one great circle of history.”³ While the United States has a relatively short history, the mystery of “God’s eternity”⁴ allows its citizens to turn toward heroes throughout time and space. Similarly, although my school community is young, its leaders can seek the intercession of Catholic educators from bygone eras. In my life, I have hope that the saints will guide me with their intercession. These connections go far beyond mere memory, for “in the word incarnate who remains man forever, the presence of eternity with time becomes bodily and concrete.”⁵ In our churches, our homes, and even our government, it is Emmanuel — God with us — who draws us together in a community that transcends the finitude of our lives.

While the Church constantly reaches out to others in her inclusivity, she never ceases to draw her members to her source and our true desire: the ever-loving God. Through the seven sacraments, the Church’s members are showered in His divine life and love, which constitute His very essence. The Eucharist makes this union tangible and “provides the movement of the cosmos with its direction; it anticipates its goal and at the same time urges it on.”⁶ These words of the Holy Father reflect the nature of our

relationship with God. The Father permits us to embark on a pursuit, only for us to realize that he is the object of our desire and return our lives to Him. But this circular motion is not in vain. Only by this motion can we round up the entire cosmos to be held within the bonds of our love. By embracing all whom we encounter in this pursuit, we expand reality, leading, in turn, to an enrichment of our relationship with the Creator. We may travel far to return to God, yet we will obtain a greater capacity for love and become more fully equipped to receive his love, our only true fulfillment.

Endnotes

¹ Benedict XVI. Encyclical Letter, *Spe Salvi: In Hope We Are Saved*. St. Peter's: The Feast of St. Andrew the Apostle, 2007, 28.

² *ibid.*, 14.

³ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000) 29.

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.*, 92.

⁶ *ibid.*, 29.

Bibliography Page

Benedict XVI. *Spe Salvi: In Hope We Are Saved*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2008.

Ratzinger, Joseph Cardinal. *The Spirit of the Liturgy*. San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2000.

Dear Holy Father,

It is with great joy that I welcome you to the United States. Although I will be half-way across the country when you arrive, I know that your blessing will extend over the entire nation just as the Church you lead extends across space and time. You have been such an inspiring example for me, my community, and my country. From the first time I began studying your writings, my vision of the Church changed and deepened. Your words provide an exciting, applicable perspective in our age-old faith. While modern culture has tragic flaws, you have pinpointed its characteristics of continual pursuit, expansion, and inclusivity. With precision and grace, you have explained the goodness of these aspects and have shown how they are essential to the Church. I hope to transmit these realities to others in my every day life and someday, to deepen my knowledge of your writing and teach others through my own. As you have shown me by your words and example, I can only succeed at these things by being intensely loyal to the Church, daily renewing my union with Christ through the Eucharist. Thank you, Holy Father, for your loyalty, which is an inspiration to me and to the world. I pray that your stay in the United States brings others closer to Christ and helps you to grow even firmer in your faith.

In Christ,

Colleen Ahern