

Benedict XVI speaks out on some issues



We've heard very little from Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI since his retirement, but he's made a surprise return to public life. Benedict has written a letter to the atheist mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi, covering subjects from the sex abuse scandal to evolution – and extracts have been released by Italy's La Repubblica newspaper. Coming off the back of Francis' letter to another atheist on the subject of obeying one's conscience, it's hard not to draw parallels between the two and there's already discussion about the possibility of collaboration. Either way, Benedict makes some interesting points.

First, he rejects involvement in the cover up of priests engaged in sexual abuse:

I have never tried to hide these things. That the power of evil penetrate to such an extent in the inner world of faith is for us a suffering which, on the one hand, we have to endure, while, on the other, we must at the same time, do everything possible to ensure that such cases do not repeated.

This probably will not satisfy those who feel the Church hasn't done nearly enough or with sufficient speed – and who will continue, fairly or not, to blame the Vatican for the inaction. Benedict adds that this one sin should not blind people to the wider accomplishments of Christianity:

You have to remember the great figures and even that faith has produced – by Benedict of Nursia and his sister Scholastica, Francis and Clare of Assisi, Teresa of Avila and John of the Cross, the great saints of charity as Vincent de Paul and Camillo de Lellis to Mother Teresa of Calcutta and the great and noble figures of the nineteenth century Turin. It is also true today that faith leads many people to selfless love, in service to others, sincerity and justice.

Those words are controversial enough, but just as interesting is a debate over the meaning of the term "science fiction". Odifreddi had written back in 2009 that the Church's theology was science fiction in the sense that it isn't based not on empirical evidence but on pure conjecture. And here Benedict pokes fun at some schools of evolutionary thinking:

There is, moreover, science fiction in a big way just even within the theory of evolution. The Selfish

Gene by Richard Dawkins is a classic example of science fiction. The great Jacques Monod wrote the sentences that he has inserted in his work certainly just as science fiction. I quote: "The emergence of tetrapod vertebrates ... draws its origin from the fact that a primitive fish" chose "to go and explore the land, on which, however, was unable to move except jumping clumsily and thus creating, as a result of a modification of behavior, the selective pressure due to which would have developed the sturdy limbs of tetrapods. Among the descendants of this bold explorer, Magellan of this evolution, some can run at a speed of over 70 miles per hour ... "

To be clear, this isn't an attack on the hard facts of evolution but rather a gentle reminder that its translation into a speculative theory – that a fish might choose to go for a jog – demands some involvement of the imagination. That Benedict takes a swipe at Richard Dawkins is revealing. Perhaps he, too, is tired of the old man. Truly, he can test the patience of a saint.

Benedict's point is that both the Odifreddi and he believe that there is an "order" to things. But while the clergyman believes in God, the mathematician believes in nature. And the atheist interpretation cannot explain those things that do not fit with a purely scientific understanding of life – namely freedom, love and evil.

Perhaps the Pope Emeritus has caught a little of Francis' spirit of debate and openness – either way, his intervention will doubtless spark discussion.

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