



Public Witness of the Church. Inspiration of Benedict XVI

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Abstract: Benedict XVI is a prominent theologian and an insightful observer of social life. One of the topics to which he devotes a great deal of attention is the presence of Christianity and the Church in the public sphere. The title of this article refers to a speech made by the pope during the *ad lami-na* visit of the bishops of the United States, in which he explicitly states that “the Church’s witness is of its nature public.”¹ This article aims to answer the question: What role do the Church and Christianity play in the public sphere? This is a very topical issue that is worth exploring more thoroughly. Particularly inspiring here is the teaching of Benedict XVI, who presents the topic in an interesting and original way. The descriptive analytical method was used in the preparation of the text. The following detailed issues will be submitted in the presentation of the topic: characterization of the public sphere, the place of the Church in this sphere, and the inspiring character of Christianity in the culture of nations that remain in an invigorating dialogue with Christianity and the Church. This article intends to shed light on the inalienability of Christianity in the socio-political culture of the West.

Keywords: Church, Christianity, public sphere, witness, culture, values

In taking up the discussion with contemporary culture, Benedict XVI refers to current trends therein. He tries to penetrate humanity’s mindset and answer the questions with the message of Jesus of Nazareth.² He also relates to the presence of Christianity and the Church in the public sphere. This is one of the most significant and lively discussed issues of today. Since the Enlightenment, there has been a clear tendency to confine religion to the private sphere and reduce it to the realm of emotions. The pope emphasizes the rationality of Christianity and its public character. He calls for the presence of Christianity and the Church in the public sphere. Substantial concepts of Western civilization, such as equality of all people, brotherhood, and solidarity, have been shaped by the centuries-old influence of Christianity on European societies and those that have experienced the invigorating effect of Christianity. Important institutions of the modern world, like human rights and democracy, have emerged from a culture inspired by the Gospel. It may therefore be said that what

This article synthesizes deepened and expanded new elements of my previous publication: *Publiczna rola Kościoła w nauczaniu Benedykta XVI*.

¹ Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, January 19, 2012.”

² Łużyński, *Publiczna rola Kościoła*, 17.

the Church taught over the centuries – namely, the message of Jesus of Nazareth – has been remembered by the secular mind and incorporated into the culture of the Christian West.³ Still, will these achievements of the developed world, deprived of the axiological background of religion, endure? This article aims to present the creative presence of the Church in the public sphere in the teaching of Benedict XVI. We will draw attention to the issue that the public sphere itself, characterized by inclusiveness, presupposes that anyone who wants to participate in the discussion on important issues concerning community life does have access to it. The Church is also such an entity. It engages in public debate mainly because normative decisions are being made there. Furthermore, we will also point to the fruits of the Church's creative presence in the life of nations. Their Christian culture is an eloquent witness to the role the Church has played in their history.

1. Characteristics of the Public Sphere

In his teaching on the presence of the Church in the public sphere, Benedict XVI refers to the concept of Jürgen Habermas. While still a cardinal, he met him on January 19, 2004, at the Catholic Academy of Bavaria in Munich. Both thinkers discussed the pre-political and moral foundations of the liberal state. The cardinal presented the topic: "That Which Holds the World Together: The Pre-political Moral Foundations of a Free State."⁴ He pointed out that the task of politics is to submit to the rule of law, which should be fair. It will not be provided by the majority principle itself. There is a need for openness toward the great religious traditions of humanity. Thus, the role of religion involves cleansing and correcting the mind. Therefore, in the search for a proper community order, the Christian faith and Western secular rationality should listen to one another.⁵ Habermas, however, presented the topic: "Pre-political Foundations of the Democratic Constitutional State."⁶ In his speech, he argued in favor of non-religious and post-metaphysical justification of the normative basis of a democratic state.⁷ These thinkers seem to have met again in an indirect way. In a speech delivered on September 12, 2006, in Regensburg on the topic "Faith, Reason and University," Benedict XVI stressed the rational nature of Christianity, which is faith in Logos – the creative mind.⁸ Whereas Habermas contributed to this discussion by publishing *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt*. He pointed

³ Maritain, "Christianity and Democracy," 155.

⁴ Teinert, "Habermas i Ratzinger," 151.

⁵ Ratzinger, *That Which Holds the World Together*, 58–59, 78–79.

⁶ Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations," 19–52.

⁷ Habermas, "Pre-political Foundations," 24.

⁸ Benedykt XVI, *Wykład na Uniwersytecie Ratyżbońskim*, 37.

out that alongside the loss of religion, modern people have deprived themselves of the power that guides and normalizes their whole life.⁹ It seems that these authors serve as a reference for each other. When addressing the subject of the public sphere in the teaching of Benedict XVI, Habermas' reasoning should be taken into account. What is his view of this sphere? An analysis of its main features seems to be a good way to approach this concept. It will help capture its essence and then shed light on the Church's place in it.

The public is an essential feature of this sphere. It is described by openness, transparency, and accessibility for all.¹⁰ It does not imply a specific place but rather a virtual space where ideas, opinions, and claims are exchanged. The community assesses the actions of the authority in a public, open manner and subjects it to collective and open criticism.¹¹ Inclusivity, meaning universal availability, is another of its characteristics. It is an open space for all who want to bring issues of importance – for them and the community – into the public discourse. It would lose its public character if anyone were to be excluded from it.¹² This sphere is also characterized by discursiveness. It is open to anyone using speech. Thus, it is a space for social dialogue in which individuals and communities express their opinions and views, a polemical sphere in which arguments and standpoints contradict each other on important issues for the community.¹³ There is an elaborated order in the course of the discussion, which drives the community. The discussion intends to lead to a consensus that is a criterion of what is rational and true. The consensus reached in the public debate is, therefore, normative. The debate aims to transform the will of the people into a sensible agreement on the legal order of the community.¹⁴

The public sphere calls for certain preconditions to guarantee its duration. It can only develop and function properly in a society that maintains state autonomy. Therefore, it is about a social order based on the principle of subsidiarity. Individuals, families, and smaller and lower communities should retain autonomy and independence in relation to larger and higher structures. This kind of order involves social freedom and respect for the tasks and competences of the individual and the community.¹⁵ The public sphere in which an open discussion could take place on important issues is not possible in a totalitarian system where the state dominates society, absorbs all aspects of social life, acquires the competences of smaller entities, and regulates freedom in all aspects of social life. An active civil society is also a prerequisite for the emergence and proper functioning of the public sphere. It can only emerge

⁹ Habermas, *Ein Bewußtsein von dem, was fehlt*, 26–36; Buksiński, *Publiczne sfery*, 121–122.

¹⁰ Ochman, "Zarys koncepcji Habermasowskiej," 19–21.

¹¹ Skarzyński, "Czy polityka jest publiczna?" 41–42.

¹² Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 107.

¹³ Benhabib, "Trzy modele przestrzeni," 223.

¹⁴ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 105.

¹⁵ Pius XI, *Quadragesimo anno*, no. 79; Jan XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, nos. 51–58.

in an active society aware of its objectives and articulating its claims openly, uninhibited, and publicly.¹⁶ The existence of this sphere is determined by the presence of a free press enabling unconstrained articulation of opinions, circulation of opinions, and exchange of arguments. Due to the free media, opinions and arguments may resonate freely, shape public opinion, and form a social consensus on important issues relevant to the community.¹⁷ Widespread private ownership and respect for private business initiatives are also significant prerequisites for the functioning of the public sphere. Ownership guarantees the individual, families, and society the preservation of autonomy and independence from the state. Furthermore, it conditions that these communities retain their subjectivity.¹⁸ Nationalization of all property would make society very dependent on the state. In contrast, its dissemination allows society to preserve its subjectivity and to pursue its objectives freely. Therefore, the fulfillment of these conditions constitutes a guarantee for the continued existence and proper functioning of the public sphere.

2. The Church in the Public Sphere

The Church occupies an important place in such a public sphere. It has accompanied people for centuries and is an expert in human affairs. The human being is the fundamental path that the Church walks on.¹⁹ In referring to the above-mentioned features, it should be emphasized that the very message of the Gospel has a public character. It is to be proclaimed publicly “on the rooftops” and transparently so that all can hear it. Its message is addressed to every human being. The Church proclaims it publicly. Thus, the nature of this message justifies its presence in the public sphere.

Inclusiveness is yet another significant characteristic of this sphere. This sphere would lose its public character if someone were excluded from it.²⁰ The Church is an important public entity. It performs an essential prophetic role in society and promotes the values underlying Western legal and political culture. Therefore, it has the right, just like other entities, to participate in the sphere where issues of importance to the community are discussed. As a significant and experienced “social actor” in human affairs, it has the right to participate in this sphere. It is present in it primarily because decisions of a normative nature are made therein.

Furthermore, this sphere is discursive in nature. Issues that are essential to the community are discussed in it, and an open, public assessment of the actions of

¹⁶ Sowiński, *Boskie. Cesarские. Publiczne*, 40–42.

¹⁷ Łużyński, *Publiczna rola Kościoła*, 40–41.

¹⁸ Łużyński, *Struktury pośrednie*, 326–338.

¹⁹ Benedict XVI, “Message of His Holiness, 2013.”

²⁰ Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 107.

the authorities is carried out. The Church also has the right to participate in the public discourse on relevant matters of the community, particularly when issues related to human rights and the common good of society are being discussed. The Church formulates rational arguments, illuminates these questions with the light of faith, invokes the natural law, raises awareness of its requirements, and proclaims the truth contained therein. It provides moral guidance for every human being. Thus, it can be “the basis of which all people can reciprocally understand and love each other.”²¹ Due to it, an agreement between the debate participants in relation to fundamental principles and values by which the community lives can be reached. A specific way of dealing with various social problems of the Church is through its social teaching. The Church preaches, above all, the truth about the supernatural dignity of every human being and the equality of all people. It points to justice as the main norm regulating social relations. Social science is an ordinary form of the Church’s presence in the world.

Normativity is a following and specific feature of the public sphere. The ongoing debate in this area aims to bring about the unification of “all empirical awareness.”²² The goal of the discussion of participants in the public debate is to establish a legal order in the community.²³ Social consensus is the criterion of rationality and even of truth. It decides on the veracity of the proclaimed truths and principles.²⁴ In it, Benedict XVI sees the vital role of the Church in the public sphere. However, he stresses that the foundation of the democratic process and the entire sphere of politics can not be based on social consensus alone. It represents a major challenge for this sphere because it has a very unstable basis. Only objective moral norms accessible to reason, regardless of the Revelation, can constitute a foundation for political preferences.²⁵

The public sphere does also have a mediating character. Problems from the “world of life” are transferred to the sphere of politics within its framework. The Church plays an important role in this process as well.²⁶ Free citizens discuss important issues concerning the community. They articulate them in the public sphere to make them the subject of political decisions. Associations and Church groups have an intermediary function in this. Current problems that people have are also discussed within them. As part of civil society, these entities make it possible to bring their problems into the political sphere.

According to the pope, “the role of religion in political debate is not so much to supply these norms as if non-believers could not know them – still less to propose

21 Benedict XVI, “Speech to the Participants, May 4, 2009.”

22 Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 143.

23 Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, 104.

24 Huiłas, *Decydować samemu*, 319.

25 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, September 17, 2010.”

26 Oviedo, “Fundamental Theology,” 49–71.

concrete political solutions, which would lie altogether outside the competence of religion – but rather to help purify and shed light upon the application of reason to the discovery of objective moral principles.”²⁷ The pope defines this role of religion in relation to politics as “corrective.”²⁸ That is the public witness of the Church. By the will of Christ it is the teacher of truth.²⁹ It accomplishes the “mission of truth” in the world.³⁰ Through its ethical reflection, the Church supports political reason with the intention of making it more attentive to the requirements of truth and justice. It reminds us of the natural law recognizable to every human being. It can be “a universal guide, [...] the basis of which all people can reciprocally understand and love each other. [...] If this solid ethical and political basis is ignored, human rights remain fragile since they are deprived of their sound foundation.”³¹ Thus, the Church is the guardian of universal ethics. Christian revelation helps in reading it. Therefore, it can be said in line with the pope that the purpose of the Church’s public appearance is to proclaim principles that are “non-negotiable.”³² This includes protecting the dignity of every human person, the natural model of marriage and family, and the right of parents to raise their children. These non-negotiable principles and truths are rooted in human nature. They are not denominational in character but part of the ethical heritage of humankind.³³ In the lack of respect for universal ethical standards, public opinion is divided and disoriented and has difficulty agreeing on the basic principles of community life. In this situation, the ministry of the Church, which bears witness to the truth that is Christ, is significant. The Church proclaims this truth in a spirit of dialogue and openness to all discussion participants.

3. Public Character of Christianity and the Church

The characteristic of the public sphere enables determining that there is a place in it for the Church and that it plays an important role in it, above all, as a source of “non-negotiable” standards rooted in human nature and accessible to every human being through intelligent exploration. Let us, however, draw attention to the fact that Christianity and its community form, the Church, have such a public character. The attribute of catholicity proves this, just like the fact that it is the continuation of the mystery of the Incarnation.

27 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, September 17, 2010.”

28 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Representatives of British Society, September 17, 2010.”

29 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, January 31, 2008.

30 Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, no. 9.

31 Benedict XVI, “Speech to the Participants, May 4, 2009.”

32 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, March 30, 2006.”

33 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, March 30, 2006.”

The Church has a catholic nature. It is open to everyone who believes and wants to be baptized. Therefore, Christians cannot agree with the statement that faith is a purely private matter.³⁴ Benedict XVI is resolutely opposed to these tendencies. He teaches that “God cannot simply be limited to human privacy, but must also be recognized as the supreme value in public life.”³⁵ The message of the Gospel that he proclaims is addressed to every person and should be taught in public so that everyone can both hear and receive it.

The public character of the Church and Christianity is also a result of the Incarnation. It can be said that Christianity is a religion of the Incarnation. In fact, “Incarnation, that is, Christ is the *Logos*, he is the incarnate Word.”³⁶ He is not a silent, distant God who does not care about human fate. On the contrary, the Son of God enters into the history of humankind, reaches out, and desires to meet humans. Through the Incarnation, Christ has united Himself with every human being. Thanks to this, humanity can also become united with God.³⁷ The pope teaches that through the Incarnation, God “made himself close, present, entering into history and into human nature, making himself one of us.”³⁸ The Church also proclaims the Gospel to the modern world. It is the continuation of the Incarnation of the Son of God, the continuation of his presence in the world. However, it is not an anonymous and impersonal world. Christ entered into the life of concrete people, the history of every human being, and still lives in it.³⁹ The Church and his Mystical Body must also be faithful to this logic of the Incarnation and try to seek contact with every human person in the multiple conditions of their life.

The Gospel proclaimed by the Church is a ferment which, so to say, transforms all social life from within. Faith brings important human values into it. It motivates us to engage in building a more human and just world. It sheds light on the dignity and vocation of man. Moreover, it enables building interpersonal relationships in a spirit of mutual respect, brotherhood, and solidarity.⁴⁰ The Church has no political or economic agenda. Instead, it spreads the message of Christ, who transforms everyone and everything. It illuminates every area of social life and all communities where humans participate actively.⁴¹

The disciples of Christ go to the ends of the earth and preach the Gospel. Its values permeate the temporal world. They make the Kingdom of God present through their way of life and their witness of faith. They implement it in their place of residence,

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Porta Fidei*, no. 7.

³⁵ Ratzinger, *Wykłady bawarskie*, 187–188.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, “*Lectio divina*, February 15, 2012.”

³⁷ Ratzinger, *Truth and Tolerance*, 172–173.

³⁸ Benedict XVI, “General Audience of October 3, 2012.”

³⁹ Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, March 30, 2006.”

⁴⁰ Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, April 16, 2008.”

⁴¹ Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, November 13, 2010.”

their working environment, and in many other areas of social life. Hence, they transform the world from within. As a religion of the Incarnation, Christianity does not flee from the world but transforms it from the inside. God enters into the concrete human history and the history of the world. The Church, present in the world and sent to the world, is the continuation of the Incarnation. Every social engagement of Christians draws inspiration from this fact.⁴²

The witness of the Church is public, also in the sense that it is a carrier of values that have shaped the culture of the West and constitute the foundation of a democratic state of law. It is where human dignity and rights, equality of all human beings, monogamous marriage, the serving nature of the authority, and its orientation toward the common good have their source.⁴³ The Church and the whole of Christianity have a public significance as a source of values that sustain the entire social order. They form an axiological infrastructure that the state cannot create on its own.⁴⁴

4. Christian Identity of Nations

The Church affects the life of concrete national communities. The leaven of the Gospel impacted their customs, architecture, art, and history. Present in the history of many nations, it contributed to shaping their cultural identity. This is an eloquent example of the public relevance of the Church and Christianity in the lives of nations that belong to Western civilization. Benedict XVI reminded of this during his apostolic pilgrimages. It is worth mentioning some of the papal statements. When the pope visited the Czech Republic, one of the most secularized countries of today, he emphasized that “the faith of Christians, from the time of Saints Cyril and Methodius and the early missionaries, has, in fact, played a decisive role in shaping the spiritual and cultural heritage of this country. It must do likewise in the present and into the future.”⁴⁵ Referring to the identity and faith of the people of Malta, he said, “Malta developed from the offshoot of this faith and is now open to various economic, social, and cultural realities to which it makes a valuable contribution.”⁴⁶ When the pope was in Germany, he spoke about the country’s Christian roots.⁴⁷ He stressed that the Christian faith had left indelible marks there, including historical monuments, works of art, documents held in libraries, social traditions, philosophical and theological thought, and mystical experiences of saints. All of this wealthy,

42 Gocko, *Kościół obecny w świecie*, 150.

43 Maritain, “Christianity and Democracy,” 145–150; Łużyński, “The Moral Principles,” 315–317.

44 Ratzinger, “That Which Holds the World Together,” 53–80.

45 Benedict XVI, “Meeting with the Civil, September 26, 2009.”

46 Benedict XVI, “General Audience of April 21, 2010.”

47 Benedict XVI, “Homily of His Holiness, September 24, 2011.”

spiritual, and cultural heritage testifies to the great fertility of faith in the history of this country.⁴⁸ Christianity shaped the heart and spirit of the English nation.⁴⁹ It has been an integral part of the language, traditions, and overall culture of this society for more than a thousand years. Sensitivity toward truth and justice and orientation toward the good and love of neighbor have grown from the inspiration of the Gospel message. Faith was and continues to be a powerful force of good in this society.⁵⁰ From the very beginning of Christianity, faith had a strong impact on the customs, art, and identity of the Spaniards to such an extent that it shaped their individual and collective identity.⁵¹ The culture of Austria is also deeply penetrated by the message of the Gospel and the activity of the Church.⁵² In the message that Benedict XVI addressed to the President of the Italian Republic on the occasion of the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the unification of Italy, the pope wrote that “Christianity contributed in a fundamental way to the construction of the Italian identity through the work of the Church of her educational and charitable institutions, establishing models for behavior, institutional structures, and social relations, but also through an extremely rich artistic activity: literature, painting, sculpture, architecture, music.”⁵³ On his pilgrimage to France, the pope taught about the Christian character of culture in an incredibly inspiring way. During the welcoming ceremony at the Élysée Palace, he stated that the Church played a civilizational role in the life of the country. Countless copyists, monks, and professors have passed on the ancient culture to succeeding generations. The Gospel of Christ has contributed to shaping hearts and minds in the spirit of love for one’s neighbor. The Church founded numerous charitable works, above all, religious congregations serving the poor and suffering. Christians were involved in creating the institutional foundations of Gaul and later France. The landscape of this country has plenty of chapels, churches, abbeys, and cathedrals. All this testifies to a living faith that the people of the country have cultivated for generations. It is also an eloquent sign that Christianity is crucial to French national identity.⁵⁴

Thus, Christianity has had a decisive impact on the development of the cultural identity of the European nations.⁵⁵ Social institutions, the law, customs, and rules of conduct all matured under the influence of the Gospel. Christianity determined the form of the political and economic life of these countries. The entire

48 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, August 18, 2005.”

49 Benedict XVI, “Introductory Words, September 17, 2010.”

50 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, September 16, 2010.”

51 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, November 7, 2010.”

52 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, September 7, 2007.”

53 Benedict XVI, “Message to the President of the Italian Republic, March 17, 2011.”

54 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, September 12, 2008.”

55 Conesa, “El diálogo crítico,” 697–717.

European culture has grown from Christian roots.⁵⁶ Western civilization was established on a community of values derived from the Gospel.⁵⁷ Christianity has brought life to Europe and profoundly impacted the shape of this continent.⁵⁸ Furthermore, it is an important connection between Europe and both Americas, known as the “new world,” which has also been shaped by the message of the Gospel and the activity of the Church. Christianity is the “soul” of Western civilization.⁵⁹

Conclusions

The public witness of the Church is one of the leading themes in the teaching of Benedict XVI. He often raised this issue in his pre-papal teaching. In relation to the considerations of J. Habermas, the public sphere can be regarded as such, that is, public, in the sense of openness; it is inclusive – that is to say, open to all; discursive – there is a space for dialogue, dispute, and even criticism of the authorities; normative – because in this space, in the process of dispute, discussion, and combination of different viewpoints, norms by which the community is guided, are shaped; intermediary – because this space allows the private problems of individuals and families to be brought into the space of power and politics. The Church should also be present in such a space to proclaim the Gospel of Christ openly and explicitly. Due to its inclusiveness, it has the right to participate in it. Discursiveness means that everyone who uses the language can participate, and therefore also the Church, which employs rational argumentation. The very Church structures, apostolic associations, and groups provide intermediate systems between the individual and the authorities and the world of politics. The witness of the Church is public insofar as it is the guardian of objective moral standards and teaches the truths of natural law, which is the heritage of all humanity. The Church bears witness to the truth and is committed to justice. It has an essential prophetic function in society. The creative inspiration in the history of nations, under the constructive and invigorating influence of the Gospel, is the outcome of its activity in the public sphere. Christianity has shaped their culture, customs, and important institutions of public life. It can therefore be said that the witness of the Church clearly has a public character.

Translated by Dorota Adamiec

56 Hardt, “In Favour of Dispositional Explanations,” 239–261.

57 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, March 24, 2007.”

58 Benedict XVI, “Address of His Holiness, September 7, 2007.”

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