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## **Complementarity of the Liturgy and Popular Piety in the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI**

**Abstract:** This article addresses the relationship between liturgy and popular piety, a key issue for theology and life of the Church. Based on the selected source material, the research hypothesis posits the possibility of this relationship if popular piety remains rooted in the liturgy. The choice of Joseph Ratzinger's theological work and Benedict XVI's magisterium stems from the fact that the sources of this eminent contemporary theologian's thought combine both currents of reflection on this relationship. The rich source material was analyzed using a theological analysis of sources, which allowed for the identification of four most important aspects of this relationship: popular piety as an expression of faith; the close connection between popular piety and the Church's liturgy; inculturation, properly understood; and the cult of the Mother of God. The conclusions from this analysis indicate that by presenting this relationship, Ratzinger provides an answer to the question of how to maintain the dogmatic hierarchy of importance in the practice of every Christian. At the same time, he suggests ways to maintain the harmony of both sources.

**Keywords:** Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, liturgy, popular piety, inculturation, faith, Marian devotion

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### **1. Introduction**

The relationship between liturgy and popular piety is dynamic and requires constant reflection and adaptation of practices to contemporary theological realities. This research aims to understand and evaluate this relationship, with particular emphasis on their mutual interaction, tensions and misunderstandings, as well as opportunities for integration in pastoral care and the formation of the faithful. Theological analysis of sources, including the texts of the Church's

Magisterium and, above all, the rich output of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, appears appropriate for verifying the research hypothesis, revealing the implications of the relationship between liturgy and popular piety, and formulating the most important conclusions.

The relationship between liturgy and popular piety is rooted in the devotion relationship: the communal expression of faith and piety as an inner attitude of the heart towards God. Through his constant and multifaceted presence in the Church, Christ fulfills his great work of glorifying God and saving humanity. Jesus accomplished this work once and for all, and yet it continues to be accomplished in liturgical actions. The heart and foundation of the liturgy are the sacraments, but Christ's saving presence is also realized in the celebration of the Word of God, the Liturgy of the Hours, and sacramentals. Liturgy is therefore the fulfillment of the priestly function of Jesus Christ (*SC* 7).<sup>1</sup> Piety is, as it were, the "soul" of worship, as it gives it authenticity and sincerity. The Council strongly recommends popular devotions, provided they are in harmony with the sacred liturgy, so that they may flow from it and lead the faithful to it (*SC* 13). It can take personal forms (such as private prayer, adoration, and the Rosary) or popular forms (such as processions, novenas, devotions, and pilgrimages). Summing up this relationship, Ratzinger states:

[...] 'cult' seen in its true breadth and depth, goes beyond the action of the liturgy. Ultimately, it embraces the ordering of the whole of human life in Irenaeus's sense. Man becomes glory for God, puts God, so to speak, into the light (and that is what worship is), when he lives by looking toward God. On the other hand, it is also true that law and ethics do not hold together when they are not anchored in the liturgical center and inspired by it. (Ratzinger 2012, 31–32)

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<sup>1</sup> The Council clearly states this in its Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy: "every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the priest and of His Body which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others; no other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree" (*SC* 7).

As is well known, Cardinal Ratzinger devoted many of his works to liturgy (Bachanek 2010, 205–14; Beyga 2016, 89–100; Brzeziński, Mikołajczak and Woźniak 2018). He justified this by pointing out that “the question of liturgy is not peripheral: the Council itself reminded us that we are dealing here with the very core of Christian faith” (Ratzinger 2005, 107).<sup>2</sup> The earliest published volume of his collected works was devoted to the liturgy. In his introduction, Benedict XVI describes the liturgy of the Church as the central reality of his life and the focus of his theological efforts (Ratzinger 2008, 6).<sup>3</sup>

There is no doubt that liturgy occupies a central place in Ratzinger’s theology, because, in his view, it is the source, summit and heart of the Church’s faith (Gózdź 2017, 11–12). Summing up his pontificate, he states: Liturgy is, at its core, a process through which we allow ourselves to be drawn into the great faith and great prayer of the Church. This connection between heaven and earth is very important. Liturgy is an act of faith that the Lord comes to us and that we can touch Him. It is an act in which the most important thing takes place: we come into contact with God. He comes to us, and he enlightens us. It instructs us and gives us strength (Ratzinger 2013, 33–34).

For this reason, the principle of *lex credendi, lex orandi* must be observed in the liturgy. This is one of the most important principles present in the teachings of Joseph Ratzinger and Pope Benedict XVI concerning the theology of liturgy (Beyga 2019, 55–59; Ferdek 2018, 104–22). He clearly stated: “The most important thing today is to acquire a new respect for the liturgy, and an awareness that it is not open to manipulation. To learn once again to recognise in its nature a living creation that grows and has been given as gift, through

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<sup>2</sup> The teachings of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Pope Benedict XVI are consistent, presenting the liturgy as a cosmic reality in which, through signs, a salvific dialogue between God and humanity takes place. This authentic dialogue will be effective if people discover God’s presence in the liturgy and are able to respond to it. Nichols (2005a, 273–94) comments on the significance of liturgy in Ratzinger’s thought.

<sup>3</sup> Ratzinger (2008, 6) writes: “Die Liturgie der Kirche war für mich seit meiner Kindheit zentrale Wirklichkeit meines Lebens und ist in der theologischen Schule von Lehrern wie Schmaus, Söhngen, Pascher, Guardini auch Zentrum meines theologischen Mühens geworden.”

which we participate in the heavenly liturgy. To renounce seeking in it our own self-realisation in order to see a gift instead” (Ratzinger and Seewald 2005, 382). Is it reasonable to say that popular piety gives believers the opportunity for subjectively understood activity in their relationship with God, as a supplement to the liturgy?

The term ‘piety’ (Latin: *pietas*) usually refers to all manifestations of religiousness in a believer. These include not only forms of liturgical prayer and worship commonly recognised by the Church, but also numerous manifestations of so-called popular religiosity (Araszczuk 2004, 179; Krakowiak 2003, 14–15). In this context, it is worth recalling the words of John Paul II, who wrote in his message to participants of the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in September 2001 that popular piety is an expression of faith which avails of certain cultural elements proper to a specific environment which is capable of interpreting and questioning in a lively and effective manner the sensibilities of those who live in that same environment. Genuine forms of popular piety, expressed in a multitude of different ways, derives from the faith and, therefore, must be valued and promoted (John Paul II 2001, 403).

An analysis of the works of the Bavarian theologian and pope leads to the conclusion that the liturgy of the Church was the core of his faith, because it meant an encounter with the living God, who acts for the salvation of humankind. However, this did not mean closing himself off to forms of popular piety. Ratzinger, viewing them in the light of the primacy of the liturgy, saw their value and their permanent place in the life of faith of the Church and of Christians. Based on the sources, we can identify four areas of ‘interaction’ between liturgy and popular piety in the theological thought of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI.

## **2. A Meeting Point for Liturgy and Popular Piety**

Ratzinger sees the correlation of liturgy and popular piety on two synergistic levels. The first is the work of creation, understood as a reality possessing a sacramental structure from the beginning. Ratzinger believes that, viewed from the perspective of human history, it will

be possible to recognize the existence of something like primary sacraments, which, out of a kind of inner necessity, appear wherever people live together, even in a technological and desacramentalized world. The Bavarian theologian calls them “sacraments of creation,” because they arise at the crucial points of human existence: birth and death, the taking of food, and the union of the two sexes. In them, man can recognize both the image of the human essence and the type of his relationship with God. Consequently, in man, as a being existing in a spiritual way, the biological dimension acquires new meaning and new depth. It becomes a space for experiencing the supernatural dimension, a space for God’s action. This is the first, natural foundation common to liturgy and popular piety (Ratzinger 2012, 188–92).

According to Ratzinger, the second level of correlation between liturgy and popular piety is faith. The liturgy expresses, actualises and co-creates the faith of the Church. On the other hand, popular piety should be an expression of deep faith and remain in harmony with Church doctrine. Its main source should be faith, so that it does not simply become a cultural expression of one region or another. Consequently, it should have a sound theological foundation. How, then, should faith be understood as a common foundation for liturgy and popular piety?

Ratzinger sees faith as a reality that encompasses the whole of human existence. On the one hand, faith means a personal relationship with God that came about with the New Covenant. On the other hand:

Being pious and having faith is not purely a private, internal matter; piety rather means conforming one’s will to God’s will in all areas of life, piety also concerns the entire area of social responsibility for co-creating the world, it is expressed in following God’s will in all matters and thus in realizing and bringing about God’s will for justice in this world. Only where piety in this sense becomes justice, where it encompasses the whole of being and the whole of life, do we truly respond to God’s call. (Ratzinger 2020a, 86)

In his apostolic letter *Porta fidei*, Benedict XVI reminded us that professing faith is both a personal and communal act (*PF* 10). The communal dimension of faith has always been present in Ratzinger's theology (Proniewski 2023, 95–98). In his homily at the church in Weng (Bavaria), Ratzinger emphasized that faith unites people, because Jesus cannot be kept to oneself. He specified that Jesus came precisely to rescue us from isolation and bring us closer together. Faith always means communal faith. We gain faith from each other, and we have it for each other. Faith is a shared path (Ratzinger 2020a, 562).<sup>4</sup>

Both areas of faith (the entirety of human existence and the communal dimension) are also realised in forms of popular piety. However, we must not forget, as Benedict XVI reminds us, that “If popular piety is not to be reduced to a mere cultural expression of a specific region, faith must consequently be its main source. Furthermore, it must be closely related to the sacred Liturgy, which cannot be replaced by any other form of religious expression (Benedict XVI 2011a).<sup>5</sup> This connection can be seen in numerous manifestations of popular piety, which are various forms of expressing faith, most often associated with the grand celebrations of the liturgical year.

Ratzinger points to a specific example of this relationship: the Corpus Christi procession, which belongs to the liturgy and at the same time contains elements characteristic of popular piety. In his opinion, these forms of popular piety express what we are: the pilgrim people of God, on their way to the land of the future. The Church also presents what humanity is, what history is: a journey towards what is to come, a journey towards the Lord

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<sup>4</sup> And the cardinal adds that communion with the successors of the apostles, communion with Peter, is part of the vitality, wholeness and fullness of the Church. Virgin Mary remains forever a revelation of God's maternal goodness. Through her, God touches our hearts, and if piety does not come from the heart, it becomes cold and empty (Ratzinger 2020a, 586).

<sup>5</sup> Referring to the forms of this relationship between popular piety and liturgy, the pope mentions shrines and the faithful who make pilgrimages to them, Marian devotion, and the veneration of saints who set an example for us and protect us through their intercession.

who created the world and who calls it to become His kingdom (Ratzinger 2020b, 1002). Therefore, Ratzinger defends this form of popular piety against those who claim that the Eucharist is for consumption and not for viewing. He reminds us that the Council of Trent, which spoke of the Lord giving himself in the signs that are food and drink, so that we may receive him, did not see this as an objection to the Corpus Christi. Therefore, the procession, which has slowly become a hallmark of this feast day, is not in contradiction with receiving the Lord. In fact, it simply means that we go out to meet the Lord, encounter Him and accompany Him. Furthermore, the cardinal adds that the Corpus Christi procession adopted elements of the rite of blessing the fields; this is where the four altars with four blessings come from. Thus, the Corpus Christi procession, which honours the bread of eternal life, also became a supplication for earthly bread, a vivid illustration of the Lord's Prayer: "Give us each day our daily bread" (Luke 11:3) (Ratzinger 2020b, 1011).

### **3. The Close Connection between Popular Piety and the Liturgy of the Church**

Post-conciliar theology placed liturgy at the center, marginalizing popular piety and even seeing it as a threat to liturgical formation.<sup>6</sup> Nadolski notes that this was related to so-called liturgical puritanism, which effected a 'purge' of sorts in the liturgy, disregarding the value of tradition and not always taking into account the psychological and religious needs of the faithful. These actions were often inspired and supported by various statements assessing popular piety as a 'magical remnant,' the 'proletarian opposite of the aristocratic character of the Roman liturgy,' a product of the subconscious

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<sup>6</sup> This view can be found in works on liturgy from this period, e.g. Bouyer 1965; Schmemmann 1973; Martimort 1987. The Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments addresses this issue in the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy. Principles and Guidelines (DPPL)*. In his letter on the 25th anniversary of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, John Paul II wrote: "[I]t is necessary to take account of popular Christian devotion and its relation to liturgical life. This popular devotion should not be ignored or treated with indifference or contempt, since it is rich in values, and per se gives expression to the religious attitude towards God" (*VQA* 18).

of individuals trying to overcome their own fears, and a ‘provisional alternative’ to the liturgy (Nadolski 1987, 95).

According to Ratzinger, popular piety, which is an important element in the development of liturgy, should not be underestimated. Ratzinger points to the significant correlation between the two:

Popular piety is the humus without which the liturgy could not develop. Unfortunately, in some sectors of the liturgical movement and in the post-conciliar reform, it has been disregarded or even condemned in various ways. Meanwhile, it must be loved, corrected and guided where necessary, but always accepted with great respect as the root of faith in the hearts of peoples, even where it seems strange and surprising. It is undoubtedly an internal root of faith, where it dies, rationalism and sectarianism easily take its place. (Ratzinger 2012, 159)

According to Ratzinger, the erroneous relationship between liturgy and popular piety stemmed from an inadequate interpretation of the liturgy. He even offers specific examples. In his opinion, the outbreak of the Reformation in the 16th century was made possible by the lack of a proper understanding of liturgy at the time. In Luther’s view, only the consecration and distribution of Holy Communion were left of the Mass. This also applies to the present day. The real progress we owe to the liturgical movement, which led to Vatican II and to the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, was also accompanied by a particular danger, namely the risk of disregarding the Middle Ages and scholastic theology as such. Thus, liturgical rigorism and archaeologism prevailed, which ultimately became very dangerous. It was impossible to understand that the innovations that appeared in the Middle Ages, such as Eucharistic adoration and then popular piety, were in fact examples of legitimate development (Ratzinger 2012, 619–20).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Another example of misunderstanding the liturgy is that, since the time of Leo XIII, the Rosary was recited during Mass in October, a custom that persisted until the mid-20th century, making Mass resemble a veiled fresco.



Ratzinger highlighted two dangers facing today's liturgy. On the one hand, the liturgy can be so verbose that it turns into a catechesis lesson, with rather dubious success. The second, equally disastrous solution is to trivialize it, omitting everything incomprehensible to modern man, and replacing biblical and liturgical texts with what is universally comprehensible. Even if these are attempted forms of popular piety, they are unacceptable in this sense.

In his Petrine ministry, Benedict XVI also highlighted the close connection between popular piety and the liturgy. In his address to the participants in the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America, he pointed out that popular piety "must be closely related to the sacred Liturgy which cannot be replaced by any other form of religious expression." He also reiterated the statement made in the *Directory on Popular Piety and the Liturgy*, published by the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments:

[T]he Liturgy and popular piety are two forms of worship which are in mutual and fruitful relationship with each other. In this relationship, however, the Liturgy remains the primary reference point so as 'clearly and prudently to channel the yearnings of prayer and the charismatic life' which are found in popular piety. For its part, popular piety, because of its symbolic and expressive qualities, can often provide the Liturgy with important insights for inculturation and stimulate an effective dynamic creativity (no. 58). (Benedict XVI 2011a)

The connection between popular religiosity and liturgy can also be seen in shaping the place where liturgy is celebrated and selecting elements of a church's decor. Popular piety, in its various expressions, also influenced the configuration of the liturgical space. It was necessary to resolve the issue of images and find a suitable place for church music. The question always remained: What is consistent with the essence of the liturgy, and what deviates from it? (Ratzinger 2012, 70). This is, of course, a process of slow maturation, which leads to the inclusion of proven elements of piety in the liturgy. The local culture was always spontaneously reflected in the liturgy, not through

manipulation of the rite, but simply through the manner of celebration (Ratzinger 2012, 160).<sup>8</sup> Local culture, also expressed in popular piety, does not prevent us from experiencing the liturgy throughout the world in the same manner, and thus being part of a great community of faith: experiencing *communio*.

Paintings and sculptures are also part of sacred art in the service of the liturgy. They are often expressions of popular piety that seek to combine the truths of faith with the local culture. Benedict XVI stresses that “religious iconography should be directed to sacramental mystagogy” (*SCar* 41). This statement calls for learning about the forms of art developed over the centuries, so that churches may contain authentic paintings and sculptures that reflect the teachings of the Church. Does this mean that she rejects the representation of sacred art inspired by popular piety in the liturgy? No, because both realities, liturgy and expressions of popular piety, are about God’s presence and its manifestation. This is why Ratzinger, when emphasising the *ars celebrandi*, which is of such great importance to him in the liturgy, points out that it also includes all the natural and man-made elements used in the liturgy. He includes liturgical signs among them and points to their richness, mentioning liturgical space, liturgical vestments, gestures and postures, art, music, and singing. Through their refined beauty and simplicity, they should guide the faithful towards *participatio actuosa*, understood as entering into a salvific dialogue with God and immersing themselves in the Paschal mystery of Christ (Kwiatkowski 2023, 59–64).

The presence of well-understood popular piety is also evident in the Church’s administration of the sacraments (Porosło 2023, 60–62). Joseph Ratzinger sees popular piety not as a constitutive element of the celebration of the sacraments itself, but as a reality of service, preparing for and prolonging the sacramental action. He defines its proper place very precisely, guided by the primacy of the sacrament, the ecclesiality of faith, and the logic of the Incarnation. This is a crucial issue for our times, when distrust of the sacraments is prevalent in the average person’s mindset, a distrust that, according

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<sup>8</sup> He provides specific examples: villages in Bavaria, cathedrals in France or Italy, and places in the Andes.

to Ratzinger, stems from an anthropological error.<sup>9</sup> It is an idealistic distortion of human nature: sacraments, which represent deep historical interpersonal relationships, have been turned into nourishment for the individual's soul, understood as an autonomous spirit. Instead of a human being, only a non-existent spectre was left here, along with religiosity, which, wanting to build on such foundations, built on spurious sand. The relationship with God should be what humans are: physical, communal and historical.<sup>10</sup> Otherwise, according to Ratzinger, such a relationship ceases to exist (Ratzinger 2012, 198–201).

Healthy forms of popular piety also help to overcome these erroneous theories. Cardinal Ratzinger explains that whoever goes to church and receives the sacraments knows that, as a human being, they can encounter God only in a human way. A human way, however, means: “in interpersonal relations, in corporeality and in historicity” (Ratzinger 2012, 200). At the same time, Ratzinger emphasizes that this space for celebrating the sacraments can provide an opportunity to purify popular piety of its inappropriate expressions. According to him, there is no doubt that our piety was often somewhat superficial in this regard, leading to various misunderstandings. Therefore, critical questions raised by modern consciousness can help purify our understanding of our own faith (Ratzinger 2012, 200).

The relationship between sacramental theology and popular piety also highlights the danger of a superficial understanding of this reality. Both spheres of relationship with God presuppose the concrete

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<sup>9</sup> Ratzinger also identifies the crisis in sacred art as part of the anthropological crisis, arguing that today we are experiencing not only a crisis in sacred art but also a crisis in art in general, to an extent never before seen. The crisis in art, in turn, is a symptom of the crisis of humanity. For humanity, along with its extraordinary growth in material domination over the world, has at the same time succumbed to such blindness in matters transcending the material plane and concerning the fundamental orientation of human beings that it can be called spiritual blindness (Ratzinger 2012, 108).

<sup>10</sup> Commenting on the theology of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI, Szymik highlights that Christianity is based on an integral faith that permeates all aspects of human existence; it is a religion that cannot do without the physical, sensual, and emotional aspects of life. Ratzinger, he notes further, strongly rejects the accusation that such an approach leads to irrationalism (Szymik 2010, 257–58).

works of creation as the place where the mystery of human salvation is realized (Migut 2023, 232–36). The unity of both elements should be evident both in the practice of the sacraments and in various expressions of popular piety. Therefore, Ratzinger warns against reducing this relationship to only one dimension. From this point of view, a religion based solely on history, an ordinary history of salvation devoid of metaphysics, is also inconceivable, as is piety detached from the world, limited to the search for personal happiness and the salvation of one's own soul, or seeking refuge in a convivial, active community (Ratzinger 2012, 233).

#### **4. Inculturation Understood Correctly**

In his encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, Pope John Paul II noted that the Church's evangelizing mission has encountered and continues to encounter different cultures, posing a challenge for inculturation. The process of integrating the Church into the cultures of nations takes a long time. It is therefore a profound and comprehensive process that concerns both the Christian message and the reflection and concrete activity of the Church. It is also a complex process, because it cannot in any way compromise the specificity and integrity of the Christian faith. Through inculturation, the Church incorporates the Gospel into different cultures and, at the same time, introduces nations and their cultures into her community. It is a process of exchange: the Church imparts her own values to them, accepting all that is good in these cultures, thus renewing them from within (*RM* 52).

For Ratzinger, inculturation is not an arbitrary "adaptation" of Christianity to culture, but a demanding theological process that must be measured by objective norms stemming from Revelation. His reflection is clearly critical of cultural relativism, yet at the same time open to the authentic richness of cultures. According to Ratzinger, this is evident in the liturgy, which proves to be a litmus test in all attempts at inculturation. He resolutely rejects inculturation that relies solely on changing external forms. In his view, the first and fundamental way of inculturation is to develop Christian culture in its broadest sense, bearing in mind that Christianity is not born

of culture, but from the revelation of God in Christ. Consequently, inculturation in the liturgy must have a Christological dimension. The Paschal Mystery must be at the center, and nothing can obscure the uniqueness of Christ's saving power. Therefore, inculturation in the liturgy requires great caution and must protect sacramental realism (Ratzinger 2012, 158–59).

Ratzinger also emphasizes the special importance of popular piety in building a bridge between faith and different cultures. The first and foremost method of inculturation is to develop Christian culture in its various dimensions (Róžański 2008, 9–28). This is evident in the case of Latin America.

Ratzinger stresses the role of properly understood culture: In the religious sphere, culture will manifest primarily in the development of authentic popular piety. In Latin America, despite all the shortcomings of Christian missions and despite all that remains to be done there, the Christian faith has taken deep root in people's souls and is reflected in popular piety, in which the mystery of Christ has become very close to the people, and Christ is truly their Christ (Ratzinger 2012, 159).

The cardinal gives specific examples: devotion to the Passion of Christ, in which these greatly suffering peoples – after experiencing cruel deities in the past – gratefully accepted a God who suffered with them as the answer to their deepest expectations, or Marian devotion, in which the whole mystery of the Incarnation is deeply experienced, the tenderness of God, human participation in God's own nature and His action.

Benedict XVI revisits the role of popular piety in the inculturation of faith in his address to participants in the plenary meeting of the Pontifical Commission for Latin America (Benedict XVI 2011a), focusing on the new evangelization and taking into account the popular piety rooted in that continent. He first recalls the words of the final document of the Conference of Aparecida (2007), at which the bishops recognized popular piety as an area of encounter with Jesus Christ and one of the forms of expression of the faith of the Church. Therefore, it cannot be treated as secondary in Christian life, “for that would be to forget the primacy of the action of the Spirit and God's free initiative of love” (Aparecida 2014, 263).

The pope also drew attention to this in his inaugural address at the conference, emphasizing that popular piety is “the precious treasure of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and must be protected, promoted and, when necessary, purified” (Benedict XVI 2007b, 1). According to the pope, these simple forms of expressing faith have their roots in the beginnings of evangelization in these lands. As faith illuminated the cultures of that region, a rich and profound popular religiosity took shape. It continues to have its inalienable significance, if only as a form of response to the challenges of a culture that is increasingly relativistic and agnostic.

In this context, the pope stressed that popular piety is also a vital element of the Church’s evangelising mission in South America:

To carry out the new evangelization in Latin America, in a process that permeates all which the Christian is and does, the many expressions of popular piety cannot be ignored. These forms of popular piety, well-channelled and properly supported, encourage a fruitful encounter with God, deep reverence for the Most Blessed Sacrament, profound devotion to the Virgin Mary, the cultivation of affection for the Successor of Peter and an awareness of membership in the Church. May all this also be useful in evangelizing, in communicating faith, in bringing the faithful closer to the sacraments, and in strengthening the bonds of friendship and family and community union, as well as to increase solidarity and the exercise of charity. (Benedict XVI 2011a)

The words of Pope Benedict XVI resonate with the vision of the role of popular piety in this evangelizing mission, contained in the concluding document of Aparecida (2014, 258–65). Aparecida highlights the urgent need to respect and promote popular piety. Popular piety is a necessary starting point for developing a mature, deep faith among the people, because it gently permeates the personal existence of every human being and, although experienced within a large congregation, is not mass spirituality. Moreover, it is a valid way of living the faith, of feeling part of the Church, and a good channel for transmitting the faith. However, popular piety needs

to bring the faithful into direct contact with the Word of God and into active participation in the sacraments, especially the Sacrament of Penance and the Eucharist, in a special way on Sundays. Popular piety must also lead the faithful to a ministry of solidarity and love (Ruiz Arenas 2018).

In his address to the Bolivian bishops, the pope also emphasized that the various expressions of popular piety are a gift that must be preserved and supported. This requires constant effort so that the value of these signs reaches deep into our hearts, is always illuminated by the Word of God, and can be transformed into strong faith. Benedict encouraged the hierarchs to intensify and strengthen the catechesis of the faithful, as well as to popularize meditation on the Holy Scriptures (Benedict XVI 2008).

## **5. Marian Devotion**

Faith has an ecclesial dimension, with all the richness of this reality. Only by accepting this truth can one be a conscious member of the Church. The Holy Spirit came to earth and brought about the visible beginning of the Church when the disciples were gathered together with Mary and prayed. Mary is the center of this praying assembly; she is, in a sense, the personification of the praying Church – prayer that has become a person. In the heart of the Church, she is always prayer. Such is the role of Mary's presence in the Church, also expressed in various manifestations of popular piety. Consequently, Ratzinger notes, Christ is never to be had alone – Christ belongs to His Mother. This means that we can only come to Christ when we walk with the Church, when we accept the congregated community of His disciples and allow ourselves to be included in it. He adds that no single group, no matter how large, can claim to be the Church. It can only say this when it is together with Mary and with the saints of all times (Ratzinger 2020b, 1077).

Ratzinger highlights that Marian devotion, expressed in various forms of popular piety, has a strong dogmatic foundation.<sup>11</sup> Since the Council of Ephesus, the title ‘Mother of God’ has been part of the repository of faith. Because it is a profession of faith in Christ, it is also the glorification of Mary. Since then, Marian devotion has always been part of the worship of Christ, so that we do not say all or enough about the great works of God and Christ if we do not praise His Mother (Ratzinger 2020b, 1075–77).

The Marian dimension of faith in popular piety is evident in the forms of celebration of the most important holidays. Undoubtedly, Christmas is a time for a wide range of ways of experiencing the mystery of Mary’s presence in the Church’s salvific mission. Referring to this, Ratzinger states that healthy popular piety associated with it is based on Mary’s participation in the mystery of salvation: In the drama of salvation, it is not that Mary wanted to quickly play a role and then leave the stage as someone whose role had come to an end. The Incarnation of God from a woman is not a role played out for a short time, but a lasting presence of God with the earth, with man, with us who are the earth. That is why Christmas is both a feast of Mary and a feast of Christ, and that is why the Christmas church must also be the church of Mary (Ratzinger 2020a, 264).<sup>12</sup>

Ratzinger commented on the relationship between Marian devotion and liturgy when discussing the essence of the devotions of May:

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<sup>11</sup> Szymik (2015, 227) notes that one of the points on which Ratzinger builds his Mariological synthesis is the statement that the Church’s Mariology perpetuates the inseparable link between the Bible and Tradition. The four Marian dogmas are rooted in the Bible. They are embedded in it like a seed that grows and bears its fruit – in the life of Tradition.

<sup>12</sup> When he spoke about the Roman basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore, he pointed out how misunderstanding Marian devotion can lead to confusion: someone might now object that this is not the church of Nativity, and therefore the church of Christ, but the church of Mary, the first Marian church in Rome and in the West in general. However, such a contrast would reveal that the person asking this question has failed to understand the essence of both the Church’s Marian devotion and the mystery of Nativity (Ratzinger 2020a, 263).



It is not strict liturgical rules that prevail here, but simple popular piety, which loves colors, sounds and strong feelings. In this special atmosphere, there is a place for Marian devotion, because she, the Virgin, expresses the youthfulness of faith, faith as a new beginning of God in an outdated world; she embodies Christianity as youthfulness of heart, as beauty, as expectant readiness for what is to come. (Ratzinger 2020b, 1063)

At the same time, he refuted accusations of mere sentimentality, arguing that this is lacking in modern times, characterized by the suppression of feelings. He also rejected the accusation that pagan elements were thus encroaching on Christianity, encouraging people to look at it from a different perspective: In Mary the earth has become fruitful; it has acquired a human face – the face of the Mother of Jesus. In our love for her, natural piety is transformed into faith, into an encounter with God's dealing with humankind, which in the life of Mary bears its fruit: the Incarnation of God. Thus, we may calmly say that in Mary's faith and natural piety are reconciled. It seems to me that a petty fear of paganism burdens our faith and endangers it just as much as the fear of sentimentality, which long ago turned into a rationalistic complex (Ratzinger 2020b, 1064).

Consequently, Ratzinger believes that in the sphere of Marian devotion, natural piety can develop without fear, because in the view of the Mother of the Lord, it has become thoroughly Christian. The honor given to Mary, whom faith rightly calls 'Mother of God,' is the proper response to the distortions of non-Christian paganism or emancipation. Moreover, it is very important for a healthy faith. In the devotions of May, none of these is the subject of reflection; it is made present through an inner instinct of faith. And because in these devotions the inalienable heritage of natural religion became Christian, there is so much cheerfulness, warmth and spontaneous trust in them (Ratzinger 2020b, 1065).

In this perspective, Ratzinger firmly states that Marian devotion in its various healthy forms is not a threat to faith or liturgy. During the devotions of May at the Marian column in Munich (30 May 1978), the cardinal recalled that people had been praying there for

centuries, bringing their concerns, joys and hopes to the Blessed Virgin, because in her they found the gateway to Christ, because in her they experienced humanity and the closeness of God:

They understood that approaching Mary in devotion does not compete with Christ. Mary stood for them as the sign that God truly became man, the God who could call humanity ‘Mother’ [...]. Looking to Mary, our forebears realized that divine grace does not belittle the human person as if he were a rival of God; rather, it elevates him, and that God’s love is magnificent precisely because it does not destroy humanity, but draws it wholly into Himself. (Ratzinger 2020b, 1070)<sup>13</sup>

A year later, during the same devotions, Ratzinger pointed out that the piety expressed in devotions and images of the Mother of God has a profound biblical dimension. Her statue refers primarily to three elements of the Holy Scriptures. It interprets them in such a way that they speak to us: the image of Mary in the Gospels, the image of the Woman of the Apocalypse from chapter 12 of the Book of Revelation, and Psalm 90, which this column transforms into a Christian and Marian prayer of trust (Ratzinger 2020b, 1071–72). Ratzinger argues as follows: Mary holds Christ in her arms. She does not represent or reveal herself, but holds the one who sustains the whole world – including Mary herself. The Marian devotion is the worship of Christ. Therefore, through her, our ancestors recognized Christ as God, who is man, who is goodness, and, on this basis, they learned faith, which is trust and overcomes fear. Marian devotion does not contradict faith in Christ and does not constitute something that exists alongside this faith. Mary is an icon of Christ, an image from which He Himself radiates. In Mary, we touch Jesus, and we find Him. Conversely, if Marian devotion is rejected, faith

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<sup>13</sup> He spoke about this human dimension of faith when commenting on the ‘narrative’ art of Gothic architecture. He described the incredible power of interiorisation contained in images of the Mother of God. They reveal a new, human dimension of faith. Such images invite us to prayer because they are imbued with prayer. They show us the true image of man, as intended by the Creator and renewed by Christ. They introduce authentic humanity (Ratzinger 2012, 107).

in Christ is almost always and inevitably limited as well: either His humanity is denied, so that Jesus is transferred to a distant, pure divinity, or Christ becomes exclusively the man Jesus, so that only His deeds and programs matter (Ratzinger 2020b, 1071–74).

Marian devotion also becomes a place for discovering Mary's presence in the mystery of the Church and her cooperation with the Holy Spirit. In his homily on Pentecost delivered in the church in Weng, Ratzinger highlighted that it is Christ Himself, through the power of the Holy Spirit, who continues to build the Church, which people have so often sought to destroy, and which has not survived because people were steadfast, but because she is stronger than human despotism and arrogance. And that is why we can rejoice in the Church. The Church is not primarily what we do of her and with her, but what she bestows upon us through all our actions, often even contrary to what we ourselves do. Communion with the successors of the apostles, communion with Peter, is part of the vitality, wholeness and fullness of the Church. Through her, God touches our hearts, and if piety does not come from the heart, it becomes cold and empty. And only when we understood Mary, her maternal goodness, did we also understand Christ. It was then that we understood what it means for God to become man (Ratzinger 2020a, 561–66).

When assessing Marian forms of popular piety, one cannot stop at their external manifestations alone. These have theological references and, therefore, cannot be judged solely by their external appearance. Ratzinger refers to this when commenting on the blessing of herbs, which has long been associated with the Feast of the Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. He reminds us that it originates from a legend according to which, when Mary's tomb was opened, the scent of herbs and flowers emanated from it. This custom encapsulates a profound understanding of ecology: where people live for God and with God, the earth also flourishes, becoming a fragrance and a song of praise. Conversely, as we can see, the dirtiness of the soul leads to the pollution of the earth, to its destruction. Therefore, herbs are for us a sign of Mary's mystery, an indication of the harmony between heaven and earth. They tell us that the earth will flourish where we make room for God, where we go towards Him. In this spirit, we want to bring herbs into our homes – so that

they may be a sign of hope for a new earth, a sign of God's love, which creates a new heaven and a new earth and makes the earth flourish wherever people live in harmony with it (Ratzinger 2020b, 1111–15; Szymik 2014, 50–52).

One of the most widespread forms of Marian devotion is the Rosary (Lekan 2024). Ratzinger is convinced of the supernatural origin of this prayer. He bases his argument on the fact that the words spoken in this prayer come from God. By repeating them, we look through these words as if through a window onto the life of Jesus Christ. Since the Rosary consists of the words of Revelation (“Our Father,” “Hail Mary”) and leads to the contemplation of the mysteries of Christ, popular piety is rooted in the Logos himself, not in subjective religiosity. Therefore, we can truly say that the Rosary is not merely the fruit of pastoral ingenuity, for it could only have sprung from a heart that had been touched by the depths of the Lord's mystery and His love for His Mother. This prayer comes from Mary herself, and perhaps many of our contemporary pastoral projects are so short-lived because we want to invent them ourselves and lack the simplicity of heart that goes deep and allows us to be touched by what is greater than ourselves. That is why the Rosary tells us something we need today: let us find time for what is essential, let us calm down, let us repeat, let us pause, so that we may become richer and not have to constantly chase after something new (Ratzinger 2020b, 1137–40).

Ratzinger also disagrees with the views that Marian devotion should be abandoned, which became fashionable after the Second Vatican Council. At that time, this devotion was often described as old-fashioned, and remedies offered by psychology and sociology were recommended instead. The cardinal does not deny that psychology and sociology also provide us with important knowledge about human beings and the shaping of community life. Different mistakes in education, in our approach to ourselves and others, and in shaping community life can be avoided if we use this knowledge. Many positive ideas can be drawn from it. But they cannot fulfil the almost religious hopes that have been attached to these sciences. They give us techniques but not values. And only values can make these techniques bear fruit. Therefore, he calls upon

members of religious orders and earnestly asks them not to allow themselves to be distracted from the religious center of their vocation; seek the center of their life in prayer and in the celebration of the sacraments (Ratzinger 2020b, 1154).

To affirm this, Ratzinger recalls Cardinal Josef Frings's appeal to the Council. At the Council, when the liturgical, Christological and ecumenical movements were opposed to the Marian movement, so that there was a danger that the two sides would become irreconcilable, Cardinal Frings made an impassioned appeal to the Council Fathers to find a common ground. He strongly resisted the short-sighted, hasty alternative, as if the Church now had to decide whether it wanted to remain modern, biblical, liturgical and ecumenical, or 'old-fashioned' and Marian. He wanted to bring both sides together to give the liturgy the depth of Marian devotion and to open Marian devotion to the full breadth of liturgical tradition. This was one of his personal appeals he addressed to the Council Fathers, animated by his zealous faith (Ratzinger 2020b, 1160).

## 6. Conclusion

An analysis of the sources leads to the conclusion that the relationship between popular piety and liturgy offers Ratzinger/Benedict XVI an opportunity to strongly emphasize the primacy of liturgy in the life of the Church and of every believer. The liturgy is the source and goal of the mission of the Church (CCC 1072), but, of course, it does not exhaust all of her activities, which also include evangelization and forms of healthy popular piety as ways of living the faith. However, according to Ratzinger, the conciliar postulate of the comprehensibility of the liturgy, contained in the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, underwent post-conciliar trivialization, which, in his opinion, resulted in the creation of what he called 'fabricated liturgy.'

Ratzinger pointed out two dangers facing today's liturgy. On the one hand, the liturgy can involve so much talking that it becomes a catechism lesson, a lesson whose success is likely to prove tenuous. The second, equally disastrous approach is to trivialize it, omit all that is incomprehensible to modern people, and replace biblical and liturgical texts with what is commonly understood. Even if one

tries to consider this a form of popular piety, it is unacceptable in this sense.

In presenting the proper relationship between liturgy and popular piety, the Bavarian pope strives to be an objective observer; accordingly, alongside the positive aspects, he also notes distorted forms of popular religiosity. Ratzinger believes their influence is detrimental, as they may instead promote a purely external experience of faith rather than encouraging active participation in the life of the Church. He wrote about it clearly in a letter to the seminarians, in which he encouraged them to cultivate popular piety, he also drew their attention to the fact that certainly, popular piety tends towards the irrational, and can at times be somewhat superficial. Yet it would be quite wrong to dismiss it. Through that piety, the faith has entered human hearts and become part of the common patrimony of sentiments and customs, shaping the life and emotions of the community. Popular piety is thus one of the Church's great treasures. The faith has taken on flesh and blood. Certainly, popular piety always needs to be purified and refocused, yet it is worthy of our love, and it truly makes us into the "People of God" (Benedict XVI 2010).

Ratzinger places popular piety in the context of an encounter with Jesus Christ and as an expression of the faith of the Church. Therefore, it cannot be treated as secondary in the Christian life, because, in his opinion, this would amount to forgetting the primacy of the Spirit's action and God's free initiative of love. While acknowledging the existence of certain distorted forms of popular piety, Ratzinger strongly emphasizes its importance in the life of the Church. It needs to be cherished, corrected, and guided. It is undoubtedly at the root of faith, and when it dies, rationalism and sectarianism easily take its place. From a liturgical perspective, one can better assess the value, but also the shortcomings, of popular piety.

Ratzinger emphasizes the value of Marian devotion in its relationship with the liturgy. He presents Mary as the embodiment of the praying Church, emphasizing that Marian devotion does not stand "alongside" the liturgy, but reveals its inner meaning and protects the liturgy from reduction to formalism or mere functionality. Authentic Marian devotion has a strong dogmatic

foundation (Theotokos) and is the bearer of dogma in an existential form. Central to the relationship between liturgy and popular piety is Ratzinger's statement: "The adoration of Mary is the adoration of Christ." Popular piety is theologically sound when it does not stop at Mary but leads to a real encounter with Christ. Conversely, the rejection of Marian devotion leads to an impoverishment of Christology.

Undoubtedly, the relationship between liturgy and popular piety needs to be properly synthesized. Here, Ratzinger recalls the ideas of Romano Guardini, who attempted to create such a synthesis in the early 1920s and urged other theologians to do the same. This task now faces the contemporary magisterium of the Church and theologians. Undoubtedly, Ratzinger/Benedict XVI has left us clear, specific guidelines for this process of synthesis. He firmly insisted that there was no contradiction between liturgy and popular piety.

### **Komplementarność liturgii i pobożności ludowej w myśli Josepha Ratzingera/Benedykta XVI**

**Abstrakt:** Artykuł podejmuje ważną dla teologii i życia Kościoła kwestię relacji pomiędzy liturgią a pobożnością ludową. Bazując na obranym materiale źródłowym, postawiona hipoteza badawcza zakłada możliwość tej relacji, jeśli pobożność ludowa pozostaje zakorzeniona w liturgii. Wybór dorobku teologicznego Josepha Ratzingera i magisterium Benedykta XVI wynika z faktu, iż źródła myśli tego wybitnego współczesnego teologa łączą w sobie obie drogi refleksji nad tą relacją. Bogaty materiał źródłowy został przeanalizowany metodą teologicznej analizy źródeł, co pozwoliło wyodrębnić cztery najważniejsze aspekty tej relacji: pobożność ludowa jako wyraz wiary; ścisły związek pobożności ludowej z liturgią Kościoła; właściwie rozumiana inkulturacja; kult Matki Bożej. Wnioski z tej analizy wskazują, że Ratzinger, przedstawiając tę relację, daje odpowiedź na pytanie, jak zachować dogmatyczną hierarchię ważności w praktyce każdego chrześcijanina. Jednocześnie ukazuje drogi do zachowania harmonii obu źródeł.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Ratzinger/Benedykt XVI, liturgia, pobożność ludowa, inkulturacja, wiara, kult Matki Bożej

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