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Between Sartre and Ratzinger, or the Legacy of the "No Man's" Revolution

Abstract: This text analyses the relevance of the 1968 revolution in the context of the crisis of values in Western Europe and the response of Pope Benedict XVI to these challenges. The author shows that this revolution, inspired by Sartre's existentialism and Marxism, had a profound impact on contemporary culture, challenging the traditional Christian understanding of man, God, and freedom. In response, Benedict XVI stressed the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ as the foundation of an authentic faith, the only real alternative to the ideology of absolute freedom, and proposed Christianity as the path to true freedom, underpinned by the love of God.

Keywords: Revolution 1968, Benedict XVI, existentialism, Christianity, freedom, morality, Sartre, personal relationship with Jesus Christ, European culture, Marxism.

Introduction

The events that shook France in May 1968 and spread in various forms throughout Europe, triggering a series of multidimensional cultural ramifications and social transformations, are undoubtedly well described from a factual point of view. The question remains, however, as to what really happened in those days. How was it possible that the Fifth Republic, which under President Charles de Gaulle was one of the most politically and economically stable countries, enjoying a period of strong economic growth and where the General himself enjoyed considerable popular support, became the stage for such dramatic events? [Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 33]. The student protests, which began at the University of Nanterre and then moved to the Sorbonne in Paris, triggered a process often referred to as the cultural revolution of the 1960s, involving not only the student community but also – very soon – politicians, intellectuals, and the beneficiaries of the economic

prosperity of the period, i.e. a large part of French society. This was all the more surprising because, as Małgorzata Gmurczyk–Wrońska notes, "economic growth translated into an improvement in living conditions that the French could actually experience (including higher wages, increased consumption, social benefits, demographic growth) and was also reflected in the new, comfortable lifestyle of the «consumer society». These changes led to an unprecedented development of schooling and education. (…). Antoine Prost writes that the French were under the impression that they were living in a period of «gigantic progress» and were hoping for better times for their children. It is therefore difficult to imagine that such violent events could have taken place and paralyzed the country. However, researchers acknowledge that this image of a rapidly developing France also had another facet" [ibid.: 33–34]. The author of this text argues that the moral revolution that began in France in 1968 was rooted not only in the Marxist ideology cherished by European left-wing movements, but also, and perhaps above all, in the idea of absolute freedom, with all its implications, formulated by the atheistic existentialism of Jean Paul Sartre. This article seeks to answer the question of how this idea continues to shape the consciousness of contemporary Europeans and, in Joseph Ratzinger's view, what opportunity Christianity offers to respond to the crises it generates.

The ideological underpinnings of the revolution

The events of May 1968 did not come out of nowhere. On the contrary, they were part of a wider phenomenon of contestation movements in France in the 1960s, which still puzzle researchers today because they differ from other social movements known from the past, in part because of the heterogeneity of their causes, which is difficult to disentangle. Andrzej Kotłowski points out that "this type of rebellion took the form of a challenge not only to the systemically determined social order, but to modern civilization as a whole. Among these actions, one can see ideas that find their justification in the system of relations, which are a response to real existing social problems (…). Young French students fought very actively for the reform of their own universities, which they wanted to make democratic, autonomous and self-governing. However, many of their demands were completely unrealistic, and the ideology that negated the existing educational system was often astonishing in its absurdity" [Kotłowski 2021: 72]. What fuelled it? Certainly, one of the impulses behind the student protests in many countries around the world was the opposition of these communities to the Vietnam War. Against this background, extreme pacifist slogans were proclaimed. Not surprisingly, there were also demands to fight against American

imperialism, anti-American attitudes and, consequently, sympathetic attitudes towards countries such as Cuba or Vietnam (despite their communist affiliation), as well as criticism of the industrial and consumer society. Add to this the tensions caused by the Cold War, the arms race, France's post-decolonization difficulties, the problems of higher education and the – largely utopian – ideas of a new order articulated by frustrated students, for whom the demands of the extreme left became a useful fuel and means of expression, and it is not surprising that a climate conducive to social revolt was created. However, it would be a mistake to draw the simple conclusion that May 1968 in France and its global aftermath were simply another stage in the development of neo-Marxist ideology – that is, the development of the social theses of communism and socialism in a new revolutionary guise. But were they its real source?

If it is not possible to identify a unified set of causes that underpinned the events of May 1968, it is even less appropriate to link them simply to the postulates and theses of classical Marxism dressed up in a new guise. According to Anna Winkler, "the critique of everyday life (…) seems to offer a better explanation of the events of May than classical Marxism. Without this critique, the student protests would simply be the excesses of «bored kids» (as Michel Crozier wanted them to be). Marxist parties interpreted the events in this spirit: not only the PCF [the French Communist Party – *A.R.B.*], but also those behind the Iron Curtain" [Winkler 2013: 23]. It is true that French left parties and trade unions became active against the backdrop of the student-led protests, but the French labour movement was deeply divided and the French Communist Party, which tried to unite it, became the target of criticism from left student groups, who accused it of departing from its original ideals and drawing on Stalinism. The French Communists did not remain silent, often describing the leaders of the student revolt as pseudo-revolutionaries, but this did not prevent the Communists from joining with other left forces in the student protests and on this occasion articulating their classic demands (such as a guaranteed minimum wage, a 40-hour working week and social security reform) [Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 36]. However, these demands did not reflect the expectations of the protest movement as a whole, which was far from coherent in itself. It mixed the interests of Trotskyists, Maoists, supporters of permanent Bolshevik-style revolution or anarchists, and opposition to any kind of arrangement, hierarchy, discipline or attempts by neo-Leninists to hijack the protests and make them partisan, mixed with contemptuous terms like 'petty bourgeoisie' directed at the student leaders by the old party apparatus [ibid.: 44]. In this context, Małgorzata Gmurczyk–Wrońska cites the analyses of Jean-Pierre

Le Goff, who "wonders whether the revolutionary movement in France at that time had more of a Marxist-Leninist, Maoist, or perhaps anarcho-Maoist tinge? Was France on the verge of civil war in May 1968? As we know, there were clashes between demonstrators and the police, de Gaulle called for the defence of the Republic and spoke of the threat of communism (…). Le Goff argues that it was with the wave of events of May '68 that ideas critical of communism, especially its Soviet version, were born. Marxism was criticized, especially its concepts of society and history (…). «May '68 belongs to no-one». What would be the point of inciting young people to celebrate the events of May, what would be the impact of other similar events on contemporary societies? (…). Le Goff admits, however, that there is what one might call an attitude inherited from May, and that is individualism, the conviction of living in harmony with oneself" [ibid.: 44–46]. And if so, this "no man's" revolution turns out to be an emanation of ideas whose roots lie in an even different subsoil than the mere Marxist legacy. It is not without reason that Jean Paul Sartre, the leading French existentialist, and Herbert Marcuse, one of the founders of the German Frankfurt School, stand out prominently among the important personalities of the May events.

Existential Marxism and freedom-oriented Marxism

By May 1968, when the student revolts broke out, Jean Paul Sartre was not only an acclaimed philosopher, writer, publicist and playwright, but also the most prominent representative of French existentialism – one who was both famous and remarkably controversial. His literary oeuvre included works that secured him a place in the pantheon of twentieth-century thinkers, such as *Being and Nothingness* (1943), *Existentialism is a Humanism* (1946), the trilogy *Roads to Freedom* (1945–49), *The Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960) or his autobiographical novel *The Words* (1963), for which he was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1964, which he did not accept, considering the prize to be a manifestation of bourgeois thinking. This decision illustrates well the meandering evolution of Sartre's views, who, as Wiesław Gromczyński notes, "was active as a philosopher, writer and socio-political activist. He was instrumental in founding the journal *Les Temps Modernes* in 1945, which brought together left-wing intellectuals. He developed the idea of the committed writer (…). In the atmosphere of post-war chaos and the disintegration of traditional values, Sartre's philosophy, popularized through his novels, plays and numerous articles, gained enormous popularity. It became the subject of conversations in cafés, inspired the emergence of a certain lifestyle and, at the same time, was the object of vehement attacks. In response to accusations of pessimism and glorification of the absurdity of existence, Sartre

(…) argued that existentialism is an optimistic philosophy because, thanks to its (ontological) freedom, it always retains the capacity to give meaning to its own existence through acts of free choice" [Gromczyński 2002: 203–204]. In fact, it was freedom, understood in an individualistic and absolute sense, which was the fundamental axis of Sartre's entire system of thought, and the attempt to translate it into the realities of individual and social life that both pushed Sartre into the arms of Marxism and pulled him out of them. The price Sartre paid for the gradual shift of his views towards the French Communist Party was the rupture of his friendship with Albert Camus and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, following his speech in defence of the PCF in 1952 [Gadacz 2009: 461]. In fact, Sartre had sympathized with the Communists on many political issues much earlier, but he was looking for a 'third way', trying to combine the struggle for human freedom with the idea of socialist revolution. For this reason, he was a co-organizer of the *Rassemblement Démocratique Révolutionnaire* (RDR), founded in 1948 – an association that appealed to socialists and communists with the aim of uniting different milieus around the ideals of freedom and human dignity and social revolution; he left the RDR in 1949 when some of its intellectuals began to seek a rapprochement with right-wing forces [Gromczyński 2002: 204]. "Sartre's attempt to position himself between the Communists and the bourgeoisie – writes Wiesław Gromczynski – failed (…). The critique of capitalism brought Sartre closer to the French Communist Party (1952–56). In his analyses of human existence, he became increasingly aware of the role of the socio-political and class factors (…). The evolution of Sartre's philosophical views towards Marxism found its fullest expression in his *Critique de la raison dialectique*, a voluminous work in which he called Marxism the insurmountable philosophy of our time. In this work he attempted to create a synthesis of existentialism, Marxism and psychoanalysis. It was, however, an image of Marxism that was incompatible with Marx's philosophy on several important points (e.g. the rejection of the dialectic of nature, the inclusion of the notion of freedom, understood in existentialist terms, in historical materialism)" [ibid.: 204–205]. And it appears that it was this last point, that of freedom, that became an important interface between Sartre and the students protesting on the streets of Paris in May 1968.

Not only did the French philosopher extend his support to the student revolution, but in impassioned speeches and interviews he advocated a new conception of society promoted by young people, reinforcing their critique of Western civilization; he also used his authority as the most prominent living French philosopher at the time to protect left-wing groups vulnerable to political repression, and later,

in the 1970s, he supported Maoist youth. But his views continued to evolve. In 1977, in an interview published in *Lotta Continua*, he declared that he was no longer a Marxist [Gadacz 2009: 461; Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 39; Gromczyński 2002: 205]. Towards the end of his life, he called himself an anarchist. What was his contribution to the ideological landscape of May 1968? First and foremost, it was the advocacy of such a vision of freedom, based as it was on the existential theses of his philosophy, that led directly to ramifications that transformed the lives of later generations and had the strongest impact on the subsequent history of Western European culture – the liberalization of mores, the sexual revolution, a change in the system of social values, the definitive abandonment of the idea of natural law, transformations in the concept of education, the progressive relativisation of value systems, and the alienation of the human individual. It is precisely on this point that the traces of existentialist ideas transposed into the present by the moral revolution of 1968 seem to coincide with those articulated by one of its iconic figures, Herbert Marcuse. It was this German-American Marxist philosopher and sociologist, co-founder of the Frankfurt School, who was recognized as one of the main ideologues of the student revolt. This is understandable, given that Marcuse, many years earlier, "had already carried out a critique of modern civilization, using Karl Marx's theories of alienation and Sigmund Freud's theory of suppression. He pointed to the oppressive nature of this civilization, noting that it creates a one-dimensional human being whom it treats as a means and not as an end, inter alia by absolutizing the value of work at the expense of leisure and the mass character of the culture it promotes. Marcuse put forward the project of a 'non-repressive society', governed by the ideals of freedom and love. He argued that the forces of the so-called 'revolutionary syndrome', capable of changing reality, should not be sought among the workers, who became the next ruling class in communist countries, but among, for example, the radical intelligentsia or rebellious students. This position made Marcuse one of the patrons of the youth revolutions of the 1960s, including the Paris revolt of 1968" [Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 42]. Most importantly, however, such explicit views did not allow him to fit easily into the mainstream of neo-Marxist ideology either. The Frankfurt thinker saw the dialectic of Hegel and Marx not so much as a movement towards the unity of subject and object, but as a movement towards the realization of reason, and hence of happiness and freedom, which he saw in individualistic terms as the fulfilment of a potency systematically restricted and repressed by the systems of norms prevailing in societies. He also believed that it was possible to realize this potency without suppressing it, which would lead to the formation of a new, free society based on different existential relations [Jakuszko 2020: 451]. In such a view

of freedom, there resound certain ideas that bring Marcuse's 'freedom-oriented' Marxism closer to Sartre's existentialist-modified Marxist thought. At this point, it could be argued that it is these ideas that have had the strongest impact on modern times through the events of May 1968.

The liberation of Eros and the new absolute

Herbert Marcuse's theses seem to have resonated so strongly with the demands of the May 1968 revolution primarily because of their libertarian, morally liberal and at the same time strongly individualist component, which in this respect shattered the framework of classical Marxism. Marcuse, as Honorata Jakuszko notes, "believed that with a high level of affluence it was possible to satisfy needs without repression, which implied a new, libidinal civilization, free from all social control, both institutional and internalized, and based on a radically new relationship between man and nature (…). He did not accept the a-historicism or pessimism of Freud, who could not conceive of such a direction for the development of late capitalist civilization that the high level of development of the productive forces would provide the opportunity for the satisfaction of all consumption needs, i.e. the liberation of Eros. This would be a state of total reconciliation of all contradictions between essence and existence, duty and being, possibility and actuality, subject and object, reason and life (…). Marcuse recognized the difficulty of finding an addressee who would undertake to implement the alternative model of society outlined by critical theory (…). Nevertheless, he formulated a project that transcended contemporary society, which as an alternative presupposed a radical transformation of man's relationship to nature and to other individuals, called direct communication, which would allow the full realization of blocked human possibilities, including authentic and creative freedom" [ibid.: 451–452]. How did this idea materialize in the reality of the student protests of 1968? Mainly in the form of a process of disintegration and transformation of traditional value systems and changes in mores. It is not insignificant that the Nanterre riots began with issues external to the classroom, such as the right of male students to visit female students in their dormitories, and that their trigger, as Paul Ricœur noted, was essentially a sexual revolution [Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 35]. "The glaring evidence of this," writes Andrzej Kotłowski, "are the May slogans: «Make love and then start again», «Have fun without inhibitions», «The more I participate in the revolution, the more I want to make love». The sphere of the intimate became part of the ideology, part of the political manifesto, because alongside the protests, the anti-war speeches against the political establishment, the movement fought for what Herbert Marcuse called the 'liberation of Eros', in other words the

achievement of a 'revolution in morals'. These events appear singularly curious and unprecedented against the background of revolutions and rebellions known from history" [Kotłowski 2021: 79]. It is not surprising, therefore, that they influenced the lives of a whole generation, even if they did not produce clear leaders, but were characterized by a kind of elusiveness and utopian optimism, an unlimited belief that everything is possible, and an irrationality reflected in slogans of rebellion against the authorities, such as 'it is forbidden to forbid', 'bliss without hindrance', 'to make love is to make revolution' [Gmurczyk–Wrońska 2008: 40,46]. Certainly, Herbert Marcuse became the face of these events by virtue of the form that his social thought took, but it should not be forgotten that the ground for a moral revolution understood in this way had long been prepared in France (and elsewhere) by existentialism, which negated the order of nature, God, all previously established values, norms, and rules (especially moral ones), in other words – any 'essence' that would precede human existence. The icon of this school of thought was, of course, Jean-Paul Sartre.

The French existentialist not only lent his support to the morally liberal slogans of the revolution. He anticipated them with his life. His – rife with controversies – relationship with Simone de Beauvoir, a French writer, philosopher, and one of the pioneers of second-wave feminism, a fighter for women's sexual rights and the right to abortion, which she herself underwent on several occasions, has become a permanent feature of the world's history of scandals. In her books, de Beauvoir was relentless in her criticism of marriage and motherhood, describing the shocking details of her life with Sartre, including their abandonment of monogamy, the 'emotional foursome' they shared, and her sexual liaisons with other men and women. Sartre was by no means a victim of this lifestyle of hers. He was an inspiration to her. Moreover, his attitude, his behaviour, his mores, his addiction to alcohol and drugs, and the whole shocking backdrop of his intellectual work did not arise from spontaneous eccentricity and lack of inhibition, but resulted directly from the fundamental tenets of Sartrean philosophy. The French existentialist expressed this bluntly in his seminal work *Being and Nothingness*, where he wrote: "my freedom is the unique foundation of values and (…) nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable" [Sartre 1956: 38; Sartre 2007a: 73]. Thus, in Sartre's thought, the ontological absolute disappears and freedom itself becomes an absolute. The French philosopher expressly confirms this in the work *Existentialism is a Humanism*, explaining: "Dostoyevsky once wrote: »If God does not exist, everything is permissible«. This

is the starting point of existentialism. (…). Thus, we have neither behind us, nor before us, in the luminous realm of values, any means of justification or excuse" [Sartre 2007b: 28–29; Sartre 1998: 37–39]. Nor is it present in the repository of human nature because, in Sartre's view, human nature does not exist as something objective. Thus, Sartre writes, "there is no human nature since there is no God to conceive of it. Man is not only that which he conceives himself to be, but that which he wills himself to be, and since he conceives of himself only after he exists, just as he wills himself to be after being thrown into existence, man is nothing other than what he makes of himself. This is the first principle of existentialism (…). What we mean to say is that man first exists; that is, that man primarily exists – that man is, before all else, something that projects itself into a future, and is conscious of doing so. Man is indeed a project that has a subjective existence, rather unlike that of a patch of moss, a spreading fungus, or a cauliflower" [Sartre 2007b: 22–23; Sartre 1998: 27]. In this regard, it must be stressed that if nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies human freedom – if this freedom is neither grounded in the values subjectivized in God nor in human nature – then there is no law, either divine or natural, that would justify its actions. This means that there is nothing in the human subject that would make his relationship to the world meaningful for his freedom. This implies, inter alia, what Sartre emphasizes about the primacy of existence over essence ("*existence precedes essence*") that takes place in the human being [Sartre 2007b: 23–24; Sartre 1998: 26]. If man is originally nothing and will only be what he makes himself to be, then the nature of what is outside of him, the being-in-itself of this world, does not and cannot have any significant effect on him – primarily because the development of human freedom does not occur through the assimilation of this being-in-itself, but through its negation. Sartre argues that man, as a being-for-itself, must nihilate himself as being-in-itself in order to establish himself as a consciousness [Sartre 1956: 81–82; Sartre 2007a: 125]. In reality, this is not only of theoretical importance, but it lays the very practical foundations of the moral and cultural changes unleashed by the 1968 revolution – the accelerated spread of atheism in Europe, the burial of the idea of natural law, the absolutization of freedom and the emergence of the concept of a fluid human subjectivity. These changes have long since outgrown their Marxist and existentialist roots, but would certainly not have been possible without them.

Are you really He?

The student revolts that set France ablaze in May 1968 and subsequently ignited the whole of Western Europe had a significant impact on the subsequent fate of European culture and axiology, not least because at the heart of the revolution,

dressed in Marxist colours, were theses that radically overturned the Christian understanding of man and his nature, of God and human freedom. Pope Benedict XVI understood this perfectly, as he recalled many years later in his speech to the German Bundestag on 22 September 2011: "Yet I would like to underline a point that seems to me to be neglected, today as in the past: there is also an ecology of man. Man too has a nature that he must respect and that he cannot manipulate at will. Man is not merely self-creating freedom. Man does not create himself. He is intellect and will, but he is also nature, and his will is rightly ordered if he respects his nature, listens to it and accepts himself for who he is, as one who did not create himself. In this way, and in no other, is true human freedom fulfilled" [Benedict XVI 2011; Benedykt XVI 2017: 137]. Benedict XVI's precise words clearly express a criticism of the fundamental theses of Sartre's thought, theses which – although existentialism itself has long since lost its relevance as a philosophical project – continue to be updated, mutate and evolve in the world view of contemporary European societies, stimulating the latest trends in thinking about man and influencing lifestyles in practice. It should not be thought, however, that the Pope acquired such an awareness only years later, by observing the changes in the way contemporary Europeans function. On the contrary, as Robert J. Woźniak notes, "the German churchman is marked by a unique sense of understanding of the complex thought and cultural currents of late modernity, sometimes called postmodernity. The philosophical and theological tenets of 'weak thought' (*pensiero debole*) that typify this current have troubled him since at least the late 1960s. It was during this period of cultural upheaval that Ratzinger was able to experience first-hand the destructive power of attempts to 'revaluate all values' (Nietzsche) and truths. His personal quest to understand and transcend the shoals of the modern, dialectical world-view also dates from this period" [Woźniak 2017: 6–7]. It is not surprising that, as early as 1967, he began a series of lectures at the University of Tübingen, which were to be published a year later in the book *Einführung in das Christentum* [*Introduction to Christianity*], a kind of commentary on the whole of the Christian creed [Ratzinger 1970; Zuberbier 1996: 7]. It is also an important response to the historical moment in which it was published. "In the midst of the student revolution of 1968," writes Robert J. Woźniak, "Ratzinger drew crowds at the University of Tübingen. Witnesses claim that there were never enough seats for his lectures on the Christian Creed. What then was his theological and ecclesiastical proposal?" [Woźniak 2017: 14]. Both then and later, Ratzinger is convinced – which he expressed as Pope in his Berlin speech to the Bundestag – that "[a]t this point Europe's cultural heritage ought to come to our assistance. The conviction that there is a Creator God is what gave rise to the idea of human rights, the idea of the equality of all people before

the law, the recognition of the inviolability of human dignity in every single person and the awareness of people's responsibility for their actions. Our cultural memory is shaped by these rational insights. To ignore it or dismiss it as a thing of the past would be to dismember our culture totally and to rob it of its completeness. The culture of Europe arose from the encounter between Jerusalem, Athens and Rome – from the encounter between Israel's monotheism, the philosophical reason of the Greeks and Roman law. This three-way encounter has shaped the inner identity of Europe. In the awareness of man's responsibility before God and in the acknowledgment of the inviolable dignity of every single human person, it has established criteria of law: it is these criteria that we are called to defend at this moment in our history" [Benedict XVI: 2011; Benedykt XVI 2017: 138–139].

In 1968, however, in his *Introduction to Christianity*, Ratzinger delves even deeper, recognizing that no Christian response, however intellectually attractive, to today's challenges will be heard in the modern world if it does not presuppose faith in the existence of God, not only as a factor that enables one to understand the Christian conception of truth and morality, but also as a living experience that legitimizes that understanding. For it is not a matter of faith understood as a purely intellectual act that gives reason to an answer that opposes the claims of unlimited human freedom, the non-existence of God and human nature, but of faith in the person of Jesus Christ, the conviction of faith "that Jesus Christ is the Logos, the Word, wisdom, reason. Those who believe in Jesus" – Robert J. Wozniak emphasizes – "open themselves to the deepest layers of truth, come face to face with the very depth of the mystery of God and the world in its paradoxical revelation. This is why Benedict XVI sees Christianity as the greatest enlightenment in human history. Christianity as faith is the religion of the Logos, of reason, of cognition and of truth" [Woźniak 2017: 17]; however, it is not a religion that is limited to an accepting, cognitive grasp of revealed truth in its moral implications, but one that happens as a living, real, whole-being relationship with its person-centre, the person of Jesus Christ. From the perspective of the causes and consequences of the May 1968 revolution, this turns out to be of colossal significance. In her lecture entitled 'Faith, Politics and Eschatology in the Thought of Joseph Ratzinger', given at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw on 30 November 2023, Professor Tracey Rowland, drawing on the research of Julie Pagis, pointed out that the common element uniting the student revolutionaries who demonstrated in Paris in May 1968 was their upbringing in a family in which the Christian faith was presented as a moral code. If Professor Rowland is right, then it is clear that the faith at that time was reduced to a system of rules – commands and prohibitions

– regulating behaviour and mores, but devoid of what is most essential about it, a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. It is not surprising, therefore, that a faith 'mutilated' in this way became glued in the minds of young people to the old, rigid, prudish and, in their view, hypocritical and oppressive morality of the society in which they were growing up, and whose rules they decided to reject under the banner of sexual liberation. Why should this history not be repeated under ever new banners of the same recurring mirage of absolute freedom, so seductively narrated by Sartre's existentialism and painted by Marcuse in a futuristic utopia of freedom-oriented Marxism? Benedict XVI understood perfectly well that the answer implicit in Christianity, if reduced to the ethical level alone, with all its intricate and complex moral implications, would inevitably be shattered and lost in the clash with the powerful force of the phantasm of the liberated human being. This is why, as early as 1968, in his *Introduction to Christianity*, he posed a fundamental question which, he was convinced, offered the only real alternative to the deceptive charm of this phantasm. He was both asking and explaining: "Are you really He? In the last resort all the reflections contained in this book are subordinate to this question and thus revolve around the basic form of the confession: «I believe in You, Jesus of Nazareth, as the meaning (logos) of the world and of my life»" [Ratzinger 1970: 49; Ratzinger 1996: 70]. For Benedict XVI was convinced that only an authentic faith in Jesus holds the answer to the deficits that are carried by the legacy of the "no man's" revolution.

Conclusions

Why was the profession of faith in Christ so crucial for Joseph Ratzinger in the context of contemporary Christianity? How could it serve as an alternative to the accelerating transformation of morals and customs, constantly fuelled by the desire for absolute freedom? In the first place, the central importance of this creed derives from the fact that it is not merely an intellectual conviction, but rather a comprehensive attitude, which Roman E. Rogowski has described as a synthesis of an act of faith (acceptance of the message of Christ), of trusting hope and of obedience to God [Rogowski 1986: 122–123], that is, of faith understood as a relationship. In his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*, Benedict XVI put it in the following way: "Being Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction" [Benedict XVI 2005: 1; Benedykt XVI 2006: 1]. This is about the person of Jesus Christ. It is precisely this encounter that allows the Christian faith not to be reduced to one of many ideologies or ethical systems, but to become a relationship and therefore entail a specific experience. It is precisely

this experience that is the sole, unique and inimitable "offer" that only Christianity can make to the world. Benedict XVI has written about this: "«God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should... have eternal life» ([*John*] 3:16). In acknowledging the centrality of love, Christian faith has retained the core of Israel's faith, while at the same time giving it new depth and breadth (…). Since God has first loved us [cf. *1 Jn* 4:10], love is now no longer a mere «command»; it is the response to the gift of love with which God draws near to us. In a world where the name of God is sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence, this message is both timely and significant. For this reason, I wish in my first Encyclical to speak of the love which God lavishes upon us and which we in turn must share with others" [Benedict XVI 2005: 1; Benedykt XVI 2006: 1]. For its transmission is not only a response to the task assigned to Christians by the Gospel, but also to the most profound deficits that the phantasm of absolute freedom produces as a side effect. Because the more this freedom is celebrated, the more it dominates the lifestyles of contemporary societies, the more it reveals in the experience it generates that which Sartre himself spoke of with brutal honesty: "We are left alone and without excuse", "Hell is – other people!", "Man is a useless passion" [Sartre 2007b: 29; Sartre 1947: 61; Sartre 1956: 615; Sartre 1998: 39]. These words echo again and again, describing with unfailing precision the deficit of love lived, over and over again, by those who have entrusted themselves to this path of liberation, who continue to walk it in the illusion that in this way, and in this way alone, they will escape its consequences. Does Christianity – the event of the encounter with the saving, liberating and healing love of God revealed in Jesus – have the chance to respond realistically to this deficit? Only on condition that it ceases to reduce itself to ideas or ethics – important as they may be as consequences, but not the most relevant from the perspective of what the disciples of Christ still have to offer with unflagging relevance and power to the heirs of the "no man's" revolution: "We have come to know and to believe in the love that God has for us" (1 *John* 4:16 [NCB]).

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