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# **Faith in the UN: Pope Benedict's Proposal**

William E. DeMars, Ph.D.



# Faith in the UN: Pope Benedict's Proposal

*by William E. DeMars, Ph.D.*

Pope Benedict's April 2008 visit to the United Nations in New York was something extraordinary.

It was not only his warm reception by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, nor the General Assembly packed with diplomats and UN staff for his speech. It was not only the full minute of applause culminating in a standing ovation.

Less publicized, but perhaps more significant, was Benedict's personal greeting to UN staff and personnel after the speech. He listened to songs by the United Nations Children's Choir, and prayed in the Meditation Room. He touched, with evident warmth and sorrow, artifacts from the bombing of the UN headquarters in Baghdad that killed Sérgio Vieira de Mello and 21 others in 2003. According to witnesses, his esteem for the United Nations and its staff was palpable. His words of greeting expressed the same warmth, respect, and gratitude:

To you, and to those who have gone before you, I would like to express my personal appreciation and that of the whole Church. We remember especially the many civilians and peace-keepers who have sacrificed their lives in the field for the good of the peoples they serve—in 2007 alone there were forty-two of them. We also remember the vast multitude who dedicate their lives to work that is never sufficiently acknowledged, often in difficult circumstances. To all of you—translators, secretaries, administrative personnel of every kinds, maintenance and security staff, development workers, peace-keepers and many others, thank you, most sincerely!<sup>1</sup>

The extraordinary thing is this: Benedict has faith in the United Nations. He trusts the people of the UN, and he entrusts to the organization its own mission to promote peace and justice. Indeed, the Secretary-General had said just that in his welcoming remarks:

Whether we worship one God, many or none—we in the United Nations have to sustain and strengthen our faith every day. As demands on our organization multiply, we need more and more of this precious commodity. I am profoundly grateful to his Holiness Pope Benedict XVI for bestowing some of his faith on us—and for placing his trust in us.<sup>2</sup>

At this historical moment, when faith in the United Nations' capacity to pursue its mission is severely shaken—even among some of its own diplomats and staff—Pope Benedict comes to New York to express his own faith in the UN, and, yes, in some real sense, to “bestow” faith in the

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**At this historical moment, when faith in the United Nations' capacity to pursue its mission is severely shaken, Pope Benedict comes to New York to express his own faith in the UN, and, yes, in some real sense, to “bestow” faith in the UN on the men and women of the UN.**

UN on the men and women of the UN. This alone constitutes an extraordinary encounter in New York.

However, all this raises a question: What is the basis for Benedict's trust in the UN? Is it reasonable and grounded? Or is Benedict merely expressing some combination of naïve optimism, sentimental hope, and blind ideological faith? This is unlikely for someone of his broad experience and learning (leaving aside the claim of papal infallibility!).

He must have some good reason for his hope. What is it? This question leads back to Benedict's speech before the General Assembly.

In the speech, Benedict presented himself, the Holy See, and the global Catholic Church as pro-UN—not merely as a political ally, or loyal opposition on some issues, but as carrying a proposal for the UN, that is, in favor of the UN's greater weight and effectiveness. The proposal is offered for the free consideration of each person, alongside other proposals.

In the 60th anniversary year of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Benedict proposes the human person as the reasonable basis for faith in the United Nations' mission to promote peace and justice. Or rather, he re-proposes the human person, already affirmed in the *Universal Declaration*, in the person's full dignity, unity, universality, transcendent nature, and capacity for communion and solidarity.

The internal logic of this proposal is neither simple nor obvious; discerning it takes some unpacking of Benedict's carefully chosen words.

Benedict expresses the hope that the United Nations will “increasingly serve as a sign of unity between states and an instrument of service to the entire human family.”<sup>3</sup> As priest and pope, Benedict does not use the language of sign lightly. The UN, as “a sign of unity between states,” must not be a useful fiction or a lie; instead, the sign must point truly to something real beyond itself; peace and unity between nations must be real—not only possible in the future but already achieved in some inchoate form. The locus of that reality is the human person.

Toward the end of the speech, Benedict asserts that the Church, from its experience of humanity over the centuries and among many peoples and cultures, seeks “to increase the protection given to the rights of the person.”<sup>4</sup> He goes on to make a causal argument for strengthening human rights:

Those rights are grounded and shaped by the transcendent nature of the person, which permits men and women to pursue their journey of faith and their search for God in this world. Recognition of this dimension must be strengthened if we are to sustain humanity's hope for a better world and if we are to create the conditions for peace, development, cooperation, and guarantee of rights for future generations.<sup>5</sup>

Humanity's realistic hope for peace and human rights, Benedict says, depends on stronger recognition of the transcendent nature of the human person. Not on God and the Church, nor on ideology and the state, but on the human person. Why would that be?

Earlier in the speech, he alludes to the events that accompanied the founding of the UN, the “profound upheavals that humanity experienced when reference to the meaning of transcendence and natural reason was abandoned, and in consequence, freedom and human dignity were grossly violated.” An abandonment of meaning, he argues, threatened the “objective foundations of the values inspiring and governing the international order,” and led to the mass murders of World War II. This too is a causal argument. In the

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same paragraph he pleads, “When faced with new and insistent challenges, it is a mistake to fall back on a pragmatic approach, limited to determining ‘common ground’, minimal in content and weak in its effect.”<sup>6</sup>

What are these new challenges? His defense of human rights throughout the speech highlights challenges to the universality, indivisibility and interdependence of human rights. This would appear to be a debate, quite familiar at the UN, about whether the rights recognized in the *Universal Declaration* really hold at all times and places, and whether they really hold together as an organic whole from which particular rights cannot be deleted or added.

But Benedict gives this conventional debate a new twist. He links both the universality and the indivisibility of human rights in two directions—upward to the common good of communities of persons, and downward to the universality and unity of each person. Both of these links are essential for the United Nations—according to Benedict’s proposal—because the unity of the person is the realistic ground and guarantee of the UN’s mission to promote the common goods of peace and justice.

Let’s take these one at a time. First, the universality of the human person. Benedict reminds us that the *Universal Declaration* was, historically,

[T]he outcome of a convergence of different religious and cultural traditions, all of them motivated by the common desire to place the human person at the heart of institutions, laws, and the workings of society, and to consider the human person essential for the world of culture, religion and science.<sup>7</sup>

Today, the *Declaration’s* multicultural affirmation of the human person is challenged by “a relativistic conception, according to which the meaning and interpretation of rights could vary and their universality would be denied in the name of different cultural, political, social, and even religious outlooks.” In the face of this challenge, Benedict insists, “This great variety of viewpoints must not be allowed to obscure the fact that *not only rights are universal, but so too is the human person, the subject of those rights.*”<sup>8</sup>

To sharpen the point, if the human person is not universal, then any person is plastic and malleable in principle, and each person is radically available in practice to being politically reengineered by whoever is stronger, using whatever means they wish. We have seen this before, and it is the antithesis of respect for human rights. Since the anti-slavery movement of the late 18th century, the modern human rights movement has been grounded on the same recognition of the “common origin of the person” that Benedict affirms.

Second, the “unity of the human person”—quite an odd and unconventional formulation. Benedict is highly innovative here; and this is the heart of his proposal for the United Nations. A paragraph that begins with a ringing endorsement of human rights as a political strategy, culminates in a penetrating analysis of how that strategy is jeopardized by reducing rights to merely political interests:

The promotion of human rights remains the most effective strategy for eliminating inequalities between countries and social groups, and for increasing security. Indeed, the victims of hardship and despair, whose human dignity is violated with impunity, become easy prey to the call to violence, and they can then become violators of peace. The common good that human rights help to accomplish cannot, however, be attained merely by applying correct procedures, *nor even less by achieving a balance between competing rights.* The merit of

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the *Universal Declaration* is that it has enabled different cultures, juridical expressions and institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values, and hence of rights. Today, though, efforts need to be redoubled in the face of pressure to reinterpret the foundations of the *Declaration* and to compromise its inner unity so as to facilitate *a move away from the protection of human dignity towards the satisfaction of simple interests*, often particular interests. The *Declaration* was adopted as a ‘common standard of achievement’ (*Preamble*) and cannot be applied piecemeal, according to trends or selective choices that merely run the risk of *contradicting the unity of the human person and thus the indivisibility of human rights*.<sup>9</sup>

This argument will be plumbed for many years to come, but I think Benedict means something like this: The attempt to protect rights by striking a balance between them must fail, because it moves away from protecting human dignity toward merely satisfying interests, which contradicts the unity of the person. In other words, if fundamental rights can be balanced against each other, then they can be traded off, and they are not inherent in the person—they are not really rights. The person, viewed and treated politically as a bundle of tradable and contingent rights, loses human dignity as a subject of inherent and inalienable rights, and loses unity/integrity of personality as his or her rights are traded-off and reinvented by shifting power relations. In this cynical vision, each person is also radically isolated, trapped in an endless competition of interests with all others, and stripped of any capacity for human solidarity with “the other”.

If human relationships are political all the way down, and human persons are ontologically nothing more than bundles of political interests, then the language of rights, and advocacy for rights, are exposed as nothing more than power plays in a power-driven world. Conflicts of power are inherent and unending at all levels of human affairs, from the interpersonal to the international. In such a world, the United Nations, and its missions of “peace” and “justice,” are nothing more than thin veils of illusory legitimacy over the interests of the strong. In such a world, the mission of the UN becomes not only unachievable, but also unintelligible—it cannot be found because it does not exist, it is unreal. There is no place to stand from which to build peace, and no light to follow.

. . . Unless, that is, people really are so malleable and plastic that most of them can be fooled into believing the illusions of power, or manipulated into cynically accepting whatever tradeoffs of their interests that the powerful can come up with at the moment. If people really have only finite, plastic, and horizontal aspirations, then a kind of “peace” is achievable, as long as the system produces enough consumer goods to buy them off. This is the bleak alternative proposal to Benedict’s proposal.

That this is *not* enough for the human heart was Benedict’s central claim at the United Nations, witnessed to by both his words and his gestures of solidarity.

Only full recognition of the transcendent nature of the human person—the finite seeking something infinite—provides a real and reasonable grounding, a place to stand for embarking on the UN’s mission to promote the common good of peace and justice. Why? Because even provisional and fragile agreements for imperfect peace and justice, the fabric of everyday politics, depend on the human capacity for solidarity and communion. And solidarity and communion between persons is only possible if we really seek something infinite, above and beyond ourselves. Benedict put it this way before the General Assembly:

Human rights, of course, must include the right to religious freedom, understood as the expression of a dimension that is at once individual and communitarian—a vision that brings out the unity of the person

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**In such a world, the mission of the UN becomes not only unachievable, but also unintelligible—it cannot be found because it does not exist, it is unreal. There is no place to stand from which to build peace, and no light to follow.**

while clearly distinguishing between the dimension of the citizen and that of the believer. . . . It is inconceivable then, that believers should have to suppress a part of themselves—their faith—in order to be active citizens. It should never be necessary to deny God in order to enjoy one’s rights. . . . Refusal to recognize the contribution to society that is rooted in the religious dimension and the quest for the Absolute—by its nature, expressing communion between persons—would effectively privilege an individualistic approach, and would fragment the unity of the person.<sup>10</sup>

Under what other horizon might the United Nations promote inter-religious dialogue with authentic respect for the other’s “quest for the Absolute”? On what other ground might the weak stand to speak truth to the strong?

Benedict’s proposal is not an alternative to the everyday politics of the United Nations, but a horizon under which that politics can labor with realistic, reasonable grounds for success. The stakes are high, and the proposal also imparts a warning that the “noble task” of the UN, and the very peace of the world it is charged to promote, are in real jeopardy if recognition of the human person is further eclipsed. Benedict puts his faith in the people of the United Nations, but he also promises his prayers as they undertake a task that he knows is disproportionate to their own powers.

Ultimately, Benedict offers not an abstract theory of the human person, but the human person as present reality. His proposal is finally an invitation to verify, understood not as measurement, but as recognition -- our mutual recognition of one another’s humanity.

**Solidarity and communion between persons is only possible if we really seek something infinite, above and beyond ourselves.**

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*William E. DeMars is Chairman of the Department of Government at Wofford College in South Carolina and a distinguished expert in the field of international humanitarianism. He earned a Ph.D. in International Relations from the University of Notre Dame, and has taught at Earlham College, The University of Notre Dame, and The American University in Cairo, Egypt. He is the author of *NGOs and Transnational Networks: Wild Cards in World Politics* (London: Pluto Press, 2005).*



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866 United Nations Plaza, Suite 495, New York, NY 10017 212-754-5948 fax 212-754-9291  
666 11th Street NW, Suite 450, Washington, DC 20001 202-393-7002 fax 202-393-7004

[www.c-fam.org](http://www.c-fam.org) [info@c-fam.org](mailto:info@c-fam.org)

