

What drove you to collect these testimonies, these "fragments of humanity"? What did you expect to find, and which anecdotes surprised you the most? Perhaps you already had a positive impression of the subject, of Ratzinger himself, but were maybe further surprised by other nuances.

There are two reasons: one is more objective in nature, related to the work I do, and the other is perhaps more personal, tied to what one experiences during the various stages of life.

I followed Ratzinger's pontificate day by day as an agency reporter (ANSA, Ed.). This entails following everything he does and says, where he goes, the documents, and the speeches, in an almost obsessive manner; that is how we covered things at the agency when I was doing it. I had the great privilege of doing this from the very first day to the last, so there was that professional interest. But in reality, from a work perspective, I knew Ratzinger from before: he had already been in Rome for 23 years when he was elected Pope.

I arrived at the Vatican in 1994. I was young—perhaps an ignorant reporter, but very, very curious—and I encountered this figure immediately. There is a significant episode, a story from when he was still Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was giving a scholarly lecture in the Old Synod Hall and, at the end, we young journalists—a handful of very young reporters sent out into the field unprepared to trail this great theologian—approached him to ask for clarification.

His secretary at the time, Monsignor Clemens, was trying to keep us at bay. But Ratzinger stopped. I remember his footsteps distinctly (he always walked with small, quick steps): he stopped on the stairs of the New Hall, beckoned us closer, asked what we wanted, and explained it to us. He gave us a lesson right there, standing up. I immediately formed this vivid image—it must have been '95 or '96—of a man who loved to explain, to teach. It was something I appreciated greatly because I loved learning and listening to masters.

This image contrasted with his public persona. When I arrived at the Vatican, the Ratzinger portrayed by the media (Italian, German, and worldwide) was the "cold" one, the icy guardian of the faith, the Panzerkardinal. However, the professor stopping on the stairs did not fit that description. Over the years, I followed him on other occasions, always professional—I must clarify that I was never part of his circle of friends—but I had formed an impression of the man. Not the theologian, not the Pope, but the man.

At a certain point, a professional need arose to tell the story of this lesser-known side. This need emerged from a personal moment of my own: after all my experiences, after observing various Popes, I realized that I was no longer interested in the technical aspect, but the human one. Our profession has become faster, more technical; we are at the mercy of artificial intelligence, and the person—their feelings, reactions, and way of building community—seems to have no more room. I, on the other hand, pursue this search for the human element within the news.

There is a quote in the book, taken from the conversation with Peter Seewald, in which Ratzinger says: "One must come down from the ivory tower... question me without arrogance, starting from the questions of life." And on another occasion, he mentions appreciating interviews because "faith is felt being transmitted this way—through the voice, through the encounter, through dialogue." I'd like to ask if a "reporter" Ratzinger also emerged. He had an academic method, but is there also a reporter-like aspect to his work?

Definitely, yes. As a "reporter," or rather as a narrator of reality, he had an extreme capacity for synthesis. Many have recounted this: even when a recording was needed for radio or TV and they gave him one minute, he would place one concept after another in exactly one minute, synthesizing everything perfectly without even looking at the clock. He possessed impressive mental clarity, the result of years of study.

I remember them telling stories—perhaps Father Lombardi or other collaborators—about these meetings at the Congregation where he was able to follow an in-depth academic dialogue and then, at the end, sum it all up and provide the perfect synthesis of the discussion. In this sense, he was a "high-level reporter," aided by his scholar's mindset.

He would listen to all opinions and reflections, letting the youngest or the newest arrival speak first, so they wouldn't feel influenced or uncomfortable having to contradict someone who had spoken earlier. Only at the very end would he intervene. This indicates a great attention to listening.

Then there is that beautiful episode, which speaks volumes from a human perspective, about the time Ratzinger did not participate in a Congregation meeting because they were discussing his Jesuit friend, Father Juan Alfaro. Alfaro taught at the Gregorian University and had become a supporter of Liberation Theology, something incomprehensible to Ratzinger. However, Ratzinger said: "I didn't want to lose my friendship with him, so this was the only time in all the years I was a member of the commission that I skipped a plenary session." This seems to me a powerful sign of the kind of person he was.

So, what traits of his personality emerge? was he a mild yet strong personality? How did he relate to those he spoke with?

In my opinion, the influence of his childhood years and the family he lived in guided him greatly. He was a mild person, a gentle soul by nature, perhaps even a bit shy, but absolutely conscientious in his intellectual and spiritual research. From this conscientiousness, a certainty was born: the certainty in what one believes allows one to be intellectually and spiritually very strong.

There is a beautiful expression: "Dwelling in God." Those who live in this state have an attitude of serenity, mildness, and tranquility even in the face of tumultuous situations. From the outside, it might have looked like distance, but in reality, it was anything but coldness; it was a steadfastness of faith. This "dwelling in God" was seen very clearly in his final years

as Pope Emeritus. Those close to him recount the way he prepared for the end, with a total absence of doubts regarding faith. He even said: "I was not one of those saints who lived through the great dark nights."

Cosa ci dice la differenziazione tra i vari interlocutori che hai sentito? C'è un quadro unitario?

Sì, c'è un atteggiamento che rimane costante. È rimasto sempre la stessa persona: da bambino, da studente, da teologo, da Prefetto, da Papa e da Emerito. Era fedele a se stesso. Alcune caratteristiche sono evidenti in tutti i racconti: il rapporto con gli studenti e i giovani, e la volontà di difendere sempre il più debole. Forse questo nasce dalla sua esperienza accademica, quando il professor Michael Schmaus gli bocciò la tesi di abilitazione e lui rischiò di dover lasciare l'accademia, una situazione complicatissima per la sua famiglia. Quell'esperienza gli ha lasciato la volontà di proteggere chi è in difficoltà.

Spesso la stampa lo descriveva come debole, incapace di prendere decisioni o travolto dai collaboratori. Invece, negli snodi cruciali — come lo scandalo degli abusi sessuali — ha mostrato una limpidezza e una capacità analitica, ma anche "simpatetica" (di compassione) verso le vittime, che non si possono trascurare.

Era anche molto ironico. C'è un racconto simpatico: Ratzinger non guidava. Un giorno, un amico che lo accompagnava qualche volta con la macchina si fece male alla gamba giocando a calcio. Ratzinger gli disse: *"Ma alla tua età giochi ancora a pallone?"*. C'era una familiarità molto tranquilla.

Emerge da lui questa capacità di godere delle piccole cose, tipica di chi ha passato la guerra. Ad esempio, la moglie dell'editore tedesco racconta che ogni volta che veniva dalla Germania gli portava gli asparagi. Lui dava valore alle cose semplici dell'esistenza.

Che tipo di 'santità' potrebbe essere quella di Papa Benedetto XVI?

"Abitare in Dio". Sicuramente. È stato un santo molto "normale". Io non ho dubbi che sia stato un santo — non voglio aprire cause canoniche perché è un tema spinoso — ma se la *vox populi* ha valore, per me sì, lo è. Si è fatto carico di situazioni molto pesanti della Chiesa, ha parlato con il Signore tutta la vita e ha cercato di vivere alla luce del discernimento. Non è forse il "santo della porta accanto" nel senso popolare, perché è un gigante intellettuale, ma la sostanza è quella.

C'è un aneddoto particolare che vorresti aggiungere?

Sì, una cosa emersa durante la scrittura del libro che non mi aspettavo. Me l'ha raccontata Monsignor Alfred Xuereb. Mi ha detto di leggere il suo diario. Mi ha colpito molto la descrizione dell'amicizia con Giovanni Paolo II. È un rapporto fondamentale per capire Ratzinger. Ho trovato conferme della sua umanità e sincerità. Mi ha colpito che nessuno degli intervistati volesse "vantarsi" di essere suo amico. Nessuno diceva: "Sì, eravamo intimi". C'era un grande pudore e rispetto, il che conferma che non si circondava di opportunisti. Questa indagine sull'amicizia mi ha toccato personalmente. Oggi vedo una scomparsa

dell'amicizia nel nostro mondo, sostituita da "amici opportunisti" che compaiono e scompaiono. Ratzinger invece, pur essendo un uomo di potere (nel senso ecclesiastico del termine), ha coltivato rapporti veri, basati sulla dignità della persona, non sul ruolo. Non ha mai voluto occupare "posti", voleva fare l'intellettuale, ma ha accettato ciò che gli veniva chiesto, con uno spirito decisamente agostiniano.