

A prelate with the mind of Ratzinger and the heart of Roncalli

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 9, 2010 NCR Today

While there are undoubtedly many ways to capture what's noteworthy about Italian Archbishop Gianfranco Ravasi, President of the Pontifical Council for Culture, here's one from my experience just this week.

Tuesday morning, I was on my way to the Paul VI Audience Hall to listen to a talk by Ravasi at a conference organized by the Pontifical Council for Health Care Workers. I bumped into a priest friend in the Vatican, who, it's fair to say, would probably be seen as falling on the conservative side of many church debates. When I told him I was headed to see Ravasi, his eyes lit up.

"He's always giving speeches," he said, "but he always has something interesting to say."

Later that day, I lunched with a lay church-watcher in Rome, who conventionally would be regarded as at least somewhat liberal. When I mentioned I had spent part of the morning listening to Ravasi, she too was animated.

"He's amazing — brilliant, but with an incredible ability to speak to real people," she said.

In other words, Ravasi, 67, is one of those rare birds who somehow manages to transcend the normal left/right divides. Perhaps it's because he's a Biblical expert, and hence usually manages to take a topic back to its theological and spiritual roots, to a point before ideological spin takes over; perhaps it's because he's a popular essayist in secular Italian newspapers, and knows how to reach a widely diverse audience.

Whatever the case, a sound-bite way of making the point is that, at his best, Ravasi seems to have both the mind of Ratzinger and the heart of Roncalli. That is, he exudes the compassion, openness to the world, and basic optimism of Pope John XXIII, as well as the intellectual lucidity and command of Christian tradition of Benedict XVI.

Given all that, Ravasi sometimes seems like the E.F. Hutton of the current crop of senior Vatican officials — when he talks, people listen.

His subject on Tuesday morning was Pope John Paul II's 1984 document *Salvifici Doloris*, "On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering," the anniversary of which is part of the motive for the Council for Health Care Workers' gathering Feb. 9-11.

Ravasi opened with a premise, which he expressed as the "symbolicity of pain." By that, Ravasi meant that pain is more than a physical or emotional experience, but in some ways it symbolizes what is essential to the human condition — our limits, our finitude, even our guilt.

Pain, Ravasi said, is our "identity card" as a creature in a fallen world.

(In a vintage touch, Ravasi wasn't content simply with asserting that on the basis of the Bible or Catholic teaching. He also cited a secular authority, in this case Susan Sontag and her 1978 classic *Illness as Metaphor*. Throughout the speech, Ravasi's allusions caromed from the Berlin Papyrus to Saul Bellow to Dostoyevsky.)

Ravasi said he intended to paint a verbal diptych, consisting of two images.

The first concerned pain as the primary source of "a crisis of sense, of meaning." It's the reaction of the doctor in Camus' *The Plague*, Ravasi said, who insisted that he could never believe in a God who could permit such suffering. In that sense, Ravasi said, illness and suffering is the "bulwark of atheism."

Unsurprisingly, this line of thought led Ravasi to dwell at length on the Biblical book of Job, perhaps the treatise par excellence in scripture on the mystery of human suffering. Among other points, Ravasi noted that Job never seems as miserable as when his so-called friends try to justify his agony in terms of some hidden sin. That insight led Ravasi to quote the famous quip of Kierkegaard: "Job could put up with everything, until the theologians showed up to explain it to him."

The second panel of the diptych concerned the revelation of the meaning of suffering in God, particularly the "Christology of suffering." Ravasi stressed three separate movements in Christ's encounter with human pain: the way he drew close to the sick; the way he entered into human suffering; and finally, his transformation of it through his death and resurrection.

In the end, Ravasi argued, the Christology of suffering was best expressed by the French Catholic poet Paul Claudel, who said that Christ did not come "to explain our suffering but to fill it with his presence."

To drive the point home, Ravasi told a story of a well-known Italian atheist, a writer named Ennio Flaiano who authored some of Fellini's screenplays. (Ravasi said he knew Flaiano's wife, since both of them hail from Lombardy.) Though Flaiano never talked about it, he had a daughter who had been born with a serious brain disorder, and whom he loved deeply. When he died, Ravasi said, an unfinished work was found among his papers "it wasn't clear whether he meant it as a screenplay or a novel.

In either case, the premise of the work is that Christ returns to earth today, and is quickly swamped by TV cameras wanting to catch him in action healing the sick. He becomes annoyed, and seeks refuge on a semi-hidden side street. At the end of the street, he sees a father with his obviously suffering daughter. Christ approaches them, and just as he is about to lay hands on the girl to heal her, the father says: "I don't want you to heal her. What I want is for you to love her."

Christ's response is, "Truly, that is what I can do for her."

Ravasi's point was that this ferociously anti-clerical atheist nonetheless grasped what is essential about the Christian understanding of suffering: God doesn't necessarily eliminate our pain, but loves us in and through that pain.

Of course, this wasn't a hard-hitting policy address, but in terms of an engaging and inspiring presentation of a fundamental element of the Christian message, it more or less brought the house down. That's what makes Ravasi stand out "and that's also why his expected elevation to the College of Cardinals in the next consistory is, at least potentially, interesting in terms of the future of the church.

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