

## A Pope Who Thinks in Centuries

April 18, 2010

Benedict sees the Church as a divine institution with a historical mission.

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In 1963 Columbia Pictures produced the movie *The Cardinal*. According to Wikipedia the Vatican's liaison officer on the project was a young Joseph Ratzinger. In the movie there is a dialogue between a couple of venerable curial officials and a young monsignor. The monsignor explains that if the Vatican could just be a little more flexible on some of its political policies, the social standing of Catholics in the United States could dramatically improve within a decade. The officials exchange "he has so much to learn" looks and reply, "The Church, Msgr. Fermoye, thinks in centuries, not decades."

This is a point no one would ever have needed to make to the young Benedict. One might say that he was born with a nose for history. Many of his early publications were in the territory of the theology of history, soteriology, and eschatology, and even his ecclesiology was framed within these horizons. His vision of the Church is that of a divine institution with a particular mission in history against which the gates of hell cannot prevail.

At least one effect of this vision is that he is less concerned than many others of his generation about popularity polls and political correctness. It is a very brave world leader who dares to suggest that there might be some issues about the relationship between faith and reason that the Islamic tradition rather urgently needs to address. The fact that in his Regensburg speech he also suggested that the will of the individual is no more reliable a standard than the will of Allah, and thus that western liberalism also needs to think more deeply about the faith and reason relationship, went largely unreported, except by Professor Schall from Georgetown. One gets the impression that Benedict's analyses are often too nuanced for the average journalist to digest.

One solution might be for his press office to produce "background briefing" papers for journalists with short historical memories. For example, it is hard to make sense of his going out on a limb to release the Lefebvrist bishops from the penalty of ex-communication unless one understands how deep is the rift within the Church in France, what happened to French Catholics during the Revolution, and how foolish it was for 1960s-generation ecclesial leaders to present documents like *Dignitatis Humanae* to the French as the Church's endorsement of the French Revolution. The 1960s generation was at best indifferent and often quite hostile to history and tradition. This was bad anthropology. Benedict now has to contend with the pastoral mess this "bull in a china shop" behavior created.

Without such an appreciation of the historical background, the Pope's extraordinary efforts to bring back wounded and disgruntled sheep could look like what Hans Küng called "fishing in the muddy waters of right-wing extremists," but it is not. It's his job to go after the lost sheep and care for them individually, rather than treating them as mere "collateral damage" in the forward march of history toward a more modernity-friendly world-ethos, as Küng would have it.

On the positive side of the ledger his speeches and homilies have been inspirational. Often busy leaders rely on the speeches they are handed by aids which were drafted by committees with all the compromises this inevitably entails. However, when Benedict speaks one senses that he has written the material himself, and it is never bland. His Wednesday audience addresses, or "Catechetics 101 classes," have been immensely popular. Catholics have enjoyed the weekly installments on the adventures of the Apostles and the contributions of the early Church Fathers. They have also taken up reading *Jesus of Nazareth*, a book that has been quite popular with Christians from other denominations.

Indeed, those in the Wednesday audience crowds include many Christians who are not Catholic. Unlike a lot of Italian and Spanish ecclesial leaders who spend their entire childhoods never meeting a Protestant, Benedict comes from the country where it all began. His homilies are also Christocentric and scriptural, and many Protestants warm to his references to Christ and Scripture. He speaks a theological dialect they understand.

Relations with the Orthodox have also improved. Archbishop Alfeyev of the Moscow Patriarchate has even established the St. Gregory Nazienzen Foundation to form a European Catholic-Orthodox Alliance against "secularism, liberalism, and relativism." Like members of the Tradition Anglican Communion, the Orthodox consider magisterial teachings against the ordination of women and homosexual marriage reasons for respecting the Petrine Office and establishing closer relations with it.

The traditional Anglicans are not Protestants in the usual sense. Most often they are people who have been deterred from swimming the Tiber by their knowledge of what Digby Anderson calls "the oikish translation of the Mass" that awaits them on the other side, or because they are not comfortable rubbing shoulders in the pews with Fenian sympathizers. Benedict has been sensitive to these cultural factors. While the Fenian issue is really outside of his jurisdiction he has at least allowed the Anglicans to keep their own rite of the Mass at the same time as he proceeds with the reform of the Roman rite, in particular the reform of those "oikish translations."

In general one might summarize the first five years by saying that this papacy has been focused on healing the schisms of the 11th and 16th centuries and the problems created by the "hermeneutic of rupture" approach to the Second Vatican Council, including the schism of 1988. It has been a papacy devoted to Christian unity. This has required a certain sensitivity to historical and theological differences not often possessed by the average secular journalist. Someone with Benedict's intellectual ability and "nose for history" is very well placed to do this and he has bravely taken the

flack, especially from people who either can't think beyond the present or want it to be forever 1968.

The Communist Party of the Soviet Union thought in terms of five-year plans, not centuries, and today it is out of business. Meanwhile Pravda carries an editorial in praise of a pope who dares to think beyond the next five years. No doubt Benedict could improve the social standing of Catholics in the world if only he would stop complaining about sloppy liturgy and put his energy into the promotion of gay marriage, women priests, publicly funded contraception, and abortion on demand. But then the gates of hell would have prevailed, and this is not possible.

Source: [http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/806/a\\_pope\\_who\\_thinks\\_in\\_centuries.aspx](http://www.catholicworldreport.com/Item/806/a_pope_who_thinks_in_centuries.aspx)