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Benedict's vacation spot is significant in his history

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 1, 2008 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI is on vacation from July 28 to Aug. 11, passing his summer break in an Alpine town in northern Italy known as Bressanone by Italians and Brixen by German-speakers. Benedict is a guest of the local seminary, lodging in an apartment known colloquially as "the bishop's room."

It's a setting where this pope clearly feels at home.

Aside from the fact that the pope's family, on his mother's side, has roots in the surrounding region (known as *Alto Adige* in Italian and *Südtirol* in German), over the years Joseph Ratzinger has come to be on intimate terms with Bressanone and its seminary.

As a rising young theologian in 1967, Ratzinger lectured at a conference in Bressanone on the figure of the priest in the New Testament and the recent decree of the Second Vatican Council on the priesthood, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. He was obviously impressed, because from 1968 to 1977 Ratzinger and his brother Georg, along with their sister Maria, vacationed in Bressanone, usually lodging at a local hotel. (The owner recently recalled that the Ratzinger siblings took three single rooms on the third floor of the 45-bed hotel, sharing a bathroom in common.)

After Ratzinger was named archbishop of Munich-Freising in 1977, he continued to summer in Bressanone as a guest of the seminary, befitting his new ecclesiastical status. He kept coming back after relocating to Rome in 1981; between 1977 and 2005, Ratzinger passed his summer break there 10 times. He became such a regular, in fact, that the rector gave him his own key to the seminary library. There's even a shady patch of the garden informally named for Ratzinger, before his election as pope, because of his predilection for reading there.

Some of the pope's writing owes its gestation to Bressanone. He completed the first four chapters of *Jesus of Nazareth* here in August 2004, and rumor has it that Benedict may use some of his down time this summer to work on the promised second volume.

This is Benedict's first visit to Bressanone since his election three years ago.

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All this might seem a charming, but largely insignificant, footnote to the pope's biography, were it not for the fact that Bressanone was the setting for a defining moment in Joseph Ratzinger's life and career. It was in his seminary apartment, overlooking the garden, where Ratzinger granted an incendiary interview to Italian Catholic journalist Vittorio Messori over three days in August 1984. Extracts were published in late 1984 by the magazine *Jesus*, immediately causing a global sensation, and the entire interview appeared in book form in early 1985 under the Italian title *Rapporto sulla fede*, and in English as *The Ratzinger Report*.

Some 23 years later, it can be difficult to recall the earthquake the book triggered. Ratzinger bluntly described a "crisis" in Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the antidote to which was rejecting an "unrestrained and unfiltered opening to the world" and emphasizing the continuity of Vatican II with earlier eras of tradition. *The Ratzinger Report* was an immediate best-seller, with more than a half-million copies gobbled up in the United States alone. It polarized opinion dramatically; as Messori recalled, it seemed everyone felt the need to take a stand for or against the cardinal's vision.

Looking back, it's striking how many vintage Ratzinger stereotypes either originated in widely quoted passages from the book, or were crystallized by them:

1. Ratzinger the pessimist

"Western culture is hellish when it persuades men that the sole aim of life is pleasure and self-interest. ? Today more than ever, the Christian must be aware that he belongs to a minority and that he is in opposition to everything that appears good, obvious, logical to the 'spirit of the world,' as the New Testament calls it. ? It is time to find again the courage of non-conformism, the capacity to oppose many of the trends of the surrounding culture, renouncing a certain euphoric post-conciliar solidarity."

2. Ratzinger the restorationist

"If by *restoration* we understand the search for a new balance after ? the overly positive interpretations of an agnostic and atheistic world, then a *restoration* understood in this sense (a newly found balance of orientation and values within the Catholic totality) is altogether desirable and, for that matter, is already in operation in the Church."

3. Ratzinger's change of heart about Vatican II

"What the popes and the council fathers were expecting was a new Catholic unity, and instead one has encountered a dissension which -- to use the words of Paul VI -- seems to have passed over from self-criticism to self-destruction. ? There had been the expectation of a step forward, and instead one found oneself facing a progressive process of decadence that to a large measure has been unfolding under the sign of a summons to a presumed 'spirit of the council,' and by so doing has actually and increasingly discredited it."

4. Ratzinger's obsession with socialism

"The 'absolute good' (and this means the building of a just socialistic society) becomes the moral norm that justifies everything else, including -- if necessary -- violence, homicide, mendacity.... And what looks like 'liberation' turns into its opposite and shows its diabolic visage in deeds."

5. Ratzinger's hostility to bishops' conferences

"In many episcopal conferences, the group spirit and perhaps even the wish for a quiet, peaceful life or conformism lead the majority to accept the positions of active minorities bent upon pursuing clear goals."

6. Ratzinger the Grand Inquisitor

"Every theologian now seems to want to be 'creative.' But his proper task is to deepen the common deposit of the faith as well as to help in understanding and proclaiming it, not 'to create' it."

7. Ratzinger the autocrat

"The Church of Christ is not a party, not an association, not a club. Her deep and permanent structure is not *democratic* but *sacramental*, consequently *hierarchical*."

8. Ratzinger the anti-feminist

"What radical feminism -- at times even that which asserts that it is based on Christianity -- is not prepared to accept is precisely the exemplary, universal, unchangeable relationship between Christ and the Father ... I am, in fact, convinced that what feminism promotes in its radical form is no longer the Christianity that we know; it is another religion."

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The furor all this set off is difficult to overstate.

For liberal Catholics, it seemed the polite veil had been ripped off the Vatican and its true essence revealed -- fearful, defensive, hostile to creative thought and to dialogue with the world. Conservatives rejoiced that someone in authority had the wherewithal to say out loud what many of them had long felt about the direction of the church after Vatican II. In any event, the battle lines in Catholicism had been well and truly drawn.

A statement issued about the book by a group of priests in Munich, Ratzinger's former archdiocese, was typical: "Those who, like Ratzinger, exalt themselves in such a triumphalistic manner above everything ? exclude themselves as dialogue partners," the priests said.

In September 1985, the Synod of Bishops met in Rome to look back at Vatican II after 20 years. Despite four weeks of speeches, debates, and work towards a set of resolutions, the only thing journalists seemed to care about was Ratzinger; at one stage, Cardinal Godfried Danneels of Belgium snapped during a press conference, "We're having a synod around a council, not a book!"

The drumbeat became so intense that the papal spokesperson at the time, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, even felt compelled to put a bit of distance between Pope John Paul II and his top lieutenant. While stressing that John Paul cherished Ratzinger, Navarro-Valls hinted that the pope might have phrased things in a sunnier fashion.

"Ratzinger is right in what he has written in the book," Navarro-Valls told reporters, "but he is not right in what he has not written."

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All of which brings us back to Bressanone, because it was here that the image of "Herr Panzerkardinal" was set in cement, and it is now here that Benedict XVI arrives after having done a great deal over the last three years to lay that image to rest.

To be sure, there were flashes in that long-ago conversation with Messori of what I've come to describe as Benedict's "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning his capacity for expressing the doctrinal essentials of Christianity in a positive spirit.

For example: "The only really effective apologia for Christianity comes down to two arguments, namely, the saints the Church has produced and the art which has grown in her womb." In a similar vein: "A theologian who does not love art, poetry, music and nature can be dangerous. Blindness and deafness toward the beautiful are not incidental; they necessarily are reflected in his theology." Or this: "Salvation for the church comes from within her, but this in no way means to say that it comes from the decrees of the hierarchy."

On the whole, however, the popular take at the time was that *The Ratzinger Report* was too much orthodoxy, not enough affirmation.

At the level of public impressions, Benedict today seems to have these two dimensions of his outlook more in sync. His ideas have not mutated, but his mode of expression, and thus the public reaction he typically elicits, is different. Positive responses to his recent visits to the United States and Australia make the point.

In that light, it might be a fascinating exercise if Benedict were once again to sit down with a journalist during his break in Bressanone, covering some of the same ground, in order to gauge how his intervening 23 years of experience and his new perspective as pope might affect his approach. It's reasonable to suspect that the orthodoxy would be the same, but the affirmative tone more resounding.

Speaking for myself, I'd volunteer for the assignment.

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Almost 900 Catholic policy activists and service providers who work with immigrants and refugees, along with an impressive phalanx of bishops, met in Washington, D.C., this week for a conference titled "Renewing Hope, Seeking Justice." Among other things, the gathering was designed to launch a major Catholic push in favor of comprehensive immigration reform heading into the 2008 elections.

I wrote a piece for the *NCR* Web site on the conference, which can be found here: Catholics call for 'fair and humane' immigration policies [1]

I interviewed Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles, who delivered a keynote address at the conference, for the most recent issue of *NCR*. I also had the chance to speak with a couple of other bishops who took part: Bishop Jaime Soto, the coadjutor bishop of Sacramento, and Bishop John Wester of Salt Lake City. The full texts of those interviews can be found here:

- Interview: Bishop Jaime Soto [2]
- Interview: Bishop John Wester [3]

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