

Benedict perfects the Q&A format

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 6, 2009 All Things Catholic

Ironically enough, forty years ago Joseph Ratzinger insisted that the dialogue is not really a legitimate Christian literary form. In his 1969 book *Das neue Volk Gottes*, the future pope observed that there's no equivalent in Christian writing to the great dialogues of Plato, arguing that's because, at its core, Christianity is not about dialogue with the world but rather kerygma, proclamation.

I say that's ironic because over the last quarter-century, no figure in global Christianity has done more to popularize the Q&A, essentially the modern form of Socratic dialogue, than Joseph Ratzinger. Indeed, one could make a good case that the Q&A has become the most distinctive form of literary expression under Pope Benedict XVI.

The latest entry came on Feb. 26, in the form of a back-and-forth with priests of the Rome diocese. The Vatican released a transcript of that session, which took place in Italian, on Feb. 27; my translation can be found here:

[The transcript of that session.](#)

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While he was still the Vatican's doctrinal watchdog, then-Cardinal Ratzinger sat down for three book-length interviews published in Q&A form: *The Ratzinger Report* in 1984; *Salt of the Earth* in 1996; and *God and the World* in 2000. The first entry in that series was a global publishing phenomenon, which cemented Ratzinger's reputation as a lightning rod; the latter two nuanced that image.

Since his election to the papacy in April 2005, Benedict XVI has taken part in several extended Q&A exercises:

- A sit-down with candidates for first communion in Rome in October 2005;
- An annual exchange with Roman seminarians;
- Annual encounters with priests in northern Italy, while the pope is on vacation, and with priests in Rome at the beginning of Lent;
- Sessions with young people as part of the preparation for World Youth Day;
- Several Q&A-style exchanges with reporters either just before his trips, or en route.

By now, the transcripts of these sessions run into hundreds of thousands of words. (Note to publishers: Someone is going to make a bonanza by collecting all these papal Q&A's into one Ratzinger Report-style volume.)

Some of the most arresting images, and defining insights, of this pontificate have come out of these Q&A exercises. For example, the charter statement of what I have termed Benedict's "affirmative orthodoxy," meaning his determination to phrase traditional Catholic identity in the most positive terms possible, came from a session with reporters prior to his 2006 trip to Bavaria. In that Q&A, Benedict was asked why he hadn't been tougher on Spain's leftist Prime Minister, Jose Luis Rodriguez Zapatero, when the two met in Valencia in July.

The pope replied: "Christianity, Catholicism, isn't a collection of prohibitions. It's a positive option. It's very important that we look at it again, because this idea has almost completely disappeared today. We've heard so much about what is not allowed that now it's time to say: we have a positive idea to offer. [Everything] is clearer if you say it first in a positive way."

To be clear, these Q&A's are not really unscripted. An aide usually collects questions in advance, giving the pope a chance to think about what he wants to say. In general, however, Benedict doesn't duck the hard questions, and one rarely has the sense that he's simply rolling out canned replies. As a result, these events are the closest one gets to watching the wheels turn in this pope's nimble mind. There are any number of reasons why Benedict XVI might find the Q&A format congenial, but at bottom he's a veteran university professor who's most at home around the table in a graduate seminar, and these exchanges are the closest he gets to being back in his natural habitat.

Benedict's latest Q&A is another instant classic, offering insights into how the pope thinks at the levels of both substance and style.

In terms of content, the pope offered a preview of his forthcoming social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* ("Charity in Truth," expected to be issued later this month), in response to a question about the global economic crisis. The core of his reply was that while protests from the church over unjust economic systems are essential, the distinctive contribution of Christianity is changing hearts.

"Where there aren't just people, there is no justice," Benedict said, arguing that the root cause of today's upheaval, such as the failure of large American banks, is original sin — egoism, greed, and idolatry of worldly goods.

"The dialogue of Abraham with God (Genesis 18:22-33) seems to me still true and realistic," Benedict went on. "Abraham says: 'Are you truly going to destroy the city? Maybe there are fifty just people, maybe there are ten, and ten just people are enough for the city to survive.' On the other hand, if the ten just people are missing, even with all the economic doctrine, society cannot survive. Hence we have to do what it takes to educate, to ensure that there are at least ten just people — but if possible, many more."

"Justice cannot be created in the world solely through good economic models, however necessary those are," Benedict said. "Justice is created only where there are just people. There cannot be just people without a humble, daily work of conversion of hearts, or creating justice in hearts." In that light, Benedict argued, the simple daily work of a pastor of souls, even in a small, out-of-the-way parish, is "fundamental, not only for the parish, but for humanity."

In light of those comments, one can expect that the new social encyclical — which was set to appear in September 2008, but then delayed in light of the crisis — will likely stress that systemic change must be rooted in individual metanoia, or conversion, away from self-interest or tribal concern toward the common good.

In terms of style, this Q&A confirms a defining feature of Benedict's approach to problems: his relentless insistence upon "both/and" solutions.

Perhaps especially in the field of social doctrine, Catholicism is rife with either/or divisions. Some emphasize the church's pro-life message, others its peace and justice concerns. More basically, some accent the "horizontal" dimension of Catholic spirituality, its impact on the broader culture, while others see that as a distraction from "vertical" matters of prayer and liturgical worship.

Benedict's comments point to a more balanced vision. Not only are private devotion and the sacramental life

not a distraction from changing the world, the pope suggests, they are a necessary prerequisite to the extent that they promote a sense of solidarity with others ? because ?good structures can?t be developed if they?re opposed by egoism, including that of competent people.? In other words, in response to the question of whether the church should concern itself with piety or politics, Benedict?s answer is clearly ?both.?

The rest of the Q&A is also worth reading. Among other things, Benedict discusses faith and culture, youth ministry, liturgy, the Petrine ministry, Mary, and indulgences. We catch glimpses of his sense of humor; for example, in reply to a pastor who suggests that today?s priests need more real-world experience, the pope quips, ?We don?t live on the moon.? We also see him offering meat-and-potatoes pastoral advice: ?A youth center that merely offers games and something to drink would be absolutely superfluous,? he says, and he suggests that three years is about the right time for a young priest to spend in an assignment before moving on.

Benedict?s cool is also on display. Towards the end, an older priest becomes highly-horsed about the post-Vatican II tendency to downplay forms of devotion such as First Fridays and Marian apparitions. Benedict calmly swats the question away, saying that while these are ?beautiful things? that have grown up over the centuries, and they shouldn?t be disrespected, ?everyone can more or less understand what?s less important than something else.?

Benedict?s treatment of the role of the papacy is perhaps especially interesting, which he defines in terms of protecting the church against ?particularisms,? meaning attempts to absolutize pieces of its message or particular forms of cultural expression. Alas, no one asked the obvious follow-up, which is how Benedict might square that with his insistence that the Hellenistic conceptual repertoire of Christianity, as well as its European legacy, represent indispensable components of the ?culture? of the church. Perhaps that?s a subject for a future Q&A.

Unfortunately, the sad truth is that very little of this interesting material is likely to get much attention, especially in light of the pope?s recent PR woes. Anyone taking the trouble to look, however, can?t help but notice that for a guy who?s not sold on the dialogue, Benedict XVI is pretty good at it.

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One hears a fair bit of consternation these days about religious illiteracy, including among Catholics, and the church?s failure to deliver effective catechesis. (God knows there?s abundant grist for the mill; a poll commissioned ahead of last fall?s Synod on the Bible, for example, found that large numbers of Americans, like people in other countries surveyed, mistakenly believe Jesus authored a book of the Bible, and they can?t correctly distinguish between Paul and Moses in terms of which figure belongs to the Old Testament.)

In that regard, there?s an interesting model out in California in the form of ?The University Series,? a Lenten faith formation program put together by a 10-parish consortium spanning the border between Los Angeles and Ventura counties. From late February to early April, ?The University? offers 90 different seminars on a staggering variety of subjects, drawing upon both local talent and also speakers from the outside. (I gave a seminar last Monday on the subject of, ?Pope and President for Peace??)

The founder is Fr. Dave Heney, pastor of St. Pascal Baylon Catholic Church in Thousand Oaks, but today Heney says he?s been able to hand over most of the nuts-and-bolts work so that the series has become largely self-perpetuating. Thousands of people take part each year, making The University one of the more remarkable instances of large-scale adult faith formation in the U.S. church.

In effect, Heney?s success confirms the ?Field of Dreams? principle: ?Build it, and they will come.?

To be fair, Heney has the advantage of being able to piggy-back to some extent upon the massive Religious

Education Congress staged by the Los Angeles archdiocese in Anaheim. Nonetheless, for anyone pondering how to move the ball on the catechetical front, ?The University? represents an intriguing experiment indeed. The web site may be found here: <http://www.theuniversityseries.org/>

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