NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

Pope who quit is patron saint of Benedict's 'interior reform'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jul. 4, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
Rome

tFor the second time in fourteen months, Benedict XVI has paid homage to a predecessor who quit the papacy after only five months, spurning the power struggles and regal trappings which surrounded it: St. Celestine V, whose pontificate ran from July 5 to December 3 in 1294.

Improbably, Celestine V has emerged as a key point of reference and role model for Benedict XVI ? not in the sense of resigning his office, but rather the personal humility, lack of lust for power and glory, and efforts at reconciliation which Benedict associates with his 13th century predecessor.

Those qualities, according to Vatican observers, are at the heart of an ?interior reform? Benedict is trying to promote in the church, and perhaps especially in its clerical culture. To the extent that Benedict has an ?exit strategy? from the various crises currently plaguing the church and his papacy, this interior reform would appear to be it ? and Celestine V, at least informally, is arguably its patron saint.

In Italian Catholicism, Celestine V has long been the symbol of the spiritual dimension of the church, as opposed to the "carnal church" of earthly wealth and influence.

tToday, Benedict XVI visited the home of Celestine V in Sulmona, a city in the Abruzzo region of central Italy, praying briefly before relics of the saint preserved in the crypt of the local cathedral. Back in April 2009, Benedict had prayed before the remains of Celestine V in the Basilica of Collemaggio in L?Aquila, where Celestine was crowned as pope in August 1294.

On that occasion, Benedict signaled his devotion to Celestine by leaving behind the stole which Benedict received at the time of his election to the papacy.

tThis morning, Benedict XVI reflected at length on what he called ?this exceptional figure,? who presided over a ?brief and painful pontificate.?

tIn language with obvious resonance given recent events, Benedict praised Celestine as a model of ?calm, clear and courageous proclamation of the Gospel ? even in moments of persecution.?

tCelestine?s legacy, Benedict said, lies in his ?detachment from preoccupation with things ? money and finery ? trusting in the providence of the Father,? as well as his ?particular attention and care for those suffering in body and in the spirit.?

tCelestine, Benedict XVI said, was a ?seeker of God? rather this own glory, which was the essence of his holiness.

tSuch holiness, Benedict said, ?Never loses its attractive force, never falls into obscurity, and never passes out

of fashion.? With the passage of time, Benedict said, ?it shines with ever greater luminosity.?

tBenedict also praised Celestine?s ?clear awareness of sin, always accompanied by an equally clear awareness of the infinite mercy of God toward his creature.?

tBenedict recalled that Celestine?s lone major official act during his brief pontificate was to issue a plenary and universal indulgence, or forgiveness of sin, to all humanity. In a clear rejection of the pomp of official papal documents, the bull declaring the indulgence, issued in September 1294, was simply titled ?Forgiveness.?

tAt a time when indulgences were usually sold for money or some other consideration, Celestine V specified only two conditions for receiving forgiveness: entrance to the Basilica of Collemaggio in L?Aquila between August 28-29 every year, and being ?truly sorry and confessed.?

* * *
tIn another expression of what has become the most distinctive element in Benedict XVI?s social teaching, his strong environmental streak, the pope praised ?concern for the protection of creation? in the Abruzzo region of Italy, which was struck by a major earthquake in April 2009.

tBenedict exhorted ?everyone to feel personally responsible not only for their own future but that of others, respecting and caring for creation, which is a fruit and a sign of the love of God.?

* * *
Though Sulmona is observing 2010 as the 800th anniversary of the birth of Pietro of Morrone, who went on to become Celestine V, official materials fudge the date slightly, saying that he was born sometime between 1209 and 1215. As a young man he entered a nearby Benedictine monastery, and eventually decided to become a hermit. He worked for years as a priest and confessor, founding a branch of the Benedictine order in 1263 that came to be known as the ?Celestines.?

After Pope Nicholas IV died in April 1292, the cardinals at the time tried off and on for more than two years without success to agree on a successor. In a moment of either inspiration or desperation, depending on how one chooses to see it, they resolved the deadlock by turning to the abbot-hermit Pietro of Morrone, whose holiness had become legendary.

Only after considerable pressure did Pietro accept, taking the name Celestine V. His coronation took place at the basilica in L?Aquila, and from there he went to Naples. Put off by open conflict both within the church and between the church and the monarchies of Europe, Celestine V resigned on Dec. 3, one of only a handful of popes to do so. His successor, Boniface VIII, threw him in jail, where he died in 1296. (Some historians believe Boniface actually had Celestine killed.)

In his poetic vision of Hell, Dante describes seeing someone "who from cowardice made the great refusal" -- a line many have taken as a reference to Celestine V, though the point is still debated. Benedict XVI is actually not the first pope to pay tribute to Celestine on a visit to Abruzzo; in 1966, Paul VI visited Fumone, where Celestine was imprisoned. Paul VI said that Celestine is a reminder of the "divine presence" in the church that prevents it from falling into a "decadence that everywhere else is fatal." That ability to survive the ups and downs of history, Paul VI said, is the "living miracle of Catholicism."
t
t

Source URL (retrieved on *04/28/2015 - 15:50*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/pope-who-quit-patron-saint-benedicts-interior-reform