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Ratzinger the Romantic

Michael Sean Winters | Jul. 17, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

When I grow up, I want to be able to write an essay [1]as lucid, thoughtful and incisive as that penned recently by Tracey Rowland, Dean of the John Paul II Institute for Marriage and Family in Melbourne, and published in last week?s Tablet [2]. The Tablet, which graciously allowed me to reprint the essay here at NCR, always offers some of its content on-line for free but it is worth getting the subscription so you can read it all. I confess my bias ? I frequently write for them ? but, in addition to their provocative essays, they have a commitment to strong writing that always makes it a joy to read and distinguishes it from most magazines.

Back to Rowland. Whatever you are doing, bring it to a conclusion, sit down, and read this essay. It should especially be read by those who are suspicious of Benedict?s ?Reform of the Reform,? his commitment to understand the Second Vatican Council through a hermeneutic of reform, which entails elements of both continuity and discontinuity, rather than simply as a break with the past. Rowland shows how Benedict?s stance is not some post-conciliar attempt to roll back the clock, but an extension of the theology of the Council itself.

Rowland correctly notes the centrality of Gaudium et Spes [3] 22 in the theology of both Benedict and his predecessor Pope John Paul II: "The truth is that only in the mystery of the incarnate Word does the mystery of man take on light." This most Christocentric text in that multi-faceted document was the text that both pontiffs referenced at the very beginning of their inaugural encyclicals. The ?New Evangelization? is, simply put, an attempt to focus on the possibilities of Gaudium et Spes 22, to proclaim the Gospel anew, not as an add-on, to a world that has lost the ability to say the first word in the Creed: ?Credo.? Rowland writes: ?Moreover, he [Ratzinger] explicitly rejected the idea that it is possible to construct ?a rational philosophical picture of man intelligible to all and on which all men of goodwill can agree, to which can be added the Christian doctrines as a sort of crowning conclusion.? He described this idea as a ?fiction.?? That fiction could well describe the efforts of contemporary American Catholic thinkers such as Robert George and George Weigel, for whom religion seems always to be a convenient confirmation of the American Dream.

My only quibble with the essay is the title. I am not sure if Raztinger is properly characterized as a ?romantic.? In his book ?Introduction to Christianity,? Ratzinger offers a decidedly ambivalent assessment of Giambattista Vico who is certainly one of the names we associate with the rise of Romanticism. Both Ratzinger and Vico share an acute awareness of the limits of Enlightenment thought, and Ratzinger even recognizes a value in the historicism Vico postulated, noting that Christianity is itself rooted in historical claims, but he clearly does not see that historicism as an exhaustive philosophic framework for Christian belief. Ratzinger reaches back not to the Romantics, after all, in formulating his theology, but to the Fathers. He shares many of the interests and concerns of the Romantics, but they too often stopped short, placing their hope in the Volk or the proletariat. Just as all McDonald?s are burger joints but not all burger joints are a McDonald?s, not everyone concerned with beauty and the heart is a Romantic.

Of course, the mention of Vico?s name brings to mind another great thinker, that of Sir Isaiah Berlin, whose work is largely responsible for introducing Vico?s ideas to the English-speaking world. Berlin's book *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* remains a must-read for anyone interested in the play of ideas in the modern

world. I have never found any record of Ratzinger meeting Berlin, and suspect they would have spoken of music, probably Mozart, more than anything else. But, I would have given any limb, maybe two, to be present at a conversation between these two giants.

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