

Why I Love Benedict

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 5, 2010 | Distinctly Catholic

I can recall precisely where I was when I realized that Joseph Ratzinger had been elected Pope. I was jogging on Varnum Street, near Providence Hospital. For those familiar with Washington, D.C., the Brookland section of town, where I then lived, is known as "little Rome" because it is home to so many Catholic institutions: CUA, the Shrine, the Franciscan monastery and other religious houses, Providence hospital, etc. The bells in the Shrine began to ring. It was close to noon, so I assumed they were pealing the Angelus. But, they kept ringing. I cut my run short and as I got closer to my home, the thought occurred that if the cardinal electors had reached their decision so quickly "it was the first full day of the conclave" they had to have selected the frontrunner, Cardinal Ratzinger. I got inside and turned on the television and shortly thereafter, Cardinal Medina Estevez stepped on to the loggia of St. Peter's and announced that, indeed, the cardinals had elected Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope.

I admit that my first thoughts were not well disposed to this new fact in the life of our Church. I shared the general "and we now know mistaken" belief that Cardinal Ratzinger had been one of John Paul II's most conservative advisers, that he had been one of these pleading for a rollback of the reforms of Vatican II, that if anything it was John Paul II who had reined in Ratzinger rather than the other way round. I admit it "the thought occurred that this election could prove a disaster. But, in those first few days, I also heard someone wiser than myself make an observation that would be borne out in the months and years ahead: "Do not confuse Cardinal Ratzinger with Pope Benedict." Still, I remained concerned at first, especially when people like George Weigel were gloating that "The "progressive" project is over," and Bill Donohue predicted that the "gnashing of teeth" had already begun in liberal circles. Those of us who had been aghast at the way certain American bishops had used Sen. John Kerry's Catholicism against him in the recently completed presidential campaign feared the worst.

But, then a funny thing happened. There was gnashing of teeth alright, but most of it came from those same conservatives who had rejoiced at Benedict's election. First, he appointed William Levada to his old post as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Cardinal Levada is no liberal, to be sure, but he also was no culture warrior. The right was appalled by his appointment because he had, in the 1990s, reached agreement with San Francisco's mayor about the extension of health care benefits to same sex couples employed by agencies that contract with the city government. The right had wanted a showdown but Levada deftly avoided one, and did so without an ounce of compromise of any doctrines of the Church. This appointment was cited by the late Father Richard John Neuhaus as a principal reason for a "palpable uneasiness" among Ratzinger's former admirers.

There were other hints that the crazy cons had misjudged their man. During EWTN's coverage of the papal Mass at Washington's Nationals Park, Neuhaus and host Raymond Arroyo mocked the "multi-cultural exhibitionism" of the Mass but Benedict appeared to be thrilled by the rich tapestry of American Catholicism on display. That same day, I was among those waiting to hear the Pope give his address to educators at the CUA and before the event, Neuhaus's comments on the Mass were already causing disgust and dismay among the assembled hierarchs.

Then came the encyclicals. They were powerfully and beautifully written and they shared a common thread and theme, that the Church and individual believers must orient ourselves to Christ first. This is the point of departure for Christian witness in each and every aspect of human life. In his encyclical on social justice, *Caritas in Veritate*, he clearly challenged those of us on the left to ask ourselves to explicitly link our concern for social justice with the cause of the unborn. In that same encyclical he challenged those on the right to stop worshipping at the pagan altar of the free market. Both sides often start with their politics and look for justification in the Scripture and magisterial teaching, but Benedict insisted that approach was wrong, irrespective of whether one started on the political right or the political left. Our politics must grow out of our faith, not the other way round.

The response to *Caritas in Veritate* showed how wrong I was to be afraid on that April morning when I heard the Shrine's bells. As [I wrote at the time](#) [1], "Unsurprisingly, Weigel celebrates Centesimus Annus which he claims "jettisoned the idea of a "Catholic third way" that was somehow "between" or "beyond" or "above" capitalism and socialism " a favorite dream of Catholics ranging from G.K.Chesterton to John A. Ryan to Ivan Illich." Actually, both Centesimus and even more so *Caritas in Veritate* stress that the "Catholic way" must be prior to the claims of any economic theory, that the disposition for grace and communion must be part of the system, not a mere add-on, that unjust systems produce unjust results, and that a system that produces " at the same time - material wealth and spiritual poverty must be seen as morally and humanly suspect." Indeed, Benedict's critique of capitalism is very radical, in that it goes to the core, the radix, in pointing out that insofar as the system is built on the manipulation of a human vice, greed, it is just so unchristian. It is not just that this Wall Street banker was corrupt or that employer was exploitative. The system itself stands in the docket. There is not an American politician alive today with the courage to say such a thing.

Of course, the other thing that Benedict did shortly after assuming the See of Peter was cashier Father Maciel. It has become clear that as a cardinal, Ratzinger had pushed for tougher action against Maciel but he was frustrated by those closest to Pope John Paul II. I would suggest that the episode must also serve to qualify our judgments about Ratzinger's time at the CDF. We do not know what battles he fought and lost. We do know, from Jason Berry's excellent, if painful to accept, reporting here at NCR, that some of those close to the late pontiff were frankly corrupt and it will be decades before we have access to the archival information that will tell us the true story of what happened in John Paul II's final years, when he was too ill to manage affairs. Finally, the thing that most distinguishes Pope Benedict's papacy from the hopes heaped upon it by the right has been his example. On the flight to the United Kingdom, Pope Benedict was asked about the impending protests of anti-religious zealots. He replied that he would face anti-Catholicism "with confidence and joy" which is precisely what he did. In his speeches in the UK, Benedict spoke clearly, but without a hint of triumphalism or condemnation, about the role of the Church in society. His thoughtful, challenging speech at Westminster Hall was vintage Benedict: He made his points beautifully, but did so in a way that invited his listeners in to his mind and heart. He did not beat up on his opponents. He did not mischaracterize the positions of others. He did not impugn anyone's motives. And, lo and behold, people listened. His speech was not only thoughtful, it was effective. I hope that some American bishops who fancy themselves brilliant expostulators on the role of the Church in society, but who evidence a penchant for slamming their opponents and demeaning those who dare to disagree, took notice. They bemoan the press. Benedict won them over.

There have been missteps to be sure. I do not understand all the politics behind the revival of the Tridentine Rite, and on the merits, I have no problem with it. But, chasing after the Lefebvrist is a fool's errand: That crowd has been disloyal to the papacy since Leo XIII. I think way too much has been made of the apostolic visitation of women's religious orders here in the U.S. " these things come and go and are quickly forgotten " but Rome should have done a better job explaining its purposes beforehand because there is no justification for insulting, or even appearing to insult, women who have dedicated their entire lives to the Church. And, of course, the response to the sex abuse crisis, although better than before, should be more robust.

I will leave it to the fine theologians we have at Q & A this week and next to discuss Pope Benedict's specific theological contributions to the life of the Church. But, I ask all those " and they are many " on the left who

have a visceral dislike for Pope Benedict to think again, to take another look, to be open to the possibility that they may find more in his papacy to admire than they thought. I have come to the conclusion that the Holy Father is not interested in pursuing an ideological agenda one way or the other. His goals are, properly, not easily given to ideological classification. This, combined with his extraordinary theological vision, has made me a fan of his papacy and of his person. Those fears I entertained on that April morning when I heard the bells announcing his election were profoundly misplaced.

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