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Q & A: Beth Haile

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 13, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

We continue the discussion with young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project as they discuss the contributions made by Pope Benedict. The discussion is intended to complement the publication, recently released by the USCCB, Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy [1]. Today, we hear from Beth Haile of Boston College.

The question: What is one of Pope Benedict's contributions to the life of the Church?

Beth Haile: American conservatives have consistently voiced their love and admiration for Joseph Ratzinger. His online fanclub looks on him, and his new identity as Pope Benedict XVI, as an ally, not only on controversial issues like abortion, women?s ordination, and artificial contraception, but also on matters like liturgical reform and anti-Marxism. Liberals too (who referred to Cardinal Ratzinger as the Panzerkardinal or ?God's Rottweiler?) assume that Benedict is the archetypal conservative, a regressive and narrow-minded individual insistent on returning the church to its earlier idyllic pre-conciliar days.

After the release of Caritas in Veritate, George Weigel, one of the most prominent conservative American Catholics, commented in the National Review that the encyclical was a ?hybrid, blending the pope's own insightful thinking on the social order with elements of the Justice and Peace approach to Catholic social doctrine, which imagines that doctrine beginning anew at Populorum Progressio.? Weigel goes on to say curtly that anyone ?with advanced degrees in Vaticanology could easily go through the text of Caritas in Veritate, highlighting those passages that are obviously Benedictine with a gold marker and those that reflect current Justice and Peace default positions with a red marker. The net result is, with respect, an encyclical that resembles a duck-billed platypus? (?Caritas in Veritate in Gold and Red,? National Review Online, July 7, 2009)

Liberals and conservatives seem to adopt Weigel?s approach, assuming they can accurately characterize the pope using narrow liberal/conservative categories. Those who look at his life also try and separate it into two periods with an earlier ?liberal? period and a later ?conservative? period. Benedict is, however, a more complicated figure. He is a figure who both resists and transcends dualistic categories. This was especially evident in the complicated text of Caritas in Veritate, but has been a recurring motif of Benedict?s pontificate. Just as there is only one Benedict with both conservative and liberal leanings, so too is there one Church which stands a middle ground between conservative and liberal tendencies.

Rather than emphasizing the themes of ?opposition? and ?return,? as you might expect from a conservative pope, Benedict has emphasized instead ?catholicity? and ?continuity.? In his Christmas Address of 2005, the year he became pope, Benedict revealed his hesitancy to be grouped in dualistic conservative/liberal categories in his discussion of Vatican II. In this speech, he contrasted a hermeneutic of dis-continuity, which sees Vatican II as a decisive break with tradition creating a dualistically opposed pre-conciliar and post-conciliar church, not with a hermeneutic of continuity, but rather with a hermeneutic of reform. According to Benedict?s hermeneutic of reform (which includes but cannot be reduced to continuity), the Council was a ?renewal in the continuity of the one subject-Church which the Lord has given to us. . . a subject which increases in time and develops, yet always remaining the same, the one subject of the journeying People of God.? In other words, Benedict?s

Christmas address reaffirmed Catholicism?s commitment to a principle of et/et, rather than either/or. There is no pre- and post-conciliar Church to choose from, but only one church, both unchanged and changing. In light of this, other dualistic tendencies also fail. In this same address, Benedict argued against those who would pit the church against the world or faith against reason. In Caritas in Veritate, he argued against those like Weigel who would pit Justice and Peace tendencies against orthodoxy. Catholicity is, according to Ratzinger in his Principles of Catholic Theology, the ?formal principle of Christianity.? Pope Benedict has not abandoned this thesis.

This nuanced hermeneutic of reform that holds together both conservative and liberal tendencies is a defining characteristic of Benedict's papacy, and it is also what makes him a difficult pope to understand. Weigel wants to try and exegete some pure conservative Benedict from the text of Caritas in Veritate, but no such conservative Benedict is to be found, nor is Benedict any more liberal in light of his favorable reception and application of the pet-encyclical of liberals, Populorum Progressio. The same pope who reached out to the ultra-conservative Piux X Society also appointed bishops like Sean O?Malley and Donald Wuerl who refused to deny pro-abortion politicians communion. The same pope who is adamantly opposed to Marxism is also adamantly opposed to capitalism which he argues degrades people and turns them into commodities. The same pope who initiated investigations into left-leaning female orders in the US is also the pope who condemned ultra-conservative Legion of Christ founder Marcial Maciel, removing him from any active ministry.

Benedict is a challenging pope because he is a both/and catholic in a world that tries to see things in either/or categories. This is not a particularly exciting or memorable legacy for a pope to have, and I suspect that Benedict will pale in any historical analysis next to John Paul II?s enduring charisma, just as I expect historians will view Ratzinger?s theological contributions to the church as far more important than Benedict?s. However, Benedict?s resistance to American political categories is a reminder that the Catholic Church is neither liberal nor conservative but catholic.

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