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# Which man is the pope today?

Eugene Cullen Kennedy | Jul. 28, 2011 Bulletins from the Human Side

It is hard not to believe that Pope Benedict XVI has either a richly cultivated sense of irony or a finely honed capacity, as the saying goes, ?to put people on.? What else would explain his advice to Sicilians on his one day visit to that island last autumn? *Catholic Culture* reports that he urged Sicilians ?to be saints? and then, in almost the same breath, offered a quick, sure passage to Heaven by telling them to ?reject the Mafia.?

But, like St. Francis scattering of bread crumbs behind him for his beloved birds, our gentle pope leaves a trail of puzzlement behind for his beloved people. He does love us, right? Well, we think so but he seems to be of two minds on so many things that it is hard sometimes to know.

Take his condemnation of the Mafia, for example. *Catholic Culture* tells us that although ?most news reports interpreted the pope?s words as an unmistakable condemnation of Mafia influence, a Reuters report said that the pontiff?s homily was a disappointment to the opponents of organized crime.? Benedict either has an extraordinary gift for ambiguity or he habitually refracts his opinion through different aspects of his personality.

It is hard to know whether he even likes being pope for, according to reports of the conclave that chose him to be the first new pope of the 21st century, he was not the shy German schoolmaster but the bold candidate who, like an experienced jockey who hugs the rail to win the derby, he positioned himself knowingly for the brief race to his election. On some days this man who knew how to find his way to the papacy, acts as if, now that, among other contrasting experiences, he has made a lot of saints and been sued for the sins of sex abusers, he sometimes looks as if he would like to find a way out.

He may be the on-the-one-hand-and-on-the-other-hand Holy Father. He surprised the world by his initial encyclical, a deeply felt meditation on love in which he recognized the healthy aspects of eros, as Vatican II did when one of the Council Fathers successfully prevented the bishops from condemning it by reminding them that it ?has something good about it.?

That, of course, was the kind of thinking that he encouraged when, as a 35-year-old theologian, he contributed enormously to Vatican II?s documents. As John Wilkins recently described his role (*Commonweal*, June 4, 2011), ?As far as the young Joseph Ratzinger was concerned, episcopal collegiality, papal authority, the liturgy, the question of religious freedom, ecumenism and the church?s approach to both other religions and to secular culture were all in urgent need of reforming scrutiny by the council fathers.?

He is now following his predecessor?s plan to undo Vatican II, to lead, as it is called, ?a reform of the reform? that will restore the pre-Vatican II church with all its supposed glory of Latin Masses, the renaissance of clerical culture in a castle with the plank bridge over its moat drawn up to keep laypeople, especially women, *out* and to keep priests *in* so they can remain adolescent and never think that their immaturity plays any role in driving Catholics out of the church in large numbers.

On one day we glimpse the pope as the exciting theology professor that his former students describe. Thus in April, Benedict answered questions submitted to him on a special television broadcast. We hear the man who

understands the language and symbols of theology and religious language when he explained the meaning of the creedal statement that Jesus ?descended into hell.?

This, he explained, ?should not be imagined as a geographical or a spatial trip, from one continent to another,? adding that ?it mainly means that Jesus reaches even the past, that the effectiveness of the Redemption ... embraces the past, all men and all women of all time.? This is a Holy Father speaking right out of the Vatican II.

The Resurrection, he continued, brings to light ?a new condition of human being ... no longer subjected to the termination of time, a life immersed in the eternity of God.? The pope seems ageless when he speaks, not in the concrete language that so many alleged reformers of the reform speak, but in the lyrical spiritual language that addresses the depths of men and women today.

Why is it that we see these brilliant flashes of the pope as a master of modern theology on one occasion and one who, on another, presents the Latin Mass, including a veto on altar girls, as the bus we had better be on if we want to be saved? What does this man suffer within himself that he can sing so gloriously in the rich religious language of the Catholic tradition on one day and sound so restrained and intimidated by the theology of Vatican II on the next?

Wilkins suggests that major events in 1968 contributed to Ratzinger?s shift in stance towards Vaticsn II. One was the way in which so many bishops reacted to Paul VI?s *Humanae Vitae*?s restatement of the church?s condemnation of birth control, by emphasizing the freedom of conscience of individuals. In that same year, students rioted across Western Europe and students even interrupted his lectures.

His sense of a break in the good order of the world caused him to become fearful as the man in the Gospel did so that he buried his talents in the ground. This unease with a universe emphasizing individual rights even in the face of papal decrees haunts him to this day. That may explain why there seem to be two very different men seated on the Chair of Peter at this time.

[Eugene Cullen Kennedy is emeritus professor of psychology at Loyola University, Chicago.]

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