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Benedict XVI a pope of ironies

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 20, 2012 All Things Catholic

For Benedict XVI, this has been a week of milestones. The pontiff turned 85 on Monday, making him the oldest pope in the last 110 years and one of just six to reign past 85 in the last half-millennium. On Thursday, Benedict also marked the seventh anniversary of his election to the papacy in April 2005.

It's been a week for remembrance of things past in another sense, too.

Two Vatican headlines recalled the feverish images of Benedict from seven years ago, when the new pope was depicted as a ruthless enforcer poised to lead the ecclesial equivalent of Sherman's march to the sea. The first involves a potential deal to end the Lefebvrite schism, bringing the church's most notorious traditionalist rebels back into the fold; the second concerns a crackdown on the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, the main umbrella group of women's orders in the United States, for alleged deviations on women's ordination, homosexuality and radical feminism.

Yet if we take the last seven years into view, not just the last week, the picture changes considerably. Quite often, the most intriguing feature of this papacy isn't how Benedict has confirmed expectations, but rather how he's confounded them. Indeed, if John Paul II was a "pope of firsts" and a "pope of surprises," Benedict XVI may well go down as a "pope of ironies."

The following are eight such defining ironies, meaning sharp contrasts between the stereotypes and mythology that surrounded Benedict at the beginning versus the lived reality of his reign.

'Doctor No' becomes the pope of yes

If Benedict XVI truly is a cultural warrior, he's a curiously stealth version. Quite often in the last seven years, when people expected him to come out swinging, he's pulled his punches instead. On his recent foray into Mexico, for instance, Benedict avoided any direct mention of either abortion or gay marriage, despite the fact that Mexico City is among the first jurisdictions in Latin America to legalize both.

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the great "Doctor No" of the Catholic church in his quarter-century as the Vatican's doctrinal czar, has actually turned out to be the pope of what I've termed "Affirmative Orthodoxy." It's an approach to church teaching that emphasizes the Catholic "yes" -- putting the accent on what Catholicism supports and affirms rather than what it opposes and condemns.

Benedict's rhetoric, either on the hustings or in Rome, could rarely be described as "hard-hitting." Typically it's gentle, basically positive and rooted in core Christian principles and concepts rather than the issues of the day.

The pope's most detailed explanation of Affirmative Orthodoxy came in a 2006 interview with German journalists just after his visit to Valencia, Spain, for a World Congress of Families. Handicappers had anticipated a Fight-of-the-Century-style showdown with Socialist Prime Minister José Luis Rodr'guez Zapatero, who loomed as an avatar of radical secularism. Instead, Benedict accented the positive, insisting before a crowd

of more than 1 million people: "Christian faith and ethics are not meant to stifle love, but to make it healthier, stronger and more truly free."

Reporters pressed Benedict to explain his approach. Here's the exchange, as it was recorded by the German radio outlet *Deutsche Welle*:

> ***Question*: A month ago you were in Valencia. Anyone who was listening carefully noticed how you never mentioned the words "homosexual marriage," you never spoke about abortion, or about contraception. Clearly your idea is to go around the world preaching the faith rather than as an "apostle of morality." What are your comments?**
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> *Benedict XVI*: Obviously, yes. Actually I had only two opportunities to speak for 20 minutes, and when you have so little time you can't say everything you want to say about "no." Firstly you have to know what we really want, right? Christianity, Catholicism, isn't a collection of prohibitions: it's a positive option. It's very important that we look at it again because this idea has almost completely disappeared today. We've heard so much about what is not allowed that now it's time to say: we have a positive idea to offer ... I believe we need to see and reflect on the fact that it's not a Catholic invention that man and woman are made for each other, so that humanity can go on living: all cultures know this. As far as abortion is concerned, it's part of the fifth, not the sixth, commandment: "Thou shalt not kill!" We have to presume this is obvious and always stress that the human person begins in the mother's womb and remains a human person until his or her last breath. ... But all this is clearer if you say it first in a positive way.

That formula -- a tenacious defense of Catholic orthodoxy coupled with a determination to phrase it in the most positive key possible -- has run through Benedict's teaching like a scarlet thread, especially his three encyclicals.

'God's Rottweiler' turns out to be a milquetoast

Part of what makes the announcement of a Vatican-mandated overhaul of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious such a thunderclap is precisely that such measures have become a rarity. Frankly, "God's Rottweiler" has been a bit of a milquetoast as pontiff, at least as measured by the quantity and severity of his disciplinary actions.t

For instance, here's the current total of Catholic theologians who have been formally muzzled, fired or banned from writing or publishing by the Vatican on Benedict's watch: zero. Instead, the Vatican these days mostly restricts itself to issuing "doctrinal notes," which amount to bad book reviews.

Many investigations of theologians, such as that of Sr. Elizabeth Johnson in the United States, are now handled by the local bishops rather than by Rome. The lone theologian to draw a public rebuke from the Vatican itself under Benedict XVI has been Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino of El Salvador in 2007. Even there, rumors of a gag order proved to be overheated; the Vatican simply cited alleged "imprecisions and errors" in two of Sobrino's books while also calling his concern for the poor "admirable."

Among the handful of crackdowns of other kinds in the last seven years, some carry a Vatican label but were actually initiated and inspired elsewhere. That's at least partly the case with the apostolic visitation of American nuns launched in 2008, as well as this week's move against the LCWR. In both cases, the real momentum came not from Rome but from this side of the water.

When Benedict was elected, the forecast called for a vast flushing sound as all the dissidents and free thinkers were washed out of the church. Seven years later, some of the pope's best friends find themselves frustrated that

he hasn't brought the hammer down more forcefully on aberrant teaching or liturgical practice.

A curial insider with little interest in the curia

As pope, this veteran curial insider has turned out to have virtually zero interest in actually running the Roman curia.

Some of the cardinals who elected Benedict seven years ago thought they were buying an end to a perceived crisis of governance in the late John Paul years. Today, many of those cardinals feel like they simply traded in that crisis for a newer model.

Insiders typically give Benedict high marks for teaching and surprisingly good grades as a traveler and public figure. They regard the internal administration of the Vatican on his watch, however, as something of a disaster. The litany of meltdowns is well known: the Holocaust-denying bishop mess, the Boffo case, the Vatican leaks scandal and so on.

Benedict clearly sees himself as a teaching pope, not a governor. That formula can work as long as the people around the pope are talented managers, but that has not always seemed to be the case. In his 2009 book-length interview with journalist Peter Seewald, Benedict explained that his personnel policy is based on fostering a "family spirit." In practice, that means key aides tend to be people of integrity rather than careerists and schemers, but they're not always known for their administrative chops.

As a result, Benedict's papacy might well finally lay to rest a persistent bit of Catholic mythology: the mere fact of having been in the Vatican for a long time necessarily signals a capacity to make the trains run on time.

Governor no, reformer yes

Benedict XVI may not have much zeal for administration, but he's nevertheless poised to go down as a reformer on two key governance fronts: the clergy sexual abuse crisis, and the Vatican's own money management.

Benedict is the first pope to directly apologize for the crisis, the first pope to meet victims and the first pope to meet and encourage child protection professionals. Among his first acts was to sentence the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, to a life of "prayer and penance" for various forms of sexual misconduct. Benedict has written new rules to punish abuse into church law and has lent his support to voices inside the system, such as Maltese Monsignor Charles Scicluna at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, demanding an end to cover-up and delay.

There's legitimate debate about whether all that is enough, but not about whether Benedict has moved the church beyond where it stood not so long ago.

On finances, Benedict has launched what many observers regard as a sort of *glasnost* inside the Vatican. He's appointed new leadership at the Vatican's traditional financial powerhouses, including the Institute for the Works of Religion (the so-called "Vatican Bank"), and created a new financial watchdog agency with the power to inspect the books of every department and to punish irregularities.

Benedict has also tasked the Vatican's money managers with meeting international secular standards of transparency, forged in the global fight against money-laundering and the financing of terrorism. Right now, the powers that be in the Vatican are scrambling to meet benchmarks established by the Financial Action Task Force, a global intergovernmental body, with the aim of getting on European "white lists."

For a pope who sometimes can seem a bit of an absentee landlord and who clearly prefers the life of the mind to

moving the levers of power, those would be two historical reforms -- assuming they're brought to successful conclusion and sustained over time.

A theologian-pope sidelines theology

Benedict XVI is a true theologian-pope, yet a core element of his legacy has been to sideline theology as the focus of Catholicism's engagement with other religions. Instead, Benedict has made shared social, political and cultural values the heart of interfaith collaboration.

When Benedict visited the Rome synagogue in 2010, for instance, he laid out several pillars of Catholic/Jewish dialogue. He minimized theological points, concentrating on practical areas where he believes Jews and Catholics can do business together:

- Resisting secularism, "reawakening in our society openness to the transcendent dimension."
- Defending the right to life and the family.
- Promoting justice for "the poor, women and children, strangers, the sick, the weak and the needy."
- Acting on behalf of peace, especially peace in the Holy Land.

Underlying that approach, which informs Benedict's outreach to Islam and other faiths even more than Judaism, is a shift from "interreligious" to "intercultural" dialogue. Benedict articulated this vision in 2008, when he penned an introduction to a book by an old friend, Italian politician and philosopher Marcello Pera.

"Interreligious dialogue in the strict sense of the term is not possible without putting one's own faith into parentheses," the pope wrote in that preface, "while intercultural dialogue that develops the cultural consequences of the religious option ... is both possible and urgent."

Put in layman's terms, Benedict's view is that trying to find a lowest common denominator of theology upon which followers of different religions can agree will inevitably result in a loss of identity on both sides. Given that bolstering Catholic identity is the stated priority of his pontificate, that's a no-go. The more profitable enterprise, as Benedict seems to see it, is to elaborate a set of shared values and then to pool resources to apply those values to current affairs.

If it takes a soldier to fully appreciate the horrors of war, one could argue that maybe it took a theologian as pope to grasp the limits of theology.

An*ad intra* guy makes an*ad extra* splash

Seven years ago, most observers expected that Benedict would play better with the insider Catholic crowd than he would *ad extra*, meaning the outside world. Yet in some ways, almost the reverse has been the case. His internal policy decisions may draw mixed reviews -- his outreach to dissident Anglicans or his revival of the Latin Mass, for instance -- but as a cultural critic on the public stage, he's a hit.

The dynamic is most clear on his foreign trips. Those outings usually feature a speech to "the world of culture," meaning intellectuals, politicians, business leaders, artists and other representatives of civil society. By now, reporters have come to expect this speech will be the trip's high point, in terms of both content and public reaction.

Typically, the speech pivots on what has become a defining theme: the relationship between faith and reason and the positive contribution religion makes to a pluralistic society.

In the United Kingdom in 2010, Benedict delivered that speech in Westminster Hall, before all the living former

prime ministers of England and the cream of British civil society, standing in the spot where St. Thomas More was tried and condemned in 1535. He drew rave notices, including from Prime Minister David Cameron, who acknowledged that Benedict had compelled English society "to sit up and listen."

I was standing outside Westminster Hall when the event broke up, and bumped into a couple of self-described secular agnostics who told me they found the speech "bloody brilliant." (In fairness, they were measuring it against the palaver they've come to expect from British politicians, but even so, the verdict was a clear thumbs-up.)

In part, this irony could be explicable by the fact that outsiders don't have to live with the policy consequences of the pope's ideas. They're free to be impressed with his sharp mind and penetrating rhetoric, to applaud him for raising the intellectual bar, without worrying about what the institutional follow-through inside the Catholic church might be.

The fact remains, however, that this consummate insider can play surprisingly well in the outside world.

A remnant cardinal becomes a missionary pope

Cardinal Ratzinger was fond of describing the situation facing Christianity in the secular West as that of a "creative minority," a phrase he borrowed from British historian Arnold Toynbee. To some ears, that language suggested Ratzinger wanted a sort of remnant church, smaller in order to be more pure.

As pope, however, Benedict XVI has turned out to have a missionary heart. His highest internal priority for the Catholic church is a "New Evangelization," which means reviving the missionary energies of Catholicism, in the first place by reaching out to lapsed and alienated believers in the West.

Far from saying "good riddance" to those folks, in other words, Benedict XVI seems to want them back.

How successful this "New Evangelization" will turn out to be is anybody's guess. What's beyond doubt, however, is that it's the apple of Benedict's eye, so much so that he stepped outside his own skin to create a whole new Vatican department dedicated to the project. Given Benedict's oft-voiced skepticism about ecclesial bureaucracy, the decision offered a clear signal that he's willing even to set aside his own instincts in order to move the ball.

This fall's Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization is supposed to flesh out what the effort will look like in practice. Whatever comes of it should have the pope's personal stamp of approval, meaning that "new evangelization" is destined to be a watchword in Catholicism for some time to come.

Anti-Marxist hawk becomes the pope of détente

I recently devoted a column [1] to this particular irony, so I won't belabor the point here. Suffice it to say that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger rose to fame by battling liberation theology for being excessively reliant on Marxism, yet as pope he's pursued a clear policy of détente with the world's last remaining Marxist regimes, including China, Cuba and Vietnam.

The pope's recent trip to Cuba, where he met both the Castro brothers and none of the anti-Castro dissidents, offered the latest case in point.

By now, the bottom line should be clear: More often than anyone reasonably might have expected seven years ago, it's been hard to draw a straight line from Joseph Ratzinger's past, especially as boiled down into stereotypes and mythology, to the present of his papacy.

Irony, thy name is Benedict.

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