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Why I came to love Benedict XVI

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 12, 2013 Distinctly Catholic
Benedict Resigns

Some leaders know which moments or decisions in their lives will lead all biographies of their lives. Winston Churchill knew that his leadership during World War II would be the central theme of all future historians looking at his life. John F. Kennedy understood that his handling of the Cuban Missile Crisis would define his role in the history books: If he messed that up, nothing else would matter. President Barack Obama knows that historians will remember him as the person who finally achieved health care reform, and he is hoping to add immigration reform to the list, even though he has probably spent more of his time dealing with economic and foreign policy issues. For Churchill, the dominant role of his war leadership is appropriate, but in the case of Kennedy and Obama, and most people, their lives are not so easily reduced to a single event.

Pope Benedict XVI will now be known to history as the first pope to resign in the modern era. But his legacy is deeper than this one decision, a decision decidedly modern for a pope seen as a staunch traditionalist.

The key hermeneutic in assessing Benedict's pontificate is, well, his hermeneutic, specifically his hermeneutic of Vatican II. Every key decision he made as pope must be seen in the light of his understanding of what Vatican II was about and what it was not about. In his famous speech to the Curia in 2005, he stressed the need to apply a hermeneutic of reform, entailing elements of both continuity and discontinuity, and he contrasted this with an understanding of the council as a rupture within the life of the church. In this, I believe, he was correct.

The reforms of the Second Vatican Council were not informed by public opinion polls. They did not emerge from thin air. In his opening address to the council, Pope John XXIII famously invited the council fathers to discern the signs of the times, but he did not call for a wholesale adoption of modern norms. The measure of discernment for the council, as for the church in every age, remained the revealed truth of Jesus Christ. And it was the church's understanding of this norm that really changed at Vatican II. Before the council, the Curia developed draft texts that were exceedingly juridical in nature, a restatement of a tired neo-scholasticism that distorted classic Thomism. Today, there is no one -- no theologian, no bishop and certainly not Pope Benedict -- who thinks that the juridical, neo-scholastic worldview should be brought back. There was a break from the past at Vatican II, and this was the break, the abandonment of a cast of mind that dominated the Curia before the council.

The reforms at Vatican II grew out of a different theological tradition that gained strength -- and was frequently silenced -- throughout the 20th century. The ressourcement school of theology argued for a "return to the sources," both the canonical texts of the Bible and the writings of the early church fathers. For the authors of the biblical and patristic texts, the claims of Christianity were new and arresting, and those claims focused on the person of Jesus Christ. Joseph Ratzinger, a peritus at the council, did not look to the future without a map. His map was drawn from Augustine and Tertullian and Origen and St. John Cassian and all the other early church fathers, the very theologians who wrestled with the meaning of the event of Jesus Christ. Benedict argued for looking forward through the lens of the early church, imitating the way Blessed John Henry Newman had looked through the same lens as a means of determining whether or not to join the Catholic church. This, for

Benedict, is the method of authentic renewal, returning to the sources, and to Christ himself, to understand the way forward. Here is the continuity with tradition he felt lacking in various understandings of Vatican II.

Benedict was not shy about insisting on obedience to his decisions. When bishops or priests or women religious raised issues he said were settled, such as the ordination of women, he was quick to pull the plug. I do not think he understood fully how counterproductive some of the church's heavy-handed tactics were, and even if he understood, I suspect he would not have acted differently. He obviously felt it was his obligation to apply centripetal force within Catholic theology after decades of centrifugal forces unleashed by the council. Put differently, in the Creed, when we say "one, holy, catholic and apostolic church," Benedict had a very clear idea about the importance of the first adjective, "one," and if he felt someone was straying beyond what Catholic orthodoxy permitted, he lowered the boom.

This concern for unity was evidenced in other aspects of his teachings. In his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, he was clear that the social justice teachings of the church and the teachings about sexual morality flowed from a single source and, in his mind, were irrevocably bound together. As I mentioned in my article at *The New Republic* yesterday, the fact that the pope was as devoted to social justice issues as he was to issues of sexual morality has been somewhat opaque in the U.S. because so many of his loudest supporters in the U.S. tended not to mention his commitment to social justice or minimized the radicalness of the demands he made in that regard. Catholic neo-cons dismissed his call for a conversion of Western lifestyles, his commitment to environmental protection, his denunciation of "unregulated financial capitalism" as a threat to world peace, his abiding lament at growing income inequality, and because these neo-con voices claimed to be authoritative and because the mainstream media does not know any better, Benedict's rigorous critique of modern consumer, capitalist culture was underplayed. Whenever he spoke against gay marriage, however, the headlines of a reactionary pope could be found everywhere.

The Catholic left, unfortunately, let the Catholic right define the narrative of Benedict's reign. They, too, neglected the significance of his social teachings to focus on anything he said about sex or gender. More importantly, they failed to really wrestle with his challenge, to see all the issues the church addresses as bound together. Take this morning's *Washington Post*. There, George Weigel is quoted [1] as saying, "If you don't sell full-throttle Catholicism, people are not going to buy it. Everyone knows the whole package is more compelling and interesting than some sort of Catholic hors d'oeuvres that leave you hungry." This from the man who advised using red and gold pens to mark up *Caritas in Veritate*, ignoring the parts Weigel thought were not really from the pope's hand. This from the man who can cite one paragraph, and one paragraph only, from John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus* but never once has evidenced his compliance with, nor appreciation for, the call to a conversion of Western lifestyles contained in that same encyclical, nor its restatement of the church's commitment to the rights of workers, nor those sections that question the very ethical and anthropological foundations of capitalism. I agree with Weigel about the need for "full-throttle Catholicism," though I find his use of the verb "sell" telling. I just wish Weigel and other Catholic neo-cons actually engaged the full breadth of the church's teachings instead of trying to distort and minimize those teachings about economic and social justice they disdain.

The most difficult part of Pope Benedict's agenda for me to understand had to do with liturgy. Keep in mind, I usually attend a Novus Ordo Latin Mass on Sundays: I am not unsympathetic with the desire for more traditional services. But, the return of baroque vestments at the papal altar, and the practice of having communicants kneel before the pope to receive the Eucharist: These played out in bizarre ways. The message sent by the practice of communicants kneeling before the pope to receive the Eucharist while everyone else in St. Peter's Square had to climb over their neighbors to receive the sacrament standing, sent the message that if you took communion from the pope's hands, you needed to be kneeling, but for everybody else, it was fine to receive the body and blood of Christ amidst chaos and standing. I will not comment on the vestments he has donned the last few years, but I hope his successor returns to more modest attire. The last few weeks, while

dealing with doggie rehab, I have been going to Mass in English at the parish near my house, and I must say that I like some of the new translations, but others make me wonder how they could have spent so long on a translation project and come up with texts that are often clunky.

One of the principal complaints within the walls of the Vatican has been that Benedict did not make the trains run on time. Clearly he played to his strengths, devoting time and energy to his speeches and other writings. He surrounded himself with people he could trust, and after some of the sordid characters that surrounded John Paul II, it was at least refreshing to know that Benedict was surrounded by men of probity. He exiled from papal favor men like Fr. Maciel whose behavior was criminal. It is a shame no one emerged with acute managerial sensibilities, and this must be addressed by the next pope.

Benedict XVI was not only surrounded by powerful, trusted men: It is one of the least remarked facts of this papacy that the pope lived with a group of laywomen who belonged to the Communione e Liberazione group Memores. A couple of years ago, one of the women was struck by a car on her way back from work, and the media seemed not to notice that she worked in an office -- if memory serves, at a bank. Three of the four women who share the papal apartments have regular day jobs. They live with the pope, eat with him, pray with him. This seems to me remarkable and, in its way, as unprecedented as his resignation.

Each day of Benedict's papacy, I have felt a great deal of gratitude for the fact that, whether I agreed with him on this policy or that, the church was blessed to have at the pinnacle of its hierarchy the man who is perhaps the most literate, cultured, learned man in public life today. If Lionel Trilling was correct that there is moral obligation to be intelligent, and I think he was, Benedict hit that moral requirement out of the ballpark. His three-volume trilogy on Jesus of Nazareth may be the most accessible yet profound theological reflection of recent years by anyone anywhere. I have a soft spot for popes like John XXIII who were schooled in church history as well as theology, but it has been an undoubted blessing for the church to have Benedict in the Chair of Peter. True, the Chair of Peter is not a faculty chair, and the Roman church must find better ways of dealing with its own theologians. But, there are not many theologians who can hold a candle to Joseph Ratzinger. His trilogy of books on Jesus not only invite one to engage the issues intellectually, but they inspire a more profound love for the Savior.

I confess that on the day of his election in 2005, I was worried. On Feb. 28, he will abdicate the office in which he has surprised many of us. The next day, when we go to Mass and the priest does not mention him in the canon, I will miss the reference to "Benedict, our pope." I will miss it long after there is a successor. My dread in 2005 was misplaced. I have come not only to love this pope, but to let his teachings challenge and change me. I am a better Catholic today, and a happier person, because of him. In some of his writings, I felt he was speaking directly to me. Benedict walks into whatever time is left to him and into the historical annals as a good man and a fine pope who directed the church in important ways to remember that what really, really matters in the life of faith is not any ambitious program of human accomplishment, but the ongoing need of Catholics to surrender themselves to the will and the mercy of God. The Christocentric focus of the council has been the focus of Raztinger's entire theological life and the defining characteristic of his papacy. He has sought to impart that vision to the rest of us. Shame on us is we did not notice. Blessings on him for making the attempt.

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