

Vargas Llosa in English

Michael Sean Winters | Mar. 7, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

A reader, Oswald Sobrino, generously took me up on my request that someone translate the essay I linked to yesterday by Mario Vargas Llosa on Pope Benedict. My views of the now Pope-Emeritus are less sullen than the great poet's, but I think he captures the essence of Benedict in a way few Catholics have, and why Benedict's writings pose a challenge not just to Catholics but to the entire culture of the West. Thank you Mr. Sobrino for so generously translating the article and sending it on so I can publish it here.

? The Man Who Disturbs?

by Mario Vargas Llosa

I do not know why the abdication of Benedict XVI has been such a surprise; although exceptional, it was not unforeseen. It was enough to look at him, fragile and as if lost in the midst of those crowds in which he was obligated to submerge himself, making superhuman efforts in order to play the protagonist in those spectacles obviously foreign to his temperament and calling. So different from his predecessor, John Paul II, who navigated like a fish in the water among the masses of believers and onlookers that the Pope attracts in all his appearances, Benedict XVI would appear completely alien to those extroverted events that today make up the required duties of a pontiff. In this way, we can understand better his reluctance to accept the chair of St. Peter that was imposed on him eight years ago and to which, as we know now, he never aspired. The only ones who abandon absolute power with the ease with which he has just done it are those rarities who, instead of coveting power, disdain power.

He was not a charismatic man nor a man of the stage, as Karol Wojtyla, the Polish Pope. He was a man of the library and of the lecture hall, of reflection and study, surely one of the most intelligent and cultured popes that the Catholic Church has had in all her history. In an age when ideas and reasons matter much less than images and gestures, Joseph Ratzinger was already an anachronism, since he belonged to what is an especially conspicuous species on the way to extinction: the intellectual. He thought with depth and originality, based on his enormous theological, philosophical, historical, and literary knowledge, gained in the many classical and modern languages that he had mastered, among them Latin, Greek, and Hebrew.

Although his books were always conceived within the bounds of Christian orthodoxy?but with a very broad horizon, his books and encyclicals often went beyond the strictly dogmatic and contained novel and bold insights concerning moral, cultural, and existential problems of our time that non-believing readers could read fruitfully and often?this has happened to me?with some discomfort. His three volumes dedicated to Jesus of Nazareth, his small autobiography and his three encyclicals?especially the second one, *Spe Salvi*, of 2007, devoted to the twofold nature of a science that can extraordinarily enrich human life but can also destroy and degrade it?contain a dialectical vigor and an expositive elegance that stand out sharply among conventional and redundant texts, written by the convinced, that the Vatican has customarily produced, for a long time now.

To Benedict XVI has fallen one of the most difficult periods that Christianity has ever faced in its more than two thousand year history. The secularization of society advances with great speed, especially in the West., the

citadel of the Church until relatively recently. This process has been aggravated by the great scandals of pedophilia in which hundreds of Catholic priests have been enmeshed and whom part of the hierarchy protected or tried to ignore, scandals which continue to be exposed everywhere, just as the accusations of money laundering and of corruption that affect the Vatican bank.

The theft of documents committed by Paolo Gabriele, the Pope's own butler and trusted aide, brought to light the pitiless struggles, the intrigues, and the disturbing entanglements of factions and dignitaries, in the heart of the Roman Curia, at odds for reasons of power. No one can deny that Benedict XVI tried to respond to these enormous rivalries with courage and decisiveness, although without success. He failed in all his efforts, because culture and intelligence are not sufficient to navigate the labyrinth of earthly politics and to confront the machiavellianism of the special interests and of fanatical forces in the heart of the Church, another of those lessons that has come to light in these eight years of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, whom, with justice, *L'Osservatore Romano* described as "a shepherd among wolves."

But it must be noted that thanks to him the Rev. Marcial Maciel, the Mexican from a satanic rulebook, finally received an official punishment from the center of the Church and that the group founded by him, the Legion of Christ, was declared to be under reorganization—a group which until then had received embarrassing support at the highest level of the Vatican hierarchy. Benedict XVI was the first Pope to seek pardon for sexual abuses in schools and in Catholic seminaries, to meet with groups of victims, and in convening the first ecclesial conference devoted to receiving the testimony of those molested and to establishing norms and regulations that will avoid future repetition of such evils. But it is also certain that none of this has been enough to erase the disgrace brought to the institution, given that constantly disquieting signals keep surfacing that, in spite of those directives issued by him, in many places, the efforts of Church authorities lean more toward protecting or denying the crimes of pedophilia than in being committed to denouncing and punishing them.

Likewise the efforts of Benedict XVI to put an end to allegations of money laundering and illegal transactions in the Vatican Bank do not appear to have had much success. The expulsion of the president of the institution, Ettore Gotti Tedeschi, close to Opus Dei and protected by Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, for reasons of irregularities, an expulsion promoted by the Pope, as was the appointment of a replacement, the Baron Ernst von Freyberg, happened too late to stop ongoing judicial processes and police investigations, apparently related to illegal commercial activities and transactions which reached astronomical quantities of money, an affair that can only continue to erode the public image of the Church and confirming that in its very heart the wordly prevails at times over the spiritual and does so in the most ignoble sense of the term.

Joseph Ratzinger had belonged to the most progressive sector of the Church during the Second Vatican Council, in which he was the advisor of Cardinal Frings and where he defended the necessity for an "open debate" on all themes, but later he found himself siding more and more with the conservative wing, and as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (the old Inquisition), he was a determined adversary of the Theology of Liberation and of all concessions in matters such as the ordination of women, abortion, homosexual marriage and, including the use of condoms which, at one point in the past, he had come to consider allowable.

His ideas, aligned with the most conservative wing, made him an anachronism within the anachronism which the Church has become. But his reasons were neither unthinking or superficial and those of us who reject them have to try to understand them, as improvised as they may seem to us. He was convinced that if the Catholic Church began to open herself to the reforms of modernity, her disintegration was irreversible and, instead of embracing its era, she would enter a process of anarchy and of internal dislocations capable of transforming her into an archipelago of factions hostile to each other, something like those evangelical churches, some circus-like, with which Catholicism competes more and more—and without much success—in the most deprived and marginal sectors of the Third World. The only way to prevent, in his judgment, that the very rich intellectual, theological, and artistic patrimony produced by Christianity be shattered in revisionist turmoil and in a circus of

ideological disputes, was by preserving the common denominator of tradition and dogma, even if this meant that the Catholic family would diminish in size and would be marginalized more and more in a world devastated by materialism, by greed, and by moral relativism.

To judge to what degree Benedict XVI was correct or not in this matter is a task that clearly belongs to Catholics only. But we non-believers would act badly to celebrate as a victory of progress and of freedom the failure of Joseph Ratzinger on the throne of St. Peter. He not only represented the conservative tradition of the Church, but also her best legacy: that of the high and revolutionary classical and Renaissance culture that, let us not forget, the Church preserved and spread by means of her monasteries, libraries, and seminaries, that culture that impregnated the entire world with ideas, forms, and customs that ended slavery and, departing some distance from Rome, made possible the notions of equality, solidarity, human rights, liberty, democracy and decisively drove the development of thought, of art, of letters, and contributed to ending barbarism and to advancing civilization.

The decadence and intellectual mediocrity of the Church has highlighted the solitary presence of Benedict XVI; and the sensation of powerlessness that seems to have surrounded him in these last years is, without a doubt, a fundamental factor in his resignation and that disquieting glimpse of how bitter our epoch is toward all that represents spiritual life, preoccupation with ethical values, and a vocation for culture and ideas.

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