Being Benedict: The pope's first year

by Jason Byassee in the April 18, 2006 issue

Late in his life, Karl Barth invited a young Catholic theologian to join his theology seminar. Frederick Lawrence, one of the students in the seminar, remembers the visitor as a “handsome young priest with graying hair, of medium build and slender stature,” who spoke with such skill that Barth pronounced his performance “outstanding.” Barth had one reservation: his guest too often used the construction “on the one hand . . . and on the other hand” when a simple decisive pronouncement would have been in order.

Few people since then have accused Barth’s guest, Joseph Ratzinger, of speaking with excessive moderation. His rigorous enforcement of theological orthodoxy in the Roman Catholic Church earned Ratzinger such informal titles as “the panzer cardinal” and “God’s rottweiler.” Upon Ratzinger’s election as Pope Benedict XVI, liberal Catholics in the U.S. and Europe feared a return to the Dark Ages.

But now, a year into Benedict’s pontificate, the world has had more glimpses of that measured priest. One of his first gestures as pope was to invite a longtime theological nemesis, Hans Küng, who had been censured by the Vatican for his liberal stances, for a day of friendly conversation. Benedict appointed a moderate, William Levada, to be his successor as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The appointment angered Catholic conservatives more than liberals, because the former archbishop of San Francisco was perceived to be wishy-washy in dealing with homosexuality.

Benedict’s first encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, is also distinctly moderate. Who could object to a discourse titled “God Is Love”? In *Caritas* Benedict criticizes modern Western sexual practices for unduly elevating *eros*, or sexual desire, at the expense of *agape*, the love of God. But he also acknowledges that the church in the past has spoken too negatively about sexual desire. The proper response to this failure, he says, is not to elevate the body and eliminate *agape* but rather to see the person as a psychosomatic whole for whom *eros* and *agape* are inseparable. Benedict brilliantly incorporates the criticism of the church and then corrects it theologically.

The second half of the document, apparently begun by John Paul II and left unfinished at his death, warns that Catholic charities must see themselves as part of the church's expression of love, not merely as one more benevolent organization trying to do good in the world. Catholic charitable activity, it insists, is not "a means of changing the world ideologically . . . . [but] a way of making present here and now the love which man always needs." Such charity is not separate from the Spirit's outpouring of love in the church or the church's mission to bear the love of God into the world.

Benedict's moderate tone has not calmed the fears of his critics. They sense that behind his explorations of love in the scriptures and church tradition, the pope is trying to forestall a church conversation about issues of gender and homosexuality. And they see the exhortation to Catholic charities as a preemptive strike against Catholic organizations that would promote condom distribution as part of the fight against AIDS in Africa.

For those who want to know the mind of this pope, a significant paper trail can be followed. The most accessible entry point is the three-volume collection of interviews he gave to journalists during the past 20 years. *The Ratzinger Report* (1984), the first and most famous of the volumes, deals with contentious political matters. In the second volume, *Salt of the Earth*, Ratzinger articulates his vision of a smaller, more faithful Catholic Church standing against a world staunchly opposed to faith. He imagines a church that is more akin to the faithful remnant described in prophetic biblical literature than to the church militant of most of the last two millennia. The final book in the series, *God and the World*, covers basic theological topics.

In these conversations, Ratzinger comes across as wise and gracious. His descriptions of Christian faith are cogent, concise and appealing. Ratzinger is quite aware of the failures of the Catholic Church. He tells the story about Napoleon's call for the church's destruction, to which a cardinal retorted: "But not even we have managed that!" When a journalist asks whether Catholics should be proud of being the "most universal, historically significant and successful church in the world," Ratzinger answers with an emphatic no. Any such success is a gift of grace, and not a source of arrogance or presumption. Besides, "the Lord has given a great deal of life to other churches and communities."

Nevertheless, it's clear that for Ratzinger the failures of the church do not stain its holiness. The church as an institution cannot be guilty of sin. It is the dispenser of God's grace, the sacramental source of all holiness. Protestants may dismiss or even mock their churches for their failures, but such a stance is not possible for Ratzinger. His is the church that Paul envisions in the New Testament epistles—the bride of a bridegroom who is so great as to make her sparklingly bright, whatever her imperfections.

One clue to Ratzinger's makeup is his attachment to Augustine, the focus of one of his doctoral dissertations. In the fourth century Augustine was a polemical defender of the church on issues of theology, culture and politics. Like Augustine, Ratzinger rigorously asserts that Christianity tells the truth about God, humanity and the world, and he judges other claims to be false. Therefore, he sees Christianity as at odds with, for example, nationalistic visions of the role of religion (Ratzinger clearly has the Nazis in mind), and he opposes the claim that all religions tell the same truth in different ways. Yet Christianity does allow the best insights of reason and philosophical speculation to be heard as it seeks to apprehend the divine. The church also recognizes that God has preceded our attempts to ascend to the divine by descending to earth in the incarnation. Christianity opposes nationalism and relativism, and seeks to reconcile faith and reason.

Ratzinger is clearly aware of developments in Protestant theology. He makes use of German Protestant debates about the historical Jesus, arguing that Barth's view of scripture offers a proper *via media* between Adolf von Harnack's radical historicism and Rudolf Bultmann's gnostic tendencies. He often draws on Barth's doctrine of election. He occasionally turns to Martin Luther when he insists on the church's antagonistic stance toward the world or warns of the limits of reason. As an Augustinian, he resists the rigid Thomism of the pre–Vatican II church. Even when Ratzinger uses more conventional Catholic sources—as he did with his second dissertation, on Bonaventure—he can come up with unconventional views. For example, he argues against Bonaventures's excessively high doctrine of the papacy. All this makes him, or should make him, an ideal dialogue partner for Protestant theologians.

Ratzinger's engagement with culture and other religions can be stirring. His work on the sacraments describes the beauty of the liturgy that drew him to seek ordination and that sustains him today. He is skittish about pronouncing eternal damnation on those who reject faith. He claims in several places that the church's only convincing

evangelism is the beauty of its art and the holiness of its saints. He even departs from his vaunted Augustinianism in places to insist that the church has always embraced God's gift of freedom and rejected an ardent determinism. When confronted by a rival theological view held by an earnest opponent, Ratzinger often humbly replies, "If I thought that, I could not say the creed."

Only occasionally in his writings does Ratzinger's famous theological rigidity surface. But it does surface. For example, when he attacks the "dictatorship of relativism," he seems to assume that relativists make up a sort of united front that can be effectively hit by such a rhetorical blast.

His remarks on women's ordination are also unsatisfying. Ratzinger maintains that men and women are different but "complementary." Their difference is such that women are unfit for ordination, as shown by Christ's choice of male disciples. As Ratzinger sees it, an acknowledgment of difference is not sexism but a recognition of biological reality. To view things otherwise is to trivialize gender difference and denigrate women's vocations of virginity or motherhood. He goes on to worry about the problem of women holding jobs once reserved for men, such as in manufacturing or military service, and calls this trend a violation of women's inherently nurturing, "interior" nature. In reading such passages, it is hard to know whether they reflect theological conviction or simply rehashed prejudice.

Protestant theologian Wolfhart Pannenberg once said in an interview that Ratzinger sees in the push for women's ordination only a militant feminism spearheaded by lesbians. Ratzinger does not address the Protestant argument that baptism is Christians' entry into a kingdom in which gender difference no longer involves one "ruling over" the other, as in the curse of Genesis 3, but reflects the egalitarian relationship envisioned in Galatians 3, in which Jew and gentile, slave and free, male and female have equal pride of place.

One can read Ratzinger with profit for hundreds of pages, but then suddenly find him carelessly dismissing opponents with what he takes to be a vigorous assertion of Catholic truth, but which is actually a caricature of his opponents. In these cases, disagreement seems to be a badge of authenticity for Ratzinger—an example of the church standing in opposition to the world, ignoring public ridicule and walking the lonely way of the cross.

This response is evident also in Ratzinger's remarks on liberation theology, which was curtailed in Latin America in the 1980s largely through Ratzinger's own work as the Vatican's chief enforcer of doctrine. For Ratzinger, liberation theology loads traditional Christian words such as *poor*, *rich* and *kingdom* with illicit sociopolitical meanings. Ratzinger worries that such meanings are simply Marxist in character. In the student uprisings of 1968, crowds in Germany chanted, "Christ be accursed!" and university classes were interrupted by protests—events that clearly had a powerful impact on Ratzinger. He accuses liberationists of "reading too much German theology"—that is, of importing intellectual movements that were detrimental in Europe and now claim to have found authentic Third World and grassroots forms of Christian thought and practice. For Ratzinger, a "preferential option for the poor" that substitutes European Marxism for genuine Latin American Catholicism does no good for the poor. The orthodox faith of the poor is what really sustains them. Ratzinger sees liberation theology as a faith that makes claims to a kingdom attainable only by violent revolution.

Catholic theologian Nicholas Lash once accused Ratzinger of inventing a form of liberation theology in order to attack it. Ratzinger should at least know that there is more to the liberationist movement than simple advocacy of Marxist revolution. Even those who do not embrace liberation theology can learn from the movement about neglected portions of the biblical and theological heritage.

In *Truth and Tolerance*: *Christian Belief and World Religions* (2004), Ratzinger treats liberation theology, John Hick's universalism, Asian religions, New Age thought, pragmatism and Kantian philosophy as one and the same theological mistake. Lash once described these moments of critique in Ratzinger as an "accumulation of disapproving epithets." The proud trumpeting of the "white hats" and the exclusion of "black hats" suggests a brittleness in Ratzinger's manner of defending truth. Though Ratzinger says there is a wide area of legitimate diversity within the church—between Dominican and Franciscan views of grace, for example—at other times he seems intent on either ignoring differences or smashing them.

Ratzinger's disavowal of sin on the part of the corporate church also seems too easy a response. It may have led to his early description of the clergy sexual-abuse scandal in the U.S. as largely a media invention. (More recent remarks on this issue have indicated greater concern.)

Ratzinger is also given to simplistic descriptions of history. For him, the Catholic Church was a heroic opponent of Nazism in Germany and was responsible for following up the colonial invasion of the Americas with an evangelistic effort marked by compassion. Both descriptions are naive and suggest that he has not really absorbed the dark side of the church's history.

Pope Benedict is a world-class theologian. His work is rooted in the worshiping life of the church. His appeals to scripture and Augustine should make contact with a Protestant audience. He has said that without Protestants, the Roman communion is impoverished, and that every baptized believer, Catholic or not, is within the communion of the church, even if some are temporarily outside of the church's unity. All these factors are reason for Protestants to look for fruitful conversations with this pope.

A signal moment in every pontificate is the choice of the papal name. Ratzinger chose his in honor both of St. Benedict of Nursia's efforts as a monastic pioneer and of Pope Benedict XV's attempt to settle World War I peaceably. In *Truth and Tolerance* Ratzinger tells about a vision that St. Benedict had toward the end of his life. The old man, saying his prayers while looking out of his window at night, saw "something quite marvelous. . . . The whole world was held before his eyes, as if brought together in a single ray of sunshine." Pope Gregory the Great, who recounted and explained Benedict's vision, said, "If he . . . saw the whole world as one before him, then it was not that heaven and earth became narrower but the visionary's soul became so wide." We can hope for such widening of vision from this Benedict. A pope with theological views congenial to and partially shaped by Protestants would have been unimaginable a half-century ago. Perhaps he and all of us will be surprised by illumination through his papacy.