

Standing his ground

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [May 9, 2001](#) issue

*Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican's Enforcer of the Faith* by John L. Allen Jr.

John Allen wants a Catholic Church that is radically committed to the liberating impulses of the gospel. Joseph Ratzinger, he argues, is dedicated to expanding and consolidating the power of the Roman hierarchy. Cardinal Ratzinger represents the conservative, even repressive, aspects of John Paul II's papacy. But Allen's book, perhaps unwittingly, demonstrates that Ratzinger is seriously struggling to shape a faithful, enduring church that can withstand the assaults of contemporary culture. Allen's Ratzinger may help Catholics and Protestants alike ask better questions about their churches and their lives of faith even if they agree with Allen's critique.

Allen, Vatican reporter for the *National Catholic Reporter*, reviews Ratzinger's humble beginnings in small-town Bavaria, his academic appointments at the universities of Tübingen (facilitated in part by Hans Küng) and Regensburg and his rapid rise to power in Rome as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Along the way, he documents Ratzinger's attacks on Küng and other Catholic theologians such as Leonardo Boff and Charles Curran. As a young, progressive Catholic, Allen wants to account for Ratzinger's defection from liberalism and Vatican II; he also wants to understand what makes Ratzinger such a formidable figure today.

While Allen's style is journalistic, he is sensitive to theological questions. He ultimately finds the key to Ratzinger's writings and policies in his ecclesiology. Ratzinger believes that the church is a transcendent, divine reality that constitutes itself on earth, especially as believers participate in the sacraments. Christians do not create the church; the church creates them. It invites them to be taken up into the life of God, and it guides them into true relationship with each other (*communio*).

For this reason believers must submit to the church and to its authoritative teachings. The church embodies a wisdom greater than that of any particular time or place. As Allen explains, in Ratzinger's view "it is the function of the magisterium to

uphold the testimony of every generation of believers over against the tyranny of the present."

Ratzinger has resisted the tendency of some Western church circles to define theology primarily as a university discipline. Theology belongs to the church. Theologians do not simply investigate intellectual questions that they happen to find interesting; they explicate the church's faith. His critics accuse Ratzinger of repressive censorship. But Ratzinger thinks that the magisterium helps theologians to be more disciplined. It keeps them focused on their true vocation of supporting the faith of simple believers and of making a credible witness to a nonbelieving world.

Doctrine must also discipline practice. Ratzinger is concerned that much contemporary Christian ethics derives from a Kantian skepticism about our ability to know objective truths. Such a system of ethics judges ideas not by their correspondence to God's will but by whether they contribute to advancing particular human notions of justice or peace. To Ratzinger, such a stance denies God's place in the world and leaves us with nothing more than multiple human interests, all vying for hegemony. We will inevitably succumb to one or another form of human totalitarianism, he believes, unless we regain the conviction that there is an objective, divinely established order of reality to which we must conform our lives.

Ratzinger's ecclesiology is closely related to his eschatology. He fears that liberal theologies ultimately reduce the kingdom of God to a this-worldly social and political program. They equate the freedom of the gospel with human notions of self-determination. Sin becomes a social, structural problem rather than a condition of the soul. Ratzinger argues for an individual salvation beyond this world. Though this vision of eschatological salvation has implications for Christian social thought here and now, the latter cannot replace it.

Ratzinger's opposition to liberation theology, feminism, the sexual revolution and theologies of religious pluralism springs from his conviction that they disregard certain "givens" established by God. If God has created us, we are not free to create ourselves. If God has called us to know Christ, other religions, while deserving of respect, do not relieve us of the responsibility to preach the gospel. The church need not fear pluralism, since a genuine pluralism illuminates the church's core principles; it does not overthrow them.

The church's power rests not in its ability to make common cause with the world but to offer the world an alternative way of life. Allen contrasts Ratzinger's Augustinianism with the French neo-Thomism of Vatican II's *Gaudium et spes* (Constitution on the Church in the Modern World). Whereas the latter looks for the activity of God's grace and salvation in the signs of the time, Ratzinger insists that the church must guard against a fallen world's corrosive influences.

Allen notes that this theme has pervaded Ratzinger's life and work from the beginning. Ratzinger may have grown more conservative over time, but he has always sensed a deep tension between the church and the world. Growing up during the Hitler years, Ratzinger remembers how Catholics survived only by hunkering down and defending the faith. His interest in Luther has played an important role in his thought, as has his horror at the excesses of the student revolts, which he experienced in Tübingen in 1968. Ratzinger wants a church that can stand fast, that does not depend on the world's approval. The church must know and act in accordance with the truth that God has given it. If the church is to make a faithful witness to the world, it must first attend to its own life.

Allen may not be aware of just how much mainline Protestants, who have no magisterium, need to grapple with these questions. We fight about church doctrine and practice but are not always sure that anyone's eternal salvation is at stake. We have a conception of the church as the body of Christ, but mostly we act as though the future of the church is ours to contend for. We pick and choose where we will be in tension with the world. Whether conservative or liberal, we cannot really imagine submitting ourselves to the church. We can only imagine trying to control it.

Yet we also sense that our life together is not fully faithful. Ratzinger forces us to ask whether we can really live disciplined Christian lives unless the church has meaningful ways to exercise discipline; whether we have the right to modify the traditional language and practice of Christian faith if we have not delved into the depths of wisdom that may lie behind them; whether we have any business doing theology unless we believe that God has revealed a truth to us from beyond ourselves, to which we must conform our lives.

While acknowledging a grain of truth in Ratzinger's concerns, Allen concludes that those concerns have "contributed to making the world a more fractured, and therefore a more dangerous, place." But it seems equally possible that the world is a more dangerous place if we do not take Ratzinger's questions seriously. Ratzinger

teaches us that we should be much more troubled than we are about the idolatries of contemporary consumer culture, which assure us that we really are self-made men and women, and that self-assertion and grasping after power are finally what life is all about.

Perhaps the trouble with Ratzinger's thinking lies not in its strong conviction that the world is fallen but in its failure to acknowledge just how fallen the church is. The way to God and God's truth becomes less clear to us when we are aware of just how easily we can pervert the church's theology and authority for our own sinful purposes. It is not enough to appeal to an invisible church behind the visible, a divine reality behind the earthly. We must ask how we can avoid confusing the ways of God with our own.

Allen argues that the election of a new pope will serve as a referendum on the theology and policies of Ratzinger. The Catholic Church must decide whether to embrace the openness to reform and to the world that characterized Vatican II or to remain on the defensive. Mainline Protestants will not be involved in that decision. But they have reason to hope that Ratzinger's legacy will not be wholly lost.