

When in Rome: Hopes for Benedict XVI

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

It was fascinating to be in Rome on the day Pope John Paul II died and to be in Italy as the College of Cardinals elected Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to be the new head of the Roman Catholic Church.

I used the occasion to meet with a good friend, Father John Radano, an American on the staff of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity. Father Radano and I became acquainted when I visited the Vatican as a representative of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and when I took part in a series of Presbyterian-Catholic dialogues. He is a distinguished scholar and an experienced church diplomat. We had a good conversation and dinner at one of his favorite restaurants near St. Peter's. I was impressed again with how seriously the Vatican takes ecumenical and interfaith relationships and how far the Catholic Church has come since the papacy of John XXIII.

It is always stunning, of course, for an American Protestant to visit St. Peter's and take in Michelangelo's dome, his heroic Sistine Chapel and his *Pietà*; Bernini's columns reaching out like a mother's arms to embrace the world; and the bright colors of robes, banners, flags and uniforms, accented against the gray white massiveness of the basilica. One can't help being struck by the historical impact of the Vatican. The surroundings tell you: this is an important enterprise. The scene also evokes from me a quiet prayer of thanksgiving for Martin Luther and John Calvin, who inspired an alternative way of thinking about church and whose heirs are responsible for sustaining a respectful, honest tension with Rome and our Roman Catholic friends.

Protestants my age can recall what seemed to be the cold, distant person of Pius XII. Those who know history have very serious concerns about his role during World War II. We can also recall the euphoria we experienced when John XXIII opened the windows of the church and allowed the winds of the spirit to blow. Many of us had

mixed feelings about John Paul II. There was much to like about the man: his energy, wit and courage, and the way his pastoral presence touched millions of people, from dock workers in Poland to politicians to children and families around the world. In his dying he gave a courageous witness, living out his sense of God's call to his last breath.

He apologized to Judaism for anti-Semitism—something my own church has yet to do. He prayed at the Western Wall. He told President Bush that he didn't agree with the U.S. invasion of Iraq. During his papacy the church talked to ecumenical partners and representatives of other faiths.

At the same time, John Paul II held the line on many of the issues that separate Catholics and Protestants: birth control; the use of condoms to prevent disease and AIDS; the role of women; clerical celibacy. He treated clergy sexual abuse of children as if it were an American problem and rewarded Cardinal Bernard Law—who overlooked abuse and reassigned abusing priests in Boston—with a soft job and comfortable apartment in Rome.

Protestants are cautiously hopeful about Benedict XVI, who served as John Paul's theological righthand man as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. Many Protestant were stunned by the congregation's 2000 statement, *Dominus Iesus*. It reaffirmed the Catholic Church's view that there "exists a single church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the Successor of Peter," and it termed other church bodies to be "not churches in the proper sense." This sounded like a return to the spirit of pre-Vatican II Catholicism.

Several days before his election, Cardinal Ratzinger made a speech attacking the "dictatorship of relativism, liberalism, radical individualism and the creation of 'sects,'" a term the Vatican used to employ to describe Protestant churches. In his first public statement as Benedict XVI, however, he struck an altogether different note. He spoke about the importance of unity, not only among Roman Catholics, but with other Christian churches. He expressed respect and regard for other religions and used the word "dialogue" four times. Around Italy there was an almost audible sigh of relief as Benedict, who chose the name of the revered author of the Benedictine Rule—someone known more for pastoral listening than pontificating—distanced himself from his image as Catholicism's theological enforcer.

Benedict XVI has work to do. His church has a major leadership crisis. The shortage of priests in Europe and North America is a huge problem, and Catholics in those regions virtually ignore Catholic teaching on birth control and abortion. In Europe, few attend mass. The pope needs to respond faithfully and creatively to the 21st century. I hope he will find ways to do so other than returning to the past.

As I observed all of this I found myself thinking about one of the best friends I ever had, Father Bob McLaughlin, pastor of Holy Name Cathedral in Chicago. We worked together, enjoyed one another's company, shared a love for the Cubs, and brought our congregations together in mission and worship. After 9/11, on an occasion when we led a joint worship service and Bob preached from a Presbyterian pulpit, he said, "John, when we are together I feel the pain of our separation deeply." Bob died, unexpectedly, two months ago. My prayer is that something of his spirit will live in the papacy of Benedict XVI.