

March 8, 2013 by Thomas Sheehan

The Legacies of Benedict XVI



John XXIII was once asked how many people worked at the Vatican. “About half,” he responded. But these days the tiny city-state is working overtime as 115 cardinal electors gather in Rome to choose a successor to Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger), the first Roman pontiff to abdicate in 600 years. Benedict’s early retirement may well set an example for future popes and bishops: a graceful resignation when one is no longer able to rule effectively. In the present case, however, the pope leaves not in a blaze of glory but under a cloud of suspicion in a stormy and uncertain period in the Roman Catholic church.

The last 34 years of the papacy—the reigns of John Paul II and Benedict XVI—have been focused on a single overarching mission, that of “reforming the reform” of the Second Vatican Council—that is, rolling back the wave of liberalization and modernization put in motion by Pope John XXII. The Council that he called (1962-65) was attended by Father Ratzinger, who in his earlier incarnation (up until 1968), was known as a progressive theologian and a leading light in German Catholic academe.

But the Council rattled the cage of the more traditionally minded among the hierarchy and Vatican bureaucracy, and in the conservative John Paul II these recalcitrants found their new Moses-in-reverse who would lead them back to the Promised Land of traditional Catholicism.

In the early 1980s, John Paul II tapped Ratzinger, who by then had become a very conservative theologian and archbishop, for the job of Vatican enforcer of orthodoxy. For the next 25 years he served as prefect of the all-powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he proved himself a zealous watchdog in matters of faith and morals.

In 1984, in a breathlessly alarmist document, he censured Latin American liberation theology for allegedly “translating Christianity into Marxist terms” and dissolving Christianity into “a purely earthly doctrine.” Ratzinger saw liberation theologians as dupes of Communism, and his document spoke of Marxism in the crude and simplistic fashion of Ronald Reagan and *Reader’s Digest*, as a monolithic and unchanging totalitarianism that mandates atheism and “the denial of the human person.”

Then in 1986 he fired Father Charles Curran, moral theologian from Catholic University of America, for his teaching on contraception and homosexuality. (The American Association of University Professors censured Catholic University over the Curran case.) More than 90 Catholic theologians, nuns, and priests were called on the Vatican carpet during Ratzinger’s long tenure at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—many of them silenced, some of them expelled from the clerical state, and still other excommunicated—for deviating from what Ratzinger deemed to be acceptable Catholic doctrine.

Of the now 115 cardinals who will vote on Benedict’s successor in the coming weeks, more than 50 percent have been appointed by Benedict himself, all of them of the same conservative stripe. Given this preemptive strike, the right-leaning direction of the new papacy is guaranteed regardless of whether the next pontiff comes from the northern or southern hemisphere.

But after three decades of tightly wrapped, top-down theological conservatism, the irony is that the last years have seen the wheels come flying off the church in general and the Vatican in particular. As scandal piled upon scandal during Benedict's eight-year reign, he has left behind him a trail of moral disaster, bureaucratic disarray, and theological revanchism.

No evaluation of his legacy can ignore the fact that Ratzinger's tenure at the Vatican, both before and after his election as pope, has been coterminous with one of the darkest moral periods in recent church history. The crimes of child rape committed by Catholic priests were well known to Ratzinger during his quarter century as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The question is: How much did he cover up? Less well known is the general disarray of the Vatican bureaucracy. The scholarly Benedict was never known as a diligent manager of the ecclesiastical warren made up of 35 congregations, tribunals, councils, institutes, commissions, and prefectures, collectively known as the "Curia."

But perhaps the lasting tragedy of Benedict's reign will be the opportunity he missed to engage an increasingly well-educated Catholic laity at a level that respects both their intellect and their social commitments in a largely secularized world.

Whereas the genius of the Catholic thinking of the 1950s and 1960s that led to the Second Vatican Council was the happy confluence of contemporary philosophy, modern theology, and cutting-edge scriptural research, Benedict's papacy renounced any interest in philosophy and fell back on the tried-and-true catechetics of a largely pre-Vatican-II theological pabulum. His trilogy of books entitled *Jesus of Nazareth*, while pious and inspirational, demonstrates no sophisticated understanding of the challenges that contemporary biblical research now poses to traditional, largely ahistorical formulations of Christian doctrine.

For example, Benedict maintains that Jesus not only claimed to be the messiah during his lifetime but also understood himself to be the divine son of God (i.e., "to participate in God's own nature"), something that no reputable Catholic scholar would hold today. His scripture scholarship is shaky as well. Benedict apparently takes the epistles to the Colossians and Ephesians to be genuine letters of St. Paul, even though scholars now

date them to decades after Paul's death. He also takes John's passion narrative to be a historically reliable account of the trial and death of Jesus ("he wants to set down what really happened"), and in the process attributes blame for Jesus' death sentence to Jewish Temple authorities.

Likewise Benedict's unrelenting war on what he calls "the culture of relativism," along with his circle-the-wagons approach to modern secularism, bespeaks his sense that Christians are "surrounded in a besieged city" and "can only wait for the arrival of the beloved who has the power to end the siege and to bring salvation."

Such sentiments reflect his antipathy to the liberating theological position of someone like his former colleague Karl Rahner, who viewed the natural, created order (the empirical, historical world) as already wrapped in God's redeeming grace. This latter view makes God the first "secular humanist," who at creation not only declares the world to be very good but also places human beings, both male and female equally, at its apex. No one who held to this view would teach that homosexuals are "objectively disordered" within God's creation, as Benedict has, or that women, precisely by not being male, are barred from the priesthood.

One had hoped that a pope with Benedict's scholarly background and intellectual heft might have generated a positive and inspiring theological ideal that could have led a renewed Catholic church into the 21st century. Instead, Benedict XVI leaves Catholicism in a defensive crouch. The legacy of his papacy will be not only the taint of moral infamy and administrative disarray, but something almost as bad: a failure of imagination.

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