

March Reflections

The resignation of Pope Benedict has produced a good deal of commentary on church scandals, hidden motivations and Vatican intrigue. In the midst of all the negative reports, it seems only fair to recall some of the positive accomplishments of Benedict during his eight year pontificate.

A gifted professional theologian, Benedict wrote three sophisticated encyclicals worthy of ongoing reflection. His 2006 *Deus Caritas Est* is a profound meditation on erotic love that challenges the cultural understanding of sex as an autonomous possession to be used as desire dictates. In 2008, he published *Spe Salvi*, a scholarly treatment of the virtue of hope that contains valuable perspectives and insights on finding meaning in the midst of suffering. His 2009 encyclical, *Caritas in Veritate*, makes important contributions to modern Catholic social teaching, including a radical call for “a true world political authority” with “real teeth” that would exercise oversight of the world’s financial markets, and a compelling case for a constructive response to the ecological crisis, which, along with his other writings on the environment, earned him the title of “the green pope.”

In the spring of 2008, Pope Benedict made a very successful six-day pastoral visit to the United States, impressing many with his kindness and candor. In an emotional meeting with sex abuse victims he demonstrated great compassion and offered a sincere apology that was well received. He visited a Jewish synagogue and met with survivors of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attack, symbolic acts that suggested his understanding of American politics and culture. In his speech to the UN General Assembly, he treated the question of religious liberty that sounded like a welcomed endorsement of our treasured First Amendment rights. At the end of Benedict’s visit, one commentator observed that “Americans fell head over heels in love with the pope.”

Some theologians have argued that Benedict’s most significant act was his resignation from the Petrine office. The last pope to do so was Celestine V, who served as bishop of Rome for less than four months. A simple, uneducated monk, who was elected as pope at the age of 85 to fill a 27 month vacancy, Celestine had the good sense to realize he was not up to the job and was being used for political purposes. With the help of a canon lawyer, he prepared a statement of resignation and read it before the full consistory on December 13, 1294. After such a long period, Benedict’s resignation came as a shock, even to Vatican insiders. It has had the effect of demystifying the pope and the papacy that has, at least in the popular view, floated above real life as we know it. It is now clearer that popes are human beings with strengths and weaknesses, not representatives of God preserved from the doubts and ambiguities of human existence. The papal ministry is supported and guided by the Spirit, as are all church ministries; but it is carried out in a political context characterized today by factions, intrigue and power-seeking, as Benedict himself has noted. The resignation reminds us that the papacy is historically conditioned and could function in different ways in the future: for example, a pope could get guidance from regular meetings with a World Synod of Bishops that actually operates on a collegial basis, as Vatican II intended. Furthermore, it is possible that the pope’s decision will foster discussion on other supposedly closed issues, such as optional celibacy for priests and expanded roles for women. At any rate, Benedict’s courageous and humble decision to resign will be an important part of his positive legacy.

On the other side of the ledger, Pope Benedict has been subject to a variety of criticisms, such as failing to reform the Vatican Curia and not doing more to handle the sex abuse crisis. John Allen, the National Catholic Reporter correspondent in Rome, once described Benedict as a gifted and articulate communicator who could be “remarkably tone-deaf” to how his pronouncements would be heard by people who don’t fully understand his theological framework. One of the most glaring examples of this tone-deafness occurred in his lecture at the University of Regensburg in September, 2006, where he included a negative quote about Muhammad that offended Muslims around the world and was not essential to his thesis about the relationship between faith and reason. Another example occurred during his 2007 visit to Brazil when he said that the arrival of Christianity in the New World did not amount to “the imposition of a foreign culture” upon native people, a claim that angered Brazil’s indigenous populations. In his 2006 visit to Auschwitz, Benedict said that by killing Jews, the Nazis also attacked Christianity. The pope was arguing that the Nazi ideology denied God in order to justify their cruel use of power, but Jews heard it as an attempt to deny Christian complicity in the Holocaust. In all these cases, Benedict made his controversial point within his own theological framework, apparently without recognizing how it would be heard by others.

Perhaps the tone-deaf problem is one way of understanding the negative reaction of progressive Catholics in the United States to many developments during Josef Ratzinger's tenure as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and as Bishop of Rome. Catholics who experienced the liberating power of Vatican II tend to criticize Benedict in strong terms: he stifled the spirit of the Council; he led "the reform of the reform" movement; his decisions took us backward to the old days when there was a sharp distinction between priests and laity. The general feeling is that Benedict the pope did not hear us or appreciate our point of view.

Much of the criticism centers on liturgical changes. "We had a full church every month for general absolution, and then suddenly we couldn't do that any more." "I am a Eucharistic minister and it bothers me that the priest now has to hand me the chalice instead of me taking it off the altar." "A couple of my friends used to wash the sacred vessels after Mass, and now the priest or deacon has to do it—a small matter, I suppose, but it makes them feel unworthy." "The new translation of the Mass is terrible; I try very hard to pay attention to the Opening Prayer, but I seldom can follow the long sentences with so many clauses; I heard the Vatican pushed that translation on us and ignored the hard work done by the English-speaking bishops. I blame the pope for letting that happen." "Our deacon said the pope reinstated the old Latin Mass on an equal basis with the new liturgy; somehow this makes one think Benedict does not appreciate all the effort we put into making the new liturgy work."

A high school religion teacher has her own complaints: "I am angry that Pope Benedict put so much effort into reaching out to excommunicated traditionalist bishops who rejected fundamental teachings of Vatican II, while cracking down on loyal, progressive theologians like Jacques Dupuis and Peter Phan." An outspoken Catholic lawyer insists: "The Vatican attack on the nuns is outrageous. The sisters built the church in the United States and have sacrificed to serve those in need. They took seriously the Vatican II call for reform and have led the way in implementing the conciliar teaching. I have to assume that somehow the pope approved this unjust attack on some of the most committed and loyal members of our church." A priest near retirement says: "I am worn out swimming against the conservative tide coming out of the Vatican. I spent my whole priesthood working to implement the spirit of Vatican II. It seems the last two popes were constantly putting up roadblocks making my ministry more difficult." Considering all these complaints, it is easy to see why progressive Catholics considered Pope Benedict tone-deaf to their concerns, aspirations and struggles.

We can imagine that the whole situation looked quite different to Benedict, who had his own theological framework for interpreting the Council and its implementation. In 1965, Karl Rahner and Joseph Ratzinger collaborated on a book, *Revelation and Tradition*. Typically, Rahner concentrated on how to make the Christian understanding of revelation intelligible in the modern world, while Ratzinger dealt with the role of tradition in the development of revelation. At Vatican II, both were official theological experts and found themselves agreeing on many issues, but for very different reasons. Rahner was interested in updating Christian teachings in order to promote a mutually enriching dialogue with the modern world, while Ratzinger favored reforms that reflected the life of the early church and the teachings of the Church Fathers. Furthermore, Ratzinger tended to interpret the teachings of Vatican II in terms of continuity with the great tradition, while others, influenced by Rahner and other contemporary theologians, were more open to the discontinuity between the teachings of Vatican II and previous church doctrines, changes in religious liberty being a prime example. In broad terms, these differences produced two camps within the Catholic community: one, congenial to Pope Benedict, that wants to shore up traditional Catholic identity, and the other, home to progressive American Catholics, that favors on-going reforms in the church that make it a more effective leaven in society. From this perspective, it was inevitable that progressive Catholics would be disappointed in Benedict's project to strengthen Catholic identity in continuity with tradition. We could have hoped for a more finely tuned ear from Benedict and more understanding, tolerance, appreciation and dialogue from the Vatican, but essential differences remained in place and await further development in the ongoing reception of Vatican II. In the meantime, the resignation of Pope Benedict reminds progressive Catholics that the future shape of the church is not dependent solely on the next pope, but on the efforts of all the baptized, who are co-responsible for the church.