

"John Paul II and Benedict XVI"
 Week of October 4, 2010
 ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY
 By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

Pope Benedict XVI's much-touted state visit to Britain last month tracked closely with the 32nd anniversary of Pope John Paul II's election to the papacy, on October 16, 1978. The visit provided yet another opportunity to compare and contrast the personal and papal styles which the two men had fashioned over the years.

As the distinguished church historian Eamon Duffy put it in the *Irish Times* in early September, "John Paul II was manifestly a giant on the world stage, his life story one of titanic struggle against 20th century Europe's two great tyrannies, he himself a key player in the collapse of the Soviet empire."

"By contrast," Duffy continued, "Pope Benedict is an altogether smaller figure, a man of the sacristy and the lecture room."

Duffy considers Benedict as "probably more intelligent and certainly a better theologian" than John Paul II, and "shyer."

Unfortunately, the current pope is also more "maladroit and badly advised in his attempts to promote his views," with "poor antennae for the likely public perceptions of his actions and utterances."

Duffy cites three egregious examples: the talk in 2006 at Regensburg University that inflamed so much of Islam; his decision the next year, against the opposition of many, if not most, of the Church's bishops, to permit the use of the old unreformed Latin Mass without any episcopal approval; and "his disastrous though doubtless well-intentioned conciliatory gestures" toward the Holocaust-denying, Lefebvrist Bishop Richard Williamson, in 2009.

Even though the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in April 2005 "has not ushered in the era of ferocious reaction many feared," it has become increasingly clear where Pope Benedict's actual sympathies lie, namely, with those in the Vatican who wish to downplay the achievements of the Second Vatican Council and who wish at the same time to emphasize the council's continuity with the attitudes and ideas that dominated the pontificate of Pius XII in the 1940s and 1950s.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the religious high point of Benedict's recent visit to Britain would be the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, the famous 19th-century convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism.

Although, as Eamon Duffy has pointed out, labels can be deceptive, in terms of the inner politics of today's Catholic Church, Newman, in striking contrast to Pope Benedict, was a liberal. Indeed, his vision of a healthy Church was "in many respects the antithesis of Pope Benedict's."

To be sure, he was utterly loyal to the papacy, but he was also a vocal opponent of the definition of papal infallibility in 1870, which he regarded as unnecessary and a burden to consciences. He was at the same time a vigorous opponent of Ultramontanism, which sought to centralize Catholicism in Rome, that is, beyond the mountains (the Alps).

Cardinal Newman deplored clericalism (which Pope Benedict has rewarded through his appointments to, and promotions within, the hierarchy), worked hard to develop an educated and active laity (of which the pope's strongest allies have been deeply suspicious), and argued for greater freedom for theologians within the Church (which, again, finds little support in this pontificate).

It may seem strange to some readers of this column that, all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, our clear preference remains for the personal and papal style adopted by Benedict XVI rather than that of John Paul II.

Those who expected Joseph Ratzinger not only to carry forward the policies of his predecessor but also to expand them in a highly aggressive, even militant fashion, may have had their fondest hopes shattered.

At the same time, those who continue to regard the papacy of John Paul II as normative for every other pontificate, even to the point of referring to him now, without any official authorization at all, as "John Paul the Great," have sensed the air escaping from the balloon of initial enthusiasm when his eventual canonization seemed almost a certainty ("Santo Subito," the banners at his funeral proclaimed).

If the choice is between an "altogether smaller figure, a man of the sacristy and the lecture room," on the one hand, and that of "a giant on the world stage," on the other, the smaller, shyer figure wins every time.

Pope Benedict XVI has had more modest designs for the Church.

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"Young Catholic Theologians and Polarization in the Church"

Week of October 11, 2010

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

In mid-August a group of young theologians, under the age of 40, teaching at Catholic colleges, universities, and seminaries met at Fordham University in New York City to discover ways to overcome the polarization they find in today's Catholic Church.

Although the group did not draft a mission statement as such, it formulated a paragraph as a kind of self-description of their work on behalf of the Church:

"We are young Catholic theologians at colleges, universities or seminaries, who desire to shape our careers in ways that reduce polarization in the American Catholic church. Each of us came of age at some distance from the ideological debates of Vatican II and the immediate postconciliar era, and we believe that our Catholic generation has new opportunities to heal divisions in the body of Christ. We proceed with profound humility toward the previous generation's tilling of common ground, even as we hope to plant new seeds of faith and charity in our church. As Christians committed to the unity of the Holy Spirit, we approach our task with intellectual solidarity toward one another."

What does the Fordham group mean by the "ideological" character of the debates at Vatican II? Did those debates represent differences in theological and pastoral emphases, or were they reflective of radically different understandings of the nature, mission, and structural operations of the Church?

Were the debates, however characterized, carried on by two more or less evenly divided groups, or were we dealing instead with an overwhelming majority of bishops and theologians, on the one hand, and a relatively tiny minority of bishops and their theological allies, on the other?

One of the organizers of the Fordham group is a former student of mine at the University of Notre Dame, Charles Camosy, now an assistant professor of moral theology at Fordham. Camosy wrote that the controversy at last year's graduation ceremony at Notre Dame "helped spur the group's commitment to moving past the polarization that often afflicts internal Catholic discussions."

But how exactly were the disagreements about President Obama's invitation to address the graduates of Notre Dame examples of polarization in the Church? And how did these disagreements "spur the [Fordham] group's commitment to [move] past the polarization?" Camosy doesn't say.

Camosy did suggest, however, that the divisions within the Church were "widened and deepened" as a result of the controversy. Again, he doesn't say how.

He expressed admiration for graduating seniors who cheered President Obama, as well as for those who staged a separate ceremony in protest.

The impression may have been left, however, that both sides were about equal in size. Such was not the case.

The overwhelming majority of graduates were in the Joyce Athletic and Convocation Center. As soon as a few adults who had received tickets from anti-Obama students began to shout epithets at the President, the assembled student body, spontaneously and without any prompting, began chanting, "We are ND!" and continued doing so until the disrupters were removed from the building.

To be sure, the alternative ceremony held elsewhere on campus was conducted peacefully and with dignity, but it never consisted of more than a tiny minority of graduates and their supporters from outside the university.

If the Fordham group of young Catholic theologians were guilty of anything—beyond their evident good will—it may have been naivete.

They implied that an older generation of Catholic theologians may have been somehow responsible for the polarization in the Catholic Church by fomenting the so-called culture wars of the 1960s and 1970s "through which much of the council and its aftermath were read."

But the Fordham group's sense of history seems truncated. Have they forgotten that after Pope Paul VI, the man elected to the papacy was John Paul I, the Patriarch of Venice, and that he died after only 33 days in office?

Had John Paul I not died prematurely, we would never have had a John Paul II, who came into office with a clearly conceived plan to re-make the face of the hierarchy—a plan that involved the dismantling of much of what Paul VI tried to create, particularly a cadre of pastoral bishops committed to carrying out the reforms and renewal launched, under Paul VI's direction, by Vatican II.

Thus, if there is any single reason why polarization exists in the Catholic Church today it is because of the type of bishops whom John Paul II appointed and promoted within the hierarchy over the course of his 26 ½ years in office.

Any other explanation of the polarization that now afflicts the Church is simply naive.

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