

## The First Year of Benedict XVI

Let me set the scene for what follows. At roughly 6:00 pm Rome time on April 19, 2005, when 78-year-old Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected to the papacy as Benedict XVI, I was on the CNN set atop Rome's Urban College, charging into battle as a foot soldier in the vast army of pundits deployed to explain what the election meant for the Catholic Church and for the world.

Ironically, this mobilization seemed almost superfluous, since many felt it was an outcome that scarcely required comment. For almost 25 years, the name of Joseph Ratzinger had been linked to every significant controversy in Roman Catholicism, whether liberation theology, sexual ethics, religious pluralism, or the limits of theological dissent. The cardinal had become a lightning rod in Catholic debate, a symbol of courageous defense of the faith for some, of a pessimistic retreat on the promise of the Second Vatican Council for others. With regard to the election of Ratzinger, many felt, *res ipsa loquitur* ... the thing speaks for itself.

In characterizing the new pope, commentators thus fell back on familiar adjectives – tough, authoritarian, archconservative.

Probably the best expression of all this came in an editorial cartoon in *L'Unità*, the newspaper of the old Communist Party in Italy. To understand the cartoon, you'll need a bit of background. Still today in Italy, perhaps the most revered pope of modern times is John XXIII, known as *il papa buono*, "Good Pope John." One treasured memory of John XXIII is an evening in October 1962, the opening of the Second Vatican Council, when the Catholic Action movement organized a torchlight parade that finished in St.

Peter's Square. The pope was not scheduled to address the crowd, but when it arrived, John XXIII wanted to speak. He finished with a line burned into the consciousness of most Italians, repeated endlessly on television and radio. Smiling down on the crowd, he said: *Tornando a casa, troverete i bambini. Date una carezza ai vostri bambini e dite: questa è la carezza del Papa.* It means, "When you go home, you'll find your children. Give them a kiss, and tell them that this kiss comes from the pope." It summed up the legendary love of the man. Thus the *L'Unità* cartoon showed Benedict XVI at the same window saying, "Tonight, when you go home, I want you to give your children a spanking, and tell them that this spanking comes from the pope."

It perfectly crystallized the expectations many had of this allegedly draconian, Darth Vader figure.

I suppose it goes without saying that this was not quite the image of Joseph Ratzinger which led more than two-thirds of the 115 cardinals gathered in the Sistine Chapel to elect him pope. Nor, I would suggest, is it quite what the first year of his pontificate has offered, confirming some expectations but confounding others.

Tonight, I will briefly review the dynamics that led the College of Cardinals to turn to Joseph Ratzinger – what they saw in him and what they expected. Then we'll review his first year, to consider to what extent those electors' hopes have been realized, and what it tells us about where Benedict XVI wants to take the church.

### ***The Election***

John Paul II brought to a dazzling crescendo the renaissance of the modern papacy. No longer temporal potentates, the popes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century reinvented

themselves as a Prime Minister of the Human Conscience, the most important ethical and religious voice in public affairs. John Paul II exploited this bully pulpit as few have. One would have to go back to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries to find popes as consequential for their own times, and their influence was circumscribed to a handful of emerging kingdoms in Western Europe. John Paul was a lead player on a truly global stage.

His impact can be measured in many ways, but consider just for an instant those stunning events in Rome between April 2 at 9:37 pm local time, when John Paul died, and April 8, the date of his funeral Mass. Rome estimates that five to seven million people washed through the city, most joining those extraordinary rivers of humanity that poured down the *Via della Conciliazione* and surrounding streets, waiting around the clock in very chilly weather, up to 22 hours, for a few fleeting seconds in front of the body of the late pope. There was also the saturation coverage of John Paul's death in the global press, representing something akin to a two-week-long infomercial on behalf of Roman Catholicism. There was the diplomatic presence at the funeral Mass, including heads of state or government from more than 70 countries, the largest such gathering ever for a funeral. The Mass itself became the occasion for diplomatic breakthroughs. Israel's President Moshe Katsav, for example, greeted President Bashar Assad of Syria and then-President Mohammad Khatami of Iran, the first time leaders from those nations had ever exchanged a handshake; speaking on CNN, Archbishop Wilton Gregory called it John Paul's "first miracle." In a fitting tribute, former Presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton used the flight over on Air Force One to work out their plans for Tsunami relief.

All this by way of saying that John Paul *mattered* in a way few popes ever have, and the cardinals electing his successor knew it. They had to find someone who would

not be crushed by the weight of comparison. It would no longer be sufficient to elect a quiet, pastoral, kindly man as chief shepherd, a pope in the mold of John Paul I, Albino Luiciani of Venice, a humble and saintly figure who had traveled only once outside Italy, spoke only Italian comfortably, and was a political innocent. The pope now had to be a global titan who can make the world listen – not with anathemas and interdicts, in the manner of high medieval popes, but by force of carefully reasoned moral argument. Among other things, this means the pope’s own personal holiness must be able to “cash the checks” his lofty rhetoric writes. The pope must be able to stand on the world stage with the Bushes and the Blairs, the Reagans and the Kohls, of his own time, and in some sense tower over them all, in both wisdom and personal moral credibility.

Setting the bar that high, of course, narrows a set of candidates quickly, and it did not take long for a strong majority of cardinals to focus on Joseph Ratzinger. There were perhaps five or six others who could have fit the bill, but each had his own electoral problems. Aside from the involvement of the Holy Spirit, therefore, the stunningly simple truth about the conclave of 2005 is that two-thirds of the cardinals regarded Joseph Ratzinger as the best and brightest they had.

In that light, it’s worth asking what exactly the electors expected of their new leader. What “mandate,” so to speak, did Benedict XVI have?

In the days leading up to the conclave I spoke with dozens of cardinals, and in the aftermath I interviewed eight more representing five countries and three continents for my book, *The Rise of Benedict XVI*. What I say here draws on that reporting.

First, the cardinals had concluded that the most significant crisis facing Roman Catholicism today is in Europe, where secularization is at its zenith: declining Mass

attendance rates, declining vocations to the priesthood and religious life, decades of intra-Catholic ideological strife, a startling public silence about the faith, and the specter of looming demographic collapse combined with high rates of Islamic immigration. In Joseph Ratzinger, the cardinals saw someone with the most profound grasp possible of the Western cultural situation, and with the clarity and courage they felt the church requires. His homily opening the conclave, warning against a “dictatorship of relativism,” drove the point home.

Second, many cardinals felt that while John Paul II was a magnificent apostle and evangelist, he was not always an equally gifted manager. The Roman Curia often speaks with more than one voice, and sometimes seems to work at cross-purposes. Moreover, it was not always clear that those making decisions had the proper background, or could distinguish between essential matters requiring intervention and others best left alone. Both the nomination and oversight of bishops seemed at times haphazard, which some critics linked to the bitter sexual abuse crisis in the United States and elsewhere. A serious reform, many cardinals believed, could only be achieved by a man *in* but not *of* the Roman Curia, someone who knows the system and who has the wherewithal to change it.

Third, some cardinals wanted a period of “Wojtylism without Wojtyla,” meaning the substance of John Paul’s papacy without the charismatic razzle-dazzle. A calmer, less frenetic papacy, focused on core challenges, had appeal after the hurricane of the John Paul years. Further, the cardinals wanted a pope who they felt would listen, whose own personal vision would not be so strong as to make collaboration difficult.

### *The First Year*

If those are the criteria, what's the report card so far?

To begin, anyone expecting radical turns from Benedict was bound to be disappointed. This pope sees himself as the carrier of a tradition rather than a personal agenda. Further, Benedict feels a deep personal bond with John Paul II, and understands a large part of his mission as preserving his predecessor's legacy. Hence the dominant storyline was always destined to be continuity.

Nevertheless, the first year has brought an intriguing mix of the familiar and the novel, and given us a basic sense of the outlines of Benedict's papacy.

#### *(1) The Crisis of Secularism*

The beating heart of Benedict's teaching turns on two key words: *truth* and *love*.

In the pre-conclave debate, some argued that the Catholic Church cannot engage the secular world effectively without internal reforms to make itself more credible to that audience – in the direction of democratic governance, tolerance of dissent, women's rights and so on. The cardinals embraced another diagnosis. The crisis of the Church in the West, according to this view, is not really one of structures, but of ideas. Low Mass attendance rates and the priest shortage are symptoms, but the disease is relativism and practical atheism. The West too often lives, in the Latin phrase invoked by the Holy Father, *etsi Deus non daretur* – as if God does not exist. In a universe without God, without intelligence, truth becomes whatever we say it is, and a church premised on objective truth cannot help but suffer.

Benedict understands modernity's skepticism about truth; he grew up in Nazi Germany, where the National Socialists asserted a monopoly on truth, and he later watched the Soviet Union build a sophisticated apparatus of repression in the name of absolute truths. He knows full well that young Muslim men today blow themselves up on buses in the name of truth. He realizes that for many people, the only humane stance in light of this experience is relativism, where all truths are equally valid. It amounts to a sort of "Peace of Westphalia" on the philosophical level, avoiding conflict by legitimizing diversity.

Yet in the end, Benedict believes, relativism is not merely a philosophical error, but a profoundly dangerous one. To take only the most dramatic example, in a world unconvinced of the truth that every human being possesses inherent dignity, the weakest and most vulnerable are placed at greatest risk. The tragic reality of that insight is matter of everyday experience.

Whereas Paul VI wrote in *Popolorum progressio* in 1967 that "development is the new name of peace," Benedict in his first message for World Peace Day instead insisted that "truth is the path to peace." The world cannot demand respect for human rights, he believes, without confidence in the truths upon which those rights are based.

Benedict also understands that many people see truth claims today as a mask for power and control, reflecting what he regards as a flawed modern notion that freedom means the absence of restraints upon one's behavior. Instead, he says, truth is the door one must walk through to become really free, meaning free to become the kind of person God intends. Truth and freedom are thus not opposed, but interdependent. For the classic presentation of this argument, I would recommend chapter three of John Paul's 1993

encyclical, *Veritatis splendor* – a text with which then-Cardinal Ratzinger was not uninvolved. It is the *Magna Carta* of Benedict's approach to the crisis of secularization and relativism.

So far this may sound rather abstract, but it has very practical implications. On the political level, it means that Benedict will support the mobilization of church resources when he believes core truths are at stake. He backed efforts of the Italian bishops, for example, to defeat a ballot measure to liberalize Italy's laws on in-vitro fertilization, and similar efforts by Spanish bishops to derail a gay marriage law. The Italian bishops won, the Spaniards lost. Inside the church, the same emphasis on truth will translate into a deep concern for Catholic identity, ensuring that the church does not assimilate to the relativistic ethos. In part, this implies vigilance that those teaching, preaching and publishing in the name of the church do not sow confusion. In the United States, we have seen this impulse behind the forced resignation of Fr. Thomas Reese, the former editor of *America* magazine, and in the current Vatican-sponsored visitation of American seminaries. Visitors to date have shown a special interest in moral theology and the need to resist relativism. Both of these developments were well in the works before Benedict became pope, of course, but he was already involved with them as Cardinal Ratzinger, and they reflect the spirit of his concern with truth.

Yet Benedict also understands that a winning argument for truth cannot be made in the first place through excoriation and discipline. Ultimately, he knows, Christianity is either about a love affair with Jesus Christ, and the community He called into being which is the Church, or it's nothing. This leads to the second of Benedict's watchwords: *love*.



Over this first year, Benedict has struck a remarkably positive and loving tone. In Cologne, in front of a million young people, he did not rail against pre-marital sex or bemoan low attendance rates at church. Instead, he spoke of love. The Eucharist, he said, is “like inducing nuclear fission in the very heart of being – the victory of love over hatred, the victory of love over death. Only this intimate explosion of good conquering evil can then trigger off the series of transformations that little by little will change the world.”

Ultimately, of course, this was the message of his first encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. Christianity has such a high regard for human love, Benedict writes, that it wishes to see that love reach its true zenith through a “path of purification” into *agape*, the total gift of one’s self for another. The church’s claims to truth are thus not about riding herd on the human conscience, he implies, but marking a path to authentic human flourishing.

How successful he will be in making this case remains to be seen; one cannot reverse the cultural tides of centuries in the blink of an eye. However, after a year we can at least say he has intrigued many.

Ecclesiastical insiders, regardless of where they stand on church politics, have by and large been impressed with the pope’s teaching, especially his homilies. Several have been rhetorical and homiletic masterpieces; close your eyes, they say, and sometimes you think you’re hearing Ignatius of Antioch or John Chrysostom. This has fired the imagination of the “inside the beltway” set.

Secular observers, meanwhile, find themselves struck by the clarity of the pope’s thought, regardless of what they make of it. Benedict, like his great master St. Augustine, has a capacity to express complex ideas in simple terms. Moreover, Benedict XVI – and I

say this without any special Catholic chauvinism – is, by most assessments, the deepest thinker among the current crop of major global leaders, whether secular or religious. Among more thoughtful people, that will always guarantee him an audience, whether they agree with him or not.

## *(2) Governance and Reform*

If Benedict has clearly engaged the first element of his mandate, what about the second – issues of church governance? Immediately after the conclave, there were fevered expectations in Rome on this front. In part, this has to do with the historical rivalry between the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and the Secretariat of State. Traditionally the “Holy Office” ruled the roost in the Curia, but under Pope Paul VI, the Secretariat of State became the “super-dicastery,” supervising the work of everyone else. The election of the prefect of the CDF thus made the Secretariat of State understandably nervous. The joke that circulated in Rome was that all the *monsignori* from State had been on their *terrazzo* watching the *Habemus Papem* announcement, and as soon as they heard the name “Ratzinger,” they all want back inside.

The punch line was, they went in to polish their résumés.

Here, one has to say in all honesty that there’s been remarkably little movement, and many in Rome are still holding their breath. Rumors are circulating about major shake-ups to come, perhaps in April, but all this remains speculative.

Based on Benedict’s record and outlook, observers have expected two sorts of reforming impulses when it comes to structure and personnel.

First, Benedict is a classic conservative with regard to bureaucracies. He distrusts them; he believes they often take on self-justifying agendas of their own, outliving the purposes they were intended to serve. The best current example in many minds would be the question of who exactly speaks for the Vatican – the Vatican Press Office, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Vatican Radio, *L'Osservatore Romano*, or various “Vatican officials” who occasionally pronounce on a wide variety of issues? This cacophony often makes it difficult to know where “the Vatican” stands on something, and many expect the pope to bring some order, as the first step towards a broader review of the Roman Curia, asking whether the various dicasteries, especially those born after Vatican II, are truly necessary, at least in their current form.

Second, Benedict was the first truly world-class theologian to serve as the pope’s top doctrinal advisor since St. Robert Bellarmine in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. He knows from experience that most of the other prefects in the Curia do not have a similar background in their areas. The official responsible for missionary activity, for example, has never been on a mission; the top official for education is not an educator; the official responsible for health has no background in health care; the top official for liturgy is not a liturgist. This is not to say these men are incompetent, and certainly every one of those dicasteries has highly skilled specialists at lower levels. The reality, however, is that Vatican personnel policy has always favored character over specialized expertise. One consequence is that critics sometimes complain that decisions are rendered by people lacking a deep grasp of the issues. At times, appointments appear to be driven more by tribal loyalties and careerist logic than by the common good. Benedict is expected to consider far more *what* a candidate knows rather than *who* he knows.

Especially among the bishops, Benedict is expected to look for men shaped in the first place by the gospel and tradition, not the logic of diplomacy and maintenance of the institutional *status quo*.

Assuming this takes shape, its impact will likely not end at the Roman Curia, or even the College of Bishops. Papal leadership will exert a gravitational tug throughout the rest of the church, leading to a reexamination of bureaucracies at all levels, especially in countries such as the United States that possess a bewildering variety of structures and institutions. Again, however, one has to emphasize that all this is more hypothesis than observable fact. We simply have to wait and see.

### *(3) Papal Style*

While Cardinal Ratzinger respected and adored John Paul, he was nevertheless uncomfortable with certain aspects of what one might term a “cult of personality” around the pope – something he believed John Paul never desired – which can run the risk of dislodging the focus from the office to the man, from the message to the messenger.

This concern can be glimpsed, for example, from Pope Benedict’s decision not to celebrate beatification Masses, not to invite visitors up to his private chapel for morning Mass, and not to receive the nuncios privately. The pope even wanted to celebrate his installation Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica rather than the square, so the focus would be on the great *baldachino* and thus the office of the papacy, rather than him personally.

Despite the fact that Benedict continues to draw larger-than-normal crowds in St. Peter’s Square, he feels no compulsion to be a mass media phenomenon in the mode of John Paul II. In fact, for all his legendary Augustinian pessimism, Benedict actually

seems to believe there are still people out there who can be persuaded by unadorned argument – if you think about it, quite an optimistic stance.

Upon election, Benedict pledged himself to a collegial style of governance. There are, of course, many interpretations of “collegiality,” but there have been indications that within his own understanding of the term, Benedict meant what he said. One early example was his decision to dispense with the five-year waiting period for the beatification of John Paul II. Aside from Benedict’s own devotion to John Paul, the decisive factor was that more than half the members of the College of Cardinals signed a petition during the Interregnum asking the next pope to take this step. Benedict understood it as a collegial act.

Further, Pope Benedict took part in last October’s Synod of Bishops, listening carefully as John Paul always did, but also intervening himself on a couple of occasions. He did so not in authoritarian fashion, decreeing conclusions or closing off topics, but as a member of the Episcopal college, offering his own thoughts on matters under discussion.

Prior to issuing his recent encyclical, the Holy Father submitted it to the judgment of the doctrinal consultants in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, retouching it until the very last minute to reflect their observations. Some construed this process as a behind-the-scenes struggle, but I suspect Benedict was simply trying to act upon the advice he had solicited. Others with similar theological erudition might have decided they really didn’t need the help.

A final note. One consequence of “Wojtylism without Wojtyla” is that the pope will, to some extent, recede as a daily presence in the imaginations of average Catholics

around the world, which may provide more space for local leaders to become visible and consequential. By itself, that reality may have the most significant implications of all for collegial governance.

### *Conclusion*

The coming months will offer more defining moments. Italy will hold elections this spring, and if, as many expect, the center-left coalition comes into power, new tensions may arise around issues of truth, especially concerning the family. Similarly, Benedict's anticipated November trip to Istanbul will not only have enormous ecumenical importance, but it will also put the pope's vision of Europe, and of Islam, squarely on the agenda.

If this spring does witness a shake-up of sorts in the Roman Curia, we may have the first clear indications of the sort of structural reform Benedict wishes to pursue. Additionally, many expect a consistory for the creation of new cardinals in June. The question of who Benedict will elevate to the College of Cardinals is critically important, especially in light of the new, post-John Paul job description for the papacy. The list of erudite, politically savvy, cosmopolitan, multi-lingual, holy men waiting in the wings at present is not long.

I could go on ticking off stories to watch, but you get the idea; it will be a busy year. Little of this papal activity will happen with fireworks bursting in the background, and it may well be that the global press takes scant, or at best episodic, interest. That does not mean, however, that in his own quiet fashion, Benedict XVI will not make history.

Indeed, anyone caught off guard by the election of a 78-year-old German to the papacy, tempted to believe the cardinals had found a somnambulant “interim” figure to keep the seat warm, should be thoroughly disabused by this first year. It is true that Benedict is moving according to his own rhythms, too slowly for some and not always in the direction some had hoped. Yet at bottom this is a pope of epic ambition, if not for himself, for the Church in his times. He aims to do nothing less than challenge five centuries of Western cultural and intellectual development, reasserting truth in a Western world often allergic to the very term.

This story will not be brought to you blow-by-blow like a car chase on the evening news, and neither will Benedict XVI compete for airtime with Madonna and Kobe Bryant. But it is nevertheless the stuff of high drama, and a great deal is riding on how the story ends.

Hence my final words to you tonight: Stay tuned!