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The Election of Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope: Have We Been Given another [St.] Benedict?

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Had one more liberal than John Paul II been elected the new Pope of Roman Catholicism, I believe conservative Catholics could have created real havoc in the church, maybe even schism.

In the last issue of CNT (April 24, 2005), I concluded my piece on Pope John Paul II by noting: "While proud of his courage on many issues regarding public policy, I believe this brilliant man failed to meet the critical challenge demanded by our times when it comes to church polity. He could have capitalized on his conservative credentials in a way that would have challenged close-minded Catholics to think differently. In this I think of how Richard Nixon in the United States was able to "open the door" to China; only a bona-fide conservative could have accomplished this. Unfortunately, John Paul II did not use his conservative credentials to move the church itself into the 21st century. Whether the next Pope will have enough of his charismatic personality to accomplish this task will be up to the Cardinal electors; whether these . . . will have the courage to 'fear not' and elect such a person will be up to the Holy Spirit."

So the election has taken place. In the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, we just may have the right person for this time. Indeed, the more I think of "church polity," it could be that this would be the only way the Holy Spirit could move the global apparatus called the institutional Catholic Church. My basic reason applies to real politik and what it might take to change the conservative mind from some of its ideologically-sustained mindsets.

On the day Pope Benedict XVI publicly appeared for the first time at St. Peter's, I was teaching at The School of Applied Theology, a sabbatical program in Oakland, California. As the class filed in, I felt the gloom, if not outright depression, of these church ministers from all parts of the world. As we began, I shared with them the latest letter I had sent the then-Cardinal Ratzinger. On August 14, 2004 I wrote him that, in my travels, I have met many intelligent, thinking and committed Catholics who are dropping out of the kind of church he seemed to be promoting and pursuing. I noted that I had heard he wants "a purer Church, even if it means it will be smaller." However, I argued: "I believe the all-male functioning and perspective which characterize your most recent letter, along with so many decisions emanating from Rome, is what is making the Church smaller and less holy. I cannot square this with the 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic church;' rather it seems to reveal a more divided, Roman, curial and apodictic church. Even more," I concluded, "I cannot square this with Jesus' vision of God's reign and how our church is to signify this."

I never received an answer from the then-Cardinal Ratzinger.

With visions of adult seminarians in St. Peter's Square literally jumping up and down at the announcement of his election, it dawned on me that, indeed, it will take someone brilliant as well as humbly honest and honestly humble to bring them and their ideological thinking into a realistic and compelling dialog with the issues that face all of us in our world and especially within the church, particularly around sex and orientation, including the implications of such for equal participation.

At that point I suddenly recalled the last sentence of Alasdair MacIntyre's classic book on (the failure of contemporary) morality: *After Virtue* (1981/rev.1984): "We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another—doubtless very different—St. Benedict."

After class I retrieved a copy of that book. In it MacIntyre notes that morality, whether theoretical or practical, has become polarized. He grounds the cause of this decay in "emotivism," the belief that all moral judgments are nothing but expressions of preference, attitude or feeling of individuals and/or groups. Such "emotivism" is what the then-Cardinal Ratzinger called the "dictatorship of relativism" the day before his election.

While I agree that much damage has been done by such a moral stance, a problem with this approach is it can make one's self and/or one's group the sole possession and arbitrator of truth. Thus, if one person or group believes something is right and another thinks it is wrong, it is right for the first group but not for the second. Indeed the "other" individual or group gets defined by the former as "relativist." In my own case, given the past letters I have written Cardinal Ratzinger, especially where I disagreed with his position on women, I ground my arguments in the text and the context of scripture. And I present my position from an honest consideration of how our tradition has come to us through a patriarchal power system and parallel ideology, including their expression in law. While I believe I am grounded in solid truth, I would not call him a relativist because we have had our disagreements. And I hope he would see me as another member of the church, like himself, sincerely seeking truth. This truth can only be ensured only by honest and open discourse.

So, returning to MacIntyre, what will make us moral? Here he posits virtue ethics. In virtue ethics, individuals are recognized as "the moral representatives of their culture and they are so because of the way in which moral and metaphysical ideas and theories assume through them an embodied existence in the social world." Maybe because he saw so many people seeming to find in Pope John Paul II the embodiment of virtue, our new Pope has taken the notion a further step. Could it be that, by taking this name, he envisions himself to be this new St. Benedict at the head of a concomitant community of character trying to be faithful in an increasingly secular world? Could he be agreeing with MacIntyre, that our only hope for authentic living/morality rests in "the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us?"

As a Cardinal, Joseph Ratzinger seemed resigned to the fact that such a community of character would only be found in small enclaves of conservatives; these would be the “true believers.” However, realizing (with MacIntyre) that such groups also can be just as emotivist and relativist as liberals and radicals, it is my hope that this new “Benedict” will promote a less Euro-oriented morality in a way that will be worthy of a global church that finds more and more people persuaded to be part of it. In such a church, such a morality will convincingly link the bedroom and boardroom, the sexual and structural, in a way that challenges all of us, where we need it, to conversion to the Cosmic Christ in the Roman Church. Hopefully this approach will then facilitate personal, communal and collective freedom and responsibility. At the same time, it will promote individual, corporate and collective justice and peace for the integrity of creation.