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Pope Benedict?s politics defied ideological categories

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Benedict Resigns
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Pope Benedict XVI interacted with world politics in ways that defied typical ideological categories. The caricature of him as a conservative reactionary does not bear scrutiny, at least not as Americans understand conservatism. Benedict stands in a long line of popes whose teachings challenge both the political left and right, but in the past eight years, conservatives have found more challenge and less solace from Rome.

On the economy, Benedict staked out positions that were far more radical than what passes for progressive politics in the U.S. For example, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, the pope defended the rights of workers in the most explicit terms: "Through the combination of social and economic change, trade union organizations experience greater difficulty in carrying out their task of representing the interests of workers, partly because Governments, for reasons of economic utility, often limit the freedom or the negotiating capacity of labor unions. Hence traditional networks of solidarity have more and more obstacles to overcome. The repeated calls issued within the Church's social doctrine, beginning with *Rerum Novarum*, for the promotion of workers' associations that can defend their rights must therefore be honored today even more than in the past, as a prompt and far-sighted response to the urgent need for new forms of cooperation at the international level, as well as the local level." This warm embrace of organized labor is not on the agenda of today's Republican Party to be sure.

Benedict also challenged modern capitalism for the gross inequalities it produces both within and among nations. In his recent World Day of Peace message, he listed five threats to world peace, and he started with "unregulated financial capitalism." The others: terrorism, international crime, fanaticism and fundamentalism. You do not need to conduct a poll to imagine how many Republicans would respond if President Barack Obama lumped together "unregulated financial capitalism" with terrorism and international crime.

The effects of capitalism were not the only problems he discerned. In *Caritas in Veritate* he noted the ways capitalism fails at its core and in its ethical demands. The market requires competition, not solidarity. It lionizes self-assertion, not self-surrender, and it values thrift and frugality, not gratuitousness and generosity. The market's heroes are self-made men. But, as Benedict taught, Christians are called to follow Jesus, whose entire life was an act of solidarity, who never asserted himself but always self-surrendered to the will of the Father, whose grace is never thrifty or frugal but gratuitous, always a bit surprising, never stingy. Most obviously, Jesus was not a "self-made man." Benedict, like previous popes, did not propose a specific economic system, but his critique of modern capitalism, root and branch, was stinging. Why did this never garner much in the way of headlines?

On another political issue, global climate change, Benedict has been something of an innovator, developing Catholic moral theology to embrace a clear concern for the environment. In 2010, in an interview with Peter Seewald, Benedict said that as pope, he recognized "an inner obligation to struggle for the preservation of the environment and to oppose the destruction of creation." He applied traditional moral ideas about stewardship to contemporary environmental concerns, and has called for drastic international action to avert further damage to

the climate. Additionally, and always keen to the power of symbols, the Vatican became one of the first carbon-neutral states in the world as the Holy See installed solar panels on various buildings within the small territory it holds on the bank of the Tiber.

Benedict has also been a tireless advocate for peace, especially in the Mideast where political instability often results in specific threats to those few, but ancient, Christian communities that remain in Muslim lands. He has engaged in dialogue with the Muslim world, and encouraged it to stand against any fanaticism within its ranks, but he also has urged Israelis to negotiate a peaceful settlement with the Palestinians. Benedict has called for all the countries of the world to spend less on armaments and more on development, following a long line of papal teachings stretching back to Pope John XXIII's groundbreaking *Pacem in Terris*. In April, at The Catholic University of America in Washington, a conference on the 50th anniversary of *Pacem in Terris* will include an examination of the ways Benedict has brought that seminal teaching into the 21st century.

Catholic neocons in the U.S., understandably, ignored or downplayed the pope's writings on these subjects. And because many Americans seem content to assume that religion has more to say about sexual mores than about economic ones, it was Benedict's re-statements of Catholic teaching on contraception, abortion and same-sex marriage that always garnered the headlines. On these issues, Benedict was never going to budge, either in his assessment of the moral issues themselves, nor in his belief that government needs to actively promote traditional values, especially concern for the family. He seemed unimpressed by those who invoked a pluralistic society, or changing mores, or any other rationale for what they deemed progress. For him, deviation from the truth as he understood it could not be seen as progress at all.

Here is, perhaps, the most challenging and unique contribution Benedict made to the world of politics, not only to Catholic theology, but to the broader cultural dialogue in the West. He never stopped asking what could bolster freedom if it were ever unhinged from the truth. In his major speeches at Westminster Hall in London and at the German Parliament, the Bundestag in Berlin, the pope posed the question to Western democracies whether a formal ethics of rights was sufficient to guarantee a humane society. Benedict, perhaps the most learned public figure of his day, could pose a question of such depth. No one has really devised an adequate answer.

This seemingly obscure question of the ethical foundations of law and government may be somewhat abstract, but it manifests itself in the most contentious issues of the day. Here in the U.S., the debate over the Department of Health and Human Services' contraception mandate is, in part, a discussion about the role of churches in civil society. During the recent debate in the British House of Commons about same-sex marriage, both sides acknowledged that "Parliament is sovereign," but Benedict challenges the idea of state sovereignty. It was John Stuart Mill who said, "Parliament can do anything except turn a man into a woman," and the critics of same-sex marriage argued, essentially, that the proposal should be rejected precisely because it sought to contravene an authority even higher than Parliament, nature itself. Benedict would not have voted for same-sex marriage if he were a British MP.

Benedict's legacy in the political realm, then, is not as traditional as it might seem. In America, Catholics may focus on the conservative sexual ethics he defended and sought to see defended in law, but in the developing world, where the church is growing, his appeals on behalf of the poor rang both louder and truer to the Gospel. There, the experience of poverty allows Catholics to experience the Gospel in a way that has become difficult for affluent Catholics in the West, as good news for the poor. His teachings on the environment, his deep suspicion of modern capitalism, and his foundational concern with the ethical and human basis for law, all these serve to point his successor in a direction that does not easily fit into U.S. political terms. Politicians may see Benedict as confounding, frustrated that his commitment to social justice and equally strong commitment to traditional sexual and gender roles was inconsistent. Benedict, if given the chance, might ask if the

inconsistency is in him, or in us.

[Michael Sean Winters writes about religion and politics on his Distinctly Catholic blog on the *NCR* website, at NCRonline.org/blogs/distinctly- catholic.]

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