The pope, modern science, and a canary in the coal mine

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Normally speaking, a visit by a pope to a Roman university to launch the academic year would not be a particularly scintillating news story. Benedict XVI’s appearance at Rome’s La Sapienza this coming Thursday, however, is likely to draw above-average attention, in the wake of a letter from 63 professors and students, including the entire physics faculty, demanding that the invitation be withdrawn. Some student groups have also threatened a sit-in.

Their charge? That Benedict XVI is an enemy of science and reason.

Specifically, the letter points to a speech given on March 15, 1990, by then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in Parma, Italy, in which he addressed the notorious Galileo case. On that occasion, Ratzinger quoted Austrian philosopher Paul Feyerabend that “the church’s verdict against Gaileo was rational and just.”

The physics professors described themselves as “indignant as scientists faithful to reason, and as teachers who dedicate our lives to the advancement and diffusion of knowledge. These words offend and humiliate us. In the name of the secularity of science, we hope that this incongruous event can still be cancelled.”

In media interviews, the professors have also cited Benedict’s recent encyclical, Spe Salvi, as hostile to modern science.
The rector of Rome’s La Sapienza, a public university, quickly confirmed that the papal lecture will go forward.

It’s tempting indeed to see this as one of those “only-in-Italy” dust-ups.

The 18-year-old speech cited by the pope’s critics, for example, offered a reflection by Ratzinger on what he saw as a change in the secular intellectual climate, re-evaluating Galileo as part of a growing awareness of the ambivalence of scientific progress -- especially under the shadow of the bomb. In that context, Benedict quoted the judgment of Feyerabend, an agnostic and skeptic, on Galileo, along with similar statements from Ernst Bloch and C.F. Von Weizsacker.

Here’s what Feyerabend wrote, as quoted by Ratzinger: "The church at the time of Galileo was much more faithful to reason than Galileo himself, and also took into consideration the ethical and social consequences of Galileo’s doctrine. Its verdict against Galileo was rational and just, and revisionism can be legitimized solely for motives of political opportunism."

Ratzinger actually called the statement “drastic” -- upon reflection, a fairly striking term from a figure who, at the time, headed the historical successor to the Inquisition.

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Ratzinger concluded the speech by saying, “It would be absurd, on the basis of these affirmations, to construct a hurried apologetics. The faith does not grow from resentment and the rejection of rationality, but from its fundamental affirmation, and from being rooted in a still greater form of reason.”

In a nutshell, therefore, Benedict is being faulted by the physics professors for quoting somebody else’s words, which his full text suggests he does not completely share. (Readers who remember Regensburg can be forgiven a sense of déjà-vu.)

An English translation of Ratzinger’s 1990 comments in Parma is here: http://ncrcafe.org/node/1541

As for Spe Salvi, here’s what Benedict wrote about science:

“Francis Bacon and those who followed in the intellectual current of modernity that he inspired were wrong to believe that man would be redeemed through science. Such an expectation asks too much of science; this kind of hope is deceptive. Science can contribute greatly to making the world and mankind more human. Yet it can also destroy mankind and the world unless it is steered by forces that lie outside it.”

Whatever one makes of that, it’s hard to construe it as an attack on science and reason.

Moreover, there’s plenty of evidence that Benedict XVI is not hostile to science, as long as it doesn’t pretend to render religious faith irrelevant. The pope recently appointed a Princeton hydrologist to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, for example, who strongly supports the theory of evolution and the science of global warming.

Given all this, one could easily conclude that the fracas at La Sapienza is one of those equal-and-opposite flare-ups from anti-clerical forces in Italy, whose resentments over the church’s centuries of power and influence sometimes breed over-the-top reactions.
Yet two other points are worth noting.

First, the Parma address illustrates a bit of professorial style from Benedict that also got him into trouble in Regensburg, which is quoting someone else’s provocative words in order to set up a discussion. (In fact, the Parma address makes it far more clear that these were not Ratzinger’s ideas, because he was discussing a movement in secular agnostic thought—a camp in which he would clearly not include himself.)

Going forward, the lesson to be learned is that a public figure, and especially a pope, can’t quote incendiary language without immediately and unambiguously distancing himself from it—at least, without paying a PR price down the line.

Second, the La Sapienza contretemps is perhaps less about Benedict’s specific thoughts on science, than broader perceptions that he is “rolling back the clock” on Catholicism’s opening to modernity, associated above all with the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). In early December, secular Italian writer Eugenio Scalfari published a piece in La Repubblica on Spe Salvi titled precisely, “The pope who rejects the modern world.”

Setting aside their merits, one can at least understand how people form such impressions. This Sunday, for example, Benedict XVI celebrated Mass in the Sistine Chapel in which he employed a pre-Vatican II altar with his back to the congregation for parts of the liturgy, and read his homily from an old wooden throne on the left of the altar used by Pius IX in the 19th century.

Critics charge that such gestures reveal a pope determined to pretend that Vatican II never happened, while Benedict insists that he is simply trying to reinforce a sense of continuity, emphasizing the importance of tradition, without repudiating the steps forward associated with Vatican II, such as religious freedom, ecumenism, and inter-faith dialogue.

One can debate such positions endlessly, but perhaps the immediate significance of the La Sapienza episode, at least from a PR point of view, is as a sort of “canary in the coal mine”?a warning of a potentially dangerous public impression about Benedict’s agenda that, at times, may cloud even innocent words and gestures.

It’s at least something to ponder.

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