

Benedict on America: In his own words

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 11, 2008 All Things Catholic

As Pope Benedict XVI's arrival in the United States approaches, the media is chock full of pieces outlining the challenges the pope faces in America, and trying to anticipate what he might do or say to address them. Perhaps it's fitting that the last word before the curtain goes up, however, should belong to Benedict himself.

By that, I'm not referring to the brief video message to the American people from the pope released by the Vatican this week. Instead, I have in mind the various reflections on the United States offered by Joseph Ratzinger over the years, much of which dates from the period before his election to the papacy.

Despite protesting in 1996 that he has "little knowledge of America," in truth Benedict XVI probably came into office with more direct insight into the United States than any other pope in history. For one thing, he is the first pope ever to have been an American prisoner of war. After deserting from the German army in May 1945, Ratzinger was sent to an American POW camp in Ulm, Germany, until his release on June 15, 1945. (By the way, the future pope filled his days by penning Greek hexameters in a notebook.)

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In his role as the Vatican's top doctrinal official, Ratzinger visited the United States five times. Over the course of more than 20 years in Rome, he also met the a wide cross section of American bishops, clergy and religious, theologians, politicians, social activists, and ordinary people. Predictably, the pope has also read widely about America, developing a special fondness for Alexis de Tocqueville.

As a footnote, from 2001 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has had canonical responsibility for reviewing allegations of sexual abuse against priests, which means that over four years Ratzinger became deeply familiar with the contours of the American crisis.

Among the best sources for gaining a sense of Benedict XVI's attitudes towards the United States:

- The 2004 book *Without Roots*, which reproduces a lecture Ratzinger delivered to the Italian Senate in May 2004, followed by an exchange of correspondence with Italian politician Marcello Pera;
- A 1996 interview with German journalist Peter Seewald that became the book *Salt of the Earth*;

- The 2002 book *God and the World*, another lengthy interview with Seewald;
- The pope's Feb. 29 address to Mary Ann Glendon, the new Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See.

The following represent some of the highlights from that material.

Religious Vitality

Probably the top note of Benedict's thought is appreciation that the United States remains a deeply religious society. Despite the inroads of secularism, it still has a lively appreciation for the public contribution of religion. The pope quotes de Tocqueville as epitomizing the American spirit: "Despotism may govern without faith, but liberty cannot."

Also following de Tocqueville, Ratzinger wrote in 2004 that democracy in the United States is based on moral and religious values derived from Christianity.

"No one prescribed or defined these convictions, but everyone assumed them as the obvious spiritual foundation," he wrote. "The recognition of this basic religious and moral orientation, which went beyond the single denominations and defined the society from within, reinforced the corpus of the law. It defined the limits on individual freedoms from within, thereby creating the conditions for a shared, common freedom."

The pope believes this basic consensus is fragile today, but intact.

"One could say, at least in my opinion, that in the United States there is still a Christian civil religion, although it is besieged and its contents have become uncertain," he wrote.

In Benedict's mind, the appreciation for religion in America stands in sharp contrast with contemporary Europe.

"In the United States, secularization is proceeding at an accelerated pace, and the confluence of many different cultures disrupts the basic Christian consensus. However, there is a much clearer and more implicit sense in America than in Europe that the religious and moral foundation bequeathed by Christianity is greater than that of any single denomination. Europe, unlike America, is on a collision course with its own history. Often it voices an almost visceral denial of any possible public dimension for Christian values."

According to the pope, why has the United States been able to hold onto its religious dynamism while Europe hasn't? In sum, he believes it's due to their differing histories of church/state relations.

The United States, Ratzinger has argued, was founded by groups fleeing Europe's system of established churches. The American tradition is that of "free churches," meaning faith groups autonomous of state sponsorship and control. In the United States, the separation of church and state is a principle meant to protect and empower religious bodies, whereas in France and elsewhere in Europe it's often designed to curtail them

and diminish their influence.

"In America, the state is little more than a free space for different religious communities to congregate," Ratzinger wrote in 2004. "This is a separation that is conceived positively, since it is meant to allow religion to be itself, a religion that respects and protects its own living space distinctly from the state and its ordinances."

Importantly, according to the pope, in the United States religious believers and groups are not *ipso facto* disqualified from public conversation.

"The private sphere has an absolutely public character," he wrote. "This is why what does not pertain to the state is not excluded in any way, shape or form from the public dimension of social life."

Shadows

This is not to suggest that all is sweetness and light. Over the years, Benedict XVI may have imbibed some of the instinctive ambivalence about the United States characteristic of many European intellectuals. As far back as 1978, in an interview with the German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* prior to the conclave that elected Pope John Paul II, Ratzinger said that despite doctrinal concerns about liberation theology, he recognized its legitimate protest against social injustice and what he called "pushy Americanism."

Nor is the pope entirely immune to conspiracy theories about the United States. In his 2004 lecture to the Italian Senate, which largely recapitulated an earlier lecture in 2000 in Berlin, Ratzinger charged that the United States is "involved to a large extent in promoting Protestantism in Latin America, and hence in the breakup of the Catholic church." Ratzinger asserted that the United States "does so out of the conviction that the Catholic church is incapable of guaranteeing a stable political and economic system, since it is considered an unreliable educator of nations."

Benedict also sees some worrying social trends in America, in particular what he describes as a revival of the "WASP ideology," meaning hostility to immigrants and perceived outsiders.

"This ideology was born when the arrival of immigrants groups of Catholic faith -- especially the Irish, Italians, Poles and people of color -- was perceived as a threat to the consolidated identity of America," Ratzinger wrote in 2004.

Under the impact of today's waves of Hispanic immigration, the pope has warned, those xenophobic currents in American society seem to be mounting a comeback.

At the level of specific policy questions, Pope Benedict has had his differences with the States. In his remarks to Glendon in February, for example, the pope stressed the need for a stronger "culture of life," including the defense of unborn life and of marriage.

Like John Paul II, Benedict has also clashed with American leaders over the war in Iraq and broader question of how to foster international security. Speaking at a conference in Trieste, Italy, in September 2002, in the run-up to the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq, Ratzinger was asked if the war could be justified.

"In this situation, certainly not," he replied. "There is the United Nations. It is the authority that should make the decisive choice. The choice must be made by the community of peoples, not a single power. The fact that the United Nations is seeking a way to avoid the war seems to me to demonstrate with sufficient proof that the damages which would result [from the war] are greater than the values it would seek to save."

Ratzinger also criticized the Bush doctrine of pre-emptive war. "The concept of pre-emptive war does not appear in the Catechism," he said. "One cannot simply say that the Catechism does not legitimate war, but it's true that the Catechism has developed a doctrine such that, on the one hand, there may be values and populations to defend in certain circumstances, but on the other, it proposes a very precise doctrine on the limits of these possibilities." Later, when Baghdad fell in April 2003, Ratzinger expressed gratitude that the outcome was not as violent as might have been expected. Still, he said, opposition to the war was the correct stance. "Resistance to the war, to this threat of destruction, was the right thing to do," he said.

Exactly one year ago, Benedict XVI said that "nothing positive" has come from the bloodshed in Iraq. Though the pope is by no means a naïf about the terrorist threat, he differs from the present American administration in his diagnosis of how best to combat it.

(Footnote: Benedict's charge that the spread of Protestantism in Latin America is backed by neo-conservative forces in the States has long been a staple of Catholic rhetoric both in Europe and in Latin America. Some point to a long-ago remark of Theodore Roosevelt to the effect that, "I believe it will be long and difficult to absorb these countries into the sphere of the United States as long as they remain Catholic." In a similar vein, some cite a 1969 essay by Nelson Rockefeller on American policy in Latin America, which included the observation, "The Catholic church has stopped being a trusted ally of the United States, and on the contrary is transforming itself into a danger because it raises the consciousness of the people. It's recommended to give support to fundamentalist Christian groups and churches of the sort of Moon and the Hare Krishna." Still others point to the "Santa Fe Document," prepared in 1980 by a team of advisors on Latin America for the incoming Reagan administration. It recommended efforts to subvert liberation theology in Latin American Catholicism as an obstacle to "productive capitalism."

In general, however, scholars of religion in Latin America find such theories dubious. They suggest that the late 20th century explosion of Pentecostal and Evangelical Protestantism has far more to do with internal dynamics in Latin American societies, especially growing social mobility and the breakdown of homogenous religious cultures. While there's little doubt that U.S. Evangelicals have invested time and treasure in missionary work in Latin America, that's a far cry from it being the conscious policy of the U.S. government to subvert the Catholic church. Moreover, the core reason that eager young Evangelicals from the States spend their spring breaks in Latin America is not to promote free-market capitalism, but, by their lights, to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ.)

American Catholicism

Once again, the leading edge of the pope's reflection, in this case on the country's Catholic community, comes off as remarkably positive.

In 2002's *God and the World*, the future pope said that American Catholicism "has become a decisive force in the context of the global Church," because it has "the courage to consecrate all of existence to the faith, drawing from it the courage and the strength to place oneself at the service of others. It's a Church with a great educational and health care system, with an enormous social responsibility." He praised American Catholics for having found a "way of life" that is "nourished by Catholic values, and not just drunk on American culture," and lauded the capacity of the American Catholic church to "speak up in a mute world."

In 2004, Ratzinger said that the "significant contribution" of Catholics in the United States has helped the country preserve its Christian heritage. He also lauded the role of American Catholic bishops during the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), where the young Joseph Ratzinger served as a theological advisor, in leading the universal Catholic church towards a new embrace of religious freedom based in part on the American model.

Pope Benedict has also applauded the growing closeness between American Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals.

American Evangelicals, Ratzinger said in 2004, "have come to see Catholicism as a defender against the pressures of secularization and an upholder of the same ethical values that they themselves profess: values that they feel have been betrayed by their Protestant brothers."

Benedict's most extended commentary on Catholicism in America came in *Salt of the Earth*, and it's worth quoting it in full:

Q: In the United States, a large number of bishops intend to answer the Roman church in the future blow for blow, as they say, with polemical writings of their own. [The reference was to a group of American bishops who in the mid-1990s announced plans to press Rome for certain reforms].

A:The number is not large, 30 bishops at most. Then too, I have spoken with one of the main leaders, and he stressed that they have been completely misinterpreted. We're good Catholics, loyal to the pope, he said, we just want to introduce better methods. I have read the writings in question very carefully, and I also said that I was fully in agreement with a whole series of things they mention, whereas I thought other things were rather dubious. I would say that there is no really out-and-out anti-Roman mood in the American episcopal conference. It has a certain breadth, which is also a good thing. There are only a few among them who are perhaps really somewhat extreme. But my impression is, after the fifteen years I have been here, that Rome and the United States have learned to get along much better. On the whole, we have a very good relationship with the American bishops' conference. It's a conference with great intellectual and religious capacity, with many outstanding pastors who are making an important contribution to the development of doctrine in the universal church. Its officers visit us here twice each year, and we have a very cordial relationship.

Q: Can the Church in North America profit from the religious awakening that is in the offing there?

A: Yes, I think so. Although we ought not to read too much into certain events and mass demonstrations of Catholicism, they do show that young people in search of religion feel they can have a home in the Catholic Church and that also the Pope is a reference point and a religious leader for them. Tensions have really eased in the last fifteen years, and there have been a lot of positive new developments. In America there is not only a movement of conversions among Anglican priests but also a completely new relationship to the Evangelicals, who were formerly the sharpest critics of the Catholic Church. At the Cairo and Beijing conferences a very interesting closeness between Evangelicals and Catholics developed, simply because they see that Catholicism doesn't, as they have thought until now, threaten the Bible and overlay it with some kind of papal domination, but that it is a guarantee that the Bible will be taken seriously. These new rapprochements won't lead to reunions anytime soon, but they show that Catholicism is once again an 'American' possibility.

Q: What might be spurring on the new religiosity in America?

A: There are undoubtedly many factors, which I can't analyze because I have so little knowledge of America. But there is a commitment to morality and a desire for religion. In addition, there is a protest against the predominance of modern media culture. Even what Hillary Clinton has said -- 'Turn off the television, don't put up with it anymore' -- shows that there is a broad current that says we no longer want simply to submit ourselves to this culture."

In one way or another -- save, perhaps, the reference to Hillary Clinton, which would violate the pope's rule of staying above the political fray -- all these ideas are likely to surface during Benedict's six days in the States.

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