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Ratzinger has changed his spots (but not the way you think), Brazilian cardinal says

by John L. Allen Jr.

NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

More than four years into the papacy of Benedict XVI, analysts have repeatedly pulled his track record apart and put it back together again, raising provocative questions about where the pope comes from and where he might be going. In that vast forensic exercise, however, one question often seems to loom above the rest.

Has Ratzinger changed his spots?

That is to say, has the lion of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, the infamous "Panzer Kardinal" who polarized opinion like few other Catholic figures for the better part of 20 years, really metamorphosed into the lamb of Benedict XVI — seemingly a kinder, gentler, more optimistic figure? Or is such talk an illusion?

Typically, those who answer "yes" mean it in terms of the categories of secular politics — that Ratzinger the archconservative has given way to Benedict the moderate. Today, however, one senior church official offered a version of the case for "yes," but from a very different angle.

Cardinal Odilo Pedro Scherer, archbishop of São Paulo in Brazil, suggested that the great contrast between Ratzinger and Benedict has nothing to do with politics, but with his legacy and impact. Ironically, Scherer suggested, this consummate theologian may well make his most important contributions as pope not in theology, but rather in philosophy and even cultural criticism.

Scherer spoke today in São Paulo as part of seminar on the church and the media sponsored by the

International Institute of Social Sciences.

Scherer, who will turn 60 later this month, was appointed to São Paulo in 2007 and became a cardinal in 2008. In very broad terms, he's seen as a more conservative, traditional figure than his two predecessors – Cardinal Paulo Arns, who was a champion of Brazil's liberation theology movement, and Cardinal Cláudio Hummes, a Franciscan seen as a moderate and a conciliator.

Scherer's thesis today was that not only is it possible to distinguish between Ratzinger and Benedict, but in some ways it's necessary to make this distinction.

As a young theologian during the era of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) and immediately afterwards, Scherer argued, Ratzinger's role was to develop personal theological hypotheses grounded in Christian faith and tradition. Later, as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005, his job was to establish the correct interpretation of the faith for Christian and ecclesiastical life.

Now, however, Benedict XVI has a much broader mandate, Scherer said, which has traditionally been expressed as 'confirming the brothers and sisters in the faith.' That means not just ruling on doctrinal disputes, but providing a positive and compelling vision of the Christian message.

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Scherer summed up Benedict's approach with a line from the pope during his 2007 trip to Brazil, when Benedict said that the church grows 'not by proselytism, but by attraction.'

Surveying Benedict's efforts so far, Scherer identified three key themes: the relationship between faith and reason; natural law; and the centrality of the human person. All three, Scherer said, offer a challenge to what Italians call the *pensiero debole*, or 'weak thought,' of the modern world, meaning a lack of confidence in the ability of the human mind to ever find objective truth.

'This may seem a little out of place, because logically you'd expect a pope to talk about the importance of faith,' Scherer said. 'That obviously is also important to Benedict XVI. Yet from the beginning, the pope also has been calling attention to human reason, the human capacity to reach the truth.'

Scherer said Benedict's emphasis on reason and truth is especially critical 'in this cultural moment,' which he described as an 'intellectual crisis.'

'Human beings must not renounce their rational capacity and become indifferent to the truth,' Scherer said. 'Doing so not only darkens our view of nature, but it would make human beings slaves – to their passions and emotions, or to special interests of various sorts.'

In that sense, Scherer suggested, the real surprise of the papacy so far is that Ratzinger the theologian has emerged as Benedict the philosopher.

Benedict's principled defense of reason, he said, 'isn't just religious teaching, but it's about philosophy and culture. It's an attempt to defend what is really at the basis of all human culture and life.'

In particular, Scherer said, Benedict XVI is defending the very basis of ethics – an effort, he suggested, that any morally sensitive person ought to appreciate, whether or not they share the particular conclusions Benedict reaches.

In terms of specific points of emphasis in Benedict XVI's teaching, Scherer singled out his strong environmental message, his accent on ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue, and his insistence upon the missionary dimension of the church.

During a brief Q&A session, Scherer also fielded a question about Benedict's recent decision to lift the excommunication of four traditionalist bishops, including one who's a Holocaust denier. Scherer acknowledged that the communication of that decision could have been better handled, saying that church insiders understood that this didn't mean the bishops were "rehabilitated," but rather that a long process of reconciliation had begun. That point, he conceded, was largely lost on the outside world.

"When we use our own jargon, sometimes everything seems clear to us, but not to anybody else," Scherer said. "Church spokespersons have to remember that the general culture no longer has a religious formation, so our words or deeds can be misunderstood or misinterpreted."

At the same time, Scherer wasn't willing to put all the blame on the Vatican or the pope.

"It's also true that people who cover religious matters should take the time to inform themselves," he said. "So, everyone could have handled this better."

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