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Pope Benedict XVI: after five years -- Part 1

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

I have recently been described in a couple of media outlets as a "frequent critic" of Pope Benedict XVI. Many readers of such comments might assume that I have a longstanding bias against the pope. But there is a substantial paper trail to the contrary, especially in this weekly column.

Soon after Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger's election to the papacy just over five years ago, I took positive notice of his decision to take the name Benedict for his pontificate.

Benedict XV, I pointed out, had been a healing and unifying pope, in contrast to his immediate predecessor, Pope Pius X, whose pontificate was the most divisive in the whole of the 20th century. (I gave the reasons for this stern judgment in my column for the week of May 9, 2005.)

The choice of a papal name, I reminded readers, is the first signal a new pope can give of the course he intends to follow during his pontificate. In selecting the name Benedict, Pope Ratzinger, as the Italians like to refer to popes, forecast that he would try to be a wise and flexible leader, a father to the entire Catholic community, not just to those with whom he might feel a special ideological kinship.

It is "only fair," I ended my column of May 23 of that same year, "to give [Pope Benedict XVI] a chance to mark out his own path -- with our prayerful support."

The following September the new pope met with his former Tübingen colleague -- and theological nemesis -- Hans Küng. I devoted an entire column to their four-hour meeting, including a private dinner together, in order to praise Pope Benedict XVI for such a generous gesture.

"Some may try to diminish the significance of [that] meeting ... by citing Benedict's earlier audience with the head of the Society of St. Pius X, the schismatic movement founded by the late Archbishop Marcel

Lefebvre," I wrote in my column for the week of October 24, 2005. "But that is exactly what bridge-builders do. And it is also what 'Pontiff' means."

I cited that meeting again in my column for the week of November 21, which provided an assessment of the pope's first seven months in office, citing other, less celebrated achievements on the ecumenical and inter-faith fronts.

My column for the week of February 27, 2006, noted that the only criticism thus far in Benedict's short pontificate had come from his conservative allies, those who had rejoiced in Cardinal Ratzinger's election. Some of them expressed "palpable uneasiness" over his early appointments to the Roman Curia and to various dioceses in the United States.

"Contrary to his pre-election image as the hard-line enforcer of orthodoxy and discipline," I wrote, "the new pope has shown himself to be modest, self-effacing, non-combative, inclusive, and pastorally sensitive."

I concluded that column by referring to the path marked out before Pope Ratzinger by Benedict XV, "who was a gentle peace-maker, not a confrontational divider."

In an assessment of Benedict XVI's first year in office, this column declared: "Only God knows how long the new pontificate will last, but it has begun well" (week of April 17, 2006).

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Looking toward his third year as pope, my column for the week of June 11, 2007 noted that liberal, reform-minded Catholics were relieved that Benedict XVI had not pursued a crack-down policy toward them. However, some commentators began to see evidence of the "old Ratzinger," citing the ban on gays in the priesthood and the censure of a prominent Latin American liberation theologian, Jon Sobrino, S.J.

My three-year evaluation appeared while the pope was in the midst of his pastoral visit to the United States, when he met with victims of sexual abuse by priests (week of April 14, 2008). I also mentioned a few unhappy initiatives, such as his granting permission the previous September for the celebration of the Latin Mass without the local bishop's approval, and the unfortunate controversy with Muslims over his speech at Regensburg University the year before that.

But the column for the week of April 14, 2008 applauded the pope for his "laid-back, self-effacing, and humble" style, for not personalizing the papacy, or for putting himself at center-stage.

The column also noted that his first two encyclicals were generally well-received and were welcomed for their "moderate, non-censorious tone."

Such adjectives, I concluded, "describe this pontificate as well as any other."

However, things began to change by early 2009 when the pope lifted the excommunications from four schismatic bishops, one of them a Holocaust-denier, and this year's controversy swirling around the pope regarding his past dealings with sexually abusive priests.

Read the second half of this column here: [Pope Benedict XVI: After Five Years -- Part 2](#)

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