NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (https://www.ncronline.org)

On Devotion to the Papacy

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 4, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

The USCCB has issued a new book about the Holy Father, Pope Benedict: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy [1], edited by Sr. Mary Ann Walsh, the director of media relations for the Conference. It is a splendid book not least because it will make a perfect Christmas gift for my Dad. (Oops ? there goes the surprise!)

My Dad would not read a book of theology. But he loves the Pope. He loves this Pope. He loved Pope John Paul II, in part because of ethnic pride: Our family name was Wojtczuk before they anglicanized it. He loved Pope John Paul I, as did we all, in the few weeks he was given to us. He loved Pope Paul VI. You get the picture.

In the 1960s, many American Catholic homes were adorned with pictures of both President Kennedy and Pope John XXIII. Good Pope John was the first Pope of the television age, and his warm smile and grandfatherly ways reached a worldwide audience. But, popular devotion to the papacy is older than the age of television. In 1782, Pope Pius VI ventured to Vienna in an effort to improve relations with the Hapsburg Emperor. The Emperor exposed him to a series of petty humiliations, but the thing that is most remembered about that visit, and which was something of a surprise to both Pope and Emperor, was the fact that devoted Catholics lined the Pope?s route to beg for his blessing. Pius VI was not a very good Pope, but he was a rock star before there were rock stars.

I recall the first time I went to a General Audience in the early 1980s. It was a slightly disconcerting experience. Held in the Paul VI Hall in the Vatican, the crowd was maddeningly intent on pushing and shoving to get a slightly better glimpse of the Pontiff as he entered. (The good sisters were the most pushy as I remember, with elbows as sharp as a too tart pinot grigio.) There was no recognizable liturgy, although we recited the Lord?s Prayer. I recall entertaining the impious thought that the scene was too rife with the cult of personality, that it resembled too much for comfort the scene that accompanied the funerals of Nasser or Stalin. I have always been suspicious of cults of personality, no matter whom their object, and everyone should be suspicious of mobs of any variety.

But, my suspicions were wrong. I came to realize that what the crowd in the Paul VI Hall wanted was to be close to the successor of the man who is the direct descendant of the man who was Jesus? best friend when he walked upon the earth. It was not Pope John Paul II?s out-sized personality that drew the people to the hall and they would have been just as eager, and just as pushy, if they were waiting for a more reserved Pope. We Catholics like to touch our faith. We like the smell of incense in our nostrils. We like the taste of the Most Previous Blood on our lips. We like the feel of Holy oils on our foreheads. We like the kiss of peace with our brethren. We want to worship in a beautiful church that excites our eyes as well as our imaginations. Our faith is decidedly incarnational because our God is incarnational. The papacy is a part of that. Our tradition is not only held in our minds as a great principle of faith. You can see the successors of the apostles. You can shake their hands. And you can fill the Paul VI Hall and stand on your chair, and scream and shout when the successor of Peter enters the room.

One is tempted to say that it is not the man, but the office, that the people love but that is precisely wrong too. That day in the Vatican, the crowd wanted, and I have come to desire too, to be close to the man. We Catholics

want to touch the human face of our faith. The crowds would not have assembled to acclaim a book. They would not have been so ecstatic over the arrival of some abstraction. Just as our Lord took on human flesh, we Catholics cling to the human in our lives and seek to bless it. We bless our fleets at great ceremonies and with great celebrations. We bless our meals with grace. We bless our calendar and our clocks with the Calendar of the Saints and the Liturgy of the Hours. We bless the gifts of bread and wine and offer them, and our lives, to be transformed on the Altar. We crave to be united into the community of love that we call the Trinity. The quotidian is where we find God. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us and, through the ministry of the Church, we believe He dwells among us still.

This new book brings the man who is Pope closer to us still. It contains short essays in which those who have met with him describe him, his personal kindness and understated charm, his keen intellect, his sense of pastoral solicitude. Cardinal Sean O?Malley offers a beautiful, if painful, recollection of Pope Benedict?s meeting with the victims of clergy sex abuse during his 2008 visit to the United States. Archbishop Gregory Aymond recalls meeting the Holy Father after receiving the pallium this year. He told the Holy Father he brought the prayers of the people of New Orleans with him and the Pope replied immediately by asking about how the rebuilding was proceeding, five years after Katrina!

I admit it. I am a huge, make that HUGE, fan of this Pope. I was among those progressive Catholics who worried what a Ratzinger papacy would look like when he was elected in 2005, but as Pope Benedict demonstrated recently in his trip to the United Kingdom, he has become an extraordinary pastor, gently guiding the flock, proposing a renewal of Christian faith to cultures that have lost their sense of the divine, presenting thoughtful dissertations on the role of the Church in society. He has not been the kind of ?in your face? pastor some feared and for which others hoped. His encyclicals are masterpieces of thoughtful engagement not thunderbolts of condemnation. His appointments to the hierarchy, as Rocco Palmo demonstrated [2]in these pages last week, have been outstanding, elevating pastors, not apparatchiks considered mostly for their presumed loyalty to an agenda, to the ranks of the hierarchy. He has encouraged the new ecclesial movements that bring together clergy and laity to preach the new evangelization. People may quibble with this decision or that, and the Vatican is still maddeningly slow in facing certain crises and in perceiving the way our hyper-ventilating media age works, but I think any fair-minded person must recognize that the papacy of Pope Benedict is proving to be a blessing to the Church. This new book will help all Catholics, from the most simple to the most sophisticated, appreciate the many faces of Pope Benedict?s papacy, but most of all, this book brings the human face of our faith, in the person of the Pope, closer to us.

To commemorate this new book, the Q & A segment of this blog will feature discussions of Pope Benedict?s contributions to the Church for the next two weeks. I contacted ten people via email to comment on Pope Benedict?s papacy and tune back in later today to find a first submission from Father Robert Imbelli of Boston College. Bishop Jaime Soto, Father Ken Himes, CUA President John Garvey and Father Julian Carron of Communioe e Liberazione will be included during the rest of the week. Next week, we will get to hear from the young theologians who participated in the Fordham Conversation Project about their thoughts on Pope Benedict. And, tomorrow, I shall write about this Pope specifically in these pages.

Source URL (retrieved on *10/27/2016 - 12:36*): https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/devotion-papacy

Links:
[1] http://www.amazon.com/Benedict-XVI-Essays-Reflections-Papacy/dp/1580512348/ref=sr_1_40?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1286194491&sr=1-40
[2] http://ncronline.org/blogs/distinctly-catholic/q-rocco-palmo-0