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# Blast From the Past: Early Ratzinger

Michael Sean Winters | Oct. 8, 2010 Distinctly Catholic

I thought I would close out our week of looking at Pope Benedict's contributions to the Church by recalling one of his very early contributions, his 1968 book Introduction to Christianity.

In the very first chapter, Raztinger recalls Kiekegaard's story of the circus tent that catches fire. A clown, already madeup in his costume, runs to the nearby village to warn them that the fire will spread and engulf their homes, but because of his outfit, they only laugh at him and, the more he pleads, the more they laugh. At the time Raztinger was writing, Harvey Cox had invoked this image in his then-recently published book, The Secular City. Both Kierkegaard and Cox were trying to show the situation of theology in the modern world. Here is what Ratzinger does with the story:

> "Perhaps we should admit that this disturbing analogy, for all the thought-provoking truth contained in it, is still a simplification. For after all it makes it seem as if the clown, or in other words the theologian, is a man possessed of full knowledge who arrives with a perfectly clear message. The villagers to whom he hastens, in other words, those outside the faith,are conversely the completely ignorant, who only have to be told something of which they are completely unaware; the clown then need only take off his costume and his makeup, and everything will be all right. But is it really such a simple matter as that?...Nevertheless, if he who seeks to preach the faith is sufficiently self-critical, he will soon notice that it is not only a question of form, of the kind of dress in which theology enters upon the scene. In the strangeness of theology's aims to the men of our time, he who takes his calling seriously will clearly recognize not only the difficulty of the task of interpretation but also the insecurity of his own faith, the oppressive power of unbelief in the midst of his own will to believe...his own situation is by no means so different from that of others as he may have thought at the start."

I would submit that this searching, brutally honest and self-critical awareness of the young Ratzinger is largely responsible for his success preaching in the public square. Unlike some bishops, the Bishop of Rome does not see himself set apart from the villagers, but knows their doubts and, just so, can speak in an idiom they can appreciate.

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