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Benedict XVI: A shy, better pope

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

Pope Benedict XVI's much-touted state visit to Britain last month tracked closely with the 32nd anniversary of Pope John Paul II's election to the papacy, on October 16, 1978. The visit provided yet another opportunity to compare and contrast the personal and papal styles of the two men.

As the distinguished church historian Eamon Duffy put it in the *Irish Times* in early September, "John Paul II was manifestly a giant on the world stage, his life story one of titanic struggle against 20th century Europe's two great tyrannies, he himself a key player in the collapse of the Soviet empire."

"By contrast," Duffy continued, "Pope Benedict is an altogether smaller figure, a man of the sacristy and the lecture room."

Duffy considers Benedict as "probably more intelligent and certainly a better theologian" than John Paul II, and "shyer."

Unfortunately, the current pope is also more "maladroit and badly advised in his attempts to promote his views," with "poor antennae for the likely public perceptions of his actions and utterances."

Duffy cites three egregious examples: the talk in 2006 at Regensburg University that inflamed so much of the Islamic world; his decision the next year, against the opposition of many, if not most of the Church's bishops, to permit the use of the old unreformed Latin Mass without any episcopal approval; and "his disastrous though doubtless well-intentioned conciliatory gestures" toward the Holocaust-denying Lefebvrist Bishop Richard Williamson in 2009.

Even though the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in April 2005 "has not ushered in the era of ferocious reaction many feared," it has become increasingly clear where Pope Benedict's actual

sympathies lie. Namely, with those in the Vatican who wish to downplay the achievements of the Second Vatican Council and who wish at the same time to emphasize the council's continuity with the attitudes and ideas that dominated the pontificate of Pius XII in the 1940s and 1950s.

It is all the more remarkable, therefore, that the religious high point of Benedict's recent visit to Britain would be the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman, the famous 19th century convert from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism.

Although, as Eamon Duffy has pointed out, labels can be deceptive. In terms of the inner politics of today's Catholic Church, Newman -- in striking contrast to Pope Benedict -- was a liberal. Indeed, his vision of a healthy church was "in many respects the antithesis of Pope Benedict's."

To be sure he was utterly loyal to the papacy, but he was also a vocal opponent of the definition of papal infallibility in 1870 -- which he regarded as unnecessary and a burden to consciences. He was at the same time a vigorous opponent of ultramontanism, which sought to centralize Catholicism from elsewhere -- literally, from beyond the mountains -- in Rome.

Newman deplored clericalism (which Pope Benedict has rewarded through his appointments to, and promotions within, the hierarchy), worked hard to develop an educated and active laity (of which the pope's strongest allies have been deeply suspicious), and argued for greater freedom for theologians within the church (which, again, finds little support in this pontificate).

It may seem strange to some readers of this column that, all the evidence to the contrary notwithstanding, our clear preference remains for the personal and papal style adopted by Benedict XVI rather than that of John Paul II.

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Those who expected Joseph Ratzinger not only to carry forward the policies of his predecessor but also to expand them in a highly aggressive, even militant, fashion may have had their fondest hopes shattered.

At the same time, those who continue to regard the papacy of John Paul II as normative for every other pontificate, even to the point of referring to him now -- without any official authorization at all -- as "John Paul the Great," have sensed the air escaping from the balloon of initial enthusiasm when his eventual canonization seemed almost a certainty. "Santo Subito," the banners at his funeral proclaimed.

If the choice is between an "altogether smaller figure, a man of the sacristy and the lecture room," on the one hand, and that of "a giant on the world stage," on the other, the smaller, shyer figure wins every time.

Pope Benedict XVI has had more modest designs for the church.

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