

Benedict XVI and the lament of the hawks

John L. Allen Jr. | Apr. 5, 2012 All Things Catholic

Three decades ago, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger rose to fame as the architect of the Vatican's crackdown on liberation theology in Latin America, which he saw as a dangerous baptism of Marxist class struggle. That stance made Ratzinger a hero to anti-communist stalwarts everywhere, the perfect intellectual complement to John Paul II's muscular challenge to the Soviet empire.

Catholic hawks at the time believed that Pope Paul VI's *Ostpolitik*, meaning constructive engagement with Marxism, was finally dead and buried.

Today, those folks probably feel trapped in a B-grade slasher film in which the guy with the hockey mask and chainsaw keeps springing back to life. That's because since his election as pope, Benedict XVI has seemed less notable for his anti-communist audacity than his appetite for détente.

Benedict's March 26-28 visit to Cuba, in which he met both the Castro brothers but none of the pro-democracy dissidents, offered the latest case in point.

One sign of the psychological dissonance: American Catholic writer William Doyno [posted a March 27 essay for *First Things* under the telling headline, "Has the Church Gone Soft on Communism?"](#) [1] Doyno's basic answer was no, insisting that Benedict XVI is not an appeaser, but he also suggested that church officials may require some "fraternal correction" about their soft touch on Cuba.

Others were far less polite.

"I'm exceedingly disappointed," said U.S. Rep. Mario Diaz-Balart, a Florida Republican. (Diaz-Balart comes from a distinguished Cuban family, and his aunt was Fidel Castro's first wife.)

"[Pope Benedict] refused to meet with any members of the opposition," Diaz-Balart told The Huffington Post. "He refused to speak out in any real way against forced abortions. He refused to speak out against the human trafficking that is sponsored by the regime. He refused to condemn the human rights violations in any meaningful way. And it cannot be said that he's not aware of those issues ... He is aware of it because a lot of us have made him aware of it."

Writing for *National Review Online*, publisher Jack Fowler was even more critical, [excoriating the trip under the headline "Benedict bombs in Havana."](#) [2]

Fowler called the visit "a failed and tone-deaf pastoral mission that did PR wonders for the Brothers Castro, but not much for the cause of freedom of the people they have tormented for nearly six decades."

To be sure, Benedict did say that Marxism no longer corresponds to reality and warned of "irrationality and fanaticism," and he did extract a minor concession allowing Good Friday to be celebrated this year as a holiday. All that, however, seemed cold comfort for those seeking a more robust anti-Castro challenge.

Cuba, however, is hardly the only example.

Benedict's China policy has also come in for withering criticism, beginning in 2007, when he issued an 18-page ["Letter to Chinese Catholics"](#) [3] outlining his vision. Among other things, the letter appeared to suggest that the future for China's underground "church of the catacombs," built on a foundation of unyielding resistance to communism, was gradual reunion with the government-approved Patriotic Association.

Most notably, Benedict XVI revoked previous directives and special faculties issued for the church in China. Those directives had advised Chinese Catholics to avoid receiving the sacraments from government-approved clergy and allowed underground bishops to ordain clergy without specific papal sanction.

At the time, [traditionalist Catholic writer Marian Horvat](#) [4] bluntly charged that Benedict XVI had delivered "Chinese underground Catholics to communism," plunging them into "an enormous spiritual trial."

Such reservations have only grown with Benedict's recent induction of Bishop John Tong Hon of Hong Kong into the College of Cardinals, making him the seventh Chinese cardinal and the only one under 80, thus eligible to vote for the next pope.

In a recent interview with Italy's widely read *30 Giorni* magazine, Tong declared himself a "moderate" favoring dialogue with the government, making him a clear contrast to the fiery anti-Communist rhetoric associated with his predecessor, Cardinal Joseph Zen. In effect, Benedict found the perfect shepherd for the quiet diplomacy sketched in his 2007 letter.

Earlier this year, renowned Italian Catholic writer Sandro Magister noted Benedict's "silence" on China in his annual address to diplomats, despite the fact, as Magister put it, that China "is the only country in the world in which two bishops have been imprisoned for their faith and never heard from again, the first for 14 years and the second for 11."

One could also throw Vietnam into the mix, another one-party state where Marxist-Leninism remains, at least officially, the ruling ideology.

It's also, to be sure, a place that doesn't exactly roll out the red carpet for the Catholic church. Just last week, Vietnam revoked travel visas for a three-member Vatican commission scheduled to collect testimony for the beatification of the late Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyen V?n Thu?n, who spent 13 years in prison and under house arrest. Local Catholics say the government fears V?n Thu?n's beatification will shine an uncomfortable spotlight on its human rights record.

Yet with Vietnam, too, Benedict XVI has preferred dialogue over confrontation.

After a meeting between the pope and Prime Minister Nguy?n T?n D?ng in 2007, a "Joint Working Group" was formed to explore diplomatic relations. It's met three times, most recently in February, and each time, the Vatican issues polite statements hailing "significant progress." In January 2011, Benedict XVI appointed his first envoy to Vietnam, a nonresident representative, who quickly pledged his "availability both in service and collaboration."

This rapprochement is unfolding, by the way, at the same time international human rights monitors report "intensifying repression" of religious minorities in Vietnam. Last year, at least a couple dozen Catholics were detained by security forces, many of them linked to a movement of Catholic entrepreneurs pushing for reform.

So, what gives? How to reconcile Benedict XVI's dovish touch as pope with his strong anti-Marxist stance as

the Vatican's doctrinal czar?

For one thing, comparing his approach to liberation theology with his diplomatic line today on Cuba or China is an apples-and-oranges exercise. His beef with liberation theology was basically intra-ecclesial; rightly or wrongly, he felt orthodox Christian faith was being hijacked in service to an ideology. How to handle dissident theologians inside the church is, obviously, a different question than how to engage hostile governments outside the church.

Benedict as pope has to worry about the external fallout of whatever diplomatic strategy he adopts, especially for the Catholics who live in these neighborhoods.

In part, too, Benedict's line undoubtedly reflects the fact that we don't live in the same world as the Cold War era. On the ground in China, Cuba and Vietnam, the decision against classic Marxism has already been made. Each society is evolving toward something new, and Benedict's calculus is likely that the church is better positioned to influence the transition by staying in the conversation.

Finally, Benedict's version of *Ostpolitik* confirms an insight that has sometimes been ignored or glossed over: This pope may be a conservative, but he's hardly an American-style neo-con.

During his last foray into Latin America, in Brazil in 2007, Benedict issued a stinging critique of both capitalism and communism, insisting that both rest on false "ideological promises." Back in 1988, in his book *Church, Ecumenism and Politics*, Ratzinger wrote that capitalism, communism and National Socialism all proposed false idols -- prosperity, the state and the *Volk*, respectively. Famously, Benedict's 2009 social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, which included a call for global governance "with real teeth," left the ideological right cold.

While Benedict is not naïve about repression in places such as China and Cuba, he's also more inclined to sympathy for their protests against economic and geopolitical injustices than most hard-liners. Given that Benedict doesn't fully share the aims of Western hawks, it should come as no surprise that he also doesn't embrace their ways and means, including saber-rattling and using his trips to deliver a poke in the eye.

Whether that's admirable tact or lamentable weakness is open to debate. The bottom line, however, is that anyone expecting Benedict XVI to turn into Dick Cheney in a cassock is destined for disappointment.

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