

## For Benedict XVI, less is more

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

**J**ournalists have a rather peculiar way of evaluating public figures. Like athletes, we want to be in the game, and that means covering someone who consistently makes news. That way our copy makes the front page, or our TV packages become the lead item on the nightly news.

Even reporters who didn't share his faith convictions, therefore, generally enjoyed covering Pope John Paul II, because he dominated the world's attention for more than a quarter-century. Some journalists made their careers as chroniclers of his life and papacy. Biographer Jonathan Kwitny once dubbed John Paul "the man of the century;" I suspect many in the Vatican press corps would add that he was "the story of the century" as well.

What became clear during Benedict XVI's May 25-28 trip to Poland, if it wasn't already, is that things are different under this pope.

Had it not been for the Auschwitz visit on Sunday, or Benedict's off-hand comment about the beatification of John Paul on Saturday, the visit might as well have taken place on the dark side of the moon as far as the interest level of most media agencies. The fact that Benedict attracts large and enthusiastic crowds both in Rome and on the road suggests he strikes a chord with his base. Yet he does not play to the press gallery, and he doesn't engage in sweeping gestures or sound-bite formulae, so he doesn't galvanize global attention.

Benedict XVI, in the language of the guild, is largely a pope for the inside pages.

In Poland, I found myself wondering if this "less is more" style could have ecclesiological consequences -- if Benedict's way of exercising the papacy, quite apart from any explicit teaching, could change the way we think about the pope.

To explore that question, I turned to Richard R. Gaillardetz, who holds the Margaret and Thomas Murray and James J. Bacik Endowed Chair in Catholic Studies at the University of Toledo in Toledo, Ohio. Gaillardetz has written widely on ecclesiological topics, and is a popular speaker on these subjects.

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While recognizing that John Paul's visibility was an enormous asset in terms of his capacity to shape history, Gaillardetz argued that his superstar status was also, to some extent, "ecclesologically problematic."

"It gave a prominence to the papacy that is in some ways 'extra-ecclesial,'" Gaillardetz said.

"The dogmatic constitution *Pastor Aeternus* of Vatican I (1869-70) said the papacy exists to serve the unity of faith and communion," he said. "Being a rock star is just not part of the job description. It adds a dimension that makes one uneasy; it's hard to know what the theological value of it is," he said.

"It attributes so much visibility to the papacy that it's difficult at the same time to accent collegiality and the legitimate authority of the bishop's office," Gaillardetz said. Under John Paul, he said, "periodic assertions of episcopal collegiality were overwhelmed in a sea of papal events."

Gaillardetz argued that the emergence of what some have called an "imperial papacy" in the late 19th and 20th centuries distorted the balance among various levels of authority. He cited *Pastor Aeternus*, which devoted four long chapters to the authority of the pope and just one brief paragraph to the bishops, as a classic example.

Gaillardetz said John Paul's commitment to evangelization helped explain his astonishing drive, as well as his reliance upon the tools of pop culture. Benedict, Gaillardetz said, comes off as more of a catechist, explicating the basics of the faith in more calm fashion.

"Benedict has no interest in spectacle, and for the most part that's positive," he said. "It may help restore a more healthy proportion."

"Benedict knows his theology, so he knows what the theology says about the papacy, how it must be rooted in the college of bishops," he said. "The papacy is not a fourth order in the sacrament of Holy Orders. He's a bishop, and with Benedict I think it will be easier to teach that."

On the other hand, Gaillardetz said, it is too early to say if this is merely a shift in style or also a matter of substance.

He said the four instruments of the activist papacy of the 20th century have been dramatic symbolic gestures (think John Paul II at the Western Wall in Jerusalem), encyclicals, bishops' appointments, and what he called the "aggressively interventionist practice of the Roman Curia."

Gaillardetz said there will obviously be fewer grand gestures under Benedict XVI, and to judge by the evidence of *Deus caritas est*, his encyclicals will be more catechetical rather than sweeping and speculative. To date, he said, Benedict has not made many significant appointments, but generally they have been "non-divisive personalities."

Yet Gaillardetz argued that what he termed the "interventionist practice on the part of the curia" continues apace. He offered three examples:

- The November document on gay seminarians
- A letter from Cardinal Francis Arinze, prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship, cracking down on liturgical practices in Chiapas in southern Mexico
- Another letter from Arinze to Bishop William Skylstad, president of the U.S. bishops' conference, warning that liturgical translations not in accord with Roman rules cannot be approved

"I think this still adds up to a fairly aggressive exercise of papal authority," Gaillardetz said.

Gaillardetz also expressed reservations about the recent decision by Benedict XVI to drop the title "Patriarch of the West," which, he said, if anything amounts to a more sweeping assertion of papal authority over the entire church, East as well as West.

At the same time, Gaillardetz said, there are inklings that Benedict's stated commitment to collegiality is real. He pointed to rule changes at last October's Synod of Bishops that allowed free exchange, as well as openness to theological discussion on difficult subjects such as the use of condoms in the context of marriage to prevent HIV/AIDS.

Yet, Gaillardetz said, as long as the "refashioning" of the papacy unfolds largely on the level of style, its impact will be greatest in the wider world rather than inside the Catholic church, where he believes the mechanisms of strong papal governance remain largely intact.

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Obviously, not every ecclesialogist would add things up this way. A number of theologians today defend a strong papacy, not least as a bulwark against hostile governments (such as China, Saudi Arabia, and North Korea) as well as from relativistic secular societies, especially in Western Europe and North America.

Moreover, there is a natural tendency to complain about papal authority only when decisions are not going one's way. Few center-left theologians objected to an "imperial papacy" when John XXIII called the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), or when Paul VI imposed progressive liturgical and disciplinary reforms in the post-conciliar years.

Most would at least agree, however, that how a pope exercises his office can influence the way Catholics, as well as the rest of the world, think about the papacy. Style and substance are not the same thing, but neither are they unrelated.

Recently Cardinal Jean-Marie Lustiger, the emeritus archbishop of Paris, argued during a Rome conference that the life of John Paul II constitutes a theological trope, a source of theological insight in its own right. In the same way, Benedict's papal style may well come to represent an ecclesiological trope, and one that could reconfigure the debate in unpredictable fashion.

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