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Contra Mr. Bottum

Michael Sean Winters | Feb. 28, 2013 Distinctly Catholic

Last week, I called attention to an article by David Gibson [1]in which Gibson, one of the best reporters on religion writing today, discussed conservative complaints about Pope Benedict XVI, complaints that have only emerged now that Benedict is resigning. As part of his article, Gibson highlighted a column by Joseph Bottum, former editor of First Things. Mr. Bottum and his friends took exception to Gibson?s article and my wholehearted endorsement of it. So, let?s look a little more closely.

Bottum makes small mistakes, such as claiming that Pope John Paul II assumed the papal throne in 1979 when, in fact, it was in 1978. Such a small mistake does not detract from his argument, of course, although it evidences a lack of editorial oversight and fact-checking. I will give Bottum a pass on this: All of us have been busy since Benedict made his surprise announcement that he was stepping down from the papal throne.

Other mistakes cannot be ignored and do affect Bottum?s credibility. He wrote:

The truth is, however, that if proper governance of the church?doing the hard administrative work needed to sail that ship of the fisherman, St. Peter?were all that is required of a pope, then Benedict should have resigned long ago. His aging has brought little new; he has been, all in all, a terrible executive of the Vatican. Not in San Celestino?s league, of course, but as bad as a pope has been for 200 years.

Now, clearly, Bottum is not suggesting that Benedict was the worst pope in 200 years, period. He is focusing on Benedict?s managerial abilities. But, his claim ? worst manager in 200 years ? is a large claim. It is also an incorrect claim and a pernicious one and a particular kind of pernicious claim. It evidences a uniquely modern way of disassociating skills from the ends to which those skills are deployed. Bottum here shows himself to be infected with precisely the kind of secular mentality he has made a career out of denouncing. Let me explain.

Pope Pius X was not a manager. He took initiatives like teaching a Sunday school class by way of emphasizing the importance of CCD. He also demanded changes in the liturgy of the Church, lowering the age for the reception of Holy Communion and encouraging a more frequent reception of the sacrament. But, the day-to-day management of the Church was turned over to his Secretary of State, cardinal Merry del Val. There is no evidence Pius objected to Merry Del Val?s activities, neither is there evidence he closely supervised them, but in any event, he was responsible for those activities when he assess his papacy. And what were those activities? Merry del Val inaugurated one of the ugliest witch hunts in the history of the Church. Secret investigations were undertaken of senior churchmen, many of whom were tarred with the charge of modernism and exiled to posts of little significance. The dragnet even caught a young priest, Father Angelo Roncalli, who would grow up to become Pope John XXIII. Archbishop Giacomo della Chiesa was also implicated and he found himself kicked out of the Vatican curia and exiled to Bologna. He was passed over for a red hat three times. Finally, at the fourth consistory, he was made a cardinal. A few months later, Pius died and della Chiesa was elected pope.

The management of the Church under Pius X set back the intellectual life of the Catholic Church by a generation. It cast aspersions against loyal churchmen. It created a climate of fear throughout the Vatican and, indeed, through all Catholic universities and seminaries. Was this not worse than any failings of Benedict? What of the mostly reactionary and incompetent popes who followed the spectacularly successful papacy of Pius VII? We can barely remember their names, but if we had lived in the Papal States at that time, we would have lived in the most backward nation in Europe, where brigands made the roads dangerous, marshes went undrained and made disease flourish, the government was corrupt and, when not corrupt, otherwise incapable of affecting any kind of positive activity to improve the lot of the people who lived under papal rule. Yet, Mr. Bottum would have us believe al this was better than Benedict. The limits of Pope Pius XII?s reign, especially its later years, are well known. Sister Pasqualina comes to mind. Better than Benedict?

Most especially, we must compare Benedict?s management with that of his immediate predecessor, Pope John Paul II. Bottum argues John Paul II by-passed to curia to achieve his aims, and there is some truth in that observation. But, in the period of John Paul?s papacy that is most relevant to this discussion of Benedict?s resignation, his final years, does anyone look on John Paul II?s last years as a managerial success? When Cardinal Sodano prevented any action being taken against Father Maciel, was that good management? What did that cost the Church?

What matters when assessing management is not so much whether the trains run on time but whether the trains have a destination that is appropriate. Pope Benedict XVI tried to deal with the crises that confronted his papacy. There were self-inflicted wounds to be sure. There were difficulties left to him by John Paul II. The entrenched methods of the Vatican proved resistant to change. But, at least Pope Benedict put the trains on tracks that are moving in the right direction. It will be left to the next pope to try and speed them up.

There are other problems in Bottum?s analysis. He writes that Benedict had ?A household staff who were pilfering papers and selling them to journalists and souvenir seekers.? Actually, he had one member of his household staff who pilfered documents, not a staff full of them.

Then, out of nowhere, Bottum changes horses. ?And yet, John Paul II also reminded us that running the Vatican isn?t the sole or even the most important job of the pope. Being a teacher, a living example of holiness, remains at the center.? This is undoubtedly true. But, it is also true that a pope whose physical health is failing, cannot really teach. When no one knows if the pope or his secretary is speaking, it is difficult to know what to think. And while it is good to have a pope who is a living example of holiness, many of us discern a profound commitment to holiness in Benedict?s selfless decision to voluntarily renounce the power of the papacy.

But, Bottum wanted Benedict to make a point. He writes:

In other words, the modern world doesn?t really need to see in the pope a model of competent administration, nice as that would be. It does need, however, a public reminder that we are not incapacitated as human beings when we age and prepare to die. We are not to be tucked away or compelled by moral pressure to remove our lives and deaths from public view.

It is true that our human dignity is not diminished by age, but out capacities for certain activities undoubtedly are diminished. The word ?pope? derives from the Italian ?papa? and in advanced age, a father is not expected to take care of the family. It becomes the family?s responsibility to care for its aging father. At this point in his life, indeed for many years, even long before his election in 2005, Joseph Ratzinger made no secret of his desire to retire to a life of reading and writing and prayer. Now, as is his undoubted right, he is letting himself do so. There is a lesson in this, too, even if Mr. Bottum does not choose to see it.

Mr. Bottum?s article put me in mind of an earlier article by the founding editor of First Things, the late Rev.

Richard John Neuhaus. One year into Benedict?s pontificate, Neuhaus wrote of the ?palpable unease? among his fellow conservatives that, heaven forfend, Benedict took the pastoral side of his papacy seriously. He was not a culture warrior. That article, too, breathed with a sense of knowingness, a mix of ?inside baseball? with historical sensibility. That article, too, failed to see that in pointing us towards Christ, Benedict was inviting us to remember that it is the promise of God?s mercy that is at the heart of the Gospel, and that the task of successor of the apostles is to see the world through the eyes of faith, not the faith through the eyes of the world. But, there is this difference. Neuhaus had the courage of his convictions and did not wait until Benedict was walking out the door to publish it.

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[1] http://www.religionnews.com/2013/02/18/analysis-conservatives-vent-disappointment-over-benedicts-papacy/