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Rolling Stone article makes unfair assumptions about Pope Benedict

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NCR Today

I am a pretty unlikely candidate to be defending Pope Benedict XVI, but I do feel some of the recent criticism he has received has not been justified and is perhaps misguided.

Veteran journalist John L. Allen Jr., in his last column for the *National Catholic Reporter*, spoke on a number of issues, but one was the recent *Rolling Stone* cover story on Pope Francis and the criticism it directed toward Pope Benedict.

Allen points out that a number of things Francis is getting credit for actually began with Benedict. He mentions the financial reform efforts currently underway as well as moves on the sexual abuse front. He goes on to note that Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado of the Legion of Christ first came under attack by Benedict. Allen also mentions the recent news that Benedict laicized 400 priests in the last two years of his papacy.

The *Rolling Stone* article makes a number of charges. In an otherwise excellent piece by Mark Binelli, *Rolling Stone* insists on contrasting every positive about Francis with a negative comment about Benedict. The negatives include Benedict's academic personality, which resulted in his inability to connect with the public. Much is also made of Benedict's role as doctrinal enforcer, his condemnation of homosexuality as an intrinsically moral evil, and his attack on liberation theology. Binelli also points out that Benedict encouraged and fostered conservative groups such as Opus Dei.

Clearly there are differences and even room for criticism, but I think it is primarily human differences that are being cited. Such differences would necessarily be a part of any transition. Benedict and Francis are two different people. In fact, they are very different. They differ in style, personality and approach. That

doesn't make one bad and one good. It doesn't mean that every time Pope Francis does something we consider positive, it contrasts with something negative about Pope Benedict.

Their priorities also differed, but perhaps without knowing it, *Rolling Stone* may have hit on the key when it states that Benedict "didn't have the personality or the strength to deal with everything that was happening." This, of course, led to his resignation. In other words, he knew a new leader was needed. He knew a change of approach was necessary. He himself called for it.

He and Francis have probably spoken more often than we know. I have a feeling he is on board with most if not all of what Francis is doing. I would suspect that he has even encouraged or nudged Francis in the direction he is going. I'm sure there is daylight between them, but I bet he is on the sideline, rooting Francis on and cheering most of the moves he is making.

I'm sure Benedict is a confidant and important adviser to our current pope. Those who may be hoping that he might be leading a secret traditionalist uprising in Rome are, I believe, quite deluded.

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