

HABEMUS PAPAM

The political cartoon in a local California newspaper caught the reaction well enough. In the left panel there was the puff of white smoke coming from chimney mounted on the Sistine Chapel and in the right there was the crude depiction of a couple with black smoke coming from their ears. The label on the right named them as liberal Catholics.

The election of Cardinal Ratzinger was more a surprise in that it contradicted the traditional wisdom that someone who entered the conclave as the Pope-to-be emerged just a cardinal. It also went against the Italian adage that a skinny Pope followed a fat one, meaning that there would be an effort to find someone not really like his predecessor. Benedict XVI has much in common with John Paul II, including a youth during which he had been victimized by the Nazis (mandatory membership in the Hitler Youth followed by compulsory military service). More respected as an intellectual than his Polish friend and mentor but faulted for a lack of charisma, both his homily and his first public addresses after his election have suggested that he too understands the importance of communication at a very human level.

Benedict has already stated the obvious: his reign will not be a long one. However, he is not just someone elected to be a caretaker while the cardinals mull over what direction they think the church should take in the future. What this means, though, is definitely a matter for debate.

Based on his years as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (once upon a time known as the Holy Inquisition), Benedict is perceived as the ultimate hardliner—"God's Rottweiler." In effect the power behind the throne during

John Paul's decline, Cardinal Ratzinger had intensified the effort to suppress internal dissent even as the church reached outwards to other religious traditions. This could mean, as one commentator has remarked, that he "will try to set in stone the rigid policies of John Paul II." But in the United States we have the precedents of the ultimate anti-Communist Richard Nixon normalizing relations with the People's Republic and the equally anti-Communist Ronald Reagan bringing about the end of the Cold War. Benedict, the ultra-conservative, has nothing to prove and for that reason might be the Pope who does allow some significant changes to take place.

A few possibilities: because of the impact of HIV in Africa, he might accede to the argument that a married couple's use of condoms is a legitimate application of the principle of double effect; in keeping with his aim to reunify the Christian community, he might prove more open to the idea of a married clergy; continuing John Paul's efforts to evangelize the world, he might encourage stronger interaction with Islam and Buddhism even as he continues John Paul's openness to the Jewish community.

Certainly there are reasons to think the opposite. Benedict's homily at the Mass prior to the convocation attacked the notion of relativism, and this can easily be read as an antipathy to even the most moderate vision of religious pluralism. His Vatican career with the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith was never known for its openness to theological innovation. And there has never been an indication that he fully appreciated the impact of the pedophile scandal on American Catholics.

(continued on page 2)

The bottom line is that we do not know what to expect. Benedict can either polarize the church still further or he can act to bring the People of God closer together. A key issue will be how he sees his role as CEO for the largest international corporation in the world. If control remains centralized with the Vatican, there is a greater chance that more progressive members of the hierarchy could act to set up a parallel church, just as did the reactionary Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre two decades back. On the other hand, allowing more authority to regional synods could open the door to a variety of interpretations in how to apply supposedly immutable theological principles. John Paul in effect avoided the issue, relying on his charisma to hold the world's Catholics together while the Vatican, primarily through Cardinal Ratzinger, squelched dissent. Benedict, who does not come into office with the reservoir of good will that was there with John Paul, will need to make his own position clear with all the risks that this involves.

Whoever is Pope, liberal or conservative, must deal with the de facto splintering of the church. Traditionalists, whether the extremists who consider Pius XII the last legitimate pontiff or those who do acknowledge the Pope but technically remain in a state of schism, are very much a minority but their influence is still growing, particularly in the United States. Many progressives have similarly broken away, with a bishop in Europe ordaining women and a number of faith communities appearing in the United States that are maintained by priests, typically married, operating outside the official diocesan structure. Benedict also needs to decide how he will deal with the influence of controversial groups such as Opus Dei, to which John Paul had given a special status as a papal prelature, and the Legion of Christ, whose founder remains accused of sexual predations against his own priests.

A particular problem confronting any effort at

world evangelization is how to deal with the People's Republic of China, which supports a national Catholic Church with validly ordained priests (some of whom have done their seminary studies in the United States) and an extensive hierarchy. One possibility would be to follow the same policy of accommodation that the church has in Vietnam, where the government gives or withholds permission for a priest to be ordained and retains a strict control over a bishop's activities, especially in more rural areas. The difference between Vietnam and China, however, is that there was never an effort to create a national church, and an acceptance of the existing hierarchy in China could be an unsettling precedent at a time when the Vatican appears to be asserting the role of a bishop in defending Catholic values in the political arena.

The same issue of acceptance remains with efforts to reunite the Orthodox and Catholic communities, which Benedict appears to see as one of his own goals. Presently there are parallel structures with an Orthodox hierarchy answerable to the various Eastern patriarchs and a Catholic hierarchy answerable to Rome. Who stays and who goes?

Looking just within the western tradition, the ordination of women and, for the Anglican community in the United States, the acceptance of gays as priests and bishops makes it less likely that the Church of England will be brought back into the fold, but perhaps it should not be ruled out altogether. A disturbing possibility, though, is that Benedict could reach out to those Episcopalians less happy with the changes in their own community and by doing so further dash the hopes of progressive Catholics.

Again, we do not know what to expect. Benedict XVI could confirm our worst fears, but he might also surprise us by opening unexpected doors. At the least, his reign, however short, will most likely not be dull.

Editor's note: Following up on our last issue, we note that St. Stanislaus Kostka parish continues to operate. We would like to acknowledge the kind letter from Joseph Kucieczyk, who pointed out that we misspoke in suggesting the parish property was originally a gift from the archbishop. The parishioners had always owned the property from the time the church was built in 1880.

Editor's note: Following Cardinal Ratzinger's election, I solicited reactions from past and present Board members. Eugene Bianchi has allowed me to excerpt the following from a much longer analysis.

The core of the problem [with the election] is a kind of humble hubris in which cardinals and pope have the answers and the modern "secular" world does not. ... In a more historical sense, the intra-church policies of John Paul II and Benedict XVI harken back to the 19th century attitude of Pius IX: we have the truth and you nasty secularists and modernists must listen to us. Read Pius IX's *Syllabus of Errors*. ... Benedict won't condemn the steam engine as did Pius IX, but the high dualism will still be there. But after a 26-year rule by John Paul II, the decks were stacked against a different outcome. When I saw the grim-faced cardinals on TV, while the populace in the square exclaimed joy at Benedict's appearance, I had the sense that they were uneasy about killing the bird of modern freedoms and being herded into a smooth curial ploy. Next time, get organized, guys; you have just been had in the name of holiness.

MEANWHILE, ARCC GOES ON Highlights of the Spring Board Meeting

It was the dark and stormy Friday night before the Pope died when the ARCC board of directors met in Bordentown, NJ. Fr. Tom Doyle, O.P. was welcomed as a member and Gaile Pohlhaus was elected to join. ARCC will play a significant role in the CTA conference this year in November, and VOTF affiliate groups have invited ARCC to their gatherings as more and more interest grows in the ways to bring about much needed structural change in the Church. A first step in this long-range goal is to focus on how bishops are chosen and how the People of God can have a voice in this process as well as who is assigned as their bishop. Once again ARCC seeks to restore the ancient tradition in the Church of accountability, openness, and participation that has been suppressed over the past centuries as the Vatican centralized power to become a global influence. It certainly has become a global influence as witnessed by current events, but at what price?

Budget matters always play a role at board meetings and this one was no different. Expenses surpassed income by more than \$2000 in 2004. Not as bad as the national debt, but a concern nonetheless. With new leadership in the church, the voice of ARCC needs to be heard more than ever to influence inevitable changes in the right direction.

Always, we are grateful and inspired by your continuing support. Please tell a friend about us (see our new website at www.arccsites.org) and ask them to join the fray.

Bob Schutzius, Secretary

ARCC DEVELOPS AN ONLINE PETITION

As noted in the report above, ARCC is moving forward in calling for a voice in the process for choosing bishops. One step has been to prepare a petition directed at all bishops and calling for a public commitment to inviting all the priests and religious of a diocese as well as lay representatives to take part in the process for submitting names of candidates for the episcopacy to the Apostolic Nuncio. The goal is to have the cooperation of one hundred bishops by Advent of 2006.

The petition is available online for your signature at this website:
<http://www.petitiononline.com/arcc/petition.html>

FROM THE EDITOR'S DESK:

For a quarter-century ARCC has been active in promoting a vision of a progressive Catholic Church. In 1978 John Paul II was named the Bishop of Rome and head of the Roman Catholic community. Many had hoped that he would advance the vision of collegiality and openness expressed in the Second Vatican Council, but very quickly it appeared evident that Rome's priority was an insistence on doctrinal conformity. There was to be no more talk of "liberation theology" in Latin America, for instance, and Hans Küng, a theologian who had played a major role in the Council, was declared unacceptable. In response, Len Swidler, one of the few laymen at the time to have earned a doctorate in Catholic theology, worked with other prominent figures to set up ARCC as a group that would continue to push for reform. We invite our readers to sample some of the material developed over the years through ARCC by going to our new, easier to remember web portal at <http://www.arccsites.org>

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