

POPE BENEDICT'S FIRST THREE YEARS

On April 19, 2008, Pope Benedict XVI will mark the third anniversary of his election as Pope; three days before that, he will celebrate his 81st birthday. And he will celebrate these events while making a trip to the United States. It seems appropriate to recall what he has brought to the papacy in these past 36 months.

First of all, he surprised many people after his election. For years as Head of the Congregation for the Faith, he had been called by European journalists "God's Rottweiler," and "The Grand Inquisitor," because of his strong insistence on orthodox theology. Yet there was a gentler side that the papacy has revealed. This was not a surprise to me because in 1989 when he was Cardinal Ratzinger, head of the Congregation for the Faith, I corresponded with him on behalf of the National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC), then in Boston, concerning end-of-life issues. He was a gracious correspondent.

Then in 1991 he came to Dallas to be keynote speaker at the Catholic Bishops' Workshop on Bioethics, sponsored by the NCBC. We chatted several times during coffee breaks and then I asked if I could spend a longer period of time with him to discuss some of the disputed moral questions of the day. We sat in his hotel room for an hour one evening before dinner, the two of us, talking about "pulling the plug" issues, euthanasia, abortion, organ transplants, etc. He spoke English very well and was kind and amiable — and of course, very much enlightened about the issues. A perfect host. The man I met in Dallas is the man who assumed the papacy and has shown to the world his inherent graciousness and amiability.

Another thing that has impressed me is the issuance of two encyclicals in three years (with a third one already in the works). The encyclical is a solemn form of communication used by popes to discuss serious issues with the Catholic world (and non-Catholic world too). Pope John Paul II wrote 14 encyclicals in his twenty-eight years as Bishop of Rome. Surprising many, Pope Benedict wrote his first encyclical on "Love." He spoke of "eros" and "agape." He wrote that eros, sensual love, has been reduced by our modern society to "sex" and a "commodity," a "thing" to be bought and sold. (We can think of recent newspaper headlines out of New York). Only when agape, unselfish and unconditional love, enters the field can eros be saved, Pope Benedict noted. And he added: "Love is not merely sentiment. Sentiments come and go ... It is not science that redeems man, it is love ... And love grows through love."

The pope followed up this first encyclical with a second one on "Hope." Perhaps the core thought of this document were these words: "The present crisis of faith is

essentially a crisis of Christian hope." The restoration of the lost Paradise is no longer expected from faith but from technical and scientific progress. But "man needs God, otherwise he remains without hope ... A world without God is a world without hope." Wonderful words for people to hear.

Throughout his speeches and writings on various topics during these past three years, there are several other themes that dominated the pope's thoughts. One is the influence of secularism on Europe. It has so pervaded European thinking that the new Constitution of the European Union does not even mention Christianity. The pope keeps arguing that to ignore the Christian foundation and formative value of Christianity is to deprive oneself of a basic understanding of Europe and of the only true means of unifying the continent.

Another theme of his that keeps reappearing is that of "relativism," the belief that there are no "moral absolutes" and that morality changes according to times, places, circumstances, situations. Thus, what was once considered wrong – such as abortion, euthanasia, the homosexual lifestyle – is now considered acceptable and even the basis of rights. The pope uses the expression the "dictatorship of relativism" and insists that it breeds "moral confusion."

And another theme that appears in the pope's speeches and writings is that of Christianity and Islam. He surprised the world with his talk at Regensburg University, September 12, 2006. The pope was criticized – and even vilified by some – for the talk. But it produced the beginning of a Christian-Muslim dialogue. At the Easter Vigil this year he baptized a prominent Italian journalist who had been born a Muslim – a gesture that spoke more than words about freedom of religion. Relationships between the nominally Christian West with rising Islam will produce some of the most significant – and difficult – confrontations of our time. The pope knows that.

I could also mention the continuation of International Youth Days, his visits to various countries, his reaching out (as John Paul II did so often) to the Orthodox Churches in an effort to heal the schism, and his reflections on faith and reason. All in all, these past three years have seen a different "style" in papal endeavors but a definite continuity of the efforts of John Paul II. I have been impressed and encouraged by this "triennium" of Benedict XVI.

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