

Testing Benedict XVI By the Company He Would Keep

Colleagues,

The Thursday Theology post for February 26, 2009 was Steve Krueger's analysis of the "working theology" of the current pope, Benedict XVI. I thought it was superb, creme-de-la-creme, so I sent it on to you. Want to check it again? Here's the URL: <https://crossings.org/thursday/2009/thur022609.shtml>.

Yet one of my dearest Roman colleagues, erstwhile priest and missionary in distant lands—and never one to say (in my hearing, at least) "If the pope says it, that settles it"—was very unhappy with Steve's analysis and critique. He had some sharp words for Steve and also for the book Steve was reviewing, David Gibson's THE RULE OF BENEDICT. That surprised me, since the Jesuits (seldom inclined to give unmerited acclaim) in their official magazine AMERICA praised Gibson's book: "extraordinarily well-written, informative, insightful, and page-turning (yes, it is a page-turner) book." But for my Roman friend, creme-de-la-creme it was not. More like sour milk. It was all wrong.

What I saw Steve doing—and he told us that more than once in his essay—was taking B16's own claim "I am a decided Augustinian," and laying it alongside Luther's own kind of Augustinianism and showing us what he found. Brilliant, I thought. The very outline of his essay took us through "three Augustinian issues" with ML and B16 side by side. Yes, there are differences, and they are important differences. Steve's conclusion: "Though Benedict claims to be a fan of Luther, the theology of the cross—central to Luther's Augustinianism—is a side of Luther that seems to have eluded Benedict entirely."

Is that a serious defect or not? For the Augustinianism of an “Augsburg-Catholic” it is indeed. So whose theological tradition has a major “defect”? That’s the standard Roman term for what non-Roman Christians are missing. And a defective theology of the cross—is that something subsidiary, or at the very center?

In order to show me and Steve the “other side” of the picture about Benedict XVI my Roman friend sent two texts just off the press—one from the pope’s own hand and one from a scholarly defender. I sent these directly to Steve. “Does this change the picture?” I asked. What he tells us below is his answer. Though he didn’t quote Pilate’s famous dictum “What I have written, I have written,” he might have. For the texts which purportedly would show the “other side,” still show the very “same” side, says Steve. Granted, that’s a verdict coming through Luther’s kind of Augustinian lenses. Here’s what he found.

Peace and joy!
Ed Schroeder

Testing Benedict By the Company He Would Keep

A good test for the church is to notice the company it would keep. Robert Bertram used to remind his students that it was precisely the company Jesus would keep that led him to the cross. The haunting question is raised from the Gospels, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” (Matthew 9: 11; see also Mark 2: 16 and Luke 5: 30). The question recurs also with equal force when you notice just who it is at the last judgment who had been in solidarity all along with the hungry, the thirsty, the estranged, the naked, the sick and the imprisoned noted in Matthew 25. The church, with its Lord, would be judged ultimately by the company it keeps.

Ed Schroeder asked me to do a follow up essay to my earlier review of David Gibson's THE RULE OF BENEDICT (2006) in light of some new data we have on this pope. Just before Benedict's recent globe-trotting to Cameroon and Angola in mid-March, presumably to keep company with the faithful there, the holy father found himself defending an action he had taken in January. In a letter dated March 10th, Benedict sought to make his case on why he lifted (the Vatican word is "remitted") the excommunication of four right-wing bishops associated with Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre (1905-1991) and his traditionalist Society of Pius X. The papal action is a good test case on evaluating where this pope's pontificate seems to be headed. Why would the pope want to hang out with these guys and the kind of Catholicism they represent?

Of course to a Lutheran, lifting excommunications by the Vatican wouldn't necessarily raise all the red flags and groundswell of criticism which the January 24th action by the pope appears to have triggered. Just on the face of it, lifting excommunications for the sake of bridge building could be seen, as Benedict would want the world to see it, as a rather nice "discreet gesture of mercy." Had Leo X of the 16th century been as generous in spirit who knows what might have happened almost half a millennium ago when one excommunicated Augustinian monk instead got the boot in 1521? Yet a deeper reading of the situation with the Lefebvrists most certainly places them at polar opposites to Luther. We are then left wondering what kind of new company this pope is urging upon his church if he is all that interested in building bridges in the name of Christ.

An old sidekick of Benedict's, Fr. Hans Küng (Küng had once brought the future pope to the University of Tübingen to join him on the faculty), has been one voice to have weighed in on his former colleague's papal action. In "Le Monde" Küng was deeply critical. Küng had once written about the kind of company

the church ought to keep but it was of a different crowd than the traditionalist purist crowd represented by the Society of Pius X. Commenting on the "Guilty Church" in his monumental ON BEING A CHRISTIAN (which Benedict had been instrumental in condemning), Küng wrote:

"A Church which will not accept the fact that it consists of sinful men and exists for sinful men becomes hardhearted, self-righteous, inhuman. It deserves neither God's mercy nor men's trust...If the Church self-righteously remains aloof from failures, irreligious and immoral people, it cannot enter justified into God's kingdom. But if it is aware of its guilt and sin, it can live in the joyous assurance of forgiveness. The promise has been given to it that anyone who humbles himself will be exalted" (pp. 507-508).

The folks Küng talks about as worthy of the church's association would not, more than likely, describe the 491 priests, 215 seminarians, six seminaries, 88 schools, two university level institutes, 117 religious brothers and 164 religious sisters (and four formerly excommunicated bishops) which comprise today's Society of Pius X. If anything, the Society's standard condemnation of the post Vatican II church as an "adulterous union" makes one wonder just who didn't want to keep company with whom? Was it the church expelling the Lefebvrists or was it the Lefebvrists expelling the church?

Küng's Tübingen faculty colleague, Peter Hünemann, equally expressed his serious doubts about Benedict's "remission of excommunication" for just this very reason. As reported by the "National Catholic Reporter" (March 20), Hünemann, "one of Germany's most eminent theologians," wondered in "Herder Korrespondenz" about the validity of the papal excommunication-lifting when the four bishops in question had shown anything but remorse for their positions, let alone any genuine repentance

required under canon law for the lifting of excommunication. The action, according to Hünemann, "was a grave mistake...one that will be very difficult to correct."

In his criticism of Benedict, Hünemann asked his reader to notice the whole history of the Lefebvrists and of the evolution of the Society of Pius X. The Society was founded in 1970 by French Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, an embattled prelate who had once been Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers largely responsible for bringing the faith to French Africa. His traditionalist views, clearly in evidence at Vatican II, ultimately ran afoul of the more progressive voices of his congregation and the French bishop ended up turning in his resignation for retirement in 1968 to Pope Paul VI. Lefebvre had been known for his identification with the defeated monarchists after the 1789 French Revolution who opposed the revolutionary principles of liberty, fraternity and equality and who had been sympathetic with the French Vichy regime of Marshal Petain which had collaborated with Nazi Germany alongside other right-wing voices and causes in French society.

Archbishop Lefebvre had gained notoriety at the Second Vatican Council for trying to undercut the language on the Council's approved document "On Human Dignity." Failing that, after his retirement in 1968 as Superior General of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Lefebvre took up his cause by responding to a call from traditionalist French seminarians for a conservative seminary (they had been refused ordination by Rome). The birth of that seminary in Switzerland in 1969 ultimately gave rise to the International Priestly Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX) in 1970, given "provisional" status by Bishop Francois Charriere of Freiburg, Switzerland for six years.

By 1975, the "Wildcat Seminary" (as it was known to the unsympathetic French bishops who refused its graduates

ordination) had worn out its welcome and after two unsuccessful meetings with the appropriate commission of cardinals for reconciliation, was officially closed by the Vatican which also dissolved the Society of Pius X. Nevertheless Lefebvre, now openly defiant, persisted in his work. When the Archbishop went ahead with ordinations in 1976, he was informed that in order to retain his canonical status he needed to apologize to Pope Paul VI. Instead, Lefebvre in his response blasted the Roman pontiff and the Council's work declaring Vatican II was "a compromise with the ideas of modern man." Paul VI responded by suspending the prelate.

Of particular note, one of Lefebvre's causes had been rejection of the liturgical reforms of Vatican II, especially the introduction of what the Archbishop called "the bastard rite" of the Mass of Paul VI. The Society, instead, defiantly retained only the Tridentine liturgies and made the Latin mass a major drawing card of support. Lefebvre had even joked that Pope Paul VI had done him a favor by forbidding him now to perform the new rites and tried to argue that "he had dodged the penalty by administering the sacraments using the previous formulas." According to one observer, Paul VI was not amused.

After several failed attempts with both Paul VI and John Paul II at reconciliation (in 1976 and 1978), Lefebvre announced his intention in 1981 to consecrate a bishop to succeed himself. The Archbishop had even finessed an agreement with the then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in 1988 to regularize the Society of Pius X again and to allow for Lefebvre to consecrate one bishop with Vatican approval. Later that year on June 30, Lefebvre reneged on that agreement and, despite Vatican warnings about "a schismatic act" and of "theological and canonical consequences," consecrated not one but four SSPX priests as bishops: Bernard Tissier de Mallerais, Richard Williamson, Alfonso de Galarreta and Bernard Fellay. Bishop Emeritus Antonio de Castro Mayer of

Campos, Brazil joined as co-consecrator.

The next day the Congregation for Bishops issued a decree that this was a schismatic act and that all six people involved had incurred automatic excommunication. On July 2, Pope John Paul II condemned the consecration in his apostolic letter "Ecclesia Dei" and said that, by virtue of canon 1382 of the Code of Canon Law, the bishops and priests involved were indeed excommunicated.

Lefebvre himself died in 1991 at the age of 85. His controversial life included not only his support for a pre-Vatican II church purified from "modernism" but support for political right-wing causes. Along with endorsing the authoritarian French Vichy regime (1940-1944), the prelate went on record in 1976 with praise for the regimes of Jorge Videla in Argentina and Augusto Pinochet in Chile. He also was noted for his historic praise in 1985 of the governments of Francisco Franco of Spain and Antonio Salazar of Portugal, noting that their neutrality during World War II had spared their populations the tragedy of war. In 1985, the French periodical "Present" quoted Lefebvre as endorsing the far-right leader Jean-Marie le Pen on the grounds the politician was the only political leader opposed to abortion. In 1990, Lefebvre was convicted in a French court of opposing Muslim immigration into Europe through hate speech, stating that "it is your wives, your daughters, your children who will be kidnapped and dragged off to certain kinds of places as they exist in Casablanca."

As Peter Hünermann assessed the meaning of lifting the excommunication of the Lefebvrist bishops, it is this storied life and its legacy that he has in mind. He noted that as recently as 2005, one of the bishops, Bernard Fellay, in meeting with the pope, seemed to be the one still laying down the ground rules for reconciliation, continuing to insist that the

Lefebvrists are the ones "who stand in true tradition of the church." The Hünemann critique offered two examples of Vatican II changes which the Lefebvrists continue to regard as "criminal:" First off, "heretics and schismatics" (Protestants and Orthodox) became "all our brothers and sisters who share our faith in Jesus Christ" and secondly, "the perfidious Jews" became "the Jewish people, the first to hear the Word of God." Hünemann seemed to be asking, "Is this the kind of crowd we want to be reopening the door to?" As the "National Catholic Reporter" puts it, "'The pope and the cardinals," Hünemann states, "are just as bound to a valid and accepted council as every Catholic is. The lifting of the excommunications were therefore a grave mistake on the pope's part . . . the pope's action is null and void under paragraph 126 of canon law.'"

In his Letter of March 10th, "Concerning the Remission of the Excommunication of the Four Bishops Consecrated by Archbishop Lefebvre," Benedict himself appears to be genuinely perplexed by all the uproar his action created. The pope begins with acknowledging "a discussion more heated than any we have seen for a long time." Even though "many bishops and...faithful were disposed to take a positive view of the Pope's concern for reconciliation, the question remained whether such a gesture was fitting..."

First off, the pope continues, there was that "unforeseen mishap" of the Williamson situation, which seems to have doubly complicated the whole affair. (It turned out that one of the four bishops in question, Richard Williamson of Britain, has had a long history of holocaust denials and very anti-Semitic public comments). "The discreet gesture of mercy," says Benedict, "suddenly appeared as something completely different: as a repudiation of reconciliation between Christians and Jews."

Yet, according to the pope, nothing could have been further from

the truth. The flap over this unintended meaning of the "remission" was a "misunderstanding."

In his letter, the pope next argues that many critics have failed to understand the distinction between lifting an excommunication for the sake of the healing of schism among the college of bishops (that's an individual thing) and the doctrinal issue of the status of ministers from the Society of Pius X. "Until the doctrinal questions are clarified, the Society has no canonical status in the Church, and its ministers-even though they have been freed of the ecclesiastical penalty-do not legitimately exercise any ministry in the Church," writes the pope.

However, papal critics who parse pontifical sentences and their meaning could easily conclude that since the Lefebvrists have never stopped their sacramental ministry, and, indeed have regarded theirs as the truer and more faithful ministry, the de facto effect is legitimacy now by the pope. Hünemann sadly notes that among Benedict's concurrent actions has been to re-legitimate the Latin rites of the Tridentine Church, one of the very foundations of the Lefebvrist movement.

Benedict, however, appears to believe he can finesse the differences. His letter next appeals to the requirement for any group wishing to be in communion with the bishop of Rome to accept the conclusions of the Second Vatican Council along with "the post-conciliar magisterium of Popes." Yet, the pope has added a contextual nuance to Vatican II. "The Church's teaching authority cannot be frozen in the year 1962," he writes with a sobering caveat for the benefit of progressives. 'But some of those who put themselves forward as great defenders of the Council need also to be reminded that Vatican II embraces the entire doctrinal history of the Church.'

However one scrutinizes papal sentences for their nuances, Benedict appears to believe that his version of bridge building to the extreme right as he “strengthens your brothers” (Luke 22: 32), is consistent with his overall pontifical game plan. “The overriding priority is to make God present in the world and to show men and women the way to God...whose face we recognize in a love which presses ‘to the end’ – in Jesus Christ, crucified and risen.” This priority is directed to “the real problem...that God is disappearing from the human horizon, and, with the dimming of the light which comes from God, humanity is losing its bearings, with increasingly evident destructive effects.”

The pope then adds that disunity among “all believers...calls into question the credibility of their talk of God.” True enough, the pope continues, countering disunity involves “ecumenism” and “interreligious dialogue” and the “social dimension of the Christian faith.” It also involves for Benedict the ‘gesture of reconciliation” enacted toward the Lefebvrists, who, ironically, have been among the most outspoken critics of the very ecumenism, interreligious dialogue and “devotion to the suffering...rejection of hatred and enmity...the social dimension of the Christian faith” of which Benedict speaks. It’s hard to reconcile this crowd (complete with Nazi sympathies and holocaust denials) to those lofty goals. But, with Benedict, there you are.

In probably a rare moment of self-pitying, obviously meant to produce guilt in his critics, Benedict laments, “At times one gets the impression that our society needs to have at least one group to which no tolerance may be shown; which one can easily attack and hate. And should someone dare to approach them-in this case the Pope-he too loses any right to tolerance; he too can be treated hatefully, without misgiving or restraint.”

So, it appears for the Roman communion the Lefebvrists are more

or less back in the fold, at least as far as Benedict is concerned. Benedict has pressed his point that they represent company the church ought to keep. Notwithstanding ending his letter on the note of Easter and its “renewed hope,” I would wonder where in the whole episode was the crucified One, the One who kept company with outcasts, tax collectors and sinners? If, as the pope says, God is missing from the world, where might God be found?

In his LETTERS AND PAPERS FROM PRISON, Dietrich Bonhöffer offered a different perspective on the absent-from-the-world-God. There, Bonhöffer wondered if it wasn't God letting Godself be pushed out of the world as a construct of human ideas (the explanation of everything we couldn't otherwise explain) and onto a cross where God could do us all so much more good? As Bertram would note in his CRUX, it is only as we are awestruck and flabbergasted at the foot of the cross, that this is what it cost the Son of God to hang out with the poor likes of me in order to redeem me, that then the greater questions of God's absence and presence can begin to be asked and answered.

From all reports keeping company with the Lefebvrists takes Benedict's church to an entirely different place, far away from the Crucified One.

Pastor Stephen Krueger
Sunday of the Passion, 2009