

# Pope Benedict XVI

Colleagues,

The current bishop of Rome stirred things up with his recent attempt to welcome a prodigal son back home. And he elicited response. National Catholic Reporter: “Another example of the danger of treating the lunatic fringe as lost sheep.” Then there was this exchange between Daniel Schorr, 92-year-old anchor on NPR, and Scott Simon—both of them Jewish—on “Weekend Edition.” Scott: “So what might the pope now do?” Dan: “Well, he could simply say what another world leader recently said: ‘I screwed up.’”

Today’s ThTh posting is about this pope, whom some of my RC friends refer to as “B16.” Steve Krueger is back again—after only a fortnight’s rest—with a book review about the “Rule of Benedict” (pun intended). Steve had raved to me earlier about David Gibson’s brilliant book. So I asked him to tell all of us what Gibson says. Here it is. As usual, Steve is not just reportorial, but does his own analysis (I insisted) and, of course, puts B16 alongside his fellow German of 500 years ago, Blessed Martin, himself a bit of a pontifex—on the Elbe river in Wittenberg, not the Tiber in Rome. As fellow German, Benedict can read Luther without translation. And he likes Luther. But, Steve asks, does he like the best stuff that came from that bridge-builder on the Elbe?

Peace and Joy!

Ed Schroeder

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## **Review of David Gibson's**

### **THE RULE OF BENEDICT XVI AND HIS BATTLE WITH THE MODERN WORLD.**

**(San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006). 390 pp., \$24.95 US.**

When Karol Wojtyla's name was dropped as a "papabile" (a "pope-able" candidate) at the second conclave of 1978 which ended up electing him, one Italian cardinal shrugged, "Chi é Bottiglia?" ("Who is Bottiglia?") Wojtyla had been that much a stranger to many of the electors. "Now you know who 'Bottiglia' is," John Paul II would soon tease that prelate as he stepped up to the new pontiff to pay his respects. Indeed, the shadow John Paul II would cast over the next 26 years was larger than life, with little doubt about who the once hardly-known cardinal from Krakow would turn out to be.

John Paul II's successor, the subject of THE RULE OF BENEDICT XVI AND HIS BATTLE WITH THE MODERN WORLD (hereafter RULE), would not have to emerge from such obscurity. David Gibson, whose vitae includes a stint at Vatican Radio during John Paul II's pontificate alongside documentaries for CNN and numerous articles for most of America's top-flight newspapers and magazines, offers in this book his well-documented assessment of Benedict's message and meaning for our time. To be sure, there seemed little question what the Catholic Church and its world were getting with the election of Joseph Ratzinger in the late Roman afternoon on April 19, 2005:

"The cell phone of an aide to Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, who was considered something of a progressive, buzzed with a text message. It was from Sir Stephen Wall, formerly public affairs adviser to the cardinal, and it simply said, 'Shit' (p. 9)...Ratzinger was the most polarizing figure in modern Catholicism and there was no middle ground when it came to

opinions on him (p. 11)."

RULE is Gibson's well-rounded attempt to get behind the man whom many had come to know as "God's Rottweiler, Cardinal No, Der Panzerkardinal, the Grand Inquisitor" (p. 6) and whose election was parodied on Italian cell networks. When good Pope John XXIII was elected in 1958, he had spoken to the Roman crowds in extemporaneous Latin and had said, "Hug your children and tell them this hug is from the pope." This time the cell phones were abuzz with the text message, "When you go home, slap your children and tell them this slap is from the pope" (p. 12).

Yet, popular perceptions aside about the man who has claimed the throne of Peter, Gibson's RULE is a major beginning to getting a fix on where Benedict's pontificate will take the church. Gibson feels with his election this pope will not be merely a temporary caretaker. "We are witnessing a struggle for the soul of Catholicism," Gibson says. "That battle has been going on for decades, but the election...brought the conflict to a head" (p. 17). Thus, "understanding Benedict himself is crucial, because his character, as much as his enormous body of theological writings, will set the tone...and will be the key for forecasting how he will act in whatever time remains to his papacy" (p. 17). RULE is about all those things, which makes this volume an important and valuable resource for anyone interested in Catholicism today who is wondering if Joseph Ratzinger would try to reinvent himself as Benedict XVI. Would he emerge in new ways which would be different, more unifying and more tolerant of the many strands of faith and life which comprise the Roman communion and its world?

To the author, a central and key insight into Benedict is his Augustinian home which often runs counter to the prevailing neo-scholasticism which the pope finds around him and which seems to inform so much of what the new pontiff believes as core truth.

"I am a decided Augustinian," Ratzinger has declared, curiously putting him at odds in many ways with even his immediate predecessor whose intellectual home was in Thomism, humanism and personalism (p. 157). This bias to the theology of the 5th century bishop of Hippo and his legacy, according to Gibson, has multiple implications running from Benedict's predilection away from experience to the perfect ideal to his source material for doing theology purely. If you could point to a central theme by which Joseph Ratzinger could always be understood, the grounding in Augustine would be it.

This Augustinian bias is the thread that runs throughout Gibson's eleven chapters which follow, more or less, Ratzinger's chronology from the time of John XXIII and Paul VI to the monumental papacy of John Paul II (Chapters 1 and 2) to the intrigue of the conclave which elected Benedict (Chapters 3 and 4) to the background story of Ratzinger and his Germany from which he emerged (Chapter 5) to the various issues before catholicism today (Chapters 6 to 11). Gibson's book is enriched by a clear presentation of both history and theological movements and insider peeks into the Vatican's machinations, including some of the inside humor which everybody isn't supposed to repeat but does.

For example, commenting on the difference between John Paul II's loosey-goosey liturgical style which embraced expressions of local culture and included tribal liturgical dance and topless nudity by female lectors (pp. 235-238) and Benedict's far more reserved and pristinely proper liturgical style, the joke was, "What is the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist? Answer: Sometimes you can negotiate with a terrorist" (p. 346). Ratzinger has consistently gone on record, while not directly criticizing the actions of his predecessor's globe-trotting celebrations, preferring Gregorian chant and polyphony that Pius X had mandated a century ago as the only forms suitable for

worship distinct from “the cult of the banal” (p. 238). “Outside the liturgical setting, classical music, principally the Germanic geniuses of Bach, Beethoven, and Mozart, represents (for Benedict) the cultural standard proper to a Christian sensibility” (pp. 238-239).

The Augustinian theme, for the author, appears in at least three fundamental ways in Benedict XVI’s story. First, it shows up in the way Joseph Ratzinger makes sense out of his youth and the sources of faith to which he was and continues to be drawn. Second, the influence appears to govern the pope’s ecclesiology or understanding of the church. Third, the inclination to Augustine appears to shape the pontiff’s core belief on the meaning of the gospel and how the gospel serves to offer or withhold God’s promise for a broken and estranged humanity. Especially on this third subject, Benedict speaks openly about his regard for Luther, especially the Reformer’s “pre-Reformation” writings, as well as other Protestant voices (especially Barth’s). Nevertheless it is questionable that the gospel which Luther understood as the “happy exchange” ever found its way into Ratzinger’s core belief (p. 149). As such, it is reasonable to ask of this pope what is so good about his version of “the good news” as he seeks consciously to exalt Christ by his strategy of diminishing the new pope’s own role in public appearances and private gatherings (in stark contrast to the personality cult magnified by his predecessor discussed by Gibson in chapter 8 and titled “Pontifex Maximus, Pontifex Minimus”).

On the first influence by the writings of Augustine, Joseph Ratzinger is discussed by Gibson as quintessentially German, complete with the author’s penetrating analysis of the “Germanic soul” (Chapter 5). Citing Goethe, RULE says, “The Germans...make everything difficult, both for themselves and for everyone else” (p. 119). Gibson argues how the Germanic quest for

“authenticity” and certainty of belief and the sense of betrayal when those beliefs are challenged impacted the young Ratzinger growing up in Bavaria during the tragic epoch of National Socialism. Complete with a historical walk through Germanic history since the first Arian Christians influenced the German tribes, Gibson tries to show how a young, shy boy, always last to be picked for sports contests, found his sense of self in the life of the mind. Born in 1927, Joseph Aloysius Ratzinger was the son of a Bavarian policeman, already in his 50s when the boy was born. The father was a strict disciplinarian who valued an orderly life and for whom the word “no” came easily. Many years later, Ratzinger would reflect, “I always remember, with great affection, the goodness of my father and mother. And for me goodness also means the ability to say, ‘no,’ because goodness that lets anything go can’t be good for another” (p. 128).

At a later time that “no” would become a familiar rejoinder for many teachers and theologians experimenting with new ideas when Ratzinger took the reins of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Similarly, in Gibson’s analysis, the studious Ratzinger found the intellectual order he sought in patristics, particularly in studying Augustine (Augustine would become the subject of his first doctoral dissertation), because it gave to the young scholar the perfect Platonic ideal that made sense out of the worldly chaos swirling around him during the war years. “What the Nazi experience seems to have bred in Joseph...was a kind of distancing, a pattern of removing himself from unpleasantness, isolating the pure ideal-of the faith, the church, the family, the nation-from the inevitable corruptions of the world” (p. 137). Gibson adds, “This approach fosters a sense of remoteness in his remembrances, a detachment that may strike many as cold” (p. 137).

Years later, it would be noted that Benedict XVI would characteristically avoid associations that would implicate his

world in the terrible chapters of Germany's history vis-à-vis the Jews and others. "One gets the impression that the Third Reich has meaning for Ratzinger today...as an object lesson about church and culture, and only the details consistent with that argument have passed through the filter of his memory...Ratzinger tends to focus on the failings of individuals rather than on perceived defects in the national character" (p. 139). The implication is that Ratzinger continues to live in the isolated and purist world of the Augustinian ideal.

The second influence by the Augustinian bias shows up in the development of Joseph Ratzinger's ecclesiology, that is, his doctrine of the church. The central question is, "Is there a place in the church for the messy, sordid business of sinners and their sins?"

As Joseph Ratzinger was moving through the formative ranks in Germany and was beginning to establish himself as a formidable Catholic thinker in touch with all the new waves of scholarship, he caught the eye of another young Swiss theologian who had become dean of the Catholic theological faculty at Tübingen, Hans Küng. Küng was able to entice the Bavarian "wunderkind" to join him at the flagship university, while both at the same time served as "periti" (a "peritus" is an "expert") to the Council that had been called and became known as Vatican II. As the Council unfolded over four sessions from 1962-1965, two camps of reformers emerged almost in increasingly bitter opposition to each other.

The first group, favored by Ratzinger, saw reform as "ressourcement," that is, a return to the early sources of the faith meant to be faithfully replicated for the renewal of a corrupted modernity (going "backward into the future," p. 164). The second group, favored by Küng and a host of other luminaries (e.g., Karl Rahner), tended to enlist the neo-scholastic

perspective and favored "aggiornamento," a jettisoning of the past and opening to modernity's future. By the fourth session, with the "aggiornamento" group clearly in control, Ratzinger's enthusiasm for the Council became dampened and his disposition "dark" (p. 166). Ratzinger's critique was the growing conviction that the Council Fathers were being "taken in by an 'over-optimism'" about modernity (p. 165), concluding "that the strong sense, deriving from Luther, on the theme of sin, was alien to the mainly French authors of the schema (that produced "Gaudium et Spes," the Council's document on the church in the modern world adopted in the final session)," p. 166. Ratzinger went even so far as to criticize "Gaudium et Spes" as "downright Pelagian," a criticism which would recall similar critiques by both St. Augustine and Martin Luther in their respective times.

The issue would recur time and again as Ratzinger later rose to become Archbishop of Munich in 1977, receiving his cardinal's biretta from Pope Paul VI in 1978. Gibson tracks out how, as his power and influence increased, Ratzinger would press his views of a purer church in a corrupted modern world toward his co-reformers of Vatican II. The long list of those whom Cardinal Ratzinger would "correct" began with his scathing critique of his old colleague, Küng, whose acclaimed *ON BEING A CHRISTIAN* was blasted by Ratzinger. Worse yet, Ratzinger, about whom Küng said "he felt stabbed in the back," was instrumental in collaborating in Rome's eventual condemnation of Küng's work in 1979 (all without a formal hearing), p. 177. In 1981, John Paul II asked Cardinal Ratzinger to take over the Sacred Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith and, in Ratzinger's own words, the rubric would be, "The Christian believer is a simple person; bishops should protect the faith of these little people against the power of intellectuals" (p. 185).

From Marxist Liberation theology to a host of other perceived assaults, just what was it about the nature of the church for



Benedict that needed protecting? Gibson's diagnosis includes the pope's understanding of a church which reflected the perfect loving Christ. In Benedict's inaugural encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est" ("God is love"), according to Gibson, "Benedict's thinking follows on the Augustinian view that the church is 'the moon that does not shine with its own light, but reflects the light of Christ the sun.' Thus in Benedict's Platonic cosmos, Christ is the ideal, and the church is the image of that ideal. From that perspective, one cannot change something in the reflection without distorting the original image, in this case Christ, who is God" (p. 362). The author wonders, however, "This near-total equivalency between Christ and the church-the Catholic Church, in Benedict's view, being the church par excellence-is, for one thing, a theological stretch" (p. 363). What makes it a stretch especially is its challenge concerning who, in fact, Christ would be for sinners? A foe or a friend? Do sinners have a place in the church or is the church a de facto "invisible" one of a Platonic ideal (a notion roundly criticized ironically by Melanchthon in articles VII and VIII of the Apology of the Augsburg Confession)?

The question raises the third Augustinian issue, that of christology and the doctrine of salvation which surrounds Christ. What kind of gospel is Benedict, in fact, prepared to proclaim to the world of modernity? It is interesting that while Benedict appears willing to share Lutheran anti-Pelagian concerns first fleshed out by Augustine in the doctrine of original sin, stressing the gracious giftedness of faith (and critiquing any effort of the human will to save itself), for Benedict faith seems to center around the pristine church itself represented most purely by its bishops. "In subsequent talks (talks following "Deus Caritas Est"), Benedict made more explicit than ever his belief that the true Church is most perfectly represented by the Catholic bishops, who preserve and

pronounce the truth of Christ because they are to be considered 'the privileged place of the action and transmission of the Holy Spirit'...Through apostolic succession, Christ comes to us: He speaks to us in the word of the apostles and their successors; he acts in the sacraments through their hands; our gaze is enveloped in his gaze and makes us feel loved, received into God's heart" (p. 363).

On belief Benedict adds, "No one believes purely on his own. We always believe in and with the Church...We must, in a manner of speaking, let ourselves fall into the communion of the faith, of the Church. Believing is, in itself, a Catholic act: it is a participation in this great certitude that is present in the living subject of the Church" (p. 363). To Benedict it would seem, the church and Christ are virtually one and the same. Yet, the question remains, while the church is, indeed, described as "the Body of Christ," is the Christ of the church of any use for human sinners and their sins?

One would hope that such a Christ would be that Christ who takes what we all deserve under judgment as his own and gifts to us what he alone deserves for our own, the promising message of Luther's gospel about the "happy exchange." But "gospel" for Benedict seems to mean something else. Benedict has gone on record as suspicious of the very term "good news" or "Froh-Botschaft" which he sees as modernity's curved-in term for self-affirmation. "There are quite dramatic words of judgment in the Gospel that can really make one shudder," the pope points out. "We really ought not to stifle them. The Lord himself in the Gospel obviously sees no contradiction between the message of judgment and the good news" (p. 321). For Augustine, the gospel was the message of God's love without the New Testament questions about the meaning of the cross. The bishop of Hippo was working on other things. The medievals, on the other hand, took up the subject of the cross all over again and it became

the main thing for that theologian of the cross named Luther. Though Benedict claims to be a fan, it is a side of Luther that seems to have eluded Benedict entirely.

David Gibson's *RULE* opens a vast array of perspectives with which to evaluate Benedict XVI. It is a superb, even-handed and not especially encouraging evaluation to this key shaper of the realities today of over a billion brothers and sisters in the Lord in the Roman communion. Updated and revised in 2007, the book is already out of date with more recent events, such as the papal visit to the USA in April of 2008. Hopefully, the author will keep us abreast with revisions as the pontificate of Joseph Ratzinger unfolds. *THE RULE OF BENEDICT* lives up to the cover's praise by "America," "This extraordinarily well-written, informative, insightful, and page-turning (yes, it is a page-turner) book provides Gibson's picture of a modern man leading a modern church who clearly views engagement with the modern world as a dead end."

This incredible book provides our welcome, like it or not, to the alternate world of Joseph Ratzinger.

Pastor Stephen C. Krueger