

Reflections on the Roman Papacy

Colleagues,

1. The Bishops of Rome, one just past, one now present, received planet-wide publicity this month. Most all of it free because the passing of one and the coming of the other was a day-after-day media event of “catholic” (= “covering the whole globe”) proportions. But what sort of PR did the Gospel get? The issue of the papacy is always the issue about the Gospel, the promissory Good News of a crucified and risen Jesus. That’s not just a question from a grumpy old Lutheran. It also came from Hans Kueng, perhaps the best-known voice for Roman theology (after the two folks just mentioned) throughout today’s world. But Kueng’s catholicism is not the same as that of the dear departed, and probably not that of the newly elected. For the latter we’ll have to wait and see. Kueng bears scars for saying things like that. At John Paul II’s death Kueng raised the Gospel question about the papacy. In reviewing John Paul’s long long years as Bishop of Rome Kueng said: “New hope will only begin to take root when church officials in Rome and in the episcopacy reorient themselves toward the compass of the Gospel.”
2. That’s always been the Lutheran line about the papacy. Reorient = re-form. And the compass for reform is the Gospel. Is Kueng a “good” Lutheran or a “good” Catholic? Answer: Yes. At least in the 16th century Kueng’s thesis was a core assertion of the “Augsburg” catholics at the imperial assembly in that town in 1530. The very last article of their confession (Art. 28) rings the changes on re-orienting the papacy along the lines of a “bishop

according to the Gospel.” Which in their day—so they documented—it surely was not.

3. Kueng’s lengthy review of the papacy under JP II uses this “Augsburg” yardstick. Since he got burned, some may say his comments are just sour grapes. But I don’t think so. His key term for JP II is “contradictions.” His article [from Spiegel Online / English site] has the title “Crisis in the Catholic Church: The Pope’s Contradictions.” It begins with this brief bio: “Hans Kung is one of today’s leading Catholic theologians. Kueng, a Swiss national living in the southern German city of Tuebingen, has been embroiled in an ongoing feud with church authorities for decades. As a result of his critical inquiries on the papacy, the Vatican withdrew his church authority to teach in 1979. Nevertheless, Kueng, 75, is still a priest and, until his retirement in 1995, taught ecumenical theology at the University of Tübingen. As president of the Global Ethic Foundation, Kueng is also an advisor to the United Nations.”

Some other excerpts:

“Don’t be fooled by the crowds: Millions have left the Catholic Church under Pope John Paul II’s leadership.

“The Catholic church is in dire straits. It will need a diagnosis, an unadorned insider analysis. The therapy will be discussed later. . . . Even for many Catholics, John Paul II at the end of his physical strength, refusing to relinquish his power, is the symbol of a fraudulent church that has calcified and become senile behind its glittering façade.

“The festive mood that prevailed during the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965) has disappeared. Vatican II’s outlook of renewal, ecumenical understanding and a general opening of the world now seems overcast and the future gloomy. Many have

resigned themselves or even turned away out of frustration from this self-absorbed hierarchy. As a result, many people are confronted with an impossible set of alternatives: 'play the game or leave the church.' New hope will only begin to take root when church officials in Rome and in the episcopacy reorient themselves toward the compass of the Gospel.

"In my view, Karol Wojtyla is not the greatest, but certainly the most contradictory, pope of the 20th century. A pope of many great gifts and many wrong decisions! To summarize his tenure and reduce it to a common denominator: His "foreign policy" demands conversion, reform and dialogue from the rest of the world. But this is sharply contradicted by his "domestic policy," which is oriented toward the restoration of the pre-council status quo, obstructing reform, denying dialogue within the church, and absolute Roman dominance. This inconsistency is evident in many areas. While expressly acknowledging the positive sides of this pontificate, which, incidentally, have received plenty of official emphasis, I would like to focus on the nine most glaring contradictions."

[And then Kueng presents the nine topics. Each with its "yes," and then "yes, but." After presenting the yin-yang, pro and con, contradictions for each item he draws the consequences. I'll only cite mostly the "consequences" here.]

HUMAN RIGHTS:

Consequences: A servile episcopate and intolerable legal conditions. Any pastor, theologian or layperson who enters into a legal dispute with the higher church courts has virtually no prospects of prevailing.

THE ROLE OF WOMEN:

The great worshiper of the Virgin Mary preaches a noble concept of womanhood, but at the same time forbids women from practicing birth control and bars them from ordination.

Consequences: There is a rift between external conformism and internal autonomy of conscience. This results in bishops who lean towards Rome, alienating themselves from women, as was the case in the dispute surrounding the issue of abortion counseling (in 1999, the Pope ordered German bishops to close counseling centers that issued certificates to women that could later be used to get an abortion). This in turn leads to a growing exodus among those women who have so far remained faithful to the church.

SEXUAL MORALS:

Consequences: Even in traditionally Catholic countries like Ireland, Spain and Portugal, the pope's and the Roman Catholic church's rigorous sexual morals are openly or tacitly rejected.

CELIBACY AMONG PRIESTS:

Consequences: The ranks have been thinned and there is a lack of new blood in the Catholic church. Soon almost two-thirds of parishes, both in German-speaking countries and elsewhere, will be without an ordained pastor and regular celebrations of the Eucharist. It's a deficiency that even the declining influx of priests from other countries (1,400 of Germany's priests are from Poland, India and Africa) and the combining of parishes into "spiritual welfare units," a highly unpopular trend among the faithful, can no longer hide. The number of newly ordained priests in Germany dropped from 366 in 1990 to 161 in 2003, and the average age of active priests today is now above 60.

ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT:

Consequences: Ecumenical understanding was blocked after the council, and relations with the Orthodox and Protestant churches were burdened to an appalling extent. The papacy, like its predecessors in the 11th and 16th centuries, is proving to be the greatest obstacle to unity among Christian churches in freedom and diversity.

PERSONNEL POLICY:

Consequences: A largely mediocre, ultra-conservative and servile episcopate is possibly the most serious burden of this overly long pontificate. The masses of cheering Catholics at the best-staged Pope manifestations should not deceive: Millions have left the church under this pontificate or they have withdrawn from religious life in opposition.

CLERICALISM

Consequences: Rome's clericalist policy merely strengthens the position of dogmatic anti-clericalists and fundamentalist atheists. It also creates suspicion among believers that religion could be being misused for political ends.

NEW BLOOD IN THE CHURCH:

Consequences: Young people from church groups and congregations (with the exception of altar servers), and especially the non-organized "average Catholics," usually stay away from major youth get-togethers. Catholic youth organizations at odds with the Vatican are disciplined and starved when local bishops, at Rome's behest, withhold their funding. The growing role of the archconservative and non-transparent Opus Dei movement in many institutions has created a climate of uncertainty and suspicion. Once-critical bishops have cozied up to Opus Dei, while laypeople who were once involved in the church have withdrawn in resignation.

SINS OF THE PAST:

Consequences: The half-hearted papal confession remained without consequences, producing neither reversals nor action, only words.

Kueng concludes:

"For the Catholic church, this pontificate, despite its positive aspects, has on the whole proven to be a great

disappointment and, ultimately, a disaster. As a result of his contradictions, this pope has deeply polarized the church, alienated it from countless people and plunged it into an epochal crisis – a structural crisis that, after a quarter century, is now revealing fatal deficits in terms of development and a tremendous need for reform.

“Contrary to all intentions conveyed in the Second Vatican Council, the medieval Roman system, a power apparatus with totalitarian features, was restored through clever and ruthless personnel and academic policies. Bishops were brought into line, pastors overloaded, theologians muzzled, the laity deprived of their rights, women discriminated against, national synods and churchgoers’ requests ignored, along with sex scandals, prohibitions on discussion, liturgical spoon-feeding, a ban on sermons by lay theologians, incitement to denunciation, prevention of Holy Communion – “the world” can hardly be blamed for all of this!!

“If the next pope were to continue the policies of this pontificate, he would only reinforce an enormous backup of problems and turn the Catholic church’s current structural crisis into a hopeless situation. Instead, a new pope must decide in favor of a change in course and inspire the church to embark on new paths – in the spirit of John XXIII and in keeping with the impetus for reform brought about by the Second Vatican Council.”

Comment:

These concluding words are right out of Augsburg, Article 28. “The Catholic church’s current structural crisis . . . the medieval Roman system, a power apparatus with totalitarian features was restored.” Aye, there’s the rub. At least so the

Augsburg catholics thought. It was not the personal style, the idiosyncratic predilections, or even the morality of individual popes that riled the 16th century reformers. It was the "system," the "church's current structure," the papacy itself (not the popes), that was not-to use Kueng's terms- "oriented toward the compass of the Gospel."

In Lutheran lingo it was "left-hand" structures and rubrics imposed upon the "right-hand" of the Body of Christ, specifically its fundamental life-line of promoting the promise of the forgiveness of sins. Read Augsburg Confession (and Apology) 28 for more details on the clear contradiction of using coercion to get anything done (right) in the church of Christ..

Or go to Melanchthon's "Treatise on Power and Primacy of the Pope," a kind of addendum to the Smalcald Articles in the Lutheran confessions. Here Melanchthon challenges "from the gospel" three structural elements of the papacy: "that the bishop of Rome is by divine right superior to all bishops and pastors; that by divine right he possesses 'both swords,' that of coercion and that of forgiveness; and that it is necessary for salvation to believe these things [for which] reasons the bishop of Rome calls himself the vicar of Christ on earth."

Or to Luther's dedicatory letter to Pope Leo X of his day, the opening paragraphs of his famous monograph on "Christian Freedom." Here Luther not only presents the essay as a gift to Leo, but has the chutzpah to give him counsel on how to survive in the midst of a papal structure that is anti-Gospel from the git-go. Is it tongue-in-cheek, or is he serious? He claims he's only following in the train of Bernard of Claervaux who gave similar counsel to the pope of his day.

Coming up to the twentieth century. In the early 1950s Jaroslav Pelikan told us students at Concordia Seminary (St. Louis)

something like this: "With the decree on papal infallibility at the First Vatican Council (1869-70), the Roman Catholic Church became a sect. From that point onward there was no structural channel available within the Roman church to call the Bishop of Rome to account."

A system with finally but one person at the top and no one "over" him (or even alongside, in the ancient tradition of "collegiality" among bishops) to challenge his words and actions by "the compass of the Gospel," is a system grounded in an "other" Gospel. It is not the pattern proposed by the church's Lord. That was the blunt charge of the Lutheran Reformers.

The very word "hierarchy" carries the virus of heresy. In hierarchy the "rule" (-archy) is in the hands of the "priest" (hieros). Now you might say, well, someone has to be in charge. Maybe so. But then the question comes: HOW does the one in charge exercise the "archy"? In Matthew 20:20-28 Jesus distinguishes between two very different archies for the life of his community. Would that those verses had been some "voice over" throughout the words and pictures coming from Rome these past weeks. Better still "voice under" if we follow the rubrics of Matt. 20.

Here Jesus gives the specs for the exercise of "archy" in HIS church. It is "archy compassed by the Gospel." He contrasts it with other "archies"—including such as claim to "know what is good for you." Gospel "archy" never ever is "authority over," but always "authority under." That sounds like an oxymoron. But only so to such as have never gotten a good dose of the upside-down "archy" of the crucified and risen Christ. In Jesus' own day there were throngs who didn't get it. Throughout the church's two millennia history there have been throngs more. And not just in Rome. Today's denominational structures across the ecumenical spectrum (Lutherans included) are plagued by the

virus of hier-archy.

While watching all the ceremony—all that red fabric—coming from Rome these days, it would have been edifying to have had Mel Gibson's recent "Movie in Red" running in split-screen alongside. Granted, that gory Jesus is a "Gospel according to Gibson." [We posted three ThTh reviews of it last year when the film appeared. If interested, check the Crossings website <www.crossing.org>] Even so, the claim of the principals in the extravaganza we've just witnessed from Rome is that there is a direct connection between the two. More than just "connection," but that the one sitting in the cathedra in St. Peter's basilica is the living representative, the vicar, of the Protagonist of Gibson's Gospel.

Except for all that red—where was the connection?

To make such connection requires us to talk about Gospel. So Kueng. So Jesus. What kind of Gospel did all that hoopla proclaim? Was there any other message than this: "the medieval Roman system, a power apparatus with totalitarian features?" If there were signals "oriented toward the compass of the Gospel," I missed them.

Once more, structures in non-Roman churches nowadays don't seem much different either. And there are folks in these communions too who also say: "New hope will only begin to take root when church officials in [our church too] and in the episcopacy reorient themselves toward the compass of the Gospel."

Benedict XVI is a German. He can read Luther (and the Lutheran Confessions) in his mother tongue! Imagine what might happen if he discovered that compass! Even we Lutherans would be blessed [=benedictus] from such a Roman Reverse Reformation.

Peace & Joy!

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