

From division to unity

It has been 12 months since Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger succeeded John Paul II as Bishop of Rome. The new Pope's election delighted many but also alarmed plenty. Here, a theologian whom he barred from teaching offers his – somewhat surprising – assessment of Benedict XVI's first year

I was disappointed last April when Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected Bishop of Rome. While some Vatican observers had dismissed his candidacy because he was too old and his health was not particularly good, my primary objection was the fact that he was a divisive figure in the Catholic Church, strongly identified with the more conservative wing.

The role of pope is not an easy one. He is looked to as the leader of the Church and at the same time the centre of unity within it. The challenge is to recognise legitimate diversity and pluralism while still holding on to unity. The tensions facing the Catholic Church and its head are similar to the daunting challenges found in any community today from our smallest cities to the global community

itself: how to reconcile unity and diversity. In theory, the ideal solution to this challenge is the old Latin axiom – *in necessariis unitas, in dubiis libertas, in omnibus caritas* – in necessary things unity, in doubtful things freedom, in all things charity.

My personal history strongly influenced my negative judgement about Cardinal Ratzinger. In 1986, after a seven-year investigation, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF), with the approval of John Paul II, declared “that one who dissents from the Magisterium as you do is not suitable nor eligible to teach Catholic Theology”.

My disagreements with the CDF centred on the question of dissent from non-infallible Church moral teachings and, specifically, with my dissent on such issues as contraception, masturbation, premarital sex, divorce, homosexual acts and abortion. In the course of this investigation I realised that I had an even deeper theological disagreement with Cardinal Ratzinger. Many theologians have pointed out that he embraced a brand of theological Augustinianism. Such Catholics often understand the two cities of Augustine by identifying the city of God with the Church and the human city with the world, thus stressing the opposition between the two. As a result, the Church is a small Church that sees itself in opposition to the world.

In 1984, in the midst of my investigation by the CDF, Cardinal Ratzinger gave the famous interview that was later published as the Ratzinger Report. The original Italian is stronger than the later translations: “Looking at North America, we see a world where riches are the measure and where the values and style of life proposed by Catholicism appear more than ever as a scandal ... Consequently, many moralists ... believe that they are forced to choose between dissent from society or dissent from the Magisterium.” I describe my position as theological Thomism, which accepts a basic goodness of all that God has created despite the disfiguring presence of sin in the world and in the Church. Dialogue and not opposition characterises the relationship between the Church and the world.

In light of the consistent Augustinian approach of Cardinal Ratzinger, I have maintained that he has not changed as much as many progressives in the Church claim he has changed since his days as a leading theologian at the Second Vatican Council. The Coun-



cil proposed two criteria for the renewal of the Church – *ressourcement* (going back to the sources) and *aggiornamento* (bringing the Church up to date, especially through a broad dialogue with others). In the years since the Council, a division has grown between these two approaches. The *ressourcement* school, identified with theologians such as Von Balthasar, Danielou, De Lubac and Ratzinger, have been fearful of many developments in the post-conciliar Church. The *aggiornamento* group of theological Thomists, such as Congar, Rahner, Schillebeeckx, Chenu and Küng, have called for continual reform.

Yet I have been pleasantly surprised by the first year of Pope Benedict's papacy. He has recognised his role as a centre of unity and has not seen the Church primarily as a small remnant in opposition to the world. Church pundits have often pointed out that the most important document from a new pope is the first encyclical. On 25 January, Benedict released his first encyclical: *Deus Caritas Est*. My fears were that the first encyclical would be on truth: we the Church have the truth and we must struggle against the relativism and subjectivism in the world around us. Many of Cardinal Ratzinger's earlier statements and homilies before his election took this approach. But the first encyclical is a reflection on what Pope Benedict calls “the heart of the Christian faith” – love. He is speaking here as the centre of unity in the Church, confirming his sisters and brothers in their faith in the power of love. There is nothing divisive about this encyclical.

The encyclical deals with the three classical understandings of love – *eros*, *philia* and *agape*. It defends the basic goodness of *eros*, understood especially as sexual love, despite the warped and destructive form such love has at times taken. Christian love does not reject *eros*, but rather perfects it and brings it to its true grandeur.



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The encyclical goes on to deny the opposition that some have seen between *agape* as the Christian giving of self and *eros* as the possessive or covetous love typical of particularly Greek culture. Such an antithesis would make the essence of Christianity a world apart, cut off from the fabric of human life. *Eros* and *agape* must find a proper unity in the one reality of love. Unlike some theologians who distinguish *eros* as human love from *agape* as divine love, the Pope even insists that God's love includes both *eros* and *agape*.

In the discussion of love, especially *eros* and human marital and sexual love, it would have been very easy for the Pope to insert a paragraph strongly supporting the existing Catholic teachings on contraception, divorce and even homosexuality. One can only conclude that the Pope purposely did not go down this road.

In this whole encyclical there is not even a hint of a small remnant Church in opposition to the world around it. The encyclical accepts a basic goodness of the human that needs to be transformed by the divine. The second part of the encyclical (rumoured to have been in preparation under Pope John Paul II) deals with the practice of love by the Christian community. Love of neighbour is the responsibility of the entire Church community at all levels, and such love must be organised in order to best serve human needs.

The encyclical distinguishes (perhaps too much) between love and justice, but sees both as necessary for the good of our global society. Justice is the direct responsibility of the body politic, but the Church contributes to the formation of consciences by its social teaching. The social teaching of the Church must be addressed in the context of dialogue with all those concerned about humanity and our world. There have been other indications in papal words (Benedict's first homily as Pope) and deeds (his meeting and dinner with Hans Küng) that Pope Benedict sees himself as the centre of unity in the Church, which thus strives to be in dialogue with all people of good will.

Does this mean that we might see a significant change from the positions that Cardinal Ratzinger has held over the years? No pope has a greater paper trail than the very productive scholar, Joseph Ratzinger. I do not see him changing his basic positions, but the new context of his role as Bishop of Rome gives a different emphasis and ordering to these positions he has held over the years.

A key indication that he has not changed his basic perspectives or approaches was Pope Benedict's address to the Roman Curia just before Christmas, during which he commented on developments in the 40 years since the end of the Second Vatican Council. He recognised that the implementation of the Council decisions and changes has been difficult, even using an analogy from St Basil comparing the Church after the Council of Nicea with a naval battle in the darkness of a storm.

The problem comes from two opposing and quarrelling interpretations of the Council – a “hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture” and a “hermeneutic of reform”. The hermeneutic of discontinuity, which has

frequently availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media and also one trend of modern theology, claims to follow the spirit of the Council. The letter of the texts themselves is the result of compromise so, according to this interpretation, one must discern in these texts the true spirit behind the Council. The hermeneutic of discontinuity risks endorsing a split between the pre-conciliar and the post-conciliar Church.

But it was the “hermeneutic of reform” that was proposed by each of the conciliar popes, John XXIII and Paul VI. Historical changes and developments have taken place in both the modern world and the Church. Changes in the modern world have occurred, for example, in the fact that many scientists no longer say there is no place for God in our world. With regard to change in the Church, Vatican II addressed three crucial questions: the relationship between faith and science, the relationship between the Church and the modern world, and religious tolerance and

relationships among all religions. Yes, changes were made at the Council because of changing historical situations, but the basic principles have remained the same. In correcting certain historical decisions, Vatican II has actually preserved the Church's true identity. The Church is the same Church: one, holy, Catholic and apostolic, journeying through time. But in our time too, the Church remains a “sign that will be opposed” (Luke 2:34).

In conclusion, I have been happily surprised that Pope Benedict XVI is very conscious of his role as the centre of unity in the Church, but this does not mean that he has changed or will change any existing teachings of the Church and his own basic theological positions. I would expect this same stance to guide him in the remaining years of his papacy.

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