

4-26-08 - Pope Benedict and the Lasting Impact of His U.S. Trip

By PETER STEINFELS, The New York Times, Beliefs

Pope Benedict XVI has come and gone. To a population that knew little about him, he almost certainly left a favorable impression. Once the afterglow fades, however, what will remain?

There are a variety of categories, of course, for sorting through the messages and images. But here are two useful ones: the God crisis and the church crisis.

As theologian and now as pope, Joseph Ratzinger has been, above all, a man of the God crisis. For him, God is the answer to questions that “can never be erased from the human heart,” as he said in his Washington meeting with other religious leaders.

“What is the origin and destiny of mankind?” he said to them. “What are good and evil? What awaits us at the end of our earthly existence?”

“Only by addressing these deeper questions can we build a solid basis for the peace and security of the human family.”

Yet in his view modernity, in a myriad of ways — from materialism to relativism to the technological mind-set — has shunted those questions aside or thrown up intellectual barriers to answering them.

Europe has been the heartland of the God crisis. So naturally it has preoccupied a European intellectual like Benedict. His response has two parts. Over the years he has offered a finely woven fabric of ideas about Christian faith, reason, truth and freedom. His arguments are certainly not beyond challenge, not even by theologians and philosophers who share his conclusions. But there is little doubt that they are serious and substantial.

But Benedict has never thought that a purely intellectual response was adequate. There was also an inescapably personal dimension to the God crisis — a matter of opening oneself, of inner conversion and personal decision.

This movement of the heart could be stirred by the witness of believers, by the solidarity and charity of the Christian community, by the power of worship or the beauty of religious art. Warning against an individualistic piety, Pope Benedict told the American bishops, “If we are truly to gaze upon him who is the source of our joy, we need to do so as members of the people of God.”

The God crisis, therefore, cannot be separated from the church crisis. If the church has become dysfunctional, inarticulate or spiritless, it will be incapable of addressing those deeper questions with responses that satisfy both the mind and the heart.

But for Benedict, the God crisis always takes priority. Whether speaking of truth to educators or human rights to the United Nations, he returns again and again to the question of “foundations,” which for him ultimately mean God. He grows impatient whenever talk of the church seems to supplant talk of God.

Of course, Benedict came to the United States knowing that the God crisis is hardly as acute here as it is in Europe and that what has been troubling American Roman Catholicism is the church crisis. And just as the God crisis has both a personal dimension and an intellectual one, the church crisis has both a personal dimension and a structural one.

The pope certainly addressed the personal dimension. He exhorted the bishops to be “engaging and imaginative.” He worried out loud about the state of the liturgy and whether preaching had “lost its salt.” He underlined the need for more priests. He urged the healing of divisions in Catholic ranks. He called on all

Catholics to take their beliefs into public life. Most of all, in meeting with victims of sexual abuse by priests, he offered a model of pastoral sensitivity.

About the structural dimension of the church crisis, however, he said nothing. Does the American church need new or refurbished structures of transparency, accountability and consultation in a wide range of matters, including finances, parish closings and the appointment and assignment of bishops and pastors?

Should new roles for the laity in parish leadership be more formally recognized? Are changes beyond prayer and exhortation needed to combat the growing shortage of priests? What about the ordination of married men or women or the reintroduction of female deacons?

Such structural changes are favored by many moderate-to-liberal Catholics. There are less publicized ones favored by some conservatives, including tight episcopal control over Catholic higher education, restoration of traditional forms of seminary training and broad resort to oaths of fidelity.

The pope's silence about all such institutional nuts and bolts is not surprising. For one thing, he believes that church structures must evolve, as he says, "organically" rather than by grand design.

His suspicion of structural changes goes further, however. He often dismisses them, especially liberal ones, as "power games" or as superficial diversions from the foundational God crisis and the interior transformation it entails.

Indeed, the very mode of calculating gains and losses in Catholic ranks, parishes without priests, a decline in religious literacy or Mass attendance among young Catholics seems foreign to Benedict's outlook.

At one level, this stance is unassailable. Who would deny his reminder of some years ago that "the church does not exist for herself but must be God's instrument"?

But what if the instrument needs significant repair or reconstruction? What if, to change the metaphor, the problem is not so much weak foundations, at least not yet in the United States, as a leaking roof, bad wiring and faulty plumbing?

Will addressing the God crisis, perhaps with the pastoral sensitivity Benedict demonstrated on his visit, spontaneously generate responses to the church crisis? Or is addressing the structural dimension of the church crisis a prerequisite to successfully addressing the God crisis?

The lasting impact of Pope Benedict's visit may hang on the answers to those two questions.