

POPE EMERITUS BENEDICT XVI (1927-2022)

He was not a rottweiler, he was a pastor

At the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the three youngest periti (theological advisers) were Swiss theologian, Father Hans Küng (March 19, 1928-April 6, 2021), Dominican theologian from the French territory of St Pierre et Miquelon, Father Jean-Marie Tillard (September 2, 1927-November 13, 2000), and German theologian, Father Joseph Ratzinger (April 16, 1927-December 31, 2022).

Father Ratzinger was elected Pope, choosing the name Pope Benedict XVI on April 19, 2005, and became the first Pope to resign in 600 years on February 28, 2013. His death on New Year's Eve marks the passing of the three youngest periti, probably the last of the prelates and periti at Vatican II.

As could be seen from the dates given above, Father Küng was 34 years old when he went to the Second Vatican Council as theological adviser, Fathers Tillard and Ratzinger were 35. The three were fresh from their theological studies having just obtained their doctorate degrees in theology. They assisted the Fathers of the Council with their newly-acquired theological competence in writing the 16 documents of the Council.

At the end of the Council, the three could not agree on how to interpret the Council whose documents they helped to write. As a theology student at the Faculté de Théologie Catholique de Kinshasa, I attended a public lecture delivered by Father Küng at the Faculté de Théologie Protestante de Kinshasa in 1985. That was a few years after his licence to teach Catholic theology was withdrawn by the Holy See. In that lecture, he was very critical of Pope John Paul II and his colleague who had then become Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger and Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith. The Holy See withdrew Father Küng's licence because of his position in Christology which was judged to be insufficiently representative of the Council of Nicaea.

As a student for the licentiate in theology at the Collège Dominicain de Théologie et de Philosophie in Ottawa, Canada, I had the privilege of having as teacher and friend Father Tillard. From my first day of attending his lectures, it was clear to me that he and Cardinal Ratzinger could not agree on the meaning of Vatican II's ecclesiology of communion, particularly on the place of the local Church within the communion. While Tillard emphasized the place of the local Church, Ratzinger—and this became even more explicit in the latter's debate with Cardinal Walter Kasper—spoke of the primacy of the universal Church.

I have never hidden the fact that I subscribe to Father Tillard's position on the local Church. But even as my friend and teacher, we were not always on the same page. At the Dominican Priory of St John the Baptist in Ottawa, where we lived, he was fond of saying to me every day after Lauds (Morning Prayer), "Anthony, I am praying for you."

One day, I asked Father Tillard, "Why are you always praying for me?"

He responded, “Because you are reading Origen and Paul Tillich. I hope their writings do not mislead you.” He was only joking.

I was invited to the 2012 Synod on New Evangelization. That was my closest encounter with Pope Benedict XVI. But I had known Father Ratzinger only through his writings. Each time I read him, I knew he was a man of deep faith and impressive intellect. His writings show he was well-versed in his reading of St Augustine of Hippo on whom he wrote his doctoral thesis as a young theologian. For those who would malign the great Bishop of Hippo, that was a crime committed by Father Ratzinger.

He was also a competent scholar of Scripture, as could be seen reading his three very impressive volumes on Jesus, published during his pontificate. His homilies and writings reveal the identity of a man who knew the liturgy, its development in history and its theological underpinnings, and who used his vast knowledge and deep faith to nourish the souls of his hearers.

He was not just a great theologian. His many interventions reveal his solid formation in philosophy. I cite two examples here: his debate with Jurgen Habermas on the place of religion in the wake of the 9-11 attack on America, published in English as *The Dialectics of Secularisation: On Reason and Religion* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), his brilliant speech addressed to the German parliament September 22, 2011, in which he was able to connect with an audience which included parliamentarians who held religion in suspicion. What struck me in that speech was how he was able to speak the language of natural law before German lawmakers, some of whom queried the idea of a Pope, a religious leader, addressing the parliament of a secular democracy, but received a standing ovation.

As a student of St Augustine and Patristic writers, he knew how to blend spiritual, intellectual and pastoral concerns. The ability to bring the three together is, for me, a *conditio sine qua non* for a theologian. But, sadly, we live in an era of trichotomy and narrow specializations in theology. There is the spiritual-intellectual-pastoral trichotomy into which some tried to fit Pope Benedict XVI. But I see in him a man who brought the three together as St Augustine and the Patristic authors did. Theology is about striving for holiness, good use of the intellect, and pastoral care of the man and woman in the pew. These are qualities of a Catholic theologian that seem to be undergoing a fast and frightening recession today. But the Church deserves priests and pastors of souls who possess these qualities.

As Professor Ratzinger, Pope Benedict XVI was courageous and willing to be in the minority. He risked his popularity for the sake of truths of our Catholic faith. A famous theologian, in an act that did not speak for charity, maliciously said of Father Ratzinger that he had sold his soul to the devil because he was suffering from “purple fever”. In other words, he was writing the way he wrote because he wanted to be promoted to the episcopate. Theologians are supposed to speak about God, and God is love. But we theologians do not always reflect this.

Father Ratzinger’s stance did not just earn him adversaries from within the Church. He was not an *enfant cheri* of the secular media. His stance on Christianity was counter-cultural, and many of his critics lacked the profundity of thought that he had. He was in touch with God in an age where some marginalize God while others malign God. But the Pope Benedict I know is a man

whose life and writings show the difference, the sharp contrast, between the real Ratzinger and the western secular media-created Rottweiler.

Regarding the office of Bishop, the Second Vatican Council taught: “Among the more important duties of bishops that of preaching the Gospel has pride of place. For the bishops are heralds of the faith, who draw new disciples to Christ; they are authentic teachers, that is, teachers endowed with the authority of Christ, who preach the faith to the people assigned to them, the faith which is destined to inform their thinking and direct their conduct; and under the light of the Holy Spirit they make that faith shine forth, drawing from the storehouse of revelation new things and old; they make it bear fruit and with watchfulness they ward off whatever errors threaten their flock” (Lumen Gentium, 25; cf. Mt 13:52; 2 Tim 4:14).

Some would want to refer to him disparagingly as conservative. But being conservative is not a vice. For, a wise scribe brings out of his storeroom things old and new. A wise scribe knows what to conserve, what not to conserve, when to conserve, and when not to conserve.

A great Pontiff has gone home, a man of deep faith and reason. He taught as priest, as university professor, as Bishop, and as Roman Pontiff. If ever I were asked to write an epitaph of him, I would write: “He taught with clarity.” In him God blessed his Church with a great teacher and pastor who lived his whole life for the Church.

May Pope Benedict XVI receive the reward of a shepherd. May his life, teaching and passing reawaken in us consciousness of what it means to be human and what it means to be Church. May Christ the Good Shepherd guide the Church and humanity in the way of truth and love.

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