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### UNDERSTANDING CHRISTIANITY

A monthly forum on the third *Saturday* of each month from 6:30 to 7:30 P.M. following Evening Prayer at 6  
Forums with Dr. Richard T. Nolan

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Editor of [www.philosophy-religion.org](http://www.philosophy-religion.org)*

Saturday, June 18, 2005

### “A LOOK AT THE LEGACY OF POPE JOHN PAUL II AND THE BEGINNINGS OF THE MINISTRY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI”

#### 1. PRELIMINARY CONSIDERATIONS

a. The late Oxford Prof. Richard Hare’s “BLIK” is coined for the blending of one’s axioms/postulates/presuppositions/ assumptions/“what’s taken for granted” (one’s fundamental convictions about reality, truth, and values) with *one’s emotions*. Everyone has a blik, which is learned from infancy onward via one’s community(ies). Sometimes a blik has internal inconsistencies and produces intellectual and/or emotional conflict within an individual. One’s blik can change via an intellectual–emotional conversion. In any case, it is within one’s blik that one decides what is real, true, objective, and of value; one’s “facts” are recognized as such within one’s blik. Used in the sciences, a word similar to blik is “paradigm” (which often overlooks the emotional factor).

b. If a blik includes the assumption that one’s blik and all of its tenets are perfectly guided/controlled by God, or that one (or a community) has perfect access to the mind of God, then one’s convictions are self-evidently correct/True; one’s convictions are regarded as objective certainties. This “God-factor” is at the heart of global and regional religious communities that claim to know for sure, with certainty, the mind of God. One is likely to be a “preserver” (one who maintains the *status quo*) rather than a “pioneer” (one who is open to the evolution of human understanding) in such matters. Agreeing to differ would seem to be absurd to a preserver who “knows” *THE TRUTH*.

c. If one does not incorporate the God-factor as stated in (b), then one probably accepts one’s own blik as a “belief system” – a school of thought – that may at best approximate accuracy. “I believe” (trust, intellectually and emotionally); “I am persuaded that ....”, and other similar wordings apply here. Agreeing to differ would be admirable. “Schools of thought” applies to theology, physics, psychology, etc. Note the first two word of the historic Creeds; they imply trust, not objective certainty. In this way of thinking, one is more likely to be a “pioneer” than a “preserver” in such matters. Or, one might be a preserver on some issues and a pioneer on others. This is not a “relativism” that accepts all positions as true, but a “pluralism” that admits to human limitations, that human beings do not have the capacity for Godly certainty, that within individual human associations there will always be a legitimate difference of informed opinion, that “schools of thought” will always exist on virtually every issue.

d. In Roman and some other Christian theologies, dogma and doctrine are separable categories. “Dogma” refers to absolute essentials to which all members must assent. “Doctrine” is a broader category, which has a degree of “wiggle room.” It is not always clear whether a particular doctrine is dogma or how much “wiggle room” there is. Moreover,

the Roman Catholic Church has maintained that the truth of dogma/doctrine is absolute and unchangeable since apostolic times; any apparent change is just a change in wording for the sake of clarity in each historic period.

However, in Peter Steinfels' (May 22, 2005, *New York Times*) review of *A Church That Can and Cannot Change* (by John T. Noonan, Jr.), he notes: "Historically, Catholicism solved the problem of change simply by denying it. Understandings of the Trinity, the priesthood, the papacy, the Mass and the sacraments that emerged over a long time were projected back into New Testament texts. Theologians joked that when a pope or other official circuitously introduced a modification of church teaching, he would begin, 'As the church has always taught ...' .... Noonan drives home the point that some Catholic moral doctrines have changed radically. History, he concludes, does not support the comforting notion that the church simply elaborates on or expands previous teaching without contradicting them." Examples include teachings on slavery, usury, religious freedom, and marriage.

Official Roman Catholicism is more likely to uphold a preserver rather than a pioneer mentality. In appraising Pope John Paul II or Pope Benedict XVI, one might ask whether he was/is faithful to his job description as prescribed by his Church's blik?

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## 2. THE POPES ARE ROMAN CATHOLIC!

a. Why would anyone expect any Roman Catholic Pope to live and minister within anything but a traditional Roman Catholic blik? Their fidelity would not exclude making changes on certain practices, such as ordaining women, allowing priests to marry, modifications in ritual, fasting, other church laws, and the like; but, to expect a major revision on the purposes of human sexuality or rethinking fundamental Christology is expecting too much a change in what are regarded as fundamentals of the divinely revealed, objectively true Roman Catholicism.

b. "Infallibility, in Christian theology, the doctrine that in matters of faith and morals the church, both in teaching and in believing, is protected from substantive error by divine dispensation. The doctrine is generally associated with the Roman Catholic church, but it is also applied by the Orthodox church to decisions of ecumenical councils (see Council). The doctrine is widely rejected by Protestants on the grounds that only God can be described as infallible.

"Roman Catholic theology asserts that the entire church is infallible (and therefore cannot err in matters of faith) when, from bishops to laity, it shows universal agreement in matters of faith and morals. Only the following persons in the church—those who hold its highest teaching office—are believed to proclaim Christian doctrine infallibly: (1) the entire body of bishops in union with the pope, the bishop of Rome, when it teaches with moral unanimity; (2) an ecumenical council that receives papal approval; and (3) under certain conditions, the pope alone. According to the definition promulgated in 1870 by the First Vatican Council (see Vatican Council, First) the pope exercises an infallible teaching office only when (1) he speaks *ex cathedra*, that is, in his official capacity as pastor and teacher; (2) he speaks with the manifest intention of binding the entire church to acceptance; and (3) the matter pertains to faith or morals taught as a part of divine revelation handed down from apostolic times. The pope is never considered infallible in his personal or private views. Since the middle of the 19th century, only two *ex cathedra* pronouncements have been made in the Roman Catholic church: the definition of the dogma of the Immaculate Conception in 1854 by Pope Pius IX, and the definition of the Assumption of the Virgin in 1950 by Pope Pius XII.

"Infallibility is not regarded by its adherents as something miraculous or as a kind of clairvoyance. Rather, it is considered a grace, or divine gift, that is biblically and theologically grounded. Proponents point to many scriptural passages, such as the farewell discourses in John, especially the promise of the Spirit of truth (see John 14:17; 15:26; 16:13). They hold that the church derives this gift from God, who alone is the ultimate source of infallibility. The matters subject to infallibility are doctrines rooted in Scripture and in the ancient traditions of the church, neither of which can be contradicted; thus, novel doctrines and other innovations are believed to be excluded. Infallibility is therefore seen as a gift that is to be exercised with the utmost care in the service of the gospel."

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### *MAGISTERIUM*

"Almost implicit in this belief in apostolic succession is the belief that the church has the right and duty to teach Christian doctrine and morals authoritatively and that the substantial correctness of this teaching is guaranteed by the continued presence of the Holy Spirit in the church. Catholic theology locates this authority in the bishops, the pope, and the ecumenical councils; under certain circumstances it acknowledges this teaching as infallible. The

teaching authority of the church is referred to collectively as the *magisterium*, a term that came into common use in the 19th century.”

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## DISTINGUISHED DOCTRINE

With dogmatic definition a high priority in the new pontificate, and with an impulse to leave few questions open or see more sides than one on an issue in vogue, this item should be to the point: Richard Gaillardetz, author of *By What Authority? A Primer on Scripture, the Magisterium, and the Sense of the Faithful* (Liturgical Press) and an endowed chair in Catholic studies at the University of Toledo, Ohio, was asked, "How do you respond to people who say, Well, if the church can reverse one thing, why can't it reverse other things?" His interview appears in our sister (Claretian) publication, *U.S. Catholic*.

Gaillardetz responds by outlining four categories: "Some people talk about 'cafeteria' Catholicism, where you're free to say, 'Oh, well, if it's not been taught infallibly, I'll just blow it off.' No, I think you have an obligation as a faithful Catholic to give a presumption of truth. But that presumption is just that. It's a presumption; it's not absolute. It's very important to recognize that there is a hierarchy of truths among our dogmatic teachings. Vatican II taught that even among dogmas of the church, not all have the same relationship to the foundations of the Christian faith.

"A good example is, you've got a dogmatic teaching about the saving work of Jesus Christ and a dogmatic teaching about the Immaculate Conception of Mary. The second teaching's meaning depends on the first. You can't understand the Immaculate Conception unless you first understand the saving work of Christ.

"Then there's a second category that's somewhat controversial, called 'definitive doctrine.' These teachings are not themselves divinely revealed but are in some way necessary to safeguard and faithfully expound divine revelation. A classic example is the canon of books we have in the Bible.

"Beyond that you have 'authoritative doctrine'--binding teachings of the church that Catholics must give a presumption of the truth to. But since they're not taught infallibly, there's at least a remote possibility of error. An example of that would be the church's condemnation of in vitro fertilization or the prohibition of artificial contraception. These are binding teachings. You're not allowed to just blow them off.

"Finally, the fourth circle isn't really doctrine at all; it's church law or discipline, things like the General Instruction of the Roman Missal. It's binding here and now for the life of the church, but it could be revised tomorrow. We can have altar girls now; we couldn't before.

"But maybe a more pertinent example is celibacy for diocesan priests; that's simply a matter of church law. If a Catholic has a disagreement with the church at this lower level, it is not as serious as denying a dogma." What are the nonnegotiables? "Generally, divine revelation. And it seems to me we have to make a distinction: If a Catholic deliberately, obstinately, publicly renounces a dogmatic teaching of the church, we do not say they are outside the purview of God's love and concern, but I think we have to say they have separated themselves from the Roman Catholic communion. But I'm not saying they cannot be saved or that God does not love them."

--U.S. Catholic, March 2005

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### 3. POPE JOHN PAUL II'S LEGACY

An exceptional analysis of Pope John Paul II's papacy was published in the June 2005 issue of *Vanity Fair* as "*He Believed in Miracles; The near-death experience that set John Paul II on the road to the papacy gave him a mystical certainty in God's purpose.*" It may be accessed/purchased at:

[http://goliathreference.ecnext.com/comsite5/bin/comsite5.pl?page=description&item\\_id=0286-9469036&purchase\\_type=ITM](http://goliathreference.ecnext.com/comsite5/bin/comsite5.pl?page=description&item_id=0286-9469036&purchase_type=ITM)

The Rev. Dr. Richard P, McBrien of Notre Dame offers comments at:

[http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php?id\\_article=1209](http://www.commonwealmagazine.org/article.php?id_article=1209) (which requires a registration)

Two excerpted paragraphs follow:

The darkest legacy of John Paul's papacy is the degradation of the image of the Catholic priesthood. When he finally spoke about the priestly-abuse scandals, he did so in supernatural rather than criminal terms. Writing to the world's priests from Rome on Holy Thursday 2002, he said, "We are personally and profoundly afflicted by the sins of some of our brothers who have betrayed the grace of Ordination in succumbing even to the most grievous forms of the *mysterium iniquitatis* at work in the world." *Mysterium iniquitatis*, the mystery of evil, evokes a very precise scriptural reference—in II Thessalonians 2:7—to the coming of the "Wicked" Satan. The comment distances the perpetrators, and indeed the Church, from responsibility, for it implies that the priests in question did not set out to abuse young people but were enticed to do so by Satan."

John Paul's papacy will forever be linked with the process that led to the downfall of the Soviet system. We all sleep more safely in our beds because of him. To the world in general and to many who are not bound by his strictures, he was a heroic figure who stuck to his principles to the very end. Within the Church, it is another matter. He demoralized countless millions of Catholics by the narrow focus of his views on sexual ethics. He denounced homosexuality and disciplined those who attempted to create special ministries for the spiritual welfare of gays, such as Sister Jeannine Gramick and Father Robert Nugent in America. He denied Holy Communion to people who had remarried without an annulment, and he insisted that contraception is a grave sin, as is the practice of couples' living together before marriage. In Africa, he preached the evil of using condoms, even when one of the partners in a marriage was infected with H.I.V. Women in general fared badly under John Paul II. He constantly held up the Virgin Mary as the perfect female model of acquiescence while claiming that he had discovered a "new feminism."

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**A Theological Dissident Examines the Teachings of Pope John Paul II** By RICHARD BYRNE in the April 1, 2005, issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*

**ROME IF YOU WANT TO:** The morbid hype that has marked the news coverage of Pope John Paul II's recent health woes is no surprise. Roman Catholicism has a billion or more adherents, sparking worldwide interest in its leader. The intricate rituals and backroom politicking involved in selecting a new Bishop of Rome exude a mysterious allure even for non-Catholics. (Is that white smoke or black smoke coming from the chimney?)

At 26 years, the papacy of John Paul II is the longest in modern times and the most eventful. The Polish-born pontiff, now 84 years old, has weighed in on prominent political and social debates. He has also steered the Church to conservative positions on issues of gender, sexuality, and doctrinal uniformity.

On those latter issues, the Rev. Charles E. Curran has been a prominent theological dissident for nearly 40 years. Father Curran rose to public prominence as a leader of theological opposition to Pope Paul VI's 1968 encyclical, *Humanae vitae*, which reiterated the Church's opposition to artificial birth control. Eventually he was barred from teaching theology at Catholic University of America in 1987, on orders from the Vatican. (Catholic University remains under a censure voted into effect by the American Association of University Professors in 1990 for the infringement of Father Curran's academic freedom.)

Now a professor of human values at Southern Methodist University, Father Curran has written a new book, *The Moral Theology of Pope John Paul II*, published by Georgetown University Press. A comprehensive review of the moral teachings embedded in the 14 encyclicals issued by the pontiff, the book may gain notice as much for its author as for its content. Indeed, Father Curran's dissents were a spur for the Vatican's ban on public dissent by theologians on church teachings in 1990. They were also an implied target of Pope John Paul II's 1993 encyclical, *Veritatis splendor*, which labeled "some trends of theological thinking and certain philosophical affirmations" as "incompatible with revealed truth."

Father Curran agrees that asking to what degree he can separate himself from his own battle with the Vatican in writing such a book is a valid question. His reply is a measured one. "I'm not that conscious directly of it," he says of his personal battles with the Vatican. "It might be working underneath. I have always tried to express my disagreements in a very academic way, without impugning anybody's motivations." In fact, he continues, "the broader Catholic tradition supplies me with an approach that allows me to criticize these things by its acceptance of faith and reason. ... It does invite this."

Richard Brown, director of Georgetown University Press, says that it has "not taken much heat" over the decision to publish Father Curran's book, despite being affiliated with a Catholic institution.

"When we first started talking about the book," says Mr. Brown, "I did have some concern that this not be Charlie's ax to grind or his getting even with the Pope." He is pleased by the thoroughness and evenhandedness of the finished product.

"He is not trying to raise hackles or settle a score," says Mr. Brown.

In his review of the moral teachings of Pope John Paul II, Father Curran identifies a significant methodological gap between the pontiff's pronouncements on social issues and similar statements on personal morality and sexuality. On the latter issues, he says, Pope John Paul II has had an "unwillingness to recognize that the hierarchical magisterium [of the Church] not only teaches the truth, but it also learns the truth."

Father Curran argues that on matters of social justice, the Church has learned much from two centuries of political and social upheaval. "There's no doubt," he observes, "that the Roman Catholic Church strongly condemned in the 19th century the modern liberties -- contemporary democracy, contemporary religious freedom. It said that freedom of conscience was a madness; *delirimentum* was the Latin word. And these were papal encyclicals saying this kind of thing. And then change came on."

The methodological gap in Pope John Paul II's moral theology arises, Father Curran says, when his willingness to accept the capacity of the Church to learn truth in social-justice teaching is abandoned when the focus is personal and sexual morality. "In the social teaching," he says, "you have accepted much more a reality of historical development. Things develop and change over history and over time. You have also tended to emphasize much more the person as the center of things."

The pope "uses what I call a relationality model. It sees the human person in the multiple relationships with God, neighbor, world, and self," says Father Curran. "Now if you look at sexual ethics, the emphasis is on the eternal, the immutable, and the unchanging. What has always been true."

For instance, he continues, the pontiff "goes back to the Book of Genesis and finds the plan of God for all time with regard to sexuality. He certainly doesn't do that with regard to social ethics. You wouldn't find much democracy in the Hebrew Bible."

In addition to the other broad-ranging changes that Pope John Paul II has made in Church law and structure, his 14 encyclicals present a formidable body of work with which his successors must contend. "In some cases," says Father Curran of the precedent in moral teaching set by the pontiff, "it's just as strong as the U.S. Supreme Court."

But Pope John Paul II's own grappling with the precedents left to him by his predecessors is just as revealing, he argues. "What he has tried to do is flatten it out," says Father Curran. "He has tried to see more continuity in the tradition than there is."

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"John Paul II set his personal stamp on several aspects of church life. Vatican II had reformed many Catholic practices, and had raised hopes for further change. John Paul continued to implement the council's decrees, but always from a conservative perspective. Two of his most conspicuous accomplishments were the establishment of a new Code of Canon Law (1983) and a new Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992). In his appointments of bishops, he showed a marked preference for those who seemed to share his conservative opinions.

"John Paul II resisted secularization in the church. In redefining the responsibilities of laity, priests, and religious orders, he rejected ordination of women and opposed direct political participation and office-holding by priests. His ecumenical moves were toward the Orthodox Church and Anglican Communion rather than toward European Protestantism. In 1999 John Paul traveled to Romania and met with the patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church; this was the first papal visit ever to a predominantly Orthodox country.

“In 2000, a Holy Year in which the church reflected on its 2,000-year history, John Paul asked forgiveness for sins committed by Roman Catholics. Although he mentioned no specific errors, several cardinals acknowledged past injustice and intolerance toward non-Catholics. These acknowledgements were understood to include the Crusades and the Inquisition and inaction during the Holocaust. The apology preceded a papal pilgrimage to the Holy Land and a visit to Yad Vashem, the Holocaust memorial in Israel.

“John Paul II canonized more than 480 saints, a larger number than any previous pope. These included some large groups—103 martyrs in Korea, 117 martyrs in Vietnam, and 120 martyrs in China—but also many notable individuals. He canonized two French nuns who came to North America: Marguerite Bourgeoys, who worked in 17th-century Québec, and Rose-Philippine Duchesne, who worked in 19th-century Missouri and Kansas. He canonized Katharine Drexel, an American heiress who became a nun and worked among African Americans and Native Americans. He canonized Polish Franciscan priest Maximilian Kolbe and German Carmelite nun Edith Stein, both of whom were killed at the Nazi death camp Auschwitz during World War II. In general, his canonizations substantially increased the number of Catholic saints from non-European countries.

“By the same token, John Paul II continued the internationalization of the Vatican bureaucracy and the College of Cardinals. During his long reign, he appointed more than 230 cardinals. They came from all parts of the world, and they included fifteen Americans. Joseph Bernardin, archbishop of Chicago; John O’Connor, archbishop of New York; and Jesuit theologian Avery Dulles were among the best-known Americans he elevated to the rank of cardinal. Francis Arinze, a Nigerian whom John Paul appointed Cardinal Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments in 2002, was looked upon as one of the most influential figures in the Vatican.

“In *Redemptor hominis*, his first encyclical, John Paul II had paid tribute to Paul VI: “He knew how to preserve a providential tranquility and balance even in the most critical moments.” Nobody would have said that about John Paul II. He was distinguished by his strenuous travels and his stance on controversial issues; moreover, his leadership of a conservative minority within the church seemed to reflect an impatience with moderate and progressive Catholics.

“John Paul died in April 2005 after one of the longest reigns of any pope in history. His death precipitated an outpouring of grief and emotional tributes from around the world. He was replaced as pope by Joseph Cardinal A. Ratzinger (see Benedict XVI) of Germany, a close confidante of John Paul who generally shared his predecessor’s conservative views.”

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From *Context: Martin E. Marty on Religion and Culture* July 2005 Volume 37, Number 7

## POPE FOR THE POOR

If someone who has filed *Context* or kept its online version would look back some years from now, she might have trouble finding mention of a pope's death and his successor's election last spring. So let's start this issue by entering into the record a few reflections that we think might well endure. For example, first, from a secular source, here is commentator Michael Sean Winters on the Catholic Church during and after John Paul II:

"In a society debating how best to shirk governmental commitments made to the elderly while movie executives are paid upward of \$100 million in severance, surely John Paul's humanism gets high marks for consistency.

"That humanism, which once underpinned and shaped the Enlightenment values of Western societies, seems so utterly absent from the spread-eagle capitalism of the West today, in which the market is the sole vehicle for assigning worth and resources. If the good of concrete human persons is not the criterion for social, political, and economic life; if the value of subjective freedom is so predominant as to trump all other values; if the moral life of the human person is consistently evaluated in utilitarian terms, is humanism still even possible? John Paul's consistent solidarity with the poor could not stand in sharper contrast to the predominant cultural ethos of the West.

"Nowhere was the pope's disappointment on social justice issues more obvious than in his native Poland after the collapse of communism. There, the very same people who had flocked to see the pope on his pilgrimages, who had sustained Mass attendance records unparalleled in Europe, who had produced the greatest share of Europe's priests--those same people ignored the church's teachings on birth control, divorced in record numbers, and, given the chance, flocked to purchase CDs and BMWs and cell phones. The disheartened pontiff turned his gaze from Eastern Europe to the impoverished southern part of the globe, trying to stem the tide of Western materialism and utilitarianism.

John Paul's numerous visits to the Third World were attempts to demonstrate the church's solidarity with and presence among the peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America. It is on these continents that the church is now looking for its springtime.

"Indeed, Catholicism is becoming a Third World religion, and the structures and priorities of the church will have to change even more than they did under Pope John Paul to accommodate this basic shift. In Africa and Asia and Latin America the gospel--with its call for solidarity with the poor and the suffering and for understanding the church as a community of solidarity between God and man--has a different ring from Western Catholics' call for sexual liberation: It is the ring of authenticity. For all of its traditionalism, there is a whiff of newness in the church today, a newness that was emphasized again and again in the writings and policies of John Paul II. He was fascinated by the approach of the third millennium and wanted desperately to live long enough to usher it in, believing that it would herald a new day for the church, a church he tried to reawaken to its radical vision of God and the dignity of the human person." --The New Republic, 4/18/05

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## POPE BENEDICT XVI

"After John Paul II died, Cardinal Ratzinger was chosen to succeed him as pope. He was elected on the second day of the conclave, April 19, 2005, on the fourth ballot. He was the best known of the cardinals, and he had a remarkable understanding of the workings of the Vatican. Many Catholics who hoped for early changes in the church's teaching on issues such as birth control and abortion or the ordination (see Holy Orders) of women and married men expressed disappointment at his election, even while recognizing the new pope's intellectual brilliance and quiet charm. For the general public, the most important concern was perhaps the potential influence of Pope Benedict's ideas upon legislation and public policy.

"In 2002 the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith had issued a *Doctrinal Note on Some Questions Regarding the Participation of Catholics in Political Life*. In that paper the then Cardinal Ratzinger wrote, "A kind of cultural relativism exists today, evident in the...defense of an ethical pluralism, which sanctions the decadence and disintegration of reason and the principles of the natural moral law.... As a result, citizens claim complete autonomy with regard to their moral choices, and lawmakers maintain that they are respecting this freedom of choice by enacting laws which ignore the principles of natural ethics and yield to ephemeral cultural and moral trends...." There was little doubt that the new pope would be a conservative influence in areas like same-sex marriage, euthanasia, and stem cell research.

"Before becoming pope Benedict wrote extensively. His publications fall into three main categories. First, there are the many works that he wrote as a professional theologian. These include *Introduction to Christianity* (1968; rev. ed. 2004), *The God of Jesus Christ* (1976; English translation 1978), *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life* (1981; trans. 1989), and *Principles of Christian Morality* (1986; with Hans Urs von Balthasar and Heinz Schürmann). Second, there are less formal and more personal writings, such as the book-length interview published as *The Ratzinger Report* (1985) and *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977* (1998). Third, there are documents issued over the signature of Cardinal Ratzinger by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. These often deal with controversial issues, in accordance with the Congregation's function as doctrinal watchdog for the Roman Catholic Church. They include the *Instruction on Certain Aspects of the "Theology of Liberation"* (1984), the *Instruction on Christian Freedom and Liberation* (1986), *On the Pastoral Care of Homosexual Persons* (1986), and the *Declaration "Dominus Jesus" On the Unicity and Salvific Universality of Jesus Christ and the Church* (2000)."

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From The Rev. Dr. Richard P. McBrien of Notre Dame at <http://129.74.54.81/rm/FMPro>

Now that the dust has settled a bit, it may be appropriate to offer a tentative reflection on the choice his fellow cardinals made in electing Joseph Ratzinger as successor to John Paul II.

There are at least two reasons why the outcome was a surprise to most observers. First, Cardinal Ratzinger had been for many years a polarizing figure in the Church. His reputation was derived principally from the job he was given by his predecessor in 1981 to serve as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Thus, when Cardinal Ratzinger made news, it was usually in his role as the chief enforcer of orthodoxy, even though it was always the pope himself who made the final decision.

Ideally, new popes come into office carrying no baggage; otherwise the media and other commentators inside and outside the Church are sure to examine their contents carefully, dirty laundry and all.

But the new pope did enter the papacy laden with baggage, which is why there were such emotional reactions to his election. Catholics on the right were jubilant -- and the farther right they were, the more intense their jubilation. Many of them hopefully anticipate that Pope Ratzinger will be an even more effective scourge of so-called dissident Catholics than was Cardinal Ratzinger.

No one expressed this sentiment more boldly or more crudely than William Donahue, head of the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and a frequent guest on cable television programs.

“The malcontents really have to make up their minds now,” he said. “Are they going to accept the official teachings of the church, or continue their whining, or are they going to walk? Why stay where you’re not wanted?” (“For U.S. Catholics, new pope could be polarizing,” USA Today, 4/21/05)

The muckrakers on the other side of the aisle screamed through headlines about the new pope’s alleged Nazi past -- his membership in the Hitler Youth and in the German army during the Second World War -- but without highlighting the Ratzinger family’s staunch opposition to Hitler and young Joseph’s eventual desertion from the army.

Most of the distress one heard about in the aftermath of Cardinal Ratzinger’s election as pope tended to be privately expressed. As such, it is more difficult to verify than a newspaper interview. But I know of no one on the Catholic left who made public statements about the new pope that would even begin to approach the level of mean-spiritedness cited above.

It remains to be seen whether, in choosing the name Benedict, Pope Ratzinger intends to follow in Benedict XV’s footsteps -- a pope who tried to restore peace to the Catholic Church after the highly polarized pontificate of Pius X (1903-1914).

Benedict XV urged those on both sides of the internal conflict to stop using prejudicial adjectives to describe their own brand of Catholicism. Catholicism, he insisted, needs no “fresh epithets.” We are all simply Catholics.

To be sure, the task of reconciliation then and today does not require any compromise of the Church’s authentic Tradition. On the contrary, such a tactic would doom from the start any efforts toward reconciliation.

There is a second reason why the election of Cardinal Ratzinger gave many Catholics pause, including the new pope’s older priest-brother, Georg. At 78, Joseph Ratzinger is the oldest man to enter the papacy in 275 years. In 1730 another 78-year-old cardinal was elected, taking the name Clement XII. He reigned for just under 10 years and is especially remembered for having erected the famous Trevi Fountain in Rome.

Unfortunately, that new pope was often bedridden with gout and became blind in the second year of his pontificate, forcing him to rely excessively on his cardinal-nephew, Neri Corsini.

When some of us predicted that, after the long and dominant pontificate of John Paul II, the cardinals would elect an older, transitional pope -- someone in his 70s -- others scoffed, insisting that the cardinals would never elect an elderly colleague who, within a few years, would likely be afflicted with poor health and decreased mobility, just like John Paul II. But the cardinals did exactly that.

Contrary to another prediction some of us had made, the new pope is not an Italian. But Cardinal Ratzinger has been a fixture in Rome for nearly 25 years and speaks Italian fluently. He is perhaps as Italian as any non-Italian could be.

Whether Benedict XVI’s “baggage” and age will prove to be serious liabilities in the long run is anybody’s guess. In the meantime, it is only fair to give him a chance to mark out his own path -- with our prayerful support.

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Nolan: It appears that neither Pope has made a clear distinction among *Godly certainties* (which they believe they possess), *relativism* (everything is equally true or valid), and *pluralism* (informed, faithful “schools of

thought”). Along with others among most religions who “know for sure” the “mind of God,” there is no incentive – in humility - to agree to differ.