

The Pope as Teacher

by Father Daniel Callam, C.S.B.

BENEDICT XVI gives many talks, and almost all of them are in print. If you don't believe me, consult the Vatican web site under "Benedict XVI"¹ Over the years I have developed a knack for reading the speeches and writings of the popes. The technique is simple: skim over everything you have heard before. I hope that it is not disrespectful to say that in consequence I read few of the Holy Father addresses word by word. It is not in the least surprising that that Holy Father repeats himself. Anyone must who speaks as often as he does. In fact, many times in his talks Benedict himself quotes what he has said elsewhere. He not only repeats himself; he also repeats what previous popes have said, just as they in turn, drew abundantly on the writings of their predecessors. The footnotes in his latest encyclical, *Caritas in veritate* ("Charity in Truth") draw heavily upon his predecessors, especially of Paul VI's *Populorum progressio*, but also upon Pius XI, upon John XXIII, and—heavily—upon John Paul II. He is not the first pope to do so. The very title of Pius XI's encyclical on labour, *Quadragesimo anno* ("The Fortieth Year," 1931), is a reference to the great encyclical of Leo XIII, *Rerum novarum* ("New Things"), published forty years earlier, in 1891. Despite its name, Leo's encyclical recommends no novelties. *Rerum novarum* is Latin for "revolution," subversive and seditious, and Leo identifies the products of things new in 1891 as exploitation of the working classes, socialism, and a general moral deterioration.

It is instructive to consider why this style of writing has been unfailingly preferred by the popes. Its ultimate base is the fact that the truths of faith and morality have been once and for all established in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. They remain the constant, universal principles of Christian life in every age and circumstance. Our day seems to feel that science and technology have altered Christianity, that the creed should be adjusted to fit in with current theories of history or that abortion is morally acceptable as long as it is perpetrated in an operating room, and so on. We need, therefore, to hear someone who reaffirms, for example, the traditional devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary, who says that a lie is still a lie even if

¹ www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/index.htm

it is televised, or that the morality of birth control is not altered by chemical or surgical techniques. It surprised me that the Pope can attract large crowds to hear what, apparently, many reject and even disbelieve. A wise colleague pointed out that it is precisely these uncompromising statements that attract people to him. He is something unusual in our society, a public figure that resolutely proclaims that we are able to be faithful to the service of God and neighbour. Even those who have abandoned Christianity take something home from his message so that, if the pope were to surrender his noble expectations of the human person, I believe that, whatever they may say, these very critics would be feel themselves somehow lessened.

Pope Benedict is, obviously, a different man from his predecessor. John Paul's strong personality seems to have impressed some commentators to the point that they want to identify Catholicism with him. I had the impression they believed that, with half an hour to spare some morning, the pope could have sat down at his desk and made anything and everything permissible for Catholics, from premarital sex to the ordination of women. This false understanding of the papacy looks on the pope as the originator instead of the guardian of faith and morals. The true charism of the Bishop of Rome is to proclaim solemnly and authoritatively the faith of the Church. The Catholic faith does not change, and there is a corresponding weight to the sheer repetition that characterizes papal teaching. It is like a huge mass set in motion by a series of carefully applied impulses. The present pope has added his forceful preaching to the accumulated momentum, so that the great object will not be deflected from its course. It is this that makes it impossible for the Church to alter its teaching in any significant way. The formulations that arise from Catholics' facing new situations will be in continuity with what has gone before. The perennial truths of the faith are the very substance of papal teaching, tirelessly reiterated because they provide direction for man's continuing journey to God.✠