

ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Week of June 27, 2011

"Blessed John Paul II"

By Rev. Richard P. McBrien

The late Pope John Paul II was beatified on May 1st and is now well on the way to canonization. Some people have complained about the speed of the process, but as the pope's biographer George Weigel has correctly pointed out, there were no complaints about the speed with which Mother Teresa's cause was advanced.

The speed of the process, however, is not the issue, nor is there any doubt in the minds of most critics that John Paul II is in heaven.

What is at issue is the record of his long pontificate. Canonization is a public declaration not only that the new saint is in heaven, but that his life or hers is worthy of emulation (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, n. 50).

While it is certainly the case that John Paul II's pontificate included many achievements (his three social encyclicals, the renegotiation of the Lateran Pacts, his outreach to Jews, his interfaith gathering and prayer for peace at Assisi), its two major deficiencies were his grave mishandling of the sexual-abuse crisis in the priesthood and his appointment and promotion of exceedingly conservative bishops to, and within, the hierarchy.

Both deficiencies continue to define the Catholic Church in our time, and account for the severe demoralization that afflicts so many in the Church today. They also explain why so many thousands of Catholics have left the Church in recent years, so many in fact that in the United States ex-Catholics would constitute the country's second largest denomination if they constituted a church unto themselves.

Therefore, it is the case that, on Blessed John Paul II's watch, the greatest crisis to hit the Catholic Church since the Reformation was allowed to grow and to fester, and the bishops appointed during his long reign were unable to offer the kind of pastorally effective leadership that the crisis required. Indeed, these bishops were not selected in the first place for their pastoral qualities, but for their unquestioning loyalty to the Holy See on such issues as contraception, abortion, priestly celibacy, and the ordination of women.

Bishop William Morris was recently sacked from his diocese of Toowoomba, Queensland, in Australia because he had urged in a pastoral letter that the ordination of women to the priesthood and the end of obligatory celibacy for priests at least be considered by the Vatican.

Pope Benedict XVI gave as his principal reason for dismissing Bishop Morris from his diocese that the bishop had effectively denied that the matter of women's ordination had already been permanently settled by an infallible teaching of Pope John Paul II.

Many Catholics are demoralized today because of the continued stench from the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood and because of the repressive, pastorally insensitive behavior of some of the bishops appointed by Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI.

They may have an additional reason for demoralization on the First Sunday of Advent later this year when the “reform of the reform” goes into effect. Some will resent the millions of dollars spent on new missals and song books, and will be confused and disoriented by the loss of familiar wordings. who are more ecumenically-minded will lament the fact that, for the first time since Vatican II’s reform of the liturgy, the Roman Catholic Church and other Christian denominations will not be celebrating the Eucharist with the same words.

Close observers of this column and of my many contemporary lectures, writings, and television appearances know that, at the beginning of the pontificates of John Paul II and Benedict XVI, I expressed not only the hope but also the expectation that both pontificates would be highly successful, notwithstanding the doubts that many other commentators were expressing. In the former case, I welcomed the election of the first non-Italian pope in over 400 years. In the latter case, I was encouraged by the new pope’s selection of the name Benedict. Benedict XV (1914-1922), as I had pointed out in my *Lives of the Popes*, “may well have been one of the finest popes in history, but surely one of the least appreciated” (p. 355).

I judged Benedict XV to be one of the twelve “good” popes in papal history, calling him “Perhaps the most underrated of the modern popes” (p. 436). For those who wonder why the Catholic Church seems to be passing through one of the worst patches in its history, more benign explanations are, first, the premature death of Pope John Paul I after only 33 days in the papacy and, second, the refusal of Cardinal Carlo Colombo of Milan to accept election to the papacy in the second conclave of 1978.

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