



FROM JOSEPH TO BENEDICT

With the death of Queen Elizabeth II less than four months earlier (*The Way*, December 2022) and with only hours left of 2022, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI (born 1927) took leave of this life. (Photo: www.zumapress.com.)

While Elizabeth was more famous, it is feasible to claim that Benedict's death was more significant. The former reigned for a breathtaking seventy years and remained, by the end, sovereign over fifteen states. The latter, serving as Bishop of Rome and Head of the Roman Catholic Church for just eight years (2005–2013), nevertheless shepherded 1.2 billion Roman Catholics (40% in Latin America).

The contrasts don't end there. Elizabeth and Benedict, born a mere 360 days apart, were, in their youth, on opposing sides of World War II. Moreover, Elizabeth headed a nation, which, under Henry VIII (1491–1547), had broken away from the Church of Rome.

JOSEPH RATZINGER: THE ACADEMIC

Benedict was born Joseph Alois Ratzinger to a policeman and hotel cook in Marktl-am-Inn, Germany. He was just six when Hitler's Third Reich began, and, raised in a staunch Catholic family, was but twelve when he entered into seminary to train as a priest. That year, 1939, saw the start of World War II, resulting, in 1941, in Ratzinger's compulsory entrance into the Hitler Youth. Two years later, he was drafted into the German military, serving in an anti-aircraft unit in Bavaria before his 1945 assignment to Hungary to set tank traps. With the war in Europe winding down, Ratzinger deserted, only to be picked up by American forces and briefly imprisoned.

Once released, Ratzinger, still only 18, reconvened his seminary studies. Ordained to the priesthood in June

1951, he gave evidence of the theological clout for which he was to become renowned, earning in 1953 a doctorate in theology at the University of Munich. Thereafter, his teaching in dogma and theology began, initially at Freising (1959), then at the University of Bonn (1959–69). There he doubled his efforts, serving simultaneously at the universities in Münster (1963–66) and, at the invitation of the theologian Hans Küng, at Tübingen (1966–69). Then, in 1969 he moved to the University of Regensburg, later becoming vice-president. Ratzinger's teaching gave rise to a number of volumes at this time, notably *Introduction to Christianity* (1968) and *Dogma and Revelation* (1973). In total he wrote 66 books.

BENEDICT XVI: THE CHURCHMAN

On his way to becoming Benedict, Ratzinger served Joseph Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, as expert assistant at the Second Vatican Council (1962–65). At the time, Ratzinger was progressive-leaning, yearning for the Church to embrace more reform. His outlook changed, though, after student denunciations of Christianity in Tübingen reminded him of Nazi tactics several decades earlier.

Ratzinger's newfound conservatism accompanied him through a succession of appointments: Archbishop of Munich and Freising (March 1977), being made Cardinal three months later; prefect for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (November 1981), becoming for two decades Pope John Paul II's closest advisor; and then Pope from 2005. As such, he combined intelligence and zeal for Catholic doctrine (upholding official positions on birth control, homosexuality, and inter-religious dialogue), with, it is said, humility and gentleness.

Not only was Benedict the oldest Pope elected since Clement XII (1730–40), he became the first in 600 years to resign his reign. Amid the ravages of Western rationalism and secularism, Benedict is remembered for upholding historic Catholic doctrine and for encouraging Catholic-Islamic dialogue. His reign coincided with a barrage of allegations against the Roman Church for sexual and physical abuse. Benedict himself came under criticism for his earlier handling of four cases while he was Archbishop.

FROM TRADITION TO SCRIPTURE



For those of us upholding the Holy Bible as the sole authority for our belief and our conduct (2 Timothy 3:16), Benedict's passing leaves us conflicted. Today's paganism and ethical anarchy—akin to the early centuries A.D.—leaves us more inclined to acknowledge areas of commonality with Rome than previously. Doctrinally, we share belief in the Trinity, the incarnation and the person of Jesus; and socially, the promotion of the prolife cause. Yet, the Roman doctrine of *semper eadem* (forever the same) precludes us, despite Vatican II, from dismissing the concerns of the sixteenth-century Protestant reformers.

THE PAPACY

There remains no biblical basis for the papacy. First, there's the awkward fact that Peter, said to be the first pope, was married (Luke 4:38)! While he spent time in Rome, the church there played third fiddle to the church in Jerusalem (where thousands had been converted to Christ following the Holy Spirit's outpouring on Pentecost [Acts 2:42-47; 4:4]), and in cosmopolitan Antioch, Syria (from whence the mission to the Gentiles took off [Acts 11:19-26]).

True, the church in Rome grew in significance due to her location at the heart of the empire. Yet, the idea of an unbroken papal line stretching back to Peter is debunked by history. The Great Schism testifies to competing papal claims in Avignon, France, and in Rome, resolved by the appointment of a third pope at the Council at Pisa (1409). All this matters, for on this shady foundation rest Rome's incredible claim that the Pope is "Holy Father" (the office of God the Father); Head of the Church (the office of God the Son); and the Vicar (or substitute) of Christ (the office of God the Holy Spirit). In support of the claim, Rome teaches the Pope's ability to speak infallibly *ex cathedra* (from the throne). The reformers saw in the papacy, then, a foreshadowing of the coming "*man of lawlessness*" who "*takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God*" (2 Thessalonians 2:4).

THE PRIESTHOOD

Likewise, there is no biblical basis for priesthood today. God ordained and regulated Israel's priesthood in Moses' time to picture for his church (the called-out ones) the coming Messiah. In his person and through his work the ceremonial priesthood became obsolete. Jesus Christ not only replaced all other priesthoods, he was and is far superior to them all. He renders the rest superfluous.

First, because Christ is perfect. Friend and foe alike recognized this (Luke 5:8, 23:4; John 19:6). Only such a priest can truly and adequately represent God before us and us before God. How sad, then, that masses put their trust in sinful, even corrupt and immoral priests. To confess one's sins to a fellow sinner is futile and dangerous. Futile, because the priest himself needs absolution for his sins, and dangerous because his intercession has no power with God. Indeed, it leaves us in our sins.

Second, it follows that Christ's atonement is also perfect. His offering of himself to his Father as a sacrifice for sin was accepted in heaven once-for-all time. From the cross Jesus declared, "*It [his atoning work for sinners] is finished*" (John 19:30). The claim, then, that in the Mass' transubstantiated bread and wine there occurs a repetition of Calvary is unnecessary, erroneous, and unbelievable. On the contrary, Hebrews 7:24-25 states that Christ "*holds his priesthood permanently because he continues forever. Consequently, he is able to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them.*"

THE PENITENT

Although the bodily resurrection of Christ and the gift of the Spirit offer repentant and believing sinners wonderful assurance of sins forgiven and of relationship with God, the Council of Trent (1545–63) anathematized those professing assurance (Decree *On Justification*, Canon xv). After all, receiving salvation for sin by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone dismantles much Roman Catholic thought, notably ~

- *Reliance on Mary and the saints.* Mary acknowledged her own need of the Saviour (Luke 1:46-47). True saints do, too. Holy Scripture says we have "*one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus*" (1 Timothy 2:5). The idea, according to the *Catholic Catechism*, that, "In a wholly singular way she [Mary] cooperated by her obedience, faith, hope and burning charity in the Saviour's work of restoring supernatural life to souls" attacks the sufficiency of Christ's work on the cross. True it is that, "the Blessed Virgin is invoked in the [Roman] Church under the titles Advocate, Helper, Benefactress, and Mediatrix" (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Geoffrey Chapman, 1994, 221), but these titles belong either to Christ or to the Holy Spirit!
- *Reliance on works as well as faith.* Since Christ's perfect merit is imputed (reckoned) to believers by divine declaration and in union with Christ, our works are not *for our salvation* but arise *from it* as gratitude (Ephesians 2:8-10). Resting alone, then, in Christ's sufficiency for our justification, we have peace with God (Rom. 5:1).

FROM PRIEST TO PENITENT

Richard Bennett



I was born in 1938 into an Irish Roman Catholic family of eight. We loved to play, sing, and act, saying together most evenings the Rosary. No one missed Mass on Sundays unless they were seriously ill. Thus, by the age of five or six, I knew of Christ, Mary, and the saints.

Like every boy studying under the Jesuits, I could, by the age of ten, recite five reasons why God exists and why the Pope is the head of the only true church. Although the Mass was in Latin, I attended daily, intrigued by its profound sense of mystery. Praying to saints was encouraged, as was devotion to patron saints for most aspects of my life. Getting souls out of Purgatory was a priority, deeming it holy to pray for the dead to be loosed from their sins.

At fourteen, I sensed a call to be a missionary. Jesus' words in Mark 10:29-30 proved influential: *"Verily I say unto you, There is no man that hath left house, or brethren, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands, for my sake, and the gospel's, But he shall receive an hundredfold now in this time, houses, and brethren, and sisters, and mothers, and children, and lands, with persecutions; and in the world to come eternal life."* I thus joined the Dominican Order in 1956, studying for eight years the Church's traditions, philosophy, the theology of Thomas Aquinas, and biblical passages from a Catholic perspective. My faith, though, was institutionalized and ritualized. Obedience to Church and Dominican Law was said to be the means of salvation. This I sought by suffering cold showers, beating my back, and penance.

OUTWARD POMP, INNER EMPTINESS

In 1963 I was ordained a priest, proceeding to finish my studies of Aquinas at The Angelicum University in Rome. There I struggled with the pomp and an inner emptiness, shocked that hundreds in my classes seemed quite disinterested in theology. The joy I gained from treading in the Colosseum the ground where so much Christian blood had been poured out, was marred by jeering youths shouting the equivalent of "scum"; not because I was Christ's but because I represented the Roman Catholic system.

The emptiness of Rome's glories was confirmed soon after. Deciding prayerfully against completing the theological degree which began with my studies of Aquinas, I was encouraged by the priest who was to direct my thesis, to accept as my own a thesis written several years earlier, so long as I would defend it orally. This turned my stomach.

[For the full testimony, go to www.bereanbeacon.org.]

PRIDE, FALL, AND A NEW HUNGER

On returning from Rome, I received orders in late August 1964 to go to Trinidad, West Indies. On October 1, 1964, I arrived and for seven years fulfilled my duties and got many to come to Mass. By 1972, feeling rather self-satisfied, I requested the Lord that, if it were his will, he humble me for my betterment. Later that evening I had a freak accident, splitting my head and hurting my spine in many places. Had I not come so close to death, I doubt that I would ever have overcome this self-satisfaction.

Rote prayer became very empty to me. I cried out to God in my pain, finding some comfort in personal prayer. I stopped saying the Breviary (the official prayer for clergy) and the Rosary, and began using the Bible to pray. The process was very slow, for I did not know my way around the Bible. I had been taught to distrust the Bible, but my training in philosophy and in Aquinas left me helpless.

Assigned to a new parish later that year, I continued to practice Church teaching, with further success. Teaching catechism in many schools, including government schools, I also advanced my study of Scripture. I found that Paul's heart cry stirred within me, *"That I may know [Christ], and the power of his resurrection"* (Philippians 3:10).

THE ULTIMATE QUESTION

Around this time, Canadian Christians came to Trinidad. Although very experience-oriented, they got me further into the Bible. I began comparing scriptural texts, even quoting chapter and verse! In studying Isaiah 53, I discovered that God deals with sin by means of substitution: *"All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all"* (Isaiah 53:6). Since Christ died in my place it was wrong for me to try cooperating in paying the price for my sin. I asked God for forgiveness, but failed to appreciate that I was a sinner *by nature*. After all, I had been taught that baptism washes away our depravity.

Along the way, I learned that God's Word is without error. Aided in searching it by *Strong's Concordance*, I perceived its absolutely reliability in narrating history, recording God's promises and prophecies, in its moral commands, and in its teaching of the Christian life (2 Timothy 3:16-17). I thus started teaching that God's Word is absolutely authoritative, commencing during a visit to Vancouver, B.C., in a large parish church of about 400 people. Three days later, the local archbishop, James Carney, called me to his office to officially silence me and to forbid me from preaching in his archdiocese.

Returning to Trinidad, my old Student Master was asked to assist me. Now close friends, I saw him as a channel to

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influence my Dominican brothers and those in the Archbishop's house. Yet, he died suddenly of a heart attack, leaving me grief-stricken. God, however, was turning me from mere Bible knowledge to an awareness of my sin. I knew from Scripture that my role as a priestly mediator opposed biblical teaching, but I loved the esteem, even idolizing, of the people. While, I began to see the worship of Mary, the saints, and the priests for the sin that it is, I could not renounce the priesthood. I was so invested in it.

Ultimately, I faced the question of Christ's Lordship over my life. Since the Roman Church had been lord for so long, I was torn within for my last six years as parish priest (Sangre Grande, 1979-85). How could I go against "Holy Mother," all the while dispensing her sacraments and keeping people faithful to her?

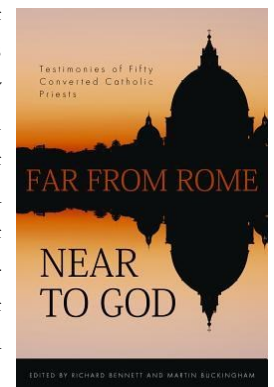
Yet, in 1981, I rededicated my service to the Roman Catholic Church at a parish renewal seminar in New Orleans. However, reengaging life's problems in Trinidad, I returned to the authority of God's Word. Amid the tension of those years, my stomach suffered much. I should have known the simple truth that one cannot serve two masters. While I broke the Church's statues of St. Francis and St. Martin in obedience to the second commandment (Exodus 20:4), I faltered in the face of objections to my removal of the statues of the Sacred Heart and of Mary.

One day, a woman challenged me (the only Christian ever to do so in my 22 years as a priest), "You Roman Catholics have a form of godliness, but you deny its power." That bothered me, for no priest in Trinidad was more ostentatious than I. So, in October 1985, feeling trapped, I went to Barbados to pray over my compromised life. There I read in a book of the biblical meaning of church as "the fellowship of believers." The New Testament knows no hint of the "clergy" lording it over the "laity." The Lord himself declared "*...one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren*" (Matthew 23:8). Thus, I now felt free to let go of the Roman Catholic Church, stepping forth in reliance on Jesus Christ as my Lord.

I left Trinidad the next month, staying in Barbados with an elderly couple, praying for a suit and for money to reach Canada. Both prayers were answered without publicizing my needs. Leaving behind 90° tropical heat, I landed in Canadian snow and ice. A month later, I came to America practically penniless, with no residency card, driver's license, or recommendation. Yet, for six months I was ministered to by a Christian couple on a farm in Washington State. Having also left Catholicism, they challenged me as to whether I was bitter or hurt. Four days later I began to see in God's gift of repentance the fruit of his salvation, gladly receiving healing through Christ's substitutionary death on the cross. Additionally, he gifted me Lynn as wife, a lovely and intelligent believer. To God be the glory!

FROM ROME TO GOD

This book contains the moving testimonies of fifty priests who found their way, by the grace of God, out of the labyrinth of Roman Catholic theology and practice into the light of the gospel of Christ. But this is not a narrowly polemical work, nor is its relevance limited to the ongoing controversy between Rome and the churches of the Reformation. The love and concern felt by the former priests for those they left behind, and their fervent desire that they too should experience the joy and peace of salvation in Christ are seen throughout. The wider relevance of the experiences described will also be felt in many contexts remote from Roman Catholicism where human pride and presumption have erected rival sources of authority between people and the Word of God, so obscuring the way of salvation by grace alone, through faith alone, and in Christ alone.



NEXT ISSUE DUE OUT: JUNE 1