

Book Reviews

Servitore di Dio e dell'umanità: La biografia di Benedetto XVI by Elio Guerriero (*Milan, IT: Mondadori, 2016*), x + 539 pp.

WE HAVE ENTERED a new era of Ratzinger studies. With the establishment of the Ratzinger Foundation in 2007, the Institut Papst Benedikt XVI and the first volume of the *Gesammelte Schriften* in 2008, the annual Ratzinger Prize in 2011, and the tenth volume of the Ratzinger-Studien in 2016, we are moving beyond the initial surveys of his thought such as those of Aidan Nichols and Tracey Rowland and into deeper explorations. While there have been a number of studies of individual aspects of Benedict's thought in the past ten years, we have lacked a synthetic analysis of the man and his thought that goes deeper than the accounts of John Allen and George Weigel, which were written at the beginning of his pontificate and are particularly concerned with the state of the Church in 2005. In French, we have the study of Bernard Lecomte (but it is too brief to carry us far beyond the portraits written by Georg Ratzinger), Peter Seewald's 2005 *Benedict XVI: Ein Porträt aus der Nähe*, or Ratzinger's own brief recollections in *Milestones*, which are limited to his time before he was consecrated a bishop.

Guerriero's biography, however, is important because it accounts for the whole man. If it is not translated into English (although it is to be hoped that Ignatius Press or Catholic University of America Press may publish a translation; all English translations in this review are my own), its influence in English scholarship may not be apparent. But it will be a landmark in Ratzinger studies in a similar way to that in which Guerriero's biography of von Balthasar was, in that it draws together all of the previous work on Ratzinger and provides a coherent account of the man and the thinker. We are now in a position to measure Ratzinger's theological achievement, evaluate it, and carry

forward those various avenues that he has opened up and we deem likely to carry us to new vistas.

Rather than attempting a superficial synopsis of this lengthy book (it is over 250,000 words) that would, at any rate, be largely familiar to readers of *Nova et Vetera*, I instead organize my comments around five themes. The first regards the character of the book as a whole. In the second section, I briefly discuss how the thick texture provided by Guerriero to Ratzinger's life and intellectual development (1) allows us better to see the man as a whole and perhaps to empathize with the difficult situations that led him to make some controversial decisions, (2) allows us to understand the broader context of individual works, and (3) clarifies just how deeply involved Benedict XVI was in the magisterium of John Paul II. The third section addresses the treatment of Ratzinger's theology in this volume. The fourth draws attention to what I would call moments of irony or surprise for those who are tempted to categorize Benedict as a mere reactionary. In the fifth and concluding section, I draw attention both to a moment in which Gurriero sounds a disagreement with Ratzinger and to one or two limitations of the book as a whole.

The Character of the Book

It may be helpful to compare and contrast this biography of Ratzinger with two well-known modern studies of theologians and hierarchs: that of John Henry Newman by Ian Ker (1988) and that of John Paul II by George Weigel (1999 and 2010). Unlike Weigel's work on the life of John Paul II, Gurriero's did not have extended access to Benedict XVI. In many ways, this is a sympathetic look at the man from a historical viewpoint rather than the product of live interviews. It further differs from Weigel's book in that the two men have such different lives and personalities: Wojtyla the actor became a charismatic pastor and media sensation, while Ratzinger the retiring professor became the shy and reluctant successor of Peter. Unlike Ker, Guerriero explicitly tells us that he does not hope to contribute to the canonization of Benedict XVI, and in fact argues with von Balthasar that the Church should abandon the practice of canonizing pontiffs (4).

And yet Gurriero's book is similar to both books. It is like Weigel and Ker's respective studies in that it is a comprehensive landmark in the study of the subject. Like both critical studies, this volume is likely to be the definitive biography for the foreseeable future. Like Ker's study of Newman, the focus or most exciting part of the book is the intellectual development of the man, and several pages

are given to analyze and provide the context for most of Ratzinger's major works.

The Benefit of Historical Context

Many biographical details of Benedict's life have slipped out in interviews, but they are scattered. Guerriero draws them together and presents a rich tapestry that has some coherence. His basic thesis about the man Benedict is that he was drawn to a monastic life but was often called out of it (5, 312–13, 394–95, 413). Indeed, it is the monastic humanism of the Collège des Bernardins that would perhaps have been the ideal fit for his personality and style of work. We get a sense of the continuity of his life and the context for his theological interests from the extensive family history and political and cultural developments of his youth. This serves two purposes. First, it provides a touching human dimension to this shy Bavarian, and secondly, we see not only the influence of World War II and the Nazi occupation on his character but also how the political developments of Western Germany during the *Wirtschaftswunder* following the war shaped the thought of the young theologian.

The most striking aspect of Ratzinger's personality that one sees in this overview of his life, however, is how retiring a man Benedict is. He accepted the episcopal appointment because his confessor told him he must (176–77). He refused John Paul II's request to have him become head of the Congregation for Catholic Education in 1980, but after the Pope was shot in 1981, Ratzinger had a change of heart, perhaps both because he empathized even more deeply with John Paul and perhaps because he realized that he was not suited to be a pastor. In the following pages, as we trace his time in Rome from 1981 on, I am struck by how entwined his own work was with John Paul's magisterium (207, 296, 335), and indeed how much his work at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith meant the abandonment of his own theological work, and to a certain extent his own personality. Guerriero recalls a conversation with von Balthasar about Ratzinger from this period in which the Swiss theologian tells him: "You just don't get it. He is sacrificing his very self for the Church" (231).

Once we get to a discussion of his own pontificate, the burden of office becomes even more apparent and, in this section, a more critical approach may perhaps have improved the book. It is almost certainly misleading, for instance, to characterize his pontificate in the following way: "The defining feature of Pope Benedict's

governing is that rather than paying attention to concrete details, he preferred to be called in to adjudicate when needed, leaving those involved the freedom to adapt to various situations” (349). In the following pages we are led through a series of mistaken appointments: men who made a good impression on Benedict and to whom he was too loyal. The result was that these mistaken appointments greatly harmed the Church. By the end of chapter 17 (“The Church in the Storm”), the reader seems to have participated in Benedict’s exhausting pontificate and, like him, is ready to retire: “For me the resignation was a duty” (476).

Ratzinger the Theologian

As Ker does in his treatment of Newman, Guerriero describes Ratzinger’s mind by regularly focusing on particularly important works, and not always his well-known works, but rather those that are more revealing of the thinker. This dimension is the most important contribution of the book. We learn of the breadth of Ratzinger’s reading as an undergraduate seminarian (Scholasticism but also Heidegger and Nietzsche) and his early attraction to Newman, who “then became for us the foundation of that theological personalism which was so fascinating” (41). Guerriero draws attention to some central developments in Ratzinger’s thought, such as his growing awareness of worldwide Christianity (110) and his increasing concern with truth (275–76). His analysis of many of Ratzinger’s theological achievements is important. We can see, for instance, Ratzinger’s style of *ressourcement*—which is not merely a historical analysis—in his *Habilitationsschrift* on Bonaventure: “Here Ratzinger showed himself not only capable of carrying on independent scientific research, which was required in order to receive the academic *venia docendi*, but every writing of his demonstrates his extraordinary talent to find original and innovative aspects in the works of the great theologians of the past. In sum, he knew how to enter sympathetically with past masters, and furthermore know how to use them to enrich and improve contemporary theological debate” (71; cf. 132).

One gets the sense in reading Guerriero that the contrast between Rahner and his disciples and Ratzinger and his *Schülerkreis* is the following: while Rahner attempts to look at reality (through the lens of Heidegger and Husserl), Ratzinger works through the monuments of tradition to get a feel for that tradition. Rahner attempts to stay within the boundaries established by Denzinger, tending not to work through the thick texture of tradition. Indeed, this approach can also

be seen in the diversity of theses that Ratzinger supervised. This is not because he had a scattered mind, but rather because, according to one of his assistants, Professor Stephan Horn: “The professor was not interested, as Rahner or Pannenberg were, in investigating reality from his own point of view. On the contrary, he drew abundantly from Scripture and tradition to enter into critical and constructive dialogue with contemporary problems. His intent was to introduce [into contemporary discussions] the breadth and wealth of living tradition considered not only in its organic development, in its heights and depths, but also in its elements of fracture and polarity that give impetus to other questions and possible insights” (145).

Déjà Vu and Liberation Theology’s Colonial Heritage

The moments of irony (only occasionally intentional) and foreshadowing in this book are quite delicious. In the 1950s, Guerriero tells us, Ratzinger’s interests were not confined to theology or philosophy, but included drama and a particular interest in Reinhold Schneider’s *Il gran rifiuto* (76). Ratzinger’s arguments about the danger of clericalism inherent in the Church’s excessive focus on the bishop after the Second Vatican Council (115) and the clericalism of liturgists who carry forward “a furious iconoclasm that eliminates the law of continuity that one cannot transgress with impunity” (129) are examples of his penchant for pinning the same criticism on those who tend to accuse others of being clerical, siding with the wealthy, rigid, unthinking dogmatists (see 287, 293). (Note that Ratzinger’s point about the clericalism of liturgists was already said in Joseph Jungmann’s 1948 *Missarum sollemnia*.)

Two other moments in the story show the irony of wealthy Europeans rushing to identify themselves with the poor. In 1979, Hans Küng’s *mandatum* was revoked by the Catholic bishops, allowing him to teach religion but not Catholic theology at the University of Tübingen. After this, an invitation to speak at a Catholic institute was revoked at the insistence of the local ordinary. Ratzinger addressed this issue with a group of youth from his diocese in November 1979, particularly Küng’s self-identification with the “Church of the Poor.” Guerriero recounts: “Ratzinger further encouraged the young people not to take too seriously the air of martyrdom that surrounded Küng. Perhaps with the exception of the Pope, there was no bishop in the world who had as much access to the media as Küng did. Moreover, a professor of Tübingen was not the most appropriate spokesmen for the Church of the Poor” (197).

Guerriero returns to the question of liberation theology later in the book and articulates Ratzinger's ironic claim that liberation theology is actually a product of colonialism: "For it was born under the influence of European and North American theologians and tended to spread to other areas of the third world from there. The theologians who began the school are European and those who made it grow in Latin America are Europeans or European-trained. From this point of view, Liberation Theology is just one more export product of the opulent west" (229).

Another foreshadowing of the present ecclesial situation is a debate that broke out in Germany in September 1993. Bishops Karl Lehmann, Walter Kasper, and Oskar Saeir coauthored a letter to the faithful in their dioceses that exhorted the priests and faithful to respect the consciences of those divorced and remarried Catholics who choose to come forward to receive the Eucharist. Rather than condemning their decision, the bishops called for a "pastoral accompaniment" (271).

Concluding Remarks

In sum, this is a very, and perhaps overly, sympathetic portrait. I note only one substantial criticism of Ratzinger, in which Guerriero disagrees with him on the question of the *novus ordo* mass (367). It is an excellent work and I hope that it will be translated before too long.

My one reservation about the book is that it does not seem to give sufficient attention to Ratzinger's great achievement in biblical exegesis. Both the *Jesus of Nazareth* volumes and his writings on Scripture are a great achievement and display the assimilative power of the truth: the Church can accept historical criticism when done well, and yet, according to the principles of *Dei Verbum* and the tradition of the Church, the meaning of Scripture is by no means exhausted by historical-critical research. The *Jesus of Nazareth* volumes model how this might be done. A more detailed examination of just how Ratzinger achieved this and what import these books might have remains a *desideratissimum*. N.V

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