

A Pope For Europe

by Richard T. Ritenbaugh

Forerunner, "WorldWatch," June 2005

Much of the world was saddened by the death of Pope John Paul II on April 2, 2005, at the age of 84. Around the globe, he was seen as a force for traditional values and democratic principles, and his passing seems to have marked the end of an era. He was the last of the great fighters of communism, generally being credited—along with Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher—with pushing the Soviet Union to the breaking point. He was the last of the West's Cold Warriors of any stature.

Seventeen days later, the College of Cardinals elected a new pope, Benedict XVI, the former Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, as the 265th pontiff of the Catholic Church. His election was only mildly surprising—he was the odds-on favorite as the Conclave began—and that because he was thought, at 78, to be too old. Even after a month's observation, many pundits still think he will be a "transitional pope," one who does little more than mark time until a pope from the next generation can take office. This, however, seems to be a dangerous underestimation of the man who for many years wielded great power as prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, the office that was once known as the Inquisition.

Cardinal Ratzinger was John Paul II's chief theological adviser for twenty years, linking him inextricably with the Vatican's conservative doctrinal stance during the latter's reign. Some European publications even nicknamed him "God's Rottweiler" and "the Panzer Cardinal" for his ferocious defense of orthodoxy. CNN.com reports, "In the Vatican, he has been the driving force behind crackdowns on liberation theology, religious pluralism, challenges to traditional moral teachings on issues such as homosexuality, and dissent on such issues as women's ordination" ("German cardinal elected new pope," April 20, 2005).

His papal agenda became clear during his pre-Conclave homily: He warned against

relativism, which is letting oneself be "swept along by every wind of teaching." [It] looks like the only attitude [acceptable] to today's standards. We are moving toward a dictatorship of relativism, which does not recognize anything as for certain and which has as its highest goal one's own ego and one's own desires. (*ibid.*)

It is clear that he believes in authority, particularly the authority of the Catholic Church, while the rest of the world, Europe specifically, sinks further into "everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25). He sees himself now in a position to turn the tide.

In the first general audience of his pontificate, Benedict XVI

referred to Europe's Christian roots in what is expected to be a major theme of his papacy.

The pope touched on the issues as he described how he chose his name, recalling Pope Benedict XV, who led the church during World War I. "In his footsteps I place my ministry in the service of reconciliation and harmony between peoples."

He also recalled St. Benedict of Norcia, a patron saint of Europe, "whose life evokes the Christian roots of Europe. I ask him to help us all hold firm to the centrality of Christ in our Christian life." . . .

The reference to Europe's Christian heritage is a theme Benedict is expected to take up frequently in a bid to combat religious apathy on the continent.

He said the founder of the Benedictine order is heavily venerated in Germany and "in particular Bavaria, the land of my origin." ("Pope Benedict XVI pledges to work for reconciliation and peace," *International Herald Tribune*, April 27, 2005)

In essence, he desires to re-evangelize Europe after decades of secular humanism have reigned unchecked across the Continent.

It remains to be seen, of course, how much of these substantial goals Benedict XVI will be able to accomplish. Entrenched politicians, academics, cultural icons, and even many within his own church will oppose him at just about every point. Under current conditions, he could, like his predecessor, have at best incremental success.

However, events within and without Europe could prove to be his allies should matters escalate to threaten her economic, political, and cultural survival. A severe economic downturn, a sharp increase in terrorism, or an explosion of violence and disruption by non-Europeans within her borders could spark a yearning to return to traditional European values. With their backs against a wall, Europeans may then be willing to listen to the advice of the head of the Catholic Church, one of their own.

This early in Benedict XVI's pontificate, however, the Vatican is relatively quiet. But it should not go unremarked that the last time a German theologian rose to such prominence, Europe was not long thereafter plunged into the Thirty Years War (1618-1648).