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Outside View: True liberalism

By **ROBERT SIRICO**

Outside View Commentator

Rome, Italy, Apr. 23 (UPI) -- We have already heard a thousand times or more that the new pope is a conservative. As counterintuitive as this may sound, I believe that insofar as the new papacy has implications for economics and politics, it is in the direction of a humane and unifying liberalism. I speak not of liberalism as we know it now, which is bound up with state management and democratic relativism, but liberalism of an older variety that placed it hopes in society, faith and freedom.

Bear with me.

When it was announced that Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger would take the name of Benedict XVI, the question immediately presented itself: Who was Benedict XV and what did he stand for? What does it imply for the future of this papacy that it would consider itself to be, in some sense, a successor papacy to that one?

Benedict XV was pope from 1914 to 1922 -- the pope who witnessed the age of peace, prosperity and hope turn to one of bloodshed, violence and the total state. He is remembered mostly for his anguished encyclical *Ad Beatissimi Apostolorum*, which sought to end the conflicts and battles that became what we call World War I, the war that so violently dashed the hopes of many generations of 19th-century classical liberals.

I think in particular of Lord Acton, who exemplified the spirit of his age. The temporal power of the papal power had mercifully come to an end, and at the urging of the liberal wing of the faith. They had placed their hope in the capacity of Christian faith to flourish in the absence of coercion, and in the capacity of the world to continue its progress toward peace and prosperity. It was to be a world of free trade, free thought, and religious orthodoxy. But it was not to be. The vision of liberalism in which they had placed their hopes was dashed, utterly and completely with the carnage of war.

Pope Benedict XV wrote the following terrifying passage in 1914:

"On every side the dread phantom of war holds sway: There is scarce room for another thought in the minds of men. The combatants are the greatest and wealthiest nations of the Earth; what wonder, then,

if, well provided with the most awful weapons modern military science has devised, they strive to destroy one another with refinements of horror. There is no limit to the measure of ruin and of slaughter; day by day the Earth is drenched with newly-shed blood, and is covered with the bodies of the wounded and of the slain. Who would imagine as we see them thus filled with hatred of one another, that they are all of one common stock, all of the same nature, all members of the same human society? Who would recognize brothers, whose Father is in Heaven? Yet, while with numberless troops the furious battle is engaged, the sad cohorts of war, sorrow and distress swoop down upon every city and every home; day by day the mighty number of widows and orphans increases, and with the interruption of communications, trade is at a standstill; agriculture is abandoned; the arts are reduced to inactivity; the wealthy are in difficulties; the poor are reduced to abject misery; all are in distress."

Obviously these sad words served as foreshadowing of what would follow: crimes and terrors of Communism and Nazism, the end of European unity, the advent of weapons of mass destruction, the takeover of the West by ideologies of social management, secularism, consumerism, and every kind of horror. These were the worldly concerns of popes that followed Benedict XV, all the way to John Paul II, who was singularly instrumental in overthrowing the great tyrannies of the last century. It was a debilitating time for anyone who believed in the spirit of Lord Acton and his contemporaries.

And what became of Christian hope? We find it in documents of the Second Vatican Council, the most important event to shape the lives of both John Paul and the German theologian Joseph Ratzinger. This was the council that did not turn its back on religious freedom but rather embraced it more fully with a confidence that the setbacks that followed the end of the temporal power would be temporary. This council looked forward to a world of renewed spiritual and material progress in which a global order of freedom -- along with technological advance -- would serve all peoples in all places. It was the council that made it the church's mission to not only care for souls but also for the well being of all societies in which people live and breathe.

At the time the council closed, many conservative Catholics had great doubts about the optimism at the heart of Vatican II, particularly that which motivated the church to embrace the modern world and more clearly define the need for religious freedom and human rights. But today, the wisdom is clearer. Communism and Nazism came and went. The other "isms" that dominated the 20th century seem also to be abating. We again live in times of new hope, similar to the ones that gave birth to the liberal vision of the 19th century.

This is a vision that was warmly embraced by John Paul II, and we can expect a full continuity with that vision under Benedict XVI. The very name of the latter gives us hope that the bloodshed between World War I and the fall of the Berlin Wall need not be our common destiny. Certainly Ratzinger has not contradicted John Paul II's liberal teachings on economics, which found great merit in the market economy and even condemned European-style welfare states.

Ratzinger has been more focused on the theological implications of political heresies such as liberation theology than he has in questions of economic systems. But he has written with great optimism about the prospects for a new and unified Europe -- not unified by the state but by faith and cooperation. He has written very powerful condemnations of the total state as we know it and decried the way in which the secularist social-managerial project of the overweening state has displaced the Christian vision of unity in faith.

Mostly, Ratzinger has written in defense of authentic freedom. He has written of the "real gift of freedom that Christian faith has brought into the world. It was the first to break the identification of state and religion and thus to remove from the state its claim to totality; by differentiating faith from the sphere of the state it gave man the right to keep secluded and reserved his or her own being with God ... Freedom of conscience is the core of all freedom." (*Freedom and Constraint in the Church*, 1981)

Here is the voice of a true liberal. Long live Benedict XVI.

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