

The Detroit News

Pope Benedict XVI will turn out to be a real liberal

BY FR. ROBERT SIRICO
Faith and Policy

ROME — We have already heard a thousand times or more that Pope Benedict XVI is a conservative. But I believe, in fact, that he will move the Catholic Church in the direction of a humane and unifying liberalism.

By that, I mean a liberalism of an older, classical variety that placed its hopes in society, faith and freedom. 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?

Pope Benedict XV was pope from 1914-22, and he 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 efforts to end the conflicts and battles that became what we now call World War I, the war which so violently dashed the hopes of so many.

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?"

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.

As tragic as these events were, they did not extinguish hope. We find it in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the most important event to shape the lives of both John Paul II 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. Vatican II 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.

When 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. 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.

This optimism was warmly embraced by John Paul II, and we can expect it to continue under Benedict XVI. Certainly Cardinal Ratzinger has not contradicted John Paul II's teachings on economics, which found great merit in the market economy and even condemned European-style welfare states.

Cardinal 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.

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.

Fr. Robert Sirico is president of the Acton Institute for the Study of Religion and Liberty in Grand Rapids.