

Pope Benedict XVI: The Mind of the Man

Father Joseph Fessio Reflects on his Teacher

Sandy Lender

In the papal gardens of Castelgandolfo, overlooking Lake Albano in Rome, stands a man who Father Joseph D. Fessio, S.J., describes as radiant. He may be of average height and average weight; he may have what Fessio calls prematurely white hair, but he carries a pleasant countenance and has expressive eyes. He turns to his companions of the *Schülerkreis*, or student circle, with which he has met annually without fail since the 1970s, and greets them with a serene smile. Fessio speaks joyfully of the time he has spent with the man he knows not only as Pope Benedict XVI, but also as Cardinal Ratzinger, colleague, friend and mentor.

Father Ratzinger was one of the professors under whom Fessio studied while completing his doctorate of theology degree at the University of Regensburg in Germany in the early 1970s. More recent experiences in Rome at September's meeting of the *Schülerkreis* bring back memories of Fessio's graduate school days and paint a picture of Pope Benedict's penetrating intelligence through the eyes of one who knows him well. One class in particular that Fessio took with then Father Ratzinger provides the canvas for the Holy Father's public speaking style.

"I was in one class with then Father Ratzinger on eschatology, which is an area he had written on," explains Fessio. "I don't recall whether he actually read from notes, or whether he simply spoke, because, with him, you can't tell the difference. He can speak in a way that's very coherent and *druckreif*, ready to print. In fact, three of his



Fr. Joseph Fessio meets the Pope at Castelgandolfo.

books are simply interviews that were carried on for long periods of time, and then published as books.

"But I do remember being in the class, seeing him give the class while looking up at the wall behind me. He was not in a trance, but in a prayerful attitude. It seemed his gaze was towards heaven as he spoke in a prayerful manner."

The University of Regensburg also offered seminars and pro-seminars for which students would prepare presentations and during which students would lead discussions. The leaders of the seminars and pro-seminars, including then Father Ratzinger, would then make closing comments. As Fessio points out, this is an area of strength for the Holy Father, who is a

master at taking multiple viewpoints or concepts from a variety of persons or sources, and synthesizing them in succinct and concise statements.

"In our meetings we have each year, we have presentations, a discussion, an exchange, it usually isn't until the end that he [the Holy Father] would gather together all the things we'd said and affirm some, correct others, and put it all in the right proportion. At Castelgandolfo on Friday afternoon, the second of September, forty of us were in a room around a large square of desks and he [the Holy Father] was in the center of one of the groups of desks. Next to me was a priest professor, Father Christian Troll, S.J., who gave a presentation on Islam, and he ended his presenta-

tion by proposing an approach that had been taken by Fazlur Rahman, a Pakistani Muslim scholar who spent many years in Chicago. What this scholar was saying, and what Father Troll was proposing, was that Muslim scholars take specific ethical or Sharia law prescriptions from the Koran—such as permission for multiple wives, or punishment by mutilation, or the injunction to convert the world to Islam by persuasion or else they become subjects (dhimmite) or are put to death—and try to understand what the principles are behind them and apply those principles in a more modern context with a different set of values and so on. In that way, Islam can enter into dialogue with the modern world and non-Muslims can enter into dialogue with Muslims and have peaceful coexistence. That was the proposal that was made to us, the other students, and the Holy Father.

“Immediately when the talk was over, the Holy Father responded. I’m not quoting him now; whatever I say will be less elegant and less eloquent than what he said. What he said was very beautiful and something we all marveled at.

“What he said was that the Islamic conception of the Koran is that God delivered these words through Mohammed to us. They’re not Mohammad’s words. They are God’s words and God’s words only, and the original Koran is in Heaven and what we have is simply the expression of that Koran given by God to Mohamed and written down faithfully by him. Therefore everything that is written in the Koran is a word of God himself with no human admixture and therefore no possibility of taint of historical conditioning and therefore no possibility of change or interpretation.

“Whereas the Christian Bible, by its very inner structure and nature, is God’s action in the world, in salvation history, using man as His instruments both to carry on His work and to proclaim His word. It’s the word of God, and, at the same time, the word of

Isaiah and Jeremiah and Ezekiel and Matthew and Mark within a community that is moving forward historically so that the Bible itself is a result of interaction. It comes from a community and forms a community; therefore, the community from which the Bible arose and in which the Bible is carried on can interpret the Bible for modern times.

“What this scholar proposed for the Koran is inconsistent with the very nature of the Koran, but what he proposes is quite consistent with the nature of the Bible.

“He [the Holy Father] said it more briefly than that and I forget his exact words. But that’s a typical example of how he will listen very carefully and then go right to the heart of the matter.”

What Fessio’s example of Pope Benedict’s response also shows is the Holy Father’s love of God’s word.

“He almost always begins with God’s word. Whether you read an article by him or a chapter in a book, no matter what the topic, he will say, ‘What does the Bible tell us about that?’ And then he’ll go through history and tradition and so on. It’s a very impressive intellectual procedure he goes through.

“I think anybody who reads his works will have a sense of the depth of the intellect which nourishes his spiritual life. He sees the divine in the concrete. Just as Jesus would tell parables, the Holy Father sees the significance of individual objects and events. In his installation homily, he spoke of the pallium and how it is made out of a type of wool. It is the burden of the flock, which he’s carrying. While it is a privilege, it is also his burden.

“During his installation homily, he also talked about the fisherman’s ring which he was given, and explained how it symbolizes his succession to the fisherman Peter. He’s very sensitive to the symbolic meaning of reality, which is, of course, a very patristic characteristic that is also expressed in icons.

“Icons aren’t just pictures. They’re seen as a window to the heavens, an access to the

eternal world beyond. That’s the way he sees things and he embodies that. When you’re with him at Mass, you feel like you’re in Heaven in the liturgy. It’s not ostentatious – it’s very calm. He gave the Schülerkreis a homily on Sunday and it was just extraordinary. It was direct, profound and delivered without any notes. Again, he was kind of looking up beyond us in a prayerful manner, and it was just a masterpiece of expression of the deepest meaning and inner coherence of the Gospel passage.”

Pope Benedict XVI’s prayerful manner of gathering his thoughts and speaking to his audience has remained unchanged since Fessio first studied with him all those years ago. Back in the early 1970s, then Father Ratzinger had 15 to 20 doctoral students to mentor, according to Fessio, and his writing career was already under way.

“He was already well known, giving conferences in Germany and Europe, and working on books. His time was at a premium and none of the students wanted to interfere with that.”

Fortunately, Fessio became friends with a gentleman who believed in forming long-lasting bonds with those around him. As the students earned their degrees and graduated from the university, they vowed to gather each year that they could, and their teacher did not forget his role. Even with his new and daunting responsibilities on the Throne of Peter, Pope Benedict XVI did not want to miss the yearly meeting of the Schülerkreis with his former students.

“I was surprised, as were the others, in a sense, that he could join us this year. But, as he explained it to us, he said even though he has taken on this task, it’s very important to maintain friendships from the past.”

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