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7-1-2005

# Review of John R. Allen Jr.'s "Pope Benedict XVI: A Biography of Joseph Ratzinger"

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### eCommons Citation

Jason Paul Bourgeois (2005). Review of John R. Allen Jr.'s "Pope Benedict XVI: A Biography of Joseph Ratzinger". *Catholic Books Review*. ,  
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**John L. ALLEN, Jr., *Pope Benedict XVI: A Biography of Joseph Ratzinger*.** New York: Continuum, 2005. 352 pp. \$19.95 pb. ISBN 0-8624-1787-6. Reviewed by Jason Paul BOURGEOIS.

This book is a reprint, with no alterations, of Allen's *Cardinal Ratzinger: The Vatican's Enforcer of the Faith* of 2000. Allen, a widely admired Vatican journalist working for the National Catholic Reporter, has himself complained about this reprint in his column "The Word from Rome." He would have liked to write a new introduction, placing the biography in the context of Ratzinger's recent election as pope. In that column, he also acknowledged past critics of the book who accused it of displaying a bias from the standpoint of the Catholic left. Allen is probably too hard on himself here, as such a bias only rarely surfaces in the book itself and virtually never in his columns and commentaries.

In any case, this book is the first biography of Ratzinger in English, and probably the only one written prior to the papal election of 2005. The first three chapters are a biography of Ratzinger's pre-CDF days. They focus on some controversial topics, and hint that Ratzinger's own memory of his past has been filtered in order to justify his experiences in Nazi Germany and his progressive reputation during Vatican II.

Chapter one examines Ratzinger's boyhood and Bavarian cultural origins, especially his experiences and retrospective memories of growing up in Nazi Germany. It hints that Ratzinger's filtered memories of the time allowed him to miss certain lessons such as the danger of blind obedience, but to take deeply to heart other lessons such as the belief that the Catholic church can and must resist ideas from secular culture that undermine its belief in human dignity.

Chapter two focuses on the "shift" in thinking that led Ratzinger from being a progressive during his time as advisor to Cardinal Frings during Vatican II to a conservative theologian afterward. Occasionally using a technique of criticism later employed by *The Daily Show*, Allen contrasts words spoken by the "liberal" Ratzinger to critique positions later taken by the "conservative" one. In any case, it is clear that Ratzinger was already suspicious of trends taken at the close of Vatican II, especially the naive optimism and openness to the secular world of *Gaudium et Spes*, and that his suspicions deepened during the post-conciliar period. Allen identifies Ratzinger as being consistently influenced by the theological pessimism of St. Augustine.

Chapter three examines the early theological writings of Ratzinger, his days as a university professor (including his progressively rocky relationship with Hans Küng), and his appointment as Cardinal archbishop of Munich. The next four chapters examine his theological work as prefect for the Doctrine of the Faith, but

unfortunately omit a separate treatment of his later, private theological writings on important issues such as communion ecclesiology and liturgy.

Chapter four is a meaty examination of Ratzinger's resistance to the Marxist foundations of liberation theology, including a detailed chronology of his interaction with liberation theologians as prefect of the CDF. Among Ratzinger's objections are that liberation theology consistently reinterprets the tradition of the Church to favor radical political action, and that it denies traditional eschatology by its over-emphasis on temporal liberation rather than eternal redemption. Allen notes the effectiveness of Ratzinger's battle against liberation theology in Latin America.

Chapter five examines various gender and sexual issues, in a treatment that underscores the nearly exclusive concern with these issues in media discussions of Catholicism in North America. Allen himself, in his later columns and commentaries, has begun to recognize and try to correct this imbalance. The familiar issues of women's ordination, birth control, abortion, inclusive language, and homosexuality are reviewed and Ratzinger's positions and actions are critiqued here.

Chapter six looks at questions of the relationship of Catholicism to other religions. In addition to examining Ratzinger's ecumenical attitudes towards various groups, there is also a detailed examination of his views on the theological problems raised by religious pluralism. Although Allen was writing before the publication of *Dominus Iesus*, he comprehensively reviews here Ratzinger's concerns about the idea that Christ and Christianity is merely one source of salvation among many, or that the claims of Christianity ought to be relativized by the dialogical encounter with non-Christian cultures in Asia or elsewhere.

Chapter seven provides a review and critique of Ratzinger's disciplinary actions against various theologians, such as Charles Curran, and of his recent actions strengthening the accountability of theologians to the magisterium of the Catholic church. In fact, chapters four to seven contain interspersed accounts of virtually every well-known dissenting theologian from 1981 to 2000, and the reasons for the actions taken against them.

Chapter eight is the most anachronistic, as it concludes the book by examining the impossibility of a Ratzinger election during the next conclave. It also envisions the possible characteristics of a Ratzinger papacy. This chapter provides an object lesson on the dangers of trying to "read the tea leaves" to predict the future, and is one that any Vatican watcher should take to heart.

Overall, this book is an excellent introduction to the underlying theological concerns of Ratzinger in his role as prefect of the CDF. However, no book can offer cogent

predictions of the character of the papacy of Benedict XVI and this biography should not be read with those aims in mind. Finally, the book is also an excellent historical survey of the divisions and controversies that have divided the Catholic church, especially in North America, in the post-conciliar period.