

Reviews:

LIGHT OF THE WORLD, THE POPE, THE CHURCH AND THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES: A CONVERSATION WITH PETER SEEWALD (Ignatius Press: San Francisco, 2010). Reviewed by *Tracey Rowland*

This is the third of Peter Seewald's books which take the form of an interview with Joseph Ratzinger though the first since Ratzinger was elevated to the papacy. In this sense the book is unprecedented in its form since popes do not normally give candid interviews. For this reason there was a lot of excitement before the book's release and a rather high level of commentary about the merits of allowing a pontiff this kind of "off the cuff" latitude, especially when this particular pontiff seems to have a 'charism' for being misunderstood. The book however says almost nothing that could not already be found by reading his essays and homilies. There were no startling revelations. Seewald gave the pope the opportunity to offer comments about the Church's teaching on the "hot topics" of contraception, the ordination of women, and the celibacy of the priesthood. In every case he reiterated the positions of his predecessors and the standard magisterial teaching. On the celibacy front he noted that "it would be extremely dangerous if celibacy became a sort of pretext for bringing people into the priesthood who don't want to get married anyway. We need to head off a situation where the celibacy of priests would practically end up being identified with the tendency to homosexuality." Apart from this acknowledgement that a celibate priesthood might be an attractive option to someone who wants social security and social respectability without the burdens of marriage, his treatment of the hot topics was otherwise unremarkable.

At the time of the book's release there was a wide scale media beat-up of comments made on page 119. The pope made a common sense observation about the use of condoms by prostitutes and within hours he was under attack from groups within the Church suggesting that he was attempting to overturn Paul VI's teaching on contraception as presented in the famous encyclical *Humanae Vitae* of 1968. The statement, which is cited below in full was turned into a casuists' picnic.

...the sheer fixation on the condom implies a banalisation of sexuality, which, after all, is precisely the dangerous source of the attitude of no longer seeing sexuality as the expression of love, but only a sort of drug that people administer to themselves. This is why the fight against the banalisation of sexuality is also a part of the struggle to ensure that sexuality is treated as a positive value and to enable it to have a positive effect on the whole of man's being.

There may be a basis in the case of some individuals, as perhaps when a male prostitute uses a condom, where this can be a first step in the direction of moralisation, a first assumption of responsibility, on the way toward recovering

an awareness that not everything is allowed and that one cannot do whatever one wants. But it is not really the way to deal with the evil of HIV infection. That can really lie only in a humanization of sexuality.

How anyone could read these paragraphs as an attack on *Humanae vitae* really stretches the imagination. The pope was not even discussing heterosexual sex.

In his preface Seewald describes Benedict XVI as “young and modern, not a bean-counter, but rather a man who ventures bravely and retains his curiosity. A masterful teacher, and a disconcerting one as well, because he sees that we are losing things that we really cannot do without.”

Not being a “bean-counter” seems to be a double-edged sword for this particular pontiff. Journalists have been conditioned to expect sound-bites and bureaucratese and when confronted with a highly educated person who nuances his comments their default position is to mangle the comments to fit into their “reactionary” and “progressive” dichotomy. The fact that they might be dealing with someone who rejects those categories as the linguistic residue of long discredited eighteenth century ideologies is difficult for some to process.

One of the paradoxes suggested by the book is that here we have a pontiff who is seriously scholarly, sensitive to shades of grey, multilingual, a member of the *Académie française* (arguably the most elite academic club in the world) and, in short, the most distant possible thing from a bean-counter—but precisely because he is so intelligent, journalists find it difficult to do justice to his vision.

Perhaps one could say that what Benedict XVI is trying to do is to map the cultural logic of atheism – to show where certain philosophies begin and end—and their consequences for the meaning and purpose of human life. Anyone who has studied philosophy will know that the phrase ‘life is nasty, brutish and short’ comes from Hobbes and that Hobbes thought that we needed a politically powerful state to protect us from being torn apart by people more brutish than ourselves. But how does one explain this to masses of tabloid readers for whom “Hobbs” means a high street dress shop? How does one explain that an emotionally deprived 17th century Englishman brought up in boarding schools and ultimately coming under the influence of a Puritan Oxford don, could have left such a devastating legacy on 21st century cultural life? How does Benedict XVI get through his basic message that life is not some long running episode of a reality-TV survival contest, but a theo-dramatic narrative which potentially ends with the divinisation of the human person in eternal beatitude?

This book does not answer those questions but is perhaps the attempt of Fr Joseph Fessio, the founder of Ignatius Press, to give the pope an opportunity to give ‘nutshell’ responses to questions he has otherwise addressed in academic books and official documents not widely read by the Church’s 1.147 billion members. For this reason I would recommend the book for the kind of person who is interested in people, ideas and world events but who does not have the time to burrow through scholarly texts. This book is so light it can be read on a train or in a garden chair.

One of the pope’s more personal comments was that while he prays primarily to Christ, he is also “friends with Augustine, with Bonaventure, with Thomas Aquinas.” The inclusion of the two greatest scholastic theologians, one a Franciscan and one a

Dominican, is consistent with his belief that “love and reason are the twin pillars of all reality.” While Bonaventure is associated with love, Aquinas is associated with reason. One of the theological leitmotifs of this pontificate has been that both are necessary, of equal importance, and operate symbiotically. Truth without love ends up with what Ratzinger/Benedict XVI calls ‘moralism’ and others call dry casuistry, while love without truth is a recipe for an erratic moral compass.

Another telling remark is his comment that courage is one of the chief qualities required in bishops. He suggests that bishops ‘have to be people with qualities of intellect, professionalism and humanity, so that they can lead and draw others into a close-knit community’. He added that it was important for him as the Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith to generate a sense of community among his staff such as one finds in a family. He did not want to treat them as “project-managers” but as real human beings bringing a variety of personal gifts to the service of the one Church. While he acknowledges that in some ways the Church is an institution in the common sense meaning of the term, at a deeper level he describes the Church as “a living organism that comes from Christ himself.” This is the Church which is the bride of Christ. The ecclesiology is Pauline as refracted through the Tübingen scholars of the late nineteenth century, and through Henri de Lubac’s *Corpus Mysticum* and *The Splendor of the Church*. The Church he loves is not a bureaucratic structure managing agencies for social welfare. In other places he has written that ‘saints reformed the Church in depth, not by working up plans for new structures, but by reforming themselves’ and thus “what the Church needs in every age is holiness, not management.” As far back as 1985 in *The Ratzinger Report* he observed that the saints were all people of imagination, not functionaries of apparatuses and in his *Images of Hope: Meditations on Major Feasts* (2006) he concluded that Paul was effective, “not because of brilliant rhetoric and sophisticated strategies, but rather because he exerted himself and left himself vulnerable in the service of the Gospel.”

The reference to the need for people with imagination is a significant point. As far back as the early 20th century the French poet Paul Claudel was saying the same thing. He coined the expression “the poverty of a starved imagination” to describe the condition of the ecclesial bureaucrat who approaches his work for the Church with the disposition of the public servant. Some people however are attracted to the model of the Church as a modern corporation. One disgruntled commentator has complained that the papacy of Benedict XVI represents a “triumph of theologians over bureaucrats.” While some might draw a distinction, even a dichotomy, between the Church's spiritual and doctrinal priorities, and its social, political and humanitarian interests—and suggest that while the first are the province of theologians and the second the province of professional administrators, for Benedict XVI these two missions of the Church are always intertwined. This was a central message of his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, in which he declared that “a humanism which excludes Christ, is an inhuman humanism.” Somehow the personal encounter with Christ has to be a fundamental part of the Church's humanitarian work and not an optional extra.

The pope's reference to the need for people with imagination was drawn into stark relief by the pope's frank admission that before he lifted the ex-communication of holocaust-denier Bishop Richard Williamson no one on his staff thought to run a Google check on Williamson. The pope made the point that the four men ordained as bishops by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre were not ex-communicated for following pre-Conciliar

theology or daft ideas, but because of their denial of the pope's prerogative to appoint bishops. His lifting of the ex-communication was a mere diplomatic gesture prior to further negotiations and was not in any sense an affirmation of the world-views of any of the four bishops. However one would have thought that in any diplomatic manoeuvre someone would be given the job of finding out about the other parties in the dispute, if only to brief the principal negotiators.

At the time of this public relations disaster which was presented to the world as a German pope lifting a sanction against an anti-Semite bishop it was noted by several commentators that there are too many priests employed in the Roman Curia with degrees in canon law and that it might be a good idea to employ a few more lay Catholics who have worked in the mainstream media with experience in public relations. Issues can often be multi-dimensional and in this context the situation of the four bishops at canon law was probably the least complex aspect of the problem.

Light of the World also contains some papal reflections on micro-level issues like whether or not the burqa should be banned and the relative merits of receiving Communion in the hand or on the tongue, interpretations of the third secret of Fatima, and the strengths and weaknesses of the historical-critical method.

It is highly recommended for those who want an overview of the pope's thoughts on a range of controversial topics. It comes with a *curriculum vitae* of the pontiff and a brief chronicle of his pontificate. The questions posed by Seewald also contain interesting sociological data. It's a good coffee table book one can dip into when escaping from the world of bean-counters.