

A man sent from God whose name is Benedict

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“Leading men and women to God, to the God Who speaks in the Bible: this is the supreme and fundamental priority of the Church.”

Three guesses as to who said this. Billy Graham, John Wesley, Martin Luther, or an evangelical Anglican like John Stott of All Souls, Langham Place, London?

No, Pope Benedict XVI.

It's no wonder that this Pope appeals more and more to evangelical Christians, to Anglicans and to the Orthodox. Some of us have been deceived by the liberal media or even by liberal Roman Catholics into writing him off as “the rottweiler cardinal” or “the panzer cardinal”. But like another elderly pope who came to office late in life, John XXIII, this man is full of astonishing surprises.

For one thing, he wants us all to know and love the Bible as he himself does. He quotes St. Jerome with approval, the 5th century translator of the Bible. “Ignorance of Scripture is ignorance of Christ”. And again, “Read the Scriptures frequently; may your hands never set the Holy Book down. Learn here what you must teach”. This Pope's big book is not a defence of himself and his own denomination but Jesus of Nazareth. His smaller books “The Apostles” and “St. Paul” are simple Bible studies which he gave to large crowds in St. Peter's Square. “Church Fathers” is simple teaching about those whom our Prayer Book calls “ancient authors” (introduction to the ordination services). The Pope regards the Biblical writers as “our normative theologians”. Among his favourite theologians are St. Paul and St. Augustine of North Africa, a fact which should endear him to all good Protestants. Another favourite is John Henry Newman, the Anglican Vicar who became a Roman Catholic and who loved the Greek Fathers of the ancient Church.

Talk of Church Fathers (or seminal influences) tells us that the next thing to astonish us about this Pope is his commitment to ecumenism. He reveres the Jews. He has been on pilgrimage to Auschwitz; he has visited the Synagogue in Rome. (An earlier Pope had said, “Spiritually we are all Semites”.) Benedict helped forge a document of agreement with Lutherans about “justification by faith”; he has preached in the Lutheran church in Rome. Benedict helped forge a document of agreement with the Coptic church of Egypt. Discreet dialogue with the Orthodox Churches is under way though as the Orthodox tend to be as fissiparous as Anglicans, progress is slow. The Russian Orthodox are especially amiable. The Pope and the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople presided together over a joint celebration of St. Paul in St. Paul Outside-the-Walls, Rome, where the Apostle is buried.

The Pope's understanding of his own limitations as under the authority of Scripture, reassures other Christians. “The Pope is not an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law. On the contrary: the Pope's ministry is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and His Word. The Pope must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the church to obedience to God's Word, in the face of every attempt to adapt the Word or to water it down, and in the face of every form of opportunism”. He sees the church as a communion of people united within the relationships within the Trinity, not as an institution for administration. He sees Christian discipleship as a personal living relationship with Jesus, rather than as keeping rules or as knowing all the right answers.

It is Benedict's generosity to Anglicans which astonishes us most of all. Dialogue about rapprochement between Anglicans and Rome has been going on and off for some 400 years, mostly off. Fr. Michael Rear, a Roman Catholic priest, has summarised this history in articles which appeared in *The Catholic Herald* and in *New Directions*. There is a whole book by two Anglicans, *Rome and Canterbury Through Four Centuries*, by Barnard and Margaret Pawley. The story is too long to repeat here. A hopeful moment was the Malines Conversations held in Belgium between 1921 and 1925. There is a book about these too, called “A Brother Knocking at the Door” by Bernard Barlow. It was from those conversations that we got the motto United but not Absorbed. Abbot Lambert Beauduin had written, “An Anglican church absorbed by Rome and an Anglican church separated from Rome are equally inadmissible.”

Since 1969 there have been ongoing talks between Rome and the Anglican Communion called ARCIC for short, Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission. Remarkable concord has been established about all sorts of issues. However, at the same time as they were trying to reach unity with Rome, Anglicans were equally busy erecting fresh barriers to unity: the ordination of women, the endorsement of clergypersons who were practising homosexuals, the invention of gay marriages, the endorsement of abortion. ARCIC is not now going anywhere. However, we of the Traditional Anglican Communion and some members of Forward in Faith have said to Rome, “But we are still here. Why not let ARCIC dialogue pass to us?”

Pope Benedict had written that Catholics can not demand that other churches be disbanded and their members individually incorporated into the Catholic Church. They must remain in existence as churches with only those modifications which unity necessarily requires. The Catholic church has no right to absorb other churches. The Catholic church has not yet prepared for other churches a place of their own. Once the Bishops and Vicar's General of the Traditional Anglican Communion had signed The Catechism of the Catholic Church and unanimously applied for reconciliation, the Pope set in train among theologians and administrators at the Vatican the two year long process which resulted in the Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum coetibus* or Groups of Anglicans. He did not make the first move. He is not stealing sheep. It was we who approached him.

Naturally enough, as with engaged couples before they marry, there are some anxieties as we await developments. You will not financially support pederastic clergymen in Ireland or elsewhere. I have known one or two such but they were married Anglican priests. You will not have to eat fish on Fridays even if you dislike it. You will not have to go to confession on Friday. You will not have to write an exam on the Catechism of the Catholic Church. RC laity don't. Why should you? Your parish council will not have to send donations to Rome. RC parishes don't. Why should yours? You will not have to submit to a bully. Cardinal Ratzinger and two of his staff gave me over an hour of their time in Rome in 1985 when we talked unity. He is the gentlest, most courteous of men, a skilled listener. Conversely, you can still treasure our Prayer Book catechism which serves a different purpose from the Roman one. Ours is a preparation for those hoping to be confirmed. The Roman one is a fat compendium of theology to be referred to, stuffed full of Bible, ancient authors and quotations from saintly people.

As to "concessions", so to speak, it is Rome which has made most. We retain our identity and our Anglican heritage or patrimony; our Prayer Book tradition of worship, our hymns and music; our married clergy; our esteemed place for the laity. An editorial in the Catholic weekly, *The Tablet*, put it like this, "Roman Catholic doctrinally but Anglican culturally" which is not quite how we'd put it, but we know what the editor is trying to say. Our only disappointment is no married bishops. After all, St. Peter the first Pope had a wife (Matthew 8:14. 1 Corinthians 9:5). However, Rome's reason is impeccable. The rapprochement of Eastern Christianity and Western, the two lungs of the one church, is what matters most, and as yet it is the Orthodox who can not stomach the thought of married bishops. And by the way, the word Ordinary is a Prayer Book one found in the ordination service and there meaning bishop. "Will you reverently obey your Ordinary unto whom is given the charge and government over you?"

We are not asked to repent of being Anglican, to repudiate our past. We shall continue to revere our scholars and saints and to learn from them. (I have heard Handel in St. Peter's, Rome.) We are not described as converting but as "entering into full and visible communion". We shall indeed enter into communion with millions and millions more Christians round the world. Think of what this means when we travel; when our own isolated folk can't find Traditional Anglican groups; when we are with Catholic relatives and friends. However, Rome does require us to assuage their scruples about us. How can they be really sure that we were validly baptized, confirmed, ordained? After all, in the Anglican communion as it now is, people are not necessarily baptized in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost. Nor are they necessarily confirmed. Laymen claim to celebrate the holy communion. Women claim to be bishops, priests and deacons. How can Rome sort out this confusion, and who can blame Rome for being confused? If at the altar rail we are each anointed, then all Romans will be satisfied that we have indeed been initiated into the body of Christ. If our clergy are ordained, then all Romans will be satisfied that our clergy are indeed bishops, priests and deacons. It was an Anglican bishop in the 1950's who persuaded me that if our orders were the only thing keeping us apart, we ought to meet Rome's needs in this regard. I am glad to do so.

"This is the Lord's doing: and it is marvellous in our eyes. This is the day which the Lord hath made: we will rejoice and be glad in it." (Psalm 118: 24-25).

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As this is not a learned paper I have not cited any of the above quotations, but they and much fascinating information can be obtained from:

Covenant and Communion: The Biblical Theology of Benedict XVI by Scott Hahn

Ratzinger's Faith: the Theology of Benedict XVI by Mrs Tracey Rowland

The Thought of Benedict XVI by Aidan Nichols OP, an ex Anglican.