



# Prez Release

## **A New Pope: Reflections by a Pentecostal** April 2005

The continuing interest in the Catholic papacy yields surprise and ongoing consternation by media pundits and news elites. The adulation and respect lavished on Pope John Paul II is curious when seen through the evaluative lens of the information brokers. Yet the simple fact is that faith matters to countless millions of people worldwide. For example, to millions of teenagers Pope John Paul II was a hero, a spiritual leader whose mere presence filled stadiums with young people as quickly as a U2 concert. Pope Benedict XVI already has an Internet fan club, largely populated by young people.

I grew up with a less than positive view of the Catholic Church. It was the largest church in the small farming town I was raised in and the processions through the streets at planting time and harvest were led by the priest and included statues of patron saints and Mary. These objects in the procession were described in my household as "idols." A decade of work in Latin America serving among the poor in relief and development efforts exposed me to the numerous occasions where the Pentecostal churches I worked with were attacked and harassed by efforts led by the local Catholic priest.

These memories, both long-remembered and recently experienced, are admittedly part of my evaluative equation in consideration of the current events surrounding the Holy See and in relationships with Catholic friends and colleagues. But there are new factors being added to that equation that require me to recalculate my perspective. We live in a day and age where all faith communities are challenged by the "religious" zealots of secularism who naively (or intentionally) act as if their perspective is somehow free of prejudice and models an inclusiveness that deserves emulation. While the "crusades" of Christian zealots have fostered tragedy and chaos in history, they pale in comparison to the 20<sup>th</sup> century experiments in secular states, which can only be described with words like genocide, pogrom and Holocaust. It is in this new world of "evangelistic secularism" that faith communities, with historic hostilities towards each other, must reconsider their relationships.

If we try to forge alliances initially around creedal agreement, we will surely fail. I will not be celebrating mass in the Vatican nor will Catholic priests regularly be preaching

revival meetings in my church's congregations any time soon. But creedal fine points must not stand in the way of faith communities joining together in matters of justice, defense of sanctity of life and standing together against the brutality of secularism that strips people of the dignity given them by their Creator. Faith communities are a most formidable line of defense in a world where techno-media influences push the limits of sexual experimentation, both real and virtual, while feigning abhorrence of the resultant violence that inevitably finds its target in women and children. Duplicitous is the only word to describe such a perspective.

It is during this transition in the papacy that I have had opportunity to think more clearly about the common challenges to faith communities in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Pope John Paul II's monumental work entitled *Evangelium Vitae*, published in 1995, provides for me a foundation on which I, as a Protestant, can link arms with my Catholic friends in a common cause. This encyclical letter is filled with affirmation of the "gospel of life." It is undergirded with support from biblical texts and affirms the central premise "that human beings are to be respected and treated as a person from the moment of conception because life is sacred and inviolable at every moment of existence." That basic premise of the whole of the Judeo-Christen tradition is something I value deeply. If it is true that then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was a most influential theological influence on Pope John Paul II, then the fingerprints of Pope Benedict XVI are all over this seminal document.

I still remember those Catholic processions through my little hometown and the testimonies of my Latino friends whose lives were made miserable by local priests. But I'm also aware, that in an increasingly complex world, new adversaries are emerging and we may actually find common ground with folks we previously dismissed as "those people." I'm under no illusion about creedal agreement, but I've found room for common cause. The new pope knows the ravages caused by secular experiments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He was raised in Nazi Germany and saw the utter chaos of that social experiment. He saw the results of nihilistic Marxism in German universities in the 1960's and the demise of its institutional forms in the late 1980's. Is it any wonder that this son of 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe would understand the problem of the soul in Europe and the crisis of secularism that even the most cynical scholars are now acknowledging? The negative imagery of "enforcer" or "Nazi pope" that are placed on the new pope reveal cynicism that is created in the world of sound bites and "image as truth." It is in this 21<sup>st</sup> century reality that people of faith must navigate new relationships and speak with united voice so that the future described by George Orwell in "1984" will not be the experience of our children and grand children.

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