

THE SOCIAL AND POLITICAL THOUGHT OF BENEDICT XVI by Thomas R. Rourke, *Lexington Books, Lanham, 2010, pp. i + 151, \$ 55, hbk*

Before Joseph Ratzinger became Bishop of Rome in 2005, only two books of note were published about him in English. These were Aidan Nichols's *The Theology of Joseph Ratzinger* (1988) and John Allen's *Cardinal Ratzinger* (2000). Both were highly original and merited reissuing after Ratzinger's election to the papacy. Both, however, were lost in the tidal wave of new books on Benedict XVI that flooded the market from 2005 onwards. Yet, now that the international public largely knows who Pope Benedict is, the field is open to more specialized studies of his life and thought.

Thomas Rourke's *The Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI* is a mostly synthetic study, with little analysis of Ratzinger's thought, let alone criticism of it. Rourke is professor and chair of the Department of Political Science and Philosophy at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, so it is natural that he should focus on this aspect of Benedict's thought. His previous publications include *A Conscience as Large as the World* (1996), a critique of American Catholic neoconservatives like Michael Novak, Richard John Neuhaus and George Weigel; *A Theory of Personalism* (2004), co-written with Rosita A. Chazarreta Rourke; and a CTS pamphlet entitled *Democracy & Tyranny* (2009). Studies of influential thinkers, such as Rourke's book, often provide a systematization or a clarity of expression that their subjects often fail to achieve, but this is not the case with Pope Benedict, whose writings are extraordinarily clear. His thought on social and political issues may never have found expression in a systematic work, but he cannot be accused of inconsistency.

Rourke's study of Pope Benedict's social and political thought suffers from two major omissions of subject matter. First, his book was substantially complete by the time the pope published his social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (2009). One imagines that Rourke's book would have turned out quite differently had the encyclical been published earlier. In seeking to make the best of a difficult situation, Rourke summarizes the encyclical in an appendix. It is probably best that Rourke was not able to take the encyclical into account because the temptation would have been too great to treat it as entirely Benedict's own work. One ought, rather, to distinguish between the pope's personal thought and his official pronouncements. This is not to suggest a dichotomy between the two, however, but a difference in emphasis. This is easily observable in the more conciliatory tone that Ratzinger adopted after taking office.

Rourke makes excellent use of Benedict's published books, as well as some articles, but he largely neglects the many speeches and sermons that the pope daily delivers as part of his official duties. The pope's addresses to diplomats assigned to or visiting the Holy See, for example, are a valuable indicator of his priorities for different parts of the world, touching on everything from the place of Catholics in that country to humanitarian concerns. Moreover, Pope Benedict has addressed the United Nations on his visit to the United States, as well as many other governments during his international travels. To neglect these expressions of Benedict's thought is to privilege his academic writings over more immediate and timely expressions of his thinking in relation to particular subjects, persons and events.

At the outset of *The Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI*, Rourke admits that his subject writes, above all, as a theologian and not as a politician. Nevertheless, he notes that Benedict does not shy away from addressing the 'foundations of political and social order'. Benedict can do this precisely because his thinking is remarkably free of compartmentalization and over-specialization. Benedict is one who keeps the big picture ever in view. Rourke says surprisingly little about Benedict's influences, apart from that of Henri de Lubac's *Catholicism*

and St Augustine's *City of God*, despite Benedict himself saying plenty on the subject. What is more curious, though, is that Rourke sees the concept of person at the root of Benedict's social thought. While such a concept is by no means absent in Benedict's thought, it is far more prominent in that of his papal predecessor, John Paul II. One might conjecture that Rourke is ascribing his own views to Benedict, since personalism is the subject of one of Rourke's previous books. He is on much surer ground, however, when he discusses how important the doctrine of creation is in Benedict's anthropology, and the role of reason in his ethics.

Reason is important in many ways. It finds its basis in revelation, especially in creation and in the Logos. Reason helps us see through the many myths that politicians are forever creating, including those of Nazism, science and progress. Reason forms the basis of human rights, which, claims Rourke, Spanish scholastics developed from the natural law. For Benedict, natural law 'expresses the fact that nature itself conveys a moral message', although acknowledging that some theologians have overburdened natural law with Christian content, thereby upsetting the delicate balance of church and state. 'The church can only be true to its own inner existence so long as it sees itself as the repository of values that absolutely transcend the state. Separation of church and state, notes Rourke, is something that Benedict puts forward as a uniquely Christian concept, one that receives sustained treatment in his *Without Roots: The West, Relativism, Christianity, Islam* (2006).

After the more abstract initial chapters on anthropology, revelation and reason, Rourke moves on to special topics, such as conscience, world religions and liturgy. Anyone who has read Ratzinger's *Milestones: Memoirs 1927–77* (1998) will be familiar with his critique of the Second Vatican Council's *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, which is said to be overly optimistic about the church's position vis-a-vis the world. Rourke goes on to highlight Benedict's subtlety of argument in relation to the topic of liberation theology, which Benedict did not condemn outright. Instead, he emphasised that sin is personal and that structures can only be sinful in a secondary sense. Moreover, he notes that optimism has always been a feature of the Church, especially in its tendency to create utopias, whether real (monasteries) or imagined (St Thomas More's *Utopia*).

Liturgy, a topic Benedict continually addresses, might initially seem an odd choice for a book on political and social thought. Yet, anyone who has followed ICEL's struggles to create a new translation of the missal that both laity and hierarchy can agree upon will know how political liturgy can be. Liturgy's social aspects have been analysed insightfully in Kieran Flanagan's unjustly neglected *Sociology and Liturgy: Re-Presentations of the Holy* (1991). Rourke, summarising a point of Benedict's, aptly illuminates the effects of liturgy in the social sphere. 'Social activism authentically considered can only flow out of the Liturgy which puts man in right relationship with others and indeed the entire order of creation'.

Rourke's *The Social and Political Thought of Benedict XVI* well summarises its subject, synthesising masses of disparate material, even if it neglects published speeches and sermons that might have illuminated different emphases and other topics. While it is difficult to disagree with Benedict because of his ecclesiastical office and immense learning, Rourke never does so in the slightest. His analysis even refrains from suggesting that Benedict might not have seen all sides of an issue, missed important arguments or overlooked key sources. This, despite Benedict's numerous opponents, whose arguments Rourke could marshal against his subject. What possibly undermines Rourke's book most of all, however, is not his uncritical admiration for Benedict, but the clarity of Benedict's own writings. There is almost nothing to explain or elucidate in Benedict's written output that Benedict has not already done himself – and more engagingly. Pope Benedict XVI is a profound and lucid thinker that we would all do well to emulate.

BARNABY HUGHES