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A Commentary in Passing: upon excerpts from

Introduction to Christianity

by Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI

Part I

The Horse in Saint Peter's Square

Our Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, when Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, had asked a particularly candid and terribly prescient question about the dismal state of contemporary theology, or rather, that promiscuous academic affair that has been gratuitously tolerated as "theology" since the heady days of Aggiornamento when the famous "windows had been thrown open", alleviating the opiated masses from a chronic miasma of which they were unaware, and exchanging incense for the rank breath of the world. The proverbial dead horse, having, by all accounts, been sufficiently beaten, remains nevertheless a disturbing carcass in the Square of Saint Peter. Even some preeminently post-enlightened persons have, with growing horror, imagined it stirring! Ghastly!

Surely this impolite fiction, long quashed, diligently suppressed, and socially discredited, has no place – of all places – in contemporary literature, especially literature of a genre that itself appears unabashedly academic and theological. Such literature, after all, would be nothing less than transgressive to our finely honed and satiated sensibilities. It would possess, did it exist, not the "odor of sanctity", but of ... well, dead horse.

Or would it? At the very least it would have to possess exacting, even impeccable moral and intellectual credentials if we are not to dismiss the agendum as a mere emotional desideration, in fact, as merely redolent of things past and recollected only in nostalgia and angst. It must, in a word, suffer from contemporaneity. We see, at least we smell, the horse, and we are, withal, compelled to ask some questions of the erstwhile rider, or at least of someone who knew the rider of the horse that lies in Saint Peter's Square. Who is he? Who is the horse? And how did they get there?

Let us at least begin to ask the question in light of an excerpt in passim from a not too obscure text titled, "**Introduction to Christianity**". The title is certainly apropos of the question. In fact, it too, begins with a question, a question that no one wishes to ask, however increasingly absurd it becomes not to ask it. To wit:

"Has our theology in the last few years ... not gradually watered down the demands of faith, which had been found all too demanding, always only so little that nothing important seemed to be lost, yet always so much that it was soon possible to venture on the next step? And will ... the Christian who trustfully let himself be led from exchange to exchange, from interpretation to interpretation, not really soon hold in his hand, instead of the gold with which he began, only a whetstone which he can be confidently recommended to throw away?" (Introduction, Chapter 1.1)

Moreover, the work itself, he states, is expressly intended, "to expound faith without changing it into the small coin of empty talk painfully labouring to hide a complete spiritual vacuum." (ibid).

Since the man who asked this question is now in the Seat of Peter, it behooves all Catholics to ask this question as well.

Let us look into this carefully ... into the man through his words ... and into the horse which, if it did not bring him there, either disquiets us or stirs us as it appears, despite all reports to the contrary, to stir at the feet of the fisherman.

Go to Part II: Of Benedict and Balaam – of Horses and Asses

* Kierkegaard's trenchant, "Attack Upon Christendom", should be required reading for every seminarian, indeed, for every minimally sentient Christian.



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