

*Sightings 4/7/08*

The Pope on Immigration  
-- Martin E. Marty

Pope Benedict XVI's U.S. visit next week during an election year will find him cast, willy nilly, in a political role. The chiding of Catholic voters, bishops and priests, and politicians who do not make enough of churchly anti-abortion positions will occur, but most concur in the view that such is "old news," unlikely to do much swaying of "undecideds," however valid debate on the subject might be. Other positions will be noted.

This first chance to size up the pope up close in America finds him to be a dialectical and complex thinker. One day he articulates long-held Catholic positions concerning other Christians and other religions with a hard, sometimes offensive (to "the others") line, and the next day he treats them more friendly. Those who wanted to reduce him to being only an enforcer of Catholic sexual moral dicta now perceive a wider agenda. He also comes on as the theologian he is, in encyclicals on "love" and "hope."

Some secular-press anticipators of his visit suggest that themes other than the sexual and biological (from stem cell research to "euthanasia") are likely to be most notable and, to many, most jarring. The fourth or fifth most controversial issue in electoral politics this year, and the first among some cable network agitators and publics in states where it is most problematic, is immigration. True, Vatican leadership has articulated views protesting the Americans' initiation of war in Iraq, our official position permitting torture of humans, capital punishment, and more, but it is immigration that finds thoughtful Americans most uncertain or divided. The Catholic leadership is certain and undivided, and the Pope will be pressed to restate its case.

If the Pope pitches for reform of immigration policies, cynics will write it all off as a pitch for Latino/Latina votes, since "Hispanics" make up a huge component of today's American Catholicism. But Michael Sean Winters, author of the forthcoming *Left at the Altar: How the Democrats Lost the Catholics and How the Catholics Can Save the Democrats*, argues that at base the church's position on immigration is "pro-family." He sets this forth in *The New Republic* (April 9), there showing how the Pope sided with immigrants and pitched for policies designed to help keep families together long before the U.S. visit came into view.

Winters quotes numerous papal papers, including a speech in which Benedict reminded anti-immigrants that Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, in the gospel story, were refugees and migrants. Beyond that narrative, Winters reminds readers that "the Catholic belief in the inherent dignity of every human being and the priority the Church places on keeping families together pushed Benedict leftward." (Why is that the "leftward" position?) For this year's celebration of the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, the pontiff asked the Church's host communities to welcome migrating families and work to help them stay together, so that they "can overcome the obstacles and the material and spiritual difficulties [they] encounter." The American Catholic bishops are a strong lobbying force for liberal immigration reform. Will they be investigated by the I.R.S. for crossing a line forbidding political action?

It is hard to deny that any policy on immigration is problematic and that "reform" does not mean easy solutions. But the view that "the immigration policy we need in the U.S. must be based on the cornerstone of respect for the dignity of every human person" is to guide Catholic positions; how the Pope steers that is likely to be a hot topic.

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