Benedict Foresaw Today's Revolutionary Iconoclasm

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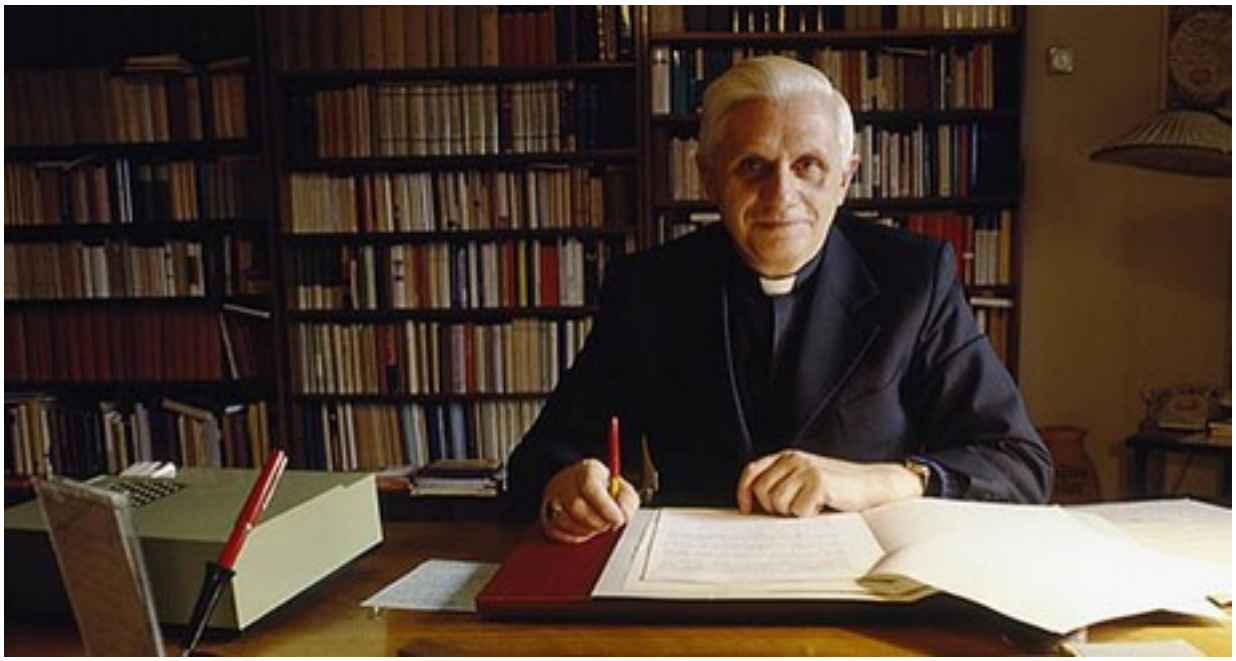
Recently, some American activists have ignited a movement to usher in an urgent iconoclasm of vile symbols of culture and history, such as the removal of statues bearing the likeness of General Robert E. Lee, *inter alia*. Whether these symbols ought to fall is an important question, and more astute thinkers have written on the topic . But distinct from that question is the irrational, apolitical manner by which this urgent iconoclasm is occurring, and the threat it poses for a rationally engaged, civil society.



The process (or lack thereof) by which this urgent iconoclasm functions raises philosophical and theological problems regarding the scope and practice of politics and its relationship to reason and moral action. The lack of an adequate response to these problems sanctions a breakdown in the political process and engenders a chaos that is fundamentally opposed to the order demanded by a healthy, civil society.

In his essay "To Change or Preserve? Political Visions and Political Praxis," Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger identifies a fundamental experience of modern society: a "deep and prevailing sense of dissatisfaction" with the world. The antidote to this problem—according to modern society—is

found in politics, for “the general consensus is that the essential task of politics is to improve the world, indeed to usher in a new world.”

Throughout the essay, Cardinal Ratzinger offers a descriptive and normative analysis of the Hegelian dialectic, Marxist progress, and their potential for various emergent forms within contemporary political society. Ratzinger identifies a “secular Messianism” underlying these movements that seeks to rush in a new age through the idol of progress.

The Hegelian dialectic and Marxist progress strive to make the “leap from the history of oppression into the definitive history of salvation.” Their mechanism for the leap: revolution, which is antithetical to reform. In its attempt to rein in perfection, revolution “obstructs all rational political activity aimed at the genuine amelioration of the world.”

As a contemporary emergent form of the Hegelian dialect and Marxist progress, the modus operandi of urgent iconoclasm and its adherents is the immediate upheaval of the present through violence in its various forms. But this method fails to recognize the natural obligation—and the Christian obligation—to honor and respect that which belongs to Caesar: law, process, rationality. Instead, the iconoclasts demand that Caesar and the things of Caesar be rapidly overthrown.

But political society functions through rational process—not revolution, but reform. The process of reform tempers visceral reactions, even those base and immediate reactions which can sometimes be intuitively indicative of the good. Reform favors disciplined, thoughtful discourse. A dialogical process pacifies the violent tendencies of revolution for conciliatory conversations about the good, true, and beautiful. Rather than overthrow civil society, reform seeks the common good through peaceful means.

Absent such abatement via rational process, revolutionary acts masked as politics engender one-sided political interest asserting pure will and power. As Cardinal Ratzinger expresses, this creates blind spots in the moral assessments of political realities and history. And blind spots in morals and politics produce unintended consequences—or, perhaps, for the urgent iconoclasts, wholly intended consequences.

The progress being proposed through the urgent iconoclasm we are experiencing will not bring

about the aims of political society—justice and peace—which are fundamentally the desire of every human heart. This form of undemocratic progress will only wreak havoc as it generates more of the same copycat conduct under the false utilitarian guise of producing results despite the costs.

The task, then, seems to be a vigilant insistence on the need for rationality and process in the face of realities like the urgent iconoclasm that we are witnessing. Rationality and process demand a robust use of the intellect that is wedded to charity. Mob action just won't cut it, and neither will pandering to political interests if we intend to be a healthy, civil society . Bracketing the political extremists on either side, this should be an agreeable path forward for those on both sides of the political aisle.

To accept any other path forward that fails to respect caritas in veritate would enable, as Cardinal Ratzinger states, "a false escape into the future." But the historicism demanded through the will to power by the urgent iconoclasts is bound, in the long run, to prove ineffective and destructive for democracy. Such a method will find the urgent iconoclasts where they began: in a deep malaise and sense of dissatisfaction with the world.

Recalling the prophetic words of Joseph Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI seems a fitting conclusion: "All ideologies of power justify themselves in exactly this way, they justify the destruction of whatever would stand in the way of progress and the liberation of humanity. We suffer on account of God's patience. And yet, we need his patience. God, who become a lamb, tells us that the world is saved by the Crucified One, not by those who crucified him. The world is redeemed by the patience of God. It is destroyed by the impatience of man."