Comment: *What's in a name*?

Popes didn't take new names, as a rule, when they were elected, for most of the first millennium.

There were exceptions. A certain Mercury, an elderly priest at San Clemente in Rome, elected in 533, renamed himself John II, on the grounds that a pope should not be called after a pagan god. John XII (955–964), the second whom we know to have adopted a new name, did so for no clear reason: baptised Octavian, bastard son of the most powerful man in Rome at the time, a loutish young playboy, he was elected at the age of 18 at the behest of his dying father. He died in his middle twenties, suffering a stroke, allegedly while in bed with a married woman.

A certain Peter, on the other hand, son of a Roman shoemaker, installed as pope in 1009 by the patrician family who were then running Rome, adopted the name of Sergius IV out of respect for Peter the Prince of the Apostles. No doubt he knew that Sergius III (904–911), a Roman aristocrat, had his predecessor Leo V strangled. Sergius II (844–847), another Roman grandee, as he perhaps also knew, sold bishoprics and other church offices to the highest bidder. Saint Sergius I (687–701), however, born at Palermo, of a Syrian family from Antioch, must (we may hope) have been Sergius IV's model. Much concerned for the English church, he baptised Caedwalla, king of the West Saxons and granted the pallium to Beorhtweald of Canterbury. He had the remains of Pope Leo the Great moved to a new tomb in the basilica of St Peter's. A good plainchant singer himself, he introduced the 'Agnus Dei' at Mass. He enriched the liturgies for the Annunciation, Dormition, Nativity and Presentation of Our Lady. In these and other ways, one might think, Sergius I was a pontiff worth commemorating by adopting his name. (In the event, Sergius IV did nothing memorable, though a eulogising epitaph may be deciphered in St John Lateran.)

By the eleventh century, the custom was established. Sometimes, at least, the choice of name advertised the new pope's conception of the office. For example: Poppo, a Bavarian, installed in 1048 at the behest of the Emperor, took the name Damasus II, deliberately signalling his desire to return to the pure church of ancient times – St Damasus, who reigned from 366 to 384, is one of the greatest of the early popes. Unfortunately, Damasus II died in less than a month, probably of malaria; but the idea of taking a name that

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would relate a pontificate to a model in earlier church history was clearly established.

Few of the fifteen popes hitherto named Benedict have had a very distinguished history. Benedict II (684–8), according to Canon J.N. D. Kelly, in the Oxford Dictionary of Popes, distributed locks of his infant sons' hair to the clergy, soldiers and people of Rome, as signs of adopting them as his sons – a somewhat theatrical piece of symbolism. Benedict XI (1303–1304), one of the Dominican popes, a former Master of the Order to boot, reigned for less than a year, dying of dysentery at Perugia: 'weak, peace-loving, and scholarly (he felt at ease only with Dominicans)', according to Kelly.

Benedict XII (1334–1342), a French Cistercian monk, 'an indefatigable inquisitor, skilful at extracting confessions from suspected heretics but sending only a handful to the stake', was, again according to Kelly, 'tall, portly and loud-voiced, and more interested in the reform of abuses [in the Curia and among the clergy] than in politics'. Benedict XIII (1724–1740), eldest son of a duke, renounced his inheritance to join the Dominicans. Elected after a conclave of nine weeks, he accepted only at the bidding of the Master of the Order. Presumably he took his name out of *pietas* towards his Dominican precursor. In his last years, he failed to prevent the Vatican finances falling into the hands of an unprecedentedly wicked scoundrel. His attention was entirely devoted to parish visiting and urging the clergy to reform ('he inveighed against the extravagances of cardinals, and against the wearing of wigs and fashionably trimmed beards'). His closest advisor, in all but financial affairs, was elected after a six-months-long conclave in 1740, adopting the name of Benedict XIV, no doubt out of respect for his patron.

Described by his contemporary Horace Walpole as 'a priest without insolence or interest, a prince without favourites, a pope without nephews', Benedict XIV turned out one of the great popes of modern times. He called for more humane treatment of the Indian peoples in South America. More controversially, by our standards, he finally suppressed the Chinese liturgical rites favoured by Jesuit missionaries. At home he founded chairs of mathematics, chemistry and surgery. He was well able to engage with the Enlightenment, discriminatingly, not in blind hostility. He was admired by Protestants and even by the French *philosophes*: Voltaire dedicated his tragedy *Mahomet* to Benedict XIV – not as a joke, the Pope sent a friendly acknowledgement.

By choosing to be known as Pope Benedict XVI, however, Cardinal Ratzinger must have known that people would assume that he was signalling a link first of all with the legacy of Pope Benedict XV.

Born at Genoa in 1854, of an old patrician family, Giacomo della Chiesa trained, after ordination, for the papal diplomatic service.

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From 1883 until 1901 he worked with Cardinal Mariano Rampolla, first when he was nuncio in Spain, then when he was Secretary of State in Pope Leo XIII's pontificate. (Rampolla would probably have been elected pope in 1903 but Emperor Franz Joseph of Austria delivered his veto – the last time that a Catholic prince interfered in the choice of a pope.) Appointed archbishop of Bologna in 1907, Della Chiesa seems never to have enjoyed the confidence of St Pius X and his circle. Named a Cardinal only in May 1914, three months before Pius's death, Della Chiesa was elected, quite unexpectedly, as European civilization collapsed into internecine war. He took the name of Benedict XV in memory of Benedict XIV, simply as one of his predecessors at Bologna.

In 1922, at the age of 67, Benedict XV died, of influenza which developed into pneumonia. His brief pontificate left a legacy, all the same. It coincided with the Great War. At the time, the Holy See, having lost the Papal States, had nothing like its previous authority in Europe and nothing like the international prestige that it has now. Apart from practical measures such as setting up in the Vatican an office to put prisoners-of-war in touch with their families, Benedict XV nevertheless submitted a seven-point peace plan in 1917 to the Allies and the Central Powers. He proposed a negotiated cessation of hostilities, based on justice, rather than a fight to the finish. The French and the British dismissed the proposal as biased against them. (This was, of course, just before the United States entered the War.) The Germans, interested at first, cooled when the collapse of Russia made victory for them again seem possible.

The Vatican was deliberately excluded from the Versailles peace settlement. Benedict XV repeatedly urged reconciliation, backing the League of Nations. Among many other initiatives, he restored diplomatic relations with France, fractured since 1905 by the anticlerical laws. This opened the way to the return home of the Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and others, the generation who would have such a decisive part in the theology that flowered at Vatican II.

Like many popes, Benedict XV dreamed of reunion with the ancient churches of the East. He declared St Ephraem, the fourth-century Syrian theologian, a Doctor of the Catholic Church. He set up the Oriental Institute in Rome. He showed far more interest in Christian unity than either his predecessor or his successor.

Benedict XV's first encyclical letter to the Church was *Ad beatissimi Apostolorum principis* (1 November 1914). In this, he deplores the newly unleashed European conflict, listing the causes: lack of international goodwill, greed for territorial and commercial advantage, and class hatred. The Church, on the other hand, he finds in good heart. Yet, in the best remembered part of the text, Benedict XV warns Catholics of their duty to live in mutual unity and respect for authority. He exhorts them to beware of making themselves their

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own authority, whether in books, newspapers or conferences. He deplores the use of 'new terms' to distinguish Catholics from Catholics. He reaffirms his predecessor's condemnation of 'Modernism' (he is said to have found a document delating himself in the papal in-tray); but, by these 'new terms'. He disbanded the network of heresy-hunting spies in seminaries and Catholic institutions. No doubt, as Kelly says, he 'successfully called a halt to the bitter animosity between die-hard traditionalists and modernists'; but the animosity reappeared in the aftermath of Vatican II and is as bitter as ever.

The election of Pope Benedict XVI, obviously, has deepened the animosity that 'liberal' and 'conservative' Catholics have for one another. Both sides seem to assume that being Bishop of Rome is just an expansion of being Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. This assumption delights many Catholics in the western world and dismays many more. . .Yet, as the new Pope must have been the first to realise, leading 1.1 billion Catholics is not the same job as policing a few thousand professors and priests. In any case, being elected to a higher office changes people (often for the worse, admittedly).

What people think, in Latin America and in Africa, where the vast majority of Catholics live, is of course another matter. This must be Europe's last chance to show what the Catholic Christianity we have almost entirely lost in the last thirty years still has the vitality to communicate. Perhaps, first of all, Cardinal Ratzinger wanted us to think of Saint Benedict of Nursia (c. 480–c. 550), the 'Patriarch of Western monasticism', 'Patron of Europe'. Perhaps he wanted us to remember what Alasdair MacIntyre famously said, in the concluding paragraph of his much discussed book *After Virtue* (first published in 1981, years before he became a Catholic): 'What matters at this stage is the construction of local forms of community within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us. And if the tradition of the virtues was able to survive the horrors of the last dark ages, we are not entirely without grounds for hope. This time, however, the barbarians are not waiting beyond the frontiers; they have been governing us for quite some time. And it is our lack of consciousness of this that constitutes part of our predicament. We are waiting not for a Godot, but for another – doubtless very different – St Benedict'.

F.K.

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