

The New Criterion

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The new Benedict

by Roger Kimball

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It looks like the philosopher Alisdair MacIntyre got his wish, at least for now. In his book *After Virtue* (1981; 2nd ed. 1984), MacIntyre offered the "disquieting suggesting" that we in the West live among the unorganized fragments of a shattered world view and that we have "very largely, if not entirely, lost our comprehension" of morality. Hence the "after" in his title: as traditionally conceived--as conceived, that is by Aristotle--a virtuous life was first of all a life dedicated to the *practice* of certain substantive virtues: courage, prudence, magnanimity, and so on. We moderns, fearful of being "judgmental"--who's to say what counts as prudent behavior? Are there not many versions of "the good life for man"?--have tended to reject Aristotle and have attempted to found morality not on substantive virtues but on more or less formal rules: follow the procedures, we think, and morality (near enough) will follow (cf. Mill, Rawls, et al.). It was the operation not so much of an invisible hand but a wilful act of moral prestidigitation. The choice, as MacIntyre saw it, was twofold. On the one hand, we had to choose between Aristotle and Nietzsche--between a morality that embraced the traditional virtues and one that, proclaiming their bankruptcy, sought to "raze to the ground the inherited structures of moral belief and argument." On the other hand, MacIntyre argued, we had to choose between the utopian pessimism of Trotsky--that rancid utopianism that comes to despairing Marxists--and efforts to resuscitate that older, Aristotelean tradition of morality that had apparently--but only apparently--been discredited by the technologically audacious march of modernity. "If," MacIntyre concluded,

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 already been governing us for quite some time. And it is our 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.

Well, perhaps the elevation of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger to Pope Benedict XVI is a fulfillment of MacIntyre's wish. We shall see. In the meantime, although it is unpleasant to say "I told you so," I have to say "I told you so." Cardinal Ratzinger was my own first choice to be Pope and I always thought he was a chief contender. I forget most of the many reasons adduced by friends who patiently explained to me why it would never happen--age came into it, as did Ratzinger's orthodoxy. The choice has not, of course, pleased everyone. *The New York Times* for example, is clearly unhappy with Ratzinger, as are many libertarian commentators. Poor Andrew Sullivan is quite beside himself ("still in shock," "the dread rises") and seems to think that Ratzinger's elevation marks the advent of Attila the Hun crossed with the Grand Inquisitor. My advice: Relax. Pope Benedict is an orthodox Catholic whose reflections (as he put it in his book *Introduction to Christianity*) "finally lead of their own accord to the words in which Paul named the main supporting pillars of Christianity: 'So faith, hope, love abide, these three; but the greatest of them is love.'" That's not so bad, is it?

Roger Kimball is Editor and Publisher of *The New Criterion* and President and Publisher of Encounter Books. His latest books include *The Critical Temper: Interventions from The New Criterion at 40* (Encounter Books) and *Where Next? Western Civilization at the Crossroads* (Encounter Books).