

Reflection on the Pope's Message Revolution Without Making Noise

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L'Osservatore Romano

Pope Benedict XVI is recognized as an eminent theological scholar by his academic colleagues, regardless of their denominational association. In his “On The Revolution of Love” he superbly crafts a statement on Jesus’ teaching on the nonviolent love of friends and enemies and on its being “the nucleus of the Christian revolution,” and hence, central to a correct understanding of the Gospel. For those who spend the time with it that it deserves, it will be an illumination of a truth hidden or obscured, perhaps since their Baptism.

Consider Benedict’s words on how nonviolent Christlike love operates: “The revolution of love...changes the world without making noise.” At one level this could mean that the Gospel revolution of Christlike nonviolence and love of enemies changes the world without the noise of war or violent revolution—both of which are always suffused with the noise of weapons, the noise of propaganda, the noise that drowns-out dialogue, the noise that overrides the voice of conscience, the noise that Novocains, the faculty of empathy. Such an interpretation would be acceptable.

But, “The revolution of love...which changes the world without making noise,” reaches infinitely beyond this interpretation. It proceeds to the very core of who Jesus was and the revolution He started, and in which He invites us to participate, namely, the revolution that the Pope says “is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone.” In Benedict’s address, “The revolution of love...which changes the world without making noise,” is a direct reference to the counter-violence, revolutionary Hymn of the Suffering Servant, the summit of salvific nonviolent love in the Hebrew Scriptures. Its opening stanza is

*“ Here is my servant whom I uphold,
my chosen one with whom I am
pleased,
Upon whom I have put my spirit;
he shall bring forth righteousness to
the nations,*

*Not crying out, nor shouting,
not making his voice heard in the streets.
A bruised reed he shall not break,
and a smoldering wick he shall not quench,
Until he established righteousness on earth;
the coastlands will wait for his teaching.”*
(Isaiah 42:1-4)

Here are some excerpts, from the writings of the renowned Catholic Biblical scholar, Rev. John L. McKenzie, on the Hymn of the Suffering Servant (Isaiah 42; 1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13-53:12) that help reveal its intimate connection with Jesus and His Way:

“The number of allusions to this passage (Suffering Servant Hymn) in the New Testament is difficult to count. But they are enough to establish the thesis that this passage had a central position in the proclamation of Jesus. The early Church attributed the proclamation of this theme to Jesus himself and no convincing reason has been urged to show that it should be attributed to another. It is as deeply embedded in the Gospels as anything else; to repeat what I have said in other connections, if this theme is not the work of Jesus himself then we know nothing of his words or his person.”

“It is remarkable that the words at the baptism of Jesus (Mt 3:17; Mk 1: 11; Lk 3:22) are almost an exact quotation of Isaiah 42:1.”

“It remains true that Jesus demands that his disciples identify themselves with him as the Suffering Servant.”

“Mere cultivation of pain does not assure identity with Jesus, the Suffering Servant. Mere animal pain does not save. Identity with Jesus suffering is first of all identity with Jesus loving, to put it in a word.”

“As Suffering Servant, Jesus experienced nothing, we have noticed, which is not part of the human condition. And he thus placed his achievement within the reach of all people.”

“The Suffering Servant theme is the peak of faith in the Old Testament, the supreme affirmation of God’s power. When we meet the theme of the Suffering Servant as proclaimed in the New Testament, we are at the very center of the Christian revolution.”

The purpose of these quoted reflections on the Old Testament theme of the Suffering Servant and its relation to the New Testament proclamation of Jesus is to try to insure that the momentousness of what Pope Benedict is proclaiming, regarding Gospel nonviolence and love of enemies, is not recklessly brushed-off with the usual well-nurtured flippancy, “Oh that stuff is only spiritual cotton candy, a bit of unrealistic piety.” Let me assure my readers, first, that a full year’s doctoral level university theology course could be built around this address. Secondly, if this is an easily dismissible piece of sweet theological fluff, it is the first such piece that the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, 25-year Prefect of the Congregation of Doctrine and Faith, has presented for public consumption in the last four decades!

Do give this address much thought and prayer. In a world—where the tools of violence and enmity are the tools of choice for ushering in a “better future,” where these tools have been so technologically honed that a few people can generate degrees of destruction and desolation that in the past would have required thousands of people years to effect, where the production and selling of these tools is the most lucrative business on the planet, and where practically all of this is done with “God” as its source and/or supporter, —is it not time for Christians and their Churches to teach what Jesus taught and to struggle to live what Jesus struggled to live in relation to violence and enmity? Has not the fullness of time arrived for one of the world’s major religions to say an absolute and never-ending, “No,” to violence and enmity, on the basis that they are in radical opposition to the Way and Will and Reality of God? Is it not time for Christians and their Churches to chose as their “way of being, the attitude of one who is convinced of God’s love and power, who is not afraid to confront evil with the weapons of love and truth alone?” Why should Christians and their Churches be the first to so witness to this truth about God by choosing this “way of being”? Why—because their Founder, Lord and Savior so witnessed to this truth about God and His Way by this “way of being.”



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