

Once upon a sweatshirt

A sweatshirt was generously given to me some months ago by a well-meaning individual during one of my parish visits with a logo on the front that reads:

“The Cardinal Ratzinger Fan Club:

Putting the Crackdown on Heresy since 1981”

Now that the former Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has had a chance to speak to us directly and with some comprehensiveness, I fear the shirt-giver may be disappointed.

That the Holy Father has a fondness for our country is now beyond doubt. How refreshing it was to hear an international leader say so many positive things about our nation and our Church in America. It was not done out of emotion, surely. Given the sincerity and integrity that has always been his hallmark, he was not pandering, but speaking as a pastor and a spiritual father.

The positive tone and didactic approach of his addresses, which Americans of every background and opinion should find heartening, is based on a theme that has long been his: the tyranny of relativism – the idea that moral principles have no objective standards. America will escape that tyranny if she remains faithful to the absolute truths that have singled us out as a secular experiment from our beginning.

At the White House welcoming ceremony for the Holy Father, President George W. Bush noted that our founders rested the cause for independence by appealing to the “laws of nature and of nature’s God.” Soon after, Pope Benedict spoke of our founding document’s conviction, “the self-evident truth that all men are created equal and endowed with inalienable rights grounded in the laws of nature and nature’s God.” A non-negotiable truth of natural law putting the crackdown on the tyranny of relativism.

The Holy Father set the theme of his visit right from the beginning when he announced, with our President at his side, that he came “as a friend, a preacher of the Gospel and one with great respect for this vast pluralistic society.”

In ongoing addresses he called this “land of religious liberty ... a vibrant democratic society.” Holding our nation up as an example, he hoped that others “would take heart” from the American experiences of *e pluribus unum*, noting that “the world begs for common witness to these values.” America, he said, is “a land of great faith” with people known for their “religious fervor.” And he cited American generosity in reaching out to the needy, whether immigrants, the poor or victims of tragedy.

And how deftly he chided us. In citing the sacrifices and contributions of Archbishop John Carroll, President George Washington and our country’s Founding Fathers, he encouraged us to be faithful to our Catholic and American roots.

As Catholics: “let your light shine ...” - “participate in the exchange of ideas in the public square, helping to shape cultural attitudes.” He referred to the scandal created by Catholics who would “promote an alleged right of abortion.” He cited the “false dichotomy between faith and political life” and the obligation of all to respect “the most defenseless of all human beings, the unborn child in the mother’s womb.”

As Americans: he reminded that the gift of freedom is “also a summons to personal responsibility.” Just as our first president insisted “that religion and morality represent ‘indispensible supports’ of political prosperity,” so did our last Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, counsel that “a democracy without values can lose its very soul.” And several times he referenced America’s basic belief in human dignity and equality “grounded in the Creator’s laws.”

On page 3 of this week’s Catholic Review, you will read of Pope Benedict’s remarkably personal and almost ebullient reflections on his American visit, delivered soon after his return to Rome. He spoke of feeling “the support of all the Church” for his ministry while here.

But how incalculable was the support which his words and his very presence have given us. He reminded us of where we have come from and what we could be if we were to live up to the ideals of our Catholic Faith and our American heritage. Now it is up to all of us as American Catholics to reflect on his words and determine how we can strengthen our relationship with God and build on the affirming image Pope Benedict XVI created of our Church and our nation.

Thanks to my friend for the sweatshirt. I don't think I'll be wearing it much - not in public, anyway.

To read the Holy Father's public addresses during his visit to the United States, log onto www.archbalt.org.