

Editorial: Il gran rifiuto

The resignation of Pope Benedict XVI, at the age of 85, puts us in mind of another repudiation of the triple crown, that of his 13th century predecessor Celestine V, also in his ninth decade. According to the Church, the former hermit and monk Peter of Morrone, who had never wanted the Papacy in the first place, was a saint, and he was canonised in 1313. Dante was harsher: ‘colui/ che fece per viltà il gran rifiuto’, he who *through pusillanimity, littleness of soul* had made the great refusal, and in *Inferno* he was consigned to endless whirling in the outskirts of Hell. (This was probably because his resignation had paved the way for Dante’s great enemy to assume the office as Boniface VIII, who then seized his predecessor from his monastery and imprisoned him.)

Nor was Cavafy much kinder to poor Celestine. In his early poem, ‘Che Fece...Il Gran Rifuto’ he was at best ambiguous: ‘For some people the day comes when they have to say forth the great Yes or the great No – το μεγάλο το όχι.’ But that no, even though it is the right ‘no’ – ‘το όχι το σωστο’ will weigh down the nay-sayer for the rest of his life. Most of us know what Cavafy means. It is possible, though, that the poet had in mind a refusal of something other than the Papacy, and that his nay-saying was not opening the way to the life of prayer, meditation and contemplation which we are told lies before the former Pope.

Readers of *Philosophy* will probably be aware that Cardinal Ratzinger (as he then was) had acquired something of a philosophical reputation for his dialogues on religion and secularity with Jürgen Habermas in 2004, which were published in 2009, and accordingly noted in *Booknotes* (July 2010). It can fairly be said that in their discussions both men evince a mutual respect often absent from contemporary offerings in this area, as well as taking the discussion beyond sterile apologetics, Christian or atheist.

On this basis, we might wonder whether we will be offered more philosophical reflections from Joseph Ratzinger or dialogues with other distinguished thinkers. Or in this day of global twittering and instant autobiographical reminiscence from all and sundry, would dignity be better served by a Celestine-like silence, albeit not from

Editorial

prison? Might it be, that having over many years spoken his mind and that of his Church, he now has a mind to be silent? A Benedictine great refusal could offer a lesson to us all.