

## The Theological Heritage of Pope Benedict XVI

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### The Pope Theologian

NO POPE in modern times has come to the Chair of Peter with as copious a body of published theological writings as did Joseph Ratzinger. He has written more than eighty-five books as well as over five hundred articles and occasional essays. Although Pope Benedict XVI is knowledgeable in many fields, the majority of his writings exhibit his professional competence as a theologian.

Upon being received into the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, then-Cardinal Ratzinger remarked in 2002: “I did my philosophical and theological studies immediately after the war, from 1946 to 1951. In this period, theological formation in the faculty of Munich was essentially determined by the biblical, liturgical, and ecumenical movement of the time between the two World Wars.”<sup>1</sup> Joseph Ratzinger engaged the theological disciplines that prepared him to meet the challenges that the Church would face in the twenty-first century. It is easy to discern in this

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This short essay, which draws on published reflections by the Irish priest-student of Joseph Ratzinger Vincent Toomey, originally appeared as an introduction to *Benedictus*, ed. Peter John Cameron (San Francisco: Ignatius Press/Magnificat, 2006). This volume of day-by-day meditations taken from the writings of Pope Benedict XVI offers to those who do not have the time to read everything that the pope has written a way to benefit from his richly textured insights into divine truth. Father Peter John Cameron, O.P., who is a long-time student of the pope's writings, has assembled excerpts from the pope's writings that may serve, among other purposes, as a source for daily reflection.

<sup>1</sup> For the complete text of Pope Benedict's remarks, see Pontifical Academy of Sciences, *Scripta Varia* 105, *The Cultural Values of Science* (Vatican City: Pontificia Academia Scientiarum, 2003), 50–52.

program of studies the hand of divine providence at work early in the life of a man who would become pope.

Professional theologians will come to recognize what the pope himself has described recently as the “unfinished character” of his complete works. The unfinishedness that Benedict XVI ascribes to his lifelong theological accomplishment does not signal a failure, however. He contemplates what might have been the case if he were not asked to assume responsibilities other than those of a university professor.

Joseph Ratzinger was called to assure pastoral service in the Church, first as cardinal archbishop of Munich and shortly thereafter as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. He was not afforded the opportunity to complete the kind of overall systematic account of Catholic theology that, for example, finds an original model in the *Summa theologiae* of St. Thomas Aquinas. The pope considers nonetheless that his writings do “amount to something like a single whole.”

Pope Benedict XVI makes these remarks on his own writings in his 2005 book *Values in a Time of Upheaval: How to Survive the Challenge of the Future*.<sup>2</sup>

### The Pope's Theology

Pope Benedict XVI has been occupied with theological studies and discussion for more than half a century. No wonder that he has found the occasion to write on nearly every topic that one expects from the pen of an authentic Catholic theologian. This massive accomplishment provides the pope's blueprint for doing theology.

One way to identify some general themes that emerge in the theological reflections of Joseph Ratzinger is to recall what he reports as the influences that surrounded his own early theological studies: the Holy Bible, the Sacred Liturgy, and Catholic ecumenism.

The Sacred Scriptures introduce Christ. Joseph Ratzinger takes seriously the Church Fathers' insistence on the unity of the Old and New Testaments. This unity illuminates the central place that Jesus Christ holds in the salvation of the world. No one is saved without at least implicit faith in the One Mediator between God and men, which in some way associates them with the worldwide communion that we call the Church.

The Liturgy of the Church finds its source in the Eucharist. It is said that Pope Benedict had to be persuaded to hold his inaugural Mass as pope in St. Peter's Square. He would have preferred to offer the Mass within the Vatican basilica to make it visually clear that Christ stands at

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Benedict XVI, *Values in a Time of Upheaval: How to Survive the Challenge of the Future* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005).

the center of every efficacious liturgical action that the Church celebrates. Each human being is called to participate in the worship that Christ offers to the Father of glory and that is preeminently commemorated in the Catholic Mass.

Ecumenism is ordered to reveal that the one Church of Christ exists in order to communicate the gift of salvation to the whole human race. There is only one saving communion. *People of God and God's House in Augustine's Doctrine of the Church* is the title of the pope's doctoral dissertation.<sup>3</sup> From his earliest student days, a principal concern of Pope Benedict XVI has been to point out the legitimate place that the Church holds among the nations; he wants to capture for his contemporaries the important reflections that St. Augustine first aired in his chapters on the City of God and the City of Man.

### The Pope's Mission

In accord with one's personal vocation, each Catholic is obliged to make the mission of the pope his or her own. Like the great pontiffs who are his predecessors, Benedict XVI considers it incumbent on a Catholic bishop to address the well-being of both the Church and the political community. He recognizes that the original rebellion of the human race still makes its adverse influence felt among even the most enlightened of our contemporaries. "The outcry in favor of anarchy," writes the pope, "is the reaction to a threatening feeling of dependency that creates a new form of non-liberty in the middle of our social liberties."<sup>4</sup>

The pope offers more than a social critique. He has an exit strategy. Benedict XVI proclaims that God has provided a remedy for mankind's ancient curse: Christ, the Eucharist, the Church. The Incarnation of the Son of God ennobles every human being. In Christ, each believer receives his mandate to make things new.

It is no wonder that Benedict XVI returns again and again to the *Fiat* spoken by the Blessed Virgin Mary. He sees that her submission to God effectively brings tranquil order, happy surrender, and true freedom to the world. Those who want to share in these liberating qualities are invited

<sup>3</sup> Joseph Ratzinger, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustinus Lehre von der Kirche* (Ph.D. diss., University of Munich, 1954).

<sup>4</sup> In Pope Benedict XVI, *Theologische Prinzipienlehre. Bausteine zur Fundamentaltheologie*, 2nd ed. (Donauwörth: Verlag Erich Wewel, 2005): "Der wachsende Schrei nach Anarchie ist die Reaktion auf das bedrängende Gefühl totaler Anhängigkeit, die eine neue Form totaler Unfreiheit mitten in den bürgerlichen Freihalten erschaffen könnte." English trans: *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology*, trans. Sr. Mary Frances McCarthy, S.N.D. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987).

to enter into her *Magnificat*. Those who implement, according to their capacities, what Pope Benedict XVI says about Christ, the Eucharist, and the Church will contribute to completing in their own lives and vocations what for reasons known only to God Joseph Ratzinger has left “unfinished.”

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