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The Theological
Legacy of Pope
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The Theological Legacy of Pope Benedict XVI¹

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As his doctoral student in Regensburg from 1971 to 1978, it was my privilege to study under Joseph Ratzinger, who is recognized as one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. He kept in touch with his former students down through the years, thanks mainly to his Schülerkreis (the circle of doctoral and post-doctoral students), which, from 1978-2013, met annually until he retired as Pope. He was, and remained all through his life as Professor, Archbishop, Cardinal Prefect and Pope, a simple, humble man. He valued human friendship. He had a brilliant mind, a phenomenal memory, and a warm heart. He loved Jesus Christ and His Body the Church. His knowledge of the main currents of thought in theology, philosophy, the human sciences, and culture generally, was wide ranging and perceptive. He sought to proclaim to the world the Truth that alone sets us free – and suffered for speaking that truth to a world that had largely turned its back on God. Humility and courage are, perhaps, his most distinctive characteristics. He was, in my opinion, the conscience of our age.² He has been vilified in the media with reference to the clerical abuse scandals, and yet no one in the Vatican did more to tackle the crisis and eliminate its causes once, early on as Cardinal Prefect, he came aware of the extent of what he called in 2005 “the filth of the Church”.³

His output was prodigious. Many of his *Collected Works* (16 massive Volumes in German) have been translated into several languages, while the annotated bibliography of his publications (including reviews of same) covers 446 pages.⁴ His early classic,

1 An earlier version of this article was published in *The Irish Catholic* (January 5, 2022).

2 D. Vincent Twomey, Pope Benedict XVI: *The Conscience of our Age* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2007).

3 See the account given by Markus Graulich in *Die Tagespost* (February 18, 2021).

4 Joseph Ratzinger/Papst Benedikt XVI. *Das Werk: Veröffentlichungen bis zur Papstwahl*, edited by Vincent Pfnur on behalf of the Schülerkreis (Augsburg: Sankt Ulrich Verlag, 2009).

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THE FURROW

Introduction to Christianity (1968) alone has been translated into over twenty-two languages. His writings on a vast spectrum of theological and philosophical topics have a clarity and a depth that make his theology inspiring, indeed, for many liberating. He never founded a school of his own. All he could ever do, given his other responsibilities, was to sketch the contours of theological answers, based on Revelation, to the existential questions of the day. As a result, his theological fragments provoke further scholarly reflection. Like Picasso, he paints in broad strokes and writes in superb prose - at times almost poetic. What he said of St Paul, can also be applied to him, *mutatis mutandis*: "Paul does not seek for himself, he does not want to make a fan club for himself, he does not wish to go down in history as the head of a school of great knowledge, he is not self-seeking; rather, Saint Paul proclaims Christ and wants to gain people for the true and real God."⁵ For, as Ratzinger himself says about his theological position, "the aim is not an isolated theology that I draw out of myself but one that opens as widely as possible into the common intellectual pathways of the faith."⁶

His election as Archbishop and later as Cardinal Prefect put an end to the plans he had, when, in 1969, he decided to transfer from the old and famous University of Tübingen to the little-known, quiet backwater that was the new University of Regensburg. Kevin McNamara got to know the young promising theologian at the Maynooth Summer School in 1969, who had told him that he had accepted a "call" to the new University of Regensburg to get away from the tension and turmoil of Tübingen's theology faculty. In the fledgling Faculty of Theology in quiet Regensburg, he hoped to find the calm and the needed academic conditions to pursue his research, stimulated by his doctoral and postdoctoral students. There he planned to write his multi-volume *Dogmatics* (i.e., a full systematic treatment of the doctrine of the Church).⁷ His election as Archbishop in 1977, and later as Cardinal Prefect, put an end to such a scholarly project. But he did not cease being a theologian, writing books and articles on a wide spectrum of topics, giving various public lectures in different countries, delivering homilies and book-length interviews, which became best-sellers. Wherever he went, he managed to capture the attention of his audience, thanks

5 Benedict XVI, "How to Speak about God," in *The Transforming Power of Faith* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2013), 44.

6 Ratzinger, *Salt of the Earth*, 66

7 His brother, Georg, was already in Regensburg as Director of the over 1,000-year-old Cathedral Choir School (*Domspatzen*). His elder sister, Maria, acted as his private secretary and housekeeper. He built a house for himself in Pentling on the outskirts of the city, and had his parents remains re-interred in the cemetery around the parish church, as is the custom in Bavaria.

THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

to the clarity and depth of his thought as well as his courage in facing up to the almost intractable problems posed by contemporary culture, and, indeed, by contemporary theology.

For example, as Cardinal Prefect, Ratzinger was invited to give a public lecture in Cambridge in 1988. The event was hosted jointly by the Catholic Chaplaincy to the University and the University's Faculty of Divinity. The topic was the threat of contemporary nihilism to the humanum (a topic he covered in different contexts, each with his typical originality). He received a standing ovation both on his entrance to the hall and when he left. Some people said afterwards they joined in at the beginning as an acknowledgement of his courage in coming to Cambridge. At the end, the ovation was in recognition of the brilliance of his lecture and the answers he gave to questions posed - in fluent, if at times halting, English with a distinctive German accent.

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The most pressing problem in theology today, he held, is the denial of the divinity of Jesus Christ. It is at the root of the Church's present crisis. One of the main causes of this situation, he claims, is an interpretation of Scripture based on an exclusive use of the historical-critical and form-critical methods. His own interpretation would not only consider the historical-critical methodology, which he valued, but which need to be augmented by the other methods of interpretation used down through the centuries by the great thinkers of the Church, in particular, those used by the Fathers of the Church. To this end, he used every minute of his spare time as Pope to write his three-volume *Jesus of Nazareth* (2006-2013). It is the fruit of over 60 years of theological reflection. That trilogy will, perhaps, be his most enduring legacy in the discipline of theology.

His many writings on contemporary cultural issues and political life— as well as his original contributions to the moral issues of the day – remain to be discovered by students of politics and philosophers alike. His historic addresses as Pope to politicians in New York (the UN), London, Paris, and Berlin, probed the most fundamental issues facing modern democracy, above all the threat posed by the denial of God. If people are convinced that all there is to life is what we experience here and now, he once wrote, discontentment and boredom can only increase, with the result that more and more people will look for some kind of escape in their search for “real life” elsewhere. Escapism and various forms of “dropping out” become endemic. “The loss of transcendence evokes the flight into utopia. I am convinced that the destruction of transcendence is the actual amputation of man from which all other

THE FURROW

sicknesses spring. Robbed of his real greatness, he can only resort to illusory hopes.”⁸ One such illusory hope is the construction of a perfect society in the future, which Marx claimed could only come about if people first abandoned God. Another is the myth of the progress based on scientism, functionalism and technology that underlines liberal capitalism’s attempt to create a perfect society.

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A large part of this legacy must be his homilies and his pastoral writings as priest, Archbishop, Cardinal Prefect and Pope, which will continue to provide inspiration for people from all walks of life. This likewise applied to his Wednesday Addresses on the Saints. He chose the Saints as his main topic because he was convinced that the canonized Saints, together with Christian art, are the most convincing apology for the Faith that the Church can offer. They also play a central role in inspiring the faithful of every generation to seek the path of holiness. On the death of his mother, he wrote: “I know of no more convincing proof for the faith than precisely the pure and unalloyed humanity that the faith allowed to mature in my parents and in so many other persons I have had the privilege to encounter.”⁹ His encyclicals on Love, Hope and Faith (the latter published under the name of Pope Francis) must rank among the most outstanding ever to come from the pen of a Pope. *Caritas in Veritate*, his encyclical on integral human development in love and truth, will have a lasting influence on Catholic social teaching. His book-length interviews covering all aspects of the Christian life in the modern world have invariably stimulated the wider, non-academic readership.

Significantly, his writings have led to not a few conversions.

Perhaps his unique contribution to the renewal of the Liturgy is his greatest legacy of all. All his life he promoted a reform of Liturgy according to the spirit and the letter of Vatican II. How pivotal Benedict XVI saw the reform of the Liturgy for the life and mission of the Church can be seen from his decision to publish as the first Volume of his *Collected Works* that on the *Theology of the Liturgy*, which is Volume 10 in the series. At the core of that volume (634 pages in the English translation) is his *The Spirit of the Liturgy* (2000), written while on holidays as Cardinal Prefect. By allowing a greater use of the Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite (the so-called Traditional Latin Mass). Pope Benedict XVI fostered a more reverent and sacral approach to celebrating the sacraments

8 Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI, *Church, Ecumenism, and Politics*, transl. by Michael J. Miller et al. (San Francisco, 2008), 199.

9 Joseph Ratzinger, *Milestones: Memoirs 1927-1977*, transl. by Erasmo Leiva-Merikakis (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1998), 131.

THE THEOLOGICAL LEGACY OF POPE BENEDICT XVI

in the vernacular (the Ordinary Form of the Roman Rite). Despite certain recent restrictions, that initiative will profoundly transform the way the sacraments are celebrated in future. Another of his initiatives with long-term consequences was the creation of the Anglican Ordinariate. Introduced to enable Anglicans to come into union with Rome while preserving the richness of their own liturgical tradition, in time it will enrich the Roman Rite.

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His original theological contribution to interreligious dialogue will also bear fruit in time. For example, in his address to representatives of the World Religions in Assisi in 2011, he drew attention to the need of adherents of all Religions to heed to listen to the voice of sincere agnostics.¹⁰ Their search for truth can purify the Religions and help them overcome the pathologies to which the Religions are prone (such as fundamentalism). In his dialogue with Jurgen Habermas, Europe's leading secular philosopher, the then-Cardinal Ratzinger had pointed out how much philosophy needed to pay attention to the voice of the Religions to overcome the pathologies of reason (such as the atom-bomb and IVF). Though initially it caused outrage on account of a quotation taken out of context, his Regensburg lecture on the role of theology in the university led to a new and more intense dialogue with moderate Islam

His controversial lecture (on the absence of God as a result of Western rationalism and the threat it poses), though widely misquoted, had a positive influence on Christian-Muslim relations, once the dust had settled. One bishop in an Islamic country said that at last we can discuss issues with our Muslim partners in dialogue, which previously had been avoided. His courageous trip to Turkey – in particular his visit to, and his respectful behaviour (and prayer) in, the Blue Mosque – definitively defused the tension. That trip, as it so happened, also ushered in new relations with the Greek Orthodox Church. In his Regensburg Address, he stressed the intrinsic relationship between faith and reason -- the leitmotiv of his life and writings – if humanity is to become more fully human. In all his writings, his ultimate concern was to highlight the primacy of God.

10 An old acquaintance of mine wrote to me after his death: "Many years ago I read comments His Holiness addressed to agnostics who are seeking the truth, he admired their questioning and struggle and urged the faithful to respond so that God is not hidden by the way Religions are often practiced. After reading that, I always felt there is a place for me in the Church, knowing I would be welcome should I return, that my half-formed thoughts and poorly constructed arguments were not summarily dismissed, giving me hope, a sense of belonging when I might otherwise feel adrift. It is a good feeling to have, and I will always be grateful."