

Pope Benedict XVI and the Church

Thomas P. Rausch SJ

As Pope Benedict XVI is welcomed by the Scottish public on the streets of Edinburgh, there is much anticipation of what he will say to the people of the UK over the course of his four-day visit. Thomas Rausch SJ, author of *Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to his Theological Vision*, looks closely at the ecclesiology of the Pope, who has already begun to present his thoughts on the Church and society in the first address of his visit.

Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, has long been interested in the theology of the Church. His doctoral dissertation, *Volk und Haus Gottes in Augustins Lehre von der Kirche* ('The People and the House of God in Augustine's doctrine of the Church'), at the University of Munich was on Augustine's ecclesiology. Though only 35 years old when the Second Vatican Council opened, he attended as a *peritus* ('expert') to Cologne's Cardinal Joseph Frings and played an important role in developing some of the Council's most important documents, among them the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*), the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen gentium*), the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et spes*), and the Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church (*Ad gentes*).

From 1959 to 1977, Ratzinger was professor of fundamental theology, first at Bonn, then at Münster, Tübingen, and finally Regensburg; in March 1977 Pope Paul VI named him Archbishop of Munich and Freising and then, in June, cardinal. Pope John Paul II appointed him prefect of the powerful Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in 1981 and he moved to Rome. He was elected to the Chair of Peter on April 19, 2005.

Pope Benedict's Ecclesiology

Ratzinger/Benedict's ecclesiology is biblical, grounded in Christology. The Church has its origins in Jesus's



gathering of the community of the new covenant (Luke 22:20). From the beginning, the Church has a structure; it is not 'an amorphous mob,' but centred on Jesus's choice of the Twelve and Peter.¹ He stresses that the primacy of Peter is recognised by all the major New Testament traditions, and that even the great Rudolf Bultmann acknowledged that Peter was entrusted with the supreme leadership of the Church, though Ratzinger rejects the

Protestant view that the Petrine succession consists solely in the word as such, rather than in any 'structures,' since the New Testament is careful to bind the word of Scripture to specific witnesses.²

Two themes stand at the centre of Pope Benedict's ecclesiology. One is that his vision of the Church is fundamentally eucharistic. Appealing to Paul's description in 1 Corinthians 10:16-17 of our becoming the one body of Christ by sharing in his body in the Eucharist, he argues that the Church is founded on the Eucharist: 'The Church is the celebration of the Eucharist: The Eucharist is the Church; they do not simply stand side by side; they are one and the same.'³ Sharing in the Eucharist, for Benedict, breaks down the divisive walls of our subjectivity, gathering us into a deep communion with Christ and with each other.

Thus from this eucharistic ecclesiology flows the second theme so important to Benedict, the Church as a communion (*communio*). The recovery of this ancient concept since the mid- twentieth century⁴ has helped move official Catholic ecclesiology from a

juridical, institutional ecclesiology to a more theological one based on a shared life in Christ and in the Spirit. United by word and sacrament, especially the Eucharist, the Church is a communion, a uniting of men and women vertically with the triune God and horizontally with one another, becoming truly one body. The Church has its origins, not as a club or circle of friends, but as the 'people of God' coming together for the word of God and especially the Eucharist. Thus, 'the centre of the oldest ecclesiology is the eucharistic assembly—the Church is *communio*.'⁵

For Ratzinger, the Church cannot be understood as a 'federation of communities,' still less as different denominations as it exists today. More properly, the primitive Church was an *ecclesia in ecclesiis*, one Church existing in many local Churches: the one body of the Lord, whole in every community, each united with its bishop, who were all in communion with each other and with the bishop of Rome, symbolising the one Church of God in this world.

He is critical of efforts to reduce an ecclesiology of communion to an aggregate of self-sufficient local Churches. A Church that does not live in visible, sacramental communion with other Christians, or that does not seek communion with the worldwide communion of the *ecclesia catholica* may be an ecclesial community, but not a Church in the proper sense. Hence his emphasis on apostolic succession, understood as the succession in the historic episcopacy. This is one of his foundational ecclesiological principles, the essence of the Church's catholicity and apostolicity. He sees this as the key question between Catholics and Protestants, arguing that Luther reduced the Eucharist to an 'assurance to the individual's troubled conscience that his sins have been forgiven,' with the result that the Reformation lost a sense of the eucharistic context which constitutes the Church as a communion.⁶

Nor can the Church be separated from the kingdom of God, as not infrequently happens in some liberation or pluralist theologies. The 2000 declaration of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Dominus Iesus*, issued under Ratzinger's presidency, insists on the inseparability of kingdom of God from Christ or from the Church (no. 18). From the days of his study of Bonaventure, Ratzinger has been strongly against what he sees as any effort to

'immanentise' the eschaton, to use a term of Eric Vögelin.⁷ That would mean for him making salvation something *within* history, rather than *beyond* it, reducing the Church to a Church of the poor, with a mission which is primarily social rather than based on hierarchical mediation.⁸

Leadership in a Global Church

The Roman Catholic Church over which Pope Benedict presides has a number of unique claims. It is the world's oldest institution, with a continuity of identity, structures, and faith that reaches back to the first Christian communities. Even as outspoken a critic as Hans Küng acknowledges that only one Church from the time of Ignatius of Antioch (c. 110) has been known as the 'Catholic Church,' despite the wish of other Churches to be called catholic. Even if other Churches do not wish to be considered 'new' Churches and are not 'uncatholic' communities, each of them owes part of its nature as a Church either directly or indirectly to its relationship with the Catholic Church.⁹

Second, the Catholic Church is already a world Church, linking Christians locally and universally into one communion. Embracing more than half of all Christians in the world, some 53 percent, it is present in almost every country. At the 1985 Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, 74 percent of the bishops attending came from countries other than those of Europe or North America. At the 2005 Synod on the Eucharist, the 244 bishops present came from some 118 different countries. With international structures such as synods of bishops, religious orders and lay movements, a developed social teaching and a universal spokesman in the person of the pope, the Catholic Church is uniquely positioned to witness to the kingdom of God in an era characterised by globalisation. With such structures and networks in place, it could link other Christian Churches together into a communion of communions that would be truly catholic.

Pope John Paul II was remarkably creative in showing the potential of the papacy for religious leadership on a global level during his pontificate, calling the Church to a 'purification of memory' and asking forgiveness of those the Church had unintentionally offended in its long history at the beginning of the

new millennium, and gathering religious leaders from around the world at Assisi for prayer and the renunciation of violence after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001.

It is perhaps too early to assess what Pope Benedict's legacy will be. There are a number of positive signs of his leadership. First, he has been particularly concerned with what Pope John Paul II termed the 'new evangelisation' or 're-evangelisation,' calling back to the practice of the faith in countries with Christian roots entire groups of the baptised who have lost a living sense of the faith, or no longer consider themselves members of the Church.¹⁰ Benedict sees this especially as his mission to Europe. Even his choice of his papal name was related to this at least in part, as he explained a few days after his election. His nominal predecessor Benedict XV was the pope who worked so hard for peace during the First World War, and Saint Benedict of Nursia, the great founder of the Benedictine Order, represented 'a fundamental reference point for European unity and a powerful reminder of the indispensable Christian roots of its culture and civilisation.'¹¹ But today the culture of Europe is determinedly secular. With negative birth rates and the Churches' continued loss of members, the only religion that seems to be growing is Islam.

Second, under Benedict, relationships with the Orthodox, particularly the Russians, have improved considerably. Both the Orthodox and Benedict are concerned with the secularism of Europe and the growth of Islam. But there has been little progress in relations between Catholics and Protestants. The 2007 document from the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF) on 'Response to Some Questions Regarding Certain Aspects of the Doctrine of the Church' makes it evident that Rome is a long way from recognising the full ecclesial status of the Reformation Churches. Relations with the Anglican Communion have been complicated by the decision of the Church of England to proceed with the ordination of women to the episcopacy, while Benedict's 2009 Apostolic Constitution, *Anglicanorum coetibus*, which provides for 'Personal Ordinariates,' preserving some Anglican usages for those Anglicans unhappy with changes in the Communion and wanting to enter into full communion with Rome, took Canterbury by surprise. Thus full communion

with Anglicans and Protestants remains a more distant goal.

Finally, while Ratzinger may have been initially slow to grasp the enormity of the problem of sexual abuse by clergy, he has shown himself to have been much more proactive than his predecessor and other Vatican officials in addressing it. In spite of the unfair criticism he has received, he has played an important role in centralising the way the Vatican dealt with accusations of sexual abuse. In 2001 he ordered that all cases be reported to the CDF. According to Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, he helped bring about changes in church law, among them 'the inclusion in canon law of Internet offences against children, the extension of child abuse offences to include the sexual abuse of all under 18, the case by case waiving of the statute of limitations and the establishment of a fast-track dismissal from the clerical state for offenders.'¹² Furthermore, as Prefect of the CDF, he reviewed all these cases,¹³ which provided him with a long and painful education. Shortly after becoming pope, he ordered the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Father Marcial Maciel Delgado, against whom at least nine former seminarians had brought allegations of abuse and who later was found to have fathered at least one child, to cease all public ministry and to retire to a life of prayer and penance. Though these allegations went back to at least the mid nineties, Maciel had been repeatedly praised by Pope John Paul. In 2004 Ratzinger initiated an investigation of the charges on his own authority.

During his visit to the United States in 2008, he met with five men and women who had been abused by members of the clergy in what all accounts described as a very moving meeting. He also raised the scandal of sexual abuse by clergy at least five times, acknowledging to the bishops that it had been 'sometimes very badly handled.'¹⁴ He has since met with victims in Australia and on the island of Malta. In his letter to the Catholics of Ireland, he expressed his willingness to meet with some of the victims.

From a more critical perspective, Benedict seems to address these cases of sexual abuse as a spiritual problem, a crisis of faith, brought on by secularisation or even by misinterpretations of the Second Vatican Council. His solution is turning to prayer and

penance, but he does not raise questions about church structures or the way in which clerical authority is exercised. He once described church reform as consisting, not in remodelling the Church according to our tastes, but in clearing away subsidiary constructions, like the sculptor allowing the image hidden in the stone to be revealed.¹⁵ In his 20 May 2010 pastoral letter to Catholics in Ireland, he used very strong language, speaking of the shame and betrayal felt by Irish Catholics, the ‘often inadequate’ responses and ‘serious mistakes’ of the bishops, but apart from ordering an apostolic visitation of Irish dioceses and religious houses, his suggestions were spiritual rather than practical or structural.

What might he do to address this problem in terms of church governance? In an interview with the Italian paper *La Repubblica*, Cardinal Walter Kasper called for a ‘serious housecleaning in our church.’ While he said that the Pope was not standing by idly, he also suggested that with such a difficult problem emerging not only in Ireland, but in Holland, Germany and the United States, ‘perhaps it deserves a more general analysis that applies to the universal church and not just a single nation.’¹⁶

One thing Benedict might consider would be to ask a Synod of Bishops to address this problem in the near future. Another might be to review the question of how bishops are advised. How often have we heard that if parents had been among the advisors of those bishops who reassigned offending priests they would not have done so? Making sure that there were lay men and women among the bishops’ advisors or consultants would have a number of advantages. It would broaden the base of the bishops’ advisors by expanding it beyond the clerical circle. It would address what remains a major failing of the way authority is exercised in the Catholic Church, the virtual exclusion of the laity from the bishops’ decision-making. It would also recognise more clearly the Church’s nature as a communion of all the baptised, rather than a top down structure in which authority moves only in one direction. Finally, the presence of such advisors in the bishops’ inner circle would keep them informed on what lay people are really thinking about a number of other issues that remain just below the official surface of the Church, foremost among them issues of sexuality, gender and ministry.

It is also true that Benedict has done little to undo the re-centring of authority in Rome that took place under his predecessor. Though shortly after the Council ended he wrote positively about moving beyond papal centralism, reforming the Curia, and collegiality, including the rediscovery of the local Church and the ‘long-awaited’ synod of bishops as a collegial organ rather than a papal instrument,¹⁷ in more recent times he has stressed the ontological priority of the universal Church over the local or particular Church and made a number of decisions without consulting the bishops, for example, his 2007 apostolic letter *Summorum Pontificum*, giving general permission to celebrate the ‘Tridentine’ Mass and his lifting the excommunications on the four Lefebvrist prelates in 2009.

While he insists that the universal Church does not mean Rome, a number of theologians argue that Vatican II not only failed to develop an adequate theology of the local Church, but also that since the Council, Rome has emphasised a universalist Ecclesiology which has resulted in many bishops putting the priority on their relationship with Rome, to the detriment of their accountability to their local Churches. With the relationship between the universal and the local Church unresolved, Christopher Ruddy maintains that Church documents remain universalistic, and thus ‘a juridical ecclesiology triumphs over an ecclesiology of communion.’¹⁸ This affects everything from how bishops are selected, whether local and regional Churches can effectively address their own issues, and how local experience enters into decision-making in Rome.

Pope Benedict remains focussed on the Church’s official language, its theology. Today his tone has changed. The critical analysis of the university professor has given way to the more positive tones of the pastor. But if he is to contribute significantly to the reconciliation of the Churches, a task which remains one of his priorities, he will have to find ways to show those other Churches that the government of the Roman Catholic Church is truly collegial.

Thomas P. Rausch SJ is the T. Marie Chilton Professor of Catholic Theology at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles. He is the author of Pope Benedict XVI: An Introduction to his Theological Vision (Paulist Press, 2009).

¹ See Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991) 24.

² *Ibid.*, pp. 52-67.

³ Joseph Ratzinger, *Principles of Catholic Theology: Building Stones for a Fundamental Theology* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987) 53.

⁴ See Ludwig Hertling, *Communio: Church and Papacy in Early Christianity*, trans. Jared Wicks (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1972) first published in *Miscellanea historiae pontificiae*, 7 (1943).

⁵ *Principles of Catholic Theology*, 254.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 260-61.

⁷ See Eric Vögelin, *The New Science of Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1952) 120.

⁸ See Thomas P. Rausch, *Pope Benedict XVI: An introduction to his Theological Vision* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009) 53-54.

⁹ Hans Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1967) 307.

¹⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, no. 33.

¹¹ Benedict XVI, "General Audience (April 27, 2005).

¹² catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1001299.htm.

¹³ 'Three Catholic Church reformers reflect on latest sexual abuse reports';

http://www.nj.com/news/index.ssf/2010/03/three_catholic_church_reformer.html.

¹⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, 'Meeting with the Bishops of the United States,' April 16, 2008; see *Origins* 37/46 (2008) 737.

¹⁵ Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 140-41.

¹⁶ Catholic News Service;

<http://www.catholicnews.com/data/stories/cns/1000962.htm>.

¹⁷ Joseph Ratzinger, *Theological Highlights of Vatican II*, (New York: Paulist, 2009) esp. 91-93, 135-39, 161-76, 199-206; first published 1966.

¹⁸ Christopher Ruddy, *The Local Church: Tillard and the Future of Catholic Ecclesiology* (New York: Crossroad, 2006) 52.