

Biographer sees continuity between John Paul II, Benedict XVI

by [Bruce Nolan](#)

December 8, 2010

NEW ORLEANS (RNS) Five years into the papacy of Benedict XVI, papal biographer George Weigel is struck by the continuity of mission between Benedict and his predecessor, John Paul II, both of whom have pursued activist papacies engaging an often-skeptical general culture.

Both popes are products of early 20th century European Catholic culture, John Paul in Poland and Benedict in Germany. Both were deeply influenced by World War II and its aftermath, and both were partly shaped by the Second Vatican Council in the 1960s.

Both popes preach "the centrality of discipleship," both seek to spread the gospel -- Benedict, especially, in Western Europe -- and both believe in outreach to the young, Weigel said during a stop here to lecture on his newest book, "The End and the Beginning."

Weigel, John Paul's biographer in 1999's "Witness to Hope," also wrote the forward to "Light of the World," a new book-length interview on a range of topics Benedict conducted with German journalist Peter Seewald.

"The End and the Beginning" is the sequel to "Witness to Hope" and includes full-blown analysis of John Paul's papacy, as well as the fruit of communist intelligence archives detailing Soviet and Polish efforts to undermine him, Weigel said.

On his ascension to the papacy, Benedict was widely known as a brilliant, professorial theologian who served John Paul for 22 years as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. In that role he was widely seen as the stern Germanic face that disciplined wayward theologians around the world, although Weigel believes that is a mostly false stereotype.

Since becoming pope, however, Benedict has demonstrated a gift as a personable listener.

"He's really a fine pastor," Weigel said. "When he meets these victims of sexual abuse, their testimony is he's a remarkably compassionate pastor. They feel he understands the wounds they carry."

Still, Weigel said Benedict has been ill-served at times by the Vatican bureaucracy -- particularly its archaic communications culture.

Part of the problem is that the institutional culture of the Roman curia has not caught up to the communications revolution of recent decades, Weigel said.

"They do not live in the 24/7 information environment," he said. "They don't feel any institutional need to have a rapid-response mechanism that every other major institution has. So the impression is created they don't care. That's a false impression, but it's an understandable one, given the fact that we're all used to living in the same news cycle."

Moreover, Weigel said the current Vatican press office under the Rev. Federico Lombardi does not insist on "message discipline," leaving highly placed cardinals to sow controversy in personal remarks at

official functions that do not reflect Benedict's views.

Weigel cited Cardinal Angelo Sodano's observation during a Holy Week homily last year deploring as "petty gossip" criticisms of the church's handling of the clerical sex abuse crisis.

In addition, Weigel said a more professional communications apparatus might have dampened some of the recent confusion and sensation around a brief Benedict observation in the Seewald book about condom use and AIDS.

Weigel said he's certain of Benedict's central point about AIDS and condoms: that using a condom to prevent disease, though objectively wrong in the church's view, may in some cases represent a morally laudable intention.

Some theologians belatedly trying to explain the concept compared it to a bank robber having sufficient conscience to at least use an unloaded pistol to avoid hurting anyone. But by then, much of the public damage was done.

"Why Lombardi could not come up with an illustration of that is just beyond my imagination," Weigel said. "And the church is not well-served by that. It's not been a happy week."