

Changing and changeless: Benedict's challenge

by [Miroslav Volf](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

The theology of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger played a major part in my book *After Our Likeness* (1998), which sought to develop a trinitarian, nonhierarchical understanding of the church. He thanked me politely for the copy I sent him and added, “You don’t expect me, of course, to have changed my mind after reading it.”

I had no such expectation. I am a Protestant in the bewildering world of restless spiritual energy splashing from below, in the world of multiplying churches, small and large, traditional and contemporary. He was then the guardian of orthodoxy and the second-ranking person in the Catholic Church, the body whose distinctive mark is visible social unity. I was advocating for new and emerging churches, while he was trying to keep them from making inroads among his flock.

In the debates that raged about the fate of the Second Vatican Council, Ratzinger parted ways with his erstwhile friends, such as the progressive theologian Hans Küng. They insisted that he was busy closing the windows of the church that Vatican II had opened. He snapped back that he had not changed; instead, they had changed by swallowing modernity hook, line and sinker, abandoning the substance of the faith in the process.

From 1954, when he published his first book, until the present day, the new pope’s theology has remained amazingly consistent. At its heart is the idea of “communion”—communion of God with humans and of humans with one another, in the one body of the church. What makes communion possible? Utter transparency of each person to God, as exemplified by Christ, and self-giving love for one’s neighbor. This, roughly, is the new pope’s spirituality.

Now, apply this spirituality to the papacy. Though he is the Supreme Pontiff, according to Ratzinger the theologian, the pope is nothing as an individual. *His* presence doesn’t matter; God’s presence does. *His* personal beliefs don’t matter; the one faith of the church does. Like Jesus, the pope should say, “My teaching is not

my own, but of the One who sent me.” And that commitment to something that is neither one’s own nor at one’s disposal brings us back to the question of change.

Semper idem—always the same—is what the Catholic Church has traditionally said of itself. The world today is awirl with change, however. One gadget is pushing the other to the garbage heap, one fad is replacing another at breathless speed, knowledge is accumulating exponentially, old political structures are breaking down and fresh ones are being erected. As new things give way to the *new new* things, can the Catholic Church afford to remain changeless? If it does not change, could it be abandoned like a car from three decades ago or driven only on a rare Sunday morning as a well-preserved antique? On the other hand, with the obsolescence rate so high, can the church afford to keep changing? If it marries today the spirit of a breathless age, will it not become a widow tomorrow? The church must do both: hold onto the substance of the faith while finding ever new ways to express it.

Semper idem is what we should expect Joseph Ratzinger to say at the end of his pontificate as Benedict XVI. As a pope, will he be wise enough to differentiate rightly between the self-same substance of faith and its many and changing expressions? That is the crucial question of this papacy.

A decade ago, when I was involved in a dialogue with the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, a German Vatican insider friend and I were musing about the possibility of a German pope, with a side glance toward Cardinal Ratzinger. “A German wouldn’t make a good pope,” he said. “Why not?” I asked. “We Germans are too rigid,” he replied. “We take ourselves and our jobs too seriously, and the church is a very diverse and living body.”

Can Benedict XVI prove my friend wrong? Can a stern watchdog morph into an embracing shepherd?