

Benedict the teacher

by [Lawrence S. Cunningham](#) in the [July 12, 2011](#) issue



In Review

Joseph Ratzinger

POPE
BENEDICT
XVI

EUROPE

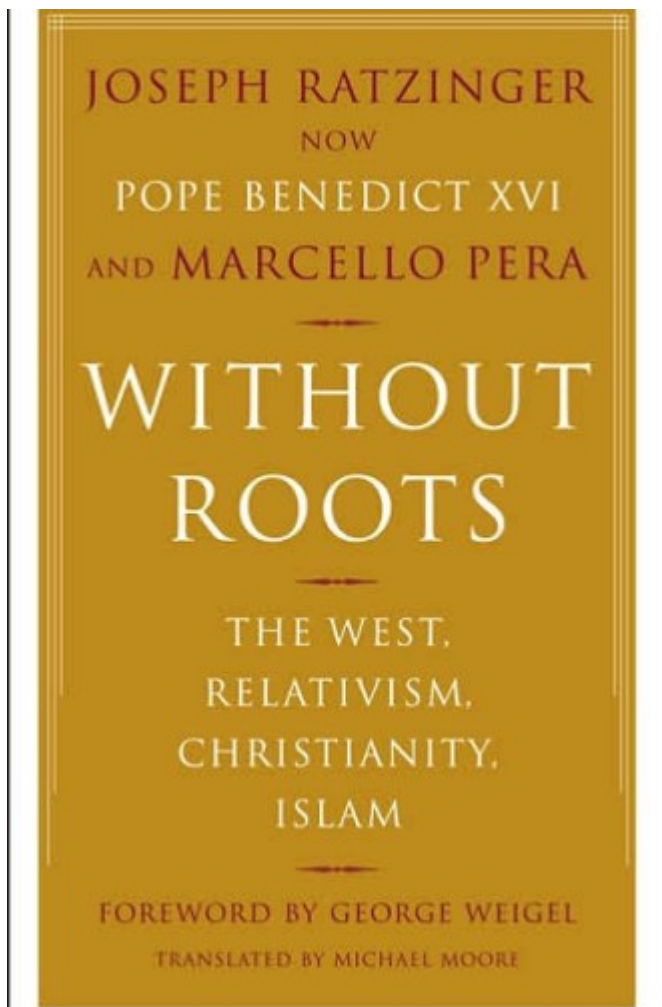
TODAY AND TOMORROW

This volume raises grave issues, rendered yet more urgent by the recent dramatic events in Russia and the Middle East. From the answers to these questions depend, as Cardinal Ratzinger has said, the present and the future of Europe.

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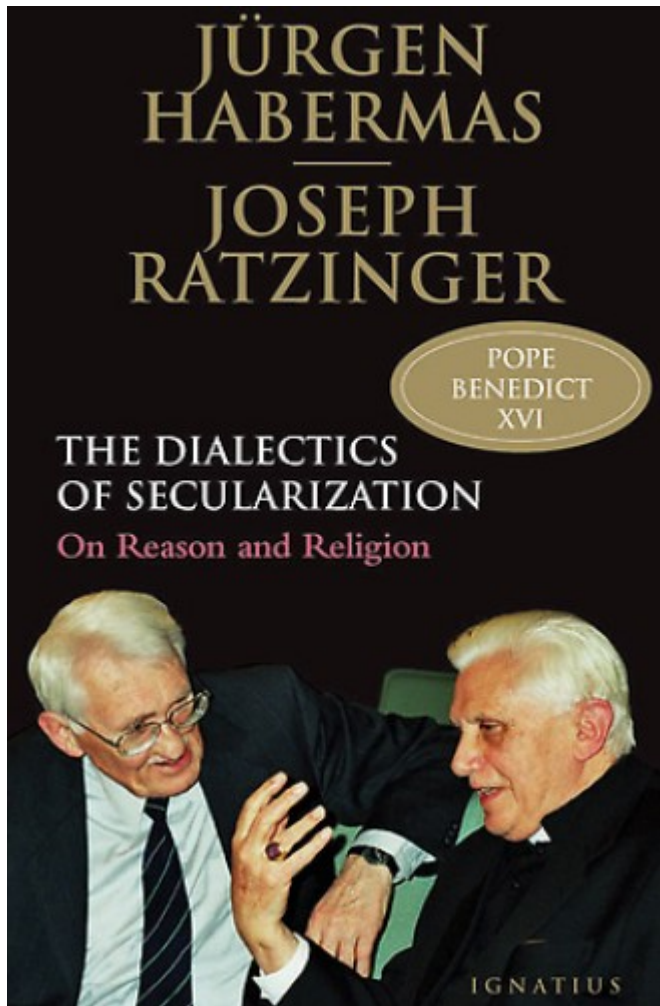
Europe Today and Tomorrow

By Joseph Ratzinger
Ignatius



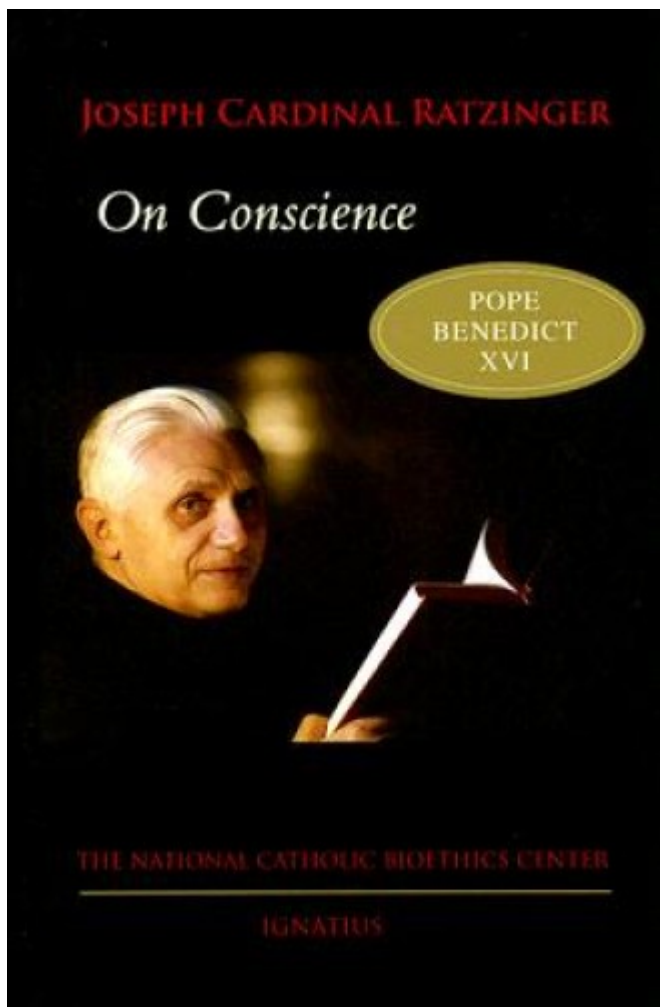
Without Roots

By Joseph Ratzinger and Marcello Pera
Basic Books



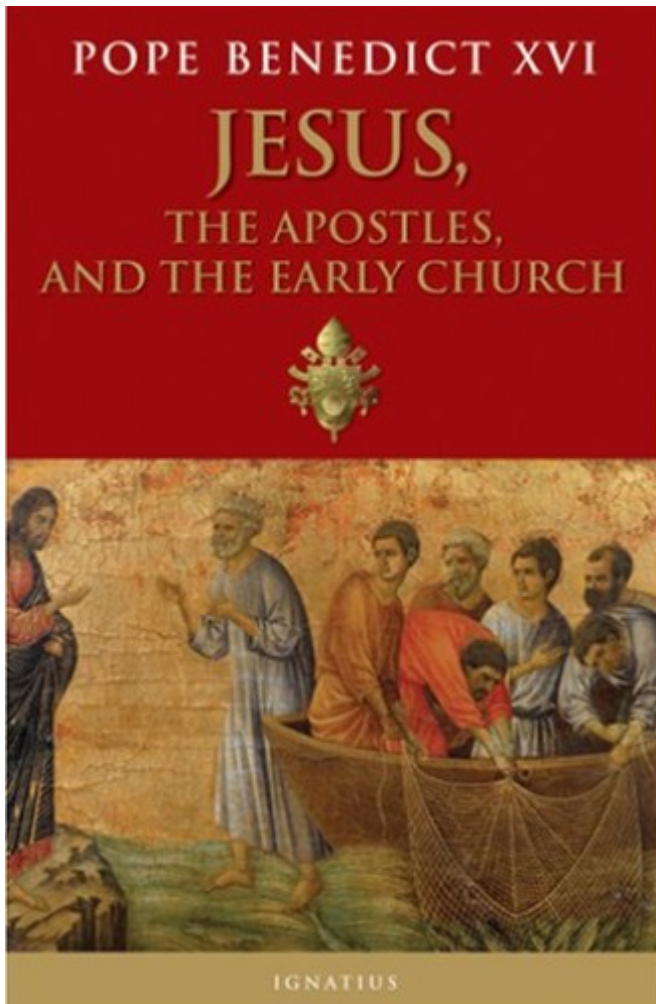
The Dialectics of Secularization

By Jürgen Habermas and Joseph Ratzinger
Ignatius



On Conscience

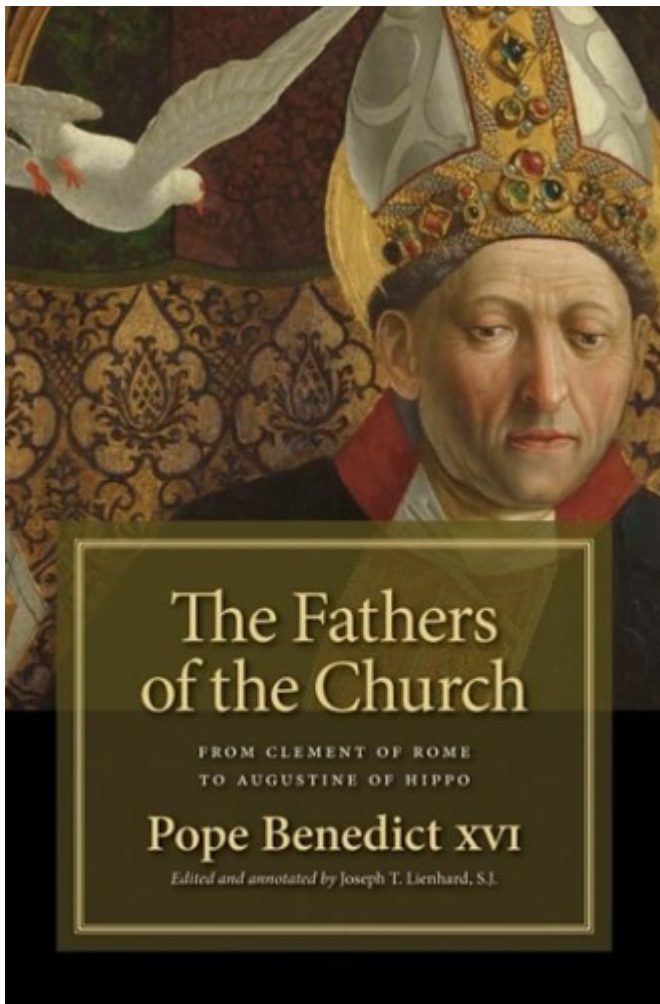
By Joseph Ratzinger
Ignatius



Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church

By Pope Benedict XVI

Ignatius



The Fathers of the Church

By Pope Benedict XVI; edited by Joseph T. Lienhard, SJ
Eerdmans

Three decades ago, University of Chicago theologian David Tracy distinguished three audiences for the theologian: the church, the general public and the academic community. Most theologians make their mark in one of those venues. Joseph Ratzinger, however, has spoken powerfully to all three.

As a member of the theological faculty at the University of Tübingen and later at Regensburg in Germany, Ratzinger was a resonant academic voice for Catholic theology. As a churchman—first as archbishop of Munich, next as head of the Congregation for the Defense of the Faith in the Vatican and then as pope—he has been an authoritative voice within the Catholic Church. Finally, he has been, especially in Europe, a powerful public intellectual.

The intellectually lazy may pigeonhole Ratzinger as a "conservative" in the pejorative sense, but he is more fairly described as a classical theologian with deep roots in the Augustinian tradition and a thinker who balances a profound grasp of the Christian faith with a comprehensive understanding of modernity—about which he feels free to offer a critique. He is by any measure the most learned theologian to assume the chair of Peter since Gregory the Great.

A set of his lectures given before he was elected pope and published as a slim volume titled *Europe Today and Tomorrow* is a fair example of Ratzinger's role as public intellectual. This volume reprints the famous 2004 address in which he exchanged views with Jürgen Habermas on the moral foundations of the state. Ratzinger rejects the thesis (maintained by, for example, Martin Heidegger, Carl Schmitt and Claude Lévi-Strauss) that Europeans have tired of rationality, but he also argues that pure rationality is insufficient as a grounding for a global ethics (a stance contrary to that of his onetime colleague Hans Küng). Ratzinger agrees with Habermas that there is a profound need for "listening" to the sources of European culture, both its commitment to reason and its deep roots in the Christian ethos. Evident behind that commitment to listening is Ratzinger's clear distaste for all thinkers who would eliminate Europe's Christian roots in favor of a purely rational foundation (in the French postrevolutionary sense of *laïcité*).

In the essay "Reflections on Europe," Ratzinger sharpens his thesis, arguing that untrammelled reason—understood as that which derives solely from the experiences of technological production or rests on scientific foundations—prizes only functionality and efficiency. It therefore leads to something completely dystopian—a world in which the weighing of goods is the only way to discern moral norms. To take that position is to view human destiny as "decided by those who have scientific power at their disposal and those who manage the finances."

The arguments found in *Europe Today and Tomorrow* were already present in *Without Roots*, a volume of essays by Ratzinger and Marcello Pera, who at the time was president of the Italian senate. The genesis of the exchange was quite accidental. Pera, by profession a philosopher of science, had spoken at a Roman university, and the following day Ratzinger was invited to speak to the senate. The book consists of their addresses along with a subsequent exchange of letters. Its broad range of topics includes the place of Islam in the West, the Christian roots of Europe and the dangers of relativism. The topics are not treated in depth, but one interesting exchange involved the possibility of a "Christian civil religion" in the

European context—something the future pope finds less plausible than the Italian politician does.

The audience for the lectures reprinted in *Europe Today and Tomorrow* and *Without Roots* was the educated European public. The two lectures compiled in *On Conscience* were keynote addresses to Catholic bishops' workshops. These lectures focus on a question of burning interest for Catholics and many others: What is the relationship between the demands of conscience and the role of authority? It is a commonplace in Catholic moral theology that one is obliged to follow one's conscience even if its judgment is in error. What happens, however, if a person's erroneous conscience is at odds with the moral teachings of the church? This problem has obvious implications for how the faithful respond to church teachings on contraception, capital punishment and war.

Ratzinger notes that a completely autonomous conscience is an invention of modernity (he traces it to Johann Fichte) and contends that this purported autonomy can lead to absurd conclusions. He points to those who served the Nazis "in good faith." Are they free of moral culpability?

The future pope draws upon a very old concept to describe his understanding of conscience: *anamnesis* (memory). Pointing to St. Paul's insistence that the law is written on human hearts, he cites Basil the Great to the effect that the love of God is "constitutively established within us" as part of our rational nature. At the more practical level, conscience is the act of recognizing truth and making judgments prior to taking action. There is, then, first *anamnesis* and then action. Our judgment might be mistaken and we might act upon that mistake, but this does not negate the deep promptings of God's voice rooted in *anamnesis*. Ratzinger's analysis of conscience is not unlike that put forth by John Henry Newman in the 19th century.

Ratzinger's point is that to make conscience a matter of pure subjectivity is to grant to the individual an authority uninformed by the promptings of human nature, the impulses of grace and the common wisdom of experience. His subtle and technical analysis of conscience is part of his larger project against a feckless relativism that, in his judgment, undergirds a kind of moral anarchy that is a dangerous part of modern culture.

Each Sunday the pope appears in his apartment window at the Vatican to offer words of encouragement and to bless the crowd in the piazza in front of St. Peter's

basilica. On Wednesdays he has a general audience in which, apart from giving polyglot greetings to groups in the assembly, he offers what he calls a catechesis. Following a pattern established by the late John Paul II, Benedict XVI chooses a theme for his Wednesday audiences. Between March 2006 and February 2007, the subject was Jesus, the apostles and representative figures of the early church, discussed under the rubric of "seeking the face of Christ." What is particularly interesting about this series—published as *Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church*—is that the pope offers not only portraits of various individuals but reflections on how these figures are remembered and remain vivid within the church's tradition.

Ever the Catholic theologian, Benedict tells us in the very first catechesis that he does not understand the reception of the kingdom proclaimed by Jesus as coming exclusively to an individual qua individual (he singles out for criticism Adolf von Harnack, a favorite target, as is the tradition of liberal Protestantism more generally) but as coming to a living community, the church, characterized by communion, tradition and the living witness of the apostolic college of bishops. In other words, these catecheses about Jesus and his followers are set within the context of Catholic ecclesiology. In his sixth lecture he says that the living tradition of the church is not "a collection of things or words, like a box of dead things. Tradition is the river of new life that flows from its origins."

Benedict has a theological point of view, and his remarks are not just hortatory. He intends to teach. He spends a lot of energy on these talks (he writes them out longhand for delivery), and it is surely part of his larger purpose to have them considered as a whole; as such, they constitute minitreatises on Catholic theology. They are catechetical in the strict sense of the term—"echoing down" (the etymological meaning of *catechesis*) the faith of the church. They are better read than heard.

Benedict followed up that series with another in which he extended his historical trajectory: *The Fathers of the Church: From Clement of Rome to Augustine of Hippo*. Unlike the editions of these talks published by Ignatius Press, which basically reprint what comes from the Vatican, the editor of this volume, Joseph Lienhard, provides appendices giving biographical sources for the persons discussed as well as a brief bibliographical source of English translations of the patristic sources mentioned. As Lienhard notes, Benedict not only discusses the best known of the early Christian writers but also explores two figures (Origen and Tertullian) who either were under some suspicion in the early tradition (Origen) or ended up in schism (Tertullian). In

addition, he discusses some lesser-known figures, including the Syriac writers Aaphrates the Sage and Saint Ephrem. It is no surprise that he devotes five lectures to St. Augustine, who was the subject of his doctoral dissertation.

Benedict's account of Augustine can stand as a statement of his own understanding of theology. First, he insists that one must believe in order to understand (*crede ut intelligas*) and, following on that, understand in order to believe better (*intellige ut credas*). He stoutly resists the autonomous claims of reason, but he also eschews any claim that one should believe blindly. He understands that faith is a gift—but once given, it is to be reflected upon in order to gain a deeper insight into the One who is the way, the truth and the life.

The books mentioned above are almost exclusively collections of occasional pieces first given as either scholarly papers or popular catecheses. They are not sustained scholarly arguments. Even the first volume (*Jesus of Nazareth*) of Benedict's projected series on Jesus is, as he himself has noted, personal reflections on the meaning of the Jesus of the Gospels and as such are open to the criticism of his peers (and those criticisms have come in spades). It is not the task of the pope to advance daring new theological hypotheses or to break new speculative ground. His task is to preserve the faith and maintain the unity of the church. In that sense, we expect the pope to be a "conservative." The degree to which he conserves is always a matter of calibration and so a matter of some debate both within the Catholic Church and from those of good will outside it. To cite a conspicuous example, not every Catholic is happy with his attempt to "reform the reform" of the Catholic liturgy.

The pope is commonly criticized even by some Catholic theologians as being too Eurocentric in his theology. By both training and intellectual instinct, he is most at home in the classical sources of the Western theological and cultural tradition, with a decided penchant for the high culture of the West. His approach to ecumenism is marked by his own experience of the Protestant reality he knows in Europe. He has a keen interest in the Christian East because of his passion for the patristic tradition.

What makes Benedict's Eurocentric worldview problematic is the fact that the greatest growth in the contemporary Catholic Church is in non-Western parts of the world. We have yet to see evidence that he has grappled seriously with the religious and social challenges coming from non-Western countries. A good deal of his energy has been expended on understanding the religious decline of the West. That decline is not unconnected to the growth of Islam in Europe itself. At any rate, the steady

stream of books that come from his pen indicates that even in his old age, and even as pope, the disciplines of a German theologian have not left him.