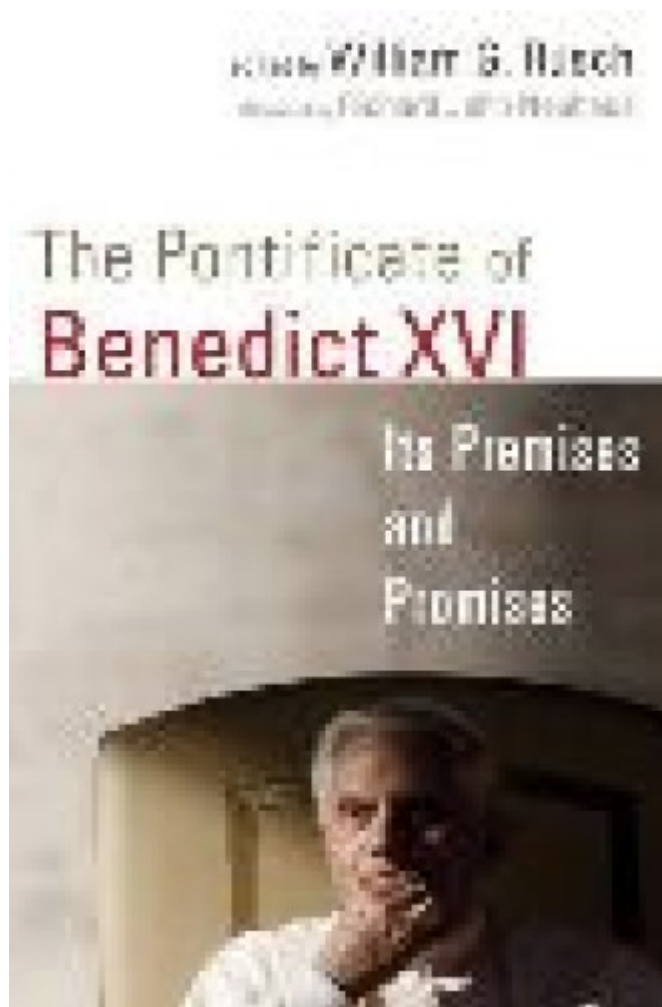


# The Pontificate of Benedict XVI: Its Premises and Promises

reviewed by [William R. Burrows](#) in the [December 29, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## The Pontificate of Benedict XVI: Its Premises and Promises

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Four years into the papacy of Benedict XVI (formerly Joseph Ratzinger), it is said that the crowds thronging St. Peter's Square for his weekly blessing and the Hall of Audiences to hear him speak are larger than those for John Paul II. This is no small indication of the magnitude of Benedict's impact.

The noted ecumenist William Rusch, a theologian and expert in matters patristic, realizes that facile characterizations of Benedict as a theological conservative, as "Panzerkardinal" and as a rigid enforcer of dogma miss his subtlety and importance. The contributors to *The Pontificate of Benedict XVI* both explicate and critique Benedict's theology, lifework and papacy.

During the 20 years in which I was serving as managing editor at Orbis Books, Cardinal Ratzinger's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith investigated and in some cases severely criticized at least eight of our authors. Five of them were authors with whom I had worked directly and who were personal friends. The common denominator in all eight cases was concern that the writers might be weakening doctrines centering on christological and soteriological orthodoxy, either by diminishing the transcendent dimensions of salvation (in the case of liberation theology) or in addressing the universality and finality of the work of Christ as God's unique incarnation (in the case of the theology of religions). Despite my judgment that CDF was often straining out gnats and ignoring the positive main points of most of these theologians' work, I came to respect Ratzinger's central concerns.

To read *The Pontificate of Benedict XVI* to best effect, one needs to grasp those concerns. Thus I suggest that Dale Irvin's opening chapter on the anomalies created by Benedict's Eurocentrism be read last. Irvin raises questions that get to the heart of ambiguities in the promises of Benedict's papacy and are best treated after the premises of his papacy have been discussed.

Those premises are laid out in Geoffrey Wainright's chapter, "The Sting of Death: The Unavoidable Question and the Response of Faith," and Sara Butler's chapter, "Benedict XVI: Apostle of the 'Pierced Heart of Jesus.'" With ample quotations from writings from various phases of the pope's work, these chapters reveal the thinking that lies behind what John Allen has called Benedict's "affirmative orthodoxy" agenda.

Wainright unveils the way Benedict contributed to a reframing of the doctrine of death and eternal life—in full awareness of how deeply that doctrine cuts against the

grain of modern thought. Butler shows that the pope's explication of the pierced side of Jesus (and popular devotion to the "Sacred Heart of Jesus") is a path to a deeply personal (not individualistic) ecclesial and liturgical theology. Together they make it clear that Benedict is both modern and steeped in patristic and medieval methods of presenting the gospel. He exemplifies a wisdom, or sapiential, approach in which theology and spirituality are united.

In contrast, much of post-Vatican II American Catholic and relatively recent Protestant theology and ecclesiology are academic in ways that come up short when it comes to introducing the believer to Jesus and his church as an integral path to knowing God. Although *The Pontificate of Benedict XVI* does not make this point explicitly, Benedict is suspicious of de-ecclesialized, de-sapientialized theology.

Harding Meyer's chapter on Benedict as theologian, philosopher of religion and ecumenist unpacks the pope's contributions in each of these areas, revealing the richness of Ratzinger's explication of Christian particularity over against modern theology's atomized, academic approach. Reading Meyer, I was reminded of the greatest missiologist of our age, Lesslie Newbigin, and his prescription that Christians should appreciate the gifts of modernity and other religious ways but not allow secularist culture to push the Christian faith into a corner labeled "unreliable private beliefs." Catholic Benedict and Protestant Newbigin are theological cousins.

Cheryl Bridges Johns's chapter on Benedict from a Pentecostal perspective goes into aspects of Benedict's time at CDF for which he has been widely criticized, namely, his battles with the theology of liberation. She also reminds us that Catholicism and Pentecostalism are in close dialogue and are the largest and most vital expressions of Christianity globally.

Metropolitan Maximos of Pittsburgh grasps the nettle of ecumenical dilemmas. His chapter shows Benedict's desire not to hold hostage Catholic-Orthodox progress toward unity—even in light of 19th-century and subsequent developments that have hardened ages-old Roman arguments for universal papal jurisdiction over all churches.

After reading Maximos, I was a dubious reader of Ephraim Radner's chapter on the possibilities for progress in Anglican-Catholic relations and for Anglican conciliarism being a model for church unity. Both Radner's and Reformed theologian Joseph Small's perceptive chapters are reminders of why Rome presently discounts

Reformed, federal ecclesiology and Anglican episcopalianism, both of which are constrained by their bows to modernity and the need for democratic majorities to uphold tradition in areas like sexual ethics and the ordination of women.

To return to Irvin: his chapter, “Benedict XVI, the Ends of European Christendom, and the Horizons of World Christianity,” brings a different set of issues into relief. For Irvin the question is whether Benedict’s linkage of faith and reason to Hellenism, the early ecumenical councils and the development of Western Catholicism mean that the European contours of Catholicism’s theology and polity are mandatory elements in a globalized world Christianity. Irvin finds this possibility problematic. What he does not say is that the Catholic Church is greatly weakened in its traditional homelands precisely because it will not allow northern Catholics the right to debate and alter its structures and ordination policies—a refusal that, curiously, none of the eight authors discusses. Yet Benedict’s insistence on maintaining European traditions is at the heart of his conflict with segments of the church that favor more democratic governance and call for revisiting sexual ethical prescriptions.

In his major work on cultural issues, *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religions*, Benedict asserts that many approaches to cultural adaptations neglect the fact that the church has its own history and culture. Fidelity to the gospel, Benedict believes, involves a careful adaptation of Catholicism, which has providentially passed through Europe on its way to becoming a world religion. For Benedict what needs to take place is not a new incarnation of Christ or a reinvention of the church but a critical process of “interculturating” church and gospel. In this process, the trump cards are not held by what Benedict calls the Western “dictatorship of relativism.”

Although Irvin’s intention is to speak of global Christianity, in raising these questions he implicitly focuses attention on issues that underpin the enfeeblement of institutional Catholicism in the West. For Irvin the way forward is to embrace the pluralism and diversity “manifested in the Christian past,” emphasizing love over doctrinal formulae.

As both Maximos and Meyer indicate, Benedict has, at least in principle, signaled that such steps could be taken. I see no indication, however, that Benedict foresees recognizing the validity of any church that is not committed to the traditions of conciliar orthodoxy on the Trinity and to the universality and finality of Jesus as the Christ and the self-revelation of the triune God. Pope Benedict XVI believes that it is on these premises that every promise of authentic renewal in Christian ecclesial life

rests.