

How will Benedict



Franklin McMahon



“As pope, Joseph Ratzinger doesn’t necessarily need to continue what he did as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith,” says German moral theologian Dietmar Mieth. Mieth first got to know the future Pope Benedict XVI in the 1960s, when Ratzinger was a popular, progressive theology professor at the prestigious University of Tübingen in Germany. Mieth thinks Catholics who worry what Ratzinger’s track record as prefect will mean for ecumenism and theological inquiry should give hope a chance and be open to surprises.

Now one of the leading Catholic moral theologians in Europe, Mieth was among the first lay Catholic theologians appointed to a major theological teaching position in Europe. He is the author of 26 books and for 22 years was the director of the moral theology section of the international theological journal *Concilium*.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH DIETMAR MIETH

According to news reports, the reaction in Germany to the election of Pope Benedict XVI has been different from the enthusiastic response that greeted Pope John Paul II in Poland in 1978. Is that an accurate perception?

Cardinal Ratzinger has always been met with a mixed reception in Germany. It is true that he is seen very much as a representative of the conservatives who are opposed to what they view as the modern *zeitgeist* (“spirit of the times”) and often seem to forget that the Second Vatican Council valued highly the signs of the times.

Thus he is seen as part of the “conservative camp” within the church, and those within German Catholicism who want to see a structural reform of the church and want to see a more open theology have not felt represented by him and have frequently criticized him.

What do German Catholics expect of him?

Many Catholics in Germany may not have very high expectations, but they do have very high hopes. And those hopes for Pope Benedict XVI are connected to his widely recognized intellectual ability, the great wealth of experience he brings to the job, a certain trust in his self-confidence, and a hope that he might remember his more progressive youth.

When was he a progressive?

He was a theologian at Vatican II, and in his early commentaries after the council he actually criticized its texts for not going far enough theologically. And from 1966 until 1969 he was a member of a very progressive theological faculty at the University of Tübingen and was in agreement and solidarity with much of what was going on here at the time. For example, he was part of the protests by the faculty against the moral teachings of the 1968 encyclical *Humanae Vitae*, which had reaffirmed the church’s ban on birth control.

But on the other hand, it also was his experience at Tübingen that led him to a change of heart. And one key experience for him was the student protests of 1968

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that he experienced as dangerous and as a kind of “terrorism of the street.”

What caused his concern and his change?

He thought the student revolution was a turning away from God and that people were putting their trust in an absolute future of humanity inspired by Marxism.

He felt the idea that the transformation of the world is ultimately in God’s hands was being abandoned in favor of a trust in the human ability to build a better future through technology. Ratzinger would take issue with such a position and see it as unwarranted in view of historical experience.

He applied the same argument to the expectation that an ultimate and better future for humanity could be achieved through social change alone. He saw that, too, as a betrayal of faith, and this is what led him to oppose political theology here in Germany and then later also liberation theology in Latin America.

What are your expectations for Pope Benedict’s relationship with theologians?

I think there have been three fronts in his conflicts with other theologians as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith: one—against political and liberation theology—that humanity usurps the place of God; two—against pragmatic liberalism—that people expect and agitate for a reform of church structures; and three—against a modern moral theology—that it is open to contemporary thinking and is willing under certain circumstances to abandon traditional church positions that no longer seem justifiable.

What do you mean by “pragmatic liberalism”?

Going all the way back to his “Tübingen reversal,” if I may call it that, Cardinal Ratzinger has been opposed to a “pragmatic liberalism,” which he saw in his Tübingen colleague Father Hans Küng.

I still remember a very lively discussion after a guest lecture by the Belgian theologian Father Edward Schillebeeckx on the relationship between theology and the church’s teaching office. Ratzinger and Küng, with two other theologians and a bishop, were part of a panel during

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which Küng and the other theologians presented a very frank and open criticism of how the teaching office treats theologians.

Ratzinger was quiet through all of that. When the audience asked him directly to comment, he distanced himself from the criticism and, referring to a number of cases from church history, said the whole discussion was much too “pragmatic” and not complex enough. He argued that the relationship between authority and theological reason was much more complicated.

That was my first experience with his opposition to so-called pragmatic liberalism. If you want to define it more positively, you could also call it “reform of the structures of the church,” and under that name it’s certainly something I subscribe to.

Part of that conflict centers on human rights and how the church has preached them to the outside world but has not fully realized them internally.

What has been the conflict in moral theology?

Back in the 1970s there was a controversy in Germany involving moral theology. In 1974 Ratzinger joined with the Swiss theologian Father Hans Urs von Balthasar in a critique of a 1971 book by my mentor Alfons Auer entitled *Autonomous Morality and Christian Faith*.

That conflict was summarized as pitting on the one hand “autonomous morality in the Christian context,” which relied more on the moral reasoning of the individual than on the guidance of the religious authorities, against “faith ethics” on the other, which emphasized the role of the magisterium in interpreting the moral law.

Over the past 20 years that dispute has pretty much been resolved and no longer leads to difficulties with the church’s teaching office. But back then there was very real tension between theology and episcopal authority, which, after his appointment in 1977, was

represented by the then-archbishop of Munich, Cardinal Ratzinger.

How was the conflict resolved?

The consensus revolves around an acknowledgment that the role of reason in ethics within the Catholic Church has a long and great tradition. For example, Pope John Paul II’s 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio* strongly emphasizes the cooperation between reason and faith. Today “autonomous morality” in the Christian context is better understood, particularly that the “autonomy” envisioned is not the same as complete self-direction or self-sufficiency; the individual Christian conscience is guided both by reason and by the received tradition of the church.

Would you see echoes of that dispute in the comments Cardinal Ratzinger made just before the conclave about the “dictatorship of relativism”?

Change in the modern world always involves problematic elements. The reality of a shallow individualism is universally accepted among Catholic theologians worldwide. And certainly that means there needs to be a discernment of spirits with respect to modern culture. I think people agree with Ratzinger on that point.

For example, in my field of moral theology, I, too, am quite conservative in the area of biogenetics. I, too, have concerns and fears because new technologies are moving forward and are creating problems we are not prepared to deal with.

Many otherwise progressive moral theologians are very strongly critical about certain technological and scientific advances. We agree with the church’s strong stance against the selection of human life according to genetic characteristics or against the false promises that are being made through deceptive manipulation of language in the talk about

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“therapeutic cloning.” But the key here is the art of discernment and engaging the public debate with good arguments.

The other question, though, is whether the changes of the modern world have not also led to new sets of values that ought to be supported. There are positive aspects in contemporary society, for example, that people today are more independent and in that sense autonomous, that democracies enable people to deal better with conflict, that people are better at cooperating through the realization of democratic values. In the church we should welcome and connect with these positive values.

People today are more tolerant. Without abandoning important values such as the commitment of interpersonal love, they are open to discussing different ways in which human relationships may be shaped.

Many would count the progress on equal rights for women among those positive modern developments. But the church still lags behind on this issue.

Our faculty, both in its theological journal and in a book, has advocated for women’s ordination. The main argument for us was not so much that we should catch up with modern society, but that the arguments against ordaining women are not persuasive. They are not well-founded biblically; they are not well-founded in theological anthropology. And it is very difficult to reconcile them with what the church asks of the world and society in terms of valuing women and equal rights for women.

It’s inconsistent for the church to promote women’s access to all positions and offices in society but then to say in the church we have special restrictions because Jesus was a man and the apostles were men. That’s a bad argument because gender is not to be understood exclusively but inclusively. Otherwise one would deny the full bodiliness of a



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Yet under Pope John Paul II—and Cardinal Ratzinger specifically reinforced this—it was “to be definitively held” by all Catholics that the church has “no authority whatsoever” to ordain women. Even the discussion was forbidden.

In reality, of course, that discussion continues even after the declaration. A discussion that is—also for moral reasons—so urgent and needed simply cannot be prevented by authoritarian decrees.


Another sign of the times is today’s ecumenism.

In Germany, as in the United States, the question of ecumenism is very important. In the past in Germany you had a Catholic village over here and a Protestant village over there. But now as these contexts are more mixed, there is a desire among people who live together to go to church together as well and

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human person if that person were not present in a specific gender. That Jesus became truly human as a man does not mean that women are therefore to be excluded from anything.

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to receive Communion together. They look to the theologians to develop the corresponding theologies to make this possible.

And because the pope in his first speech made ecumenism and Christian unity a top priority, it is quite possible that he will look for new ways here.

It is true that in Germany there is a considerable amount of skepticism with respect to the church's future because people look at Pope Benedict's record as a Catholic shepherd thus far. On the other hand, given his fascinating history as a theologian, he could very well search out new ways that have not been considered before.

Do you have this hope for other areas as well, for example, for a more balanced evaluation of contemporary society that also recognizes its positive values?

I am not good at predicting the future.

There is skepticism because people look at Pope Benedict's record thus far. But like all who welcome new beginnings, I would give hope a chance.

But like all who welcome a new beginning, I would give hope a chance. And I would say that both in the theology and in the biography of this pope there are enough intriguing aspects that could lead one to expect that he will not see everything through the lens of a negative zeitgeist. I don't see democracy and human rights negatively. And I can't imagine that in the final analysis the pope will do so either.

So I think we need to wait and see, and I would say—and this is very important to me—we also shouldn't push all responsibility onto the office of the pope. In part due to the strong

worldwide presence of the previous pope, the attention, especially of non-Catholics, is often disproportionately focused on the pope. Even Catholics are tempted to think that everything that gets better or worse in the Catholic Church is due to this one single person. I don't agree with that.

For example, I think bishops should engage in dialogue with Rome with more self-confidence. In his first days in office Pope Benedict has emphasized collegiality. This collegiality isn't just granted, it must also be claimed by the bishops. So I think bishops today should take the pope at his word and reshape the collaboration between the Petrine office and the episcopal office. I don't believe that a pope today would really want to govern "against" bishops' conferences if they simply asserted the competencies that are rightfully theirs.

Similarly I think theologians should speak out more. There is a certain sleepiness and defeatism that to some degree is, of course, caused by fear-mongering. If you want to become a professor, you need to get the mandatum or even take an oath of fidelity, and that causes fear and a certain pressure toward conformity. That's not good for the spirit. The spirit needs space and freedom to inform theology.

A few years ago here in Germany we had a very strong church reform movement. Many Catholics expressed their agreement with the movement's proposals for reform. These kinds of movements need much stronger international collaboration and solidarity, so that the so-called new ecclesial movements that are being promoted by Rome are not seen as the only Catholic movements.

I'd like to see the people in the parishes renew and strengthen their involvement and not just be defeatist and say, "I'll stay or leave depending on whether I like what I hear or not." People need to get involved to bring about change. **USC**

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