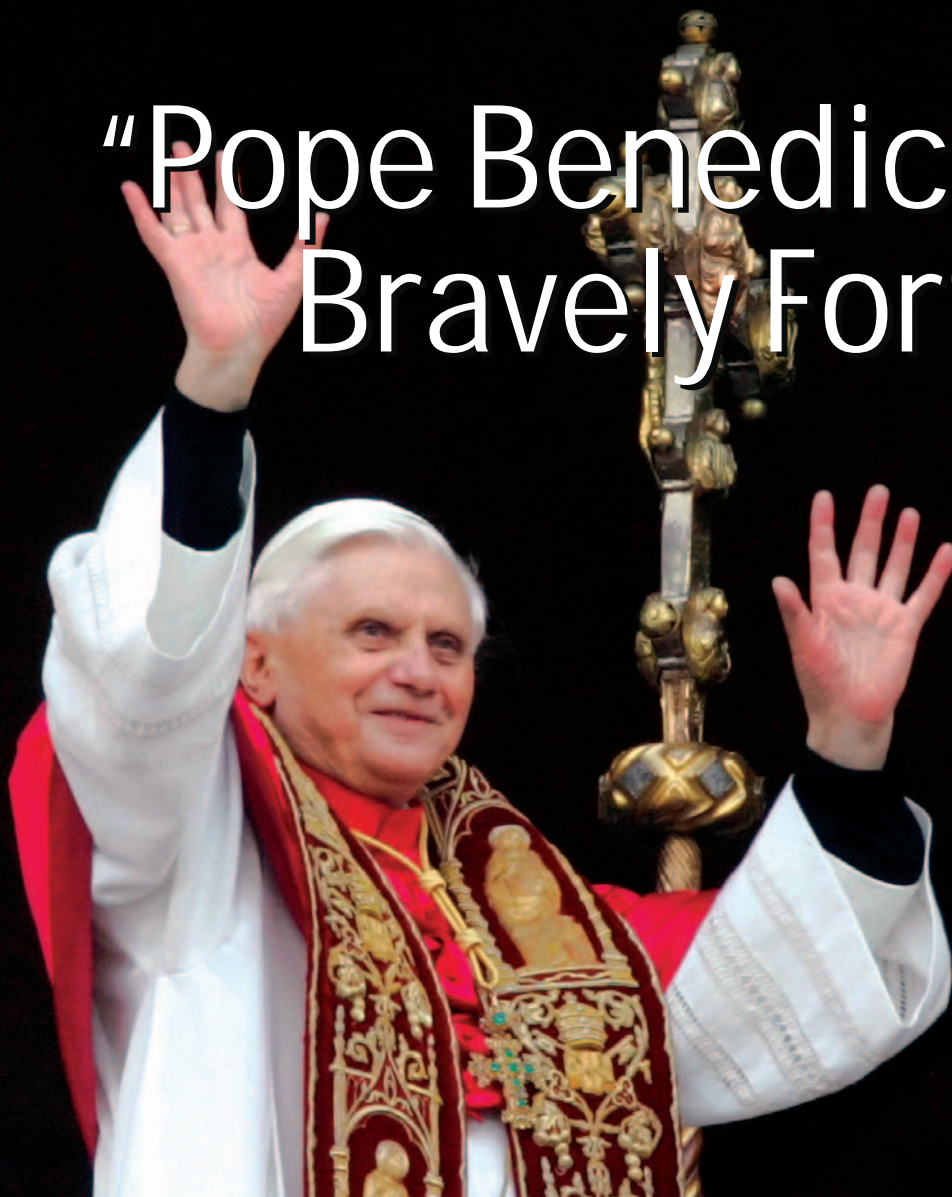


"Pope Benedict Goes Bravely Forth"

A review of his pontificate at five years.



Pope Benedict XVI upon his election.

by Jeff Ziegler

When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected the 265th pope on April 19, 2005, many reporters failed to come to terms with his theological depth. Instead, they tended to view him politically, at times employing the language used to criticize one's adversaries. In the opening sentence of its article on the papal election, the *New York Times* described the new Pope as "hard line," rather than principled, and went on to call him "divisive." "Where John Paul was charismatic and tended to soften his rigid stances with human warmth, Cardinal Ratzinger is bland in public," the *Times* added.

Such jaundiced political assessments miss the mark, for Pope Benedict "will be remembered as a theologian-pope—possibly the most able theologian ever to occupy the Chair of Peter," says Father Anthony Kelly, CSSR, a professor at Australian Catholic University and member of the International Theological Commission. "The tone of his communication is inevitably affected by an intense intellectual culture, to say nothing of his demonstrated theological competence over the last four decades. There have been innumerable learned popes, but in Benedict we have an outstanding theologian."

Addressing the cardinals who had elected him the day after his election, Pope Benedict made clear that he was

"solicitous only about the proclamation of the presence of the living Christ to the whole world." To further this goal, he set forth four major priorities that have been misunderstood or ignored by media critics who view the Church through a political lens.

These priorities were largely those of Pope John Paul, though Pope Benedict has implemented them in different ways. "There has not been dissonance in the change" in popes, "but much harmony," observes Father Antonio Castellano, SDB, a professor at the Salesian Pontifical University who serves on the International Theological Commission.

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apostolic journeys outside Italy, canonized 28 saints, preached 213 homilies, and delivered more than a thousand addresses. Through it all, his four priorities have endured.

UNITY IN THE FAITH

In a world in which 4.6 billion out of 6.8 billion people are not Christians, Pope Benedict has made clear that unity in the faith is necessary for effective evangelization.

"Just as, by the Lord's will, Peter and the other apostles form one Apostolic College, in the same way the Successor of Peter and the bishops, the successors of the apostles—the Council firmly confirmed this—must be closely united among themselves," the newly-elected Pope told the cardinal electors. "This collegial communion, despite the diversity of roles and offices of the Roman Pontiff and the bishops, is at the service of the Church and of all believers' unity in faith, on which the efficacy of evangelizing action in the contemporary world chiefly depends."

Two weeks after his inaugural Mass, the Pontiff formally took possession of the Chair of St. Peter in the Lateran Basilica. On that occasion, he said that the defense of the unity of the faith was essential to his mission as pope.

"The Chair is the symbol of the *potestas docendi*, the power to teach that is an essential part of the mandate of binding and loosing which the Lord conferred on Peter, and after him, on the Twelve," he preached. "This power of teaching frightens many people in and outside the Church.... The pope is not an absolute monarch whose thoughts and desires are law. On the contrary: the pope's ministry is a guarantee of obedience to Christ and to his Word. He must not proclaim his own ideas, but rather constantly bind himself and the Church to obedience to God's Word, in the face of every attempt to adapt it or water it down, and every form of opportunism."

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Benedict has consistently exhorted bishops and priests to preach the Gospel in all its integrity. "An incomplete Catholic teaching is a contradiction in itself and cannot be fruitful in the long term," he told the Austrian bishops during their *ad limina* visit. In early 2010, he told the bishops of Scotland that "if the Church's teaching is compromised, even slightly...then it becomes hard to defend the fullness of Catholic doctrine in an integral manner. Pastors of

the Church, therefore, must continually call the faithful to complete fidelity to the Church's Magisterium."

Pope Benedict's defense of the unity of the faith has gone beyond exhortation. Two months after his election, Pope Benedict promulgated the *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church* so that "every human being" could know the Church's teaching by

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means of a text characterized by "brevity, clarity, and comprehensiveness." He has urged parishes, catechists, families, and "every Christian" to read it so as to awaken "renewed zeal for evangelization and education in the faith."

To foster the Church's authentic teaching on the Blessed Sacrament, the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments likewise issued the *Compendium of the Eucharist* in 2009, following the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, which was published in the last year of Pope John Paul II's reign.

During the past five years, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith has also taken actions to promote unity

in the faith. It has warned against the "dangerous" errors of Jesuit Father Jon Sobrino, made clear that food and water must be provided to patients in a so-called vegetative state, and authoritatively applied Catholic teaching on bioethics to new challenges. It has definitively taught that Protestant bodies cannot properly be called "Churches" and emphasized that Catholics have the duty to evangelize non-Christians as well as "the responsibility of proclaiming in fullness the Catholic faith to other Christians." The congregation has also authoritatively interpreted the meaning of the Second Vatican Council's teaching that "the one Church of Christ...subsists in the Catholic Church" so as to combat an "erroneous" reading of the Council.

At the heart of Pope Benedict's efforts to foster unity in the faith is his insistence on the need for an "authoritative rereading" of the Second Vatican Council. "We wish to declare our firm and certain desire of continuing to put the Second Vatican Council into practice, following in the footsteps of our predecessors and in faithful continuity with the two thousand years of tradition of the Church," Pope Benedict told the cardinal electors.

Pope Benedict "attended all sessions of the Second Vatican Council as a *peritus* and has always been an enthusiast of the Council," notes Father Thomas Norris, a professor at St. Patrick's College in Maynooth, Ireland and a member of the International Theological Commission. "It may well be that Benedict will be the last pope to have been involved in Vatican II," adds Father Kelly.

Pope Benedict offered this authoritative reading of the Council during his 2005 Christmas address to the Roman Curia. "The problems in [the Council's] implementation arose from the fact that two contrary hermeneutics came face to face and quarreled with each other," he observed.

On the one hand, the pernicious "hermeneutic of discontinuity and rupture," he said, "availed itself of the sympathies of the mass media and also one trend of modern theology." Positing "a split between the pre-conciliar Church and the post-conciliar Church," this hermeneutic holds that "it would be necessary not to follow the texts of the Council but its spirit. In this way, obviously, a vast margin was left open for the question of how this spirit should subsequently be defined and room was

consequently made for every whim.”

On the other hand, the “hermeneutic of reform” has been characterized by a dynamic fidelity in which the deposit of faith is presented in new ways. “Wherever this interpretation guided the implementation of the Council, new life developed and new fruit ripened.”

The Pontiff distinguished between principles and the Church’s application of those principles, an application that is contingent upon changing historical realities. As these realities change, the application of the principles may change as well. Much as St. Thomas Aquinas “mediated the new encounter between faith and Aristotelian philosophy” in the 13th century, “the Council had to determine in a new way the relationship between the Church and the modern era,” Pope Benedict said as he defended the Council’s necessity.

In *Caritas in Veritate*, his 2009 encyclical on integral human development, Pope Benedict sought to foster the unity of the faith in other ways. Noting that “the Church forcefully maintains [the] link between life ethics and social ethics,” he taught that a commitment to Catholic teaching on abortion and contraception is necessary for an authentic vision of social justice. Echoing his 2005 address to the Curia, he wrote that there are not “two typologies of social doctrine, one pre-conciliar and one post-conciliar, differing from one another: on the contrary, there is a single teaching.” To illustrate his point, he revived interest in Pope Pius XI’s teaching on subsidiarity, referring to it 12 times in his encyclical, and also cited Blessed John XXIII’s teaching on the “urgent need of a true world political authority.” At the same time, Pope Benedict paid tribute to Pope Paul VI’s postconciliar encyclical *Populorum Progressio* as the great social encyclical of our time, while continuing Pope John Paul’s emphasis on solidarity and deepening his teaching on man’s duties toward creation.

In his “authoritative rereading” of the Second Vatican Council, in his encyclicals, and in his Wednesday general audiences on the major figures of early and medieval Christianity, Pope Benedict has shown himself to be “a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old” (Matt. 13:52).


THE HOLY EUCHARIST

In addition to being a “listening pope” and a “professor pope,” Pope Benedict is a “praying pope,” observes

Dr. Thomas Söding, a professor at the Ruhr-Universität Bochum who serves on the International Theological Commission. “From the two World Youth Days in Cologne and Australia to his weekly audiences and Sunday greetings, Benedict XVI always is present as a man of spirituality.”

“Our pontificate begins with a certain significance, during the time in which the Church is living the special year dedicated to the Eucharist,” the Pontiff told the cardinal electors in 2005, referring to the Year of the Eucharist begun under his predecessor. “With a providential connection of circumstances in

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these things, is there not a certain sign that should be perceived, a sign that ought to mark the ministry to which we have been called?”

Pope Benedict presided over the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist in 2005 and issued the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* in 2007. Meditating upon the Holy Eucharist as the source and summit of the life and mission of the Church, Pope Benedict offered a profound meditation on the Church’s Eucharistic faith before discussing the liturgical rites.

“Everything related to the Eucharist should be marked by beauty. Special respect and care must also be given to the vestments, the furnishings and the sacred vessels, so that by their harmonious and orderly arrangement they will foster awe for the mystery of God, manifest the unity of the faith, and strengthen devotion,” he taught. “While respecting various styles and

different and highly praiseworthy traditions,” the Pontiff desired “that Gregorian chant be suitably esteemed and employed as the chant proper to the Roman liturgy.”

Correcting misinterpretations of the Council’s teaching on active participation, he added that an authentic understanding of active participation demands “the spirit of constant conversion which must mark the lives of all the faithful.” Like his predecessor, Pope Benedict has also taken pains to emphasize the importance of Eucharistic adoration outside of Mass.

Sacred Scripture, like the Holy Eucharist, is an integral part of the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, and Pope Benedict convoked a Synod of Bishops in 2008 to reflect upon the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church. The Pontiff’s forthcoming post-synodal apostolic exhortation will be the most significant document on Sacred Scripture since the Second Vatican Council.

Pope Benedict most profoundly influenced the Church’s liturgical life through his 2007 *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum*, which made provision for the wider celebration of the Mass, the sacraments, and the Divine Office according to liturgical books in use before the Second Vatican Council. The document’s norms allow every priest, without permission from his bishop or the Apostolic See, to celebrate private Masses using either the Roman Missal issued by Blessed John XXIII (1962) or the Roman Missal issued by Pope Paul VI (1970). In parishes where there is a “stable group of faithful who adhere to the liturgical tradition,” the document also called upon the pastor to “willingly accept” the requests of the faithful for the celebration of the extraordinary form of the Mass. In a letter to the world’s bishops issued the same day, Pope Benedict addressed the “unfounded” fear that the *motu proprio* “detracts from the authority of the Second Vatican Council” and the “quite unfounded” fear that “a wider use of the 1962 Missal would lead to disarray or even division in parish communities.”

In addition to his teaching, Pope Benedict’s personal example has also fostered a sense of the sacred within the liturgy. In early 2008, he offered a Sunday Mass *ad orientem* in the Sistine Chapel. Later that year, the master of papal liturgical ceremonies announced that those who received Holy

Communion from the Pontiff would do so kneeling, receiving the Host on the tongue.

In his address to the cardinal electors, Pope Benedict highlighted the connection between the Holy Eucharist and the priesthood—a connection brought to the fore during the Year for Priests (2009-2010). Pope Benedict's election came less than four weeks after his Good Friday *Via Crucis* meditation, in which he lamented, "How much filth there is in the Church, and even among those who, in the priesthood, ought to belong entirely to him!"

Pope Benedict has worked slowly but deliberately to clean the Church's "filth." Addressing a question "made more urgent" by clerical abuse scandals, the Congregation for Catholic Education reaffirmed that bishops "cannot admit to the seminary or to holy orders those who practice homosexuality, present deep-seated homosexual tendencies, or support the so-called 'gay culture.'" Following trials conducted by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, in which due process is given to the accused, the Pope has laicized some priests found guilty of abuse, while others have been consigned to a lifetime of

prayer and penance.

The most prominent cleric disciplined during the Pontiff's reign was Archbishop Emmanuel Milingo; in 2006 he was declared excommunicated for ordaining bishops without papal approval, and in 2009 he was laicized. In addition, two years before his death in 2008, Father Marcial Maciel, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ accused of sexual misconduct, was invited to "a reserved life of penitence and prayer, relinquishing any form of public ministry."

CHRISTIAN UNITY

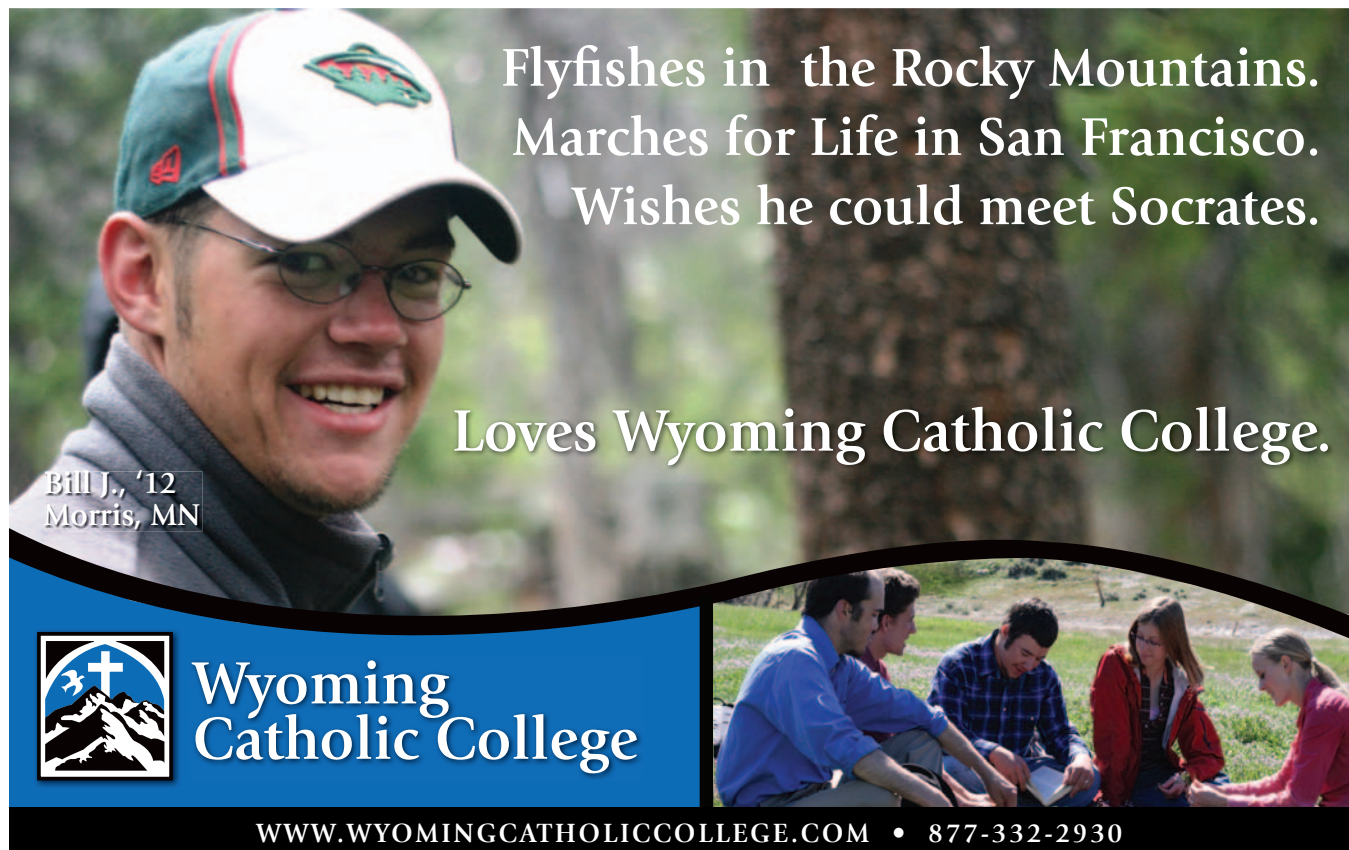
Reminding the cardinal electors that Christ prayed for the unity of his followers after the Last Supper, Pope Benedict pledged that he would promote the "principal cause of ecumenism." "Declarations of good feelings do not suffice," he said. "Substantial works are required that penetrate souls and awaken consciences, moving each to that interior conversion that is the foundation of all progress in the way of ecumenism."

In the early years of his pontificate, Pope Benedict trod in the path of his predecessors, praying and working for unity with separated Eastern and

Western Christians alike. Most notably, Pope Benedict visited the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople in 2006 and two years later invited him to address the Synod of Bishops on the Word of God.


In 2007, the Pontiff wrote a letter to the Church in China in which he urged unity among Catholics without compromising the faith. Because the situation varies in different Chinese locales, Pope Benedict has permitted underground bishops loyal to the Holy See, after consultation with their priests and faithful, to "seek recognition from civil authorities" and thus minister openly so long as scandal is avoided and recognition does "not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion." The present situation, however, is such that "almost always in the process of recognition, the intervention of certain bodies obliges the people involved to adopt attitudes, make gestures, and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their consciences as Catholics."

The most striking "substantial works" on behalf of Christian unity came in 2009. In January, the Congregation for Bishops lifted the excom-



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munications of four bishops illicitly ordained by Archbishop Marcel Lefebvre, paving the way for doctrinal talks in the hopes of fully reconciling the Society of St. Pius X to the Holy See. In November, the Pontiff issued the apostolic constitution *Anglicanorum Coetibus*, which allowed the establishment of personal ordinariates through which Anglican communities could enter the Church corporately while retaining aspects of their unique spirituality.

DIALOGUE

"Simply and lovingly we address all men," Pope Benedict told the cardinal electors, "that we may confirm to them that the Church wishes to arrange an open and sincere dialogue with them, while the true good of man and of society is sought."

Pope Benedict's dialogues are not the vapid exchange of pleasantries that has given the word a bad name. Rather, they spring from the evangelizing impulse that led the Pontiff to declare a Year of St. Paul in 2008-2009.

Father Mario Ángel Flores Ramos, a professor at the Pontifical University of Mexico and member of the International Theological Commission, says that the "most important" facet of the pontificate has been the Pope's "disposition to dialogue in all fields and contexts with the purpose of presenting a word from Catholic thought. Dialogue within the Church, ecumenical dialogue, interreligious dialogue, cultural dialogue, dialogue with the world of policy and the economy, [and] dialogue with science and the social mass media" have all marked his pontificate.

Yet as the Pope engages in dialogue, "the voice of a German professor comes through, insisting even in contexts which are of their nature never entirely clear—such as interfaith dialogue and even ecumenism—that the essential Christian truths be clearly expounded," Father Kelly explains. "One detects in him an emphasis on the need for a new integration of Christian and intellectual positions at a time when pluralism reigns, and the Church is tolerated only as a force of social cohesion and support."

"The first three encyclicals are strong evidence of his accurate discernment of the greatest spiritual needs of today," adds Father Kelly. "*Deus Caritas Est* connects love and eros; *Spe Salvi* proposes the reasons

for hope that can open up confidence in the future; *Caritas in Veritate* has addressed the topic of world economic recession with the wisdom of developing Catholic social doctrine." The encyclicals, observes Dr. Söding, not only contain "Christian authors and self-referential Church documents" but also engage "ancient and modern philosophers, especially critics of the Church and Christianity."

Pope Benedict has placed special emphasis on dialogue with secular Europe and with Islam's 1.4 billion adherents.

In his first general audience, the newly-elected Pope said he chose the name Benedict "in order to create a spiritual bond with Benedict XV, who steered the Church through the period of turmoil caused by the First World War." In his first encyclical, Benedict XV lamented "the spectacle presented by Europe, nay, by the whole world, perhaps the saddest and most mournful spectacle of which there is any record."

In similar terms, Benedict XVI has lamented the disappearance of Europe through contraception. "The problem of Europe, which it seems no longer wants to have children, [has] penetrated my soul," he said in 2006.

To foreigners this Europe seems to be tired, indeed, it seems to be wishing to take its leave of history.... Contemporary man is insecure about the future. Is it permissible to send someone into this uncertain future? In short, is it a good thing to be a person? This deep lack of self assurance—plus the wish to have one's whole life for oneself—is perhaps the deepest reason why the risk of having children appears to many to be almost unsustainable.... Unless we learn anew the foundations of life—unless we discover in a new way the certainty of faith—it will be less and less possible for us to entrust to others the gift of life and the task of an unknown future.

To further his dialogue with Western secularism, the Pope has called attention to the link between natural ecology and moral ecology. Referring five times over the course of his pontificate to the "book of nature," he noted in 2008 that the Church

must not only defend earth, water, and air as gifts of creation belonging to all. She must also protect

man from self-destruction. What is needed is something like a human ecology, correctly understood. If the Church speaks of the nature of the human being as man and woman, and demands that this order of creation be respected, this is not some antiquated metaphysics. What is involved here is faith in the Creator and a readiness to listen to the "language" of creation.... Rain forests deserve indeed to be protected, but no less so does man, as a creature having an innate "message" which does not contradict our freedom, but is instead its very premise.

Throughout his pontificate, Pope Benedict has called upon Christians and Muslims to confront Western secularism by cultivating a life of reason informed by faith. "My visit to Turkey afforded me the opportunity to show also publicly my respect for the Islamic religion," he said in 2006. "In a dialogue to be intensified with Islam, we must bear in mind the fact that the Muslim world today is finding itself faced with an urgent task" of welcoming "the true conquests of the Enlightenment, human rights, and especially the freedom of faith and its practice."

This "urgent task" became particularly apparent in the wake of the Pope's September 2006 Regensburg address. After he quoted a Byzantine emperor who referred negatively to Islam—Constantinople was under siege at the time—numerous Muslim governments voiced outrage, and a nun was gunned down in Somalia. Nonetheless, "the Regensburg drama only served to advance the dialogue with the Muslim peoples," says Father Norris, and annual talks ensued between the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Academy for Islamic Research of al-Azhar (Cairo).

The honesty of Pope Benedict's dialogue with Islam led the *New York Daily News* to editorialize "Pope Benedict goes bravely forth"—an apt description of his entire pontificate. ■

JEFF ZIEGLER writes from North Carolina.