

New book confirms: Benedict XVI is his own best spokesperson

John L. Allen Jr. | Mar. 10, 2011 NCR Today

ANALYSIS

One keen irony about the papacy of Benedict XVI is that while the Vatican regime over which he presides has sometimes come off as ham-fisted in terms of public relations, the pope himself is almost universally acknowledged as a gifted communicator.

A veteran theologian and teacher, Benedict can express complex theological ideas in crystalline sentences that don't require a Ph.D. to grasp, and he has a knack for phrasing the Christian message in positive terms -- what I've called his "Affirmative Orthodoxy."

In the old days, a pope would say or do something controversial, and then his aides would smooth things over. More recently, it's actually been the pope who gets the Vatican back "on message" after someone else has put his foot in his mouth. (This, by the way, should not be taken as a criticism of Benedict's official spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, who does a heroic job under the circumstances.)

We've had another example of that dynamic in recent days with the release of volume two of Benedict's book *Jesus of Nazareth* (published in the United States by Ignatius Press.)

Excerpts released last week earned Benedict XVI positive ink for his acknowledgment that "the Jews" are not responsible for the death of Christ. As of today, the full text of *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week* is available, and it's likely to cement the impression that Benedict XVI is his own best spokesperson.

In terms of news value, perhaps the biggest flash is another papal olive branch to Judaism: Not only should Christians not blame Jews for the death of Jesus, Benedict says, but Christians also shouldn't be trying to convert them.

The book is drawing positive reviews not just from Catholics, but Protestants and Jews as well.

In a conference call with reporters organized by Ignatius Press, Protestant Biblical scholar Craig Evans called the second volume of *Jesus of Nazareth* "a remarkable achievement" and "the best book on Jesus I've read in many years."

Rabbi Jacob Neusner, a prolific Jewish writer who's engaged in scholarly exchange with the pope over a quarter-century, said Benedict has "accomplished something no one else has achieved in the modern study of scripture" -- demonstrating how the results of historical and scientific study can be blended with deep faith.

In that sense, Neusner said, the method underlying *Jesus of Nazareth* could be of use to Jews and Muslims in the way they approach their own scriptures and sacred figures, such as Moses and Muhammad, "transcending the limits that modern historical study places on theological affirmation."

Biblical scholars will have to parse the fine points of Benedict's exegesis, and no doubt there will be some

debate. Benjamin Witherington of Asbury Theological Seminary, for example, has already noted that Benedict's references tend to be a bit dated -- he engages writers from the first half of the 20th century more than from the last thirty years. (Though as Witherington said, "I realize he's been a little busy for the last thirty years.")

Beyond the pope's comments on Judaism, the following represent a sampling of other interesting points from *Jesus of Nazareth: Holy Week*.

Ecumenism

Commenting on Jesus' prayer in the Gospel of John that "they may all be one," Benedict XVI insists on continuing the quest for "visible unity" among the divided branches of the Christian family.

"The struggle for the visible unity of the disciples of Jesus Christ remains an urgent task for Christians of all times and places," Benedict writes.

"The invisible unity of the "community" is not sufficient," he writes. "Unity must be visible, it must be recognizable as something that does not exist elsewhere in the world; as something that is inexplicable on the basis of mankind's own efforts and that therefore makes visible the workings of a higher power."

There are at least two ways to read those lines, one of which could be seen as a challenge to other Christians, and the other as a plea not to give up ecumenical hope.

Benedict's emphasis on the essentially "visible" character of Christian unity could be seen as an indirect rebuke to some Protestant understandings of the church, which tend to downplay institutions -- perhaps especially the hierarchical structures associated with Roman Catholicism.

Jesuit Fr. Joseph Fessio, a former student of Benedict XVI and the head of Ignatius Press, said that's how he read the text, suggesting that Benedict is "using a scalpel that's very sharp" in the way he subtly suggests that structures and institutions are essential.

On the other hand, Benedict's words also could be read more simply, as an invitation not to throw in the towel on overcoming the various schisms and fractures which have marked Christian history. In a time of what many refer to as an ecumenical "winter," in which hopes for structural unity seem to have dimmed, that kind of papal fervor has value.

In addition, some Protestants say the pope's keen interest in the Bible, and the way he approaches it, itself represents a promising ecumenical opening.

"I was astonished at how Protestant and Evangelical he sounds," Evan said. "I wouldn't hesitate to give this book to my students, and if it didn't say "Pope Benedict" on the cover, they might not even know it's not a Protestant book."

For Many/For All

Few questions of liturgical translation have been as contentious in recent years as the best way to render the Latin phrase *pro multis* in the words of consecration during the Mass. It occurs when the priest consecrates the wine, and in the present English translation, it's translated as follows: "It will be shed for you and for all so that sins may be forgiven."

Critics have long insisted that not only does *multis* in Latin clearly mean "many," not "all," but translating it as "many" is also theologically inaccurate, conveying the impression that everybody is saved regardless of their relationship with Christ and the church. Defenders insist that rendering it as "many" rather than "all" artificially

truncates the scope of Christ's mission, which is universal.

Because the critics often tend to be theologically conservative, and the defenders more liberal, the *pro multis* controversy easily gets swept up into the broader left/right tensions in the church. (It doesn't help that the standard authority for the "all" position was a Lutheran scholar, Joachim Jeremias.)

The new English translation of the Missal uses "for many," in accord with a 2006 Vatican directive.

In his book, Benedict briefly sketches the history of the debate during the 20th century, which has often pivoted on what the word "many" meant in the Old Testament, especially in the prophet Isaiah. He concludes that from a purely linguistic point of view, the modern word "many" is the correct translation.

Yet Benedict also suggests that decision has to be distinguished from the theological significance Christians attach to death of Jesus on the Cross.

"If Isaiah used the word "many" to refer essentially to the totality of Israel," he writes, "then as the church responds in faith to Jesus' new use of the word, it becomes increasingly clear that he did indeed die for all."

In other words, Benedict XVI effectively offers a "both/and" solution to the longstanding *pro multis* debate: "many" is the right translation, but "all" is a legitimate theological interpretation.

Church and State

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Although Catholicism long upheld a tight union between throne and altar, the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) broke that mold in its declaration on religious freedom. Benedict XVI has become a great apostle of what he calls "healthy secularism," borrowing the term from French President Nicolas Sarkozy, meaning a form of church/state separation that implies freedom for, not freedom from, religion.

Benedict indirectly returns to that theme in Jesus of Nazareth, arguing that the "essence" of the new path proposed by Jesus was "a separation of the religious from the political."

That idea, Benedict said, "changed the world."

"In his teaching and his whole ministry, Jesus had inaugurated a non-political Messianic kingdom and had begun to detach these two hitherto inseparable realities from one another." Part of the core of Jesus' message, Benedict writes, was the separation of "politics from faith, of God's people from politics."

Though those broad principles obviously leave tremendous scope for fleshing out the proper relationship between church and state, they at least confirm that Benedict's broad support for "healthy secularism" remains undimmed. It's an especially critical point for Catholics in the Middle East today, who are trying to help their Muslim neighbors see that a civil state can be both democratic and respectful of religion.

Women in the Church

Benedict makes a distinction toward the end of the book between two different ways in the New Testament of talking about the resurrection of Jesus and its significance, what he calls the "confessional tradition" and the "narrative tradition." The former refers to short creedal formula, such as those found in the letters of Paul, while the latter are expressed in the post-resurrection stories in the synoptic gospels.

One interesting difference between the two, Benedict notes, is that all the witnesses cited in the confessional tradition are men, but in the narrative accounts women take precedence.

By way of explanation, Benedict says the narrative accounts do not feel bound by the ?juridical structure? of the Jewish tradition, in which only men could testify in court, but instead ?communicate the whole breadth of the resurrection experience.?

The pope applies that distinction to today?s church.

The church?s juridical structure is founded on Peter and the Eleven,? he writes, ?but in the day-to-day life of the Church it is the women who are constantly opening the door to the Lord and accompanying him to the Cross, and so it is they who come to experience the risen one.?

The practical translation of that point into church politics likely amounts to the following: No change on ordination, but a commitment to promoting women in all the roles within Catholicism that don?t require a Roman collar.

For more analysis of Pope Benedict's newest book, see John Allen's story: [Church should not pursue conversion of Jews, pope says](#) [1]

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