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The pope's Schulerkreis takes on 'Creation and Evolution'

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 11, 2006 All Things Catholic

Pope Benedict XVI's long-awaited interview with German television was broadcast the evening of Saturday, August 13.

Leaders generally can't afford the luxury of "thinking out loud," since anything they say is subject to scrutiny and, often enough, misunderstanding. For creative minds accustomed to examining issues from a variety of perspectives before reaching conclusions, it's therefore crucial to carve out a few safety zones where ideas can be tossed around freely.

In that spirit, Pope Benedict XVI has his own "kitchen cabinets," and perhaps his favorite is a group of former doctoral students with whom he meets each year, known in German as his *Schülerkreis*.

In German academic life, the bonds between a *Doktorvater* and his disciples have always been strong, but even by that standard Joseph Ratzinger seems to inspire a special loyalty among those who studied under him. After Pope Paul VI called him out of the academy in 1977 by naming him Archbishop of Munich-Freising, Ratzinger and his students adopted the custom of meeting over a weekend once a year, in a cross between a retreat and an academic seminar.

You can take the professor out of the classroom, but you can't take the classroom out of the professor.

When Ratzinger was elected as Benedict XVI, his students feared the new pope's calendar would render these gatherings impossible. In fact, however, Benedict appears to savor them now more than ever. Two days after the pope's April 24 installation Mass, he met with 72-year-old German Salvatorian Fr. Stephan Horn, the informal chair of the *Schülerkreis*, to tell him he wanted the meetings to go forward. In late August 2005, the group assembled at Castegandolfo, where the pope has his summer residence, for a two-day meeting.

They will do so again Sept. 1-3 of this year.

If these sessions were merely a case of Benedict catching up with old friends, it would perhaps be noteworthy only as a color story about how the pope spends his "down time." In fact, however, the *Schülerkreis* has become an opportunity for Benedict to gather thoughts on some of the most important issues on his docket.

Last year, the group discussed God in Islam. Though these are closed-door events, leaks indicated that Benedict XVI expressed reservations about the capacity of Islam to adapt to pluralistic Western cultures, given that the Koran is regarded by Muslims as the literal word of Allah and hence less amenable to interpretation than the Christian Bible.

This year, the theme for the *Schülerkreis*'s Sept. 1-3 meeting is an equally explosive subject -- "Creation and Evolution."

Understanding who takes part in these gatherings, and what kind of thinking they represent, is fast becoming an important "hermeneutical key" in interpreting where the pontificate of Benedict XVI may go.

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Even after John Paul II's famous 1996 statement that evolution is "more than a hypothesis," Catholic scientists and philosophers have debated the extent to which Darwinian theory is compatible with orthodox Catholicism.

Most recently, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, set off a firestorm with a July 7, 2005, op/ed piece in *The New York Times* asserting that the Catholic church cannot accept "evolution" in the sense of a philosophy that excludes intelligent design in nature. The article triggered a fierce reaction from many Catholic scientists and theologians, who felt the cardinal was blurring scientific and theological arguments, and inadvertently aligning himself with anti-evolution activists in the States. It didn't help matters that Schönborn's piece in *The Times* was placed with the help of a PR firm retained by the Discovery Institute, a Seattle-based institute which supports "intelligent design."

Four speakers have been invited to lead the discussion of evolution during this year's gathering of the *Schülerkreis*.

One will be Schönborn himself, a longtime member of the group. (In fact, Schönborn was not really a graduate student of Ratzinger, spending just a year in Regensburg with him in the late 1970s doing post-doctoral work. Yet Schönborn has always been considered part of the *Schülerkreis*). The other three are: Jesuit Fr. Paul Erbrich, emeritus professor of natural philosophy from the University of Munich; Professor Robert Spaemann, a political philosopher; and Professor Peter Schuster, President of the Austrian Academy of Sciences.

Given the background of these speakers, it's reasonable to expect two things from the discussion:

- Debate over how convincing the scientific evidence for the theory of evolution really is;
- Consensus that whatever its scientific merits, "evolution" as a philosophical stance which excludes divine causality in nature (sometimes dubbed "evolution*ism*") is incompatible with Christianity.

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Evolution as Science

Doubts about the scientific case for evolution may come from Erbrich, whose work is frequently cited by "intelligent design" advocates.

Perhaps the most famous Achilles' heel in Darwin's theory was the lack of fossil records to demonstrate a smooth progression of intermediate forms between one species and the next. Darwin himself said future discoveries should plug the gap, but that has not happened. Experts, however, sometimes suggest that where the fossil record has failed, molecular biology has triumphed. At the molecular level, they argue, one finds precisely the relatively smooth transitions that evolution predicts.

In an influential 1985 essay, however, Erbrich poked holes in that claim. Proteins with essentially the same structure and function, he said, are found even in very distantly related species. To explain this, evolutionary theorists would have to posit that essentially the same proteins developed two or more times, independently of one another, and both by chance.

"The probability ... of the convergent evolution of two proteins with approximately the same structure and

function is too low to be plausible, even when all possible circumstances are present which seem to heighten the likelihood of such a convergence," Erbrich wrote.

From there, Erbrich drew a broader conclusion.

"Why does the scientific theory of evolution hold on to the concept of chance to the degree it does?" he asked. "I suspect it is the fact that there is no alternative whatsoever which could explain the fact of universal evolution, at least in principle, and be formulated within the framework of natural science. If no alternative should be forthcoming, if chance remains overtaxed, then the conclusion seems inevitable that evolution and therefore living beings cannot be grasped by natural science to the same extent as non-living things -- not because organisms are so complex, but because the explaining mechanism is fundamentally inadequate."

On the other hand, the *Schülerkreis* will likely hear a more positive treatment of evolutionary theory from Schuster, a distinguished expert on molecular biology.

Schuster, who turned 65 this year, is not much for sound-bite science. Heres a typically sexy essay title: "Bistability of Harmonically Forced Relaxation Oscillations." Broadly speaking, however, Schuster accepts evolution as a valid scientific hypothesis, and has little patience for ideological opposition to it.

He had this to say, for example, about the creationist movement in a 2004 essay titled From Belief to Facts in Evolutionary Theory:

The United States [has seen] an unfruitful and special development that is not shared by Western Europe , Schuster wrote. Almost militant opponents of the idea of evolution in the American society make the request that a Science of Creation in the spirit of the nineteenth century is taught simultaneously with evolutionary biology at school. Schuster cited a critical appraisal of creationism published by the National Academy of Sciences in the United States in 1999.

Following Schönborns *New York Times* piece, Schuster wrote a critical response, to appear in the journal *Complexities*. His blunt conclusion:

"Darwinian evolution ? is an empirical scientific fact, a fact in the same class with the Copernican solar system, Newtonian mechanics, Einstein's universe or the world of quantum mechanics, and is neither one hypothesis among others, nor an ideology. The interpretation of observations in biology, as we understand it today, does not need a plan, nor does it provide obvious hints for an active designer."

In an Aug. 11 interview with *NCR*, Schuster said it was Schönborn who asked him to take part in the Castelgandolfo seminar.

"I asked Schönborn, 'Why me?' " Schuster said by phone from Vienna. "The cardinal said he had discussed it with the pope, and the pope wanted a scientist who in no way can be suspected of being a creationist."

At the same time, Schuster is not a Darwinian dogmatist, saying that the mechanism of natural selection is only one of several principles that determine the course of biological evolution, and macroscopic evolution is seen now as an exceedingly complex overlay of many influences.

Evolution as Philosophy

While a discussion of intermediate forms and evolutionary leaps is interesting, most observers regard it as a debate for scientists, not theologians or church authorities. It's the philosophical misuse of evolution with which the church is most concerned.

What this amounts to is a distinction, which unfortunately comes more naturally in German than in English, between evolution and "evolution*ism*" -- between a scientific hypothesis, and a philosophical system.

That seemed to be the drift of an exchange I had with Schönborn last August, in the wake of *The New York Times* piece.

"For Catholic thinking," Schönborn told me, "it was clear from Pius XII's encyclical, *Humani generis*, that evolutionary theory can be valid to understand certain mechanisms, but it can never be seen or accepted as a holistic model to explain the existence of life."

That seems close to Robert Spaemann's approach as well.

In 1988, Spaemann published a book called *Evolutionismus und Christentum*, in which he laid out what he sees as the contradictions between Christianity and "evolutionism" considered as a philosophical theory.

Christianity, Spaemann argues, rests on the philosophical assumption of stably existing entities with fixed natures -- most importantly, human nature created in the image of God. "Evolutionism," he says, instead posits that everything is in flux, so the only permanent reality is change, thereby undercutting the basis for belief in a universal human nature.

Over the years, Spaemann (who, at 79, is the same age as the pope) has put his money where his mouth is.

In 1991, he was active in organizing opposition to a series of lectures in Germany by the Australian ethicist and animal rights activist Peter Singer, whom some critics have accused of blurring the metaphysical distinction between human beings and the rest of the natural world. Spaemann, who is a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life, circulated a "Kinsauer Manifesto," which endorsed efforts to disrupt Singer's appearances, and expressed opposition to both abortion and euthanasia.

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Horn has told the German press that Benedict is keen on the need for science and faith to be in dialogue, and that he ultimately takes a positive view of evolution.

"By no means is the Pope tending towards Creationism," Horn said. "Rather he is convinced that creation and evolution can go together."

Horn said that Benedict certainly believes that human beings owe their existence "to God's creative 'Yes,'" but, Horn said, the pope also regards what this means in detail as something to be worked out in dialogue with natural scientists.

Among the members of the *Schülerkreis* are three Americans: Jesuit Fr. Joseph Fessio, Provost of Ave Maria University in Naples, Florida; Social Service Sr. Maria Lugosi of Buffalo, New York; and Fr. Antoine Saroyan of St. Gregory the Illuminator Church, an Armenian Catholic parish, in Glendale, California.

The informal secretary of the group is lay German theologian Siegfried Wiedenhofer, a former Ratzinger student who today serves as professor of systematic theology at the Johan Wolfgang Goethe University in Frankfurt.

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On Aug. 10, I had a brief interview with Horn about the *Schülerkreis*. It's worth noting that we used Italian, so

the quotes below represent my translation of his remarks.

What significance do these events have for you?
In my opinion, there are three principal dimensions.

In the first place, we try to come together with the same spirit we had when we first met during the time of our studies. We have theological discussions, of course, but these are always linked with a spiritual element -- the Holy Mass, or the Prayer of the Hours, or Vespers.

As the years have gone on, we've deepened our relationships among ourselves, who were students with J. Ratzinger at different times -- in Bonn, or Münster, or Tübingen, or Regensburg. We've shared experiences, academic studies, and also our thoughts.

We've also sought out dialogue with other professors and their thinking. Sometimes, therefore, the meetings have had an ecumenical character.

In so far as you can say, what's the significance for the pope?
I think our maestro is always happy to meet his students from the past, in the sense I've just described. Certainly, the chance to meet other theologians and philosophers is always interesting for him. I remember, for example, a very moving ecumenical exchange with Metropolitan Damaskinos (Papandreou), the Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch in Switzerland.

How are the themes chosen, such as "Islam" last year and "Creation and Evolution" this year?
In these two years, the themes were chosen as they always have been. The group gets together towards the end of each meeting to discuss possible themes for next year. We try to come to consensus on a few preferred themes, as well as names of possible speakers for each theme. In the end, we present our preferences to our maestro, and naturally we leave the final decision to him.

How are the speakers chosen?
In the case of the theme "Creation and Evolution," we selected two principal speakers: Professor Peter Schuster and Cardinal Schönborn. But given the vastness and the complexity of the theme, it seemed useful to have two other experts with us as participants (*Gesprächspartner*), a philosopher (Professor Spaemann) and a scientist (Fr. Erbrich).

Have texts from the presentations ever been published?
No.

In a recent interview with a German newspaper, you said that Pope Benedict believes creation and evolution can be reconciled. Can you say more?
Already in 1968, then-Professor Ratzinger wrote on the subject *"Schöpfungslaube und Evolutionstheorie"* ("Belief in Creation and the Theory of Evolution"), which was republished in 1973 in the book *Dogma und Verkündigung*. He discussed the consequences for the faith of an evolutionary view of the world. He offered the response that the theory of evolution neither destroys the faith nor confirms it, but rather presents it with a challenge. Later on, he underlined that the theory of evolution sometimes has a tendency to insist on being a full explanation of the totality of existence, which makes both metaphysics and God superfluous. Hence for him what's needed is a calm approach on both sides. You can also consult the book *Glaube-Wahrheit-Toleranz*, published by Herder in 2003, p. 143.

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