

# BENEDICT'S VISION FOR... EUROPE

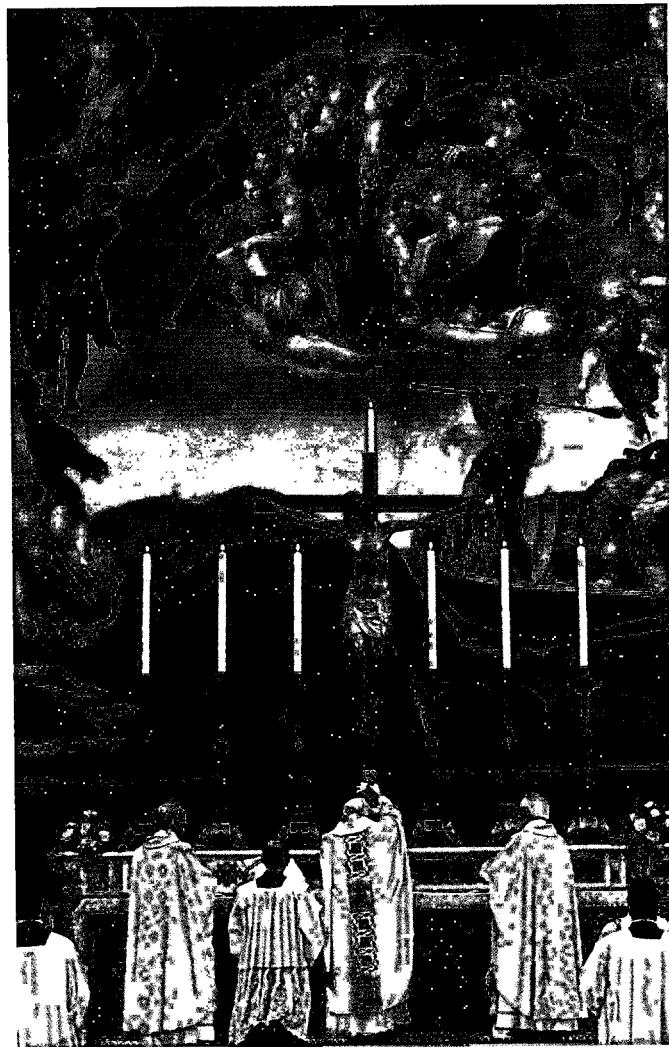
Europe is, he said, the site of the "profound encounter between faith and reason"

■ BY THOMAS STORCK

It is now five years since Benedict XVI announced his resignation of the papal office, a resignation that seems only more inexplicable — and more lamentable — with the passage of time. Doubtless it will be for historians of the future to seek any kind of adequate explanation of the motives which led to such a fateful step, since at present there is little more than unfruitful journalistic speculation on those motives. But if we can say little with certainty about Benedict's resignation, we can begin, even after a mere five years, to make some sound historical judgments on the achievements and notable features of his reign.

One achievement which I must mention, however briefly, is his *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* of 2007, on the traditional Latin liturgy or extraordinary form of the Roman rite, which provided that "it is licit to celebrate the Sacrifice of the Mass in accordance with the typical edition of the Roman Missal promulgated by Blessed John XXIII in 1962 and never abrogated, as the extraordinary form of the Liturgy of the Church." What lasting effects this will have on the life of the Church cannot yet be known, but it surely gives much hope to those who believe that the liturgical alterations of 1970, despite the best intentions of Paul VI, have not been propitious for the Church, and that any steps toward a recovery of Catholic vitality must include an increasing use of the traditional liturgy.

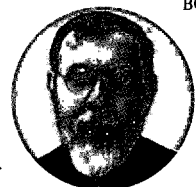
Benedict's efforts on behalf of the Church were hardly limited to the liturgy. One of the most interesting, because it showed his profound understanding of world historical trends, was Benedict's concern



Pope Benedict XVI celebrates baptisms in the Sistine Chapel, January 13, 2008 in Vatican City. In the background may be seen the fresco of Michelangelo *The Last Judgement* (Grzegorz Galazka)

for Europe. This concern long predated his elevation to the papacy. For example, in 1991 he published a book, later translated into English as *A Turning Point for Europe?*, in which he pondered the various social and intellectual forces which have brought Europe to her present crisis.

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Another notable expression of his concern was his September 12, 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg on the de-Hellenization of European thought. He here gets to the heart of the European, or rather Greek, impact on the development of Catholic theology, and of Catholic thought in general. He interprets St. Paul's dream of the Macedonian beckoning him to come over from Asia and help them (Acts 16:6-10), "as a 'distillation' of the intrinsic necessity of a rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek inquiry." The God of one people, Israel, was now "proclaimed as the God of heaven and earth and described in a simple formula which echoes the words uttered at the burning bush: 'I am.'" But without Greek reason, or *logos*, the universalizing of the ancient Israelite religion would have been much more difficult. Benedict continued: "This inner rapprochement between biblical faith and Greek philosophical inquiry was an event of decisive importance not only from the standpoint of the history of religions, but also from that of world history — it is an event which concerns us even today. Given this convergence, it is not surprising that Christianity, despite its origins and some significant developments in the East, finally took on its historically decisive character in Europe."

In other words, in the development of the Faith, Europe was more than simply a convenient geographical location in which Catholics could dwell. The bringing of the Gospel to Greece, hence to Europe as a whole, brought about a "profound encounter of faith and reason... an encounter between genuine enlightenment and reli-

## CONTRIBUTIONS

gion." Thus Europe took on a role in the articulation of the Church's Faith, a role that Pope Benedict insists is foundational for our entire understanding of God and his relations with his creation.

Benedict XVI continued his efforts on behalf of Europe with the establishment of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization. In the homily which he gave in June 2010 announcing its inauguration, he noted the existence of "regions of the world that are still awaiting a first evangelization," but he chose to concentrate the work of this body on those areas "in which, in recent centuries...the secularization process has produced a serious crisis of the meaning of the Christian faith and of belonging to the Church." Thus the new council would have as its

role, which is dying both physically and morally. But I do not think this is entirely correct.

I say this not, of course, because the souls of Europeans are any more important than the souls of Africans or Asians, or because I consider the growth of the Church in those latter areas as historically insignificant. By no means. But there are at least two reasons why the Church not only cannot abandon Europe and her daughter cultures of the Americas, but also why it is not absurd to focus resources there. In the first place, European thought is still immensely important all over the world. The curricula of non-Western universities, for example, is heavily influenced by the West, and sometimes their courses focus more

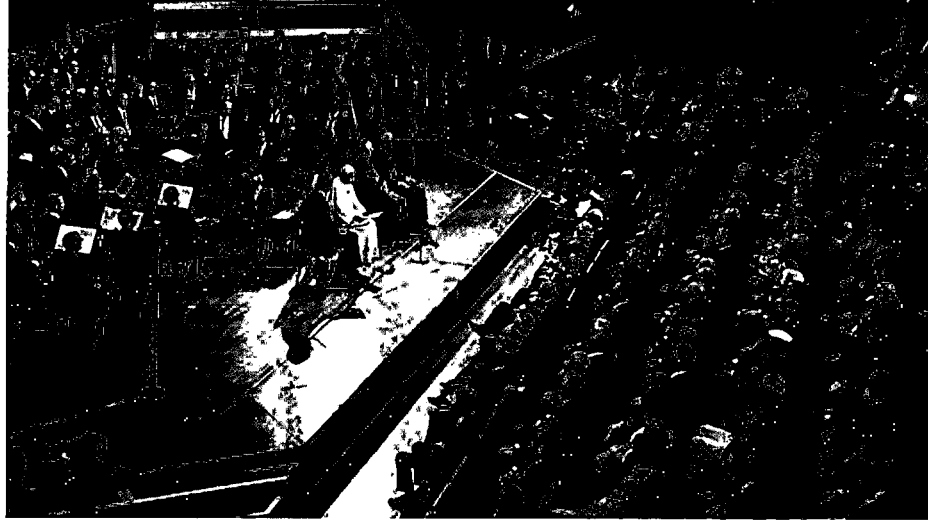
were we to say that Catholic life and thought lack the vitality and attractiveness to retain the allegiance of those lands which first received the Gospel. It would be the admission of defeat were we to acquiesce in a notion of cultural or intellectual development in which peoples, as they progress, must abandon their Catholic roots and embrace secularism. Although it is true that the New Testament speaks of a massive falling away from faith in the latter days, still, we can by no means assume that we have already reached those latter days, nor, even if we have, can we simply throw up our hands and concede that the Church is unable to hold on to her own, that the cultural penetration which her original evangelization achieved is to be simply abandoned as impossible to preserve. Christianity is a historical religion, one not only grounded in specific events which occurred in time, but one whose subsequent development has been providentially overseen. Thus Pope Benedict's concern for those places "where the first proclamation of the faith has already resonated and where Churches with an ancient foundation exist" was nothing other than a concern for the foundations of the Faith and the intellectual and spiritual goods which the Church obtained and used in her history.

Benedict XVI meditated profoundly on the meaning of Europe, both before and after his election as Pope. No doubt part of that stemmed from his personal affection for the continent in which he was born. But much more important was his insight that, if we try to look at historical developments in the broadest sense, if we try to look beyond the parochial concerns of our own time, the reconversion of Europe is of immense importance for the health of the Church and thus of the entire world. Europeans are no more important as persons than any other people.

But Europe was that unique place in which a fusion of the original Hebrew revelation with Greek devotion to reason allowed the Catholic faith to come to a mature expression with lasting consequences and meaning for all mankind.

The Church of the future, whatever turn events might take, cannot forget the insights that Benedict had without forgetting a major part of the foundations upon which the Faith rests. ○

Pope Benedict XVI lectures on faith and reason at the University of Regensburg in Germany on September 12, 2006. A quotation from a Byzantine emperor that the Pope used in this talk provoked outrage in the Muslim world. The Pope said on September 17 that he was "deeply sorry" that Muslims were offended by the quotation he used (CNS photo/Catholic Press Photo, L'Osservatore Romano)



"principal task...to promote a renewed evangelization in the countries where the first proclamation of the faith has already resonated and where Churches with an ancient foundation exist but are experiencing the progressive secularization of society..." Was this a misuse of the resources of the Church?

It has been argued that since the Church is growing in Africa and other parts of the non-Western world, such as Korea, it would be sensible to focus greater resources in those areas, where, so to speak, one may get a greater "bang for the buck." If there is to be a new Christendom, according to this view, it will be in Africa or other such places, not in Eu-

rope on European thought and history than on their own. Because of its Christian formation, Europe is inherently missionary — for good or for evil. In the book already mentioned, *A Turning Point for Europe?*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger quotes the German philosopher Robert Spaemann, "If Europe does not export its faith... then it inevitably exports its lack of faith, that is, the conviction that there is no truth and no justice and that the good does not exist."

In the second place, since Europe was the continent where the Church and her culture came to maturity, it surely is reasonable to seek to regain that continent for the Church. Indeed, it would be odd