



## BENEDICT XVI AND GOD

■ BY EMILY RIELLEY

# "WE LOVE GOD IN ALL THAT WE LOVE"

The Pope has a very distinctive theological viewpoint. The editor of the English edition of *Communio* magazine, a journal of theology, analyzes Benedict's theological system

David Schindler is Edouard Cardinal Gagnon Professor of Fundamental Theology and Provost-Dean of the John Paul II Pontifical Institute for Studies on Marriage and Family at The Catholic University of America, in Washington, D.C. He is also editor of the English-language edition of *Communio: International Catholic Review*, a theological journal founded in 1972 by Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac, among others. There are 15 different national editions of *Communio*, whose editors meet biannually to plan their common work.

This interview has a twofold goal: to bring the insights of a collaborator and reader of Ratzinger to bear on Pope Benedict's approach to culture in general and American culture in particular; and to present Ratzinger's approach to important questions of the day in light of the American historical experience. Following Benedict's theology, it attempts to bring to light some of the fundamental strengths and weaknesses of America and the Church in America.

**P**rofessor Schindler, you have been involved with *Communio* since the North American edition was founded. In his autobiography, *Milestones*, then-Cardinal Ratzinger described the founders' goal for *Communio* as "an international journal whose work would both be done out of the heart of communion in sacrament and faith, and also lead to its enhancement... Since the crisis in theology had emerged out of a crisis in culture, and, indeed, out of a cultural revolution, the journal had to address the cultural domain, too." What part does *Communio* play in the cultural landscape today?



David Schindler (above left), greets Pope Benedict XVI in Rome in December. Schindler is editor of *Communio* magazine, which was founded by the Pope in 1972 when he was a young priest and theologian. Opposite page, the journal's co-founders Hans Urs von Balthasar (top left) and Henri de Lubac (top right). In the lower photo, Father Ratzinger with Father Karl Rahner, S.J. Here, the cover of a *Communio* issue

DAVID L. SCHINDLER: The journal was founded most basically to recover a God-centered understanding of the Church and of the human being. And also to recover the fact that the reality of our being in the Church and the reality of our being in the world is a matter, in the deepest sense, of love.

This task of recovery is at the heart of the Second Vatican Council, and it is even more important today, I would say, than it was then.

Joseph Ratzinger had to step down from editorial work at the German edition when he moved to Rome, of course, but he continued to contribute articles. He gave an address, "*Communio: A Program*," in 1982, on the 10th anniversary of the journal's founding, which was a beautiful recapitulation of its history and mission.

This past December (2007), he invited the various national editors to hold the annual winter meeting in Rome, where he received them in the Vatican and was able to greet each one personally. On another note, he cited articles from the 2006 *Communio* issue

devoted to the Wedding at Cana in *Jesus of Nazareth*, in the section on symbols in the Gospel of John, and he says he continues to read the German edition regularly.

### How did you first meet Cardinal Ratzinger?

SCHINDLER: Through Hans Urs von Balthasar, the Swiss theologian and co-founder of *Communio*. In 1984, Balthasar was awarded the Paul VI International Prize by Pope John Paul II, who asked him to organize a conference in September 1985 on the work of Adrienne von Speyr. Ratzinger held a reception for Balthasar at Castel Gandolfo immediately following the conference, and it was at this reception that Balthasar introduced me to Ratzinger. I had been editor of the North American edition of *Communio* for three years by then.

### How would you characterize Joseph Ratzinger as a theologian?

SCHINDLER: What's characteristic is his capacity for integration. His scholarship is marked by a great integration of academic theology and spirituality — and always in a way that speaks from within the heart of our cultural problems.

A sign of this integration: when you read his homilies, they provoke you into thinking, and when you read his theology, it inclines you to pray. Simply, he does theology in the manner of the great saints and doctors of the Church — a way of doing theology that is badly needed in our time.

SCHINDLER: **The German philosopher Robert Spaemann has spoken of Benedict's theology as a retrieval, a mutual enrichment between old and new; he says Ratzinger the theologian never felt the need to reconstruct theology from the ground up via a new schema, as, for example, Karl Rahner did, because Ratzinger was too historically grounded to go that way. In what sense is Benedict retrieving something that was both already there, and, in a sense, lacking in our times?**

SCHINDLER: Newness and oldness: a beautiful point. To me, this is again the greatness of Benedict. He's simply doing what every saint and doctor of the Church has done. He has gone back to the roots of his being and of the Church's being: the Gospel. And he's done it entirely naturally, in the sense that he recovers it precisely in the context of his own historical being. That is, he recovers it while living in the 20th century and today in the face of the problems of Nazism, Communism, and liberalism.

What results is a development. So the idea that his emphasis on, say, the structure of being as centered in God and filiality were somehow recent inventions is nonsense. These things are the heart of the Gospel.

In other words, this recovery and development is what real theologians do. This is epitomized in Benedict, as Spaemann observes, and also can explain why so many theologians become very obscure: they want to be new. Benedict has no interest in being new. He has an interest in being faithful. And the creativity takes care of itself because we're historical beings. Everyone, especially the theologian, has to look at his own work in this way and to ask: What is the cause of the obscurities? There can be difficulties in someone's thought and so on, but what is remarkable in Benedict's work, and what is really one of his great gifts to the Church, is that his thought is jargon-free. And it's jargon-free because he has no interest in speculation, in the sense of

saying, let's speculate on this without regard, say, for the integrity of human life and ecclesial life. He says what he has to say to keep alive the memory of what has been given.

### Could you say something about his way of engaging people in conversation?

SCHINDLER: He's very simple and gentle, always curious about the world. Always very much full of wonder at things. He has a great capacity as a listener. If you do not interrupt him during a conversation, you can easily end up spending the entire time speaking mostly about yourself, responding to his questions about you and your work.

### How does he deal with people with whom he disagrees?

SCHINDLER: People who disagree with him are often a bit disarmed to discover how respectful he is of what they have to say. In any conversation he is concerned about the truth, but it's always clear that in defending the truth, he's defending something that is integral to the dignity of the other person. He's not defending his ego, but rather something that is greater than himself and that is necessary for the realization of the dignity of both himself and the interlocutor.

### How does Pope Benedict XVI engage the question of culture?

SCHINDLER: At the heart of his basic proposal to culture is a particular conception of dialogue. Dialogue for Benedict is something we *are* before it is something we *do*. For Benedict, human existence *is* dialogue with God, specifically, with the Creator. Relation to God lies at the core of our being as creatures and thus we implicitly invoke the question of the nature and existence of God in all of our conscious acts. As Aquinas says, we know God implicitly in all that we know, and we love God implicitly in all that we love.

Embedded within the dialogue with God is an implicit dialogue with all other creatures, relation to whom is given to us inside the relation with the Creator.

### Why is Benedict's conception of dialogue relevant to American culture, where polls indicate both a high belief in God and a widespread interest in the very question of God?

SCHINDLER: Interestingly, Benedict says the problems of the West can all be traced back to the forgetfulness of God. In what sense is that true in America? First of all, one has to recognize the sincerity of Americans; they are not cynical when they say they believe in God. The question is how that is understood.

Here, the point is that even when the relation to God is important in peoples' lives, it tends to remain fragmentary in



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nature. That is, the relation to God may be one important part of life in general, but then there is a relation to the economy, to one's profession, to one's operating in the public order, and each of these has its own logic. There's a certain purpose to the economy, making a profit and so forth; there's a certain approach to owning things, to being a homeowner; there's a certain understanding of one's profession, all given in professional schools and law schools. It is not that the relation to God has no influence, but the influence is by way of a moral inspiration. The relation to God does not provide the deepest form and end of these various activities. The logic of these other activities is established on its own, independent of and alongside the person's relation to God.

At the heart of Ratzinger's theology lies this effort to recover the "God-centeredness" of all things, to recover the true nature of the creature's relation to God. Relation to God is what is most fundamental about the creature and what forms the creature as a creature from the beginning for as long as the creature exists. What the creature is in his deepest reality is "from-God" and "for-God." This is what it means to have the structure of a "son in the Son."

**How is dialogue possible, then, with those who do not believe in God, or for whom belief in God is a matter of purely private belief? Don't we need something more, like a natural law, to dialogue with men of other beliefs?**

SCHINDLER: That's just the point. For Benedict, the question of God's existence emerges from the heart of reason and nature. This was one of the major points that was often overlooked in the Regensburg lecture, which had a double intention.

On the one hand, the point of the lecture was to initiate a dialogue with the West to show that reason opens organically to God. That means the dynamics of reason and nature themselves are violated if reason and nature are not probed all the way through to the question of their origin and end. Perhaps one can put this most sharply by recalling what Benedict has said regarding the nature of conscience, which is in every human being.

He suggests that the term "*anamnesis*," from the Greek for "memory," is more basic than the term "*synderesis*," that is, the primitive sense of right and wrong. By "*anamnesis*," he means that an implicit memory or recollection of God is

rooted in the creature's conscience. So we can't engage our own being without the implication of this memory in some way.

In his book, *Values in a Time of Upheaval*, Ratzinger states that the *anamnesis* of the Creator is "identical with the foundations of our existence." The point, in terms of dialogue, then, is to be able to show — to one who does not believe — that belief in God is not an arbitrary addition to human existence or a fragment of human life, but rather a reality that fulfills what most fundamentally defines human action and knowledge as such.

In regard to America, the burden of Benedict's proposal regarding God is twofold: First, to show that the question of God is not a matter of something that's simply beyond reason or non-rational, but is in fact necessary for the integrity of reason and nature. This being so, the second point is to show that the relation to God can never be merely a fragment. Rather, the logic of the creature has to inform every human thought and every human action from the inside. It has to inform all the other relations, for example, the economic, familial, political, and cultural relations.

One of the tasks called for here is a recovery of something that has often been lost in modern times — what Aquinas says is the natural desire to know the truth about God. The desire is not simply supernatural, although of course it is only fully realized in faith, but it is already built into nature in its created reality as such.

**But the Declaration of Independence, for example, clearly speaks about the creator and is framed in terms of men having been "created." What is missing here, in terms of the memory of God as Benedict understands it?**

SCHINDLER: A good way to respond to the issues here is in the language of rights. Typically, in our culture, the predominant understanding of rights is that they are first of all either immunities from coercion, or an entitlement. In both cases, a right is conceived as a claim that the self first has on the other. Interestingly, what flows from Benedict's understanding of creation is that human life is a gift calling forth a response of gratitude.

Much more needs to be said here, but rights emerge, in Benedict's understanding, from a context of other-centered-



Above, images from Nazi Germany and from Soviet Russia

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ness. That means, from the context of a call to respond to the other and to serve the other.

Benedict's understanding of creation warrants recognition of unconditional human rights, but notice that in his understanding of creation, rights are never first entitlements and are never first self-centered. It is a view of rights only as embedded within the call to respond to the other: what I have a right to be is what I must be to serve others in their integrity.

**What does this “other-centeredness” imply for legitimate human autonomy — that is, freedom?**

SCHINDLER: This is a difficult question. If there's one thing that has characterized Ratzinger's theology from the beginning, it's the recognition of the essential dependence of the creature. Creaturely existence is filial through and through. That is, to be a creature is to be from another and for another.

This is what Christ reveals to us. And he reveals it in terms of a perfection: in Jesus, “filiality” is revealed to be a dimension of what is ultimate, because God never exists only as Father. He also always exists as the Son and as the Spirit. Sonship is divine. And what creatures *are*, are sons and daughters in the Son.

This point is emphasized already in Ratzinger's commentary on *Gaudium et Spes* following the Second Vatican Council, and it is also the salient feature of his Christology in *Jesus of Nazareth*. It is this “filiality” that is fundamental to the autonomy of the creature, properly understood. It is this “filiality” with its implied dependence upon God that is missing from so much of America's understanding of the human being and of human freedom.

In fact, it is this failure to integrate “filiality” — and thus dependence — into autonomy and freedom and indeed rights, in so much of American discourse, that grounds what we may call the characteristic tendencies of America, from its founding documents to the present, toward a deistic and Pelagian understanding of human freedom. It's these characteristic tendencies that inform the dominant, self-centered characteristic of rights.

**What do you mean by deistic and Pelagian?**

SCHINDLER: What I mean is a failure to recognize the distinct Fatherly origin inside all of human being and human action — from their beginning and all along the way.

**For an American, it might seem difficult, after gaining a clear awareness of these tendencies, to reconcile a real love for our country with our theological tradition. What would Benedict say is a healthy love of country?**

SCHINDLER: I have never read anything in Benedict to make me think he would attenuate the importance of patriotism. Patriotism involves a love of one's own. It is an extension of the love of one's family, in the sense of one's soil, one's history, what one has been given, and a willingness even to die for that. This is a profound thing, for instance, in Benedict's own person. He is Bavarian and beautifully so.

Patriotism does not imply being uncritical, however; it implies releasing, through one's criticism, the positive elements that are really being intended. The point is to provide a criticism, if you will, from God's perspective and the perspective of the whole of humanity. Even more basic than our relation to our own family is our relation to God. That, by the way, is the meaning of the text when, in response to “blessed is the womb that bore you,” Jesus answers that blessed are those who hear and keep the word of God. He is not opposing the two; he is ordering them. And it just so happens that Mary had the benefit of being first in both. This deepens the unity: her body is a knowing of the will of God. You cannot for a moment detach the two in her.

Benedict would tell an American not to be anti-American, but to love America. And the criticisms that he would, does, and will raise regarding America are not antithetical to that, but are ways of helping America purify the things that are good — and one can talk abundantly about them.

The moral energy of America is very real and is not a defect. America's emphasis on equality and rights is indispensable for any adequate conception of the human being. The fact that people still do believe in God, and the fact that people are still not cynical by and large — unless they happen to be working, say, for the *Washington Post* or the *New York Times* — is a positive thing.

Americans generally have a lot of common sense. The point is to deepen these things in terms of what we have been talking about here, but without losing the uniqueness of



Pope Benedict has made Christian ecumenism (top) and dialogue with people of other faiths key objectives of his pontificate. Bottom, the gathering at Regensburg where he touched on Islam, September 12, 2006

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America, which has a real contribution to make to the Church. As Benedict himself has said, we need to emphasize the positive, but we need to clarify the criticisms that are necessary to enable what is positive to flourish as it ought, in all of its integrity.

**To go back to the question of the importance of God: How do we give public status to this question of God's existence in a pluralistic society, and in dialogue with the world's great religious traditions?**

SCHINDLER: This is a very large question. Let me say just two things here. The first is about dialogue, the second about the question of pluralism inside the Western liberal state. First, dialogue. The Regensburg lecture emphasized, in relation to the West, that reason is inherently open to God. The second point was to show, with respect to Islam, for example, the sense in which God as *logos* is inherently reasonable. The dialogue he proposes between East and West regarding God's existence is simultaneously affirming something in both traditions while also calling both traditions to a greater integrity, at least as seen from the point of view of Catholicism.

**And in relation to pluralism inside the Western liberal state . . .**

SCHINDLER: The first thing that needs to be said in this context is that every pluralism presupposes some sense of unity. You can't have absolute difference without tacitly invoking some conception of unity. You need something in common before you can say two things are different. But here is where we need to ponder in more sustained fashion the claims of the liberal state.

Now the claim in the liberal state, and especially in America, is that to have unity inside a state, it suffices to establish a purely juridical unity that avoids the enshrinement of any substantive truth about the nature and destiny of the human being. It relegates those questions to the private sphere.

The question that needs to be pondered, it seems to me, in light of the theology of Benedict, is whether any such purely

juridical unity suffices or can even actually exist.

**But isn't this the genius of the separation of Church and state that is so fundamentally affirmed in America?**

SCHINDLER: The separation of Church and state, in the sense of a distinction of powers, is a great achievement of the

West, and one that Benedict strongly endorses. The question is what this separation actually means. The issue is whether the legitimate and necessary separation of Church and state entails a purely juridical conception of the state, say, *à la* John Courtney Murray's articles of peace, according to which one claims that the constitutional order must avoid any substantive truth about the human person.

It is this purely juridical understanding of the state that Pope Benedict rejects. He has said this on various occasions, for example, most recently on January 1, 2008, in his statement for the World Day of Peace: "the *juridic norm*, which regulates relationships between individuals, disciplines external conduct, and establishes penalties for offenders, has as its criterion the moral norm grounded in nature itself. Human reason is capable of discerning this moral norm, at least in its fundamental requirements, and thus ascending to the creative reason of God which is at the origin of all things."

There is much to be sorted out here, but Benedict's point is that the question of the truth about the human being remains intrinsically relevant for the state, while the liberal state, instead, insists on bracketing that question for purposes of the public constitutional order.

It could be shown, although we can't do it here, that in fact the purely juridical notion of the state inevitably embodies notions of freedom, reason, and God that are already in clear ten-

sion with those of Catholicism.

The purely juridical state always promotes a proceduralist form of debate in civil society as a whole, because by definition the state cannot permit the resolution of debate in terms of a substantive truth that would be juridically binding for everyone.



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On the occasion of his historic visit to the U.S.A.

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#### FROM THE TOP

- Rome. Conference on the dangers of communism, Auditorium Augustinianum 1999;
- Washington. March for Life, 2008;
- Rome. A conference on nobility in the aristocratic Great Hall of a stately mansion, Palazzo Pallavicini, 1993;
- Rome. World Gay Pride 2000: protest and reparation procession

Debate in liberal society can have as its only end the continuance of the debate for its own sake. Thus debate inside a purely juridical state inevitably takes the form of manipulation via the cosmetic arts, for example, advertising, political strategies, and so on, which replace any serious pursuit of truth.

This points us in the direction of what Benedict means when he refers to the dictatorship of relativism.

**Could you summarize what Benedict sees as the fundamental problems faced by mankind today?**

SCHINDLER: The first thing I would say is that the problems he sees are all bound up with *Evangelium Vitae*'s striking phrase regarding the totalitarian inversion of democracy — a totalitarianism of the strong over the weak. It seems to me that he sees the gravest threat to civilization to be this widespread tendency toward instrumentalism, which renders the culture unable to see the inherent value in the innocent, the weak, the vulnerable, the “useless.” And perhaps the most virulent threat comes from what is one of the strongest assets of modern Western culture, namely its technological power. Especially as that has been brought to bear, for example, in the areas of reproductive technology.

At the heart of this problem, then, is the failure to recognize that something is good or true or beautiful simply by virtue of its being (*verum et bonum qua ens*).

As Ratzinger pointed out in his early book, *Introduction to Christianity*, a great shift occurs in modernity: the dictum that something is true and good by virtue of its being, that is, its being-given, or better still, its being-given by God, is replaced with the dictum that something is true or good only *quia factum*, that is, insofar as man has made it or modified it.

That something is good by virtue of its being, that is to say, its being-given by God, is what is implied by a doctrine of creation and a recuperation of the centrality of God, and thus we come back to the point where we started in this conversation and to the question of the forgetfulness of God.

I would like to add another comment here regarding the dictatorship of relativism. Perhaps relativism is easy enough to understand: the idea that each person constructs his or her own truth, or that truth claims in the end are a matter only of personal preference. But why call that a dictatorship?

When we think of dictatorship we think of claims to truth

being imposed by tanks. In the West, there is no question in the liberal state of tanks imposing the state's claims to truth.

The point is that what is being imposed is much more subtle. It is the imposition of a public ethos which always and in advance reduces every claim of truth (by whatever group or person in society) to merely an expression of private preference. At least, that is, for purposes of public order and from the perspective of the state. Given this ethos, which denies any unconditional truth for purposes of public order, it follows that there can be no unconditional recognition of human rights. Therefore it will be the case that the strong will always prevail over the weak.

Or that the dignity of the weak will be threatened by the power of the strong.

**What then is Benedict's fundamental proposal in the face of these problems?**

SCHINDLER: As Benedict has often said, the problems indicated here go to the very roots of our being, and therefore our response has to be equally radical, must also go to the roots of our being. And so we return to what we said at the outset, that fundamental for Benedict, fundamental for the human beings of today — as it has been in a different way for all human beings in all times and all places — is recuperation of the centrality of the reality of God, and therefore also love, at the heart of their lives.

Really, the response indicated in the theology of Benedict is very simple. What is needed as a response to the problems of today is simply sanctity: a sanctity of life, that is, understood in all of its ontological depth and breadth.

What is meant most properly by a culture of life and a civilization of love is a recuperation of the “*Dies Domini*,” the day of the Lord, as an entire way of life.

We have to recover a stillness at the heart of our activism which makes room for God and for the other in their integrity. And, again, Benedict invites us to “remember” this in the manner archetypically realized for us in Mary's *fiat*. ●

*Emily Rielley is managing editor of the North American edition of Communio: International Review. She has BA in English from the University of Dallas, and an MTS from the John Paul II Institute in Washington, DC. She lives in Arlington, Virginia.*



**A Renaissance artist's depiction of the life of Christendom, with clergy and people in a public procession. Opposite page, top, a painting of the first American Thanksgiving depicting the American people as “one nation under God” and, bottom, St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York dwarfed by skyscrapers**