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A Humble, Bold Scholar

Thomas P. Rausch

Loyola Marymount University, trausch@lmu.edu

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CATHOLIC VOICES – SYMPOSIUM

A Humble, Bold Scholar

By Thomas P. Rausch, SJ

The sudden news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation should not have taken so many by surprise. He had several times raised the possibility of a pope resigning. Still the news came as a bombshell. Clearly he did it for the good of the Church, and his freedom to give up his office was a sign of this remarkable man's humility and spiritual freedom. The office was never about him. For this quiet but gracious scholar, it must have been a considerable burden. And with his intelligence, he no doubt recognized that the Church needed the strong leadership that he was no longer able to provide. He had watched at close hand the once vital Pope John Paul II's long descent into illness and infirmity.

It is also true that management was not this scholar-pope's strong suit. In the last year there were continuing rumors that the Vatican lacked clear leadership, and even was in disarray. And so with remarkable courage Pope Benedict, often stereotyped as a conservative, took the unpre-

cedented step of retiring, the first pope in 600 years to do so, a move that will very likely stand as an example for his successors.

His legacy is considerable. He was elected to the Chair of Peter as a world-renowned theologian, with hundreds of books and articles in many languages. His astonishing range of interests extends from dogmatic theology to liturgy, culture and the arts, politics, ecumenism, and non-Christian religions. His three-volume work on Christology, *Jesus of Nazareth*, is a modern classic.

He has also been enormously influential in shaping the life of the Church as it moves into the third millennium. Brought to the Second Vatican Council by Joseph Cardinal Frings, Archbishop of Cologne, he was just 35 years old when the Council began in 1962, and ended up playing a role in the development of some of its most important documents. As prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and then as pope, he exercised a care for the

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integrity of doctrine in an era of considerable pluralism, both in theology and in postconciliar dialogue with other religious traditions.

In terms of ecumenism, the acceptance of the 1998 Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification by the Vatican and the Lutheran World Federation was largely due to his efforts, while relations between the Roman Catholic Church and Orthodox churches, particularly the Russian Orthodox Church, have warmed considerably during his pontificate. More controversial was the CDF's 2000 declaration, *Dominus Iesus*, as well as his establishment of a Personal Ordinariate for sojourning Anglicans.

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges Benedict faced as pope was the continuing fallout from the scandal of the sexual abuse of children by clergy, especially as it became evident that this was not just an "American problem." Though often criticized for his response, unfairly in my judgment, he played an important role in centralizing the way the Vatican dealt with accusations against clerics. According to Archbishop Vincent Nichols of Westminster, he

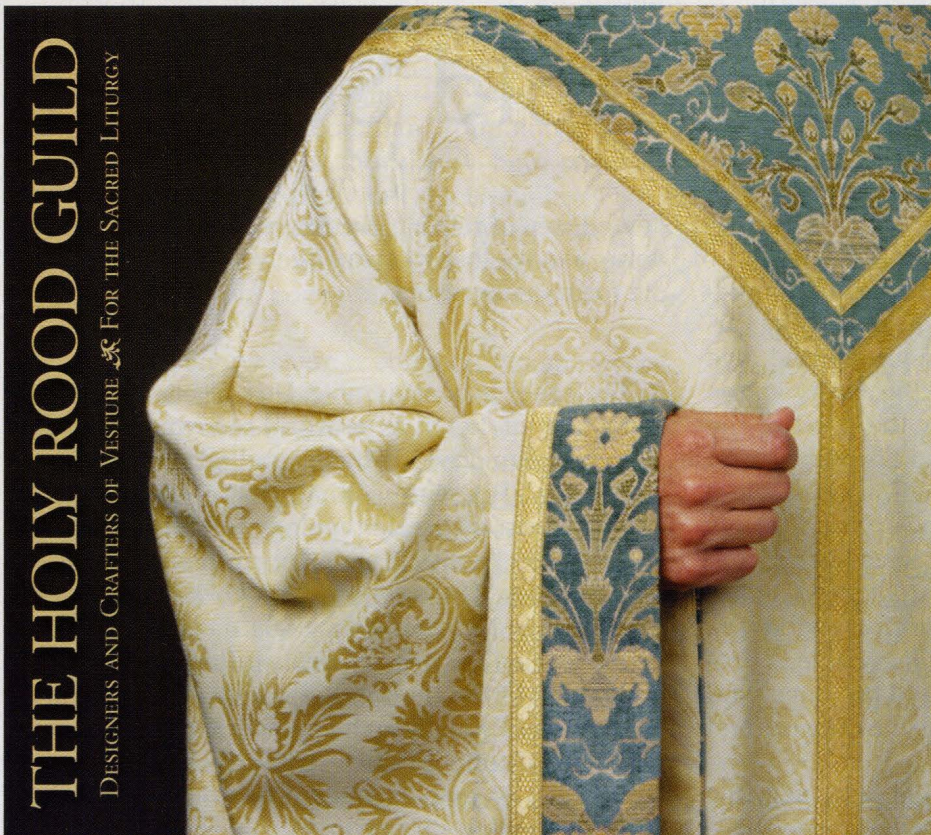
helped bring about changes in church law, among them "the inclusion in canon law of Internet offenses against children, the extension of child abuse offenses to include the sexual abuse of all under 18, the case by case waiving of the statute of limitations and the establishment of a fast-track dismissal from the clerical state for offenders" (see John Thavis, "Vatican intensifies defense of pope on sex abuse decisions," Catholic News Service, March 29, 2010). Shortly after becoming pope he ordered the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, Marcial Maciel Degollado, who had fathered three children and stood accused of sexually abusing at least nine former seminarians, to cease all public ministry and retire to a life of prayer and penance.

Pope Benedict will be remembered as a public intellectual. He has been named to L'Académie française, the North Rhine-Westphalian Academy of Sciences, Humanities, and the Arts, and the European Academy of Sciences and Arts. His encyclicals are rich in references to philosophers, social scientists, and novelists. After the terrorist strikes of September 2001 he joined in a public dialogue with

Jürgen Habermas of the neo-Marxist Frankfurt School on the state's inability to justify the very values it seeks to promote, since the state is not the source of truth or morality. At the same time, he dared to raise the difficult question of religion and violence in his much-misunderstood lecture at Regensburg in 2006.

But his deepest interest has always been to bring others to the love of God who is both reason and love. This concern was behind his declaring a "Year of Faith" beginning on Oct. 11, 2012, the 50th anniversary of the Second Vatican Council's opening session, and calling representatives of the worldwide episcopacy to Rome for a Synod on the New Evangelization. In this he was truly a teacher for all Christians. ■

The Rev. Thomas P. Rausch, SJ, is T. Marie Chilton Professor of Catholic Theology at Loyola Marymount University.



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