

## In an assessment of Pope Benedict XVI's legacy, scholar predicts continued conservatism

February 27 2013, by Corrie Goldman

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Pope Benedict XVI waves to the crowd as he arrives for an open-air Mass in the Terreiro do Paco in Lisbon, May 11, 2010. Benedict's reach will likely extend far beyond his official papacy because of the influence of the many conservative bishops and cardinals he has appointed worldwide, says Stanford scholar Thomas Sheehan. Credit: M.Mazur / [thepapalvisit.org.uk](http://thepapalvisit.org.uk)

Pope Benedict XVI's unanticipated resignation left pundits and

parishioners alike speculating about the future of the Vatican.

Most immediately, there is the question of his successor. But Benedict's departure also offers an opportunity to assess the legacy of his papacy.

A staunch conservative like his predecessor, [Pope John Paul II](#) (1979-2005), Benedict will be remembered for taking a hard line on issues such as the role of women in the [church](#) and contraception. Thomas Sheehan, a professor of religious studies at Stanford, described Benedict's tenure as a "transitional papacy" that will be looked upon as "the tail of John Paul II's long reign."

As Sheehan sees it, Benedict's and John Paul's conservative doctrines merge together as a singular "roll-back" era, during which Catholics have gone back to "tried and true doctrine on such things as birth control, [reproductive health](#) and the priesthood."

But a lesser-known image of Benedict is one from earlier in his career when he "was a liberal adviser to theologians and bishops at the Second Vatican Council," Sheehan noted.

Sheehan, who studied and wrote about the Vatican during the decade that he lived in Rome, does not anticipate a radical theological shift in the next pope: "The heads of Vatican ministries will change, but the dominant Roman theologians and the body of the Vatican bureaucracy will largely stay the same."

A continued conservative agenda, Sheehan asserted, will be to the detriment of Catholicism in the modern world.

The Vatican's "tight authoritarian approach," Sheehan said, is encouraging laity to "weaken their loyalty to the hierarchy" and to "follow their own conscience, even if that means leaving the church." He

noted that lapsed Catholics constitute the third largest religious grouping in the United States.

## **Papal legacy will continue**

Since Benedict is the first pope to resign in 700 years it's difficult to predict how much personal power the pontiff will retain while he is alive. But Sheehan noted that Benedict's reach would certainly extend beyond his official papacy, "insofar as his influence will be felt in the scores of conservative bishops and cardinals that he has appointed worldwide."

However traditional Benedict's ideologies may be, his unorthodox decision to abdicate may end up being his greatest legacy because it could signal a new era for the church. "If nothing else," Sheehan says, "Benedict has set a good example for future popes: a graceful resignation when one is no longer able to rule effectively."

Of course, no evaluation of this pope's reign can ignore the pervasive scandals that have rocked the church. "Benedict's tenure is basically coterminous with one of the darkest moral periods in recent church history," Sheehan said.

"Whatever good deeds he did during his papacy, such as traveling around the world, issuing encyclicals, and writing about Jesus of Nazareth," Sheehan said, Benedict "will be remembered not only for being pope during the scandal" but for actually "helping to cover it up" when he was head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Given how the pedophile scandal has caused what Sheehan called disarray in the church hierarchy, he feels that reform would require a bottom-up cultural shift "from the laity in the pew and the local priest in the pulpit."

## **A personal perspective on biblical scholarship**

A self-described "DNA Catholic," with Irish and Italian heritage, Sheehan spent 10 years studying for the Catholic priesthood in the archdiocese of San Francisco before transitioning to academia.

Sheehan, whose current research centers on philosophy of religion and 20th-century European philosophy, left the seminary but not the church in the 1960s when the church was going through a culture war of sorts. The Second Vatican Council (1962-65), established to reform Catholicism and invigorate relations between the church and the modern world, was promising change, but traditional seminary faculty members were largely against it.

"I got caught in the conflict between a strongly traditionalist seminary faculty and the burgeoning reforms of the Second Vatican Council, and I was asked to leave the seminary at the same time as I decided the priesthood was not for me. My real calling was the university," Sheehan said.

He went on to pursue a doctorate in philosophical theology at Fordham University, and it is within this academic arena that he is most concerned about the future of the Catholic Church.

"The strength of the Catholic Church in the 1950s, '60s and '70s was a union of philosophy, theology and biblical scholarship." But Sheehan said, "That union has long since fallen apart, and today the church is suffering under a traditionalist anti-intellectualism of the worst sort."

Sheehan said that, as pope, Benedict had the opportunity to unite rigorous intellectual scholarship with a modern spirituality in a way that progressive Catholics of Europe and North America could relate to. But although Benedict has issued three encyclicals that Sheehan describes as

"very pious and heartwarming on faith, hope and charity," he thinks that the pontiff missed a major opportunity to further the church's purchase on contemporary intellectual life.

"One hoped that Benedict's papacy might have generated a guiding theological idea to engage the modern world," Sheehan said. Instead, he contends, we have seen "the death of forward-looking European and American theology – including Latin American liberation theology – and in its place a revival of left-over pre-Vatican II pabulum."

## Looking to the past

The biblical exegesis that [Pope Benedict](#) put forth in his book *Jesus of Nazareth* shows "not the least awareness of cutting-edge historical critical scholarship," said Sheehan. "What he delivers up instead is a warmed-over, feel-good message that knows nothing about the advances in Catholic scripture scholarship over the last 50 years."

Sheehan said the strongly traditionalist tone of Benedict's papacy can be partially attributed to his philosophical and theological training.

There are, generally speaking, two branches of theology in the Catholic Church, one that follows Saint Augustine and another that follows Saint Thomas Aquinas, Sheehan explained. As an Augustinian, Benedict "was strongly influenced by Augustine's dualism of the City of God versus the City of Man." Thomas Aquinas, on the other hand, was "more of a compatibilist" who saw the potential for a creative union between the secular and the sacred.

Benedict's papacy was "more about circling the wagons against the modern secular world," said Sheehan. "Hence his oft-repeated mantra about a modern 'culture of relativism' as against the absolute, presumably ahistorical truth of Catholicism. A great opportunity for engaging the

modern world has been lost."

Provided by Stanford University

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