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## New pope starts debate on direction of Catholic Church

By KEVIN SCHMIESING  
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If there was any doubt that the legacy of Pope John Paul II would endure long beyond his passing, it was dispelled when senior cardinal deacon Jorge Medina Estevez announced to Rome and to the world the election of Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who will now be known to history as Pope Benedict XVI.

The new supreme pontiff, like the previous one, is an academic. Born in Germany, Ratzinger held a string of German university appointments teaching theology, and participated as a priest and theologian at the Second Vatican Council.

Appointed archbishop of Munich and Friesing in 1977, John Paul II tabbed him four years later to the top post in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican's department charged with maintaining orthodoxy in the church.

As the prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger was John Paul II's right hand man on theology. When the former pope sought to stem the spread of liberation theology in the Americas, the new pope, Benedict XVI, drafted key documents criticizing the combination of Marxism and Christianity. He defended the authentic form of liberation that comes through fidelity to the Gospel and freedom from sin.

For some so-called "progressive" theologians, the election of Benedict 16 will be dismaying. It was Ratzinger's office that assessed the work of suspect American Catholic university professors such as Charles Curran and, recently, Roger Haight. In both cases, their views were deemed incompatible with the teachings of the church, and they were forced to resign from official positions teaching Catholic theology.

But Benedict, like John Paul, is no reactionary. He is a champion of Vatican II, in the same way that his predecessor was — that is, of the true spirit of Vatican II, which engages the modern world with the perennial truths of the Gospel, rather than capitulating to modern trends and thereby emptying the faith of the bracing vision of human dignity and salvation that it has to offer.

### Benedict will continue the work of John Paul and promote 'moral reason'

The discomfort of some liberal academics in Europe and the United States notwithstanding, Ratzinger is widely respected as a theologian, both inside and outside the Catholic Church. His expertise ranges from systematic theology to Scripture; his commentary on Genesis was published by Grand Rapids-based William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., a premier American evangelical press.

But Benedict XVI's mission must be viewed with a lens wider than the disputes of contemporary American theology.

There is much in a pope's name, and no doubt Ratzinger intended to convey something about his vision for the papacy through his selection of Benedict. The last Pope Benedict reigned for a brief period in the second decade of the 20th century, long enough to plead for peace with European powers bent on each other's destruction.

Then there was the original Benedict — not a pope, but a sixth-century saint, and one of the most impressive figures in the history of Christendom. He was the father of Western monasticism, a church reformer and major catalyst in the rise of

Christian culture in Europe.

Pundits have mentioned often lately that one of the challenges facing the new pope is reviving Catholicism in Europe. Cardinal Ratzinger has been a strong advocate for reclaiming Europe's Christian roots, and he has done so in a way that can cross the divides that rend Europe — secularist, Christian, Muslim.

During a public discussion in late 2004, Cardinal Ratzinger called for a revival of "moral reason." The fall of communism, he noted, created a "void" that must be filled by agreement on sets of moral standards so freedom is not used in ways that damage human dignity.

"Faith can help one find it," he said, "but it does not depend on it."

Pope Benedict's appeals to the world, like John Paul II's, will be unquestionably rooted in Christianity, but will invoke values that attract and are shared by people of good will from all faiths and none.

But it will not only be Europe that is on the new pope's mind. His position in the Vatican curia enabled Ratzinger to work closely with churchmen from throughout the world, including the Catholic Church's "growth areas," Latin America, Africa and Asia.

Like John Paul, he will be a universal figure who transcends national boundaries.

John Paul II has been celebrated for contributing to communism's demise; the current pope wishes to fill the void its collapse created with moral content and spiritual meaning that the modern world so desperately needs. For Catholics and others who admired John Paul, the election of Benedict XVI is welcomed warmly.

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