

Rule of Benedict: The pope as ecumenist

by [Michael Root](#) in the [May 17, 2005](#) issue

When Pope Benedict XVI announced in his first sermon that he has a “primary commitment to work without sparing energies for the reconstitution of the full and visible unity of all the followers of Christ,” many expressed surprise. The leading newspaper in his old diocese, the Munich *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, ran a headline on its Web site that asked: “Is this the old Ratzinger?”

The pope’s ecumenical commitment did not suddenly appear with his election, however. The Lutheran–Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the Doctrine of Justification (JDDJ) would probably never have been signed without Cardinal Ratzinger’s personal initiative. After Rome’s ambiguous June 1998 response to the JDDJ, a joint signing ceremony appeared impossible. As Rome and the Lutheran World Federation sought a way forward, Ratzinger met with an old friend from his days as archbishop in Munich, Johannes Hanselmann, the former bishop of the Bavarian Lutheran Church and former president of the LWF. Together the two theologians produced the first draft of an “Annex” to the JDDJ that helped Rome to affirm it without qualification.

If we are to grasp the meaning of Benedict’s statement of ecumenical commitment, we need to see how it is of a piece with his total view of the church and the papacy, a view rooted in the Second Vatican Council. While the new pope has certainly changed his mind on some topics during his long career as a theologian, what is more important are the continuities that link Professor Ratzinger of the Second Vatican Council to Cardinal Ratzinger of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—and both, one might presume, to Pope Benedict.

At Vatican II Ratzinger shared more with theologians such as Yves Congar and Henri de Lubac, who wished through a return to scripture and the fathers to enrich a Catholic faith that too often had been reduced to handbook scholasticism, than he did with those theologians primarily concerned to bring the church up-to-date. In his

Memoirs, Ratzinger states that he sensed from the beginning that he and Karl Rahner, although they shared some concerns, “lived theologically on two different planets.”

As he has argued with some sharpness, Benedict does not understand Vatican II as a stage on the way to something else, a foretaste of a Vatican III that will really reform the church. The council is not “a point of departure” but “a base on which to build solidly.” He sees in the council’s text a unified theological vision, to be interpreted in continuity with the Council of Trent and Vatican I. Not all agree with Benedict’s reading of Vatican II, but his commitment to what he understands to be the legacy of the council is beyond doubt.

The way Vatican II has been ecumenically appropriated by the new pope can be seen in his 1992 letter on the church as communion, *Communio innotio*. On the one hand, he offers an unambiguous affirmation of Vatican II’s assertion that the bishop of Rome is “the perpetual and visible principle and foundation” of the unity of the bishops and the faithful throughout the world. Lack of communion with the bishop of Rome wounds the Orthodox churches and, even more, the “ecclesial communities” of the West. On the other hand, he states (again echoing Vatican II) that the division also wounds the Catholic Church “in that it hinders the complete fulfillment of her universality in history.”

In light of the close connection between universality and catholicity, this remark is striking. There was for Cardinal Ratzinger and there will certainly be for Pope Benedict no doubt that the church of Christ is found in its fullness uniquely in the Catholic Church; division cannot alter that fact. But division does wound the Catholic Church in its universal mission. Paradoxically, precisely the mission of the bishop of Rome to be a universal pastor, an essential bond within the communion of the church—a view many see as an ecumenical obstacle—implies that the pope must have a “primary commitment” to ecumenism.

What should we expect ecumenically from Benedict? We can safely say that doctrine will remain central. The unity of the church is founded on a common faith, and common faith requires shared doctrinal commitments. There will be no glossing over differences. His ecumenical goal will not be a “reconciled diversity” that is simply peaceful coexistence. Only a unity so visible as to be unmistakable can be the true goal. In other words, we should expect an ecumenism much like that laid out in *Ut unum sint*, John Paul II’s encyclical on ecumenism: vigorous, open to being flexible

on nonessentials, and unyielding on what are understood to be matters of the faith itself.

More uncertain than Benedict's ecumenism is how it will be received. The pope will not offer an easy ecumenism, but it might be a realistic ecumenism. Perhaps the central question will be whether Benedict can come to be seen, as John Paul was, as a leader whose following spans the various denominational divides. Will Protestants who are committed to a traditional outlook similar to Benedict's come to see him as their own advocate?

In his sermon the day after his election, Benedict stated that ecumenism requires more than "good sentiments." It requires "concrete gestures that penetrate spirits and move consciences." Just what gestures will be forthcoming cannot be predicted, but one can guess that they will be significant.