



Australian Council of Christians and Jews

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Australian Council of Christian and Jews Media Release

The Resignation of Pope Benedict the XVI and His Legacy

The Australian Council of Christians and Jews has seen during Pope Benedict XVI Papacy, much progress in Interfaith dialogue and notably dialogue between Christians and Jews and in particular Catholics and Jews.

Pope Benedict the XVI as Cardinal Ratzinger, was a significant force in the drafting of *Nostra Aetate* over 40 years ago and indeed, two days after the announcement of his resignation, addressed Roman Clergy on *Nostra Aetate* and the relationship of the Catholic Church to the Jewish people and the importance of inter-religious dialogue. As the then - Pontiff said in the context of the drafting of *Nostra Aetate*:

"From the beginning, our Jewish friends were present and they said ...even if it is this clear that the Catholic Church is not responsible for the Shoah, it was Christians for the most part that committed this crimes. We need to deepen and renew Christian awareness of this even though we know full well the true believers have always resisted these feelings. Thus it was clear that our relationship with the world of the ancient People of God needed to be an object of reflection."

"...instead of a declaration as initially conceived, concerning openly the People of God in the Old Testament, a text was created on interreligious dialogue, anticipating what only 30 years later would be demonstrated in all its intensity and importance...(which)...indicates the foundation of dialogue in difference, in diversity, in faith, ...and it is not possible for a believer to think that religions are all variations on a single theme."

There is one reality of the living God... but there is religious experience with a certain human light from Creation and therefore it is necessary and possible to enter into dialogue and thus to become open to one another and to open everyone to the peace of God, the peace of all His sons and daughters, the peace of His entire family."

During his earlier years in the 1960's, Cardinal Ratzinger was part of the seemingly reform/liberal group of Scholars within the Catholic Church grappling with the issue of how the Church should engage with "*Modern Man*".

In 1972 he was responsible for the publishing of a journal on theological issues called "*Communio*" which sought to chart a course between conservative dogma and traditionalists on the one hand and progressive theology on the other.

But during the 1980's, during the period of Pope John Paul II's papacy, a number of issues including child abuse, contraception, homosexuality, some church teachings and the role of women in the Church, were seemingly not adequately grappled with and this became a series of issues inherited by Pope Benedict XVI. Benedict was elected in a sense, to repair the Church and its internal mechanisms because of the perception that as Head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he had dealt with doctrinal issues as well as centralising under the auspices of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, handling of doctrinally related issues including the handling of allegations of child abuse.

Another attribute that Cardinal Ratzinger brought to Papacy was the level of intellectual rigour and scholarship and it may be that his scholarship and the approach to dogma and many of the theological issues with which he grappled, led many to perceive him as a very conservative figure.

Whilst theologically there may be a measure of conservatism, the progressive approach that he applied as one of the scholars in the Second Vatican Council was clearly to be seen in the above remarks that he made when addressing clergy on 14 February 2013. To us in interfaith dialogue it seems significant that one of the first addresses that he made after announcing his resignation was on the subject of the whole basis for interfaith dialogue by the Church, clearly something that stayed with Pope Benedict XVI during all his years since the 1960's and the benefit of which he seeks to pass on to younger clergy.

Many see Benedict as a Pope who came to repair or rescue the Church but with the many issues with which he had to grapple, did not succeed on a number of those tasks and leaves the church at a time when it is still reeling from many of the issues coming to the fore such as notably its stances on child abuse, homosexuality and contraception. To say that the approach he adopted to those subjects which was conservative having regard to the position that Cardinal Ratzinger held prior to becoming Pope may be understandable. However as a progressive, he attracted much criticism in failing to decisively deal with these issues and also from an interfaith standpoint, failed in the eyes of many, to adequately deal with some issues of traditional liturgy that were otherwise inappropriate in the context of interfaith

dialogue. Examples are the restoration (or at least acceptance of use) of the “sensitive” Easter liturgy and the retention of “*Motu Proprio*” (including the call for the conversion of the Jews) that are and were disturbing to Jews. To preserve such liturgy or rather to allow those traditionalists to practise such liturgy led to criticisms that the old style of Catholic Church prior to the Second Vatican Council, was being allowed to revive and to criticisms that it weakened the Church’s stance on distancing itself from the idea of active conversion of the Jews and others.

Every Pope’s challenges have been varied and dependent upon society and the constant need to manage the Church in its many forms, locations and social aspirations.

Pope Benedict XVI has resigned but is still out there as the senior statesman of the Catholic Church no doubt giving guidance to Pope Francis and, as a continuing author of scholarship, able to leave it a continuing written legacy notwithstanding the health issues that caused him to step down from the Papacy.

His resignation was a brave one and we will see in the coming years, what his scholarship may bring to the interfaith arena and notably to the issue of Christian/Jewish dialogue.

His successor, Pope Francis has already embraced the desire to foster closer relations with Judaism and Jews so we can both hope that the interfaith steps taken by Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI will be continued manifold.

Yours faithfully,

William M Szekely
Chair, Australian Council of Christian and Jews