

Pope Benedict's life, ministry influenced by university experiences

VATICAN CITY - Although he has not been a full-time professor since 1977, Pope Benedict XVI's life and ministry have been heavily influenced by his university experiences.

He made his reputation as a theologian and still meets annually with a group of his former doctoral students.

But, he has written, the student revolt of the 1960s, specifically the upheaval at the University of Tübingen, Germany, where he was teaching, shocked him and convinced him that in the name of the "reform" started by the Second Vatican Council too many Catholics were willing to abandon essential Catholic teachings.

Since becoming pope in 2005, two more university-related incidents have put him in the eye of a storm: His 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg, Germany, offended many Muslims; and in January a threatened protest led him to cancel his visit to Rome's premier state university.

Still, his personal comfort in the academic environment and his conviction that universities have a crucial role to play in promoting both intellectual and spiritual maturity explain why he wants to address a university audience during his April trip to the United States.

Pope Benedict will meet the heads of many of the 220 U.S. Catholic colleges and universities as well as representatives of diocesan education offices April 17 in Washington.

A recurring theme in his speeches - first as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and then as pope - has been the need for modern men and women to get a new hold on the relationship between faith and reason and to restore balance in the relationship between freedom and a correct moral order.

Pope Benedict sees universities, particularly those with a theology faculty, as being in a unique position not only to pass on scientific knowledge and technical skills, but also to promote a dialogue between faith and science and wider recognition of the fact that the search for God is an essential part of being human.

The pope is critical of what he sees as a modern tendency to consider religious faith as unreasonable and, therefore, unworthy of a place in academic or public discourse. The resulting attempt to push religion into the strictly private sphere also impoverishes the whole educational process because it ignores a key part of human life: the search for truth, for meaning and, ultimately, for God.

His 2006 speech at the University of Regensburg, where he once taught, offended many Muslims because he quoted a medieval Byzantine emperor who said the prophet Mohammed had brought “things only evil and inhuman, such as his command to spread by the sword the faith.” The pope afterward clarified that he was not endorsing the emperor’s words.

But the speech itself was about faith and reason, religious freedom, science and democracy, and faith and culture.

He said that too often today only what can be demonstrated through mathematics or empirical evidence is considered scientific.

“If science as a whole is this and this alone, then it is man himself who ends up being reduced, for the specifically human questions about our origin and destiny – the questions raised by religion and ethics – then have no place within the purview of collective reason as defined by ‘science,’” he said.

“The great task of the university,” the pope said, is to promote a search for truth using the “breadth of reason,” focusing not only on the material, but also on deeper questions about human life.

In January, Pope Benedict was invited to be the main speaker at the formal opening of the academic year at Rome’s Sapienza University, but the visit was canceled after 67 professors objected, saying the pope was “hostile to science,” and after a group of students threatened to demonstrate while he was speaking.

In the speech he had prepared for the visit, the pope said universities must recover their roles as places of dialogue and of the search for truth in every sphere.

Particularly in the West, he said, there is a danger that “precisely because of the greatness of his knowledge and power, man will fail to face up to the question of the truth” and give unbridled power to the purely expedient and functional, trampling human dignity in the process.

In his meetings with university students and professors over the years, the pope also has expressed concern about a fragmentation of knowledge in academics and in society as a whole.

A university, he has said, must be a place where students are exposed to a broad range of subjects so that they do not graduate simply as trained technicians, but as thinkers who know how to reason and to see the interconnectedness between subject areas, including faith, ethics and science.

“I am convinced that greater cooperation and new forms of fellowship between the various academic communities will enable Catholic universities to bear witness to the historical fruitfulness of the encounter between faith and reason,” he told European university professors last June.

Only when technical accuracy is not the only measure of success can research contribute “to the promotion of human dignity and to the daunting task of building the civilization of love,” Pope Benedict said.