Scholar, pastor: German pope defies easy caricature

VATICAN CITY – Americans will soon have their first close-up encounter with Pope Benedict XVI, a figure who, in the minds of many, is still coming into focus.

Some view him as a vigilant pastor, one who has used virtually every medium possible – books and speeches, sermons and encyclicals – to guide Catholics back to the essential message of Jesus and the Gospel.

Others see the German pope as a doctrinal overseer, policing the church's moral boundaries on issues like end-of-life medical care, marriage and homosexuality.

For many non-Christians, Pope Benedict is an enigma, a man who has visited a mosque and prayed toward Mecca with his Muslim host, yet who repeatedly speaks about the need to proclaim Christ as the unique savior for all people.

He is hailed as a liturgical hero by traditionalist Catholics for having widened possible use of the Tridentine Mass and introduced touches of antiquity in his own liturgies.

At a more basic level, the millions of Americans who do not follow church news very closely may know Pope Benedict simply as a soft-spoken bookworm who like cats and plays classical piano.

The "real Benedict" no doubt has some elements of all these partial portraits, but in a combination that defies easy caricature. This is a pope who brings depth of thought to every word or action, in ways that are not entirely predictable.

He once described heaven as "plunging into the ocean of infinite love," has called saints the real revolutionaries, and compared receiving the Eucharist to nuclear fission – a "chain of intimate explosions of good over evil in the human heart."

Such philosophical and theological flourishes are not uncommon and are sometimes dropped into his talks off the cuff.

Improvising a sermon at a Rome parish, he once said the absence of God from today's world was forcing many men and women to seek new forms of "anesthesia" in order to deal with the resulting fear and emptiness.

That touched on what has become a central theme of his pontificate: that when modern society tries to do without God it opens the door to the exaltation of science and technology, economic selfishness, ideological excess and misuse of freedom.

With equal force, he has maintained that religion cannot sever its links to reason without slipping into fanaticism.

U.S. author and scholar George Weigel said Pope Benedict has thus taken aim at the two great problems defining international public life in the early 21st century: religious faith that rejects reason and reason that has lost faith in itself.

"Irrational faith – faith detached from reason, from an understanding of God as a creator who imprints his reason on his creation – leads to a situation in which people believe that God commands them to do the irrational; the result is a great hole in lower Manhattan and 3,000 deaths," Weigel told Catholic News Service.

On the other hand, he said, Western culture has experienced a "loss of faith in reason," a diminished sense that reason has the capacity to arrive at the truth.

"This notion that there may be 'your truth' and 'my truth' but nothing we recognize as 'the truth' makes it very hard for the West to make the case for civility, tolerance and religious freedom in the face of irrational faith," Weigel said.

Those two points were the subject of the pope's address in Regensburg, Germany, in 2006. Among Muslims, the speech initially provoked an uproar, but eventually has led to a major new dialogue initiative between the Vatican and Islamic moderates.

Regensburg was the first instance of what some have called Pope Benedict's tendency to make provocative statements that later need clarification or qualification. Other examples include his speeches on indigenous peoples in Brazil and on the Holocaust at the Nazi death camp Auschwitz in Poland.

"There may be several explanations for this," said Jesuit Father Christian W. Troll, a

German professor of Islamic studies who has known the pope for many years.

“The first thing is that the pope is really trying to speak about very difficult issues, so sometimes clarifications will be requested. And one could say in his favor that he is prepared to clarify,” he said.

A second factor, Father Troll said, is that the pope does not always foresee how these speeches will be played by the mass media – although he is learning through experience.

And sometimes the pope can come off as “professorial,” as if he’s talking to pupils, Father Troll said.

“I say this as a man who respects him very much, but he perhaps can sound a little too self-assured and not open to different mentalities,” he said.

Those who have worked with the pope through the years say he is, in fact, a good listener, one who rarely forgets what he’s told. When it comes to the United States, he is surprisingly well-informed, said U.S. Jesuit Father Joseph Fessio, who studied under the future pope in the 1970s.

“He has an amazing power of retention. He reads an enormous amount. Still, I don’t know how he does it,” Father Fessio said.

Path to the papacy

While in the United States, Pope Benedict will celebrate the third anniversary of his election. As inevitable as that event may seem in retrospect, his path to the papacy was long and indirect.

Joseph Ratzinger was born April 16, 1927, in the Bavarian town of Marktl am Inn, the third and youngest child of a police officer, Joseph Sr., and his wife, Maria.

Joseph joined his brother, Georg, at a minor seminary in 1939. In a revealing memoir, he recalled how difficult it was to go from the “childhood world of my own” to sitting in a study hall with 60 other students. He was the smallest boy in his class and found the daily sports activities a “true torture.”

Like other young students, he was automatically enrolled in the Hitler Youth program, but soon stopped going to meetings. As World War II raged, he was conscripted into the army. In the spring of 1945, with the war ending, he deserted his unit and returned home. When the U.S. military arrived, he was arrested with others who had served in the German army and placed in a prisoner-of-war camp for a few months.

He returned to the seminary late in 1945 and was ordained six years later, along with his brother.

In a meeting with young people in 2005, the pope said witnessing the brutality of the Nazi regime helped convince him to become a priest. But he also had to overcome some doubts, he said. For one thing, he asked himself whether he "could faithfully live celibacy" his entire life. He also recognized that his real leanings were toward theology and wondered whether he had the qualities of a good pastor and the ability "to be simple with the simple people."

The future pope's life as a parish priest was, in fact, a short one. He was assigned for nearly a year to a Munich church, then began teaching theology. In 1953, he received a doctorate in theology, writing his thesis on St. Augustine, and went on to teach at universities in Bonn, Munster, Tubingen and Regensburg.

At the 1962-65 Second Vatican Council, a young Father Ratzinger made important contributions as a theological expert, particularly in the debate on the sources of revelation. He embraced the council's early work and its bold approach to renewal, but began to have misgivings in later sessions.

In particular, he warned of an emerging anti-Roman bias and the idea of a "church from below" run on a parliamentary model. He also worried that Vatican II might have made theologians feel as if they were no longer subordinate to bishops.

Those criticisms became even sharper in later years. As a cardinal, he said the church had experienced a "progressive process of decadence" in the name of a presumed "spirit of the council." He was particularly critical of liturgical reforms launched by Vatican II.

The winds of change also blew through the academic world, and the student protests of 1968 marked a turning point for Father Ratzinger. Alarmed by what he later called a “violent explosion” of Marxist theology, he left Tubingen for a new post at the University of Regensburg.

In 1977, Pope Paul VI named him archbishop of Munich. It was a new role, one that he barely had time to settle into, because in 1981 Pope John Paul II called him to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

As the guardian of the faith, then-Cardinal Ratzinger wielded great influence as the Vatican responded to a wide array of challenges, including liberation theology, dissent from church teachings and pressure for women’s ordination.

At heart, Cardinal Ratzinger remained an academic. Even during his 24-year run as head of the doctrinal congregation, he published dozens of scholarly books and articles. But he also made headlines in a few book-length interviews, expressing criticism of the church’s path since Vatican II in such areas as liturgy, theology and ecumenism.

As Pope John Paul’s pontificate entered its final days, Cardinal Ratzinger had already made preparations to return to a house in Bavaria and spend the rest of his days writing books. But he also found himself at center stage in Rome. In a Good Friday meditation, he shocked many people by denouncing the “filth” in the modern church – even, he said, among some priests.

When Pope John Paul died, Cardinal Ratzinger celebrated his funeral and presided over daily meetings of cardinals before the conclave. Veteran Vatican-watchers sensed momentum, and by the time white smoke came out of the Sistine Chapel smokestack April 19, 2005, few were surprised at the cardinals’ choice.

A different style

From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope Benedict made it clear that he would not try to match Pope John Paul’s charismatic style.

The differences were apparent on his first trip abroad, when Pope Benedict presided over World Youth Day celebrations in his native Germany. When young people began

chanting his name, as they had done with Pope John Paul, Pope Benedict gently hushed them. The tone of the closing Mass was more solemn and less theatrical than at previous World Youth Days.

On other trips, too, the pope has been reluctant to perform for the media or the crowds. It is difficult imagining him playfully swinging a hockey stick – as Pope John Paul did in St. Louis in 1999 – to make a connection with the locals.

As Pope Benedict said a few days after his election, a pope's task is to make shine "not his own light, but that of Christ."

Yet Pope Benedict's reserved, low-key approach has drawn record crowds to the Vatican. There is an appeal in his shy smile as he moves through the multitude at his weekly general audience, trying to make eye contact with as many people as possible.

"He seems to have a pastoral sense about him … I feel that he understands the role of shepherd," Rose Marie Lombard, a pilgrim from Rochester, N.Y., said at one of the pope's first public appearances.

In any case, she added, Catholics understand the papacy is not a popularity contest.

Pope Benedict immediately cut back on the heavy calendar of papal events that had become routine under Pope John Paul. He no longer presides over beatifications, he meets fewer visiting dignitaries and he speaks less often to visiting church groups.

Unlike his predecessor, who would typically invite a variety of guests to his lunch table, Pope Benedict generally dines with a few close aides.

Insiders say reducing the schedule was essential in order for the pope to focus on his priorities. Like any pontiff, he still has bishops to appoint, meetings to prepare for and Roman Curia tasks to oversee.

But Pope Benedict's primary goals are about faith, not administration. He expressed it well at his inaugural Mass in 2005, when he said his chief mission was to help lead people out of the modern "desert" of empty values, alienation and injustice toward the light of Christ.

Above all, in public speeches and sermons, in encyclicals and a best-selling book on Jesus, the pope has insisted that unless the modern world makes room for God and religious faith an erosion of fundamental values is inevitable.

“Human life is a relationship … and the basic relationship is with the Creator,” he said. “A world emptied of God, a world that has forgotten God, loses life and falls into a culture of death.”

It’s a theme the pope has brought to bear on all kinds of social and political issues, including poverty, abortion, bioethical research, marriage, consumerism and environmental degradation.

Part of this message transcends Christianity, as when the pope argues, for example, that traditional marriage between a man and a woman is part of a divine design common to all cultures and religions, and not merely a position of Catholic doctrine.

Focus on Christ

But he keeps coming back to Christ, as the figure who brought God into human history. Because of Christ, he once said, God can no longer be considered “distant, unknown, enigmatic and perhaps dangerous.” A personal encounter with Jesus is the key to everything the church does, the pope said, and is the factor that ensures Christian actions will have impact in the world.

The pope has also insisted that every Christian is duty-bound to evangelize and announce Christ as the unique savior to all people. In the perennial internal church debate over dialogue and mission, Pope Benedict clearly comes down on the side of mission.

In an important talk to the Roman Curia last December, he posed the question: “Is it still acceptable to evangelize today?” For the Christian, he said, the answer must be an emphatic yes, because “whoever has found a great truth … should transmit it.”

Pope Benedict’s pastoral strategy appears to have a double goal: helping Catholics reinforce their own faith and inviting them to share it and make it count in society. In some ways it’s a back-to-basics approach, with weekly audience talks on the apostles, saints and early Christian theologians – a kind of “Catholicism 101.”

His book, “Jesus of Nazareth,” which has sold more than 2 million copies, was written in a more challenging style. Its central point, however, is simple: Jesus was God, not merely a moralist or a political revolutionary or a social reformer.

The reaction to all this has been mixed. Many of those who listen to the pope in person or bother to read his talks or documents come away with a favorable impression.

“Today he spoke about Lent in a simple and very clear way. I understood it and appreciated it – what he’s preaching, really, is the heart of the Gospel,” said Claudio Faltracco, a pilgrim from northern Italy who attended a general audience in February.

But Pope Benedict does not filter especially well through the mass media. He makes headlines primarily when there’s potential for controversy – the tensions with Muslims, his statements about abortion and Catholic politicians, or his letter to Chinese Catholics, for example – but not when he’s drawing lessons from the lives of the early saints.

At times, the pope has used media interest in hot-button issues to make a larger point. Evolution and the environment are two examples. He has stirred the pot on evolution by saying it should not exclude a divine cause behind creation – the same essential argument he has made for defending the earth against environmental damage. The larger point in both cases is an awareness of God.

The pope’s public statements about social and economic issues are also clearly tied to the demands of the Gospel. They can be powerful, as when he wrote about economic injustice in “Jesus of Nazareth”: “As we witness the abuse of economic power, as we witness the cruelties of a capitalism that degrades man to the level of merchandise, we have also realized the perils of wealth, and we have gained a new appreciation of what Jesus meant when he warned of riches.”

Three years is not a long time for measuring papal success or failure, but a list of accomplishments for Pope Benedict would have to include:

– His 2006 encyclical “Deus Caritas Est” (“God Is Love”), which described the faith

as charity in action.

– The 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, which indicated a path of unity for the church and challenged the government to a real dialogue.

– Seven foreign trips, including an interreligious pilgrimage to Turkey, where he prayed in a mosque and defused a growing crisis with Islam.

– A series of small but telling liturgical changes, including the relaxation of the restrictions on the Tridentine Mass, the appointment of a new papal liturgist and a return to more traditional vestments and altar decorations.

– The naming of 38 new cardinals from 20 countries.

From a Roman Curia perspective, the pope's pace has been methodical, and some who expected a "Ratzinger revolution" have been disappointed. Yet, slowly but surely, the pope is making his mark. To date, he's named about 15 heads of Vatican agencies; 10 of them have been Italian, resulting in a Rome buzz about the "re-Italianization" of the Roman Curia.

Among Vatican congregations, the most important of the curial agencies, the appointments have all been non-Italians, including the naming of U.S. Cardinal William J. Levada as the pope's successor at the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

Those who have watched this pontificate develop say 2008 may be a watershed year. With a crucial dialogue date with Muslims at the Vatican, trips to three continents, a Synod of Bishops on the Bible, and a jubilee year dedicated to St. Paul, the pope will have a chance to stand in the spotlight and give the world a clearer picture of his person and his mission.