

# Theme of papal book may also be hallmark of his papacy

WASHINGTON – The emphasis on Jesus' centrality to the Catholic faith in Pope Benedict XVI's first book as pope is likely to permeate his papacy, panelists told a Washington audience during a book launch event for "Jesus of Nazareth" May 15.

Bishop William E. Lori of Bridgeport, Conn., and Vatican analysts George Weigel and John Allen discussed the book at the Pope John Paul II Cultural Center in Washington. The event was hosted by Archbishop Pietro Sambi, apostolic nuncio to the United States, and Bill Barry, publisher in the Doubleday religious publishing division.

"Jesus of Nazareth," published in April in Italian, German and Polish, was launched in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom May 15.

"It's not easy to present a book of your boss," said Archbishop Sambi with a laugh. "But I am happy to do so because the author is a very competent and learned teacher, and the subject is a fascinating one."

Allen, Vatican reporter for the National Catholic Reporter, CNN and other media, said Pope Benedict had demonstrated his commitment to the centrality of Jesus during his just-completed trip to Brazil.

The three "news flashes" from the trip – the pope's comments on abortion and Catholic politicians, his condemnation of drug dealers and his criticism of both capitalism and Marxism – were reported as distinct from one another but had a common thread in "the false promises of ideologies" that seek to replace Jesus in people's lives, Allen said.

In his talk to the bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean, Pope Benedict made clear that "preaching Christ is not a distraction from the work of social justice; it is working for justice," he added.

The new book "is much more than an academic exercise," Allen said. "It is the Magna Carta of Benedict's pontificate."

Bishop Lori said the book arose from Pope Benedict's "pastoral concern over distorted and relativistic views of Jesus," such as those promoted by author Dan Brown in "The Da Vinci Code," also published by Doubleday.

Much more than an academic exercise or an "exposition of theory," the pope's book "aims to open our hearts and minds to Jesus," he said.

Bishop Lori recalled riding in a small plane in rough weather years ago with then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, who became Pope Benedict. Despite feeling ill, the cardinal patiently answered questions from others in the plane.

"He was like a revered professor and a gentle pastor all rolled up in one," the bishop said. "And now that person is shared with a worldwide audience."

Weigel noted that "Jesus of Nazareth" was written by "a man who at the core of his person is a teacher ... who wants to invite everyone into the conversation about who Jesus is."

Pope Benedict, "a man of deep prayer," issues through his book "an invitation to think while we're praying," Weigel added.

Responding to a question from the audience, Weigel said the new book also demonstrates the pope's "deep appreciation of Judaism" and his "strong rejection" of the tendency in some Christian circles to regard the New Testament as divisible from the Old Testament.

The book "could be useful as a bridge for Christian-Jewish understanding," he added.