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Pope's new book addresses key concerns for this pontificate: Christ is key

by John L. Allen Jr.

All Things Catholic

When people pick up a newspaper or turn on the TV news, they generally aren't looking for a Sunday school lesson. This creates a challenge for journalists covering religious leaders, since most of their public utterances are devoted either to expounding their faith, or urging people to behave. The way reporters solve the problem is by combing through those utterances to find statements presumed to have broad, non-sectarian significance, normally because they apply to matters of politics or culture.

The result is that the real concerns of religious leaders, and the priority they assign to those concerns, often don't come across terribly clearly -- not because reporters aren't doing their jobs, but because of how the news business works in a secular world. Recent coverage of Benedict XVI's new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, offers a good example.

The first wave of stories focused on comments in the book about Africa and capitalism, even though they amount to asides in a 448-page treatise on the Gospels. Other stories styled the book as a rebuke to *The Da Vinci Code*. (That red herring was encouraged by an indirect allusion to Dan Brown's potboiler from Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna in a Vatican news conference.) Still others seemed charmed by the fact that the pope wrote that because his book is not a magisterial act, "everyone is free to contradict me." Beyond those angles, there was little interest in follow-up, in large part because a pope discussing Jesus strikes most people as the ultimate in "dog bites man" developments -- that is, the most normal thing

in the world.

By the time anyone had actually read all 448 pages of *Jesus of Nazareth*, the moment for further analysis had already passed. Passed, that is, everywhere but here, where papal analysis never goes out of fashion.

I'm in Rome this week, and, among other things, I set myself the task of studying *Jesus of Nazareth*. The key question is, "Why this subject, and why now?" Yes, a pope talking about Jesus is hardly a thunderclap -- but a pope talking about prayer or morality would be equally par for the course. Given Benedict's fascination with liturgy, one might have expected him to turn his pen to that theme if it were purely a matter of indulging his own interests, or settling old academic scores. Yet the pope himself hinted that something more urgent is involved in *Jesus of Nazareth*, writing that he devoted "all his free moments" after his election to finishing the book. To be honest, that's a bit of misdirection; popes don't really have "free time," and in any event, how they fill the moments in their day which are not formally scheduled usually is a good indicator of their real priorities. Thus the choice to write on Jesus, striving to put the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith back together again, is hardly casual.

What seems clear is that the motive for the book is also emerging as the core doctrinal concern of this pontificate: Christology. Put in a nutshell, Benedict's thesis in *Jesus of Nazareth* is that there can be no humane social order or true moral progress apart from a right relationship with God; try as it might, a world organized *etsi Deus non daretur*, "as if God does not exist," will be dysfunctional and ultimately inhumane. Jesus Christ, Benedict insists, is "the sign of God for human beings." Presenting humanity with the proper teaching about Jesus is, therefore, according to Benedict, the highest form of public service the church has to offer.

The English edition of *Jesus of Nazareth* goes on sale from Doubleday May 15, and an excerpt will be carried in the May 11 edition of Newsweek. (That should make the pope, for at least a week, no longer "invisible," as *Newsweek* described him April 16.) *Jesus of Nazareth* is the first installment of what Benedict has projected as a longer work; he decided to publish the first 10 chapters now, he wrote, "because I don't know how much time and how much strength will still be given to me."

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Intellectually, the aim of *Jesus of Nazareth* is, in the first place, to defend the reliability of the gospel accounts; and secondly, to argue that that gospels present Christ as God Himself, not as a prophet or moral reformer. Over and over, the pope uses phrases such as "implicit Christology," "hidden Christology," and "indirect Christology," to argue that even where the gospel accounts don't draw out the theological consequences of stories and sayings of Jesus, their message is nonetheless discernible.

On one level, *Jesus of Nazareth* reads like a running conversation with exegetes such as Adolf von Harnack, who argued that the Jesus of the gospels was not yet "the Christ," and that turning him into a deity was a work of later Christian theologizing. (Clearly, Benedict isn't buying it.) The book is sprinkled with references to writers such as Rudolf Bultmann, Joachim Jeremias, Pierre Grelot, Romano Guardini and Hans-Peter Kolvenbach (the Superior General of the Jesuits, whom Benedict obviously admires.)

The book also contains some characteristic literary flashes of Joseph Ratzinger, such as his suggestion that we can see a model of redeemed creation in the beauty of Benedictine monasteries, while the horrors of a world enveloped by the "obscurity of God" can be glimpsed in Chernobyl.

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On another level, the book offers detailed commentaries on the Scriptures. Benedict, for example, complains that modern translations of Matthew 7:28, which in Greek says that the crowds were "frightened" by Jesus' teaching, often uses "astonished" instead, which he believes obscures the awesome character of an encounter with divinity. Likewise, Benedict doesn't like the way modern translations treat "Yahweh" as a proper name for God, when in fact the Hebrew means "I Am," which is almost a way of underlining the impossibility of naming God. Benedict also says that he would prefer calling the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" the "Parable of the Two Brothers" instead, because the older brother who resents his father's graciousness offers an equally important lesson, especially for pious religious people.

Yet *Jesus of Nazareth* is not just an intellectual exercise, or an attempt to offer grist for homilies, though there's material for that aplenty. Ultimately, the motive for the book seems to be deep concern for what the pope sees as the toxic consequences of flawed Christology.

Over the course of the book, Benedict critiques a number of popular modern interpretations of Jesus: Jesus as a preacher of liberal morality, Jesus as a social revolutionary, Jesus as an inspired prophet or sage on the level of other founders of religious movements. The pope is well aware that these interpretations usually arise from noble motives, which he also shares -- to affirm the primacy of human beings over the law, to combat poverty and injustice, to express tolerance for other religions. In the end, Benedict believes that all such exegesis puts the cart before the horse. Out of impatience to get to desired social outcomes, Benedict argues, revisionist Christologies subvert the only basis for real humanism, which is belief in God, and in an objective truth that comes from God and stands above the human will to power.

On page 56, reflecting on Christ's temptations in the desert, Benedict makes this argument. (The following is my translation from the Italian edition.)

"Whenever God is considered a secondary concern, which can temporarily or stably be set aside in the name of more important things, then it is precisely those things presumed to be more important which fail. It's not just the negative result of Marxism which makes the point. The aid given by the West to developing countries, based purely on technical-material principles, which has not only left God to the side but has also distanced people from God with the pride of its presumed superior wisdom, has made the Third World into the 'Third World' in the modern sense. That aid put aside existing religious, moral and social structures and introduced its technical mentality into the vacuum. Believing it could transform stones into bread, it has instead given stones in place of bread. What's at stake is the primacy of God. It's a matter of recognizing God as a reality, a reality without which nothing else can be good. History cannot be governed with merely material structures, prescinding from God. If the heart of the human person isn't good, then nothing else can be good. And goodness of heart can come only from He who is Himself goodness, who is the Good."

Benedict makes the same argument with regard to peace.

"Discord with God is the point of departure for all the poisonings of the human person; and overcoming that discord is the fundamental presupposition of peace in the world. . . . Standing in peace with God is an indispensable part of any commitment to 'peace in the world.' It's from the former that the criteria and the strength derive for this commitment. Where humanity loses sight of God, peace also falls away, and violence takes the upper hand with previously unimaginable forms of cruelty. We see this today all too clearly."

In that sense, *Jesus of Nazareth* expresses in an exegetical key the same concern with Christology that drove the interventions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger with regard to theologians such as Jesuit Frs. Jacques Dupuis and Roger Haight, as well as the most recent notification on Jesuit Fr. Jon Sobrino. In each case, the concern was with what Joseph Ratzinger saw as a faulty Christology in the name of some presumed good -- inter-religious tolerance in the case of Dupuis and Haight, social liberation for Sobrino.

Thus we come to what the pope wrote about Africa, in the context of the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

"The actuality of the parable is obvious. If we apply it to the dimensions of globalized society, we see how the population of Africa, which finds itself robbed and pillaged, concerns us closely. We see how much they are our 'neighbor;' we see also that our style of life, the history in which we too are involved, have despoiled them and continues to despoil them. In this regard, what's understood above all is the fact that we have wounded them spiritually. Instead of giving them God, the God who is close to us in Christ, and thereby gathering from their traditions all that is precious and grand and carrying it to fulfillment, we have instead brought them the cynicism of a world without God, in which only profit and power count; we've destroyed moral criteria so much that corruption and the will to power deprived of scruples become something obvious. This doesn't apply just to Africa. Yes, we must give material aid, and we must examine our kind of life. But we give too little if we give only material things."

To be clear, Benedict XVI is not minimizing the importance of both direct aid and structural justice with regard to the poor, above all in Africa. On April 23, Benedict wrote to Chancellor Angela Merkel of Germany, current president of the G-8, demanding the "the rapid, total and unconditional cancellation" of the external debt of poor countries, describing it as a "grave and unconditional moral responsibility, founded on the unity of the human race, and on the common dignity and shared destiny of rich and poor alike."

His argument is rather that any such act of justice, shorn of reference to God, is destined to be a partial remedy to the wounds afflicting the human family. Only a renewed focus on Christ, and on the plan for human life marked out in the example of Christ, he believes, offers hope of a lasting cure. According to Benedict, efforts to cut corners, to recast Christ in ways that seemingly promote progress more directly, always end in ruin.

I had an unexpected confirmation of this analysis last week.

Last Thursday, I attended the annual Rector's Dinner at the North American College, the residence for American seminarians in Rome. While there, I was pulled aside by a Vatican official who wanted to comment on what I had written some time ago about the Sobrino notification, where I made the point that it wasn't really about liberation theology but about Christology.

"That piece was widely noticed here," the official said. "Christology is the key for this pope." The official then added: "And it's not over."

That comment suggests there may be additional investigations, additional notifications, additional teaching documents and papal messages, circling around the themes laid out in *Jesus of Nazareth*.

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I'll add four vignettes from the book which don't necessarily illustrate larger themes, but which are

nevertheless of interest.

First, Benedict tackles the question of calling God "mother." In a nutshell, he affirms that God is beyond gender, and that Scripture often uses the image of a mother's womb to express the intimacy of God's love for humanity. Yet, he says, "mother" is not a title of God in the Bible, and hence the church is disqualified from using it.

Benedict notes that there were a number of mother-gods in the religious traditions of the cultures surrounding the Israelites, and speculates that perhaps it was only by excluding that sort of language in the Bible that the sovereignty and the "otherness" of God could become clear. While the pope acknowledges that theory may not be completely satisfactory, he says we're nevertheless obliged to follow the Bible's lead.

"Even if we can't give absolutely cogent reasons, the language of the prayer of the entire Bible remains normative for us, in which, the great metaphors of maternal love notwithstanding, 'mother' is not a title of God, and is not an appellation with which one may address God. We must pray as Jesus, on the basis of the Holy Scripture, has taught us to pray, not as it might strike us or please us. Only thus do we pray in the right way."

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Second, in light of recent controversies in Catholic-Jewish relations, including a dispute in Israel over the presentation of Pope Pius XII at Yad Vashem and concerns related to the renewed use of the older Tridentine Mass, it's interesting to note the way in which Benedict refers to Judaism in *Jesus of Nazareth*.

In keeping with classical Christian exegesis and theology, Benedict is unabashed in asserting that Christ was the fulfillment of the promises and longings expressed in the Hebrew Scriptures. Yet he is deeply impatient with suggestions that Christ rebelled against, or transposed to a merely metaphorical plane, the demands of the Jewish law. Yes, Benedict says, Christ "universalized" the law, making it applicable not just to Israel but to all peoples, but he also insisted repeatedly that it was not his intention to cancel anything from the Law and the Prophets. Benedict rejects any attempt to minimize the importance of the Old Testament for Christianity.

It's interesting in this regard that the exegete whom Benedict quotes at greatest length, and with most evident fondness, is Jewish. The pope devotes pages 129-140 to reflections on the book *A Rabbi Talks with Jesus* by Jacob Neusner, whom Benedict calls a "great intellectual." Benedict writes at one stage that he wants to insert himself into their conversation. He praises the "great love" with which Neusner writes of Jesus, and applauds him for seeing clearly what Benedict believes too many Christian exegetes, in their passion for dissection, fail to grasp: that the Jesus of the New Testament is precisely the Christ of Faith, one who claims for himself the authority that belongs only to God.

"Jesus was not simply another reforming rabbi," Neusner writes, in a passage Benedict cites with approval. "What's in discussion are the claims of authority on the part of Jesus." In that sense, Benedict

claims, Neusner "liquidates" the image of Jesus as a preacher of liberal morality promoted by Harnack and others.

Benedict adds that he also wants to walk along the same path with Neusner in order to better understand "our Jewish brothers."

Another insight into Benedict's attitude towards Judaism comes in his discussion of the Parable of the Prodigal Son (or, as noted above, as the pope prefers, the "Parable of the Two Brothers."). Benedict notes that ancient Christians tended to see in the two brothers representations of the Pagans (the profligate brother who saw the light) and the Jews (the earnest older brother who stayed home and followed all the rules).

"This application to the Jews is not unjustified," the pope writes, "if we leave it as we've found it in the text; as a delicate effort of God to persuade Israel, an effort which is completely in the hands of God. We should certainly note, in fact, that the father of the parable not only does not contest the fidelity of the older brother, but expressly confirms his identity as a beloved son: 'My son, you are with me always, and everything I have is yours.' Such an interpretation would be wrong, however, if it were transformed into a condemnation of the Jews, which is not what the text is talking about."

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Though Benedict is a gracious figure, sometimes in the thrust-and-parry of academic argument, one can feel the iron fist beneath his velvet gloves. There are passages in *Jesus of Nazareth* where his frustration with exegetes who cast doubt on the reliability of the gospels becomes especially clear.

Perhaps the best example is Benedict's discussion of the temptations of Christ. In the gospel accounts, Satan supports his offers by quoting the Psalms, and Jesus responds by quoting Deuteronomy. Benedict says the conversation reads like a debate between two experts on the Scriptures, and notes approvingly a passage from Vladimir Solov'ëv, a 19th century Russian philosopher, in his book on the Anti-Christ. Solov'ëv wrote that the Anti-Christ "received a doctorate *honoris causa* in theology from the University of Tübingen; he's a great expert in the Bible."

"With this account," Benedict writes, "Solov'ëv wanted to express in drastic fashion his skepticism with regard to a certain kind of erudite exegesis of his time. It's not a matter of rejecting scientific study of the Bible as such, but rather a very healthy and necessary warning regarding erroneous paths that such study might take. Interpretation of the Bible can, in fact, become an instrument of the Anti-Christ. It's not only Solov'ëv who says so, it's implicitly affirmed in the account of the temptation itself. The most destructive books on the figure of Jesus, which dismantle the faith, are interwoven with the presumed results of exegesis."

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Finally, anyone who knows the thought of Benedict realizes how strongly he recoils from charges that Catholicism went wrong by "Hellenizing" the faith of the Bible.

In fact, Benedict has argued that the encounter between Christianity and the thought world of Greco-Roman antiquity was providential, and that Christianity cannot simply shuck aside its Hellenistic inheritance, like a snake casting off an old layer of skin, without losing something essential. (That formed part of the argument in his now-famous address at the University of Regensburg, which few noticed because of controversies over his comments about Islam.)

In that light, it's interesting that the very last paragraph of *Jesus of Nazareth* aims to exonerate the church from the charge that by adopting Hellenistic philosophical concepts, it betrayed the message of Scripture. Instead, he argues, Greek concepts allowed the early church to explicate more clearly the claims implicit in the Bible about what it means for Jesus to be the "Son of God," and to save those claims from misinterpretation.

"It was necessary," he writes, "to clarify successfully this new significance through complex and difficult processes of differentiation and through pain-staking research, in order to protect it from mythicopolytheistic and political interpretations. This was the motive for which the First Council of Nicea (325) employed the adjective *homoousios* ('of the same substance'). This term did not Hellenize the faith, it did not burden the faith with an extraneous philosophy, but rather it fixed precisely the incomparably new and different element which appeared in [the Bible's] speech about Jesus with the Father. In the Credo of Nicea, the church once again says together with Peter, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' "

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