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Q & A: Fr. Robert Imbelli

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Distinctly Catholic

As mentioned, this week at Q & A we will be looking at the papacy of Pope Benedict XVI to mark the publication of a new book, *Pope Benedict XVI: Essays and Reflections on His Papacy*, published by the USCCB.

Our first interviewee, Fr. Robert Imbelli, is a professor of theology at Boston College and he was good enough to send his thoughts on Pope Benedict's pastoral-theological approach.

The question: What is one of Pope Benedict's most significant contributions to the life of the Church?

Father Imbelli: Since he was a young student of theology, Pope Benedict found in John Henry Newman a theological and pastoral sensibility akin to his own. Newman's concern to help believers "realize," make more fully real for themselves, the meaning of their faith is very much Benedict's own pressing desire.

This concern of Benedict manifests itself even in his more theoretical writings, like the classic *Introduction to Christianity* and the difficult, but deeply rewarding, *Eschatology*. But, as with Newman, it comes to supreme expression in his magnificent sermons. Perhaps no Pope, since Gregory the Great, has crafted such theologically substantive and aesthetically sensitive homilies. They are probing reflections upon the texts of Scripture, illuminated by suggestive references to the concrete context and congregation to whom they are addressed.

Benedict believes that the need to "realize" the grace of the Gospel is particularly imperative today. Nowhere, perhaps, does Benedict's persuasion find more succinct expression than in the "Foreword" to his book, *Jesus of Nazareth*. There he identifies the pastoral predicament that he discerns in the

contemporary Church. Some academic studies of the New Testament have rendered problematic for believers the image of Jesus conveyed in the Church's liturgical and theological traditions. The perilous result is that "Intimate friendship with Jesus, on which everything depends, is in danger of clutching at thin air."

Here, in sharp relief, is the issue that Benedict seeks to address in all his preaching, teaching, and theological reflection. It is the Newmanian program (not to mention that of the New Testament itself!) of aiding believers in their realization of Jesus Christ, so as to enter into intimate and life-giving relationship with him. Nowhere is the Pope's program more clearly set forth than in his *Jesus of Nazareth*, the second volume of which has been completed and should be available in time for Lent.

From this theological-pastoral imperative proceed two further aspects of Pope Benedict's ministry. The first is his effort to embody the centrality of Christ in the liturgy by symbolic forms and gestures. Hence the placement of the cross on the altar as an anamnesis of Christ whose sacrifice enabled and enables the Eucharistic meal. Hence also the promotion of a prolonged silence after the readings of God's Word and after the reception of communion. These are signs and gestures that seek to foster for believers their realization of the truth and love of Jesus Christ.

This discernment is also the underlying motivation of the Pope's insistence upon an interpretation of the Council as "reform within continuity." The continuity in question is most fundamentally Jesus Christ himself. It is Christ, whom Vatican II proclaims, in profound continuity with the Tradition, to be the fullness of revelation in person (*Dei Verbum*) and, consequently, the Light of all nations (*Lumen Gentium*).

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