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Pope to give out first Ratzinger Prizes in theology

by Francis X. Rocca by Religion News Service

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican on Tuesday (June 14) announced three winners of the inaugural Ratzinger Prize in theology, which Pope Benedict XVI (known as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger until his papal election) will present at a ceremony on June 30.

The inaugural winners include an Italian expert on the writings of early Christian theologians; a Spanish scholar whose subjects have ranged from St. Bonaventure to Oscar Wilde; and a German monk who wrote his doctoral thesis on the theology of the future pope himself.

The prize, which carries a cash award of 50,000 euros (\$72,000), is intended as a kind of "Nobel Prize in Theology," according to Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the former vicar general (or acting bishop) of Rome, who served as chairman of the selection committee.

Manlio Simonetti, 85 and the only layman among the recipients, is a former professor at the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and a specialist in the writings of the early church fathers, including Augustine, Origen and Gregory the Great.

The Rev. Olegario Gonzalez de Cardedal, 76, has written extensively in the field of Christology, but also on contemporary topics including the relationship of church and state in his native Spain, and a comparative study of German, Spanish and English poetry.

The Rev. Maximilian Heim, 50, a Cistercian monk, is abbot of the Heiligenkreuz Abbey and a professor at Austria's University of Heiligenkreuz. He is the author of "Joseph Ratzinger: Life in the Church and Living Theology" (2007), and a consultant to the committee that publishes Benedict's complete works.

Notably, all of the recipients are European, and none works primarily in the English-speaking world.

“Being able to assign only three prizes, we were forced to limit ourselves to three linguistic areas,” Ruini said at a Vatican press conference on Tuesday. “In the future we will certainly overcome this limit.”

Awarding the prize is one of the major activities of the Joseph Ratzinger (Benedict XVI) Vatican Foundation, which was established last year by Benedict’s former students to promote the study of his work and of theology in general. The pope still meets with his former students for a two-day seminar every summer.

The foundation’s president, Monsignor Giuseppe Antonio Scotti, said Tuesday that funding for the cash award came largely from a group of non-profit foundations associated with Italian banks.

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