

# Bonner Querschnitte

## Bonn Profiles – Press Reports

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## BQ 242 – No. 06/2013

### The Pope's resignation did not come as such a great surprise

#### An interview with Thomas Schirmacher

(Bonn, 23.02.2013)

*You recently met with the Pope. Is he really so weak?*

At the three week long synod in Rome in October last year, everyone was able to see that Pope Benedict XVI is physically limited to the point that some days he must forgo or limit his speaking, even though he feels fit intellectually. I saw him recently at two masses and I was reminded of the final time of Pope John Paul II. As he spoke he was fully alert, but he was not physically able to stand on his own.



The Pope receives books on the topic of the persecution of Christians (© L'Osservatore Romano)

the duty," to step down. That Benedict would not take the same path as his predecessor was something that many knew, although it was not quite clear how he would do it.

*Isn't it much more important that the Pope feels mentally fit?*

Of course. However, the three week synod was demanding enough for a 52 year old guest such as me, not to mention what it was like for the leadership of the synod. The Pope, however, continued to lead the normal affairs, participated in many more

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meetings than would otherwise have been the case, and had a number of evening appearances outside the Vatican. A number of people asked how he was actually able to handle it. A papal mass is in itself physically demanding, partly because there are always television cameras pointed at you. A pope who is becoming weaker and weaker can either leave certain affairs to others, as has actually always been the case, or he can let those things rest, as was the case in Pope John Paul II's final phase. The step taken by Benedict is truly provided for in ecclesiastical law, but it has never been utilized – a resignation due to the infirmity of old age.

*You published a German book in 2002 entitled **The Pope and Suffering: Why the Pope does not resign**, which in 2005 was released with the title **Pope John Paul II and Suffering: Why the Pope does not resign**. What distinguishes Pope Benedict from his predecessor?*

Pope Benedict has clearly understood his office to be less sacramental than his predecessor, who saw his suffering as a continuation of the suffering of Christ. In recent months it has been noticeable that Benedict has above all increasingly lost control over the governmental sector of the Vatican. The spiritual aspect of his office, as head of the church and as a theologian, has always been more of a priority than the political aspect as head of state of the Holy See. It is not by chance that the political significance and the political activity of the Vatican have been reduced at several points. Even in Germany in his farewell address in Freiburg he called for the Roman Catholic Church to loosen itself from being caught up with the world. It is completely in keeping with how Benedict became Pope and what his understanding of the papal office is, that he would give up the office if he can no longer guarantee its leadership.

*Less sacramental?*

Yes. He once said to the cardinals that a pope is fallible most of the time. In most of his masses and addresses there are hints that he makes mistakes, that he seeks forgiveness from God and the Church, and that he can only hope that God will protect him from wrong decisions. That even applies to his short resignation announcement. This was not the case with John Paul II. That includes the continual indications made by Benedict that he is not head of the church but rather that Jesus is.

The Pope has made many an unusual decision substantiating this. Thus his three volume book on Jesus was written expressly as a private individual who makes mistakes, which anyone may freely communicate to him by email. No predecessor of his had ever done such a thing; in the past published papal writings were always official writings only. Within his annual meeting with former students, he was nothing more than the professor conducting discussions, and he was one who also willingly invited Protestant professors to join in the discussion. He abruptly did away with the status symbols of his predecessors, above all those of a political nature, such as head coverings symbolizing political power. Stated another way, in contrast to his predecessors, Pope Benedict never gave up being the private individual Joseph

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Ratzinger, and thus it is only consistent that he may retire from participation in public affairs, becoming a private man again.

### *What is your opinion as a Protestant?*

To lead 1.2 billion people, to monarchically run a small state, to control enormous wealth, and as one of a few people to continually be present in the media is hardly even achievable for people who are physically fit. The Pope is also only mortal and reality is catching up with the superelevation of his office in papal dogma dating from 1870. The Pope himself has recommended to Orthodox churches that it is enough to acknowledge the office of the pope in its configuration prior to the split of the church in 1054. His resignation, even if it is covered by ecclesiastical law, demystifies the office and makes it more human. Presumably it will not be the last resignation due to reasons of age but should rather become the rule.

### *You are one of the Protestant experts on the Roman Catholic Church and have spoken with many of its high officials on all continents. What motivates an Evangelical theologian and a representative of the World Evangelical Alliance in this respect?*

I have of course always taught confessional studies. Whoever wants to understand and teach about Christianity as it is found around the world cannot just bypass the Catholic half of it. Additionally, the Vatican, the World Council of Churches including the Orthodox member churches, and the World Evangelical Alliance are the only three large-scale Christian umbrella organizations, with the Vatican representing about 50% of global Christianity and the latter two 25% each of global Christianity. You cannot simply pass by each other. This applies to the activity with the UN in New York and Geneva and the OSCE in Vienna as well as on the topic of the persecution of Christians. And I like to know my counterparts 'in the original,' which means face to face.



Geoff Tunnicliffe, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, in conversation with Pope Benedict XIV. (© L'Osservatore Romano)

### *What has the relationship of the World Evangelical Alliance been to the Vatican and vice versa?*

Our General Secretary Geoff Tunnicliffe has met the Pope several times. We made our contribution at the synod. We have always appreciated good relationships with several senior colleagues of the Pope, such as the heads of papal congregations including Cardinals

Kurt Koch, Peter Turkson, and Jean-Louis Tauran. And as the World Evangelical Alliance, we have always been treated respectfully. This particularly applies to the five years of negotiations on the joint document by the Vatican, the World Evangelical

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Alliance, and the World Council of Churches entitled “Christian Witness in a Multi-Religious World,” which I led from our side. But this also applies to our on-going official discussions on theological similarities and differences, which on our side is being led by my predecessor as Chairman of the Theological Commission, Rolf Hille.

*Is that then a rapprochement of the Alliance with respect to the Roman Catholic Church?*

You should know that the times when we used to slink around each other and only talked – and only acted - as if we were in agreement are passé. In discussions it is pleasing how unexpected similarities as much as differing positions are openly addressed and comprehensively discussed.

As our General Secretary presented the case of evangelization upon the occasion of the Vatican Synod, which the Vatican had requested, he stated in the second sentence that the gospel arises solely out of the Scriptures, which are the highest standard for faith and life. As he said this, he was just two or three meters from the Pope.

This short address given by the General Secretary of the WEA before the pope and the synod upon the occasion of the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Second Vatican Council, which at the same time was a public declaration of the WEA's Theological Commission, reads: “Evangelization: The Hallmark of the Evangelical Faith” and begins with the words: “Evangelism is the proclamation in word, deed and Christian character of the saving work of Jesus Christ

on the cross and through the resurrection. Evangelism lies at the core of the identity of being evangelical. We affirm that it is not possible to be truly evangelical without a radical commitment to world evangelization.” Does someone speak this way if he does not know where he stands?

Additionally, cardinals and other high officials have always spoken quite plainly even about the mistakes of their own church, just as we, and I personally, have not given the impression that everything that glitters is gold. Please understand that I must treat certain information as confidential and may not discuss it. Ecumenical relationships are also based on personal trust

*The World Evangelical Alliance was also represented at the Assisi World Day of Prayer for Peace, wasn't it?*



In conversation with Cardinal Turkson, a promising papal candidate (© private)

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The Pope had made it unmistakably clear beforehand that he wanted to prevent any suspicion of syncretism or of joint inter-religious prayer. After all, it was the only time that he publicly contradicted his predecessor when 25 years prior, as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, he refused to go to the Assisi World Day of Prayer. By assigning every religion its own building for prayer in Assisi, no truly joint prayer took place.

*But should there really be friendship between Evangelical and Roman-Catholic leaders?*

Let's leave the complicated ecumenical arithmetic aside for a moment. Experience simply shows that friendship and trusting relationships, even between people who think differently, are indispensable and can prevent much harm. It would be fatal to never personally look in the eyes of those who think differently or are opponents and to only look at them from a distance as through gun sights. Christianity is the religion of love, and love always has something to do with relationships and trust.

This is best illustrated by the reunification of Germany as a result of one of the largest peaceful, non-blooded revolutions in history in Communist Germany. At the defining moment it was the personal trust between Helmut Kohl and Mikhail Gorbachev, as well as between Kohl and George Bush, Sr., beyond all political and cultural differences, that was crucial in contributing to the possibility of peace and freedom in Germany!

*You have stayed overnight in the hotel where the cardinals sleep during the conclave? Is that right?*

Yes. Up to the selection of John Paul II, the overnight stays for the – predominantly rather old – cloistered cardinals was an imposition. John Paul II then ordered that the cardinals be allowed to move about within the entire Vatican and had an own hotel 'Martha' built with suites and individual rooms directly next to St. Peter's Cathedral. The rooms are rather Spartan and of course have no contact to the outside world. I always knew which cardinal had slept in 'my' bed at the time of the last conclave in 2005.

*What was your contribution to the Roman Catholic synod?*

I reminded the synod about persecuted Christians in the world. The Pope and a number of cardinals welcomed this immensely. The Pope thanked me for my efforts with warm words but seen on the whole that



Schirmmacher as a guest at the synod in October 2012  
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topic remained tabu, even when representatives of the Eastern churches or China wanted to place it on the agenda.

*From the Evangelical point of view, which publications do you find to be his most significant?*

First of all, I would mention the three volume book on Jesus. Not only because it fights for the historical credibility of the Gospels, but above all due to its argumentation. The Pope wanted to make it clear that Jesus is the epicenter of the Christian faith and he repeated this clearly at the synod: the Christian faith is a personal relationship with Jesus. He continually says that the future belongs to a Christianity of decision, based on a personal decision and a relationship with Jesus, not a Christianity of traditional or cultural membership.

Next to that I would mention his first encyclical *God is love (Deus caritas est)*, which places something in the center which strangely has been missing for hundreds of years in church confessions, that is that love is God's central characteristic in the Bible. In the center is a nonviolent Christianity which forces no one and devotes itself towards those who are weak.

The second encyclical *Saved in Hope* was actually almost only a Bible study, apart from the final chapter about Mary which comes off as attached in order to make the document 'Catholic.'

*Hasn't the Pope been a rather conservative hardliner?*

With ethical questions he was much more conservative than he was with dogmatic questions. Since ethical questions above all occupy the secular public and liberal Catholics, the dogmatic side of things was given less attention. Viewed dogmatically, he brought movement and made approaches to other churches, also to Evangelicals. This was tangible from the abolition of 'limbus' early on in his term in office, to the book on Jesus in which he was to a certain extent exegetically generous and broke away from later typically Catholic interpretations, and all the way to the relationship with Orthodox churches. One notices that as a well-read theologian he thoroughly knew other positions from books and writings as well as from comprehensive conversations and that he took the dogmatic discussion and opinion of others seriously.

*His best action from your point of view?*

Tightening ecclesiastical law regarding sexual abuse as a consequence of his excellent March 19, 2010 pastoral letter to Catholics in Ireland.

*His biggest mistake – leaving aside theological differences?*

Pope John Paul II viewed his press secretary as his closest confidant who kept him up to date on the world, independent of the apparatus of the Vatican. He also saw him as

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a representative of the Pope, able to keep the media up to date. Benedict never had such a press secretary as a confidant, and the media appeared to be bothersome to him. His press secretary was actually only able to relay official communiqués. In my opinion, that contributed to the escalation of many media campaigns.



Schirmacher with his counterpart in the Vatican: the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Theological Commission) Georg Müller (© private)

have been written by professionals or – at least in part – are in the original and have been written in a timely manner. This is a point at which the Pope's successor surely has some great opportunities.

### *Is there anything you regret?*

In 2008 the Pope said the following: "The root of evil lies in an Islam which is by its very nature violent and conflict-laden." He was initially a 'sharpshooter' when it came to the topic of Islam, and then he became increasingly still with respect to this topic until at the end it was almost tabu. Surely that is an unpleasant topic for a pope, and he had to always think about the many Christians who live in Islamic countries. However, in the end the topic was underexposed. And the necessary differentiation between Islam and Islamism was never sufficiently addressed.

*We would like to thank you for the conversation.*

### *What about the Pope and social media*

This is a good example of why the Pope wants to place his office in the hands of someone who is younger. The three volumes of the Jesus book were written by the Pope with a pencil! He was principally very much in favor of using Facebook, Twitter, etc. The Vatican generally got that quite right, but the personal side of such media failed due to the fact that the Pope could not work with a tablet PC on his own and was appalled by the negative reactions. Followers in the social media can, however, differentiate very well whether entries

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- [Photo 2](#): Schirmmacher as a guest at the synod in October 2012 (© private)
- [Photo 3](#): In conversation with Cardinal Turkson, a promising papal candidate (© private)
- [Photo 4](#): Thomas Schirmmacher with his counterpart in the Vatican: the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (Theological Commission) Georg Müller (© private)
- [Photo 5](#): Geoff Tunnicliffe, General Secretary of the World Evangelical Alliance, in conversation with Pope Benedict XIV. (© L'Osservatore Romano)

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