

NEW ENGLAND NEWSPAPER OF THE YEAR

# TELEGRAM & GAZETTE

THURSDAY, APRIL 21, 2005

WORCESTER, MASSACHUSETTS



## Pope Benedict XVI expected to expand papal infallibility

By Bernadette Brooten

**O**n a beautiful spring day in 1972, I met Pope Benedict XVI. We sat facing each other in a seminar on papal infallibility in the medieval university town of Tübingen, Germany: Joseph Ratzinger, who was to become Pope Benedict XVI, and I, a young Catholic theology student.

The teacher, Hans Küng, argued that the pope is not infallible, while Cardinal Ratzinger, a guest in the seminar, argued that he is. I took upon myself the task of critiquing the cardinal's position on theological grounds — to his face. Papal infallibility is not grounded in Scripture or church tradition, and it severely limits the pope from undoing past mistakes.

Today, Pope Benedict XVI has opportunities that probably even he didn't dream of to expand papal infallibility. Indeed, during his time as a Vatican official, Cardinal Ratzinger extended infallibility to include the ban on the ordination of women and the invalidity of Anglican ordinations.

The new pope always has argued that the Roman Catholic Church should stand for absolute truth vis-à-vis the state and society. As prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981-2005, Cardinal Ratzinger censored and silenced a number of leading theologians, including Charles Curran, who argued for the morality of birth control, and Leonardo Boff, a Latin American liberation theologian.

Cardinal Ratzinger's 2000 statement *Dominus Jesus* ("Lord Jesus") raised grave concerns among both Protestants and non-Christians. In it, he defined Protestant churches as "ecclesial communities" that are not "churches in the proper sense." He further claimed that, because "followers of other religions ... are in a gravely deficient situation," the Roman Ca-

AS I SEE IT



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tholic Church must "announc[e] the necessity of conversion to Jesus Christ and of adherence to the church through baptism and the other sacraments, in order to participate fully in communion with God." Jews and followers of other religions have long asked that they not be made the objects of proselytizing.

He has strictly opposed church acceptance and even civil rights for lesbians, gay men and bisexuals. In 1986, he actually placed the blame for violence against these groups upon calls for increased civil rights. When the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops suggested in 1987 that condom use might be a "lesser evil" that could save lives in the AIDS crisis, Cardinal Ratzinger insisted that, even as a lesser evil, people should not use condoms to prevent AIDS.

U.S. Catholics, still shaken by

the clergy sexual abuse crisis, will wonder how Pope Benedict XVI will respond to it. In 2002, U.S. bishops meeting in Dallas passed a series of norms governing sexual abuse by priests, but a commission that included Vatican representatives significantly weakened these norms later that year.

In Europe and elsewhere, citizens will be looking to see whether the new pope will accept a separation of church and state. He angered many by arguing that Turkey should not be admitted to the European Union because it is an Islamic society, and that the new European Constitution should have referred to Christianity.

If papal infallibility strikes you as a fine point of encrusted catholic dogma of interest only within the confines of dark and dank theological circles, consider the public-policy implications.

Already, the Roman Catholic prohibition of condoms has led to countless deaths from AIDS. The prohibition on artificial means of birth control has contributed to overpopulation, with resulting poverty and damage to our ecosystems. Cardinal Ratzinger's advice in 2004 that bishops consider refusing the Eucharist to pro-choice Catholic politicians surely swayed some Catholic votes.

But the new pope's theology of an infallible papacy is not the only, or even the most traditional, Catholic theology.

Catholic theology is to take account of the "sense of the faithful" (*sensus fidelium*), that is, what the people of the church actually believe. No one can deny that numerous faithful Catholics disagree with the Vatican on questions of sexuality, but also on the value of other religions, and on the separation of religion and the state.

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Telegram & Gazette, (Worcester, Mass.), April 21, 2005. Daily circulation 103,477.  
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