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A theological debate for the ages

Brandeis professor discussed papal infallibility with new pope in 1972

By Christopher Moore
DAILY NEWS STAFF

WALTHAM — As the world speculates about the future of the Roman Catholic Church under the direction of Pope Benedict XVI, a Brandeis University professor who debated the man 33 years ago looks to his past with a skeptical eye.

A PATH TO UNITY

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Bernadette Brooten is a Catholic theologian and professor of Christian studies at Brandeis. As a theology student at the University of Tübingen in Germany in 1972, Brooten took part in a debate between her professor and 11 German theologians. One of those theologians was Joseph Ratzinger, the man the world now calls Pope Benedict XVI.

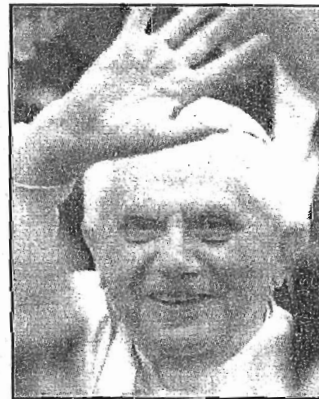


CONTRIBUTED PHOTO

Professor Bernadette Brooten

"It was a turning point in his (Ratzinger's) career, actually," said Brooten. "Up to that point, he had been known as a fairly liberal theology professor."

The debate took place at a seminar on papal infallibility. Brooten's professor, Hans Kung, had written a book about



AP PHOTO BY ANDREW MEDICHINI

Pope Benedict XVI

the 100th anniversary of the First Vatican Council, which had declared the pope to be infallible when making official declarations on matters of faith and morals.

The declaration has to do with a Catholic doctrine called "apostolic succession," which essen-

tially holds that the teachings of Jesus Christ have been passed from his apostles to each successive pope until the present day. That unbroken line, according to the doctrine, ensures the pope's authority on spiritual and moral subjects.

In his book, Kung argued against the doctrine. Not only was it not introduced until 1870, Kung argued, but it also restricts future popes from undoing past mistakes.

At the seminar, Ratzinger disagreed.

"Little did he know that what he was defending, he would one day enjoy," said Brooten.

Brooten predicted yesterday that Benedict XVI will only expand the doctrine, missing opportunities for reform within the church and alienating bishops outside the Vatican.

From 1981 to 2005, Ratzinger was head of the Sacred Congre-

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Professor looks back at theological debate

gation for the Doctrine of the Faith, one of the nine departments that assist the pope in the governing and administration of the church. In that position, he declared that the ban on women as priests was infallible and that followers of non-Christian religions were "in a gravely deficient situation."

"He argued that Turkey should not be admitted into the European Union, because it's an Islamic society," said Brooten. "This has policy implications. In Germany, Christian Democrats have had hesitations about admitting Turkey into the EU because they're Muslim. He does shape public opinion on matters that affect people who are not Catholic and are not Christian."

According to Brooten, Ratzinger also stated in 1986 that, while violence against gays and lesbians is not to be condoned, it is nevertheless not surprising "when civil legislation is introduced to protect behavior to which no one has any conceivable right."

Such declarations have caused many to doubt that Ratzinger, as Pope Benedict XVI, will support human rights declarations that include equal

treatment for women or gays and lesbians. Many are also anxious over how his policies will affect the Catholic community's relationship with Muslims and Jews.

"However, in his Mass (yesterday), the new pope said he respected other religions," said Brooten. "Our hope would be that he might move away from this tone, now that he's pope, that he would take a more conciliatory tone."

Brooten described the new pope as a "very intelligent, polite man," whose unabrasive personality will likely help him as pope. As she reflected on his past and pondered the future, she could not help but marvel at the connection she shares with the man now front and center on the world stage.

"It was an astounding experience for me, as a 21 year old in a foreign country," she said. "I was presenting my views, in German, to the man who would become the pope. I didn't know it at the time, but it was exciting anyway."

Christopher Moore is a staff writer for the Daily News Tribune. He can be reached at cmoore@cnc.com or 781-398-8009.

The Daily News Tribune, April 21, 2005. Daily circulation 8,489. "Little did he (Joseph Ratzinger) know that what he was defending, he would one day enjoy," said Brooten." Bernadette Brooten, professor of Christian Studies, Brandeis University.