



## THE NATIONAL CATHOLIC BIOETHICS CENTER

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### ***In Memoriam Pope Benedict XVI***

Pope Benedict XVI was a special friend of The National Catholic Bioethics Center (NCBC) going back to the years when he served as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). He spoke at the NCBC workshop for bishops in 1984 and in 1991, and we published a book with his words of wisdom entitled "[On Conscience](#)" that is available for purchase. Pope Benedict XVI appointed our past NCBC president, Dr. John Haas, as a member of the Pontifical Academy for Life and a consultant to the Pontifical Council for the Pastoral Care of Health Care Workers.

The death of a pope is a cause of sadness around the world, although the abdication of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013 and election of Pope Francis as his successor means that the Church is not left in an interregnum and anticipating a conclave. It is indeed a unique situation to have a pope celebrating the funeral of his predecessor.

Cardinal Ratzinger and subsequently Pope Benedict had a major impact on Catholic bioethics. He issued the CDF teaching document [Donum Vitae: Instruction on Respect for Human Life in Its Origin and on the Dignity of Procreation](#). It explained why the Catholic Church cannot accept *in vitro* fertilization and clarified bioethical questions surrounding scientific techniques linked to procreation developed in the 1970s and 1980s. Later, as pontiff, the CDF released *Dignitas Personae* in 2008 which gave more instruction on Catholic teaching regarding the proper reverence for human life and the dignity of human embryos, including condemnation of the freezing and cold storage of these tiny human beings which takes place on a massive scale in many countries.

Just before they went into the conclave to elect the successor to Pope St. John Paul II, he preached a sermon to the other cardinals referring to the "dictatorship of relativism" as a major threat to the Church and the world. With his election as Pope Benedict XVI this phrase became famous and a major theme of his papacy. His main point was that almost any false view is accepted or tolerated by some powerful institutions and opinion leaders today, but the truths of the Catholic Faith and morality are frequently condemned. In many ways he built on the strong restatement of Catholic belief in objective truth and morality in St. John Paul II's encyclical letter *Veritatis Splendor*.

Pope Benedict was an exceptionally gifted theologian and profound thinker. His numerous books and articles showed his academic talents. He was also a very gentle person and quite shy. His students loved him and appreciated his qualities. Unfortunately, the constant meetings with crowds of people and tremendous administrative responsibilities of the papal role weighed on him. The corruption he saw in some quarters of the Church and resistance to orthodox Catholic teaching troubled him deeply. He felt increasingly frail and unable to deal with some of these problems. This led to his dramatic decision to abdicate his office and become pope emeritus in 2013.

One insight of Pope Benedict XVI that has continued to inspire Catholic thought is “human ecology”. He remarked that Catholic teaching is clear that humanity should be good stewards of creation and not destroy our natural world. This same respect for animals and plants cannot be coherently promoted without also safeguarding the special dignity of human beings.

“If there is a lack of respect for the right to life and to a natural death, if human conception, gestation, and birth are made artificial, if human embryos are sacrificed to research, the conscience of society ends up losing the concept of human ecology and, along with it, that of environmental ecology. It is contradictory to insist that future generations respect the natural environment when our educational systems and laws do not help them to respect themselves. The book of nature is one and indivisible: it takes in not only the environment but also life, sexuality, marriage, the family, social relations: in a word, integral human development. Our duties towards the environment are linked to our duties towards the human person, considered in himself and in relation to others. It would be wrong to uphold one set of duties while trampling on the other. Herein lies a grave contradiction in our mentality and practice today: one which demeans the person, disrupts the environment, and damages society.”

These words from his encyclical letter [\*Caritas in Veritate\*](#) showed how bioethics pertains to all living beings and should not be artificially divided. Recognizing the unique dignity of people and respecting the environment go hand in hand and must not be placed in opposition to each other.

Very importantly, Pope Benedict was the first pontiff to speak out frequently against gender ideology—the radical modern ideology that gender is fluid and not biologically based. [He said](#) this “undermines the fundamental understanding of what it means to be a human.” He reminded us that our Christian anthropology rejects the dualistic view that a person can be in the “wrong body,” that one can be a “man” in a “woman’s” body or *vice versa*. The Catholic teaching is that God creates us body and soul and that our biological sex is good and should be embraced. Pope Benedict had the insight that “this is the age of sin against God the Creator.” Pope Francis cited this statement of Pope Benedict approvingly and added to the [reflection](#) calling gender ideology a form of “ideological colonization.”

We should pray for Pope Benedict XVI’s soul and for the protection and guidance of the Church he loved so much. His [spiritual testament](#) urges us to “Stand firm in the faith!” and not to be confused. That is indeed in keeping with his whole life and ministry. We can honor him by a renewed fidelity to and love for the Church.