



Last Testament: In His Own Words

Pope Benedict XVI, Peter Seewald

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Pope Benedict made history by being the first Pope in over 700 years to resign from office. The Catholic Church the world over was stunned. Worn out by corruption in the Church and by an endless series of clerical sex scandals, he decided that the resolution of all these problems was outside his power for a man of his age.

Last Testament is nearest to an autobiography from the shy and private man who has remained “hidden to the world” in a former convent in the Vatican gardens. He breaks his silence on issues such as:

- The “Vatileaks” case in which his butler leaked some of his personal letters that alleged corruption and scandal in the Vatican
- The presence of a “gay lobby” within the Vatican and how he dismantled it
- His alleged Nazi upbringing
- His attempts at cleaning up the “dirt in the church” (clerical sexual abuse)
- The mysterious private secretary “Gorgeous George”

On a more personal level he writes with great warmth of his successor Pope Francis, who he admits has a popular touch, a star quality which he has lacked. Much controversy still surrounds Pope Benedict’s Papacy-in this book he addresses these controversies and reveals how at his late age, governing and reforming the Papacy and particularly the Vatican, was beyond him.

Last Testament: In His Own Words Details

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Christopher Blosser says

Interesting retrospective and summation of the life of Joseph Ratzinger/Pope Benedict XVI in his own words and a welcome ending to Seewald's prior book-length interviews, Salt of The Earth, God and The World and Light of The World.

Of particular interest to me was the Pope Emeritus' recollections of his intellectual interactions with fellow academics in philosophy and theology, his experience as a peritus at Vatican II, and his appraisals of political figures he encountered in the course of his pontificate.

Throughout the interview his character shines through as a man of genuine faith, conviction and humility -- who regardless of his impressive theological stature and academic legacy is nonetheless capable of receiving criticism and correction from colleagues ("he reproached me many times, which is possible and proper among friends"), appreciative of those instances in life in where one is "made small" as opportunities for Christlike self-mortification ("That does someone good: to recognize once again one's utter poverty").

Likewise as Pope, cognizant of very clear ethical disagreements with political leaders (Obama, Castro, Putin), was able to see their humanity as well:

"I got to know these people, and not only from their political and tactical sides. What was generally impressive about these encounters was discerning that -- although these people indeed think very differently to us on many issues -- they certainly try to see what is right."

And so with respect to agnostics, professed atheists and left-wingers, "if they think and speak honestly. Of course there are fanatics, who are only functionaries and just dispense their working slogans. But if they are human beings, one can see that they are somehow restless inside..."

Above all, and as with prior interviews, he comes across as one whose life -- and pontificate -- "put God and faith at the center [and] Holy Scripture in the foreground"; "to discover God again, to discover Christ again, and so find the centrality of faith again" -- and for whom "the important thing is that the faith endures today. I see this as the central task. All the rest is just administrative issues..."

Eapen Chacko says

This book is remarkable for one reason that the interviewer Peter Seewald, a German journalist, who has known the Pope Emeritus for many years, goes beyond the purview of any print or electronic journalist I know. He throws very pointed, personal questions at the Pope, and harbors on if he's not satisfied with the answer. No modern celebrity of any stripe has opened himself to this kind of vulnerability. The result is an informative, surprising, at times touching, and honest book about Pope Benedict, his relationship to his predecessor St. John Paul II, and an evaluation of his papacy.

Pope Benedict, as the interviewer says, is someone who speaks so carefully and thoughtfully that his words can often just go straight into print. His responses to some questions are just like this. Pope Benedict would have loved to have been a Professor of Theology for life. Instead, he was called to become a reluctant bishop, then a Cardinal to serve at the side of St. John Paul II. He wanted to resign his position several times but the Polish Pope always said, "No."

Eventually, Benedict became a reluctant Pope. His writings, whether on the Saints or addressing an audience at Regensburg, are clear, scholarly, accessible, challenging, informative and demand real engagement by the reader. His decision to step down to effectively become a monk in reflection and contemplation was historic, and he explains his reasons very well here. The knee-jerk press questioned his motives, but in the case of Pope Benedict, he says what he believes and has no ulterior agenda.

He admits that certain issues at the end of his papacy, when he had already been physically and emotionally drained, could have gone better, but his explanations also lend credence to the fact that he set lots of things in motion, like the reforms of the Vatican Bank, which Pope Francis is still trying to work out. No Pope is elected because he is a Catholic Jack Welch, thank God.

In an answer to a question at the end of the book, Pope Benedict offers this response, "...there is not a place where He sits. God Himself is the place beyond all places. If you look into the world you do not see heaven, but you see traces of God everywhere. In the structure of matter, in all the rationality of reality. Even where you see human beings, you find traces of God. You see vices, but you also see goodness, love. These are the places where God is there." Radio talk shows ask every day, "Where is God?" There's the answer.

As a former Professor of theology himself, he says that German theology has to repair itself. "Here theology still has to go thoroughly to work and provide human beings with conceptual possibilities again. Here the translation of theology and faith into the language of today has tremendous lacunae" Theologians from Kung to Curran think that they have been self-anointed to stand as indisputable remakers of the Church's deposit of faith. Pope Benedict, who is one of them, calls them to their original mission, in a gentle way.

Completely blind in one eye, increasingly frail, less and unable to play his beloved piano, Pope Benedict could be a sad figure, but his intellect is as sharp as ever, and his ease with the extremely sharp and sometimes accusatory questions, and his gentleness with the interviewer show a man who is hewing close to his Maker and at peace. I learned a lot from reading this book, and I am sure that you will too.

Marta says

un verdadero regalo

Kevin Wojciechowski says

Reading this book is like getting to know that German grandpa of yours that you're not super close with even though you've visited with him a few times and enjoyed his timeless wisdom, but you figured now's probably a good time to get to know him better since he's nearing death. Then he starts telling you his life story and there are some parts you really could care less about, but there's some things that give you a completely different perspective on his character and makes you wish you'd known him better growing up. You realize

your grandpa was a beer-drinking, sofa-loving, faith-filled man of God.

I'm not a big fan of books set up in interview format and there were some sections of the interview that I admittedly skimmed through. But anyone who desires a glimpse at the resilient yet tender heart of our "papa", Pope emeritus Benedict XVI, needs to give this book a read.

Conor says

Beautiful. A gem of a book.

Sindy Castellanos says

Excelente entrevista que permite tener un acercamiento a la personalidad de Benedicto XVI.

En las respuestas se puede entrever su recorrido humano y espiritual, lo que ayuda a comprender mejor sus reacciones y decisiones.

Durante la lectura destaca la humildad y sencillez con la cual se expresa un gran pensador de nuestro tiempo, que ha influido de manera decisiva en la renovación de la Iglesia Católica.

Andrew says

Of course it gets 5 stars. It's Benedict. But I will say in order of superiority (noting that I've yet to read the Ratzinger Report...but that wasn't a Seewald interview):

1.) Salt of the Earth is the absolute best. It's just such a good book.

2.) Light of the World is really good.

3.) Last Testament is really good, but like 80% of it was covering the same ground as the other interviews. I think this book was made because Seewald is going to write a definitive biography of Benedict, so he needed the do one last get together.

4.) God and the World. I just haven't been able to read it all the way through yet. I think it's because it's more of a theological treatise and less about church politics. I like reading theology, but for some reason it doesn't work in the interview setting....

Read it if you love Benedict. But I will say, there was a lot of name dropping without any context (like if you don't know who Hugo Rahner, Karl Rahner, Balthasar, de Lubac, or any of the heads of vatican offices are then you are going to get confused).

He does go into more detail about his relationships with different people which I found very interesting, but overall it's always fun to listen to Benedict talk about his life and thought.

Lazaro says

It's rare hearing Pope Benedict give off the cuff remarks, and this book is really full of it. Just confirms how much of a humble and holy man he is, full of faith, with a firm and deep understanding.

Michael Joosten says

Whether or not anything else is published under Joseph Ratzinger's name, this reads as his good-bye. Pope Benedict is as clear transcribed as in writing--and he is crystalline in his writing--but there is an added warmth in the transcription. The Seewald interviews are among my favourite Ratzinger books because of this, but it is perhaps especially appropriate in the context of *Last Testament*.

The content of the book is about 80% biographical, spanning Joseph Ratzinger's childhood through his papacy, material for the biography Seewald intend(s/ed) to write (though, personally, I wonder if I would enjoy a biography, even in capable hands, as much as the interviews--there would be more content, since other people's perspectives on the Pope Emeritus would be integrated, but it would be at a further remove). The rest--the initial 20% or so of the book--is a reaction to Pope Benedict's resignation. Leading with this and then traversing Benedict's life up to that point may contain redundancies for some readers, but this feels appropriate: this book is the conclusion to the essay that is Benedict's life. The various parts of recapitulated and put in the context of the whole.

I was 18 when John Paul II died and Benedict XVI announced his impending resignation on my 26th birthday (which... made for a dour mood that day). He was the pope of my formative years, from World Youth Day, through seminary and leaving seminary and leaving Canada and getting married. As an academic and a German and an introvert, as someone too Vatican II for the SSPX and too continuity for the liberal fringe, he was a pope I always identified with. I have missed his papacy, flawed though it was, and I dread the day when he moves on--the last of my grandfathers, so to speak, to pass away.

Thadeus says

This book was very inspirational to me. I generally don't like the idea of interview-based books, but the thoughtful line and coherence of questions made this a very good read. In part, possibly, because it was conversational and it was as if Pope Benedict was speaking with the reader.

I gained much insight into the man, influences on his life, topics that he felt were his mission to share. Hearing on a wide range of topics from how he corresponded and interacted with other theologians, to what types of daily habits he had in various times of his life.

Pope Benedict opened up for me the thoughts and the life of a person of intellect, a little of what the life of a professor might lead, and overall this drew me in. I feel closer to that profession now, and also closer to Pope Benedict. I look forward to reading more of his writing!

Highly recommended!

Angela Boord says

Not as good as Light of the World; I do wish that Seewald had asked more questions that allowed Pope Benedict to expand rather than to give answers of only a few words. But it's still Pope Benedict, and his humility, intellect, and dedication to the Church shine through regardless.

Jeremy says

Ah, a new book by Pope Benedict XVI, and, if the back inside flap is to be believed, his last. And it's not written by him per se, since it is a book-length interview, and a very candid and honest one at that. I loved the clarity and the straightforward nature of the answers that Pope Benedict gives, sometimes a very simple "no" or "perhaps" to the questions that Peter Seewald asks, and a few times even said something was "stupid." It's so refreshing to finally hear the pope's own words on such matters like his resignation (obviously), but also on things such as what he thought he struggled with during his papacy, what his strengths and weaknesses are, and what he wish he had more time to do during his papacy (and even what he wished he had time to do if he had not become pope!)

To that end, the first quarter and the last quarter of the book were the most interesting to me. There were some eye-opening things that I did not know about, and it was great to hear the pope speak about them. So often, I hear people say how Pope Francis is the 'compassionate' pope, while Benedict XVI is an old stiff who was a mean guard dog of the Church, and one who is not good with people. This interview shines light on those false notions placed on him.

The middle half of the book, while good, was more of an interview-biography, and the pope explained where and in what situations he grew up, his studies and jobs before moving to the Vatican, and his relationships with certain people (the small section about his relationship with JP II was really cool though). I just wish everything that the Pope said, throughout the whole interview, was delved into with greater detail. I just want to hear all of what he has to say!

All in all, the book whet my appetite to dive back into some of Benedict's more enduring works like Introduction to Christianity, and his 'Jesus of Nazareth' trilogy (so. good.). More than anything though, it was just good to hear from the Holy Father Emeritus again, a man that I look up to greatly, one whose works I have formally studied, and one who has influenced me in the years during which I really started to understand what it means to have a relationship with Christ.

I can't put it any better than Peter Seewald does in the foreward to this book, 'Last Testament':

"No one besides Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI) has stood for so long by the helm of the biggest and oldest institution in the world. With his contributions to the [Second Vatican] Council, the rediscovery of the Fathers, the bringing to life of doctrine, and the purification and consolidation of the Church, he was not only a renewer of the faith, but also...one of the most significant popes ever, the modern world's Doctor of the Church, of a sort that will not be seen again. With Benedict XVI, an era comes to an end, perhaps even an aeon - one of those chapters of history which in the passing of millennia denote the major turning points of history. The eight years of his papacy were something like the great retreat the Church needed, to buttress the

interior castle and to strengthen her soul. By the verdict of his followers, Benedict XVI was 'a great Pope': 'great due to the vitality and penetrating power of his intelligence, great due to his major contributions to theology, great due to his love for the Church and for humanity, and great due to his virtue and his religiosity.' In the words of Pope Francis, his spirit 'will manifest itself more greatly and more forcefully, from generation to generation.'

Viva il Papa.

Julie Davis says

I actually preordered this by accident or I'd never have read it. As it turns out, I'm glad I did.

Journalist Peter Seewald continues the interview format that he used for his previous books with Pope Benedict XVI. This book serves not only as Pope Benedict's last testament but as a good overview of his entire life. I was interested in reading about the decision to step down as pope and what Benedict's life has been like since. I was much less interested in his life story but am glad that I read it because it gave me a much better understanding of his journey in faith. I never realized that as a young man Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict) was a progressive who was considered possibly dangerous and who was good friends with Hans Kung. Ultimately Ratzinger chose to adhere closely to the liturgy in his zeal to bring the church into better touch with modern times. And that has made all the difference.

I didn't give this 5 stars because I wasn't familiar with some of the theologians or controversies which Seewald kept coming back to. However, even in reading about those one gets a look at Pope Benedict and how he approaches conflict.

Very interesting overall, a super fast read, and I found it ultimately inspiring.

Jean-Daniel says

As if it was an ordinary thing to read an interview with the Pope Emeritus ...

Kind of strange feeling knowing that it might be last time he offers his wisdom and as he did all the time as the cardinal and later as the Pope, he simply puts the threads of his thoughts together. Humbly yet wisely.

As many, I have read his interviews before, so I am accustomed to the style of Peter Seewald who sometimes writes at very large. Yet, this time, I guess because of knowing that it is the last one, I was a little bit impatient to get to the answers and not to spend eternity with questions.

Inspiring, thoughtful, spiritual ... But if you are still searching for THE answers of abdication or the scandals ... well, you might not find it in here ;)

Matt Moser says

This was a marvelous final interview with the great Pope Benedict XVI. As I read through these pages, I

became increasingly convinced that we have a future doctor of the Church among us.
