

**INSIDE
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VATICAN



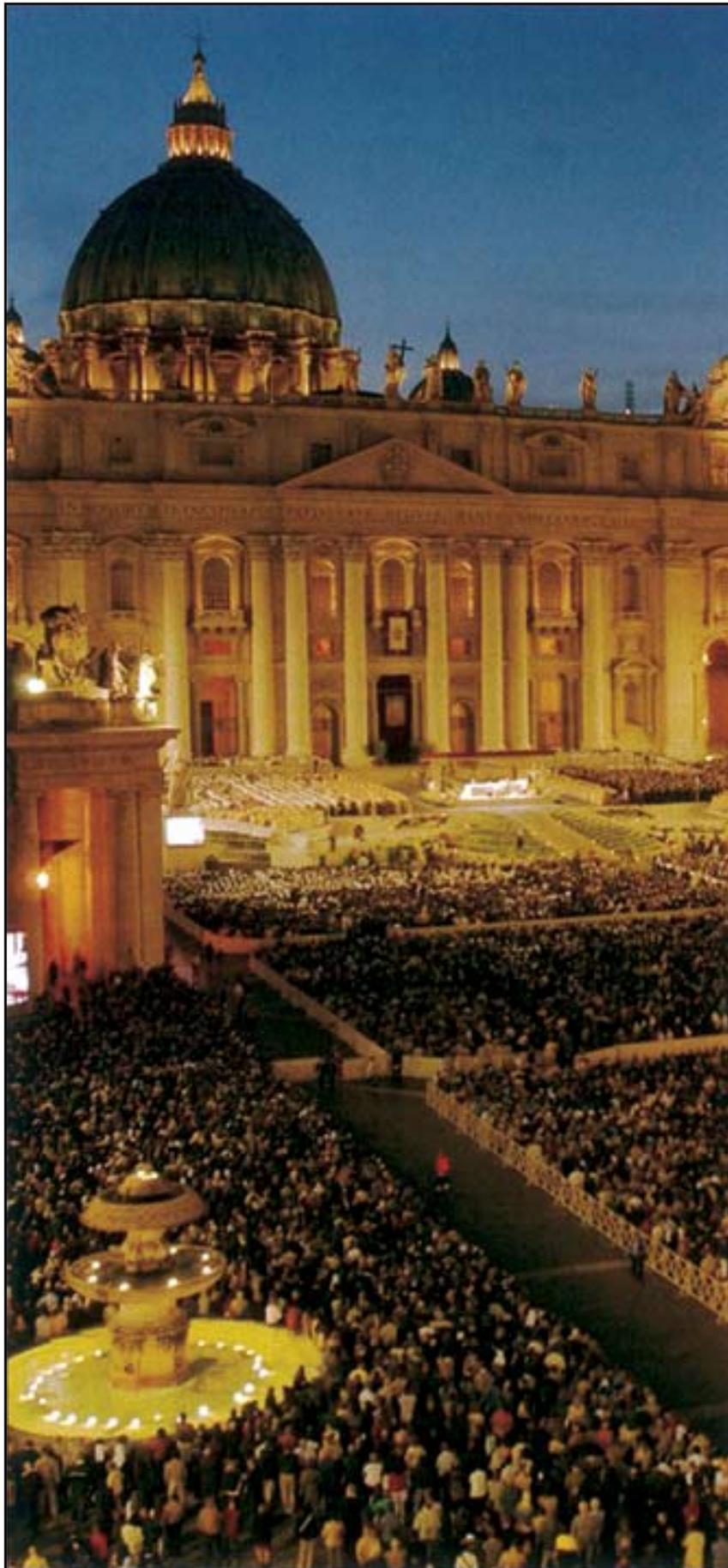
This month we name our selections for the "Top Ten People of 2005." Heading our list: Pope Benedict XVI. What does the fact that he is German mean for Germany? And what does it mean for the Church?

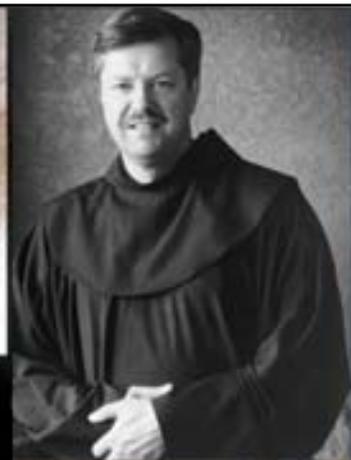
**PERSON
OF THE
YEAR**

**THE GERMAN HOUR
OF THE CHURCH?**

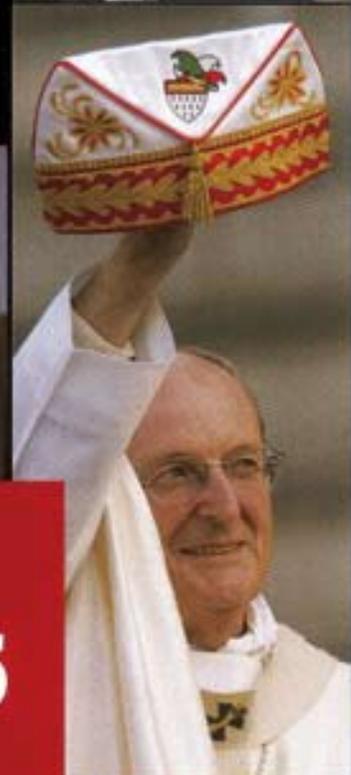
- 1 **Pope Benedict XVI**
- 2 **Fra Elia**
- 3 **Antoine Arjakevsky**
- 4 **Fr Peter Vasko**
- 5 **Cardinal Meisner**
- 6 **Bishop Ncube**
- 7 **Christine Voilmer**
- 8 **Rocco Buttighone**
- 9 **Eric Hotung**
- 10 **Joe Foran**

The year 2005 was split in half early, by the death of John Paul I on April 2, three months into the year. April 2005 was an extraordinary month in Rome, and out of the emotional funeral and the quick conclave that followed, came a new Pope: Benedict XVI. We could not do otherwise than select Benedict as *Inside the Vatican's* "Man of the Year" for 2005. But not only for his election as the successor of Peter. We select him also because of his remarks before he became Pope, especially those at the Stations of the Cross by Rome's Colosseum in March, where he spoke bluntly of the terrible "filth" that has entered the life of the Church. In the nine months since he has been Pope, Benedict has not yet shown how he intends to "clean up" the Church, but that he intends to do so was made clear by that Good Friday meditation. Who are our other "Top Ten People" of 2005? Fra Elia is an Italian healer, a holy man with great spiritual power; Antoine Arjakovsky, originally from France, and an Orthodox by faith, now resides in Ukraine, where he is a key person in the ongoing dialogue between Catholics and Orthodox in that critical region; Father Peter Vasko, an America Franciscan, is fighting to help the Christians in the Holy Land; Cardinal Meisner of Cologne was the key voice during the papal conclave on behalf of the Ratzinger candidacy; Bishop Ncube of Zimbabwe is speaking out for justice in a country on the brink of chaos; Christine Vollmer, a mother of seven, is one of the leading pro-life activists in the world; Rocco Buttiglione is an Italian philosopher who has suffered for his faith; Eric Hotung, a native of Hong Kong, is a peacemaker, an unassuming man capable of working quietly behind the scenes to build bridges with the leaders of Communist China; and Joe Foran is an ordinary Catholic who is dying of cancer, and facing his death with great dignity and faith. These are our "Top Ten People" for 2005. —*The Editor*



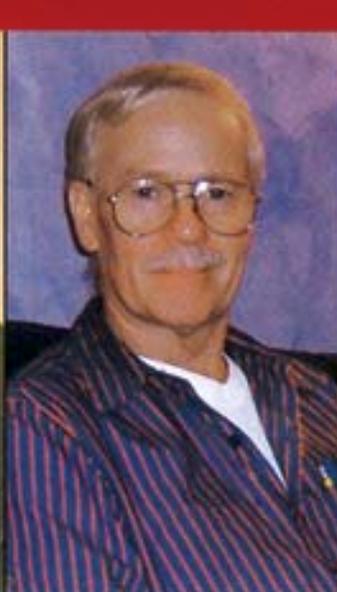


Clockwise from upper left: Pope Benedict; Fra Elia; Father Peter Vasko; Cardinal Meisner; Eric Hotung; Joe Foran; Rocco Buttiglione; Christine Vollmer; Bishop Ncube; (center) Antoine Arjakovsky



THE TOP TEN PEOPLE OF 2005

By *Inside the Vatican staff*





Franciscan Father Peter Vasko

The difficult situation for Christians in the Holy Land has led one man to devote his life to helping them stay in their country

Father Peter Vasko, OFM, is president of the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land, an organization dedicated to helping the Christians living in the Holy Land to survive and prosper in the land of Christ's birth, life, death and resurrection.

A native of New York, Vasko has lived in Jerusalem for the last 20 years and is part of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land. He is a man on a mission: he wants to stem the exodus from Israel of the last members of the Christian community in that land.

It is a difficult task. Unless trends change, he told *Inside the Vatican*, there will be no Christians in the Holy Land in 60 years. "Our foundation works to provide incentives for Christians in the Holy Land to continue living there: academic scholarships, subsidized housing and employment opportunities," Vasko said.

His interest in the Holy Land is quite personal. It was first sparked in the late 1970s when, as a successful marketing executive for the hospitality industry, he made a couple of weekend trips to a Trappist Monastery in Conyers, Georgia, looking to "fill that empty space" in his soul. One day, on a retreat, he saw a Jerusalem Bible and a five-fold Crusader's cross.

"It was like a knife cutting through me," he recalled. "I knew I was destined to go to Jerusalem."

He entered the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land in 1981 and was ordained in 1987. "I consider it an honor to receive a vocation to work in the Holy Land, and minister in the same place that Jesus Christ himself preached," he said.

Twice a year, for six weeks at a time, Vasko travels the globe appealing to Christians worldwide to support the foundation, which in the past five years has awarded more than \$1 million in scholarships to 70 young, academically inclined Christian students to study within their country.

Fifty percent of the graduates have gone onto careers in architecture, engineering, pharmaceuticals, business or teaching; the remaining 50 percent — the women — have returned to their traditional places in the home.

The Foundation is also committed to helping with housing, and construction of 250 apartments. The first phase, representing 90 units, has been completed, and students now have a place to live after receiving their degrees and obtaining employment.

But the success stories are the exception to the rule. Due to soaring unemployment rates (as high as 85 percent for West Bank and Gaza Christians and Muslims, compared to 7 percent for



Israelis) and rampant poverty (annual income of \$3,000 to \$4,000 versus Israel's average of \$24,000 to \$26,000, Palestinian Christians are leaving in record numbers. And although Israel and the Palestinian authority receive billions of dollars in foreign aid — much from the United States — "very little trickles down to the Christian Palestinians," said Vasko.

According to statistics gathered by the foundation, roughly 8.6 million people currently reside in Israel; 4.6 million are Jews, 3.9 million are Muslims, and 115,000 Christians currently reside in Israel proper, with an additional 35,000

in the West Bank and Gaza, not presently considered part of the state of Israel.

Sharply critical of the Israeli government for using a military presence to close certain territories, effectively cutting off Palestinians from access to medical services, employment, education and even food, Vasko is outraged by the enormous "security wall" constructed by Israel around the country which "cuts many social and economic ties, effectively 'ghettoizing' areas not belonging to Israel."

The 428-mile-long, barbed-wire-laced wall, twice as long and three times as high as the Berlin Wall, is "effectively splitting the very heart of the Palestinian world around the West Bank," Vasko said.

The wall brings 10 percent of Palestinian land under Israeli control and cuts off some 72,000 inhabitants from their own property and much-needed services.

Vasko, who serves as a liaison and guide for the White House through the US embassy, and as chaplain for the US Marine Security Guard for the US consulate in Jerusalem, encourages all Catholics to support their brethren in the Middle East both through pilgrimages (he leads them twice a year) and donations.

"Christians in the Holy Land feel abandoned by Christians in the West," Vasko said. "Become God's instrument for those in the Holy Land desperately seeking help. Without Christians in Jerusalem, the Church will never be the same. If we have no sense or appreciation of who we are and where we came from, how can we call ourselves Christians?"

For information about the Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land, contact U.S. Headquarters, Franciscan Foundation for the Holy Land, 1400 Quincy Street, NE, Washington, DC 20017 Phone: toll-free (866) 905-3787; Fax: toll-free ((866) 905-3788; email: info@ffhl.org ●