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### **Helpless in the Vatican The Failed Papacy of Benedict XVI**

"Lord!" the man begins. It is night, and the torches cast flickering shadows on the ancient walls. "Your Church often seems like a boat about to sink, a boat taking in water on every side." It is a somber statement, particularly coming from a senior member of the Catholic Church.

The priest continues, speaking of weeds in the fields of the Lord, and of how much "filth there is in the Church," the result of priests' betrayal of God. "The soiled garments and face of your Church throw us into confusion. Yet it is we ourselves who have soiled them! It is we who betray you time and time again." He beseeches God, saying: "Have mercy on your Church; even within her, Adam continues to fall again and again."

These were prophetic words. They reflected a bitterness and lack of illusions that could only have been expressed by an experienced cardinal who had exhaustively studied the files outlining the "filth in the Church."

The speaker was Joseph Ratzinger. He was chastising his own church during the Easter holiday five years ago, in 2005. It was a bitter indictment by a veteran of the Church, who apparently had little hope and was on the verge of retirement. It was meant as a legacy and as a warning, but what Ratzinger did not do was to specify the actual misconduct.

Five years later, the situation in the Church has caught up with Ratzinger, who is now Pope Benedict XVI. The filth in the Church has seeped out of the secret dossiers and hidden corners of vestries, seminaries and schools and has been brought to light. As the head of the Church, the captain of this battered ship, Ratzinger now finds himself at the center of the filth.

The pope is now confronted with accusations from all over the world, accompanied by increasingly urgent appeals to finally render his ship seaworthy again. The sex abuse cases which were initially a problem only for national bishops' conferences, particularly in the United States, Ireland and Germany, have merged into a crisis for the entire Catholic Church, a crisis that is now descending upon the Vatican with a vengeance and hitting its spiritual leader hard. Meanwhile that leader seems oblivious to what has happened so suddenly.

... Suddenly, the worldwide chorus of outrage seems to be putting the German pope's entire papacy in jeopardy.

... Now, after five years in office, Benedict has seen his project fail and himself become a spiritual shepherd lost in a world that no longer understands him. The secular world now views the pope with, at best, indifference, if not downright hostility. The Church's dialogue with the Jews suffered a serious setback in the wake of the scandal surrounding Holocaust denier Bishop Richard Williamson. An icy silence still predominates in parts of the rabbinate, and the planned beatification of Pius XII, whose role during the Nazi era is controversial, will hardly change that.

Many Muslims have never forgiven Benedict for a lecture he gave in Regensburg in 2006, where he examined the issue of violence and Islam in a bold but ineptly executed move. The speech unleashed a torrent of protests in the Muslim world.

Even radical opponents of reform, such as the Society of St. Pius X (SSPX) and other traditionalists, have not hurried back to Rome, even though the pope has opened all doors for them, declared the Latin mass to be equally valid and reversed the excommunication of SSPX's bishops. Meanwhile, Benedict's gesture of reconciliation toward the extreme right fringe has angered more liberal dioceses in Germany and France.

Of course, the office of pope does not exist so that its holder can be loved by the whole world. After Pius IX died in 1881, a number of Rome residents tried to seize the coffin so that they could throw it into the Tiber River. Today, a few days after Easter, only the most devoted pilgrims are rallying around their spiritual leader. The rest of the world, shocked by the sheer scope of the abuse cases, looks to Rome with skepticism, and some are already calling upon Benedict to take responsibility for his sinning priests and resign.

In the Italian magazine *MicroMega*, Don Paolo Farinella, a Catholic priest, has already written an example of the kind of statement he believes the pope should make to Irish Catholics: "I come to you with empty hands to beg your forgiveness" -- for the strictness of the celibacy, for the conditions in seminaries and for the thousands of cases of child abuse. "I will withdraw to a monastery and will spend the rest of my days doing penance for my failure as a priest and pope."

It hasn't come to that yet, not by a long shot. Some 80 percent of Germans still cannot imagine Benedict following the example of an almost forgotten pope, Celestine V, who resigned in the 13th century because he no longer felt able to perform his office. Nevertheless, the question remains as to why nothing seems to go right anymore for this once-celebrated pontiff.

... There is also no lack of recommendations relating to the future of the Church, both from believers and non-believers. Suddenly everyone knows what the Church has done wrong in decades gone by: the celibacy and the exclusion of women from the priesthood; the hierarchy of old men and the persecution of any efforts to liberalize the theology; the blind condemnation of contraception and birth control in the poor regions of the world; the eternal lack of understanding of homosexuality; the mistrust of technology and modern culture; and the constant needling and provocation aimed at the Protestant churches, Judaism and Islam.

Ratzinger the theologian has defended the doctrines and precepts of his church again and again, often cleverly and with exquisite scholarliness. In doing so, he has cited the teachings of the Church fathers, the councils and the entire Holy Scripture. For a time, he enjoyed the undivided goodwill of the German press. Even Hamburg's arch-Protestant weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* softened its otherwise skeptical view of Rome.

Nevertheless, Benedict's message did not reach its intended audience. The pope lost his close connection to his wards. The master of the word failed to convince the public of the legitimacy of even one of his positions.

... the disenchantment quickly set in. The longer Benedict was in office, the clearer it became that he was not interested in the opening up of the Church to the modern world that the public -- which had perhaps been fooling itself -- had expected of him.

His revival of the traditional Latin mass, the return of the idea of the controversial prayer for the Jews in the Good Friday prayers, the departure from critical biblical research in his book "Jesus of Nazareth" -- these were all relatively minor and inconspicuous steps in the direction of a more traditional Church. Observant church insiders, however, quickly recognized their significance as a warning sign.

In Germany, in particular, the mood began shifting beyond the Catholic Church when, in 2007, Benedict offended the country's 25 million Protestants with a verdict from the Vatican, stating that their denominations could "not be called churches in the real sense." His message of "dogma instead of dialogue" also offended the Catholic base, which, in many places, had long surpassed Church leaders in their ecumenical efforts. Even the then-leader of German Catholics, Cardinal Karl Lehmann, was clearly against the direction Benedict had taken, and tried to soften it somewhat with his own positions.

Swiss theologian Hans Küng, Ratzinger's old friend from the days of the Second Vatican Council and later his adversary, soberly concluded that his audience with the pope at the beginning of Benedict's papacy did not, by a long way, signal a new dawn in the Church. "I had assumed that my invitation was the first in a series of bold acts of which the pope was capable. But he disappointed the world. Since then, he has not issued any further signals of renewal. On the contrary, he has, time and again, taken a step backward from the achievements of the Council."

In his position as pope, Ratzinger had the chance to strike out in a different direction than in his previous post as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he was the Church's supreme commissioner of faith for almost a quarter century. As Benedict, however, he quickly gambled away this opportunity and slipped back into his old role. Ratzinger has therefore become a prisoner of his biography -- to the detriment of the Catholic Church.

... Ratzinger was consecrated as a priest in 1951. He only worked in pastoral care for a short time, however, meaning he had little first-hand experience with the everyday worries of the faithful.

Instead, he quickly embarked on a career as a theologian. In 1958, at the age of 31, he became a professor of dogmatic and fundamental theology. In 1962, he served as a theological consultant to the Second Vatican Council, where Ratzinger championed

views that were both liberal and critical of the Vatican, views that advocated the individual freedom of a Christian and opposed the Roman Curia's claim to omnipotence.

At the time, Ratzinger argued that the Church had "reins that are far too tight, too many laws, many of which have helped to leave the century of unbelief in the lurch, instead of helping it to redemption."

After the Council, Ratzinger, together with Hans Küng and Karl Rahner, was considered one of the reformers in the Church. In 1966, he brought his friend Küng to the University of Tübingen in southern Germany as a professor of dogmatic theology. In 1968, Ratzinger and 1,360 other theologians worldwide signed a resolution drafted by Küng, titled "For the Freedom of Theology."

In the same year, however, Ratzinger had a traumatic experience that explains his thoughts and actions to this day. During the 1968 revolt, he witnessed his students reviling the image of Christ on the cross as a "sodomasochistic glorification of pain" and chanting "Jesus be damned!" during one of his lectures. In a 1983 SPIEGEL interview, he said that it became clear to him in the lecture halls at Tübingen, then under the spell of the great Marxist philosopher Ernst Bloch, that the outcome of the Council had been the "opposite" of what had been intended.

For the 41-year-old cleric, the Tübingen experiences were a deep shock that changed him radically from a cosmopolitan theologian to a timid dogmatist. Since then, the unalterable, God-given truth has meant everything to him. For Ratzinger everything had to be subordinate to this truth.

Ratzinger also believed that the Catholic Church is the guardian of the absolute moral truth. As archbishop of Munich and Freising, Ratzinger had the motto "Cooperatores veritatis" ("Worker of Truth") embroidered onto his shoulder shawl. As Ratzinger often points out disdainfully, he believes that the notion that truth only reveals itself in fragments to people, including those who believe in God, and that truth is therefore not a fixed variable but takes on different forms in time and space, depending on culture and tradition, is nothing but condemnable "relativism."

... For more than two decades, Cardinal Ratzinger, from his office in Rome, kept watch to ensure that the faithful around the world -- including, in particular, the Church's functionaries, its priests and bishops -- toed the line. His soft gestures, shyness and high voice can be deceptive. In truth, Ratzinger is also a staunch crusader.

When Ratzinger became pope, he met with nothing but enthusiasm in the first few months of his papacy. Soon, however, he quickly became the target of criticism. His Regensburg speech in September 2006 provoked Islamists around the world to commit acts of violence against Christians. It was only with difficulty that the Church managed to smooth out the waves of outrage Benedict's words had triggered. Nevertheless, many still believed that it was all a misunderstanding, and that the learned professor had only expressed himself awkwardly when he said, quoting the Byzantine Emperor Manuel II Palaeologus: "Show me just what Muhammad brought that was new and there you will find things only evil and inhuman."

The next scandal came in January 2009, when the pope rehabilitated Holocaust denier Richard Williamson, an excommunicated bishop of the Society of St. Pius X, a

reactionary faith group that Benedict XVI was determined to bring back into his church. It was all the more controversial because Benedict is German. For fear of a permanent rift, the pope risked the reputation of Catholicism worldwide.

... For Ratzinger the man, the world outside the Church and the Vatican, the world of power and the power of the worldly, has always been something sinister. Even during his time as prefect of the CDF, he did not take the trouble to develop the network of supporters considered normal for a senior member of the Church. He was not interested in intrigues and tactical maneuvers. The theology professor, who accepts no contradiction between reason and faith, was always confident in the power of arguments.

He knew that it wouldn't be easy. "Society hates us because we stand in its way," he once confided in his biographer, Peter Seewald. Given this mindset, he could not have been truly surprised by the uproar of the past few weeks.

But it has affected him.

In particular, it pained Ratzinger that the person who is probably closest to him, his brother Georg, was cast in a bad light. Georg Ratzinger was director of the Regensburger Domspatzen, the cathedral choir in the Bavarian city of Regensburg, from 1964 to 1994. He was strict and sometimes used corporal punishment. Critics allege that Georg Ratzinger must have known about sexual abuse cases in the boarding school associated with the choir.

On his name day, the feast of St. Joseph of Nazareth, Joseph Ratzinger was sitting with his brother Georg in the ceremonial hall of the Palace of the Vatican, the Sala Clementina. The pastoral letter to Irish Catholics had just been signed. The two brothers looked fragile, their white hair slightly tousled. The Henschel Quartet was playing Haydn's "The Seven Last Words of Our Savior on the Cross."

"It would have been better to preserve the silence," the younger of the two brothers, the pope, said after the performance. He was referring to the customary moment of silence after the music ends. But he could not remain silent, and instead spent a full eight minutes talking about doubts and forgiveness and committing oneself to a higher purpose. He spoke about beauty and that difficult material, "the human flesh." It's a material which is very foreign to him -- and yet it will shape the last years of his papacy. It was a moving moment, probably one of the few moments in which the pope was not being driven by his official duties.

As it happens, there are members of the Church who are far more obstinate than Joseph Ratzinger in keeping quiet about cases of sexual abuse.

For example, the case of Father Lawrence Murphy from Milwaukee, who molested about 200 boys at a school for the deaf, was not reported to Rome until 20 years after the last incidence of abuse. Under a strict interpretation of church law, that meant that the statute of limitations had already expired.

Nevertheless, Ratzinger's CDF supported the initiation of proceedings against Murphy. Ratzinger's deputy, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, only recommended that the case be

dropped after Murphy, who was already fatally ill, had begged for mercy in a letter to Ratzinger.

As prefect of the CDF, Ratzinger urged John Paul II, in 2001, to issue the papal letter known as the "Motu Proprio," which obligated the church to report all abuse cases to Rome and address them there.

Critics saw this as an attempt to keep the scandals under control and to handle them with the utmost discretion. The Vatican insisted that the requirement of "papal secrecy" was meant solely to protect those involved, and that it never precluded reporting abuse cases to the secular authorities.

... But like the vast majority of bishops in the past (and many today), Ratzinger is also convinced that too much openness only benefits one's adversaries.

... The American church paid dearly for its attempted cover-ups. To date, US dioceses have been forced to pay well over \$2 billion (€1.5 billion) in compensation for the misdeeds of about 5,000 priests. Some dioceses have had to declare bankruptcy as a result.

The law of silence regarding abuse cases was still considered unbroken at the time. Cardinals Bernard Law of Boston and Roger Mahoney of Los Angeles were members of opposing camps within the Church, Law being conservative and Mahoney liberal. But the two men agreed that the Church's good reputation was more important than the truth.

This conviction may have been rooted in the widely held belief in the treatability of sexual offenders. The emphasis was placed on the notion that "it was God's duty to protect ordinary believers from all doubt," says Jesuit priest Eberhard von Gemmingen. The archbishop of Vienna, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, recently offered a deep look into the inner life of the Vatican. When the serious abuse of boarding-school students by Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër came to light in 1995, the officials close to then-Pope John Paul II blocked an investigative commission. The "diplomatic faction" among the pope's courtiers, Schönborn said, tried to blame everything on the media -- against the will of the current pope. "At the time, Ratzinger said to me, sadly: The other party has prevailed."

... When the pope spoke on Palm Sunday, it sounded as if he were expressing defiant words of comfort for himself. The Christian faith gives us "courage not to be disturbed by the chatter of prevailing opinions," he said to a crowd of 50,000 supporters on St. Peter's Square. Was he saying that the cover-up charges are nothing but the gossip of disbelievers?

Before giving the sermon, Benedict XVI did something he had avoided on Palm Sundays in previous years. He had himself driven across St. Peter's Square in his popemobile while the faithful cheered and waved their palm fronds. It was no different a little over 2,000 years ago, when Christianity's founder entered Jerusalem. But papal spokesman Lombardi was quick to prevent any improper comparisons from being made. The pope, said Lombardi, had no intention of entrenching himself, but wanted to make himself visible, even to the faithful at the back of the crowd.

One of his closest confidants, on the other hand, has distanced himself from such defiant gestures. On Wednesday, Vienna Archbishop Christoph Schönborn, in a penance service in the city's St. Stephen's Cathedral, offered a confession of guilt: "We confess that we have obscured and betrayed the name of God which means love." It was, at last, the confession the whole world had been hoping to hear from the German-born pope.

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