

Helpless in the Vatican. The Failed Papacy of Benedict XVI

The pope's reluctance to take a firm stance on sexual abuse by priests is expanding into a crisis for the Catholic Church and fueling outrage over his papacy. Some Catholics are now even calling on Benedict, who has committed a series of gaffes since becoming pope in 2005, to resign. By SPIEGEL staff.

"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.

At the Center of the Filth

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.

In Germany, churchgoers are demanding to know why Benedict has not said a word about the crimes of priests in his native country. **Christian Weisner, a senior member of the reform movement "We Are Church," is deeply disappointed by the pope. Benedict XVI, says Weisner, has "not understood the true scope of the distress."**

Demands for Repentance

The Poles are angry with the pope, because they fear that his inaction in the face of the crisis could harm the reputation of "their" pope, John Paul II, whose beatification they expect to take place soon. "A public mea

culpa would have given him credibility in the fight over the purity of the Church," wrote the Polish daily newspaper Gazeta Wyborcza.

The Irish, to whom Benedict wrote a pastoral letter in which he assigned the responsibility for the abuse cases to local bishops and, in what was not exactly a sign of remorse, to the "secularization of Irish society," were disappointed in the pope. Writing in the Sunday Tribune, an Irish Sunday newspaper, columnist Maurice O'Connell demanded: "Why, for example, can Benedict not jump on a plane, come to Ireland, and, on Maundy Thursday (as he will be doing in Rome), wash the feet of 12 victims?"

Finally, in the United States, where about 12,000 abuse cases have come to light in the last few decades and the media are already accusing the pope himself of having covered up the scandals, the attorney of one abuse victim even wants to force the pontiff to appear in court. Many Catholics who suffered as a result of the sexual urges of their priests 30 years ago have given up hope that the pope will show any remorse at all. David Clohessy, the national director of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests (SNAP), accuses the pope of ignoring the suffering of the victims. "Actions, not words, protect innocent kids and heal wounded victims," says Clohessy.

Papacy In Jeopardy

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

Benedict XVI began his papacy by embarking on a project of reconciliation which went beyond the Church itself. The newly elected pope wanted to rule with the word, and with discourse, not prohibitions. That was what he had been doing for 23 years in his previous position, as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). And now he was suddenly advocating an open, self-confident dialogue on several fronts: with the secular world, with Islam, with the Jews and with the traditionalists within the Church. Perhaps even with the followers of Martin Luther.

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.

Calls for Benedict's Resignation

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.

'A Humble Worker in the Vineyard of the Lord'

It is the tragedy of a man who had set out to write books and, only near the end of his life, was summoned to assume the herculean office at the Vatican. At the beginning of his papacy, Benedict XVI described himself, in all modesty, as "a simple humble worker in the vineyard of the Lord."

To date, however, Joseph Ratzinger has been more of a hobby gardener in the vineyard, rather than a landscape architect or someone who cuts off fruitless vines.

He has incurred the suspicions of the secular world and the skepticism of other religions, but he has not found a way to address this opposition. Again and again, after each new scandal, each misunderstanding and each new blunder, his actions seem forced. He lacks his predecessor's ability to always find the right symbolic gestures. The charismatic John Paul II led the church at the height of the American abuse crisis, but it did not diminish his popularity. Even before his death, as he allowed the world to participate in his process of dying, crowds flooded into St. Peter's Square in Vatican City to be close to him.

Of course, what English author G.K. Chesterton wrote in the early 20th century still holds true today. "At least five times," Chesterton wrote, "the Faith has, to all appearance, gone to the dogs. In each of these five cases, it was the dog that died."

Some may find comfort in Chesterton's remark.

Derision for Religion

Nevertheless, many Catholics find their pope's actions painful to watch, not because they consider him incapable or even unlikeable, but because they cannot look on as this extraordinary man gets in his own way. The members of the "We Are Church" movement, in particular, have turned away from Benedict.

According to a poll conducted for SPIEGEL by pollster TNS Forschung, 73 percent of Germans believe that the pope's handling of abuse cases in the Catholic Church is "not adequate."

Following the revelations about clerical misconduct, the disenchantment has, in many places, turned into aggression, malice and, in some cases, cheap derision against all things religious. In the last few weeks, a tone of contempt for the Catholic Church has emerged in online forums throughout Germany.

In one forum, a contributor wrote: "The fact that the Church only admits what it can no longer deny shows that the Vatican only regrets one thing, if anything: the fact that the priests were caught."

Another contributor wrote: "The institution of the Church is a morally depraved club of old men. One needs to distance oneself from this organization as clearly as possible."

What's Wrong with the Church

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.

This may have something to do with the public -- or the positions.

In any event, the Germans' goodwill toward "their pope" was short-lived. In fact, most of his fellow Germans have long immersed themselves in their own personal belief system. Although they clearly retain the desire for a metaphysical source of comfort when life becomes difficult, they prefer to dispense with the institution and its requirements.

'Weary of Faith'

Christendom has "grown weary of faith (and) has abandoned the Lord," as Ratzinger concluded in his prayers for the Stations of the Cross at the Roman Coliseum in 2005. He spoke of the "banal existence of those who, no longer believing in anything, simply drift through life."

But the pope, this owl-eyed old man with a high voice, simply isn't as adorable as the Dalai Lama. He lacks the clear message of a Barack Obama. And no one would want to be stuck on a deserted island with one of his German propagandists, let alone be guided through the desert by them.

The days of Vatican chic are over, it seems.

Germany's flirtation with this man lasted all of two summers. For a time, it was hip to have read Ratzinger. Authors suddenly began making pilgrimages and the culture sections of magazines wondered if it was time for a return of the sacred. Berlin's upper middle class sent its children to the Canisius College Jesuit high school, convinced that they were guaranteeing their children's future.

Warning Signs

Nevertheless, 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.

'He Disappointed the World'

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's 'Rational Adventure'

Joseph Ratzinger was born on April 16, 1927 in the Bavarian village of Marktl am Inn, the son of a police officer. Although money was tight, Joseph and his older brother, Georg, attended high school.

When Joseph, their youngest son, was only in second grade, the parents bought him a missal, the Mass book priests use on the altar. For Ratzinger, religion became what he would later call a "rational adventure." His Catholicism was never merely incense and naïve faith.

His school registered him for the Hitler Youth, which was unavoidable, but he rarely attended. He was eventually drafted to serve as a child soldier in Munich. He spent the end of the war in a POW camp near the southern German city of Ulm.

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.

Traumatic Experiences

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.

Guardian of the Truth

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."

In Ratzinger's world, man is more of an object than an active subject. Critics of this pope have noticed, again and again, that he comes across as distant and cold, even when he turns to people with deliberate affection. He completely lacks the charisma of palpable brotherly love that John Paul II exuded.

In 1981, John Paul II brought Ratzinger, then an archbishop who had already been elevated to the rank of cardinal, to Rome to head the CDF. At the pope's request, Ratzinger first turned his attention to Latin America. The Polish pope believed that leftist priests there were trying to lead the faithful astray into Marxist convictions. He pilloried the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and condemned the movement's commitment, which was based on theology, to a Church of the poor.

Staunch Crusader

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.

When Benedict XVI visited Israel a few months later, a trip that was only made possible after a number of pretexts and explanations, his appearance at the Yad Vashem Holocaust memorial was sharply criticized as being "almost sterile," "unemotional" and simply "disappointing." Chief Rabbi Israel Meir Lau had expected to see more human sympathy for the suffering of murdered Jews. Instead, he said, the pope's speech was "devoid of any compassion, any regret, any pain over the horrible tragedy." He also criticized the pope for not using the phrase "6 million Jews" in relation to the number of Holocaust victims.

The False Life of Man

Ratzinger has always been a shy person. But he came away from his experiences in Tübingen with an insurmountable fear: a fear for the wellbeing of the Church. Ratzinger wrote his dissertation on St. Augustine, the church father who imagined Christ wandering through the world as a stranger, driven by the constant endeavor to work toward a theocracy.

He also took on Augustine's repression of sensuality, which the church father made socially acceptable in the church in the 4th century, and his pessimism and rejection of the things of this world. It is a way of thinking that assumes that little good can be expected from the world beyond the walls of the Church and the Vatican. It also holds that if there is a true life within the false life of man, it only exists inside the Church, and that only the walls of the Vatican offer protection.

Those days are gone. Today, outrage directed at the Church can no longer be kept within the affected dioceses. The public is also demanding an explanation from the spiritual leader in Rome, particularly as the pope himself was confronted with these problems during his spiritual career. During his time as archbishop of Munich, there was the case of the priest Peter H., which has come back to haunt the pontiff in recent weeks.

The priest had attracted attention in the Diocese of Essen because of child molestation, and the diocese recommended that he undergo therapy under the care of the Archdiocese of Munich. Ratzinger agreed. But after the therapy, his vicar general assigned the man to another parish, allegedly with Ratzinger's knowledge. Peter H. molested more children in the ensuing years and was only banned from providing pastoral care in 2008. Last week, the Archdiocese of Munich even had to send a priest to the towns of Garching and Bad Tölz to help repair the trail of emotional destruction left by the erring priest.

'Too Much Failure'

The pope's most recent pastoral letter on sexual abuse in Ireland was a source of disappointment. "What would it have taken to devote a few sentences to the dramatic developments in Germany?" complained members of the German Catholic youth organization BDKJ. Even the archbishop of Berlin, Cardinal Georg Sterzinsky, made a penitential pilgrimage through the streets of the German capital. "We suffer from the fact that there is too much failure in the church," Sterzinsky said.

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.

'The Human Flesh'

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.

Keeping Quiet about Abuse Cases

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.

The Vatican's Worst Nightmare

Many Catholics questioned whether this was true. After the issuance of the *Motu Proprio*, however, all dossiers relating to pedophile priests passed across Ratzinger's desk. No one in the global Church had a better idea of what was really going on in the seminaries and Catholic institutions. And this is precisely why the Catholic Church could very well face proceedings that could expand into Vatican lawyers' worst nightmare, and could end in the pope having to answer for the charges of abuse in a secular court.

"I want to know what the Vatican knew and when they knew it," attorney William McMurry, who is representing three alleged victims of priest sexual abuse in Kentucky, told the *Washington Post*. Their case has now come before the US District Court in Louisville, and could eventually make it all the way through the courts to the Supreme Court in Washington. The plaintiffs argue that the Vatican can be held responsible for the damage inflicted by its employees. With the suit, the Americans hope to embark on a legal path that seemed off-limits for years: They are determined to assert a direct claim by abuse victims against the Vatican.

Jeff Anderson, an attorney from Minnesota who has represented hundreds of abuse victims since 1983 and has won millions of dollars in compensatory damages for his clients, has been waiting for such an opportunity to come along. In recent weeks, Anderson made headlines worldwide when he turned over documents about the Father Murphy case to the *New York Times*. Now he is hoping for the biggest conceivable prize: to subpoena the Holy Father himself. "This is a tipping point," Anderson told the *Associated Press*. "I came to the stark realization that the problems were really endemic to the clerical culture, and all the problems we are having in the US led back to Rome. And I realized nothing was going to fundamentally change until they did."

Elaborate Defense Strategy

Although legal experts agree that summoning Benedict XVI to testify before a US court is extremely unlikely, the lengthy legal battle this would entail would be embarrassing enough.

Ratzinger's church lawyers have already assembled an elaborate defense strategy. They argue that the pope, as the Vatican's head of state, enjoys immunity against lawsuits in US courts. They also point out that the American bishops who covered up abuse cases are not employees subject to directives from Vatican City.

Ironically, Ratzinger has always advocated that his Church take a tough approach toward sinners in cassocks. For him, the ordination of priests is a central sacrament, an office that entails constant self-examination and strict discipline.

For example, Ratzinger enforced his hard line against the Mexican priest Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legion of Christ, a powerful congregation of priests. Maciel Degollado, who died in 2008, allegedly fathered and abused several children.

Despite the many rumors, John Paul II, who deeply respected Maciel Degollado as a servant of God, dedicated a festive mass on St. Peter's Square to the Mexican priest in 2001. One of Ratzinger's first actions in his new office as pope, however, was to banish Maciel Degollado to a monastery.

'Targeted Campaign'

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.

At the height of the abuse crisis in the United States, on Nov. 30, 2002, Ratzinger answered questions at the Catholic University of San Antonio de Murcia in southeastern Spain. There are, of course, sinners in the church, he explained, "but personally I am convinced that a targeted campaign is behind the constant media reports on the sins of Catholic priests, particularly in the United States." The goal of this campaign, he said, was to "discredit the Church."

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.

Protecting Believers from Doubt

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."

In his pastoral letter to Irish congregations, Benedict XVI went further than any pope before him. "In her (the Church's) name, I openly express the shame and remorse that we all feel," he wrote. But it was not the admission of personal failure many had hoped for. Benedict criticized some bishops, but not the entire, authoritarian, fossilized "system of bishops." He also failed to take the opportunity to go on the offensive, to speak in the first person and to write about his time as archbishop in Munich.

"Critics will ask: Can Benedict XVI credibly demand greater accountability from bishops, if his own record as a diocesan leader reflects the same pattern of neglect?" writes Benedict biographer John Allen.

Going on the Offensive

Meanwhile, the Vatican seems to have emerged from its state of shock. After the days of awkward silence on a constant stream of new revelations, the Vatican is now going on the offensive, and the pope's defenders are becoming as aggressive as his critics.

Benedict's helpers, old, often retired bishops, armed with microphones and contacts to editors-in-chief and television producers, are stepping up to defend the pontiff. According to a Vatican expert at La Repubblica, the wall they are building around the head of the church is as thick as the wall surrounding the Kremlin.

They are embarking on a defensive war of sorts, a term Antonio Riboldi, the former bishop of Acerra, used

when he said that a "war is underway between the Church and the world, between Satan and God." Anyone who attacks the pope has been instructed to do so by the Devil, claims Father Gabriele Amorth, who has been the Vatican's chief exorcist for 25 years.

Shortly before the Easter festivities, Church officials complained about the "stubbornness" of the "anti-Christian hate campaign" in the media, the sole purpose of which, as they argued, is to discredit the pope.

Praying for the Pope

The French bishops, who are in a significantly better position in the abuse affair than their German or Irish counterparts, because they took steps early on to ensure that the relevant offenses would be handed over to civil courts, are sending expressions of solidarity to Rome, and bishops are asking Catholics the world over to pray for the Holy Father "in these difficult times, so that God's grace will sustain him."

German Cardinal Walter Kasper, who has always had a somewhat distant relationship to Ratzinger, conceded, in an interview with the Milan-based newspaper Corriere della Sera, that the church had been silent on instances of abuse in the past, at least in some cases." Calling upon the Vatican to put its house in order, he said that the path to renewal is "irreversible, and that's a good thing." But he too is convinced that the attacks on Benedict "exceed the limits of fairness and decency."

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?

'We Have Betrayed the Name of God'

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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Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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