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The Pope's difficult visit to Germany this week

When Joseph Ratzinger became pope in 2005, Catholics in Germany joyfully celebrated the first German pope in almost 500 years. Since then, the euphoria has turned to disappointment and disillusionment. Benedict XVI's visit to Germany this week will do little to heal the deep divide between conservatives and reformers in the German Church.

By Frank Hornig, Anna Loll, Ulrich Schwarz and Peter Wensierski
Der Spiegel

One thing is already clear: The two men will be all smiles when they meet.

If all goes according to plan, German President Christian Wulff will greet the pope at 11:15 a.m. this Thursday in front of Bellevue Palace, the president's official residence in Berlin. Photographers and cameramen will be eagerly jostling for the best spots, security teams will be intently scanning the area, and Wulff will shake his guest's hand with the proper degree of decorum.

But what will happen next? What will the German head of state and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church talk about when they meet for the first time, shortly after Benedict XVI's landing in Berlin? Will they talk about the fact that Wulff, a practicing Catholic, is divorced and remarried, a fact that, under the current rules of the Church, excludes him from receiving Communion?

Will Benedict XVI address the sensitive issue in his speech before the German parliament, the Bundestag, that afternoon? Although about 100 Bundestag members plan to boycott his address, Gerda Hasselfeldt, the Catholic chairwoman of the conservative Christian Social Union's group in the Bundestag, will be there without fail. Hasselfeldt is also divorced and has remarried. So has the leader of her party, Horst Seehofer, who also fathered an illegitimate child, and Oskar Lafontaine, the former co-chairman of the Left Party and a former Jesuit school pupil.

Sticking to the Rules

Benedict is scheduled to arrive at Berlin's Olympic Stadium at 6 p.m., where he will celebrate mass and meet with Berlin's openly gay Mayor, Klaus Wowereit. Will the pope encourage Wowereit, a Catholic and a member of the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) who has been living with his partner for years, to practice abstinence and not to act out his proclivities, as his church demands of all homosexuals?

Luckily for the pope, he won't have any problems with two other prominent people he will meet in Berlin. Chancellor Angela Merkel (remarried) and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (gay) are both Protestants.

But even those Catholics who seem to abide by all the rules aren't truly reliable. One of his hosts in Berlin, Bundestag President Norbert Lammert, recently ruffled feathers at the Vatican when he and fellow Christian Democrat Annette Schavan, who is Germany's education minister, together with other reformist Catholics, sent a letter to Germany's bishops about the marriage ban for priests. Those who staunchly cling to celibacy, Lammert writes, "are leading the Church with open eyes into a pastoral emergency."

The open criticism of the pope was not well received in Rome. Lammert's appeal was an "insult to Jesus Christ," Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, a close associate of Benedict, thundered.

One of the Last Absolute Monarchs

Worlds will collide when Joseph Ratzinger arrives in his native Germany this week for his first state visit. About 100 members of parliament have chosen to forego the experience, including lawmakers like SPD parliamentarian Ulla Burchardt from the western city of Dortmund. "A head of state who disregards labor rights, women's rights and the right to sexual self-determination should not be allowed to address the Bundestag," says Burchardt.

Her Green Party counterpart Toni Hofreiter finds it "questionable to invite the pope to the parliament by using the trick of defining him as a head of state" (the pope is the official head of state of Vatican City, the world's smallest state). Hofreiter will also not attend the speech. And Alexander Süssmair of the far-left Left Party "cannot even imagine what the democratic Federal Republic of Germany could learn from the representative of an absolute monarchy." In reaction to the boycott, former Bundestag members have been invited to attend so that the empty seats will be filled.

Many of the people that Benedict will encounter during his visit are divorced, gay, in common-law marriages or uninterested in the Church's ban on birth control. And even though they are Catholic, they do not see themselves as sinners. The pope, who rules the papal state as one of the last absolute monarchs on earth, will encounter a modern society with modern representatives.

Benedict will travel the country for four days, distributing his blessing and waving to the crowds from his popemobile. But in the German society of the 21st century, the answers his Church has to offer are no longer as relevant as they once were.

The enthusiasm and the spirit of optimism have disappeared — on both sides. What began like a love affair six years with the headline "We Are Pope" in the tabloid newspaper Bild has since turned into a more distant relationship.

Germans Feel Deceived

The pope and his fellow Germans are not on good terms. The romance that existed in 2005 has vanished, leaving the hopes and the expectations of the day unfulfilled. The euphoria of the early years was a misunderstanding. According to a current SPIEGEL poll, only 8 percent of Germans want the Catholic Church to have more influence on politics and society in Germany.

The Germans are the ones who feel deceived. Ratzinger did not become the kindly, benign old prince of the church and bridge builder ("Pontifex maximus") they had wanted him to be. On the contrary, he proved to be more conservative than the Germans wanted to believe at first. He has never grown out of his former role of head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Instead of opening up in his faith, he withdrew into his fortress and became even more obstinate.

His Church is erecting new walls because it's what Benedict wants. Ironically, it is in Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, where his followers are transforming the community of Catholics into an organization of clerical obedience. The doctrine of the Vatican and the reality of the lives of most Catholics are moving further apart. In many places, traditionalists are gaining the upper hand over liberal Catholics.

More bishops in Germany's dioceses are seeking refuge in the Church's past, while Germany society is constantly becoming more dynamic, more Muslim, more atheistic and more multicultural. German society is divided over how to treat immigrants, and it is seeking alternatives to nuclear energy, a solution to the ongoing debt crisis and answers to the problems of an aging population. But Benedict and his Church hardly play a role in any of these debates anymore, because they are more concerned with the purity of their doctrine and their own problems.

The Church still hasn't weathered the consequences of the abuse scandal. It has failed to liberate itself from the deepest identity crisis of its recent history. Although Benedict expressed his dismay over the scope of the crimes, he has not pursued an extensive investigation of the causes. Instead, he assigns the blame to the Devil who, as he says, has thrown "dirt into the faces" of him and his priests.

Lost Euphoria

When Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez announced the name of the new pope from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on April 19, 2005, cheers erupted on St. Peter's Square and elsewhere. North of the Alps, the election of the first German pope in 482 years was also met with great enthusiasm. Even non-religious intellectuals were suddenly raving about the sophisticated man at the head of the Church.

A few months later, hundreds of thousands of young people attending the Catholic Church's World Youth Day in Cologne greeted the pope as if he were a pop star. "Now the country is quaking under the storms of enthusiasm emanating from Catholic World Youth Day," the German Sunday newspaper Welt am Sonntag raved.

There is little evidence of this euphoria today, and the anticipated stampede of young people into the Church has failed to materialize. Cologne was merely an ecstatic event without consequences. Benedict is not leading his church into an open-minded future, but back into a narrow-minded past.

This is evident in his words and actions. The German pope, of all people, irritated Protestants by saying that their church is not a church "in the actual sense." He snubbed the Muslims with harsh words against the Prophet Muhammad. And he insulted the Jews by reinserting into the Good Friday liturgy, a prayer for the conversion of the Jews that one of Benedict's predecessors, Paul VI, had removed as a gesture of reconciliation after the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

Back in Time

Instead, Ratzinger sent signals of understanding and sympathy to the conservative fringe of Catholicism. By currying favor with the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), he took the Church back in time and infuriated the overwhelming majority of Roman Catholics.

The backlog of reforms in the Church, which had developed under his conservative predecessor John Paul II, increased under Benedict. The Vatican continues to reject artificial birth control, which it sees as cause for eternal punishment. Millions of AIDS deaths have done nothing to convince the keepers of Catholic sexual morality that condoms might be a good idea.

Similarly, half of the Church's members remain excluded from all leadership positions. Women cannot become priests, let alone bishops. The official Church still excludes lesbians and gays from its community.

"A man like him is not made to lead a community of more than a billion people and fill them with life. He is especially lacking in charisma," says Leonardo Boff, the famous Latin American liberation theologian. Boff has long criticized Ratzinger, ever since the German, as head of the CDF, badgered him over alleged heresy.

From Liberal to Conservative

At the beginning of his career, Ratzinger held completely different views, views that were open-minded and liberal. At the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he and the prominent Swiss theologian Hans Küng were among those who sought to open up their fossilized church and fought against the Vatican's claim to absolute authority.

But the year 1968 became a turning point in Ratzinger's life. As a professor at the University of Tübingen in

southern Germany, he was booed by students, who chanted "Jesus be damned" in his lectures. It was a shock he never came to terms with. The enlightened professor of theology transformed himself into a conservative dogmatist, filled with suspicion of all attempts to reform the Church.

Since then, Benedict has viewed the Catholic Church as the sole custodian of a divine truth. The notion that this divine truth was established for the sake of mankind and not for the sake of an absolute idea is no longer relevant in Ratzinger's theology.

It is doubly fatal for the Church that Ratzinger's fanaticism about the truth goes hand in hand with a fear of the world and its confusing ways. Like John Paul II, he believes that this earthly, hedonistic society is a culture of death, which the Church should distance itself from. As a result, the pope is squandering the opportunity to play an important part in shaping secular society, choosing isolation instead of openness.

A New Antipope

Because of this approach, Ratzinger encounters particularly great resistance in his native Germany. A broad alliance of about 70 protest groups, including the Pro Familia alliance for self-determined sexuality and the German AIDS Society, has called for a rally in downtown Berlin on Thursday. About 15,000 people are expected at the event, to demonstrate against the Church's "inhumane gender and sexual policy, harassment of homosexuals, contempt for women's rights and shameful condom policy."

Catholic reform groups like "We Are Church" are galvanizing public opinion against Benedict in a campaign called, in a play on the famous Bild headline, "We Are (Not) Pope." Former abuse victims and people who grew up in children's homes plan to protest openly over the roughly €30 million ($41 million) the Church has budgeted for the pope's visit — compared with the roughly €2 million it has paid in compensation to victims of sexual violence to date.

A radical anti-pope alliance calling itself "What the Fuck" has already named a female antipope, Rosa I. In a recent protest, she shook the fence at the Vatican Embassy in Berlin, calling Benedict a "false pope with a false image of humanity."

Even Berlin Mayor Wowereit gave his worldly blessing to such criticism, when he expressed "great sympathy" for the protests, because, as he said, "the Church, with its teachings, promotes theories that belong to a period thousands of years ago, not the modern age."

All-Time Low

Under these circumstances, 84-year-old church leader Ratzinger's third visit to Germany since 2005 will probably be his most challenging.

The 2005 World Youth Day event in Cologne and a largely private visit to Bavaria in 2006 were at least successful in terms of their atmosphere, even if the boost they were supposed to give to the German Catholic Church quickly fizzled out. This time, on the other hand, Benedict will witness the decline of the Church in his native Germany.

In the last year alone, the reverberations from the abuse scandal prompted more than 181,000 Germans to leave the Catholic Church (and about 150,000 to leave the Protestant Church). According to the latest statistics by the German Bishops' Conference, more than 2.6 million people in Germany have left the Church since 1990. Some 87.4 percent of Catholics no longer go to church on Sundays. The number of men hoping to become priests is at an all-time low, as is the number of baptisms and Catholic weddings.

Rise of the Neocatechumenate Movement

But a shift is underway, especially among young Catholics. At the World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, more than 100,000 visitors were members of an organization called the Neocatechumenal Way, or NC Way. "And there were already 250,000 at the meeting in Madrid a few weeks ago," says Gianpaolo Carpanese of NC Way. "Our path is inspired by God," he adds. NC Way is a fast-growing neoconservative movement that is relatively unknown outside the Church. But with its roughly 100 groups in Germany, it already maintains a presence in most major cities.

The term neocatechumenate means "preparation for baptism." Neocatechumens are especially devout believers who hope to become true Christians through a rediscovery of baptism. To achieve this, they must pass through various stages lasting several decades, not unlike born-again Christians in the United States.

Gertrud Brück, 62, experienced how "Neocats" can change a congregation. Unable to imagine a life without the Catholic Church, Brück was involved in the parish office of the St. Marien parish in Cologne's Nippes neighborhood, was a member of the board of the church women's group, organized floral arrangements in the church and did readings during Sunday mass.

'I Was a Bad Person'

One day, her pastor returned from a priests' council meeting where he had become enthusiastic about the Neocatechumens. He urged Brück to join "the Way," and told her: "Whoever doesn't join is merely religious and not Catholic."

Brück followed his advice at first. "The pattern was always the same in many meetings," she says. "You stood up front and said: I was a bad person, and it was only through the Neocatechumenate that I was led to the path of improvement." When she had questions, they were quickly dismissed.

The Cologne native, feeling as if she had come upon a sect within her own church, distanced herself from the movement. "There is no evidence of liberal faith within the Neocatechumenate," says Brück.

"No matter where the Neocatechumens turn up, they divide congregations and drive away other believers," says Johannes Krautkrämer, an assistant vicar in the southern section of Cologne. After voicing his concerns over the pious supporters of baptism in a letter to Cardinal Meisner, he was no longer offered positions as an independent vicar. The church leader is apparently not about to accept criticism of the conservative movement. Despite fierce arguments in the priests' council in his archdiocese, Meisner approved a seminar run by the Neocatechumenal Way in Bonn.

The deterioration of the climate among the faithful is also evident in the aggressive criticism with which Christians, ranging from the conservative to the reactionary, pounce on almost anyone who does not wholeheartedly support the orthodox camp.

'Shadow Catholics'

Jesuit priest Mertes, who exposed sexual abuse at Berlin's Canisius College high school, speaks of "shadow Catholics" who vilify their opponents with denunciations and vile attacks. "Parts of the hierarchy knuckle under to these loudmouths, because they're afraid of being berated themselves," he told SPIEGEL in a recent interview.

Perhaps the most active mouthpiece of this movement is the website kreuz.net, where generally anonymous authors berate their respective enemies on a daily basis. In their world, Mertes is a "decadent German Jesuit" and "abuse propagandist" whose only goal is to harm the holy church.

The gay theologian David Berger, a member of the orthodox Catholic scene himself for years, has been

called a "professional faggot," among other insults, after having published a tell-all book about conservative Catholicism. His home address soon appeared on kreuz.net. Berger considered stopping his critical remarks about the church, but then he decided against the idea. "Then the gay-baiters would have achieved what they wanted," he says. SPIEGEL is also regularly assailed as a "Kirchenkampf magazine" — a reference to the struggle between the Nazi regime and the Catholic Church — which supposedly agitates against true Christians "in the style of Goebbels."

Are reformist Catholics fighting a lost cause? Have their conservative opponents already won the battle for control of the faith they supposedly share?

Subjected to Hate Mail

Monika Grütters is a member of the German Bundestag for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). On a morning two weeks before the pope's visit, she is sitting in her office, talking about how difficult it is to be a devout Catholic.

Every year, in the first week of January, she and about 50 other national politicians attend a retreat at the Maria Laach monastery in the Eifel Mountains of western Germany. On Sundays, Grütters attends mass at St. Ludwig's church in Berlin's Wilmersdorf neighborhood. "Four open-minded, humorous, down-to-earth Franciscans have created a meeting place for spiritual Berlin there," she says. The five services held at the church each weekend are always full, and when a minister recently spoke of "reforms that are urgently needed" in the Catholic Church in his sermon, he received spontaneous, vigorous applause from the congregation.

Grütters rummages angrily through a stack of letters and printed emails. "Here!" she says. She has been showered with a stream of insults, merely because she told the Berlin daily newspaper Der Tagesspiegel that she hoped that rumors about Berlin Archbishop Woelki's ties to Opus Dei were untrue. "It would be devastating," she told the newspaper.

In one of the letters, she is berated as a "zeitgeist dominatrix." Devout Catholics write that they will do their best to ensure that she no longer appears on the list for a Bundestag mandate at the next election. Others have written directly to the CDU's leader, Chancellor Angela Merkel, demanding that the party leadership bring exclusion proceedings against Grütters unless she resigns her seat immediately.

"In such a large organization as the Catholic Church, the diversity of opinions can and should be equally large," says the Catholic politician. "But the large number of open-minded, future-oriented Catholics and reform-oriented lay people cannot allow themselves to be intimidated by the energetic presence of the conservatives and traditionalists, their level of organization and the ruthlessness of some."

Growing Fear

Jesuit priest Mertes, with whom Grütters is in contact, finds it "tragic that such circles within the Church have been promoted by the hierarchy in recent years, thereby attaining a high institutional legitimacy." Mertes believes that it is high time that the issue be discussed with the bishops and other hierarchies.

Many pastors in Cologne have been trying to do this for years. In early September, five of them met in an apartment in the Ehrenfeld neighborhood. They spent hours discussing their disappointments, the dark power of the clergy, the tone of orders within their diocese and the many taboo subjects. They also talked about the fear that pervades the atmosphere in their church.

Pastor Michael Jung from Meckenheim, on the edge of the Eifel Mountains, was one of the five pastors. In a letter to Cardinal Meisner, he had politely asked for more transparency and dialogue in connection with the

upcoming consolidation of parishes. It was apparently a mistake, given that transparency and dialogue are not welcome concepts in the Cologne archdiocese. Only a week after sending the letter, Jung was asked to resign from his position as pastor — at 41. "There is a growing fear among employees and priests of being shot down," says Jung.

Even trivial matters are sometimes exaggerated in the conservative religious community. Did the priest read the archbishop's pastoral letter out loud, or did he merely offer his interpretation of it? Does he wear sweaters and jeans, or does he consistently wear a priest's collar? In German rectories, and not just in the Cologne archdiocese, self-proclaimed "faith police" use even such minor external details to monitor the purity of doctrine.

Is this today's Catholic Church?

Deep Divide
In the summer of 2010, Munich author Peter Seewald conducted several days' worth of interviews with Benedict, which he turned into a book. "The crisis within the Church is one thing, and the crisis within society is another. The two things are not unconnected," Seewald writes in the preface.

He discusses the illusory worlds of the financial markets, a modern age that is losing its standards, an environmental catastrophe, a fast-paced life that makes people sick, and the universe of the Internet, in which there are still no answers.

These are important issues and debates to which the leader of 1.2 billion Catholics could contribute. But Pope Benedict's opinion on these subjects is hardly even noticed, because he is too caught up with his battered official church and its purification.

For the book, the pontiff and his interviewer spent hours discussing God and the world at the papal summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, in the summer of 2010. In the end, what made headlines was a slight shift in Benedict's emphasis on the use of condoms. He conceded that perhaps condoms could, after all, be used in rare, strictly defined, exceptional cases. It was yet another sign of the deep divide between the pope and secular society.

'Our Troubles Will Continue'
The disenchanted Catholics are nearing the end of their discussion in the apartment in Cologne's Ehrenfeld neighborhood. They have spent four hours airing their frustrations. None of them expects the pope's visit to yield any new impetus for change.

"For a few days, Benedict's visit will hide the true condition of the Church," says one man. "After that, our troubles will continue."'
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