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Fight is on for hearts of German Catholics

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For more than a decade Wir Sind Kirche, one of the loudest voices for liberal reform in Roman Catholicism, has been on a mission to get Germany's estranged Catholics back in the pews. Their method has been making the faith more accessible, less doctrinal.

Now the long-awaited spiritual revival may finally be at hand. Germans are suddenly dusting off their Bibles and breaking out the rosary beads. What troubles Wir Sind Kirche, however, is the source of all the excitement - Pope Benedict XVI, the former doctrinal watchdog himself.

Benedict XVI is scheduled to visit Germany today through Thursday, and Germans are expected to turn out in large numbers to witness their countryman retracing his Bavarian roots. The prospect of Germany coming together in praise of the first German-born pope in more than 1,000 years spells trouble for a movement that has built its reputation on its ability to harness public opinion to defy papal power.

"This naturally makes our job harder," said Annegret Laakmann, a founding member of Wir Sind Kirche (German for "We Are Church"), who heads the group in Germany.

Since his election, Benedict's image has mellowed, shifting from a hard-liner who issued searing condemnations to a pastor writing letters on love and lust. A year ago, nearly a million German Catholics joined Benedict in Cologne to celebrate World Youth Day. A poll published in April in Stern, a leading German newsweekly, found that 53 percent of Germans approved of the job Benedict is doing. According to Theodor Bolzenius, a spokesman for the Central Committee of German Catholics, a lay umbrella group, Benedict's growing popularity has "given the German church another chance." With the pope's image softening, Laakmann said, some of the movement's supporters have begun to question whether Wir Sind Kirche's stinging critiques of the pope are misplaced.

After Benedict's election in April 2005, the group registered a sharp downturn in annual donations, falling from about \$173,000 in 2004 to \$120,000 in 2005. "People said, 'Our cardinal is pope, so we don't have to donate to you anymore,'" Laakmann recalled.

Wir Sind Kirche has built a worldwide following by providing an alternative platform to Catholics who disapprove of Vatican orthodoxy. The movement promotes equality between laity and the clergy; equal rights for women, including ordination; the lifting of mandatory celibacy for priests; and the rapid advancement of ecumenical dialogue.

Those ideas might not resonate in the corridors of the Vatican, but they found fertile soil in the land of Martin Luther. Wir Sind Kirche grabbed the media spotlight in 1995 with a petition outlining its liberal platform that gathered the signatures of more than 1.8 million German and Austrian Catholics - an act that essentially marked the start of the movement.

With the tacit support of many German bishops, Wir Sind Kirche rapidly spread its influence, forming chapters in dioceses throughout the country and placing representatives on church advisory boards.

A combination of rhetorical flair and theological rigor, meanwhile, has helped spread the group to more than 30 countries across the globe, including chapters in the United States.

When popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI called bishops to the Vatican for worldwide synods, Wir Sind Kirche responded by summoning its own ranks to Rome to conduct "shadow synods."

In the run-up to the conclave that elected Benedict last year, the movement released a "curriculum vitae" for selecting a new pope. The church's top job, the document read, required "a lover of the earth," "a gentle soul with a sense of humor" and "a visionary leader" who would not limit the priesthood according to "gender, marital status or sexual orientation."

Throughout the global expansion, Germany remained Wir Sind Kirche's spiritual home. Germany, after all, was the country that spawned many of the reformers who spearheaded the Second Vatican Council of the 1960s. Among their ranks was the then-Rev. Joseph Ratzinger (now Benedict XVI), who played a leading role in crafting the council's liberalizing reforms. As late as 1993, the reformist impulse was alive with top German bishops issuing a pastoral letter that encouraged divorced and civilly remarried Catholics to return to the sacraments.

Germany's hospitality, however, could be wearing thin. In Regensburg, the movement is locked in a protracted struggle with Bishop Gerhard Ludwig Mueller. Two years ago, Mueller removed Wir Sind Kirche's representative, Johannes Grabmeier, from the diocese's advisory board on the grounds that Grabmeier's ties to the movement constituted a conflict of interest.

The ouster marked the first time a bishop has taken formal measures to limit the group's influence over diocesan policy, said Christian Weisner, a Wir Sind Kirche spokesman.

Weisner laments the movement's inability to reinstate Grabmeier and fears that the bishop has in fact scored points in Rome for taking action against the group. Benedict, he said, "wants more bishops like Mueller."

The Vatican and Mueller declined to comment on the matter.

Benedict plans to swing through Regensburg on Tuesday. Wir Sind Kirche is organizing several "protest vigils" in Regensburg and has mounted a letter-writing campaign to protest the pontiff's visit.

In confronting Benedict in Regensburg, Wir Sind Kirche will face off with the pope on his home court. Benedict held his last teaching position at the University of Regensburg, where he definitively abandoned his earlier progressivism and began laying the intellectual foundations for a conservative reinterpretation of the Second Vatican Council.

Wir Sind Kirche, however, isn't discouraged by the large crowds that Benedict is expected to draw. "This is a big event and many people will come," Weisner said. "But that doesn't mean they're all devout Catholics."

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