Spirituality
Vatican



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April 16, 2019
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A group of prominent German-speaking theologians has sharply criticized retired Pope Benedict XVI's recent letter on clergy sexual abuse, saying it "instrumentalized" the Catholic church's continuing crisis to rehash stale, decades-long theological disputes.

In a blunt two-page letter released April 15, the theologians said the former pontiff ignored scientific research on the causes of abuse, neglected evidence of the centuries-long history of the problem, and did not speak from the perspective of victim-survivors.

"The analysis of Joseph Ratzinger/Benedict XVI is based on a number of false assumptions," said the German Association of Moral Theologians, which represents about 40 prominent academics. "It is assessed by us as a failed and improper contribution to the resolution of the abuse crisis."

In his letter, released April 11, Benedict had partially blamed the abuse crisis on developments in theology following the Second Vatican Council. The ex-pope alleged that there had been a "collapse" in moral theology in recent decades that left the church "defenseless" against changes in wider society, and even identified two

German theologians by name.

The letter, one of a handful Benedict has shared publicly since his resignation in 2013, immediately drew criticism from Vatican watchers. They noted it did not address structural issues that abetted abuse cover-up, or Benedict's own contested 24-year role as head of the Vatican's powerful doctrinal office.

Prominent U.S. theologians also expressed concern that Benedict's action risked undermining Pope Francis' efforts to address clergy abuse and played into narratives splitting Catholics between two popes.

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In their April 15 response, the German theologians say they felt compelled to comment on Benedict's letter because it was a "reproach and insult to the reputations of former and current members" of their association.

The academics say the former pope's decision to pin the blame for abuse on the upheavals of the 1960s is not new for Benedict, who before his 2005 election as pontiff was Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, a German theologian and head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

"In the past, he already portrayed the Church as victim of a hostile world," the theologians say of Benedict. "By stating this [again], however, he conceals the fact that in many cases it was the ecclesial office holders themselves who, by denial and cover-up, knowingly shielded the perpetrators."

"Of their own volition, those in authority within the Church did not develop an appropriate response nor did they even come to terms with the situation, as many of the victims have repeatedly told us," say the academics.

The association's letter is signed by two theologians on behalf of the larger group: Christof Breitsameter, of the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich, and Stephan Goertz, of the University of Mainz.

Benedict has spoken as pope emeritus before about his theological disputes with other academics. In a 2016 book-length interview, the ex-pontiff described his break with famous Swiss theologian Fr. Hans Kung, claiming that over time Kung had

become "increasingly radical."

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A version of this story appeared in the **May 3-16, 2019** print issue under the headline: Theologians concerned about newly engaged role of Benedict, pope emeritus.