Opinion
Vatican



by NCR Staff

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In a letter that rocked the global Catholic Church, retired Pope Benedict XVI blamed the continuing Catholic clergy abuse crisis on the sexual revolution, developments in theology following the Second Vatican Council, and modern society's aversion to speaking about God. A number of noted theologians and church historians are concerned that Pope Benedict XVI's choice to engage in public action undermines Pope Francis and plays into narratives splitting Catholics between two popes. Below are letters to the editor in response from NCR readers. The letters are edited for

length and clarity.

I appreciate your even-handed response to this historic action of Pope Benedict XVI to intervene directly through his 6,000-word letter and offer his respected opinion in regards to the cause and cures for the current priestly sexual abuse crisis rocking the church.

You brought out comments of the usual liberal or even radical progressivist theologians who are criticizing and even condemning this brave action of Benedict, who millions believe should never have resigned.



As a young Catholic who is unashamedly a supporter of the great Popes John Paul II and Benedict, I find Benedict's letter to be clear, concise, and totally accurate.

Anyone who would still champion Vatican II and the past 50 years, and especially this pope and his agenda, is living in fantasy land. Benedict gives subtle criticism to the post-Vatican II church, and a series of remedies to correct the current crisis in the church with regards to the priestly sexual abuse scandal, which many faithful and famous cardinals, bishops, priests and theologians have already stated is the only path to restore the church. Those means include a return to God, belief in prayer and the Holy Eucharist, a return to priestly discipline and classical theology and formation. Vatican II threw these things out. Benedict is saying they need to be restored.

Francis apparently believes in none of the above. Prayer, discipline, the Blessed Sacrament, were not even mentioned in his February meeting, which hundreds of

victims of abuse, and even progressives have labeled a failure.

Benedict offers in his letter the true way and path to correct this situation and untimately save the Church. It is typical for all the very liberal theologians who you highlighted in your piece to criticize and condemn Benedict and his letter and its initiative. They champion Francis and his agenda. But many believe that in very short order, they will find that they supported the wrong side.

KENJIRO M. SHODA

Radnor, Pennsylvania

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This is a sad situation with Pope Benedict XVI that he says the sexual revolution is responsible for the clergy abuse.

I am 93 and even when I was a child in the 1930s my father and mother knew of sexual abuse by clergy and warned us eight children of that in a way only parents can. They were able to talk with their children about this. They remained and always were deeply committed to their faith and so was I.

It is quite obvious that as parents we have the opportunity and the obligation to teach our children about sexuality, but even more about love and partnership, mutual friendship and lasting caring for each other.

This is where the church has failed to understand and teach and help parents but have never bothered to learn from good and holy lay people.

I am sorry that Benedict thinks that he knows the answers. He made so many

mistakes, that he ought to remain where he is, and teach about Jesus where he knows something and is good at.

ELIZABETH AVERILL-WINTER

Madison, Wisconsin

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Why was this letter published in the first place? An easy way to show that Pope Francis is going to fulfill his promise that the Catholic Church would be taking up new "concrete and effective measures" to confront clergy sexual abuse is to publicly rebuke this fellow.

Pope Benedict XVI failed in his position of grand inquisitor. It was not an absence of God that permitted the offensive, minority portion of the clergy to offend, it is the fact that these men were not of good conscience and others of poor conscience permitted the acts.

If Benedict actually feels that the men who committed the crimes are not to blame, and this must be the case as it was his official job to protect the faith and yet did nothing, then he is not of good conscience. As per Pope John Paul II, moral law is universal across humanity.

HARRY NYE

Tottenham, Ontario

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The only cogent phrase I could discern is that sex abuse is the absence of God. We have a canonized saint and this pope himself who knew of abuse and did little to address it. This is truly the absence of God.

Perhaps Benedict XVI's writings should be confined to an inner circle in the Vatican. He is most assuredly out of touch with the needs of the laity.

JANE FRANCISCO

Charlotte, North Carolina

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Nowhere in the article have you stated that the "former pontiff" is actually a distinguished theologian. Joseph Ratzinger had a long career at the Vatican, administering the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith.

The elderly former cardinal is eminently qualified to speak about the pressing issues and illuminating them in historical context without having journalists call him a parallel or shadow pope.

I hope you understand the current pope, Francis, has the humility and dignity to forgive the pope emeritus on this occasion, should any one of the Vatican leaders feel undermined. The current pope is not the victim, he is a bystander while there are countless tens of thousands of innocent lives that were tainted by the scandalous clerical abuses.

KATARINA D'CUNHA

Perth, Australia

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It's a pity that Pope Benedict XVI has allowed himself to be wiled by the right wingers in the Vatican. The problem of sexual misbehavior among the clergy cannot be laid merely on the "sexual revolution" of the 1960s. The global dysfunction of the seminaries in the 1960s and 70s is greatly to be blamed, but not totally.

Popes John Paul II and Benedict, historically speaking, must also be held accountable for their fear filled unwillingness to allow the work of Vatican II to come to full fruition in the ecclesial community. They stifled the voices of our theologians and those of progress minded activists in the ministries of peace and social justice. This is especially true in the area of moral theology which has remained stagnant since the reign of Pope Leo XIII.

Pope Francis has been doing the best he can in the face the obstructionist cardinals of the Curia. May the good Lord give him the wisdom and stamina to outfox all of them.

(Msgr.) DESMOND DALY

St. Petersburg, Florida

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Just a few thoughts from a feminist recovering Roman Catholic woman. First thing that comes to mind as I read this is a reluctant admission to myself that as a supporter of being able to have a voice, so too must I grant that to Joseph Ratzinger.

However, I would qualify that by saying he should not be speaking or quoted as speaking as "pope emeritus." I think that is a ridiculous term and he should not have been allowed to give himself that title. If he wants to speak, he must speak as an ordinary Catholic or as a theologian, but certainly not from platform that gives him the appearance of authority which he does not have.

KATHY CAMERON

Regina, Saskatchewan

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Dear pope emeritus,

While there is only a minute chance, if any, that you will get to read this letter from an unknown lay person, I'll send my urgent appeal to you, anyway.

I have only one request:

Please stop contradicting or in any way interfering with Pope Francis.

If you continue with your recent pronouncements, you are most likely causing a schism in our church.

G.J. LEWIS

Toronto, Ontario

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The theologians concerned about Pope Benedict overlooked the first and last line, which stated that the piece had been cleared with Pope Francis. The problem of sexual abuse is not only clericalism. The sexual revolution fed right into it. The sexual drive, like every other human drive, must be directed by self-regulation, current culture not-withstanding.

HANNA KLAUS

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

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I am in agreement with Michael Sean Winters. The rambling letter of emeritus Bishop of Rome Benedict XVI suggests a fevered search for literary salvation, and it has not worked. Once a theologian whose words shook loose mountains from their bases, he complains that in some places he hears that in later days his books were hidden and had to be read beneath the desk. He is sad about that.

He also seems to know that the historical moment — which might be like one of those clocks which shows with a wave dividing light from dark where the world is bright and where it is going into darkness, or the shadow approaches — has moved on, illuminating other theologians, pastors, writers, and a different pope.

But beyond that critique, Benedict XVI's letter does absolutely nothing to improve his chances for a kinder memorial when the history of the times is written. He complains about provocative clothing, sex education, dirty movies on airplane flights (what is that anecdote about?). But the accountability side is part of the darkness: it isn't addressed by him. It won't be: he has missed the opportunity. And he was there — both as a long-serving prefect and later as the pope.

The one fine bit in his letter was his reference to one of Gaudini's observations. Indeed, the church is reborn in the hearts of people. It isn't being reborn (yet) in the church's administrative structures.

ROBERT ZAHRT

Fort Wayne, Indiana

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Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese suggests it would be prudent "to delay consideration of canonization of a pope until after all the cardinals and bishops he appointed are dead." I think it would be prudent to delay consideration of canonization of anyone until 75 or even 100 years after his/her death.

By then, the reputations of those who should be given public recognition as exemplars for others will have survived the test of time, no politics — of church or state — will be controlling, and canonization will be an occasion for rejoicing by all.

KATHARINE WILSON CONROY

New Rochelle, New York

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I was a Redemptorist priest for 24 years. I have practiced as a married priest outside the jurisdiction of the hierarchy for the past 41 years.

I love everything NCR columnist Jamie Manson said about Pope Benedict XVI. I am delighted with your superior understanding of what has happened to the Roman Catholic hierarchy since Vatican II.

Benedict and his ilk, mostly appointed bishops by Pope John Paul II, are very good and sincere men, but they are truly ignorant because of their training and isolation from the people of God, like you. You are the church, as Vatican II declared.

I am now 90, and feel very good about you and the rest of the people of God who think, and feel, and love, like you. God bless you. The church is progressing as it

should. Just be patient with Francis, but of course, never let him off the hook.

SAL UMANA

Tampa, Florida

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