Vatican
Book Reviews



Pope Francis greets Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI prior to the start of a meeting with elderly faithful in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, on Sept. 28, 2014. Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI turned 95 this past weekend, a significant milestone on its own but even more given he has now been a retired pope longer than he was a reigning one. To mark the occasion, a new book published Thursday, April 21 sets out to examine the current state of Vatican affairs not so much through the lens of Pope Francis' nine-year papacy, but via Benedict's nine-year retirement. (Gregorio Borgia/AP)

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Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI turned 95 this past weekend, a significant milestone on its own but even more given he has now been a retired pope longer than he was a reigning one.

To mark the occasion, a new book sets out to examine the current state of Vatican affairs not so much through the lens of Pope Francis' nine-year papacy, but via Benedict's nine-year retirement. And it isn't pretty.

Veteran Italian commentator Massimo Franco's "The Monastery," published in Italy on Thursday, shifts the focus of most books about the Holy See by using Benedict's retirement home in a converted monastery in the Vatican gardens as the prism to view the unprecedented anomaly of having two popes, one reigning and one retired, living together in the Vatican.

In real-life scenes befitting the Netflix drama "The Two Popes," the book paints a picture of two papal courts that started out on excellent terms: Francis referred to Benedict as a "wise grandfather" to whom he turned for advice, and Benedict treated Francis with the deference owed to a pope.

But in retelling the past nine years with unusual access to Benedict's team and his allies, Franco notes that Vatican turf wars and the progressive shift of the church in places like Benedict's native Germany have essentially turned "The Monastery" into the symbolic headquarters of the Francis opposition. And Benedict, he writes, has become the unwitting and unwilling point of reference for right-wing, Catholic traditionalists who loathe Francis.

"The Monastery is the place where people hurt by Francis go to be healed," Cardinal Gerhard Mueller, who himself was sacked by Francis early on as the Vatican's doctrine chief, told Franco.

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The book takes as its starting point Benedict's 2013 revolutionary decision to retire — the first pope in 600 years to do so. Benedict stepped down because he said he no longer had the strength to carry on. But the book traces many of the problems afflicting the church today to the unhealed "trauma" that his abdication, and unexpectedly long retirement, have caused.

The problems "are not Francis' fault or Benedict's fault," Franco said in an interview. "It's the byproduct or the inevitable, unavoidable product, of The Resignation."

For a church that prizes unity and sees in the figure of the pope Christ's vicar on Earth, confusion about who is really pope or the specter of a parallel papacy is no small thing. And most Vatican watchers agree that Benedict's experiment with resignation will have to be corrected and regulated with a set of norms before any future pope decides to follow suit.

Franco, a columnist with leading daily Corriere della Sera, recounts some of the key hiccups that have characterized the last nine years, starting with Benedict's refusal in 2018 to endorse an 11-volume set of books about Francis' theology because it included authors who had criticized his own papacy. Benedict's endorsement had been sought by Francis' then-communications guru, Monsignor Dario Vigano, precisely to show the continuity between the two popes and to quiet traditionalist critics who considered Francis' theology wanting.

A scandal erupted because Vigano manipulated a photograph of Benedict's letter declining to endorse the project to make it seem like he was on board with it. Francis reluctantly accepted Vigano's resignation in the aftermath.

The other main strain in relations came two years later, when Benedict co-authored a book with a Francis critic affirming the need for priests to remain celibate, precisely at the time that Francis was considering allowing married men to be ordained to alleviate a priest shortage in the Amazon.

A previous pope-theologian weighing in on an issue that was currently under study by the current pope was the nightmare scenario of a "parallel magisterium" predicted by canon lawyers and theologians in 2013. They faulted Benedict's decision to retire then and especially his choice to keep the white cassock of the

papacy and call himself "Emeritus Pope" rather than revert back to his birth name.

The book episode, Franco writes, was something of the final straw and an epilogue to the Vigano debacle, both of which saw Archbishop Georg Gaenswein, Benedict's longtime secretary, as a key behind-the-scenes player. Gaenswein had served as a bridge between the two popes by also acting as head of Francis' papal household. But after the 2020 book disaster, Francis removed him as prefect of the papal household, though he retains the title and remains in charge of The Monastery and Benedict's team.

"Francis, understandably irritated, was pushed by his allies to cut the ambiguous umbilical cord with that monsignor (Gaenswein) who moved as easily in the Vatican halls as he did in the salons of the aristocracy," Franco writes.

Benedict had said he was retiring to a lifetime of prayer because he no longer had the strength of body or mind to carry on the rigors and travel of the 21st-century papacy. Gaenswein told Vatican News on his birthday on April 16 that Benedict "is in good spirits, naturally he is physically relatively weak and fragile, but rather lucid."

His 95th birthday falls as Francis, who in December turned 85, is himself slowing down: Francis' bad knee has made walking, stairs and getting up from his chair painful, and he can no longer stand for long periods of time. But he nevertheless has a grueling travel schedule planned for the coming months and has shown no indication he plans to retire anytime soon.