

## Ratzinger's past vs. Benedict's present

Richard McBrien | Apr. 19, 2010 Essays in Theology

In mid-March John Allen, the *National Catholic Reporter's* senior correspondent and long-time expert on Vatican affairs, [published an article](#) [1] that pitted Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, formerly Archbishop of Munich and Freising (1977-82) and head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (1982-2005), against his current persona, Pope Benedict XVI.

The gist of Allen's insightful article is that there has been a great transformation of Joseph Ratzinger's attitude toward the sexual-abuse crisis from his years in Munich and most of his years in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and his last few years in the congregation and his years in the papacy.

"As late as November 2002," Allen writes, "well into the eruption in the United States, he seemed just another Roman cardinal in denial." Ratzinger, like many others in the Curia and in various dioceses around the world, regarded the sexual-abuse scandal in the priesthood as a creation of an essentially anti-Catholic media in the United States.

As pope, however, "Benedict XVI became a Catholic Elliot Ness -- disciplining Roman favorites long regarded as untouchable, meeting sex abuse victims in both the United States and Australia, embracing 'zero tolerance' policies once viewed with disdain in Rome, and openly apologizing for the carnage caused by the crisis."

People had all but forgotten that the pope was once head of a large archdiocese in Germany. If they remember much of his pre-papal life at all, it is as a well-published theologian who held professorships in several prestigious German universities, and then as the widely-feared Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, where he disciplined fellow Catholic theologians for their alleged deviations from orthodoxy.

His time in Munich was viewed as only a brief transition from his years as a theologian to his years in the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith and then the papacy itself.

But it is now his time in Munich that has suddenly come under close scrutiny because of the evident mishandling of a case involving a predatory priest. This priest was first sent away for therapy and then allowed to resume his pastoral ministry, even when that ministry involved contact with children.

Indeed, it was only last month that the priest was finally removed from the active ministry altogether, not that Ratzinger or later Pope Benedict XVI was personally responsible for that tragic lapse in ecclesiastical oversight.

Munich's vicar general at the time has assumed "full responsibility" for the priest's reassignment and has insisted that then-Archbishop Ratzinger was not informed of the decision. Some have found this account unpersuasive. In any case, the reassignment happened on Ratzinger's watch.

The real concern now is that there may have been other such cases that have not yet been revealed. If so, the difficulty for the pope will be compounded.

If there is any defense at all, it is that there was little understanding among the bishops (or the Vatican) at that time of the nature and extent of this problem. They tended to view it as a moral issue rather than as a criminal matter, and assumed that such priests could be rehabilitated and returned to the active ministry.

There was also a concern at the time, shared by Ratzinger as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, to protect the reputation of the Church and its priesthood. This became a poisonous formula for the imposition of secrecy, cover-ups, and the threatening of victims and their families.

Others, like Dominican Father Thomas Doyle, a canon lawyer and Air Force chaplain, issued warnings at the time, predicting with uncanny accuracy that the Church would eventually suffer losses in excess of one billion dollars from lawsuits brought by victims and their families

Those warnings went unheeded. So, too, did the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin's efforts to establish an effective policy that all the U.S. bishops might follow.

And yet as Pope, Benedict XVI removed Father Maciel, founder of the powerful Legionaries of Christ and a favorite of Pope John Paul II, from the public exercise of the priesthood, and, as pointed out above, he personally met with, and apologized to, victims of sexual abuse by priests in the United States and Australia.

But, as John Allen writes, "relatively few people know or care how far the Vatican, or the pope, have come over the past eight years."

Unfortunately, the pope has not yet adopted any new accountability mechanisms for bishops. But if other cases surface in Munich, Allen observes, "even fair-minded people with no axe to grind" may be led to ask, "Can Benedict XVI credibly ride herd on bishops...if his own record as a diocesan leader isn't any better?"

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