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Benedict's defense may mean tainting John Paul II

by John L. Allen Jr.



Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, founder of the Legionaries of Christ, greets Pope John Paul II in St. Peter's Square in this 2000 file photo. (CNS/Catholic Press Photo)

Analysis

Under ordinary circumstances, Pope Benedict XVI's mastery of German literature might not seem an obvious way of preparing for the papacy. At the moment, however, it feels spot-on, because Benedict and his admirers face a choice straight out of Goethe's *Faust*: In order to salvage Benedict's reputation on the sexual abuse crisis, they're almost compelled to tarnish that of Pope John Paul II.

It's not clear whether mounting criticism of John Paul's record will be enough to slow down his beatification, but it may well color the late pope's legacy in the eyes of history.

Chapters of John Paul's pontificate being reexamined today, in large part because they've been adduced to prove Benedict's resolve, include:

- Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, whom the Vatican recently denounced for leading an "objectively immoral" private life, including various forms of sexual misconduct and abuse (see story on Page 9). Benedict ordered Maciel to live a life of prayer and penance in 2006, but that edict left unanswered why Maciel, who died in 2008, was sheltered for so long under John Paul. (Accusations against Maciel first surfaced publicly in the mid-1990s).
- Cardinal Hans Hermann Groër of Vienna, Austria, who was accused in the mid-1990s of having abused novice monks while serving as a Benedictine abbot. Even after a group of Austrian bishops announced they were "morally certain" of Groër's guilt, the Vatican declined to look into the case. Cardinal Christoph Schönborn of Vienna recently revealed that the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict, had wanted to act, but groused at the time that "the other side won" -- an apparent reference to other Vatican officials who blocked an investigation.
- When a September 2001 letter from Cardinal Dario Castrillón Hoyos applauding a French bishop for refusing to report an abuser priest to the police was recently unearthed, a blunt Vatican statement said the letter confirms the wisdom of putting Ratzinger in charge. Yet if Castrillón was indeed part of the problem, why did John Paul keep him on as prefect of the Congregation for Clergy for the rest of his papacy? (Castrillón has said that John Paul authorized the 2001 letter.)
- Given that sexual abuse crises had erupted in various parts of the world throughout the 1980s and 1990s, why did it take John Paul until May 2001 to issue a *motu proprio* outlining new procedures for such cases? (That *motu proprio* proved unwieldy enough that Ratzinger was forced to secure special faculties from the pope in early 2003 to ensure that it would work.)

It's tough to make a case for Ratzinger's determination, without also conceding that there were obstacles at the top -- and that, in turn, cannot help but cast a critical light on the pope who allowed those obstacles to fester.

Whether these questions will be sufficient to slow down momentum toward beatification of John Paul remains to be seen. An official Vatican inquest into John Paul's life concluded in 2009, before the recent wave of attention to his record on the crisis. On Dec. 19, Benedict signed a "decree of heroic virtue," testifying to the saintliness of John Paul's life, qualifying him to be called "Venerable."

Veteran Italian journalist Andrea Tornielli, who covers Vatican affairs for the conservative daily *Il Giornale*, said that the *positio* -- the Latin term for the official study of John Paul's life, which formed the basis for the decree of heroic virtue -- treats the sexual abuse crisis only in a "rapid and hasty" fashion.

Tornielli has reported that the lone document considered in the process about the Maciel case is a Nov. 17, 2007, letter from Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, asserting that there was no "personal involvement" of John Paul in the way the Vatican handled the charges against Maciel. That letter was written in reply to a request from the officials responsible for John Paul's cause, seeking clarification.

For some time, it's been expected that John Paul's beatification could come as early as October of this year, marking the anniversary of his election to the papacy on Oct. 16, 1978. At the moment, the process may have hit a speed bump for an entirely different reason. Polish media reported in mid-March that a miracle attributed to John Paul -- the healing of a French nun from Parkinson's disease -- may be in doubt, since, according to the report, the nun's diagnosis is not certain.

The Vatican dismissed that report as "without foundation."

Others have raised doubts not about the ultimate outcome of John Paul's cause, but its pace. In June 2008, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano sent a letter to the commission studying John Paul's life. Sodano, who served for 15 years as John Paul's secretary of state, wrote that he has no doubt about John Paul's

saintliness, but wondered aloud about the wisdom of fast-tracking the cause while Popes Pius XII and Paul VI are still in the queue.

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Once a miracle has been certified by the Congregation for the Causes of Saints, it will be up to Benedict to decide when to stage a beatification. Even the late pope's most ardent admirers are now suggesting that it would be a good idea to clear up the question marks about John Paul's record beforehand, especially on the Maciel case.

"As a matter of prudence, and to help ensure that the third paragraph in every news story the day after the beatification doesn't feature Maciel, who doesn't deserve the attention, I would hope that the beatification follows a public accounting of how this deception took place," said George Weigel, who authored the John Paul biography *Witness to Hope*.

Weigel said that such an accounting can occur only after the Vatican has put a solution in place for the Legionaries of Christ. A May 1 statement from the Vatican indicated that Benedict plans in the days ahead to name a personal delegate for the Legionaries, and a commission to study the order's constitutions, to lead them on a "path of profound revision."

A defense of John Paul's record on the sexual abuse crisis will likely feature five key arguments:

- John Paul was an *ad extra* pope, meaning that his focus was on evangelizing the wider world rather than internal ecclesiastical administration. He depended upon his lieutenants to handle such matters, implying that if someone dropped the ball on the crisis, primary responsibility lies with figures such as Sodano, and John Paul's private secretary, now-Cardinal Stanislaw Dziwisz of Krakow, Poland. Tornielli said that in the Vatican these days, some are quietly suggesting that Dziwisz needs to "assume his own responsibility."
- By the time the crisis erupted with full force in the United States in early 2002, John Paul was already in physical decline and arguably unable to respond with the vigor the situation required. That argument is likely to accelerate the tendency to shift responsibility to the late pope's aides.
- Whatever administrative shortcomings John Paul's record may show on the sexual abuse crisis, they don't impugn his personal saintliness. When a pope is beatified or canonized, the Vatican routinely insists that the act is not tantamount to endorsing every policy choice of his pontificate.
- A mixed record on the sexual abuse crisis does not erase the accomplishments of John Paul's reign, such as his role in the collapse of communism, or his breakthroughs in Catholic/Jewish and Catholic/Muslim dialogue.
- John Paul also inspired a new generation of priests who take their calling seriously. Weigel puts the argument this way: "He attracted tens of thousands of young men who brought with them a heroic concept of priestly life and ministry, and who understood the crisis of priestly sin and crime as a crisis of fidelity," he said. "Those young priests are the medium- and long-term answer."

Those arguments may be enough to clear the path toward beatification.

"There's no chance of Benedict delaying the beatification because of the abuse scandal," said Giancarlo Zizola, another leading Italian expert on the Vatican. "On the contrary, I expect he'll accelerate it."

The longer-term question, however, is whether the case for the defense of John Paul vis-à-vis the sexual

abuse crisis will withstand the verdict of history -- and right now, the jury seems decidedly hung.

When Benedict was elected to the papacy five years ago, the result was widely seen as a vote for continuity with John Paul -- an impression reinforced on the morning after the conclave of April 2005, when Benedict told the cardinals still gathered in the Sistine Chapel that he could feel John Paul's 'strong hand holding my own.'

From Benedict's perspective, therefore, the almost mathematical correlation between exonerating his own record and impugning John Paul's may bring to mind a line from Faust himself: 'Even hell hath its peculiar laws.'

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