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Pope Benedict XVI: After Five Years -- Part 2

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

In an article written last spring, Marco Politi, Vatican correspondent for the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica*, suggested that Benedict XVI's pontificate can now be broken into two halves: before and after the storm created early last year by the pope's lifting of the excommunications from the four schismatic bishops, one of whom is a Holocaust-denier.

Politi's article, "The church's new age of dissent," appeared in English translation in the March 21, 2009 issue of *The Tablet* (see also my column for the week of April 20, 2009).

Politi noted that the controversy stirred by the pope's action had disclosed serious tensions between the Vatican's central government and important bishops in the Northern Hemisphere.

Although the bishops had expressed solidarity with the pope in the face of all the negative publicity he received because of the lifting of the excommunications, one has to read between the lines, Politi pointed out.

Between the lines, many bishops asked that the pope "change his style of government." His fellow German bishops, for example, professed themselves delighted with the pope's expressed desire to enter into dialogue with them, signaling that thus far it had not happened.

There were similar messages from the French hierarchy, but it was the Austrian bishops who, according to Marco Politi, "delivered the most strongly worded message." They pointed out that it was not only the pope who was suffering because of the controversy, but also many local churches and people outside the church.

Politi asked if it made sense for the pope to revoke the excommunications of these critics of the Second

Vatican Council on the very anniversary of Pope John XXIII's announcement of the council. And did it make sense for Benedict XVI to insist on pardoning a Holocaust-denier in the very week dedicated to its memory?

Some of the pope's defenders blamed the indelicate timing on the poor advice received from his close associates. Those same defenders are using the identical excuse in the current controversy regarding the pope's dealings with sexually abusive priests as archbishop of Munich and Freising and later as head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith.

Politi pointed out that the Vatican decree lifting the excommunications had been leaked to the press 48 hours before its official publication, and immediately thereafter the Holocaust-denier Bishop Richard Williamson's incriminating interview with Swedish television was disclosed.

The pope and his aides had two days in which to block publication of the decree, but chose not to.

There was a similarly ignored warning in 2005. Several hours before the pope was to deliver his now-infamous lecture at Regensburg University that so infuriated Muslims around the world, a group of journalists who had received advance copies of the lecture warned the papal spokesman Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi that the talk could cause problems with Muslims.

We now know, however, that Lombardi does not have direct access to Benedict XVI, unlike his predecessor, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who had regular access to John Paul II.

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Politi reported that it was well-known in the Vatican that Lombardi informed those immediately above him in the chain of command and that Cardinal Angelo Sodano, currently the dean of the College of Cardinals, warned the pope of the risks.

But Benedict XVI went ahead and reaped the negative consequences.

Marco Politi described the controversy surrounding the lifting of the excommunications as "the first real crisis" of Benedict's pontificate?greater than the pope's expansion of the right to a Latin Mass without the local bishop's approval, greater than his decree excluding gays from the priesthood, and greater even than his more recent support for Cardinal Franc Rodé's mandated "visitation" of U.S. communities of women religious.

The pope had been advised by a majority of cardinals when he convened them in March 2006 that these schismatic bishops should express a "faithful adherence to Vatican II" as a condition of lifting the excommunications.

But the pope chose to ignore those views, went ahead with the decree, and created a firestorm as a result, just as had happened with regard to the Latin Mass and his speech at Regensburg.

Politi noted that some earlier crises had their impact *outside* the church. The crisis created by the lifting of the excommunications last year and now the sexual-abuse crisis that has reached even the papacy itself are crises that have exploded *inside* the church.

What are those inside the church to do? Remain silent out of deference to the office of the Bishop of Rome? Or speak out for the good of the church itself?

And if the latter, does this make us "frequent critics" of the pope?

Read the first half of this column here: Pope Benedict XVI: After Five Years -- Part 1

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