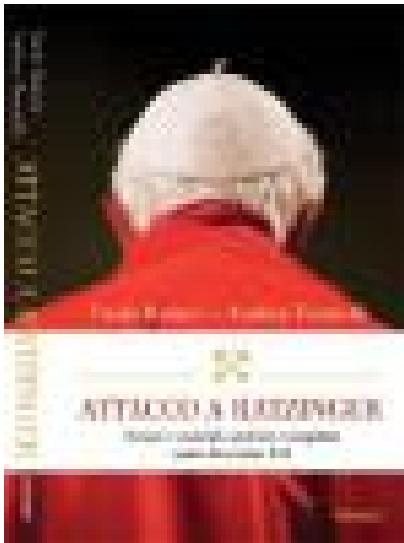


'Attack on Ratzinger': Italian book assesses Benedict's papacy

John L. Allen Jr. | Aug. 27, 2010 All Things Catholic



Friends and foes alike of Pope Benedict XVI concur that he's got an image

problem. Where they place the blame for it may differ, but the fact itself seems clear: From a PR point of view, this is a pontificate defined by its train wrecks.

Cataloguing those train wrecks is the burden of a valuable new book by two of the best Italian *vaticanisti* going: Andrea Tornielli of *Il Giornale* and Paolo Rodari of *Il Foglio*, both of whom also operate widely read blogs -- "Palazzo apostolico" for Rodari and "Sacri palazzi" for Tornielli. Their work is titled *Attacco a Ratzinger: Accuse e scandali, profezie e complotti* ("Attack on Ratzinger: Accusations and Scandals, Prophecies and Plots"), published in Italian by Piemme.

The book came out in Italy on Tuesday, and one hopes an enterprising publisher in the States will bring out an English translation quickly. (Let me volunteer here and now: I'd be happy to put together a preface introducing the book, and its authors, to an English-speaking audience.)

While the sexual abuse crisis has occasioned the most serious criticism of Benedict XVI, it's hardly an isolated case. Tornielli and Rodari treat a long list of other controversies and PR debacles too, including:

- A September 2006 speech in Regensburg which triggered Muslim protest by appearing to link Muhammad with violence;
- The appointment, followed by the swift fall from grace, of a new Archbishop of Warsaw who turned out to have had an ambiguous relationship with the Soviet-era secret police;
- Reviving the old Latin Mass, including a controversial Good Friday prayer for the conversion of Jews;
- Lifting the excommunications of four traditionalist bishops, including one who has denied that the Nazis used gas chambers;
- Comments aboard the papal plane to Africa to the effect that condoms make the problem of AIDS worse;

- Criticism from the Catholic right of Benedict's social encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*;
- Open conflicts among cardinals, most notably Christoph Schönborn of Vienna, Austria, and Angelo Sodano of Italy, the Secretary of State under John Paul II;
- Ecumenical tensions related to the creation of new "ordinariates" to welcome traditionalist Anglican converts.

It's a measure of how bad things have been that this is actually far from a complete list. The authors could have included other calamitous episodes, such as Benedict's 2007 trip to Brazil, when he seemed to suggest that indigenous persons should be grateful to their European colonizers; blowback among Jews and reform-minded Catholics to Benedict's 2009 decree of heroic virtue for Pius XII, moving the controversial wartime pontiff a step closer to sainthood; and the surreal "Boffo case" earlier this year, involving charges that senior aides to the pope had leaked fake documents suggesting the editor of an Italian Catholic paper had harassed the girlfriend of a guy with whom he wanted to carry on a gay affair.

On the crises they do examine, Rodari and Tornielli's work has two principal merits.

First, they strike the right balance between insider and outsider approaches. Readers who did not follow these episodes closely will find the main twists and turns ably summarized, while even devotees will learn things they didn't know. (More on those revelations in a moment.)

Second, Rodari and Tornielli present a diverse sampling of theories to explain the negative public image of this papacy, surveying what the authors describe as the "most qualified observers" in Europe and the United States. (In the interests of full disclosure, for some reason they included me in that set.)

A few of these views seem awfully conspiratorial, such as Italian journalist Marcello Foa's suggestion that the shadowy "Bilderberg Group" is behind media hostility to Benedict XVI, because the papacy is the last obstacle to a secularist one-world creed. Others politely suggest the Vatican has no one to blame but itself, such as Rachel Donadio, Rome correspondent for *The New York Times*, who asserts that the Vatican's poor handling of the sex abuse crisis has deepened the gap between American Catholics and Rome.

One thing everyone seems to agree on is that the Vatican's PR strategy is often deficient. Commenting on the conventional wisdom that Joaquin Navarro-Valls, John Paul's spokesperson, brought Vatican communications into the 20th century, George Weigel quips, "Yeah ? the first half of the 20th century." Today, he said, things actually seem to be moving backward.

Tornielli and Rodari don't pretend to settle all the questions, and they realize that the tumult unleashed by these episodes can't be reduced exclusively to a communications problem. (No matter how you spin it, for example, some people are going to find rolling out a welcome mat for Lefebvrites and Anglican traditionalists ill-advised.) That said, Tornielli and Rodari believe they have documented an "attack" against the pope stemming from three concentric circles:

- "Lobbies and forces" outside the church with a vested interest in discrediting the pope, either for ideological or financial motives;
- Liberal critics inside the church, who have long caricatured Ratzinger as the "Panzerkardinal";
- The pope's aides, who sometimes represent his own worst PR enemies.

Whatever one makes of that, the series of disasters surveyed in *Attacco a Ratzinger* has unquestionably eclipsed Benedict's priorities and message for a broad swath of the world. In a sound-bite, the tragedy of Benedict's papacy is that this is a great teaching pope, whose classroom is all but empty because his schoolhouse is burning down.

In just over 300 pages, Tornielli and Rodari assemble most of the data required to ponder how those flames were ignited and what's required to put them out. Even readers who may dispute their diagnosis are in their debt.

* * *

Now for one of those revelations from the book -- a nugget which captures the Vatican's PR tone-deafness so perfectly that it just takes your breath away.

It concerns the affair of Bishop Richard Williamson, one of four traditionalist prelates whose excommunications were lifted by Pope Benedict XVI in January 2009. Williamson infamously gave an interview to Swedish television in November 2008, repeating statements he had made two decades earlier in Canada, to the effect that Nazis did not use gas chambers and that only 200,000 to 300,000 Jews had died in Nazi camps during the Second World War. The interview was not broadcast in Sweden until Jan. 21, 2009, but its contents were anticipated in a piece in the German weekly *Der Spiegel* the day before, on Jan. 20.

By that stage, Benedict XVI had already decided (sometime in late 2008) to lift the excommunications of the four bishops -- seeing it, he would later insist, as the beginning of a process of reconciliation, not the end. A formal decree was presented to Bishop Bernard Fellay, leader of the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, on Jan. 17, 2009, and it took effect on Jan. 21. The decree was not made public by the Vatican, however, until noon Rome time on Jan. 24, when it was published in that day's news bulletin.

Once that happened, headlines about the pope "rehabilitating a Holocaust denier" became the shot heard round the world. After weeks of controversy, Benedict XVI would eventually issue an agonizing letter to the world's bishops apologizing for the hurt caused by the affair.

All that, of course, is a matter of record. What Tornielli and Rodari add is that on Jan. 22, 2009 -- two days after *Der Spiegel* broke the story of Williams' interview, and two days before the Vatican formally announced the lifting of the excommunications -- a high-level meeting took place in the Vatican to discuss the presentation of the pope's decree. The meeting was convened by Italian Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Vatican secretary of state. Also present were:

- Cardinal Dar'o Castrillón Hoyos, then president of the Ecclesia Dei Commission for relations with the traditionalists;
- Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith;
- Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, then prefect of the Congregation for Bishops;
- Cardinal Claudio Hummes, prefect of the Congregation for Clergy;
- Archbishop Francesco Coccopalmerio, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts;
- Archbishop Fernando Filoni, substitute in the Secretariat of State.

The gathering, in other words, brought together the Vatican's most senior brain trust. Tornielli and Rodario reconstruct the meeting on the basis of a previously unpublished set of confidential Vatican minutes.

Here's the mind-blowing point: During the meeting, there was no mention whatsoever of Williamson's explosive comments on the Holocaust, despite the fact that they had been in circulation for two full days. The minutes reflect a detailed discussion about whether, and how, the lifting of the excommunications applied to other clergy of the Society of St. Pius X, but there was apparently no consideration of how this move might go down in the broader court of public opinion.

Two key figures were not on the guest list for the Jan. 22 meeting: Lombardi, who had to explain the decision to

the world's media, and Cardinal Walter Kasper, who had to explain it to the Jews. Instead, Filoni led a brief discussion about a proposed statement to the press, and the minutes reflect general agreement not to grant any media interviews. Coccopalmerio was commissioned to publish an article in *L'Osservatore Romano* explaining the decree, but only "after a few days."

The lack of any sense of urgency, or alarm, about public reaction is astonishing. The impression one gets is that the Vatican's best and brightest were acutely sensitive to the kinds of questions canon lawyers might ask, but either unaware of -- or, even more troubling, indifferent to -- how the decree might strike the rest of the world.

The rest is history. After being whipped around by a global tsunami for 10 full days, the Vatican's Secretariat of State finally released a statement on Feb. 4, calling Williamson's statements on the Holocaust "unacceptable." It clarified that by lifting the excommunications, Benedict XVI only opened a door to dialogue, and it's now up to the traditionalists to prove their "adherence to the doctrine and discipline of the church." The four prelates still have no authority to act as Catholic bishops, and their movement is still not recognized. If they want to be fully reintegrated into the church, they will have to accept the teaching of the Second Vatican Council.

Looking back, here's the thing.

Even if Williamson had never given his interview to Swedish TV, anyone looking at the situation from a PR point of view should have anticipated that once the Vatican announced these four bishops were no longer excommunicated, reporters would look into their backgrounds. Had anyone in the Vatican spent even five minutes on Google searching under the name "Richard Williamson," his troubling history on the Holocaust would have leapt off the screen, which was a matter of public record long before he spoke to the Swedes. (Indeed, all the Swedish journalist did was ask Williamson to repeat stuff he had already said.)

Armed with that information, the Vatican could have issued its detailed Feb. 4 statement along with the decree itself, to explain from the outset that these guys have not been "rehabilitated," but rather given an opportunity to clean up their act. They could also have organized a press conference, so there would be TV sound bites assuring the world that this decision in no way signified a rollback on Catholic/Jewish relations or anything else.

Under any set of circumstances, failure to take such common sense steps is hard to explain.

Yet Williamson did give that interview to Swedish TV, and in that light, the revelation that the pope's top aides assembled two days after it went public and still seemed oblivious to the train wreck hurtling towards them -- well, you'll never need additional proof that the Vatican has a PR problem.

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By the way, one point Benedict XVI made in his letter to bishops after the Williamson affair is that it had brought home the need to be savvier about the Internet. In truth, *Attacco a Ratzinger* shows clearly that by 2009, the Vatican should already have learned that lesson. The story of the rise and fall of Archbishop Stanislaw Wielgus of Warsaw two years earlier makes the point.

To recap, the Vatican announced that Benedict had appointed Wielgus to replace Cardinal Josef Glemp in Warsaw on Dec. 6, 2006, with Wielgus' official installation set for Jan. 5. On Dec. 20, a leading Polish newspaper accused Wielgus of having collaborated with the Soviet-era secret police. Wielgus admitted that he had "contacts," but denied ever having denounced anyone or otherwise collaborated. On Dec. 21, the Vatican issued a statement expressing Benedict's "full confidence" in his nominee. On Jan. 4, another Polish daily published a 1978 document signed by Wiegus pledging his cooperation with the secret police, under the code name "Gray." As public protest mounted, Wielgus was compelled to turn a Jan. 6 Mass celebrating the beginning of his ministry into a forum to announce his resignation instead.

Here's the nugget Tornielli and Rodari add to the record: It wasn't until Jan. 2, after the bomb had obviously already gone off, that anyone from the Vatican bothered to ask Poland's Institute for National Memory, which maintains the archives from the Communist era, for whatever files it might have on Wielgus. This omission came despite the fact, as Tornielli and Rodari point out, that the institute made its index available on the Internet two years before.

"All it would have taken was a click on the web to realize that in the list of 240,000 names cited in the archives of the institute, the name of Wielgus appears twice," the authors write.

Rodari and Tornielli say it's an "open question" why no one did that before approving Wielgus for the most important post in Polish Catholicism, especially given the hyper-sensitivity in Poland about collaboration. Open, indeed.

* * *

One more nugget: Tornielli and Rodari cite Fr. Marco Valerio Fabbri of Rome's Opus Dei-run University of Santa Croce on the case of Stephen Kiesle, a former Oakland priest and convicted abuser. A 1985 letter from then-Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger to the bishop in Oakland at the time, saying that Kiesle's case should go slow "for the good of the universal church," has been widely touted as proof of the pope's ambivalent record on the sexual abuse crisis.

Fabbri, however, says that interpretation rests on a misreading of Ratzinger's 1985 letter, which was issued in Latin. The letter speaks of "dispensation," Fabbri says, not expulsion from the clerical state. The issue in the letter was not, therefore, whether Kiesle should be defrocked, but whether he should be released from his obligation of celibacy.

Under canon law, the two things don't automatically go together. Canon 291 states: "Loss of the clerical state does not entail a dispensation from the obligation of celibacy, which only the Roman Pontiff grants." The logic, according to Fabbri, is clear. If a priest's obligation of celibacy automatically ended with laicization, then being laicized under penal law would *ipso facto* mean freedom to marry in the church. In other words, it would amount to a reward for committing a crime.

The bottom line, Fabbri says, is that by refusing to grant such a dispensation right away in the Kiesle case, Ratzinger was actually being tough with an abuser, not lax.

The obvious question this begs: If that's true -- and it certainly seems a compelling explanation -- why didn't we hear about it right out of the gate from somebody authoritative? Why does this sort of thing always seem to be a day late and a dollar short?

* * *

There's plenty of other good stuff in *Attacco a Ratzinger*, ranging from new background on the conflict between Schönborn and Sodano to great behind-the-scenes detail on the humiliating withdrawal of Benedict's nomination of Gerhard Wagner as an auxiliary bishop in Linz, Austria, in late January 2009.

That about-face came after media outlets recycled incendiary statements Wagner had made back in 2005, theorizing that Hurricane Katrina was divine punishment for the immorality of New Orleans, and in 2001, suggesting that Harry Potter leads children into Satanism. While most Catholics saw the Wagner episode as another Vatican failure to adequately vet nominees, Tornielli and Rodari produce a zinger that cuts in the other direction from an unnamed Vatican official: "Cardinals and bishops can publicly criticize the pope all they

want, but an auxiliary bishop is forced to resign because of a couple of statements years ago about Katrina and Harry Potter ? it's truly incredible."

Getting that kind of insider skinny is a primary reason we need an English translation of the book.

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As it happens, I read *Attacco a Ratzinger* on the heels of a piece in last Sunday's *New York Times* surveying three PR disasters in the corporate world: BP, Goldman Sachs, and Toyota. The piece referred to a provocative essay by Eric Dezenhall, a former aide to Ronald Reagan, titled "Not all publicity is good publicity." Intrigued, I sought out the essay, which appears in the July-August issue of *Ethical Corporation* magazine.

Now CEO of his own communications agency, Dezenhall debunks eight chestnuts propagated by gurus of corporate spin, prominent among which is the idea that every crisis is an opportunity. (The Catholic equivalent, I suppose, would be that every crisis is a "teaching moment.")

Bunk, Dezenhall says: "A crisis is a mugging," he writes, and "your goal is to get out alive, not to get out with all your money and self-esteem."

Why a mugging? Because of the 21st century nature of PR disasters, fueled by what Dezenhall calls "crisis capitalists" -- people who pile on when somebody's in trouble because there's money and fame to be had. (Massimo Introvigne, one of the experts interviewed by Rodari and Tornielli, has a different term for the same slice of life -- he calls them "moral entrepreneurs.") Dezenhall says they include "reporters, victims, bloggers, tweeters, plaintiffs' lawyers, regulators, legislators, non-governmental organizations, activists, short-sellers, anonymous sources, technical experts, analysts, media hounds, opportunists, and a cavalcade of amateur crisis experts."

The conclusion seems obvious: From a PR point of view, it doesn't matter whether anyone is actually out to get you, because when a crisis starts rolling, market dynamics will compel people to act as if they were. The aim, therefore, isn't to persuade them not to mug you; the aim is to avoid making it easier.

Here's a potential case study along those lines that Tornielli and Rodari hint at, but don't really develop.

When Benedict XVI went to Cameroon and Angola in March 2009, coverage of the trip in the West was dominated by the pope's comments aboard the papal plane on condoms. During a brief session with the press, French journalist Philippe Visseyrias had asked Benedict to comment on perceptions that the church's position on HIV/AIDS is "not very realistic and efficient." (Note that Visseyrias did not use the word "condom," and the phrasing of his question didn't require the pope to bring it up.)

Benedict replied that the two cornerstones of the church's approach are the humanization of sexuality, and genuine friendship with suffering people. Along the way, he added that condoms are not the solution to AIDS but, in fact, make the problem worse.

That last bit predictably became the lead in media coverage, and it set off massive protests, especially in Europe. The Spanish government announced that it would ship one million condoms to Africa as a rejoinder, and the Belgium parliament formally censured the pope. From the point of view of the global press, the rest of Benedict's six days in Africa might as well have taken place on the dark side of the moon.

Only several days into the story did three other points emerge, none with the same force as the pope's original remark:

- There is an empirical basis for the claim that wide distribution of condoms is not the best anti-AIDS strategy. Research by Edward C. Green of Harvard University shows that programs emphasizing abstinence and marital fidelity have brought down infection rates more successfully than those which rely primarily on condoms. Green says that's for three reasons: people often don't use condoms correctly; they stop using them when they believe they know the other person; and condoms generate a false sense of security that induces users into high-risk behaviors.
- Whatever one makes of the claim that condoms aggravate AIDS, Benedict XVI was only repeating a conviction held by a wide cross-section of Catholic bishops and other religious leaders in Africa. Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Abuja, Nigeria, said, "The pope is not the only one saying this. NGOs who want to promote condoms in my country run into resistance from many other organizations and movements, including the Muslim community as a whole."
- Many secular AIDS experts in Africa, unaffiliated with the Catholic church, also hold that view. For example, Vanessa Balla, a non-Catholic physician in Cameroon who treats AIDS patients, told me at the time, "With condoms, people think they can do whatever they want. It just encourages them to engage in really risky sexual behaviors. I've seen it myself ? they take as much risk as possible." Emotionally insisting that "it's incredibly hard to watch young people dying of AIDS," Balla said the solution is "not condoms, but changing behavior."

For the record, the pope was not caught off guard by Visseyrias' question. The Vatican spokesperson, Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, collects questions from journalists several days before a trip, picks two or three that seem to be the most common, and then submits them to the pope in advance.

Let's grant that Benedict XVI could not have travelled to Africa and ducked the issue of AIDS and condoms. Let's also stipulate that Vatican officials could have, and should have, anticipated that whatever Benedict XVI said would attract wide interest, running the risk of being misrepresented or caricatured.

In that situation, what would a better anti-mugging strategy have looked like?

First, the primary aim of Benedict's six-day trip was to throw a spotlight on Africa, especially the dynamism of the Catholic church on the continent. Thus when the AIDS question came up on the plane, Benedict could have said something like: "That's a very important issue, and I'll talk about it two days from now during my visit to the Cardinal Léger Center for the Suffering on Thursday. For now, however, I want the focus to be on good news from Africa." Such a reply would have ensured that journalists had to file day-one stories on the broader African situation, without feeding impressions that the pope was ducking the condoms question. It also would have created global interest in his visit to the Léger Center, one of the most visually striking moments of the trip, as it put the pope in direct pastoral contact with sick and disabled people.

Second, when Benedict did talk about condoms, the Vatican could have arranged for him to be flanked by other African religious leaders -- Catholic and Anglican bishops, Pentecostal preachers, Muslim imams, and leaders of traditional tribal faiths, all of whom would have echoed his argument. They were not hard to find; on the second day of the trip I interviewed the grand imam of the national mosque in Yaounde, the Cameroon capital, who told me his only regret about the pope's comment is that he hadn't waited so they could say it together.

Third, the Vatican could have arranged to have secular African AIDS experts such as Balla on hand, with no ties to the Catholic church, who could have offered their expertise in support of the pope's argument. Both the religious leaders and secular AIDS experts could have been made available to reporters at the press center in Yaounde immediately after the pope's speech at the Léger Center.

Fourth, Lombardi and his aides could have assembled a packet of empirical studies demonstrating the limits of anti-AIDS efforts based on condoms, featuring the Green study from Harvard. That packet could have been distributed shortly before the pope's speech, so that it figured in the first cycle of stories and TV commentary.

Journalists should not have had to wait forty-eight hours to read about Green's work in an op/ed piece in *The Washington Post* -- a piece, by the way, that seemed to catch the Vatican completely by surprise.

None of this would have completely prevented protests about the pope's remarks, especially given that there's a legitimate debate to be had about the proper role of condoms in anti-AIDS efforts. Such a strategy, however, would at least have made it more difficult to portray Benedict XVI as isolated, out of touch, and uncaring, which was the storyline that dominated the African journey.

That's the kind of practical reflection one hopes *Attacco a Ratzinger* might stimulate.

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