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Has the 'real Ratzinger' come out to play?

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ROME -- When Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger was elected to the papacy in April 2005, the popular forecast called for stormy weather ahead. This was, after all, the Vatican enforcer who had been leading a "smack-down on heresy since 1981", in the words of T-shirts and coffee mugs marketed by a Ratzinger fan club. His rise elicited dread in some quarters and joy in others, but virtually everyone agreed big things were in the works.

During most of the past seven years, however, that anticipated upheaval has seemed a lot like the dog that didn't bark. Back in February 2006, the late Fr. Richard John Neuhaus famously voiced "palpable unease" among those most elated by Ratzinger's election, and that disappointment endured in a swath of Catholic opinion which had begun to despair that the pope would ever impose order.

Of late, however, many observers believe the "real Ratzinger" has finally come out to play. Consider the tumult of the past month:

- On April 18, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith decreed a sweeping overhaul of the Leadership Conference for Women Religious, the main American umbrella group for the superiors of women's orders, to correct what the congregation described as LCWR's "corporate dissent" on issues such as women's ordination and homosexuality, and its contamination by "radical feminism."
- At least five Irish priests have faced Vatican-inspired discipline, with implementation left to their religious orders. Two Redemptorists have seen their writings for a church magazine either withdrawn or limited (one was also dispatched to a monastery for a six-week "reflection"), a Passionist prominent in the English media is now subject to prior censorship, and both a Marist and a Capuchin have been told to stop writing and speaking on certain hot-button topics.

- On April 5, Benedict XVI included some blistering language in his Holy Thursday homily about a "call to disobedience" issued by more than 300 priests and deacons in Austria who oppose celibacy and support women's ordination. The pope called the effort "a desperate push to do something to change the church in accordance with (their) own preferences and ideas."
- On April 14, Benedict XVI ordered the German bishops to translate the traditional Latin phrase *pro multis*, from the words spoken by Christ at the Last Supper in reference to the shedding of his blood, as "for many" rather than "for all". (The Vatican had previously done the same thing for English.) In the politics of liturgical translation, "for all" has been the preferred post-Vatican choice among progressives; conservatives typically prefer "for many," worrying that "for all" suggests a false promise of universal salvation.
- On April 25, Benedict created a commission of three veteran cardinals to investigate the recent Vatican leaks scandal, complementing two other internal probes. The suggestion was that the Vatican's moles, assuming they're identified, will face stern punishment.

One could add to this list a further episode from March: the leadership of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers voted on the dismissal of Fr. Roy Bourgeois, a peace activist who has come under Vatican scrutiny for his advocacy of women's ordination.

To put all this in context, veteran Italian writer Andrea Tornielli dusted off a 1979 homily from Ratzinger: "To say that someone's opinion doesn't correspond to the doctrine of the Catholic church doesn't mean violating their human rights," he said then. "Everyone should have the right to freely express their own view, which the Catholic church decisively recognized at Vatican II and still does today. This doesn't mean, however, that every opinion must be recognized as Catholic."

The fact that Tornielli felt compelled to reach across three decades to find that *mot juste* perfectly captures the "back to the future" feel of the past month.

All this, of course, is unfolding at the same time the Vatican is negotiating a deal with the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, popularly known as the Lefebvrites, which could clear the way for reunion. In tandem with Benedict's 2009 decision to welcome traditionalist Anglicans, it's tempting to conclude that his policy amounts to accommodating dissent on the right and squelching it on the left.

So, is the long-awaited "Reagan Revolution" in Catholicism at hand? In thinking that through, five bits of perspective may be helpful.

First, a cascade of disciplinary moves all at once can produce a misleading sense of proportion. Measured over the full seven years of Benedict's papacy, the total number of occasions when Rome has called someone on the carpet remains relatively limited. There's only been one theologian publicly chastised by the Vatican on Benedict's watch, the Jesuit liberationist Fr. Jon Sobrino of El Salvador in 2007. A handful of other cases, such as Sr. Elizabeth Johnson in the United States or Fr. Andres Torres Queiruga in Spain, have been handled by local bishops, and a few writers for publications sponsored by religious orders have had their wings clipped at Rome's behest.

Aside from theologians, there's also been one bishop sacked on Benedict's watch: Bishop William Morris of the Australian diocese of Toowoomba in May 2011, who was removed as head of the diocese for, among other things, questioning church teaching on women's ordination.

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Second, when discipline has been imposed, even by recent historical standards it's often been fairly light. No one's had their license to teach theology publicly yanked, as happened to Hans Küng in 1979, nor has anyone been fired from a teaching post at the Vatican's direction, as happened to Charles Curran at the Catholic University of America in 1987. For the most part, official censure of theologians these days typically takes the form of bad book reviews.

Beginning in the 2000s, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith informally adopted a policy of preferring to target ideas rather than people, on the belief that gag orders or firings often take the focus off the content of the case and put it on process. In the main, this approach has continued under Benedict XVI. (In Sobrino's case, the congregation criticized the content of two of his books, but did not impose disciplinary measures.)

In other situations, both Rome and some of the pope's protégés around the world have shown restraint. In Austria, for example, neither the Vatican nor Vienna's Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, a Dominican intellectual who studied under Ratzinger in Regensburg, have yet imposed any canonical penalties upon the dissident priests' movement. The group's leader, Fr. Helmut Schüller, basically shrugged off Benedict's Holy Thursday rebuke, saying, "I cannot see it as a very sharp wording."

Third, some recent moves are the result of unique circumstances, as opposed to a systematic decision to crank up the inquisition. The crackdown on Irish priests is part of the fallout from an apostolic visitation of Ireland motivated by that country's massive sexual abuse crisis. The new cardinals' commission reflects the fact that the Vatican leaks scandal has been a cause célèbre in Italy, generating front-page news and dominating prime time talk shows for much of February and March. Both were "perfect storms" unlikely to be repeated anytime soon.

Fourth, it may be too early to tell exactly how draconian these new measures will turn out to be. At face value, for instance, the Vatican decree on the LCWR seems to leave precious little wiggle room. Yet when a sweeping visitation of women's religious orders in the States was announced four years ago, it elicited similar anxieties, but now that it's over it does not seem to have produced quite the nuclear option some predicted — at least, not yet.

Fifth, some of the recent ferment may have a prosaic bureaucratic explanation. Heads of Vatican offices tend to become unusually active just before they retire, out of a sense of obligation to leave the desk clear for the next guy. The timing of recent moves by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith may be explicable in this light, given that Cardinal William Levada will turn 76 on June 15.

In other words, the events of the past month may not necessarily be the first temblors of a larger earthquake.

In general, Benedict XVI is a teaching, rather than a governing, pope. Especially at 85, he tends to leave administrative questions in the hands of others. To be sure, the pope has not shown himself hesitant about endorsing a disciplinary move when it lands on his desk. Yet there's little indication that Benedict is personally seeking new occasions to bring down a hammer.

Benedict's top priorities for 2012 include a synod of bishops in October on the "New Evangelization," meaning reviving the missionary energies of the church, and the declaration of a "Year of Faith" to begin on Oct. 11, 2012, the 50th anniversary of the opening of the Second Vatican Council. Whatever the real-world impact of those initiatives may be, they seem more like an invitation to catechesis and pastoral outreach than heresy-hunting exercises.

What all this suggests is that if there's indeed a purge unfolding, it will likely be sporadic and uneven, driven more by some Vatican departments, and by some local bishops or religious orders, than others. One way to read it would be as the natural consequence of thirty years of appointments of more 'evangelical' church leaders under John Paul II and Benedict XVI, meaning figures deeply concerned with Catholic identity and alleged threats to it in a secular milieu, than any new campaign orchestrated out of the papal apartment.

Yet with all those cautions on the record, the bottom line on April 2012 remains: The 'German Shepherd', it would seem, still has some bite.

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