

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

March 1, 2013 at 1:56pm

Germans look back on Benedict's papacy with mixed emotions

by Jonathan Luxmoore

Benedict Resigns

When Benedict XVI announced his resignation Feb. 11, he filled front pages across his German homeland as media commentators assessed his eight-year pontificate and tributes came in from public figures.

Yet some say enthusiasm for the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger never reached a high level in Germany, where relations between the pope and his own countrymen always remained complex.

"I think many Germans had trouble from the outset with the idea of a German pope," said Stefan Forner, spokesman for the German church's Berlin archdiocese.

"Since World War II, we haven't had much sense of national pride here," he said. "While some were disappointed the pope didn't engage more with our country's problems, most were unmoved that a German had become such an important world figure."

Among top-level reactions to the resignation, Germany's Protestant chancellor, Angela Merkel, said Pope Benedict had "won the hearts of the faithful," while President Joachim Gauck, an evangelical pastor who visited the Vatican in December, praised the 85-year-old pontiff's "faith, wisdom and modesty," adding that many non-Catholics had "found guidance and support in him."

Not surprisingly, the resignation topped the agenda at the German bishops' spring plenary in Trier, where the bishops' conference president said all Germans had "in some sense shared the honor" of Ratzinger's election.

Benedict XVI had not "succeeded in everything," Archbishop Robert Zollitsch added, and had faced

criticism for failing "to meet the excited, interrelated expectations of so many."

However, Zollitsch said "truth, clarity and compassion" had formed the "three pillars" of his pontificate, and most Germans had appreciated his twin devotion to God and "the specifically human means of reason."

"We feel a deep, overriding respect and gratitude, but also a sadness," the Freiburg-based archbishop told the plenary.

"The fundamental dedication shaping our Holy Father's life is so transparent that people revere him as a spiritual and intellectual authority. So do most of those who, by individual choice and attitude, cannot or will not understand him," Zollitsch said.

Ratzinger was already well known in his homeland as a conservative when he became first German pope on April 19, 2005.

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He'd already served a quarter-century as prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith; many local Catholics viewed him as more a Roman than a German figure.

In Ratzinger's native Bavaria, news of his election brought scenes of elation, with the popular *Bild-Zeitung* daily proclaiming "Wir Sind Papst" ("We are the Pope") across its front.

Meanwhile, the advent of a German pope raised hopes of a religious revival across the country, where Catholics make up 31 percent of the population of 82.3 million, the same proportion as Protestants, according to federal government data.

In a 2005 survey by the country's Enmid agency, around half of Germans claimed to believe in God, compared to 24 percent calling themselves atheists and 26 percent disclaiming a view.

But religious affiliations were much higher in western Lande than in the former Communist-ruled East Germany, where only 30 percent of citizens professed any belief.

If Benedict XVI could engender just some of the enthusiasm aroused by John Paul II in neighboring Poland, German Catholicism's long-running decline could be reversed.

In August 2005, when the new pope arrived in Cologne for the church's Weltjugendtag, or World Youth Day, it looked for a moment as if the hoped-for revival was under way.

But the triumphant homecoming took place when the atmosphere was fresh, before disputes and controversies had erupted, and when Germany's politicians were sympathetic in the run-up to parliamentary elections.

Although Benedict XVI drew huge crowds on a pilgrimage to Bavaria in September 2006, it soon became clear the presence of a German pope had failed to reverse a fall in church membership and attendance.

In 2008, annual priestly ordinations fell below 100 for the first time in Germany's 27 Catholic dioceses, while total Catholic seminary admissions dropped to just 176, half the number two decades previously.

In a survey that year for the bishops' conference's Misereor charity and Union of German Catholic Youth, most young Germans expressed some interest in spirituality but showed little response to faith experiences offered by the Catholic church.

The German church suffered from controversy over the pope's January 2009 attempt at reconciliation with the arch-traditionalist Society of St. Pius X, which has a breakaway seminary at Zaitzkofen in Bavaria.

It made little headway under the pope's guidance in seeking reconciliation with Germany's evangelical church in preparation for the fifth centenary of the Reformation in 2017.

It faced a wave of criticism when the bishops' conference decreed that Catholics could not continue receiving sacraments if they stopped paying their church membership tax, introduced in the 19th century, which has made the German church one of the world's richest by netting \$5 billion euros (\$6 billion) yearly.

Yet the greatest blow fell in January 2010, when sexual abuse by Catholic clergy was reported at Berlin's Jesuit-run Canisius Kolleg.

Hundreds of Germans later came forward, claiming molestation by priests and church staffers in a scandal that inflicted grave damage and was still festering in January, when the German bishops withdrew from an abuse inquiry, citing a breakdown of trust with researchers.

In 2010-11, more than 306,000 Catholics asked to be removed from parish registers, while only 13 percent are currently attending Mass, compared to 22 percent in 1989.

German newspapers say the pope's native Bavaria has suffered the worst losses, with the dioceses of Eichstätt, Augsburg, Bamberg, Würzburg and Passau reporting a 70 percent increase in departures since the abuse scandal.

Although a nationwide movement, Deutschland Pro Papa, was set up in 2010 to support Benedict XVI, this had little impact. In early 2011, dozens of Catholic theologians from Germany, Austria and Switzerland demanded "intensive Church reforms" in a memorandum, including voluntary celibacy, women's ordination and greater lay participation.

The pope's third homecoming that September was marred by disputes over his right to address the German Bundestag in Berlin, while media reports say the church's current Year of Faith has had little public resonance.

Some church leaders are understandably disappointed.

The host of the 2005 Weltjugendtag, Cardinal Joachim Meisner of Cologne, who provoked controversy in January by appearing to endorse the use of "morning-after pills" by rape victims, denounced the climate of "Cathophobia" in a pastoral letter before the pope's resignation.

"It's always hurt me how disrespectfully, even maliciously, people talk about the Pope in Germany," Meisner told the Katholische Nachrichten-Agentur.

"Many people seem to lack any pride that, after almost 500 years, a German has been holding this great world office."

Others say it was unwise to harbor expectations of a religious revival and insist Benedict XVI's low-

profile ties with Germany can't be compared with the spectacular role played by John Paul II in the very different circumstances of Poland.

While Germany lacks a tradition of mass folk Catholicism, the church here focuses on quality rather than quantity, producing world-class theologians rather than mass displays of popular devotion.

Although most Germans are reticent about trumpeting their faith, they take it very seriously and will debate points of doctrine with a candor and directness that aren't always found elsewhere.

Stefan Forner, the Berlin archdiocese spokesman, said he thinks Benedict XVI's time in office may still have unforeseen consequences, making it unwise to reach conclusions.

Although many Germans rejected his views and values, the pope nevertheless raised important questions, and did so with a German clarity and thoroughness that enhanced the public discourse.

Besides exemplifying humility and dedication in his own life and faith, Forner argues, Benedict also gave Catholics self-confidence by setting out useful parameters to the "permanent struggle" of Germans everywhere to reconcile faith and reason.

"The pope wasn't a magician -- those thinking he could come here and change everything a few holy words have read too much *Harry Potter*," said Forner, whose own archdiocese announced plans in December to merge its parishes in the face of falling membership.

"This isn't how the church develops. Ordinary Mass-going Catholics have found something impressive and lasting in what Benedict XVI has said and done here. But its real effects will only be known over time."

The German church will have six cardinals at the conclave to elect the pope's successor, including two -- Reinhard Marx of Munich-Freising and Karl Lehmann of Mainz -- who featured high on the list of 500 top German thinkers, published in December by the country's *Cicero* weekly.

While this will give it a strong voice, Benedict XVI's continued presence, however low-profile, could still spring some surprises -- not least when the German church assembles for its first National Eucharistic Congress in June.

In his address to the bishops' plenary, Zollitsch said some Catholics had been disappointed after "expecting certain ecclesiastical reforms."

However, Benedict XVI had always acted "in a spirit of honesty and self-criticism," he said, while "many millions" of Germans had, for all the controversies, felt "spiritually nourished and supported" by his leadership.

"The pope asked forgiveness for his own shortcomings; and I would ask the Holy Father in return to pardon errors committed against him within the church in Germany," Zollitsch said.

"We are more calmly aware now than before of how he sought to get the message of his life across -- that we should draw from the wells of salvation and let ourselves be saved by the Lord's gift."

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