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'I never tried to cover up' abuse, Benedict says

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 24, 2013 NCR Today
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In itself, the fact that the pope made the front page of a major newspaper Tuesday is hardly surprising. Over the last six months, the papacy has been a global phenomenon, making waves and generating interest well beyond the borders of the Catholic church.

Which pope did so this time, however, is a different matter.

Instead of Francis, the newsmaker in this instance was Pope Benedict XVI, who stepped down Feb. 28 and who has stayed largely out of the spotlight ever since.

On Tuesday, however, the Italian daily *La Repubblica* published lengthy extracts of an 11-page letter by the 86-year-old emeritus pontiff to an Italian mathematician and philosopher named Piergiorgio Odifreddi, who had published a 2011 book challenging Benedict's take on Jesus of Nazareth titled, *Dear Pope, I'm Writing You*.

It was the second time in recent weeks *La Repubblica* published a letter from a pope to an atheist intellectual after a Sept. 11 missive from Francis to Italian journalist and leftist activist Eugenio Scalfari.

In general, Benedict thanks Odifreddi for seeking "an open dialogue" on matters of reason and faith, and for having approached his thought "in a respectful fashion, trying to do it justice," while also offering spirited defense of his views on several fronts.

Odifreddi says he received the letter Sept. 3 and waited three weeks to publish it in order to get Benedict's approval for doing so.

In terms of news value, probably the most interesting section of Benedict's letter regards the church's child sexual abuse scandals, which the pope says cause him "deep dismay."

"I never tried to cover up these things," he writes.

"That the power of evil penetrates to such a point in the interior world of the faith is, for us, a source of suffering. On the one hand we must accept that suffering, and on the other, at the same time, we must do everything possible so that such cases aren't repeated," Benedict says.

"It's also not a motive for comfort to know that, according to sociological research, the percentage of priests guilty of these crimes is no higher than in other comparable professional categories."

"In any event, one must not stubbornly present this deviance as if it were a nastiness specific to Catholicism," Benedict writes.

Overall, the letter is devoted to an unfailingly polite, though occasionally pointed, response from Benedict on several stock subjects in the exchange between believers and their atheist critics:

- Whether theology can be considered a "science"
- Whether empirical sciences such as biology, and even mathematics, also have their flights of fancy -- what Benedict describes as lapses into "science fiction"
- The humanitarian contributions of religion, expressed in luminaries such as Francis, Vincent de Paul and Mother Teresa
- How much can be known about Jesus as an historical figure
- The historical-critical method of Biblical interpretation, with Benedict insisting that far from rejecting such methods, he sees them as essential so that Christianity is not merely proposing "myths using historical images"

Benedict also faults Odifreddi for proposing a "religion of mathematics" which fails to consider what he believes to be "three fundamental themes of human existence": freedom, love and evil.

"Whatever neurobiology does or doesn't say about freedom, in the real drama of our history it's there as a determining reality, and it has to be taken into consideration," Benedict writes.

On the subject of evil, Benedict says that "a religion that overlooks these fundamental questions remains empty."

Conceding that he's been tough on Odifreddi in parts, Benedict concludes by saying that "frankness is part of dialogue," because understanding one another requires candor.

Despite that, the pope emeritus says he appreciates that Odifreddi has "sought an open dialogue on the faith of the Catholic church" and that despite their disagreements, "we also have some points of convergence."

In a brief essay published alongside the letter, Odifreddi says he decided to write a book directly challenging the writings of Benedict XVI because he felt the pope's ideas were "sufficiently firm and strong to be able easily to withstand a frontal assault."

"I concentrated on intellectual arguments that I hoped would capture his attention, without pulling back from challenging the internal problems of the faith and its relations with science head-on," he writes.

Odifreddi says that Benedict's reply is in the spirit of the "Cortile of the Gentiles" project launched by the pope in 2009, the aim of which is precisely to open a space of dialogue between believers and atheists.

Odifreddi says the entire 11-page letter was too long for newspaper publication, but will be included in a new edition of his book.

He and the pope, Odifreddi writes, may disagree on almost everything, but they have at least one aim in common: "The search for the truth, with a capital 'T'."

The respectful tone parallels the earlier exchange between Francis and Scalfari, which also created a mini-sensation.

Scalfari had floated some questions for Francis in a piece published in July about *Lumen fidei*, an encyclical letter begun by Benedict and brought to completion by Francis.

In his letter, Francis told Scalfari that God's mercy "has no limits," and that sin for a non-believer wouldn't be a lack of faith in God, but rather a failure to obey one's conscience.

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