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## **CRISIS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH**

### **The Pope's Contradictions**

*By Hans Küng*

**Outwardly Pope John Paul II, who has been actively involved in battling war and suppression, is a beacon of hope for those who long for freedom. Internally, however, his anti-reformist tenure has plunged the Roman Catholic church into an epochal credibility crisis.**

The Catholic church is in dire straits. The pope is deathly ill and deserves every bit of sympathy he can get. But the church must live on, and in light of the selection of a new pope, it will need a diagnosis, an unadorned insider analysis. The therapy will be discussed later.

Many marvel at the staying power of this highly fragile, partially paralyzed head of the Roman Catholic church, a man who, despite all medications, is barely able to speak. He is treated with a sort of reverence that would never be extended to an American president or a German chancellor in a similar state. Others feel put off by a man they see as an obstinate office bearer who, instead of accepting the Christian path to his own eternity, is using all means at his disposal to hold on to power in a largely undemocratic system.

Even for many Catholics, this pope at the end of his physical strength, refusing to relinquish his power, is the symbol of a fraudulent church that has calcified and become senile behind its glittering façade.

The festive mood that prevailed during the Second Vatican Council (1962 to 1965), or Vatican II, has disappeared. Vatican II's outlook of renewal, ecumenical understanding and a general opening of the world now seems overcast and the future gloomy. Many have resigned themselves or even turned away out of frustration from this self-absorbed hierarchy. As a result, many people are confronted with an impossible set of alternatives: "play the game or leave the church." New hope will only begin to take root when church officials in Rome and in the episcopacy reorient themselves toward the compass of the Gospel.

One of the few glimmers of hope has been the pope's stance against the Iraq war and war in general. The role the Polish pope played in helping bring about the collapse of the Soviet empire is also emphasized, and rightly so. But it's also heavily exaggerated by papal propagandists. After all, the Soviet regime did not fail because of the pope (before the arrival of Gorbachev, the pope was achieving about as little as he is now achieving in China), but instead imploded because of the Soviet system's inherent economic and social contradictions.

In my view, Karol Wojtyla is not the greatest, but certainly the most contradictory, pope of the 20th century. A pope of many great gifts and many wrong decisions! To summarize his tenure and reduce it to a common denominator: His "foreign policy" demands conversion, reform and dialogue from the rest of the world. But this is sharply contradicted by his "domestic policy," which is oriented toward the restoration of the pre-council status quo, obstructing reform, denying dialogue within the church, and absolute Roman dominance. This inconsistency is evident in many areas. While expressly acknowledging the positive sides of this pontificate, which, incidentally, have received plenty of official emphasis, I would like to focus on the nine most glaring contradictions:

**HUMAN RIGHTS:** Outwardly, John Paul II supports human rights, while inwardly withholding them from bishops, theologians and especially women.

The Vatican -- once a resolute foe of human rights, but nowadays all too willing to become involved in European politics -- has yet to sign the European Council's Declaration of Human Rights. Far too many canons of the absolutist Roman church law of the Middle Ages would have to be amended first. The concept of separation of powers, the bedrock of all modern legal practice, is unknown in the Roman Catholic church. Due process is an unknown entity in the church. In disputes, one and the same Vatican agency functions as lawmaker, prosecutor and judge.

Consequences: A servile episcopate and intolerable legal conditions. Any pastor, theologian or layperson who enters into a legal dispute with the higher church courts has virtually no prospects of prevailing.

**THE ROLE OF WOMEN:** The great worshiper of the Virgin Mary preaches a noble concept of womanhood, but at the same time forbids women from practicing birth control and bars them from ordination.

Consequences: There is a rift between external conformism and internal autonomy of conscience. This results in bishops who lean towards Rome, alienating themselves from women, as was the case in the dispute surrounding the issue of abortion counseling (in 1999, the Pope ordered German bishops to close counseling centers that issued certificates to

women that could later be used to get an abortion). This in turn leads to a growing exodus among those women who have so far remained faithful to the church.

**SEXUAL MORALS:** This pope, while preaching against mass poverty and suffering in the world, makes himself partially responsible for this suffering as a result of his attitudes toward birth control and explosive population growth.

During his many trips and in a speech to the 1994 United Nations Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, John Paul II declared his opposition to the pill and condoms. As a result, the pope, more than any other statesman, can be held partly responsible for uncontrolled population growth in some countries and the spread of AIDS in Africa.

Consequences: Even in traditionally Catholic countries like Ireland, Spain and Portugal, the pope's and the Roman Catholic church's rigorous sexual morals are openly or tacitly rejected.

**CELIBACY AMONG PRIESTS:** By propagating the traditional image of the celibate male priest, Karol Wojtyla bears the principal responsibility for the catastrophic dearth of priests, the collapse of spiritual welfare in many countries, and the many pedophilia scandals the church is no longer able to cover up.

Marriage is still forbidden to men who have agreed to devote their lives to the priesthood. This is only one example of how this pope, like others before him, is ignoring the teachings of the bible and the great Catholic tradition of the first millennium, which did not require office bearers to take a vow of celibacy. If someone, by virtue of his office, is forced to spend his life without a wife and children, there is a great risk that healthy integration of sexuality will fail, which can lead to pedophilic acts, for example.

Consequences: The ranks have been thinned and there is a lack of new blood in the Catholic church. Soon almost two-thirds of parishes, both in German-speaking countries and elsewhere, will be without an ordained pastor and regular celebrations of the Eucharist. It's a deficiency that even the declining influx of priests from other countries (1,400 of Germany's priests are from Poland, India and Africa) and the combining of parishes into "spiritual welfare units," a highly unpopular trend among the faithful, can no longer hide. The number of newly ordained priests in Germany dropped from 366 in 1990 to 161 in 2003, and the average age of active priests today is now above 60.

**ECUMENICAL MOVEMENT:** The pope likes to be seen as a spokesman for the ecumenical movement. At the same time, however, he has weighed heavily on the Vatican's relations with orthodox and reform churches, and has refused to

recognize their ecclesiastical offices and Communion services.

The pope could heed the advice of several ecumenical study commissions and follow the practice of many local pastors by recognizing the offices and Communion services of non-Catholic churches and permitting Eucharistic hospitality. He could also tone down the Vatican's excessive, medieval claim to power, in terms of doctrine and church leadership, vis-à-vis eastern European churches and reform churches, and could do away with the Vatican's policy of sending Roman-Catholic bishops to regions dominated by the Russian Orthodox church.

The pope could do these things, but John Paul II doesn't want to. Instead, he wants to preserve and even expand the Roman power system. For this reason, he resorts to a pious two-facedness: Rome's politics of power and prestige are veiled by ecumenical soapbox speeches and empty gestures.

Consequences: Ecumenical understanding was blocked after the council, and relations with the Orthodox and Protestant churches were burdened to an appalling extent. The papacy, like its predecessors in the 11th and 16th centuries, is proving to be the greatest obstacle to unity among Christian churches in freedom and diversity.

**PERSONNEL POLICY:** As a suffragan bishop and later as archbishop of Krakow, Karol Wojtyla took part in the Second Vatican Council. But as pope, he disregarded the collegiality which had been agreed to there and instead celebrated the triumph of his papacy at the cost of the bishops.

With his "internal policies," this Pope betrayed the council numerous times. Instead of using the conciliatory program words "Aggiornamento - Dialogue and Collegiality -- ecumenical," what's valid now in doctrine and practice is "restoration, lectureship, obedience and re-Romanization." The criteria for the appointment of a bishop is not the spirit of the gospel or pastoral open-mindedness, but rather to be absolutely loyal to the party line in Rome. Before their appointment, their fundamental conformity is tested based on a curial catalog of questions and they are sacrally sealed through a personal and unlimited pledge of obedience to the Pope that is tantamount to an oath to the "Fuehrer."

The Pope's friends among the German-speaking bishops include Cologne's Cardinal Joachim Meisner, the Bishop of Fulda Johannes Dyba, who died in 2000, Hans Hermann Groer, who resigned from his post as Vienna's cardinal in 1995 following allegations that he had sexually abused pupils years before and the Bishop of St. Poelting, Kurt Krenn, who just lost his post after a sex scandal emerged in his priests' seminary. Those are just the most spectacular mistakes of these pastorally devastating personnel policies, which have allowed the moral, intellectual and pastoral level of the

episcopate to dangerously slip.

Consequences: A largely mediocre, ultra-conservative and servile episcopate is possibly the most serious burden of this overly long pontificate. The masses of cheering Catholics at the best-staged Pope manifestations should not deceive: Millions have left the church under this pontificate or they have withdrawn from religious life in opposition.

**CLERICALISM:** The Polish pope comes across as a deeply religious representative of a Christian Europe, but his triumphant appearances and his reactionary policies unintentionally promote hostility to the church and even an aversion to Christianity.

In the papal campaign of evangelization, which centers on a sexual morality that is out of step with the times, women, in particular, who do not share the Vatican's position on controversial issues like birth control, abortion, divorce and artificial insemination are disparaged as promoters of a "culture of death." As a result of its interventions -- in Germany, for example, where it sought to influence politicians and the episcopacy in the dispute surrounding the issue of abortion counseling -- the Roman Curia creates the impression that it has little respect for the legal separation of church and state. Indeed, the Vatican (using the European People's Party as its mouthpiece) is also trying to exert pressure on the European Parliament by calling for the appointment of experts, in issues relating to abortion legislation, for example, who are especially loyal to Rome. Instead of entering the social mainstream everywhere by supporting reasonable solutions, the Roman Curia, through its proclamations and secret agitation (through nuntiatures, bishops' conferences and "friends"), is in fact fueling the polarization between the pro-life and pro-choice movements, between moralists and libertines.

Consequences: Rome's clericalist policy merely strengthens the position of dogmatic anti-clericalists and fundamentalist atheists. It also creates suspicion among believers that religion could be being misused for political ends.

**NEW BLOOD IN THE CHURCH:** As a charismatic communicator and media star, this pope is especially effective among young people, even as he grows older. But he achieves this by drawing in large part on the conservative "new movements" of Italian origin, the "Opus Dei" movement that originated in Spain, and an uncritical public loyal to the pope. All of this is symptomatic of the pope's approach to dealing with the lay public and his inability to converse with his critics.

The major regional and international youth events sponsored by the new lay movements (Focolare, Comunione e Liberazione, St. Egidio, Regnum Christi) and supervised by

the church hierarchy attract hundreds of thousands of young people, many of them well-meaning but far too many uncritical. In times when they lack convincing leadership figures, these young people are most impressed by a shared "event." The personal magnetism of "John Paul Superstar" is usually more important than the content of the pope's speeches, while their effects on parish life are minimal.

In keeping with his ideal of a uniform and obedient church, the pope sees the future of the church almost exclusively in these easily controlled, conservative lay movements. This includes the Vatican's distancing itself from the Jesuit order, which is oriented toward the tenets of the council. Preferred by earlier popes, the Jesuits, because of their intellectual qualities, critical theology and liberal theological options, are now perceived as spanners in the works of the papal restoration policy.

Instead, Karol Wojtyla, even during his tenure as archbishop of Krakow, placed his full confidence in the financially powerful and influential, but undemocratic and secretive Opus Dei movement, a group linked to fascist regimes in the past and now especially active in the world of finance, politics and journalism. In fact, by granting Opus Dei special legal status, the pope even made the organization exempt from supervision by the church's bishops.

Consequences: Young people from church groups and congregations (with the exception of altar servers), and especially the non-organized "average Catholics," usually stay away from major youth get-togethers. Catholic youth organizations at odds with the Vatican are disciplined and starved when local bishops, at Rome's behest, withhold their funding. The growing role of the archconservative and non-transparent Opus Dei movement in many institutions has created a climate of uncertainty and suspicion. Once-critical bishops have cozied up to Opus Dei, while laypeople who were once involved in the church have withdrawn in resignation.

**SINS OF THE PAST:** Despite the fact that in 2000 he forced himself through a public confession of the church's historical transgressions, John Paul II has drawn almost no practical consequences from it.

The baroque and bombastic confession of the church's transgressions, staged with cardinals in St. Peter's Cathedral, remained vague, non-specific and ambiguous. The pope only asked for forgiveness for the transgressions of the "sons and daughters" of the church, but not for those of the "Holy Fathers," those of the "church itself" and those of the hierarchies present at the event.

The pope never commented on the Curia's dealings with the Mafia, and in fact contributed more to covering up than

uncovering scandals and criminal behavior. The Vatican has also been extremely slow to prosecute pedophilia scandals involving Catholic clergy.

Consequences: The half-hearted papal confession remained without consequences, producing neither reversals nor action, only words.

For the Catholic church, this pontificate, despite its positive aspects, has on the whole proven to be a great disappointment and, ultimately, a disaster. As a result of his contradictions, this pope has deeply polarized the church, alienated it from countless people and plunged it into an epochal crisis -- a structural crisis that, after a quarter century, is now revealing fatal deficits in terms of development and a tremendous need for reform.

Contrary to all intentions conveyed in the Second Vatican Council, the medieval Roman system, a power apparatus with totalitarian features, was restored through clever and ruthless personnel and academic policies. Bishops were brought into line, pastors overloaded, theologians muzzled, the laity deprived of their rights, women discriminated against, national synods and churchgoers' requests ignored, along with sex scandals, prohibitions on discussion, liturgical spoon-feeding, a ban on sermons by lay theologians, incitement to denunciation, prevention of Holy Communion -- "the world" can hardly be blamed for all of this!!

The upshot is that the Catholic church has completely lost the enormous credibility it once enjoyed under the papacy of John XXIII and in the wake of the Second Vatican Council.

If the next pope were to continue the policies of this pontificate, he would only reinforce an enormous backup of problems and turn the Catholic church's current structural crisis into a hopeless situation. Instead, a new pope must decide in favor of a change in course and inspire the church to embark on new paths -- in the spirit of John XXIII and in keeping with the impetus for reform brought about by the Second Vatican Council.

### **Hans Kung**

Hans Kung is one of today's leading Catholic theologians. Küng, a Swiss national living in the southern German city of Tübingen, has been embroiled in an ongoing feud with church authorities for decades. As a result of his critical inquiries on the papacy, the Vatican withdrew his church authority to teach in 1979. Nevertheless,

Küng, 75, is still a priest and, until his retirement in 1995, taught ecumenical theology at the University of Tübingen. As president of the Global Ethic Foundation, Küng is also an advisor to the United Nations.