



VI ER OGSÅ KIRKEN - en forening af katolikker

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I det ansete engelske, katolske tidsskrift skriver vatican-kenderen Marco Politi: Benedikt XVI's tidligere kriser har vedrørt forbindelserne mellem kirken og andre trosretninger.

Men ophævelsen af bandlysningen af de fire Lefebvre-tilhængere har fået katolske biskopper til at give udtryk for ønsker om en anden form for forbindelser med Vatikanet.

THE TABLET

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The Church's new age of dissent



Marco Politi

Earlier crises in the pontificate of Benedict XVI have involved relations between the Church and other faiths. But the one precipitated by the lifting of the excommunications of four Lefebvrist has prompted Catholic bishops to express their desire for a different kind of relationship with the Vatican

In spite of a letter to bishops around the world that immediately provoked professions of solidarity, Pope Benedict XVI, it seems to me, is like a solitary monarch in a curia that has lost its bearings.

The storm caused by the remission of the excommunications against four Lefebvrist bishops may appear to have died down but the crisis that exploded following the chain of

errors which Pope Benedict sought to explain has not. It has become a pontificate of two halves: before the break and after. The period after has brought to light questions concerning the leadership of Joseph Ratzinger, revealing at the same time a tension between the Church's central government and important bishops from the Northern Hemisphere.

Reading between the lines of the bishops' messages of solidarity to the Pope, there are requests that he change his style of government. The German hierarchy professes itself delighted that the Pope wants to enter "into dialogue with the bishops" (signalling that thus far this has not happened). The French bishops underline the necessity for the Vatican to become accustomed to an exchange that is "rich and substantial", hinting that the relationship between the Pope and the bishops should not consist simply of orders from on high. In Switzerland, the Bishop of Lugano, Pier Giacomo Grampa, expresses the hope that the humble and fraternal style of Benedict XVI's letter should become the style adopted in the day-to-day governance of the Church.

But it is the Austrian bishops who delivered the most strongly worded message. The Church guided by one of his most faithful disciples, Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, reminds the Pope that he is not the only person who is suffering and that pain has also been endured "by many local churches and people outside the Church".

The main problem in the Church today is not the existence in the Curia of an anti-Ratzinger party. There may be cardinals who are more or less enthusiastic about the direction in which the Pope is guiding the Church. Certainly the secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, is not considered part of the curial apparatus or "one of their own". However, in the main the heads of congregations are well aligned and follow papal instructions faithfully. Centres of opposition or dissent do not exist. The real problem appears to be the absence of a guide inspired by a coherent strategy who can take account of the geopolitical scene and of public opinion both inside and outside the Church.

Did it make sense to revoke the excommunications of the four Lefebvrist bishops - without obtaining any statement of faithful adherence to the Second Vatican Council - on the very day that marked the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII's decision to call the council? Did it make sense to insist on pardoning the Holocaust-denying Bishop Richard Williamson in the very week dedicated to the memory of the Shoah?

Here an important detail should be remembered. The Vatican decree lifting the excommunications was published a full 48 hours after the story was first leaked to the press. Immediately afterwards Bishop Williamson's interview with Swedish television was published in which he insisted that six million Jews did not perish in the Holocaust. There were two days in which Benedict XVI and his aides had ample opportunity to block the publication of the decree and avoid the need for the warnings, explanations and requests to the Society of St Pius X (SSPX) that emanated from the secretary of state only after the catastrophe had happened. The generosity with which the Pope in his letter avoided blaming any of his collaborators - foremost among them Cardinal Castrillón Hoyos, president of the Ecclesia Dei Commission charged with negotiating with the Lefebvrists - does not negate one fact: although he was warned by the world's media of the impending crisis, the Pope did not consider it opportune to call a halt and review the decision.

I immediately thought of the days following 12 September 2006 at Regensburg. Several hours before Benedict XVI delivered his lecture to the university, quoting the anti-Islamic words of a distant Byzantine emperor, a group of journalists (who had received a copy of the lecture under embargo at 7 a.m. that day) had already advised the Vatican spokesman, Fr Federico Lombardi, that the talk would cause problems with Muslims. The journalists were from La Repubblica, New York Times, Los Angeles Times and Associated Press as well as the Italian television company, Channel 5. No one can doubt that Fr Lombardi informed his superiors. Above all, it is well known in the Vatican that Cardinal Angelo Sodano warned the Pope of the risks he was taking with his lecture. Yet Benedict XVI went ahead, with the consequence that he had to express many times his regret to the representatives of Islam.

The Pope's entourage has a maxim: "Do not disturb the driver." But this is not the way to guide a community of 1.2 billion faithful. Pope Benedict's letter expresses a great personal sincerity but also betrays a weakness. To speak of hostility directed against the Pope especially from within Catholic circles raises some serious questions. It suggests that either the Pope considers every criticism to be a personal attack - and this should not be the reaction of a leader who needs to understand the complexity involved in the process of government - or that there exist in the Church many people who are uneasy with the direction being taken by the Pope.

This is the first real crisis of the Pope's leadership. In past years the crises were always outside the Church: relations with Islam, the relationship with the Jewish community impatient over moves to beatify Pius XII. But this time the crisis exploded "inside" the Church and the fact that emerges clearly is that the bishops have denounced an absence of collegiality in the government of Pope Benedict.

The Pope was fully aware that a majority of the members of the College of Cardinals which he convened in Rome in March 2006 were of the view that the followers of the SSPX could only return to the bosom of the Church if they expressed a "faithful adherence to Vatican II", but he chose not to take account of this. In taking the decision to remit the excommunications he consulted neither heads of dicasteries of the Curia nor the bishops with a particular interest. He did not consider it important or necessary.

When I interviewed him in November 2004, just a few months before the conclave in which he was elected Pope, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said: "It is increasingly apparent that a worldwide Church, particularly in this present situation, cannot be governed by an absolute monarch ... in time a means will be found to create realistically a profound collaboration between the bishops and the Pope, because only in this way will we be able to respond to the challenges of this world."

Benedict XVI has done nothing to realise this principle. The affair concerning the Lefebvristes - like the unilateral decision in 2007 to re-establish in permanent form the pre-conciliar Mass - has brought to light the heart of the crisis: the failure to implement collegiality. Pope John Paul II also preferred an exercise of power that was strongly personal but behind his charisma he kept a close ear on world public opinion, had a profound sense of history and the ability to perform gestures that threw open new

perspectives to the Catholic Church and to the whole of Christianity. There was for instance his act of penitence for the errors and the horrors committed by the Church down the centuries, the joint prayer with leaders of other world religions, the celebration of the unique ties between the Abrahamic faiths - Judaism, Christianity, Islam - and the final proposal of a consultation with the heads of the Christian Churches to review together the exercise of papal primacy.

Today, without these leaps forward, what remains is the naked problem of an exercise of power that is authoritarian and solitary before which the bishops around the world are increasing their demands for collegiality. The affair concerning the nomination of Fr Gerhard Maria Wagner as auxiliary Bishop of Linz becomes emblematic of this. It had never happened that a national bishops' conference opposed a papal nomination and obliged the Pope to revoke the decision. Yet this happened in Austria. And it is a sign of an underlying tension that could easily ignite. Similarly, it had never happened that an archbishop proclaimed an excommunication, later validated by the Vatican, and bishops from another country protested against the decision to the point where the Vatican newspaper, L'Osservatore Romano, had to criticise the excommunication. This happened with the excommunication pronounced in Brazil by Archbishop José Cardoso Sobrinho on the mother of a nine-year-old girl who allowed her daughter to have an abortion after she was raped and became pregnant. The violent reaction of a number of bishops in France against the excommunication created a difficulty for the Vatican.

Truly, beneath the surface of Roman power - as under a volcano - one can hear ominous rumblings.