

# The crucial test for the pontificate of Benedict XVI

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by Phil Lawler, February 17, 2009

Years from now, I feel certain, Church historians will look back upon the early months of 2009 as the crucial test of this pontificate. Four years after he assumed the throne of St. Peter, Pope Benedict has run into a solid wall of resistance to his pastoral plans. That resistance is evident not only in the secular world but also within the Church (especially in Europe) and even inside the Vatican. The Holy Father's response to this challenge will define the remainder of his papacy.

The late Pope John Paul II defined his mission-- first as Archbishop Krakow, then as Bishop of Rome-- to lead the Church to the full implementation of the teachings of Vatican II. When he was elected to succeed the beloved Polish Pontiff, the former Cardinal Ratzinger embraced the same mission, while adding his own distinct perspective. The message of Vatican II, Pope Benedict insisted, must be interpreted using a "hermeneutic of continuity," recognizing that the Council was not a radical break from enduring Catholic tradition.

During his years as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger had often been depicted as a stern authoritarian. That image did not fit the man, and when he became Pope the world saw the real Benedict XVI: a gentle, humble, scholarly man, with a strong preference for collegial governance and an extraordinary willingness to hear opposing arguments. This was not the cartoonish *Panzerkardinal* his critics had depicted. Although he could not match the personal charisma and "stage presence" that John Paul II enjoyed, Benedict XVI proved remarkably popular.

Nevertheless, the Pope's enemies always knew where he stood. Disaffected clerics and dissenting theologians-- those who espoused the "hermeneutic of rupture" that the new Pope condemned-- waited nervously for Benedict to make his move. If the man they had mocked as "God's Rottweiler" ever threatened their positions, they were ready to mount the resistance.

In 2007, when Pope Benedict issued *Summorum Pontificum*, reviving universal access to the traditional Latin liturgy, the resistance became palpable. Liturgists, theologians, and bishops-- even the entire French bishops' conference-- lobbied openly to dissuade the Pope from releasing his *motu proprio*. When the document was promulgated over their objections, many bishops issued their own diocesan guidelines, clearly at variance with the Pope's orders, restricting the use of the traditional liturgy. Still, this was a quiet form of resistance; the bishops who effectively forbade celebration of the traditional Latin Mass still claimed to be following the Pope's orders.

In January, when the Pope lifted the excommunications of four bishops from the traditionalist Society of St. Pius X (SSPX), the resistance burst out into the open. The traditionalist order broke with Rome because of disagreements over the work of the Second Vatican Council. Pope Benedict has made it clear that the teachings of Vatican II will not be rescinded, but there is room for discussion about the proper interpretation of those teachings, and he was ready to engage the SSPX in that discussion, confident that the entire Church could benefit from a lively debate. But any plans for such a discussion were quickly submerged beneath the avalanche of criticism set off by Bishop Richard Williamson's ugly anti-Semitic remarks, and now the debate Pope Benedict hoped to begin seems even less remote than it was a month ago. Indeed there are conspiracy theorists on both sides of the Catholic theological spectrum who suspect that the furor was deliberately instigated, in an effort to scuttle the Pontiff's plan.

Whether or not it was a conspiracy, there can be no doubt that the Vatican bureaucracy fumbled the announcement of Pope Benedict's bid for reconciliation with the SSPX. Nor could there be much doubt that conflicts within the Roman Curia were reaching a critical mass. Influential prelates were more or less openly blaming each other for the debacle; there were credible reports of angry shouting confrontations between curial cardinals.

Suddenly, the pontificate of Benedict XVI appeared vulnerable. And at this strategic moment the Vatican announced the appointment of a controversial conservative priest to become auxiliary bishop of Linz, Austria.

Ordinarily the appointment of an auxiliary bishop is a routine move, which secular media outlets ignore. An *auxiliary* bishop has very little control over Church policy, after all. But the Pope's selection of Father Gerhard Maria Wagner outraged Austria's liberal clerics-- and since liberals dominate the Austrian clergy, their voices could not be dismissed. Now the emboldened resistance began issuing demands. Father Wagner should not be ordained a bishop, said the most influential Catholic priests of Austria. Soon the entire Austrian hierarchy-- meeting under the aegis of no less an authority than Cardinal Christoph Schönborn, the Archbishop of Vienna, the former student of Professor Ratzinger, the general editor of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*-- had joined in open criticism of the papal appointment. Father Wagner had asked the Pope to withdraw his nomination. And the Pope had agreed.

{**Correction:** As of February 23, the Vatican has *not* released any official statement regarding the withdrawal of the appointment, and indeed it is not clear that the Pope has received an official request from Father Wagner asking that his name be withdrawn. The statements made by Austrian Church officials last week, and the impressions clearly conveyed to reporters, seem to have been at least premature.}

So now let's take stock of the situation. In Austria-- a country where dissident Catholics have nearly seized control of the Church-- a papal appointment has been rejected. At the Vatican, there is open feuding among the leaders of the Roman Curia. In the mass media there is a steady drumbeat of criticism of Pope Benedict and his policies.

This, I repeat, is the decisive hour of this pontificate. If there was ever a time to pray for the Pope, this is it!

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