

# The Passion of Pope Benedict: Six Accusations, One Question

by Sandro Magister

Pedophilia is only the latest weapon aimed against Joseph Ratzinger. And each time, he is attacked where he most exercises his leadership role. One by one, the critical points of this pontificate

ROME, April 7, 2010 – The attack striking pope Joseph Ratzinger with the weapon of the scandal posed by priests of his Church is a constant of this pontificate.

It is a constant because every time, on different terrain, striking Benedict XVI means striking the very man who has worked and is working, on that same terrain, with the greatest foresight, resolve, and success.

\*\*\*\*\*

The tempest that followed his lecture in Regensburg on September 12, 2006 was the first of the series. Benedict XVI was accused of being an enemy of Islam, and an incendiary proponent of the clash of civilizations. The very man who with singular clarity and courage had revealed where the ultimate root of violence is found, in an idea of God severed from rationality, and had then told how to overcome it.

The violence and even killings that followed his words were the sad proof that he was right. But the fact that he had hit the mark was confirmed above all by the progress in dialogue between the Catholic Church and Islam that was seen afterward – not in spite of, but because of the lecture in Regensburg – and of which the letter to the pope from the 138 Muslim intellectuals and the visit to the Blue Mosque in Istanbul were the most evident and promising signs.

With Benedict XVI, the dialogue between Christianity and Islam, as with the other religions as well, is today proceeding with clearer awareness about what makes distinctions, by virtue of faith, and what can unite, the natural law written by God in the heart of every man.

\*\*\*\*\*

A second wave of accusations against Pope Benedict depicts him as an enemy of modern reason, and in particular of its supreme expression, science. The peak of this hostile campaign was reached in January of 2008, when professors forced the pope to cancel a visit to the main university of his diocese, the University of Rome "La Sapienza."

And yet – as previously in Regensburg and then in Paris at the Collège des Bernardins on September 12, 2008 – the speech that the pope intended to give at the University of Rome was a formidable defense of the indissoluble connection between faith and reason, between truth and freedom: "I do not come to impose the faith, but to call for courage for the truth."

The paradox is that Benedict XVI is a great "illuminist" in an age in which the truth has so few admirers and doubt is in command, to the point of wanting to silence the truth.

\*\*\*\*\*

A third accusation systematically hurled at Benedict XVI is that he is a traditionalist stuck in the past, an enemy of the new developments brought by Vatican Council II.

His speech to the Roman curia on December 22, 2005 on the interpretation of the Council, and in 2007 on the liberalization of the ancient rite of the Mass, are thought to be the proofs in the hands of his accusers.

In reality, the Tradition to which Benedict XVI is faithful is that of the grand history of the Church, from its origins until today, which has nothing to do with a formulaic attachment to the past. In the speech to the curia just mentioned, to exemplify the "reform in continuity" represented by Vatican II, the pope recalled the question of religious freedom. To affirm this completely – he explained – the Council had to go back to the origins of the Church, to the first martyrs, to that "profound patrimony" of Christian Tradition which in recent centuries had been lost, and was found again thanks in part to the criticism of Enlightenment-style reason.

As for the liturgy, if there is an authentic perpetuator of the great liturgical movement that flourished in the Church between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, from Prosper Guéranger to Romano Guardini, it is precisely Ratzinger himself.

\*\*\*\*\*

A fourth terrain of attack runs along the same lines as the previous one. Benedict XVI is accused of derailing ecumenism, of putting reconciliation with the Lefebvrists ahead of dialogue with the other Christian confessions.

But the facts say the opposite. Since Ratzinger has been pope, the journey of reconciliation with the Eastern Churches has taken extraordinary steps forward. Both with the Byzantine Churches that look to the ecumenical patriarchate of Constantinople, and – most surprisingly – with the patriarchate of Moscow.

And if this has happened, it is precisely because of the revived fidelity to the grand Tradition – beginning with that of the first millennium – that is one characteristic of this pope, in addition to being the soul of the Eastern Churches.

On the side of the West, it is again love of Tradition that is driving persons and groups of the Anglican Communion to ask to enter the Church of Rome.

While with the Lefebvrists, what is blocking their reintegration is precisely their attachment to past forms of Church and of doctrine erroneously identified with perennial Tradition. The revocation of the excommunication of four of their bishops, in January of 2009, did nothing to the state of schism in which they remain, just as in 1964 the revocation of excommunications between Rome and Constantinople did not heal the schism between East and West, but made possible a dialogue aimed at unity.

\*\*\*\*\*

The four Lefebvrist bishops whose excommunication Benedict XVI lifted included Englishman Richard Williamson, an antisemite and Holocaust denier. In the liberalized ancient rite, there is even a prayer that the Jews "may recognize Jesus Christ as savior of all men."

These and other facts have helped to feed a persistent protest by the Jewish world against the current pope, with significant points of radicalism. And it is a fifth terrain of accusation.

The latest weapon of this protest was a passage from the sermon given at Saint Peter's Basilica on Holy Friday, in the pope's presence, by the preacher of the pontifical household, Fr. Raniero Cantalamessa. The incriminating passage was a citation from a letter written by a Jew, but in spite of this the uproar was aimed exclusively at the pope.

And yet, nothing is more contradictory than to accuse Benedict XVI of enmity with the Jews.

Because no other pope before him ever went so far in defining a positive vision of the relationship between Christianity and Judaism, while leaving intact the essential division over whether or not Jesus is the Son of God. In the first volume of his "Jesus of Nazareth" published in 2007 – and close to being completed by the second volume – Benedict XVI wrote splendid pages in this regard, in dialogue with a living American rabbi.

And many Jews effectively see Ratzinger as a friend. But in the international media, it's another matter. There it is almost exclusively "friendly fire" that rains down. From Jews attacking the pope who best understands and loves them.

\*\*\*\*\*

Finally, a sixth accusation – very current – against Ratzinger is that he "covered up" the scandal of priests who sexually abused children.

Here too, the accusation is against the very man who has done more than anyone, in the Church hierarchy, to heal this scandal.

With positive effects that can already be seen here and there. Particularly in the United States, where the incidence of the phenomenon among the Catholic clergy has diminished significantly in recent years.

But where the wound is still open, as in Ireland, it was again Benedict XVI who required the Church of that country to put itself in a penitential state, on a demanding path that he traced out in an unprecedented pastoral letter last March 19.

The fact is that the international campaign against pedophilia has just one target today, the pope. The cases dug up from the past are always intended to be traced back to him, both when he was archbishop of Munich and when he was prefect of the congregation for the doctrine of the faith, plus the Regensburg appendix for the years during which the pope's brother, George, directed the cathedral children's choir.

\*\*\*\*\*

The six terrains of accusation against Benedict XVI just referred to bring up a question.

Why is this pope so under attack, from outside of the Church but also from within, in spite of his clear innocence with respect to the accusations?

The beginning of an answer is that he is systematically attacked precisely for what he does, for what he says, for what he is.