

Movimiento internacional
Somos-Iglesia

Movimento Internacional
Nós somos Igreja

Movimento Internazionale
Noi siamo Chiesa

Mouvement international
Nous sommes Eglise

Internationale Bewegung
Wir sind Kirche

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We are Church: Acid test for Pope Benedict's political and pastoral abilities

**Prospects of Pope Benedict's journey to the US and of his speech at the UN.
And a critical appraisal of the first three years of his pontificate.**

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The *International Movement We are Church* hopes that Pope Benedict on his upcoming journey will find the right words and gestures in view of the current challenges concerning global development, the inter-religious dialogue, ecumenism and the future of the Roman-Catholic Church.

„His journey to the United States – one of the world's biggest Roman-Catholic churches – will be the **acid test for the political and for the pastoral abilities of Pope Benedict**”, says **Raquel Mallavibarrena, Chair of the *International Movement We are Church***, a world-wide reform movement within the Roman-Catholic Church.

In his speech at the United Nations General Assembly on April 18 the Pope must be very sensitive to find the right words that will be understood by people from all continents and of all religions. His address can be thought provoking but he should do better than he did in Auschwitz/Poland (about Jews, May 2006), in Regensburg/Germany (about Islam, September 2006) and in Brazil (about indigenous people, May 2007).

When the Pope will talk about human rights and justice at the United Nations **he will have to explain why he started an appeasement policy towards China and why he uninvited the Dalai Lama** a few months ago. The Pope's plea for human rights would be much more convincing if the Roman-Catholic Church itself did not deny equal rights and responsibilities to women within its own church.

We are Church is very critical about the fact that the Pope - right on his 81st birthday - will meet President Bush, a religious fundamentalist and initiator of the unjust Iraq war. This is a very dangerous strategic alliance. When meeting President Bush **the Pope should at least repeat the Vatican's opposition to the Iraq war and speak of aid to the poor**. Christianity is about solidarity with the weak and the poor, not with the political and economical elite.

Facing Pressing Questions of the Church

„If he really wants to be a good pastor of his flock **he must address the dramatic priest shortage worldwide and other pressing questions of the Church**”, says **Anthony Padovano**, spokesperson of *We are Church* in the United States and of CORPUS (National Association for an Inclusive Priesthood). By maintaining compulsory celibacy - which cannot be founded on biblical grounds and is now questioned all over the world - the Pope denies the canonical right of the faithful to have the Sunday Eucharist guaranteed (can. 213 CIC).

„The Pope has to make clear that **the policy of zero tolerance after the paedophile scandals of recent years will be forceful** if his pastoral visit to the US should be a really new start for the Roman-Catholic Church in North America”, says **Aisha S. Taylor**, deputy spokesperson of *We are Church* in the United States and Executive Director of the Women's Ordination Conference. „We need much more transparency and accountability instead of maintaining a policy of secrecy and silence.”

In the light of **ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue** *We are Church* is very concerned about last year's renewed Vatican statement that the Protestant churches are „not churches in the real sense”, about the recently changed prayer for the conversion of Jews on Good Friday, and about the papal baptism of a Muslim in St. Peter's during in the Easter vigil.

Growing Disappointment About Pastoral Standstill

„**Three years after his election (April 19, 2005), disappointment is growing in the People of God** even among those who originally had hoped Ratzinger would act, as pope, more courageously than he did in his position as prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith”, says **Vittorio Bellavite**, spokesperson of *Noi siamo Chiesa (We are Church Italy)*.

The hope of millions of Christians, based on the Second Vatican Council, that interior reform steps and ecumenical progress would take place, has not realised up to now.

The extension of the pre-conciliar Tridentine Rite, the censorship of P. Jon Sobrino's writings and other liberation theologians as well as the continued old system of Mission are discouraging. These are only a few of many indications that Pope Ratzinger has set off in the direction of a counter-reform against Vatican II.

International Movement We Are Church:

A Critical Appraisal of the First Three Years of the Pontificate of Benedict XVI. The Vatican Council II reassessed.

The end of John Paul II's long pontificate, under the guidance and inspiration of the new Bishop of Rome, **could have been marked by a return to the process of reformation of the Roman-Catholic Church** such as to offer a renewed proposal of evangelisation able to relate comfortably to modernity. **This has not come to pass.**

After the first three years of the pontificate of Benedict XVI, which we have observed attentively, we can offer a few impressions, having in our hearts a true love for the Roman Catholic Church into which we were born and in which we have grown up, and considering the substantial pastoral problems the church faces at the start of the third millennium.

For Pope Ratzinger relativism is the principal enemy, Europe the contested territory, „family and life” the battleground, and the armament used in this conflict is the affirmation of the „rationally” and „naturally” founded nature of Christian ethics and anthropology.

The dominant position, in other words, is that held by those convinced of the rational plausibility of the faith of which the Catholic Church, in its hierarchical structure, is the main or only depositary, obliged by its mission to make definitive pronouncements on anthropology, human rights, ethics, nature, and even the interpretation of history.

According to Benedict XVI, all societies, all cultures, and almost all religions are required to conform to the values which, as spiritual leader of the whole world, he proposes. The overall picture, only lightly disguised, is that of the reintroduction of a *societas christiana* guided by the Roman Catholic Church. This basic principle, applied with inevitable mediations and delays, seems to us to be the inspiration of Benedict XVI's pontificate. Its consequences are varied, serious and widespread. The main ones are:

(1) Only the negative aspects of the phenomenon of secularisation are perceived, without grasping how much it could help to purify a faith still typical of too many believers, which is habitual and only vaguely connected to real life. **The message of the Vatican Council II contrasts with this:** The Church and Catholics can learn from the world, not only teach it. Their attitude, therefore, must be one of positive encounter and dialogue, in the light not of a rigid doctrine, but of a faith which gains experience from life.

The message coming from Rome is often one of fear, of pessimism, of critical verdicts. Religious instruction characterised by fear cannot effectively offer the great Christian hope in the way that it is supposed to, especially in moments of uncertainty or difficulty like at the beginning of this century.

We are a long way from that „new Pentecost” hoped for by Pope John, which inspired the Vatican Council II and which still guides the lives of many individuals and communities who live their moral and social roles as Christians.

(2) A stricter adherence to conservative theological orientation in the teaching of Benedict XVI has led both to increased doctrinal rigidity and the re-emergence of an hierarchical and authoritarian structure of and in the Church. Proofs thereof include:

- the choice, except on rare occasions, of „conservative” bishops at the head of the dioceses and the central offices of the Roman Curia;
- the reintroduction of the Tridentine Rite (with the hasty and unfortunate correction of the prayer for the Jews on Good Friday) whose consequences will not fail to create more problems than those they clumsily attempted to resolve;
- the resumption of „persecutions” of theologians (*in primis* Jon Sobrino, censored on the eve of the General Episcopal Conference of Latin America at Aparecida);
- the unfortunate references to Islam in the Regensburg address;
- the papal baptism, broadcast, in the Easter night, of a Muslim well known for his attitude as crusader against Islam;
- doubts raised about enculturation by the insistence on the direct link between the Christian faith and Hellenistic culture;
- the absence of every penitential attitude as far as the recognition of the sins committed by the sons and daughters of the Church is concerned;
- the repetition of the positions contained in *Dominus Iesus*, in particular with the ill-considered „Replies to questions regarding certain aspects concerning the doctrine about the Church”;
- the permanent stonewalling against serious and increasingly urgent problems (from that of the role of the Bishop of Rome to that of the collegiate status of local bishops' conferences and the ministries, from that of the role of women in the Church to that of sexual and family ethics, from that of the poverty of and in the Church to numerous others).
- The strongly interventionist policy in the Italian political situation is part of this overall orientation.

(3) The appeal to the Second Vatican Council is, generally speaking, entirely ritual and sometimes tendentious. In the Address to the Roman Curia dated 22nd December 2005, the position of Benedict XVI was very clearly expressed. The interpretation of the Council therein, not as an occasion for profound innovation but merely for reform in what is, in practice, the ongoing life and teaching of the Church, leads to the implicit rejection of much of the Council's

contents, and, worse still, of its task of following the path of reform in the „spirit” of the Council itself.

Since then all the ecclesiastic circles hostile to change have used that speech as a rallying point. They conceive of a monolithic, self-sufficient Church, and distrust the rich varieties of ways and feelings through which the relationship between the individual, the community and God manifests itself in the world.

One of the consequences of this is the weakness of the pastoral approach of Catholic teaching towards the problems, sins, joys and suffering of men and women today. **Instead we find the doctrinal message, a didactic approach, judgements and warnings.** This is, it seems to us, a very inadequate response to the eternal and renewed search for meaning running through our society after the fall of many ideologies: that of the „plain word of the Gospel”. This is the task of believers and the Church’s teaching.

(4) The implicit desire to rebuild a church of Christianity, and the conflict with Western secularised and relativist societies take up much of Benedict XVI’s attention, and result in a Eurocentric Social Teaching, while the serious and dramatic problems of the North/South relations in the world, the permanent problems of war and peace, of rearmament (and of nuclear arms in particular), of the protection of the environment and of the social and economic future of the planet are considered less relevant.

The preferential option for the poor is of secondary importance, the commitment to pacifism is downgraded to what is compatible with the Church’s belonging principally to the Western world. Instead of prophetic texts denouncing situations of mortal sin we often find what appear to be just ritual phrases.

We know, however, that within a few months a new encyclical dedicated to world problems is expected: let us hope that this document, in denouncing the serious injustices existing today, contains those prophetic tones that have hitherto seemed rare and weak to us. In the case of a progressive encyclical Pope Benedict should begin a new deal in his pontificate.

(5) The obsessive affirmation of the centrality of the Roman Church has led ecumenism up a blind alley and caused it to reaffirm that churches associated with Protestant reform are „not churches in the real sense”. Despite a few polite phrases, Benedict XVI and the Roman Curia regard the historic Reformed Churches as not really „salvageable”, inasmuch as they, having embraced modernity, have „sold off” the Gospel; while the doors are being opened (despite the insurmountable difference of opinion over the pontificate) to the orthodox churches, which, like Rome, are lined up against modernity.

In conclusion, it seems to us that Pope Ratzinger has set off in the direction of a counter-reform, completely misconceiving Vatican II, and we fervently hope for a change in the current orientation of the pontificate, in which we see too many shadows. We have always hoped that the Bishop of Rome, casting aside the privileges inherited from history, would be able to be a credible witness of the Gospel, in such a way as to encourage all brother bishops and the whole Roman Catholic Church in the way of Jesus, that the whole world may believe.

Background information

The *International Movement We Are Church* - a grassroots church reform movement of lay persons, priests, and persons in religious orders - was started in Austria and Germany in 1995 and then spread out in Europe and all continents. *We Are Church* is represented in more than twenty countries and is in touch with other reform movements all over the world. Its goal is to keep continue the process of reform in the Roman Catholic Church, a process which has been opened with Vatican II Council (1962-1965) and came to a standstill in recent years. Website: <http://www.we-are-church.org>

The International Movement We Are Church supports Voice of the Faithful (VOTF) in calling all Catholics to transform our Church: <http://votf.org/petition>