

# The Church in the Third Millennium

Pope Saint John Paul II died in 2005 after a 26-year reign, the third longest in Church history. Increasingly ill with Parkinson's disease in the latter years of his papacy, Saint John Paul II still managed to travel, write, and inspire untold numbers. It is estimated that more than 4 million people converged on Rome to pay their last respects to this remarkable man. The pope who followed him, Benedict XVI, took the reins in a Church that had Saint John Paul II's fingerprints all over it. Saint John Paul II had created a record number of cardinals and bishops; of the 117 cardinals eligible to vote on his successor, Saint John Paul II had appointed all but 3. With his enormous body of writings and the people he put in place who shared his vision, Saint John Paul II ensured that his understanding of where the Church was going and what it needed to do would last long into the future. In a nutshell, he set the Church's agenda for the twenty-first century.

## The Reformed Reformer: Benedict XVI

When Benedict XVI took over as Pope on April 19, 2005, he already knew his way around the Vatican. After all, as Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger he had led the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith for the past 24 years and was well known in Catholic circles as the Vatican's theological watchdog and enforcer. But this was his role; what about the man who filled the role? On that, most Catholics knew little.

### From Germany to Papa Razi

Joseph Ratzinger was born in Germany in 1927. Six years old when the Nazis came to power, he spent his teenage years living through World War II. The Ratzinger family members were not resisters fighting the Nazi brand of German nationalism, but they had no sympathy for the values the party expressed, either. At age 14, Joseph found himself enrolled in the Hitler Youth, a mandatory program for teens in Nazi Germany, but he did not participate. He was headed toward the priesthood, the only profession he seems ever to have considered seriously. Two years later, Joseph the seminary student was drafted along with his entire seminary class into the German army. He worked as part of an anti-aircraft battalion and spent a few months as an American POW before returning to the seminary life for which he was so much better suited.

On June 29, 1951, the Ratzinger household celebrated the priestly ordination of not one but two sons, as both Joseph and his brother Georg were ordained. Father Joseph was headed for an academic career. Becoming a professor in 1958, he taught at a number of German universities and stayed in the academic world for twenty years, publishing an extraordinary number of books and articles along the way. In 1977, he was appointed an archbishop and later that year was made a cardinal. From that point on, he would be a major player not only in the realm of Catholic theology but also in Church politics. Just four years later, he accepted Saint John Paul's call to become the head of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, a position he maintained until his election as Pope 24 years later.

### A Shift in Focus

If Pope Benedict were a rock star, we would say his big break came at Vatican II, which he attended as a theological adviser to Cardinal Frings of Germany. At the Council, Ratzinger wrote a speech for the Cardinal sharply criticizing the methods used by the Holy Office (formerly known as the Inquisition),



declaring them to be a scandal that hurt the faith. The speech was enthusiastically received, and soon after the Council, the Holy Office was revamped, its procedures reworked, and its name changed to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. Joseph Ratzinger, meanwhile, had earned the reputation of reformer.

This is where many observers of Cardinal Ratzinger get a bit lost. Less than two decades following the Council, he was named to head the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. The Congregation certainly had long escaped the historical shadow of the Holy Office and Inquisition, but nonetheless it remained the enforcer of the theological status quo. Cardinal Ratzinger had been a reformer; now he was to take on the role of enforcer. What was up?

According to the Cardinal, the answer lay not in a change in his beliefs but in the way reform was being handled. Time and again, Cardinal Ratzinger defended Vatican II, but he believed that much of the theology that grew out of it went in dangerous directions. As he saw it, many radical thinkers had become so engaged with the idea of openness and dialogue that they forgot to be Christian and Catholic. For Cardinal Ratzinger, and for Pope Saint John Paul II, nothing in the Church—including the Second Vatican Council—should be considered an invitation to relativism, which essentially argues that everything is related, so there are no absolute truths. The Church, Popes Saint John Paul and Benedict believe, is founded on truth and must continue to teach truth—and truth is an unchanging absolute. How truth is expressed may change over time, but the core of what is taught does not.

As Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Cardinal Ratzinger was the first line of defense against relativism or any perceived theological straying within the Church. The Cardinal oversaw crackdowns against dissent called for by Saint John Paul, silencing more than a hundred of them, including some of his past colleagues in reform. The Cardinal was in the forefront of the push to weed out liberation theology and uproot the base communities that had become such an important part of the Catholic landscape in Latin America. In his role as Prefect, Cardinal Ratzinger argued that national bishops' conferences lacked teaching authority, expanded the working definition of papal infallibility to include teachings that previously would not have been considered infallible, defined homosexuality as a tendency toward intrinsic evil, and worked tirelessly to maintain the traditional Christian understanding of Christ's uniqueness and undercut the theology of religious pluralism that had been gaining ground since Vatican II.

Even more than Pope Saint John Paul, Cardinal Ratzinger became the symbol for the strength of tradition and the demand for uniformity in the Church. Whether that was something to celebrate or grieve depended on a person's theological views.

## **The Once and Future Benedict**

When the white smoke appeared above St. Peter's Square and the news of Cardinal Ratzinger's election was announced, many Vatican watchers immediately had visions of the Church militant on the rise. The watchdog had become master of the house, they thought, and so surely the demand for conformity would grow even stronger. Instead many watchers found themselves somewhat surprised at the even tone and peaceable nature of most of his actions in the first two years of his papacy. When a remark of his regarding the Prophet Mohammed enraged many Muslims, Benedict apologized and met with Muslim leaders to determine how best to convey his respect for Islam and its followers. Under his



guidance, the Vatican is attempting to restore diplomatic ties with China, a tricky operation because China maintains a national Catholic Church that is not in communion with Rome.

This does not mean Benedict had moved away from his theological foundations. In fact, the battle against what Benedict had called the “dictatorship of relativism” may end up being the hallmark of his papacy. Also, while he seeks to revive waning Christian faith in what was traditionally the Church’s heartland, Europe, Benedict has often made the statement that the Church may need to be smaller to remain faithful to the gospel. He has no interest in reaching out to those drifting away from the Church by making the demands of faith any easier. It is not likely that there will be any major changes in policy or direction under his leadership, but history will have to give the final word on what effect Benedict’s papacy has on the worldwide Church.

## **Who Does What: The Changing Roles of Bishops, Priests, and Laity**

The Church is a hierarchy in a world that increasingly values democracy and individual decision making, and that does not always make for an easy fit. Even within the Church there is more than a little conflict over exactly who gets to do what. Traditionally, this conflict has been between those higher and lower within the Church’s hierarchy, but nowadays the conflict is often between the hierarchy and the laity. The number of lay Catholics taking on roles in the day-to-day running of parishes and dioceses that used to be reserved for those in religious life has increased dramatically, and that kind of shift in practical power is always going to be accompanied by some difficulties. Still, there is a growing recognition and acceptance among both clergy and laity that the only way the Church is going to live out its mission in the twenty-first century is if everyone works together.

### **Fewer and Farther Between: Bishops and Priests**

We saw that the Second Vatican Council expressed a broad-reaching concept of the rights and duties of bishops, but in the Church under Pope Saint John Paul II, power and decision making were very much centralized within the Vatican. So what should be valued most: the fact that bishops are called to be teachers and shepherds in their own right, or the need for unity of understanding and action among those who lead the Church? It is a hard balance to find and one that Catholics will continue to work through in this century.

Bishops are not the only ones trying to figure out the boundaries of their responsibilities. In the United States, for example, go back to a typical parish in 1960, and you would find the priest as the undisputed ruler over everyone and everything that went on. Vatican II changed all that, and now priests participate in their parishes rather than ruling them, working with rather than just for the laity. There is a strongly pragmatic aspect to this new arrangement as well, as a drastic priest shortage means more work to do than priests available to do it.

The need for priestly celibacy is a hotly debated topic. Especially in the Western world, a growing majority of lay Catholics are comfortable with the idea of allowing priests to marry. Married priests were the norm in the earliest centuries of the Church, and in some parts of Latin America and Africa, it is commonplace for priests to have longstanding sexual relationships that are roughly equivalent to



marriage, even though these are not accepted by the Church. Many people have long thought that allowing priests to marry would be the best way to ease the priest shortage. However, popular thinking and Church teaching are worlds apart on this issue; the Vatican is vehemently opposed to ending mandatory celibacy, and it does not look likely to budge on this issue anytime soon.

## From Pew to Pulpit: Lay Catholics in Parish Life

The rise of the laity to new levels of participation and responsibility in parish life is a direct result of Vatican II. The bishops at the Council wrote that the liturgy is the work of all the faithful, clergy and laity, and they said that lay Catholics must be active in the mission of the Church, not just recipients of the ministry of the clergy. Lay Catholics the world over took these ideas and ran with them, seeing in them the theological foundations for their desire to participate more fully in the Church they loved.

Not only have the laity taken on roles previously reserved for priests or religious, but they also have created new ministries. For instance, the base communities so popular in Latin America are small groups of Catholics who come together once or twice a week to sing, pray, and study the gospel. This is a ministry of the laity to the laity, and it can be a powerful force, influencing how participants understand and implement Catholic doctrine in their lives. Other grassroots organizations are more directly vocal about their desire for greater participation in the way the Church is run. In the United States, a group called Voices of the Faithful, for instance, grew out of anger and frustration with the Church's leadership over its handling of the recent sex-abuse scandal; while it accepts the authority of the Church's hierarchy, this group advocates greater lay participation in the governance of the Church at all levels. This and similar calls for greater participation are not always welcomed by the clergy, however; some priests and bishops are deeply concerned about these movements because they do not fall directly under the guidance of the hierarchy.

Over the last forty years, the response of the Church's leaders to the roles the laity have taken on has been a mixed bag of optimism and concern. In 1975, Pope Paul VI issued *On Evangelization in the Modern World* (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*), in which he talks about the laity consecrating their time to Church service, which implies that the work of lay ministers is not simply helpful but also holy. More recently, though, Pope Saint John Paul issued his *Exhortation on the Vocation and Mission of the Lay Faithful in the Church and in the World* (*Christifideles Laici*). In this 1988 encyclical, Saint John Paul II is much more cautious in tone than Paul was; he wants to make it clear that ordained ministers are in charge and that lay members are under the guidance and supervision of the ordained when they take on ministerial roles. Lay ministers serve the Church, yes, but they are not in a parallel position to the clergy; theirs is definitely a subordinate status. Some people see Saint John Paul II's writing as restating the true and traditional Catholic understanding of ministry, while others believe this is one more area in which he pulled the Church back from the openness of Vatican II.

What is becoming clear, though, is that lay ministers see their work as more than just a job. Surveys of lay ministers in U.S. Catholic churches find that they usually feel a sense of being called to their role and of receiving a charism, or special grace, for their work. That does not always mesh with how members of the clergy or other lay members of the parish see them, though. Many people in the pews view lay ministers as simply stand-ins for overworked priests rather than as people who are called to their work. . . .



## Looking Inward, Looking Outward: The Church at Home and Abroad

As the Church enters its third millennium, it faces a new challenge: less interest in the areas where it has traditionally been strong and unprecedented growth in places that used to be thought far-flung and exotic. In response, the Church must figure out how to repackage its ancient message for the eyes of the modern Western world, open its understanding to new ways of being Catholic and being Church, and seriously dialogue with those of other religions who are now the friends and neighbors of a growing number of the world's Catholics.

### Outward Bound: The Church's Growth in Africa and Asia

At the turn of the twentieth century, Earth was home to about 1.5 billion people; by 2001, that number was about 6 billion. As a species, we have been growing exponentially, and the Catholic population is growing faster than most; the population of the globe rose by 117 percent in the last half of the twentieth century, but the number of Catholics shot up by 139 percent. In fact, there are more than a billion Catholics now—about 18 percent of the global population.

Asia and Africa saw the biggest population explosions, and the number of Catholics in those areas has been growing rapidly. Asia has 861 percent more Catholics now than at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the Catholic population in Africa grew by a whopping 6,708 percent. Not that you are likely to see a Catholic church on every street corner in Calcutta or Dar es Salaam—Catholics still make up a small percentage of the inhabitants of both continents, but that percentage is growing.

For a long time, Catholics in Africa and Asia had little voice in the Church, but this too is changing. African and Asian Catholics face different challenges than do Western Catholics, and over the course of the twenty-first century we are likely to see the Church taking notice. Africa is afflicted with the highest HIV rate in the world, as well as by terrible poverty and appalling wars. The Church knows that witnessing to the gospel in Africa means helping people live lives of dignity in the midst of tragedies, as well as helping find ways to end those tragedies. As for Asia, Catholics there find themselves in the midst of a continent that contains the countries with the largest Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist populations in the world and many other thriving religious traditions as well. Asian Catholics have to work out how to live in harmony with those around them who have dramatically different ideas and beliefs.

Looking at Africa and Asia shows us a lot about the future of the Church. From being a big deal in a few areas of the world, it is fast becoming one part of the religious landscape in much of the world. The Church must adapt to living and working with people of many other beliefs and to the different understandings that Catholics in non-Western areas bring to their faith. Many practices that Western Catholics take for granted are really just how the West goes about being Church. This can cause a problem when Catholics all over the globe are forced to do things the same way.

Today the Church is talking about “inculturation”—taking universal ideas and beliefs and allowing people to develop rituals, practices, and symbols meaningful for their particular cultures. It can be a sticky process; sometimes it is hard to know the line between simply expressing the same belief but in a different way and expressing an entirely different belief. Moreover, what looks like inculturation in Africa



or Asia can seem far-fetched to those far away in Rome, meaning there have been more than a few heated battles between the Vatican hierarchy and the locals in those two continents. One of the main challenges the Church is going to face in the twenty-first century is how to maintain the integrity of its unity while recognizing the reality of its diversity. It may not be an easy road, but it is one that will lead the Catholic Church to become truly catholic—that is, universal.

## **Less of a Good Thing—Shrinking Interest in the Catholic Heartland**

About 40 percent of Europe is Catholic, along with about 63 percent of the total population of North and South America, but these numbers are changing. Latin America has been overwhelmingly Catholic for half a millennium, but now evangelical forms of Christianity are making big inroads. The number of Catholics is on the rise in the United States (partly due to the increase in immigration from Latin America), but so is the number of people who do not think religion is important at all—a trend called secularization. Jump over to Europe—the historic heart of Catholic Christianity—and you will find practically an epidemic of people turning away from Christianity.

What is behind this? Did Westerners just suddenly wake up one morning and decide that religion was unimportant? The answer is “kind of yes.” Westerners have turned more and more to the belief that science can explain the world and that religion is no longer necessary. Even many people who express a religious preference have an essentially secular point of view, thinking of religion as a “Sunday thing” that does not affect how they see the rest of their lives or the world. More than a few people see religion of any kind, and Christianity in particular, as being too big a part of our world’s violence. Then there is sex: Some scholars would say that more people in the Western world have been turned off by the Church’s views of sexuality than by any other issue. From these viewpoints, it is just a short hop to believing that religion has no value at all.

As more people in non-Western areas are turning to Catholic Christianity, more people in traditionally Christian areas are turning away from it. This is a big problem for the Church and one it is having a hard time changing. How can the Church show secular Westerners that it is still needed in society? How can it convince people thinking about leaving the Church that it gives them something they cannot find anywhere else? It does not seem likely that the Church is going to be able to answer these questions any time soon.

## **Talking It Over: Dialogue with Other Religions**

Since Vatican II, the Church has put much effort into talking with members of other religions, not to convert them but to encourage mutual understanding. By doing this, the Church shows its belief that everyone brings something to the table and that no one side has the lock on truth. Some Catholics have a hard time with this; after all, hasn’t the Church spent centuries telling everyone that it is the only path to God? Others agree that God’s work in the world goes beyond the Church but worry that Church beliefs may get watered down or neglected in dialogue. In the end, the Church sees dialogue with other religions as not only valuable but also inevitable. Western Catholics are much more likely to encounter people of other religions than they were a hundred years ago, and dealing with people of differing beliefs is part of daily life for Catholics in other areas. In the twenty-first century, the need for understanding and harmony between Catholic Christians and those of other faiths will only continue to grow.





When Islamic radicals crashed airliners into American targets on September 11, 2001, it drove home for Americans how much people are willing to live, die, and even kill for their beliefs. It is a lesson that people in the Middle East, Ireland, Serbia, and many other areas had already learned. Part of the Church's need for dialogue is to find ways for people of different traditions to live together in peace.

One of the biggest reasons for religious dialogue is that more and more Western Christians find themselves drawn to other religions, especially the religions of Asia. Hindu understandings of reincarnation and the sacredness of all life and Buddhist messages of compassion and right action have found their way into the consciousness of the Western world, and their influence is growing among Christians. So while the Church is working for true understanding and harmony with people of other beliefs, it also wants to understand what draws Christians to these beliefs and how it may best help Catholics hold strong to their faith. . . .

As we settle into the new millennium, Catholics are still going to struggle as they try to be part of their world, with its constant change and moving definitions of morality, while remaining faithful Christians who hold fast to the ancient faith. The Church will continue to work at finding the balance between recognizing its own authority and not stepping on God's, being part of history yet not being swayed by changing fashions, and standing up for truth clearly and honestly without becoming rigid or demanding that all follow its path. We have seen times when the Church simply repeated its teachings and demanded allegiance, refusing to deal with the world around it. That may have made things seem easier but not better. The Church of the twenty-first century cannot return to such a time and would not want to if it could. It has a harder job now: not to be aloof from the world but to be down on the front lines, calling people to the gospel and showing them how to live it. The road that lies ahead may be harder to navigate, but if it carries the Church to greater compassion and a fuller expression of God's will, then it is the only path worth following.

(Excerpted from *The Catholic Church: A Brief Popular History*, by Cynthia Stewart [Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2008]. Copyright © 2008 by Anselm Academic. Used with permission of Anselm Academic.)

