

# Holy Moly, He's Done It Again

by Carl Bernstein



Carl Bernstein shared a Pulitzer Prize with Bob Woodward for his coverage of Watergate for The Washington Post. His most recent book is the acclaimed biography, *A Woman in Charge: The Life of Hillary Rodham Clinton*. He is the author, with Woodward, of *All the President's Men* and *The Final Days*, and, with Marco Politi, of *His Holiness: John Paul II and the Hidden History of Our Time*. He is also the author of *Loyalties*, a memoir about his parents during McCarthy-era Washington.

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**Andrew Medichini / AP**

**Early this week, Pope Benedict compounded his troubles by elevating a bishop who blamed New Orleans for Hurricane Katrina and called Harry Potter satanic. How does a pope who's not that ideologically different from the beloved John Paul II manage to screw up so badly?**

"Can't anybody here play this game?" Casey Stengel once asked famously. Some of the archangels swarming around the Vatican must be asking the same question after the supremely gifted reign of Pope John Paul II and the bumbling performance in the field of his successor, Benedict XVI.

He has managed in the brief springtime of his papacy to offend two of the three great monotheistic faiths—Muslim and Jewish—to the extent that worldwide apology tours have had to be mounted to undo the damage. And much of Christian Europe—especially reform-minded Catholics—have been offended in the process.

John Paul II was the first modern pope to grow up in a secular culture. To watch Benedict try to operate in the temporal sphere—except perhaps for his playing classical piano—could be painful.

The most damaging incidents are extraordinary by any measure of ability to offend, or to step into ecclesiastical muck:

- In remarks two years ago at the university where he formerly taught in Germany, the pope unequivocally equated violence and Islam, setting off a political storm through the Muslim world.
- Three days after Christmas 2008, he declared that saving humanity from homosexuality was just as important as saving the rainforest from destruction.
- In January, he revoked the excommunication of four schismatic bishops who, as members of the Society of St. Pius X, refused to accept the teachings of Vatican II; one of the bishops had made a career of denying the existence of Nazi gas chambers and genocide, and persevered in his claims even after Benedict had brought the four back into the Roman Catholic Church.
- While Jews around the world expressed their disbelief and took offense, Pope Benedict this week precipitated another international storm by appointing as Archbishop of Linz, Austria, the Rev. Gerhard Maria Wagner, known for his statements that Hurricane Katrina was divine retribution for the sins of New Orleans' citizens; that the Harry Potter novels were "satanic"; and that homosexuality was curable.

As the *New York Times* reported, "The affairs have engendered a storm of criticism of the church hierarchy and led to frantic efforts to mollify angry and confused parishioners around the globe, while the latest controversy [over the appointment of Rev. Wagner, who has since withdrawn from consideration] has raised concerns that the actions could be part of a disturbing pattern."

Indeed, Benedict is increasingly pictured in the press and among detractors as an ultra-right-wing pope who would set the Catholic Church back decades, even undoing the reforms of Vatican II, not to mention the work within the Church of his great predecessor, John Paul II.

Mind you, there is not a whole lot of theological difference between these two: Benedict, the former Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, was, after all, JP II's enforcer of doctrinal purity, his ghostwriter even, and not for nothing did Ratzinger earn the name God's Rotweiler on Rome's playing grounds. The pronouncements of each on homosexuality, for instance—a particularly rough patch in Pope Benedict's seemingly endless run of difficult patches—tended to follow parallel tracks, which is to say that they were both convinced that God was against it and the church was duty-bound to point out His disapproval.

To be sure, John Paul had his occasional stumbles. (The first pope to visit the the synagogue of Rome, he briefly set Jewish sensibilities askew when, at Auschwitz, he invoked the memory of a Jewish convert to Catholicism who became a nun, died at the death camp, and whom he beatified for sainthood.)

Yet such was the mastery of John Paul that he could operate in the secular world—especially if cameras and a huge audience were around—with the certainty that the perennial theology of the Catholic Church, as expressed through the force of his own personality and manner, would resound and almost always get its best hearing through the magnificent vessel of his preaching and witness. No matter how unpalatable the theological substance to some of his listeners.

Benedict has not been so blessed, though few members of John Paul's inner circle were closer to him or had a better seat from which to learn.

John Paul II had the advantage of preparing for the papacy and the priesthood as an actor—an unusual pursuit for a prelate, but Karol Wojtyła's acting was done as part of a Catholic underground theater that took the form of opposition to Nazism. As so often in his experience, the underlying dogma and faith fashioned his temporal philosophy and response.

This, after all, was a pope who came to favor the introduction of American cruise missiles in Europe—a position opposed by most Western European governments at the time and, for a pope, perhaps involving a bit of doctrinal contortionism, given Christ's cheeky teachings about matters of defense. But John Paul II—a geopolitical genius, it turned out—prevailed, as he did in understanding that his Polish church and the Solidarity movement would be the theological equivalent of Afghanistan for the Kremlin.

John Paul was the first modern pope to grow up in a secular culture: He attended public schools, danced with girls—indeed, as a teenager he had a crush on a beautiful Jewish girl who fled his hometown just ahead of the arrival of the Germans. Though Benedict's background, too, had temporal touches, he knew from his earliest years he wanted to be a priest. Wojtyła came much later to the decision, and wrestled with it. To watch Ratzinger/Benedict try to operate in the temporal sphere—except perhaps for his playing classical piano—could be painful.

And it is his relationship to the world outside the Vatican that has been, in a word, a mess. This, of course, was John Paul's strongest suit, as he traveled, charmed, cajoled, paraded, and became the individual seen in person—and probably through modern media as well—by more people than anyone in the history of the earth.

Benedict's message is not much different than his predecessor's: He calls on Europe to return to its Christian values and roots in an age of de-Christianization and secularization; he attacks relativism's denial of moral and objective truths, calling this the central problem of the 21st century—just as John Paul saw the same problem as the root of the evils of the 20th. Only through the redemptive love of Christ can earthly satisfaction be achieved, he—like Karol Wojtyła—preaches.

Yet with John Paul II and the modern Vatican organization created in his reign to spread his message and the perennial theology of the Catholic Church, there was rarely any doubt of what the pope intended, and rarely was the message muddled.

With Benedict, it's hard to tell what he's doing or thinking.

Geroge Weigel, who wrote a competing biography to the one Marco Politi and I published in 1996 about John Paul II (and George's is really terrific, especially in understanding the theology of John Paul and Ratzinger, which he extols) recently criticized the Vatican of Benedict XVI for its "chaos, confusion, and incompetence."

Weigel attributes the difficulties not so much to Ratzinger as to the Roman Curia and administration.

Politi, who has gone on to write a biography of Ratzinger/Benedict and still covers the Vatican for *La Repubblica*, notes, "I think this pope consults very little. John Paul II was a spin doctor. He knew the media was important. Benedict XVI doesn't often calculate his decisions on public opinion. He acts very alone." The men who run the Vatican in the Benedict era are aware "that certain issues—the Jews, the Holocaust, German Jews and German Christians—must be handled correctly," according to Politi. But Benedict's predilection not to consult with any earthly presence has made the situation untenable, and left the Vatican bureaucracy with the task of trying to explain his words and actions after the damage has been done.

"This has not only been a mistake," Politi says. "This has been a crisis that has left strong unease within the church about how the pope is ruling. Inside the Vatican and outside the Vatican, you can see people questioning how he rules."

In the John Paul II days, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had the advantage of staying in his cupboard—the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith—exchanging views only with the Pope, and speaking publicly only through carefully written missives on doctrinal issues. If Pope John Paul II can be said to have had a partner in his papacy, it was Ratzinger, and it should be noted that some of John Paul II's greatest words about the condition of man were written by Ratzinger.

John Paul was his cover. No more.

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