

Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger or the “Rottweiler of God” Dies. Destruction of the people’s church and liberation theology

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Joseph Ratzinger passed away at the age of 95. He is best known as the former pope, but his most important achievements can be found during his time as Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith of the Catholic Church. In that position he was the architect of one of the most large-scale ideological and anti-leftist campaigns in post-war history, the so-called Restoration.

Neoconservatism

In 1978, Karol Wojtyla is appointed leader of the largest religious community in the world. He finds a post-conciliar[i] church in deep crisis: sharp decline in mass attendance and vocations, high divorce rate among Catholics, rejection of papal authority on birth control, a world full of heresies, ...

He wants a radical turnaround. No more risks, no more experiments, done with participation and consultation. The texts of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) are preserved, but the spirit is buried. The pope is preparing for a centralist and orthodox church policy, accompanied by a spiritual and moral rearmament.

He cleverly responds to the political climate of that moment, which, incidentally, shows many similarities with today. In the mid-1970s, a severe economic crisis begins. The optimistic spiritual climate of the 1960s is changing and is characterized by the pursuit of

certainty and security, the call to – preferably charismatic – authorities, a renewed ethical revival, the flight into the private sphere or into the irrational, etc.

It is against this background that “neoconservatism” arises. This new conservatism is no longer defensive, but is itself launching a political and ideological offensive. This movement is supported by ‘strong’ individuals such as Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher.

Skillfully capitalizing on the mass media, they express a worldwide missionary urge propagating simplistic worldviews, radiating certainty and optimism, etc.

God’s rottweiler

Another major concern for the pope is the emergence of a thriving progressive popular church in Latin America. Wojtyla is a Pole and an anti-communist through and through. Fighting Marxism and Communism in the world is one of his life goals.

Because the influence of Marxism in the grassroots church and in liberation theology is undeniable, he will do everything he can to restore order to the continent.

He counts on Ratzinger, who in 1981 is appointed Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, the Vatican’s ministry of ideology and information. He will hold that office for a quarter of a century, and he will make full use of it to make his mark on world affairs.

Ratzinger becomes the architect of a large-scale ecclesiastical and pastoral offensive, which he himself calls “Restoration.” The aim is to strengthen the central administrative apparatus and to eliminate any form of dissent within the church. Ratzinger quickly emerges as a true grand inquisitor, which will earn him the nickname ‘rottweiler of god’.

The entire Catholic Church is targeted, but the main arrows are directed at Latin America, where the political impact is by far the greatest. We therefore restrict ourselves to this continent in what follows.

The Destruction of the people’s church and liberation theology

The first thing that happens is the creation of databases of Latin American episcopal conferences, liberation theologians, progressive religious, suspicious pastoral projects, etc. Ultra-conservative and outspoken right-wing bishops and cardinals are appointed in almost all ecclesiastical provinces.

In Brazil alone, about fifty conservative bishops are appointed. At the end of the 1980s, 5 of Peru’s 51 bishops are members of Opus Dei. Chile and Colombia are going the same way. Dissident bishops are put under pressure: some receive warning letters, others receive travel bans or are summoned.

This appointment policy is all the worse because the episcopate plays a very important role in this continent. It is in many cases the only possible opposition to military repression, to torture, etc. If the bishops in Brazil and Chile had remained silent as they did in Argentina, the number of victims of the repression would have been much higher.

A great clean-up is also done on the lower levels. The formation of priests is effected by

pressuring, reorienting, or closing seminaries or theological institutes. Efforts are being made to better control the religious orders who are often protagonists of the liberation church. Special attention is paid to theologians. They are henceforth kept in line by making them swear the new 'oath of allegiance'.

In 1984, Ratzinger writes the 'Instruction on Certain Aspects of the Theology of Liberation.' It is a frontal attack against liberation theologians, especially those from Latin America. A year later, Leonardo Boff, one of the figureheads of Liberation Theology, is even banned from speaking. The grip on Catholic magazines is being increased: where it is deemed necessary, they are censored, the editorial board is replaced, or they are put under financial pressure.

Progressive pastoral projects are curtailed or even stopped altogether. In 1989, recognition of the international Young Christian Workers (YCW), which was considered far too progressive, was withdrawn by the Vatican. It must make way for the anti-leftist and confessional International Co-ordination of Young Christian Worker Movements (ICYCW).

Besides the destruction of all that is progressive in the Church (?), huge reorientation projects are set up to put the believers back on the right track. Evangelization 2000 and Lumen 2000 are large-scale media evangelization projects aimed at Latin America, which together have no less than three satellites at their disposal.

The projects are set up by right-wing and ultra-conservative individuals and groups: Comunione e Liberazione, Maria Action, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, and others. The employees of these media giants compare their work to a kind of new "air force."

Those who can read are bombarded with cheaply published religious books. Large-scale retreats are financed for priests and religious orders. For these projects, the top of the Catholic Church can always count on the financial support of the business world.

Anti-Communist Crusade

Nothing is left to chance. One by one, all the pillars of the people's church in Latin America are undermined. Observers refer to this as a "dismantling of a church." What we are dealing with here is one of the largest ideological and political campaigns in post-war history.

This campaign is part of the anti-communist crusade of the Cold War. It can also be seen as a US revenge campaign for the lost power in the preceding period.

During the 1960s and 1970s, the countries of the Third World strengthen their position on the world market. They force higher prices for raw materials and so increase their purchasing power on the world market. This peaks during the 1973 oil crisis.

In 1975, Vietnam inflicts an ignominious defeat on the US. Shortly thereafter, the White House is humiliated twice: first by the Sandinista revolution in their 'backyard' (1979) and then by the hostage drama in Iran (1980). When he takes office, Reagan also feels threatened by an overly independent economic attitude of important countries such as Mexico and Brazil.

The White House does not give in and launches a counteroffensive on several fronts. Liberation theology is one of its main targets. As early as the late 1960s, liberation theology, still in its embryonic stage at that time, is seen as a threat to US geostrategic interests, as evidenced by the Rockefeller report.[ii]

In the 1970s, theological centers are established to engage in ideological combat with liberation theology. However, it is mainly from the 1980s that this counter-offensive reaches cruising speed. The US spends billions of dollars supporting the counter-revolution in Latin America.

This dirty war claims tens of thousands of victims. Death squads, paramilitary groups, but also the regular army does the dirty work. Many martyrs fall in the ranks of the Christian liberation movements. The most famous are Bishop Romero and the six Jesuits in El Salvador.

To combat liberation theology on its own turf, Protestant sects are employed. They receive heavy financial support from the US. By means of cheap slogans and sentimental messages, they try to attract the believers in order to withdraw them from the 'pernicious' influence of liberation theology. Expensive electronic means are used.

Religion appears here as the opium of the people in its purest form. The military is also involved in this 'religious war.' Top officers of the armies of Latin America draft a document to give more shape to the "theological arm of the armed forces."

Mission accomplished

The joint efforts of Ratzinger and the White House pay off. In the 1990s, the grassroots church of Latin America is dealt a very severe blow. Many grassroots groups cease to exist or are barely able to function for lack of support from the official church, for fear of repression, because they no longer believe in the hoped-for breakthrough, or simply because they are physically liquidated.

The optimism and activism of the 1970s and 1980s give way to despair and contemplation. Social analysis loses significance in favor of culture, ethics, and spirituality, perfectly tailored to Ratzinger.

Overall, the emphasis shifts from liberation to denunciation, from resistance to comfort, from analysis to utopia, from subversion to survival. The Book of Exodus is traded for the Apocalypse and Ecclesiastes.

By the end of the 1990s, at least, the base church no longer poses a threat to the establishment. Both the Vatican, the Pentagon, and the local elites of Latin America have one less concern at that point. That reassurance quickly turns around, however, with the election of Chávez as president of Venezuela, but that is another story.

In 2005, Ratzinger is rewarded for his successful 'Restoration' and elected head of the Catholic Church. But as a manager he shines much less than as an inquisitor. All in all, he is a weak pope.

He leaves behind a weakened institution, plagued by a shortage of priests and empty churches in the West, and ongoing sex scandals. He fails to put things in order in the Vatican. That may be the main reason why he resigns in 2013.

Ratzinger will go down in history primarily as the man who successfully implemented the Restoration in the Catholic Church and defused the people's church in Latin America. These are no small 'earnings'.

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Notes

[i] The Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, also known as Vatican II, was held from October 11, 1962 to December 8, 1965. It was a church meeting that aimed to modernize the Catholic Church.

[ii] '[The Rockefeller Report](#)', a report of the Rockefeller Foundation (1969) identified liberation theology as a threat to the national security of the United States. The Reagan administration heeded the advice.

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