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Disillusioned German Catholics

The Pope's Difficult Visit to His Homeland

When Joseph Ratzinger became pope in 2005, Catholics in Germany joyfully celebrated the first German pope in almost 500 years. Since then, the euphoria has turned to disappointment and disillusionment. Benedict XVI's visit to Germany this week will do little to heal the deep divide between conservatives and reformers in the German Church. By SPIEGEL Staff.

One thing is already clear: The two men will be all smiles when they meet.

If all goes according to plan, German President Christian Wulff will greet the pope at 11:15 a.m. this Thursday in front of Bellevue Palace, the president's official residence in Berlin. Photographers and cameramen will be eagerly jostling for the best spots, security teams will be intently scanning the area, and Wulff will shake his guest's hand with the proper degree of decorum.

But what will happen next? What will the German head of state and the leader of the Roman Catholic Church talk about when they meet for the first time, shortly after Benedict XVI's landing in Berlin? Will they talk about the fact that Wulff, a practicing Catholic, is divorced and remarried, a fact that, under the current rules of the Church, excludes him from receiving Communion?

Will Benedict XVI address the sensitive issue in his speech before the German parliament, the Bundestag, that afternoon? Although about 100 Bundestag members plan to boycott his address, Gerda Hasselfeldt, the Catholic chairwoman of the conservative Christian Social Union's group in the Bundestag, will be there without fail. Hasselfeldt is also divorced and has remarried. So has the leader of her party, Horst Seehofer, who also fathered an illegitimate child, and Oskar Lafontaine, the former co-chairman of the Left Party and a former Jesuit school pupil.

Sticking to the Rules

Benedict is scheduled to arrive at Berlin's Olympic Stadium at 6 p.m., where he will celebrate mass and meet with Berlin's openly gay Mayor, Klaus Wowereit. Will the pope encourage Wowereit, a Catholic and a member of the center-left Social Democrats (SPD) who has been living with his partner for years, to practice abstinence and not to act out his proclivities, as his church demands of all homosexuals?

Luckily for the pope, he won't have any problems with two other prominent people he will meet in Berlin. Chancellor Angela Merkel (remarried) and German Foreign Minister Guido Westerwelle (gay) are both Protestants.

But even those Catholics who seem to abide by all the rules aren't truly reliable. One of his hosts in Berlin, Bundestag President Norbert Lammert, recently ruffled feathers at the Vatican when he and fellow Christian Democrat Annette Schavan, who is Germany's education minister, together with other reformist Catholics, sent a letter to Germany's bishops about the marriage ban for priests. Those who staunchly cling to celibacy, Lammert writes, "are leading the Church with open eyes into a pastoral emergency."

The open criticism of the pope was not well received in Rome. Lammert's appeal was an "insult to Jesus Christ," Cardinal Walter Brandmüller, a close associate of Benedict, thundered.

One of the Last Absolute Monarchs

Worlds will collide when Joseph Ratzinger arrives in his native Germany this week for his first state visit. About 100 members of parliament have chosen to forego the experience, including lawmakers like SPD parliamentarian Ulla Burchardt from the western city of Dortmund. "A head of state who disregards labor rights, women's rights and the right to sexual self-determination

should not be allowed to address the Bundestag," says Burchardt.

Her Green Party counterpart Toni Hofreiter finds it "questionable to invite the pope to the parliament by using the trick of defining him as a head of state" (the pope is the official head of state of Vatican City, the world's smallest state). Hofreiter will also not attend the speech. And Alexander Süssmair of the far-left Left Party "cannot even imagine what the democratic Federal Republic of Germany could learn from the representative of an absolute monarchy." In reaction to the boycott, former Bundestag members have been invited to attend so that the empty seats will be filled.

Many of the people that Benedict will encounter during his visit are divorced, gay, in common-law marriages or uninterested in the Church's ban on birth control. And even though they are Catholic, they do not see themselves as sinners. The pope, who rules the papal state as one of the last absolute monarchs on earth, will encounter a modern society with modern representatives.

Benedict will travel the country for four days, distributing his blessing and waving to the crowds from his popemobile. But in the German society of the 21st century, the answers his Church has to offer are no longer as relevant as they once were.

The enthusiasm and the spirit of optimism have disappeared -- on both sides. What began like a love affair six years with the **headline "We Are Pope"** in the tabloid newspaper *Bild* has since turned into a more distant relationship.

Germans Feel Deceived

The pope and his fellow Germans are not on good terms. The romance that existed in 2005 has vanished, leaving the hopes and the expectations of the day unfulfilled. The euphoria of the early years was a misunderstanding. According to a **current SPIEGEL poll**, only 8 percent of Germans want the Catholic Church to have more influence on politics and society in Germany.

The Germans are the ones who feel deceived. Ratzinger did not become the kindly, benign old prince of the church and bridge builder ("Pontifex maximus") they had wanted him to be. On the contrary, he proved to be more conservative than the Germans wanted to believe at first. He has never grown out of his former role of head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Instead of opening up in his faith, he withdrew into his fortress and became even more obstinate.

His Church is erecting new walls because it's what Benedict wants. Ironically, it is in Germany, the cradle of the Reformation, where his followers are transforming the community of Catholics into an organization of clerical obedience. The doctrine of the Vatican and the reality of the lives of most Catholics are moving further apart. In many places, traditionalists are gaining the upper hand over liberal Catholics.

More bishops in Germany's dioceses are seeking refuge in the Church's past, while Germany society is constantly becoming more dynamic, more Muslim, more atheistic and more multicultural. German society is divided over how to treat immigrants, and it is seeking alternatives to nuclear energy, a solution to the ongoing debt crisis and answers to the problems of an aging population. But Benedict and his Church hardly play a role in any of these debates anymore, because they are more concerned with the purity of their doctrine and their own problems.

The Church still hasn't weathered the consequences of the abuse scandal. It has failed to liberate itself from the deepest identity crisis of its recent history. Although Benedict expressed his dismay over the scope of the crimes, he has not pursued an extensive investigation of the causes. Instead, he assigns the blame to the Devil who, as he says, has thrown "dirt into the faces" of him and his priests.

Lost Euphoria

When Cardinal Jorge Medina Estévez announced the name of the new pope from the balcony of St. Peter's Basilica on April 19, 2005, cheers erupted on St. Peter's Square and elsewhere. North

of the Alps, the election of the first German pope in 482 years was also met with great enthusiasm. Even non-religious intellectuals were suddenly raving about the sophisticated man at the head of the Church.

A few months later, hundreds of thousands of young people attending the Catholic Church's World Youth Day in Cologne greeted the pope as if he were a pop star. "Now the country is quaking under the storms of enthusiasm emanating from Catholic World Youth Day," the German Sunday newspaper *Welt am Sonntag* raved.

There is little evidence of this euphoria today, and the anticipated stampede of young people into the Church has failed to materialize. Cologne was merely an ecstatic event without consequences. Benedict is not leading his church into an open-minded future, but back into a narrow-minded past.

This is evident in his words and actions. The German pope, of all people, irritated Protestants by saying that their church is not a church "in the actual sense." He snubbed the Muslims with harsh words against the Prophet Muhammad. And he insulted the Jews by reinserting into the Good Friday liturgy, a prayer for the conversion of the Jews that one of Benedict's predecessors, Paul VI, had removed as a gesture of reconciliation after the 1962-1965 Second Vatican Council.

Back in Time

Instead, Ratzinger sent signals of understanding and sympathy to the conservative fringe of Catholicism. By currying favor with the traditionalist Society of Saint Pius X (SSPX), he took the Church back in time and infuriated the overwhelming majority of Roman Catholics.

The backlog of reforms in the Church, which had developed under his conservative predecessor John Paul II, increased under Benedict. The Vatican continues to reject artificial birth control, which it sees as cause for eternal punishment. Millions of AIDS deaths have done nothing to convince the keepers of Catholic sexual morality that condoms might be a good idea.

Similarly, half of the Church's members remain excluded from all leadership positions. Women cannot become priests, let alone bishops. The official Church still excludes lesbians and gays from its community.

"A man like him is not made to lead a community of more than a billion people and fill them with life. He is especially lacking in charisma," says Leonardo Boff, the famous Latin American liberation theologian. Boff has long criticized Ratzinger, ever since the German, as head of the CDF, badgered him over alleged heresy.

From Liberal to Conservative

At the beginning of his career, Ratzinger held completely different views, views that were open-minded and liberal. At the Second Vatican Council in 1962, he and the prominent Swiss theologian Hans Küng were among those who sought to open up their fossilized church and fought against the Vatican's claim to absolute authority.

But the year 1968 became a turning point in Ratzinger's life. As a professor at the University of Tübingen in southern Germany, he was booed by students, who chanted "Jesus be damned" in his lectures. It was a shock he never came to terms with. The enlightened professor of theology transformed himself into a conservative dogmatist, filled with suspicion of all attempts to reform the Church.

Since then, Benedict has viewed the Catholic Church as the sole custodian of a divine truth. The notion that this divine truth was established for the sake of mankind and not for the sake of an absolute idea is no longer relevant in Ratzinger's theology.

It is doubly fatal for the Church that Ratzinger's fanaticism about the truth goes hand in hand with a fear of the world and its confusing ways. Like John Paul II, he believes that this earthly, hedonistic society is a culture of death, which the Church should distance itself from. As a result, the pope is squandering the opportunity to play an important part in shaping secular society, choosing isolation instead of openness.

A New Antipope

Because of this approach, Ratzinger encounters particularly great resistance in his native Germany. A broad alliance of about 70 protest groups, including the Pro Familia alliance for self-determined sexuality and the German AIDS Society, has called for a rally in downtown Berlin on Thursday. About 15,000 people are expected at the event, to demonstrate against the Church's "inhumane gender and sexual policy, harassment of homosexuals, contempt for women's rights and shameful condom policy."

Catholic reform groups like "We Are Church" are galvanizing public opinion against Benedict in a campaign called, in a play on the famous *Bild* headline, "We Are (Not) Pope." Former abuse victims and people who grew up in children's homes plan to protest openly over the roughly €30 million (\$41 million) the Church has budgeted for the pope's visit -- compared with the roughly €2 million it has paid in compensation to victims of sexual violence to date.

A radical anti-pope alliance calling itself "What the Fuck" has already named a female antipope, Rosa I. In a recent protest, she shook the fence at the Vatican Embassy in Berlin, calling Benedict a "false pope with a false image of humanity."

Even Berlin Mayor Wowereit gave his worldly blessing to such criticism, when he expressed "great sympathy" for the protests, because, as he said, "the Church, with its teachings, promotes theories that belong to a period thousands of years ago, not the modern age."

All-Time Low

Under these circumstances, 84-year-old church leader Ratzinger's third visit to Germany since 2005 will probably be his most challenging.

The 2005 World Youth Day event in Cologne and a largely private visit to Bavaria in 2006 were at least successful in terms of their atmosphere, even if the boost they were supposed to give to the German Catholic Church quickly fizzled out. This time, on the other hand, Benedict will witness the decline of the Church in his native Germany.

In the last year alone, the reverberations from the abuse scandal prompted more than 181,000 Germans to leave the Catholic Church (and about 150,000 to leave the Protestant Church). According to the latest statistics by the German Bishops' Conference, more than 2.6 million people in Germany have left the Church since 1990. Some 87.4 percent of Catholics no longer go to church on Sundays. The number of men hoping to become priests is at an all-time low, as is the number of baptisms and Catholic weddings.

Germany is experiencing a large-scale, historic withdrawal of the Catholic Church from German society. Monasteries are being forced to shut their doors as Catholic orders are dissolved. About 700 churches nationwide have been sold or torn down.

Monasteries Closing Down

Sometimes these drastic changes involve the end of a 1,000-year history, as in the case of the closing of the Michaelsberg Benedictine monastery in the city of Siegburg near Bonn, which was founded in 1064. Until recently, only 12 elderly monks were still living in the massive fortress of the church towering over the town, which was once home to several hundred monks.

Throughout the country, parishes are being combined to form "pastoral metropolitan areas" of 10,000 people or more. The German Catholic Church is undergoing a process of consolidation, downsizing and centralization. In many places, bishops must resort to Indian, Polish or Latin American priests, which has led to language problems in a number of communities.

Catholic kindergartens are being closed, as are hospitals, nursing homes and educational institutions. Even the Catholics' journalistic flagship, the *Rheinischer Merkur*, has not survived as an independent newspaper. It was shut down last November.

Nevertheless, many bishops are ignoring the alarm signals. Others are even proud of the contraction process. The traditionalists, in particular, are enthusiastic about a smaller church

where only the most devout Catholics convene.

The political and social influence of priests is almost inevitably shrinking. The church experienced its most recent defeat in July, when the Bundestag, ignoring its protests, voted to issue its limited approval of preimplantation genetic diagnosis.

'Self-Imposed Silence'

Meanwhile, the official Church is not seriously pursuing an open debate over its loss of significance and possible solutions to the problem. "There is a self-imposed silence over the crisis in the Church," says **Jesuit priest Klaus Mertes**, who exposed systematic sexual abuse at a Berlin Jesuit school in 2010, thereby setting the Catholic Church abuse scandal in Germany in motion.

"So far, the Church hierarchy has not had the courage to honestly and frankly admit what the situation is really like," says theologian Hans Küng, who is critical of the pope.

Liberal voices already had a rough time of it under John Paul II, but they have come under even greater pressure from Rome since his death. Mainz Cardinal Karl Lehmann was long the leader of the reformist camp in Germany. As chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, he did not shy away from conflict with Rome when it came to promoting a more modern form of Catholicism in Germany.

Those days are gone. The shift in the balance of power was almost physically palpable at a joint reception of the dioceses of Limburg and Mainz in the garden of the Limburg seminary in late August. The 75-year-old Lehmann, who is perhaps the last great liberal in his church, was on crutches after knee surgery and seemed weak. He responded to a question about reforms in Germany's dioceses with a weary, resigned look. The elderly bishop misses his companions from another era, who have either retired or passed away. "The others," as Lehmann puts it, are now calling the shots in the German episcopate. No more than a third of German bishops are still clearly on his side.

A few meters away from Lehmann, a prominent representative of "the others" was busily working his way through the crowd: Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, a young, energetic bishop who is shifting the once-liberal Limburg diocese decidedly toward Benedict's traditionalist course.

Ardent supporters of the pope, like Tebartz-van Elst and his compatriots in Berlin, Regensburg, Essen, Fulda, Eichstätt and Speyer, are now setting the agenda in German Catholicism. Many of them are protégés of conservative Cologne Cardinal Joachim Meisner, who once compared abortions with the Holocaust and has even gone to court to protest being characterized as a "hate preacher."

'A Poisoning of the Atmosphere Within the Church'

The spiritual leaders ought to be guiding their congregations and exercising Christian brotherly love, but in reality they are often preoccupied with themselves and their ideological disputes. Conservative groups and subgroups, sects and sectarians are shaping the debate, complains one of the bishops. Even the secretary of the German Bishops' Conference, Jesuit priest Hans Langendörfer, likens the current situation to a "poisoning of the atmosphere within the Church."

Through the bishops, Benedict's conservative reversal now encompasses large segments of German Catholicism. The traditionalists, who have strong networks, are working across Germany to promote a renunciation of liberal society, more piety and uncritical submission to the Roman hierarchy.

The number of backward-looking groups is in the hundreds, and many of them have now joined forces. The Forum of German Catholics, for example, sees itself as a conservative antithesis to the Central Committee of German Catholics, a liberal organization of lay people.

Handing Out Plastic Embryos

Just how influential these groups have become was evident at a meeting in the southwestern city of Karlsruhe a week ago. About 1,000 traditionalists had come together to mobilize for the

upcoming papal visit, in a campaign dubbed "Germany for the Pope."

The attendees included Andreas Laun, an auxiliary bishop from the Austrian city of Salzburg who has garnered praise for his ideas about what he calls the "homosexualization of society." Werner Münch, the former governor of the eastern state of Saxony-Anhalt, raged against the "de-Christianization of politics."

Even the ultraconservative Legionaires of Christ, who see themselves as a spiritual militia, had come to Karlsruhe to bring Germans back to the right path of faith. Their friends with the SSPX campaigned for the Latin mass, in which priests stand with their backs to the congregation as they mumble the Lord's Prayer. Representatives of the Catholic Scouts of Europe tried to drum up enthusiasm for folk dancing among young people, calling it "Your Alternative to Disco." Abortion opponents worked their way through the crowd, handing out small plastic embryos, reflecting the strategy of forum organizer Hubert Gindert.

Gindert recently called upon all Catholics in Germany to remove their children from religion classes if their teachers were sympathetic to reform-oriented theologians. He also said that parents should take their children out of sex education classes, which he characterized as nothing but the "manipulative and innocence-destroying sexual education of children by the government."

Pressure from the Conservatives

A look at the board of trustees of the Forum of German Catholics reveals that these are not insignificant breakaway groups. The board includes confidants of the pope, like retired Cardinal Paul Josef Cordes, as well as Cardinal Meisner and German bishops like Heinz Josef Algermissen from the central city of Fulda. "We are in the midst of a culture war," Algermissen told his supporters at an earlier meeting of the Forum. The Church, he said, must defend itself against the "mistakes of the present day."

Even Robert Zollitsch, the archbishop of the southwestern city of Freiburg and chairman of the German Bishops' Conference, gave his blessing to the Forum at an opening service in Karlsruhe. Although Zollitsch is not one of the conservatives, he can no longer ignore their call. "Those who know me know that I want to build bridges," says Zollitsch.

In reality, conservatives and traditionalists are exerting influence on the bishops' conference. When Zollitsch recently expressed sympathy for the problems of remarried Catholics like President Wulff in the newspaper *Die Zeit*, and then suggested that a solution to the problem might be in the works, supporters of the opposing camp promptly attacked him. "The circus horse is applauded when it does the right pirouettes," author Alexander Kissler, popular among traditional Catholics, wrote spitefully.

Return of the SSPX

In the past, archconservative church groups were left to their own devices, forming a closed circle that was either ignored or ridiculed by the base.

That has now changed, partly because of the signals coming from Benedict. The protagonists of this movement are beginning to stir up congregations throughout Germany and shape them as they see fit.

Take, for example, the long excommunicated bishops of the SSPX, who were ostracized in the Church until Ratzinger became pope. "We have done our homework," a leading member of the society says today. The group's leadership admonished Holocaust denier Richard Williamson, while three other priests were forced to leave the SSPX because of anti-Semitic remarks they had made.

"There is now absolutely no reason for Rome to keep our society out of the Church," says Bishop Bernard Fellay, the head of the society. As a sign of recognition from the top, his priests, after two years of negotiations, were even permitted to celebrate a Latin mass at St. Peter's Basilica a few weeks ago. "Because of us, conservative Catholicism has gained strength and unity," raves a representative of the society, which rejects ecumenism and seeks to lead the faithful back into a pious religious world that predates the Second Vatican Council.

If the pope, as is being discussed in Rome, recognizes the society as a world diocese in the near future, some of the 500 SSPX priests worldwide could soon arrive in Germany to compete with local ministers with their retro masses. Parish priests who incorporate lay people in their services and permit discussions about the Church already hold little standing in conservative circles, where they are sometimes berated as "leftist Council priests."

Rise of Opus Dei

Opus Dei, whose name means "Work of God," is a conservative lay organization whose members, depending on their status, are encouraged to practice self-chastisement, as well as daily communion and frequent prayer. It has also entered the mainstream of the Church.

There is hardly a German bishop who does not regard the organization, founded in Spain, with favor. The new Berlin archbishop, Rainer Woelki, obtained his doctorate at Opus Dei's Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. His patron and former boss, Cardinal Meisner, holds masses in Cologne for the Opus Dei founder. Even the pope revealed his sympathy for the organization at the beginning of his papacy. The only parish he visited during the 2005 World Youth Day was the St. Pantaleon Opus Dei congregation in Cologne.

Prelate Christoph Bockamp has been the German head of the organization since 1996. SPIEGEL met with him in the fireplace lounge at Campus Muengersdorf in Cologne, a dormitory for female students run by a foundation affiliated with Opus Dei.

It is a rare event, because Bockamp and his group normally keep as great a distance from the public as possible. As an adolescent, says Bockamp with a slight smile, he associated Opus Dei with clandestine organizations and the Mafia. Which of course was nonsense, he adds.

Active in Many Dioceses

Like the leader of SSPX, Bockamp also emphasizes his group's complete unity with the pope and the Roman Catholic Church. "We are having trouble opening enough new centers worldwide," he says, as evidence of how important the work of Opus Dei is to the Church these days.

At the beginning of the month, Opus Dei members sued the state of Brandenburg in eastern Germany over the right to open a boys' high school in Potsdam outside Berlin. Opus Dei is now active in many German dioceses, and Bockamp says that he is in contact with all German bishops. "We meet at receptions, or I request meetings to tell them about what we are up to in their diocese."

In the past, Catholic grassroots groups in Germany were also known for sympathizing with the peace and environmental movement, and Church youth groups enthusiastically traveled to Taizé in France to celebrate ecumenical Christianity with young believers of various denominations. It was taken for granted that girls could be altar servers. On Sundays, lay people helped distribute the host to the congregation and structure services.

Much of this world is still in existence today. Many parishes are diverse places, because priests and the members of their congregations become involved without paying much attention to conservative crusades.

Rise of the Neocatechumenate Movement

But a shift is underway, especially among young Catholics. At the World Youth Day in Cologne in 2005, more than 100,000 visitors were members of an organization called the Neocatechumenal Way, or NC Way. "And there were already 250,000 at the meeting in Madrid a few weeks ago," says Gianpaolo Carpanese of NC Way. "Our path is inspired by God," he adds. NC Way is a fast-growing neoconservative movement that is relatively unknown outside the Church. But with its roughly 100 groups in Germany, it already maintains a presence in most major cities.

The term neocatechumenate means "preparation for baptism." Neocatechumens are especially devout believers who hope to become true Christians through a rediscovery of baptism. To achieve this, they must pass through various stages lasting several decades, not unlike born-again Christians in the United States.

Gertrud Brück, 62, experienced how "Neocats" can change a congregation. Unable to imagine a life without the Catholic Church, Brück was involved in the parish office of the St. Marien parish in Cologne's Nippes neighborhood, was a member of the board of the church women's group, organized floral arrangements in the church and did readings during Sunday mass.

'I Was a Bad Person'

One day, her pastor returned from a priests' council meeting where he had become enthusiastic about the Neocatechumens. He urged Brück to join "the Way," and told her: "Whoever doesn't join is merely religious and not Catholic."

Brück followed his advice at first. "The pattern was always the same in many meetings," she says. "You stood up front and said: I was a bad person, and it was only through the Neocatechumenate that I was led to the path of improvement." When she had questions, they were quickly dismissed.

The Cologne native, feeling as if she had come upon a sect within her own church, distanced herself from the movement. "There is no evidence of liberal faith within the Neocatechumenate," says Brück.

"No matter where the Neocatechumens turn up, they divide congregations and drive away other believers," says Johannes Krautkrämer, an assistant vicar in the southern section of Cologne. After voicing his concerns over the pious supporters of baptism in a letter to Cardinal Meisner, he was no longer offered positions as an independent vicar. The church leader is apparently not about to accept criticism of the conservative movement. Despite fierce arguments in the priests' council in his archdiocese, Meisner approved a seminar run by the Neocatechumenal Way in Bonn.

The deterioration of the climate among the faithful is also evident in the aggressive criticism with which Christians, ranging from the conservative to the reactionary, pounce on almost anyone who does not wholeheartedly support the orthodox camp.

'Shadow Catholics'

Jesuit priest Mertes, who exposed sexual abuse at Berlin's Canisius College high school, speaks of "shadow Catholics" who vilify their opponents with denunciations and vile attacks. "Parts of the hierarchy knuckle under to these loudmouths, because they're afraid of being berated themselves," he told SPIEGEL in a [recent interview](#).

Perhaps the most active mouthpiece of this movement is the website kreuz.net, where generally anonymous authors berate their respective enemies on a daily basis. In their world, Mertes is a "decadent German Jesuit" and "abuse propagandist" whose only goal is to harm the holy church.

The [gay theologian David Berger](#), a member of the orthodox Catholic scene himself for years, has been called a "professional faggot," among other insults, after having published a tell-all book about conservative Catholicism. His home address soon appeared on kreuz.net. Berger considered stopping his critical remarks about the church, but then he decided against the idea. "Then the gay-baiters would have achieved what they wanted," he says. SPIEGEL is also regularly assailed as a "Kirchenkampf magazine" -- a reference to the struggle between the Nazi regime and the Catholic Church -- which supposedly agitates against true Christians "in the style of Goebbels."

Are reformist Catholics fighting a lost cause? Have their conservative opponents already won the battle for control of the faith they supposedly share?

Subjected to Hate Mail

Monika Grüters is a member of the German Bundestag for the conservative Christian Democratic Union (CDU). On a morning two weeks before the pope's visit, she is sitting in her office, talking about how difficult it is to be a devout Catholic.

Every year, in the first week of January, she and about 50 other national politicians attend a retreat at the Maria Laach monastery in the Eifel Mountains of western Germany. On Sundays, Grüters attends mass at St. Ludwig's church in Berlin's Wilmersdorf neighborhood. "Four

open-minded, humorous, down-to-earth Franciscans have created a meeting place for spiritual Berlin there," she says. The five services held at the church each weekend are always full, and when a minister recently spoke of "reforms that are urgently needed" in the Catholic Church in his sermon, he received spontaneous, vigorous applause from the congregation.

Grütters rummages angrily through a stack of letters and printed emails. "Here!" she says. She has been showered with a stream of insults, merely because she told the Berlin daily newspaper *Der Tagesspiegel* that she hoped that rumors about Berlin Archbishop Woelki's ties to Opus Dei were untrue. "It would be devastating," she told the newspaper.

In one of the letters, she is berated as a "zeitgeist dominatrix." Devout Catholics write that they will do their best to ensure that she no longer appears on the list for a Bundestag mandate at the next election. Others have written directly to the CDU's leader, Chancellor Angela Merkel, demanding that the party leadership bring exclusion proceedings against Grütters unless she resigns her seat immediately.

"In such a large organization as the Catholic Church, the diversity of opinions can and should be equally large," says the Catholic politician. "But the large number of open-minded, future-oriented Catholics and reform-oriented lay people cannot allow themselves to be intimidated by the energetic presence of the conservatives and traditionalists, their level of organization and the ruthlessness of some."

Growing Fear

Jesuit priest Mertes, with whom Grütters is in contact, finds it "tragic that such circles within the Church have been promoted by the hierarchy in recent years, thereby attaining a high institutional legitimacy." Mertes believes that it is high time that the issue be discussed with the bishops and other hierarchies.

Many pastors in Cologne have been trying to do this for years. In early September, five of them met in an apartment in the Ehrenfeld neighborhood. They spent hours discussing their disappointments, the dark power of the clergy, the tone of orders within their diocese and the many taboo subjects. They also talked about the fear that pervades the atmosphere in their church.

Pastor Michael Jung from Meckenheim, on the edge of the Eifel Mountains, was one of the five pastors. In a letter to Cardinal Meisner, he had politely asked for more transparency and dialogue in connection with the upcoming consolidation of parishes. It was apparently a mistake, given that transparency and dialogue are not welcome concepts in the Cologne archdiocese. Only a week after sending the letter, Jung was asked to resign from his position as pastor -- at 41. "There is a growing fear among employees and priests of being shot down," says Jung.

Even trivial matters are sometimes exaggerated in the conservative religious community. Did the priest read the archbishop's pastoral letter out loud, or did he merely offer his interpretation of it? Does he wear sweaters and jeans, or does he consistently wear a priest's collar? In German rectories, and not just in the Cologne archdiocese, self-proclaimed "faith police" use even such minor external details to monitor the purity of doctrine.

Is this today's Catholic Church?

Deep Divide

In the summer of 2010, Munich author Peter Seewald conducted several days' worth of interviews with Benedict, which he turned into a book. "The crisis within the Church is one thing, and the crisis within society is another. The two things are not unconnected," Seewald writes in the preface.

He discusses the illusory worlds of the financial markets, a modern age that is losing its standards, an environmental catastrophe, a fast-paced life that makes people sick, and the universe of the Internet, in which there are still no answers.

These are important issues and debates to which the leader of 1.2 billion Catholics could

contribute. But Pope Benedict's opinion on these subjects is hardly even noticed, because he is too caught up with his battered official church and its purification.

For the book, the pontiff and his interviewer spent hours discussing God and the world at the papal summer residence, Castel Gandolfo, in the summer of 2010. In the end, what made headlines was a slight shift in Benedict's emphasis on the use of condoms. He conceded that perhaps condoms could, after all, be used in rare, strictly defined, exceptional cases. It was yet another sign of the deep divide between the pope and secular society.

'Our Troubles Will Continue'

The disenchanted Catholics are nearing the end of their discussion in the apartment in Cologne's Ehrenfeld neighborhood. They have spent four hours airing their frustrations. None of them expects the pope's visit to yield any new impetus for change.

"For a few days, Benedict's visit will hide the true condition of the Church," says one man. "After that, our troubles will continue."

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Translated from the German by Christopher Sultan

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