

A man of contradictions, Benedict leaves us two very different legacies

By Donna B. Doucette, Voice of the Faithful Executive Director, in *THINK: Opinion, Analysis, Essays, on NBC News*

The pope emeritus took the first strong steps to stop clergy sex abuse, but ultimately prioritized the institution of the church.

A man of contradictions. A pope of colliding centuries. It's as if Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who (was laid to rest Jan. 5, 2023, in Vatican City), has two legacies instead of one.

The theologian Joseph Ratzinger was a significant architect of the theology that informed the doctrines of the Second Vatican Council, a reform effort in the 1960s that brought fresh air to the church by encouraging outreach to other religions, the use of local languages instead of Latin at Mass, support for religious freedom and much more.

Despite this promise and the potential for transparency, Benedict continued the church's centuries-old preference for handling abuse cases privately.

Ratzinger was deemed one of the influential progressives at the council, but as a cardinal starting in 1977 and then as pope from 2005 to 2013, he instead sought to filter the fresh air from the windows opened by the council. Yet that fresh air—including the recognition that the church is the People of God rather than the hierarchical structure alone—is what

opened the path for ordinary lay Catholics to speak up and participate fully in our faith in this century.

As pope, Ratzinger declared in 2008 that Christians should promote a culture giving women, “in law and in everyday life, the dignity that is theirs by right.” But he seemingly ignored that ideal by investigating U.S. nuns for doctrinal purity (the investigations eventually fizzled out), warned women against feminism because it might blur their maternal vocation



(Continued on Page 2)

Synod on Synodality 2021-2024: Continental Stage

We have completed the Diocesan Stage of the Synod on Synodality 2021-2024 and are now in the Continental Stage.

During the Diocesan Stage, the Synod Secretariat received contributions from 112 out of 114 Episcopal Conferences worldwide and from all 15 Oriental Catholic Churches, plus reflections from 17 out of 23 dioceses of the Roman Curia besides those from religious superiors, from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life, and from associations and lay movements of the faithful, including Voice

of the Faithful, which sent its report on its Synod sessions directly to the Secretariat.

From this input, a broadly diverse group in Rome developed the Document for the Continental Stage (DCS) to guide this Stage. Now, each Continental Assembly will develop a discernment process based on the DCS. A Final Document for each Assembly will grow out of this local discernment process and so reflect the Assembly's local context. In preparation for the continental discernment with Canada, for example,

(Continued on Page 3)

A man of contradictions ... *(Continued from Page 1)*

and repeatedly said women could never be priests. That collision of the eras ironically emerged from an institution that elevates motherhood to sanctity while equally insisting that only celibate men (presumably not aspiring to fatherhood) can be worthy of representing Christ as priests.

The contradictions and the clash of ancient (or at least medieval) and modern views did not stop there. Benedict, for example, was the first pope to acknowledge the crimes of clergy sexual abuse and attempt to make amends institutionally. He removed, in the estimation of some, hundreds of priests who had abused children. He also met face to face with some of the abused in the U.S. during his 2008 visit—a visit after which he spoke of the need for a more transparent Catholic Church, which (coincidentally, I assume) echoed the call for transparency and accountability that my own organization, Voice of the Faithful, published in an ad greeting him on that visit.

But despite this promise and the potential for transparency, Benedict continued the church's centuries-old preference for handling abuse cases privately, stopping far short of the reforms that could effectively protect against future abuse.

Voice of the Faithful organized in 2002 in response to the astounding revelations of child sex abuse by clergy in the Boston diocese. We quickly grew to a worldwide presence as the scope of the clergy abuse problem became apparent. Standing on the White House lawn when Benedict visited in 2008 and hearing his words over the course of the entire U.S. visit gave us hope that at last someone in the Vatican “got it,” that abuse now would be addressed forthrightly across the global Catholic Church.

But despite this promise and the potential for transparency, Benedict continued the church's centuries-old preference for handling abuse cases privately, stopping far short of the reforms that could effectively protect against future abuse—reforms such as directing bishops to publish lists of abusers, requiring every diocese to establish and implement clear reporting channels for those who had been abused and requiring “safe environment” committees in every diocese and parish. He failed to hold bishops accountable publicly (and perhaps not at all) for covering up these crimes. Worse, it appears that as a diocesan bishop, he, too, failed to protect children from further abuse, a failing for which he apologized shortly before his death.

Sadly, it did not surprise me that as bishop he may have covered up some of the same crimes other bishops failed to address. The propensity to try to protect the institution at all costs, even when that cost is an abused child, has too often governed the actions of bishops. Even with newly declared policies that direct bishops to report all abuse, there are huge lapses.

During his papacy, Benedict also sought to bring extremist, schism-minded traditionalists closer to the center by relaxing certain restrictions: allowing greater freedom to say Mass in Latin, for example, and striving to bring the Lefevrist sect back to communion with the church. This openness allowed further rifts that devolve even today into either/or attacks by Catholics upon other Catholics.

The contradictions and collisions are perhaps intrinsically Catholic. We often are reminded that, as Catholics, our perspective should not be “either/or” but rather “both/and.” Both faith and reason. Both doctrinal teachings and individual conscience. Both communal worship and private prayer. So perhaps the contradictions in Benedict's life are simply his version of both/and in action.

As a woman who grew up mostly in the pre-Vatican II church but has spent her adult life learning from and living her faith after Vatican II, I can thank Benedict XVI for the theology he contributed to those reforms. I can appreciate his spiritual writings and recognize that for many he was a valued and honored teacher.

I can also decry his failures to fully address the sex abuse of children by clergy, wonder why no one gave him a good recent book about gender and ask how a scholar such as him could ignore the case for female deacons. Numerous books and articles by biblical scholars and researchers find evidence that female deacons were ordained well into the 12th century. Their history is one of being gradually removed from performing diaconal duties, not one of never having been ordained. Surely a scholar such as Benedict knew of these works.

Mostly, however, I will appreciate the path we now can follow because Benedict served the church at Vatican II, helping open our minds and hearts to a path for the whole People of God: laity, religious and clergy. My voice now rises with those of other laypeople to participate, to lead, to admonish, to seek advice, to follow Christ on my own unique path—which is as sacred (and as mundane) as the paths of all other People of God.

(Continued on Page 3)

A man of contradictions ... (Continued from Page 2)

Perhaps, using the contradictions and collisions of Benedict's work, the Spirit has set in motion the 21st century path of the Catholic Church, which Pope Francis is calling us to embrace: synodality. The antithesis of the encrusted hierarchical institution Benedict sought to protect, a synodal church recaptures the way of being a church modeled for us by Jesus and by the apostles. The both/and, the contradictions and collisions, of Benedict's papacy opened pathways he perhaps did not see, but they are as much a part of his legacy as those he tried intentionally to lay down.

Maybe that is a last contradiction, that a figure seen as traditionalist and conservative more than 50 years ago provided the stones for the current path toward synodality and a Catholic Church for the 21st century.

This story is reprinted by permission of NBC News. Subscribe to the THINK newsletter at nbcnews.com/think and ReTHINK the news cycle with timely op-eds, in-depth analyses and personal essays delivered weekly to your inbox.

Synod on Synodality 2021-2024 (Continued from Page 1)

the USCCB is consulting with those who participated in the Diocesan phase for reactions to the DCS.

Voice of the Faithful was invited to participate in the U.S. national Synod discussion for the Continental Stage through the USCCB Synod Team. VOTF held several listening sessions and synthesized the results to provide input at the USCCB's Synod Team's meeting in February 2023.

The DCS, therefore, is the document through which the dialogue of the local Churches, among themselves and with the universal Church, is taking place during the Continental Stage. To pursue this process of listening, dialogue and discernment, the participants in the Continental Stage are reflecting on three questions:

How does this 'journeying together' allow the Church to proclaim the Gospel in accordance with the mission entrusted

to Her; and what steps does the Spirit invite us to take

in order to grow as a synodal Church? (Preparatory Doc., no. 2)

- After having read and prayed with the DCS, which intuitions resonate most strongly with the lived experiences and realities of the Church in your continent? Which experiences are new, or illuminating to you?
- After having read and prayed with the DCS, what substantial tensions or divergences emerge as particularly important in your continent's perspective? Consequently, what are the questions or issues that should be addressed and considered in the next steps of the process?
- Looking at what emerges from the previous two questions, what are the priorities, recurring themes and calls

to action that can be shared with other local Churches around the world and discussed during the First Session of the Synodal Assembly in October 2023?

The DCS defines itself as a "profound re-appropriation of the common dignity of all the baptized. This is the authentic pillar of a synodal Church and the theological foundation

of a unity which is capable of resisting the push toward homogenization. This enables us to continue to promote and make good use of the variety of charisms that the Spirit with unpredictable abundance pours out on the faithful."

While the DCS represents the global participation of the People of God from throughout the world during the Synod's Diocesan Phase, the Final Documents of the seven Continental Assemblies will be used to draft the *Instrumentum Laboris*, which will be completed by June 2023 and used as the working document at the first of two sessions of the XVI General Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held in Rome October 4-29, 2023.

A copy of the DCS is available to read or download, along with many other Synod resources, by visiting the Synod 2021-2024 page on VOTF's website, votf.org. The Synod page link is under the Programs menu at the top of the homepage.



Planned giving: the gift that continues

Consider a planned gift and secure the mission of Voice of the Faithful

A planned gift is a gift created by you and your professional advisor. Planned gifts often provide financial and/or tax benefits for you and your family and help guarantee the long-term financial security of one or more charitable institutions about which you care. As you put your estate plans in order, we hope you will consider including a gift to Voice of the Faithful. Your gift can create extraordinary opportunities and secure our mission.

Among the several types of planned giving are: Outright Bequests, Residual Bequests, Policy Beneficiary, and Funding with Assets.

One of the simplest and most popular ways to support charitable institutions is through a bequest in your will or a provision in your living trust. Bequests cost nothing now but may give you a great deal of satisfaction because you know that your future gift will help sustain VOTF. A bequest can be a specific amount, a percentage of your estate, or a particular piece of property. The value is generally deductible from the estate of the donor. Bequests are simple and flexible—you can change your mind at any time.

***God wants each of us to be good stewards:
after all, everything we have is really God's.***

If you have questions or would like more information about these types of planned giving, contact VOTF Trustee Margaret Roylance at mroylance@votf.org, or call (781) 559-3360. Here is some general advice.

Outright Bequests

To make an outright bequest to VOTF, you designate in your will a specific asset or amount of money you wish to bequeath. The following language is a sample of an outright bequest: “I give and bequeath [asset description/cash amount] to Voice of the Faithful for its general charitable purposes.”

Residual Bequests

To make a residual bequest to VOTF, you designate in your will a percentage of the remaining value of your estate after

all outright bequests have been made. The following language is a sample of a residual bequest: “I give and bequeath [asset description / cash amount] to VOTF for its general charitable purposes.”

Account or Policy Beneficiary

You also can make VOTF a beneficiary of your retirement account or life insurance policy:

- Your retirement plan account (IRA, 401k or 403b) can pass directly to a charitable organization as your primary beneficiary, or it can be transferred to a deferred giving arrangement that will pay an income for life to a family member, after which the remaining assets pass to the organization. You might even consider a deferred gift that is designed to pay a life income to you.
- Gifts of life insurance can be made to VOTF. Donors also may purchase an insurance policy with VOTF as the owner and sole beneficiary. All premiums paid by a donor are tax-deductible.

Funding with Assets

Many types of assets can be used to fund a charitable or planned gift. These include cash, appreciated securities, real estate, personal property, IRAs/Retirement Plans, life insurance, and other assets. Gifts for general charitable purposes are most helpful in giving VOTF leaders the flexibility to apply the funds where they are needed most. However, it also is possible to designate your gift for a particular purpose consistent with the mission and strategic priorities of VOTF.

Please let us know if you have made charitable plans for VOTF, so we may acknowledge your generosity and commitment to our mission.

Today, through the generosity of many like you, VOTF strives to model the behavior that we ask from our Church: centered in Christ, open to the gifts of all, inclusive and loving towards all, accountable to all members, and transparent in actions.

Donate to VOTF

VOICE
OF THE FAITHFUL

Keep the Faith, Change the Church

P.O. Box 920408, Needham, MA 02492
781-559-3360, Fax 781-559-3364, www.votf.org

Voice of the Faithful® is a worldwide organization of Roman Catholics working to provide a prayerful voice, attentive to the Spirit, through which the faithful can participate actively in the governance and guidance of the Catholic Church. We support survivors of clergy sexual abuse, support priests of integrity, and work to help shape structural change in the Church.

KEEP UP-TO-DATE — Sign up to receive our free *In the Vineyard* e-newsletter at www.votf.org.