

The publication of an autobiography (of sorts), with its ominous title, has come as a surprise. Benedict has often lamented over his papal nomination; he'd planned to retire and dedicate himself to writing. Even as far back as 1995, when Prefect for the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith, he had petitioned John Paul II several times to accept his resignation. Yet since retiring the papacy in 2013, his theological magnum opus hasn't materialised, and nor will it. Asked by Peter Seewald, the co-author of *Last Testament*, if there's more writing to come: "No! No, no, I knew after Christmas: this is *Nunc dimittis*; I have done my work." There are, however, diaries and 30,000 letters which he claims to be disposing of, as their publication would be, he predicts correctly, 'A field day for the historians.'



Like most popes, Benedict XVI caused his fair share of controversy during his papal reign: 'highlights' include quoting Byzantine emperor Manuel II Palaiologos, that Muhammad spread Islam through violence (one has to ask who, if anyone, was in charge of papal PR at the time); stating that gay people are "ordered towards an inherent moral evil", and welcoming back into the fold the previously excommunicated holocaust denier Bishop Richard Williamson. These controversies, and others - the Vatileaks scandal, his handling of clerical sexual abuse, and the 'gay lobby', are all addressed in the book. However, if you're expecting revelations, you'll be

disappointed. In most cases, the pope simply denies any wrongdoing on his part or claims he had no knowledge of the workings of a 'filthy church.'

The issues for which Benedict has received most criticism are treated lightly, both in Seewald's questioning and Benedict's responses. In both instances where the clerical child sex abuse scandal is discussed, Benedict reiterates his non-involvement in alleged coverups and focuses on his efforts to deal with the accused. The mention of the abuse scandal falls between two questions concerning Benedict's reinstatement of the Tridentine Mass, the traditional liturgy relegated, to some controversy, during the Second Vatican Council (October 1962 - December 1965). The abuse scandal's placement, wedged between a discussion of the liturgy, perhaps demonstrates Benedict's difficulties: comfortable with discussions and debates surrounding liturgical and doctrinal minutiae, he struggled with the reality of governing a worldwide church strangled by crisis and shedding its moral authority. The former was easier for him to understand and confront.

Seewald questions the Pope about 'Vatileaks', the theft of internal Vatican documents by the pope's butler, Paolo Gabriele:

*[Seewald] Like your name patron, St. Benedict, you were also confronted with a 'raven', as someone referred to your servant, Paolo Gabriele, the thief of confidential files from your closest surroundings. How hard did this story hit you?*

*[Pope Benedict] Not hard enough for me to collapse into some kind of despair or world-weariness, at least. It was simply unintelligible to me. Even when I see the person I can't understand how someone would want to do something like that. What can have been expected from it. I cannot penetrate this psychology.*

This statement betrays the skewed priority of the Vatican at the time: that the Church, as an institution, must be protected at all costs. What Gabriele's leak revealed was a Church beset by egotism, careerism and infighting. Unfortunately for the Vatican, it is no longer immune to the demand for institutions of power to be transparent. This transparency can either be voluntary or acquired by force through the media and the internet. 'What can have been expected from it' was obvious: shaming the Church into reform. The leak was successful in this regard; the Vatican began a process of financial reform which continues under Pope Francis. I doubt such reform would have been a top priority for the Vatican had it not been made public. It is worrying that Benedict could not 'penetrate this psychology' - it is the psychology of a believer who, with

no influence despite his proximity to the seat of power, felt he had to expose the Church to enact change.

One of the successes of the book (perhaps one of its aims) is giving a certain humanity to a man once labelled 'God's Rottweiler' and whose shepherding always seemed at a distance from his flock. Seewald notes that the "[pope laughs]" 59 times and occasionally "chuckles." The Pope mentions his dislike for cufflinks ("I had great difficulty with the cufflinks. They even got me quite annoyed, so I thought that whoever invented them must be in the depths of Purgatory. [Laughs]" and his interior design choices (he's not a fan of carpets). He also mentions that for Christmas he has asked for a recording of Bach's B Minor Mass from his brother Georg (also a catholic priest) and that his mother was an illegitimate child. His occasional outbursts reveal his ordinary human nature: when asked about dissenting theologian Hans Kung, "Well, I had made the naive assessment that Kung had a big mouth...but fundamentally wanted to be a Catholic theologian" or the indologist Paul Hacker, "He was a big head, an enormous head."

However, there's always the sense that the Pope is holding back. When Seewald asks about well-known controversies or crises, the pope often claims that the story was exaggerated, that he had little or no knowledge of the matter or that he simply wasn't to blame. Similarly, his response to possible tension or conflict with other church officials is always downplayed, as if the revelations of the inner-workings of the Church were entirely false, and that Vatican cardinals exist in a state of harmony and fraternal bliss. However, he does admit that as Cardinal of the CDF (Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith):

*It [clerical abuse] was involved. But I thought of so many things. As Cardinal of the CDF one hears of so many things, because all the scandals arrive there, so one really needs a strong soul in order to bear everything. One always knows that filthy things are going on in the Church, but what one has to stomach as head of the CDF is really very far-reaching, and in that connection I simply wanted to pray to the Lord himself, so he helps us.*

It's unclear whether the Lord rolled up his sleeves and got involved. Despite knowledge of scandals in the Church, including child abuse, it wasn't until his own pontificate that Benedict began to dismiss large number of priests (he puts the number at 'around 400') or at least to do so publicly. Why did he wait so long before taking substantial action? One also has to ask that with his numerous resignation attempts during his time in charge of the CDF, was he even the right person to be dealing with such important, destructive issues?



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Benedict's resignation is discussed at length. It shocked the world but not Benedict himself, "There was no internal struggle...having to examine yourself before God and before yourself; that took place, yes, but not in the sense that it tore me to pieces." Seewald asks Benedict if the papacy has been secularized by the resignation, but the pope doesn't give a straight answer. More striking is Seewald's mention of the work of Cardinal Reginald Pole, for whom 'the cross is the authentic place of the representative of Christ. There is a martyrological structure of the papal primacy.' In other words, a pope must sacrifice himself to the office, bearing witness to Christ's passion in his own life. Benedict believes, unlike his predecessor, that this martyrdom should not be at the expense of the pope himself:

*It is certainly enduringly true, and thus the Pope must each day bear witness, must take up his cross each day and always be a martyr, in the sense of being a martyr to the sufferings of the world...If a pope were only ever applauded, he would have to ask himself whether or not he was doing things right...There will always be opposition, and the Pope must be a sign of contradiction. This is a criterion which concerns him. That doesn't mean, however, that he must die by the sword.*

One has to suggest that a certain humanity is now vital for a modern papacy, something that Pope Francis and his team are well aware of. What the papacy may have lost in terms of transcendence and mystery through Benedict's resignation, it has gained in human vulnerability, a coming nearer to the people.

Perhaps the most striking omission in *Last Testament* is that of any substantial theological insight or commentary. Although the book is pitched as a biography, for a man who spent his life before the papacy as a star of academic theology and the keeper of orthodoxy, it's surprising that his final publication is theology-free. Is this omission simply a symptom of Benedict's age and fatigue or does it represent a cooling of the theological fire that fuelled his life and vocation until now? Perhaps both are at play.

Benedict's pontificate now seems odd, parenthesised as he is between the tarmac-kissing, jet-setting John Paul II and the media-dream and ex-nightclub bouncer Pope Francis. Benedict is a pope who admits 'practical governance is not my thing', and who compared to his predecessor and successor, 'had a different sort of charisma, or rather a non-charisma.' I doubt we'll see another remote, intellectual pope anytime soon. Francis and his advisors learnt their lesson from Benedict's PR mishaps. With Francis there has been a move away from Benedict's scholarly pronouncements, always vulnerable to context in a world in which few actually read past headlines.

*Last Testament* reveals a man's shortcomings, his seemingly life-long physical frailty, and his reluctance to accept his papal nomination (whether or not it was the will of the Lord.) We meet a pope relieved to have relinquished the office, and the burden, of St. Peter's chair. The book is a sigh of relief by someone who certainly isn't missing the perks, or the perfidy, of his old job.