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## Four years of Pope Benedict XVI

by Richard McBrien

Essays in Theology

On April 19 Pope Benedict XVI marked his fourth year in the papacy. Three days earlier, he had turned 82. At age 78, Joseph Ratzinger was the oldest person elected to the papacy since Clement XII in 1730.

Just to gain some historical perspective on that, Clement's election was 46 years before the U.S. Declaration of Independence, almost 60 years before George Washington's own election as the first President of the United States, and 63 years before the beginning of the French Revolution.

In an article by the Vatican correspondent for the Rome newspaper *La Repubblica*, Marco Politi suggests that Benedict XVI's pontificate has now been broken into two halves: before and after the storm created by the Pope's lifting of the excommunications from the four bishops of the Society of St. Pius X, including the Holocaust denier, Richard Williamson. (For the English translation, see "The Church's new age of dissent," *The Tablet*, 3/21/09.)

Politi notes that the controversy has disclosed serious tensions between the central government in the Vatican and important bishops from the Northern Hemisphere.

He writes: "Reading between the lines of the bishops' messages of solidarity to the Pope," following the release of his letter of explanation and apology to the worldwide episcopate, "there are requests that he change his style of government."

Thus, his fellow German bishops professed themselves delighted with the Pope's expressed desire to "enter into dialogue with the bishops (signalling that thus far this has not happened)." There were similar messages from the bishops of France, where the Society of St. Pius X has its largest membership.

‘But it is the Austrian bishops who delivered the most strongly worded message,’ Politi writes. They pointed out to the Pope that he is not the only one suffering from the consequences of the controversy, but that this pain has also been endured ‘by many local churches and people outside the Church.’

Politi asks: ‘Did it make sense to revoke the excommunications without any statement of faithful adherence to the Second Vatican Council on the very day that marked the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John XXIII’s decision to call the council? Did it make sense to insist on pardoning the Holocaust-denying Bishop Richard Williamson in the very week dedicated to the memory of the Shoah?’

Some explain the indelicate timing on the poor advice that the Pope had received from his associates. But Politi points out that the Vatican decree lifting the excommunications had been leaked to the press 48 hours before its official publication, and immediately thereafter Bishop Williamson’s interview with Swedish television was disclosed.

The Pope and his aides had two days in which to block the publication of the decree, but chose not to.

There was a similarly ignored warning in 2005. Several hours before the Pope was to deliver his now-famous lecture at Regensburg University, in which he quoted the anti-Islamic words of a distant Byzantine emperor, a group of journalists who had received an advance copy of the lecture advised the Vatican spokesman, Father Federico Lombardi, S.J., that the talk would cause problems with the Muslims.

‘No one can doubt,’ Politi writes, ‘that Fr Lombardi informed his superiors. Above all, it is well known in the Vatican that Cardinal Angelo Sodano warned the Pope of the risks he was taking with his lecture. Yet Benedict XVI went ahead, with the consequence that he had to express many times his regret to the representatives of Islam.’

Politi notes that the controversy surrounding the lifting of the excommunications is ‘the first real crisis’ of Benedict’s pontificate. In previous years, Politi observes, the crises were always outside the Church. ‘But this time the crisis exploded ‘inside’ the Church and the fact that emerges clearly is that the bishops have denounced the absence of collegiality in the government of Pope Benedict.’

The Pope was fully aware that a majority of the Cardinals whom he had convened in Rome in March 2006 insisted that the Pius X bishops should express a ‘faithful adherence to Vatican II’ as a condition of lifting the excommunications. The Pope chose to ignore their views, went ahead with the decree, and created a firestorm as a result.

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He had done essentially the same thing, again without consultation, in granting permission for the Latin Mass without approval from local bishops. Earlier this year he had to withdraw the nomination of an auxiliary bishop in Austria because the national conference of Austrian bishops demanded it.

Marco Politi notes that there are now 'ominous rumblings' within the hierarchy, 'as under a volcano.'  
Can the Pope and his advisers simply ignore them?

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Theology at the University of Notre Dame.

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