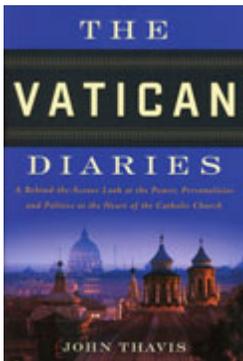


## A quest for the real Benedict

John Wilkins With excerpt | Mar. 6, 2013



THE VATICAN DIARIES: A BEHIND-THE-SCENES LOOK AT THE POWER, PERSONALITIES AND POLITICS AT THE HEART OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

By John Thavis

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A pope resigns. What is one to think? A useful start is John Thavis' just published *The Vatican Diaries* in which Thavis goes on a quest for "the real Benedict." Thavis, for almost 30 years the Catholic News Service chief in Rome, recounts how journalists have tried and tried again to encapsulate Pope Benedict XVI in a sound bite. Each time he escaped them. After his homecoming visit to Bavaria, Germany, in 2006, they were in despair. Thavis reports they felt they had been in a "pious bubble" for six days in which the pope did and said nothing. How could they write about that?

Some of Benedict's hard-line supporters were equally at a loss. They had expected a "Benedict the Bold" who could launch stern disciplinary moves and a liturgical restoration. But this image never stuck. Nor could anyone compare Benedict, as pope, to a German panzer (an earlier tagline, meaning a German tank).

True, in 2007 he removed almost all restrictions on celebration of the Tridentine rite. But Thavis points out that this could in fact work against the ultra-traditionalists, since it removed from the rite its exclusive cult status. Nor, the author adds, is the pope himself an ardent advocate of the rite. Well, perhaps. The jury is still out on that.

Then came the challenge to Islam in the pope's lecture at the University of Regensburg, Germany, in 2006. This was "Benedict the Crusader," the journalists decided. But that image did not survive his subsequent peacemaking visit to Turkey.

Journalists also had difficulty in pinning down Benedict's complex role in the clerical sexual abuse crisis that overshadowed his papacy and erupted afresh in 2010. Had he been the quiet voice of conscience behind the scenes? Or part of the problem? Was he expressing shame on behalf of the church but doing nothing to reform the clerical structures because he saw no need? There is evidence on both sides, which Thavis deploys, but rightly he gives weight to the second option.

Thavis opens his diaries by countering the common view of the Vatican as a unified machine grinding inexorably forward. That is a misperception. Rather, the Vatican is an extraordinary collection of empires that not infrequently act out of turn, staffed by men who run the entire gamut of humanity. At the top, huge egos clash and plan and plot; lower down in the pecking order, subordinates go their own checkered way.

It is a walled city full of characters, none more so than the American Carmelite Reginald Foster, until recently supreme Latinist, translator of reams of papal output. Thavis' favorite Foster nugget, apropos a John Paul II document on St. Joseph: "My God, the pope thinks Mary and Joseph never had sex! They could have had their marriage annulled!?"

Chapter by chapter, from "Sex" and condoms to "Hemlines and Banana Peels" to the "crusade" to canonize Pope Pius XII, Thavis alternates between light and heavy. A reporter respectable in suit and tie, he knows everyone in Rome and everyone knows him, including the source he calls "the Warbler." He can reach the parts that others cannot. In places I laughed aloud. He has a delicious description, for example, of the tug of war that ensued when the bulldozers excavating for a new underground Vatican car park came upon a 2,000-year-old necropolis. Which would win, the bones and artifacts or the parking places for cardinals?

He confesses to an "intense fear of flying" but this did not stop him from accompanying John Paul and Benedict on their trips abroad. In Syria in 2001 he and the CNN correspondent were "with the pope in Damascus" when John Paul made the first papal visit to a mosque. In fact, excluded by the security guards, they were down a side street viewing the scene on a black-and-white television screen in a shop that sold household goods.

Thavis was there in Washington in 2008 when Benedict made his first visit to the United States. The pope arrived at the White House for the sort of celebration of his 81st birthday that only Americans could offer. In his address, he reflected on the founding fathers and moral values. "Thank you, Your Holiness!?" exulted an enthused President George W. Bush, leaping to his feet. "Awesome speech!?"

By contrast, Thavis' chapter on "Nuestro Padre," the fraudulent and corrupt pedophile Mexican priest Marcial Maciel Degollado, is amazing and frightening. The story of the founder of the Legionaries of Christ, favored by the Vatican and John Paul II because his order attracted record numbers of candidates for the priesthood as well as huge inflows of money, is by now mostly well-known. But the ethical question remains: How was it possible for a transgressor like this to advance so far in the church? Thavis marshals the facts in masterly fashion to deliver blow after blow, culminating in Maciel's appalling deathbed scene.

The book succeeds well in presenting the Roman Curia as a flesh-and-blood community, a byzantine theater of the sacred. Perhaps Thavis might just have found some space for the spark of truth that lies behind the caricature of a ruthless machine. A top theologian hauled before the Vatican's doctrinal congregation would have no reason to anticipate a tea party. After one such visit in 1984, for instance, the Brazilian liberation theologian Leonardo Boff came back from Rome through London, where he stayed with a friend of mine. When Boff came through the door, he collapsed in a chair and wept for half an hour.

Many a high-ranking prelate could have done the same. This is a civil service that knows all about cruelly freezing you out if you are not in favor. "When I go there," said Cardinal Carlo Martini, "I come up against a brick wall."

The Second Vatican Council has only a walk-on part in this book, and Thavis makes a surprising error when he misquotes Benedict's 2005 address to the Roman Curia on how to interpret its work. Back in 1985, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger had said that the Vatican II documents "do nothing but reaffirm the continuity of Catholicism." There were "no fractures," he said. Really? Now in 2005 Benedict advanced a revision of his

position. Thavis says he contrasted a "hermeneutic" (interpretative principle) of "rupture" (bad) with a "hermeneutic of continuity" (good). But Benedict did not say that. He contrasted "rupture" (bad) with "reform" (good). Reform! That had long been a suspect category in Catholic eyes, yet here was the pope affirming it. The door is still ajar.

Thavis' own nearest glimpse of "the real Benedict" comes during the pope's visit to Bavaria, where his speeches were "as flat as stale beer." On the final day, however, the conviction in his voice rings out as he dedicates a new chapel organ in Regensburg. This is an instrument "superior to all others," the pope declares. Then he sits back as the music of Bach sounds from the pipes. Here he is safe. Here mathematics and beauty meet in heavenly harmony, away from the messiness of the modern world, watering the soul with truth and certainty. Benedict sees himself, Thavis believes, as the maestro of faith. It is a tender touch with which to end this book.

[John Wilkins is the former editor of *The Tablet*.]

### **Informal encounters and backdoor conversations**

*The following is an excerpt from The Vatican Diaries: A Behind-the-Scenes Look at the Power, Personalities and Politics at the Heart of the Catholic Church by John Thavis. Copyright Viking/Penguin, published with permission.*

When I began covering the Vatican for Catholic News Service (CNS), in the early 1980s, I was stunned by the lack of coordination among Roman Curia offices and the haphazard way information was made public -- more often in a maze of rumor and innuendo than through official channels. Eventually I came to appreciate the opportunities afforded by such ambiguity. Because the atmosphere within the Vatican is more medieval village than corporate headquarters, I found myself working more effectively through informal encounters and backdoor conversations. My sources ran the gamut from top Vatican diplomats to the ushers in St. Peter's Basilica -- once they came to know and trust you, they all talked. ?

I had a few other places to visit. ? The first was the main convent of the Religious Teachers Filippini where nuns had hidden more than 60 Jewish women and children during World War II. It's a large four-story building on Via delle Botteghe Oscure, adjacent to the old Jewish ghetto. ? I had no appointment but was met at the door by the black-bonneted Sister Carmella. I explained I had heard about the Jewish families that had been concealed here, and wondered if there was anything to see. ?

Eighty-year-old Sister Teresa took me to a third-floor vestibule, where we stood in front of a plaster statue of Mary. The statue, she said, had been a gift of the Jews who had survived the war here. ?It seems a little strange that they would choose the figure of Mary, since the Jews don't believe in that. But you see, they knew we would like it,? she said. ?

She led me down to the ground floor and across a courtyard, explaining cheerfully that she had not yet entered the convent during the war but had heard the stories from the older nuns. We entered a kitchen, at one side of which was a door leading to the cellar. A fluorescent light buzzed to life and we descended to a gray concrete labyrinth of underground chambers. It looked like a modern catacomb. It was here that the Jews had stayed, many of them for more than a year during the period 1943-44. Keeping them safe was not so simple, Sister Teresa told me. They had to be fed, and spies in fascist Rome were always on the lookout for anyone buying an excessive amount of food. So the nuns would go out one by one every day to different parts of the city to buy the extra groceries.

One day Nazi soldiers had come to the complex and began banging on the front door with their rifles. The nuns inside feared the worst, and gathered to pray around a statue of St. Joseph Labre ? known as the beggar saint, [who] had lived a life of poverty and devotion on the streets of Rome, surviving from charity and sharing what he had with others. Every morning he would come to this same Filippini convent for a bowl of soup. ?

As she led me out, the nun mentioned that a Jewish baby girl hidden in the convent?s basement now ran a shop a block away. Intrigued ? I soon found my way to the tiny children?s clothing store where Ornella della Torre was sitting behind a computer. Yes, she told me, she was the one saved by the nuns? generosity. She remembered nothing firsthand because she was only an 18-month-old infant at the time, but the details had been told to her many times.

At dawn on Oct. 19, 1943, Nazi troops swept through the neighborhood, going house to house and rounding up Jewish men, women and children. Ornella?s mother, then 25, grabbed her baby daughter and slipped into the back alleys before the soldiers reached her apartment. They lived on the street for a while until they heard from others that the Filippini convent had become a safe haven. The nuns took them in and harbored them. Ornella spoke affectionately of the sisters and admired them for putting themselves at risk to save others.

As for Pope Pius XII, she said it was likely he knew and approved the fact that Rome?s religious house was hiding so many Jews. ?But,? she said, and paused to choose her words carefully, ?he?s an ambiguous figure for me. ? The question is whether he could have done more. Maybe he could have.?

Do you think he was a saint? I asked. ?Oh no! Other popes, perhaps, not him,? she said, reaching inside an accounts book to pull out a large color photo of Pope John Paul II, who had visited the Roman synagogue in 1986. ?You don?t know how much I like this pope,? she said. ?But for me, when it comes to Pius XII, that question mark remains.?

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