

An Open Letter from Dr Hans Küng to the Catholic Bishops of the World

Fri, Apr 16, 2010

VENERABLE BISHOPS,

Joseph Ratzinger, now Pope Benedict XVI, and I were the youngest theologians at the Second Vatican Council from 1962 to 1965. Now we are the oldest and the only ones still fully active. I have always understood my theological work as a service to the Roman Catholic Church. For this reason, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of the election of Pope Benedict XVI, I am making this appeal to you in an open letter. In doing so, I am motivated by my profound concern for our church, which now finds itself in the worst credibility crisis since the Reformation. Please excuse the form of an open letter; unfortunately, I have no other way of reaching you.

I deeply appreciated that the pope invited me, his outspoken critic, to meet for a friendly, four-hour-long conversation shortly after he took office. This awakened in me the hope that my former colleague at Tübingen University might find his way to promote an ongoing renewal of the church and an ecumenical rapprochement in the spirit of the Second Vatican Council.

Unfortunately, my hopes and those of so many engaged Catholic men and women have not been fulfilled. And in my subsequent correspondence with the pope, I have pointed this out to him many times. Without a doubt, he conscientiously performs his everyday duties as pope, and he has given us three helpful encyclicals on faith, hope and charity. But when it comes to facing the major challenges of our times, his pontificate has increasingly passed up more opportunities than it has taken:

Missed is the opportunity for rapprochement with the Protestant churches: Instead, they have been denied the status of churches in the proper sense of the term and, for that reason, their ministries are not recognized and intercommunion is not possible.

Missed is the opportunity for the long-term reconciliation with the Jews: Instead the pope has reintroduced into the liturgy a preconciliar prayer for the enlightenment of the Jews, he has taken notoriously anti-Semitic and schismatic bishops back into communion with the church, and he is actively promoting the beatification of Pope Pius XII, who has been accused of not offering sufficient protections to Jews in Nazi Germany.

The fact is, Benedict sees in Judaism only the historic root of Christianity; he does not take it seriously as an ongoing religious community offering its own path to salvation. The recent comparison of the current criticism faced by the pope with anti-Semitic hate campaigns – made by Rev Raniero Cantalamessa during an official Good Friday service at the Vatican – has stirred up a storm of indignation among Jews around the world.

Missed is the opportunity for a dialogue with Muslims in an atmosphere of mutual trust: Instead, in his ill-advised but symptomatic 2006 Regensburg lecture, Benedict caricatured Islam as a religion of violence and inhumanity and thus evoked enduring Muslim mistrust.

Missed is the opportunity for reconciliation with the colonised indigenous peoples of Latin America: Instead, the pope asserted in all seriousness that they had been “longing” for the religion of their European conquerors.

Missed is the opportunity to help the people of Africa by allowing the use of birth control to fight overpopulation and condoms to fight the spread of HIV.

Missed is the opportunity to make peace with modern science by clearly affirming the theory of evolution and accepting stem-cell research.

Missed is the opportunity to make the spirit of the Second Vatican Council the compass for the whole Catholic Church, including the Vatican itself, and thus to promote the needed reforms in the church.

This last point, respected bishops, is the most serious of all. Time and again, this pope has added qualifications to the conciliar texts and interpreted them against the spirit of the council fathers. Time and again, he has taken an express stand against the Ecumenical Council, which according to canon law represents the highest authority in the Catholic Church:

He has taken the bishops of the traditionalist Pius X Society back into the church without any preconditions – bishops who were illegally consecrated outside the Catholic Church and who reject central points of the Second Vatican Council (including liturgical reform, freedom of religion and the rapprochement with Judaism).

He promotes the medieval Tridentine Mass by all possible means and occasionally celebrates the Eucharist in Latin with his back to the congregation.

He refuses to put into effect the rapprochement with the Anglican Church, which was laid out in official ecumenical documents by the Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission, and has attempted instead to lure married Anglican clergy into the Roman Catholic Church by freeing them from the very rule of celibacy that has forced tens of thousands of Roman Catholic priests out of office.

He has actively reinforced the anti-conciliar forces in the church by appointing reactionary officials to key offices in the Curia (including the secretariat of state, and positions in the liturgical commission) while appointing reactionary bishops around the world.

Pope Benedict XVI seems to be increasingly cut off from the vast majority of church members who pay less and less heed to Rome and, at best, identify themselves only with their local parish and bishop.

I know that many of you are pained by this situation. In his anti-conciliar policy, the pope receives the full support of the Roman Curia. The Curia does its best to stifle criticism in the episcopate and in the church as a whole and to discredit critics with all the means at its disposal. With a return to pomp and spectacle catching the attention of the media, the reactionary forces in Rome have attempted to present us with a strong church fronted by an absolutistic “Vicar of Christ” who combines the church’s legislative, executive and judicial powers in his hands alone. But Benedict’s policy of restoration has failed. All of his spectacular appearances, demonstrative journeys and public statements have failed to influence the opinions of most Catholics on controversial issues. This is especially true

regarding matters of sexual morality. Even the papal youth meetings, attended above all by conservative-charismatic groups, have failed to hold back the steady drain of those leaving the church or to attract more vocations to the priesthood.

You in particular, as bishops, have reason for deep sorrow: Tens of thousands of priests have resigned their office since the Second Vatican Council, for the most part because of the celibacy rule. Vocations to the priesthood, but also to religious orders, sisterhoods and lay brotherhoods are down – not just quantitatively but qualitatively. Resignation and frustration are spreading rapidly among both the clergy and the active laity. Many feel that they have been left in the lurch with their personal needs, and many are in deep distress over the state of the church. In many of your dioceses, it is the same story: increasingly empty churches, empty seminaries and empty rectories. In many countries, due to the lack of priests, more and more parishes are being merged, often against the will of their members, into ever larger “pastoral units,” in which the few surviving pastors are completely overtaxed. This is church reform in pretense rather than fact!

And now, on top of these many crises comes a scandal crying out to heaven – the revelation of the clerical abuse of thousands of children and adolescents, first in the United States, then in Ireland and now in Germany and other countries. And to make matters worse, the handling of these cases has given rise to an unprecedented leadership crisis and a collapse of trust in church leadership.

There is no denying the fact that the worldwide system of covering up cases of sexual crimes committed by clerics was engineered by the Roman Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith under Cardinal Ratzinger (1981-2005). During the reign of Pope John Paul II, that congregation had already taken charge of all such cases under oath of strictest silence. Ratzinger himself, on May 18th, 2001, sent a solemn document to all the bishops dealing with severe crimes (“*epistula de delictis gravioribus*”), in which cases of abuse were sealed under the “*secretum pontificium*”, the violation of which could entail grave ecclesiastical penalties. With good reason, therefore, many people have expected a personal *mea culpa* on the part of the former prefect and current pope. Instead, the pope passed up the opportunity afforded by Holy Week: On Easter Sunday, he had his innocence proclaimed “*urbi et orbi*” by the dean of the College of Cardinals.

The consequences of all these scandals for the reputation of the Catholic Church are disastrous. Important church leaders have already admitted this. Numerous innocent and committed pastors and educators are suffering under the stigma of suspicion now blanketing the church. You, reverend bishops, must face up to the question: What will happen to our church and to your diocese in the future? It is not my intention to sketch out a new program of church reform. That I have done often enough both before and after the council. Instead, I want only to lay before you six proposals that I am convinced are supported by millions of Catholics who have no voice in the current situation.

1. Do not keep silent: By keeping silent in the face of so many serious grievances, you taint yourselves with guilt. When you feel that certain laws, directives and measures are counterproductive, you should say this in public. Send Rome not professions of your devotion, but rather calls for reform!

2. Set about reform: Too many in the church and in the episcopate complain about Rome, but do nothing themselves. When people no longer attend church in a diocese, when the ministry

bears little fruit, when the public is kept in ignorance about the needs of the world, when ecumenical co-operation is reduced to a minimum, then the blame cannot simply be shoved off on Rome. Whether bishop, priest, layman or laywoman – everyone can do something for the renewal of the church within his own sphere of influence, be it large or small. Many of the great achievements that have occurred in the individual parishes and in the church at large owe their origin to the initiative of an individual or a small group. As bishops, you should support such initiatives and, especially given the present situation, you should respond to the just complaints of the faithful.

3. Act in a collegial way: After heated debate and against the persistent opposition of the Curia, the Second Vatican Council decreed the collegiality of the pope and the bishops. It did so in the sense of the Acts of the Apostles, in which Peter did not act alone without the college of the apostles. In the post-conciliar era, however, the pope and the Curia have ignored this decree. Just two years after the council, Pope Paul VI issued his encyclical defending the controversial celibacy law without the slightest consultation of the bishops. Since then, papal politics and the papal magisterium have continued to act in the old, uncollegial fashion. Even in liturgical matters, the pope rules as an autocrat over and against the bishops. He is happy to surround himself with them as long as they are nothing more than stage extras with neither voices nor voting rights. This is why, venerable bishops, you should not act for yourselves alone, but rather in the community of the other bishops, of the priests and of the men and women who make up the church.

4. Unconditional obedience is owed to God alone: Although at your episcopal consecration you had to take an oath of unconditional obedience to the pope, you know that unconditional obedience can never be paid to any human authority; it is due to God alone. For this reason, you should not feel impeded by your oath to speak the truth about the current crisis facing the church, your diocese and your country. Your model should be the apostle Paul, who dared to oppose Peter “to his face since he was manifestly in the wrong”! (*Galatians 2:11*). Pressuring the Roman authorities in the spirit of Christian fraternity can be permissible and even necessary when they fail to live up to the spirit of the Gospel and its mission. The use of the vernacular in the liturgy, the changes in the regulations governing mixed marriages, the affirmation of tolerance, democracy and human rights, the opening up of an ecumenical approach, and the many other reforms of Vatican II were only achieved because of tenacious pressure from below.

5. Work for regional solutions: The Vatican has frequently turned a deaf ear to the well-founded demands of the episcopate, the priests and the laity. This is all the more reason for seeking wise regional solutions. As you are well aware, the rule of celibacy, which was inherited from the Middle Ages, represents a particularly delicate problem. In the context of today’s clerical abuse scandal, the practice has been increasingly called into question. Against the expressed will of Rome, a change would appear hardly possible; yet this is no reason for passive resignation. When a priest, after mature consideration, wishes to marry, there is no reason why he must automatically resign his office when his bishop and his parish choose to stand behind him. Individual episcopal conferences could take the lead with regional solutions. It would be better, however, to seek a solution for the whole church, therefore:

6. Call for a council: Just as the achievement of liturgical reform, religious freedom, ecumenism and inter-religious dialogue required an ecumenical council, so now a council is needed to solve the dramatically escalating problems calling for reform. In the century before the Reformation, the Council of Constance decreed that councils should be held every five

years. Yet the Roman Curia successfully managed to circumvent this ruling. There is no question that the Curia, fearing a limitation of its power, would do everything in its power to prevent a council coming together in the present situation. Thus it is up to you to push through the calling of a council or at least a representative assembly of bishops.

With the church in deep crisis, this is my appeal to you, venerable bishops: Put to use the episcopal authority that was reaffirmed by the Second Vatican Council. In this urgent situation, the eyes of the world turn to you. Innumerable people have lost their trust in the Catholic Church. Only by openly and honestly reckoning with these problems and resolutely carrying out needed reforms can their trust be regained. With all due respect, I beg you to do your part – together with your fellow bishops as far as possible, but also alone if necessary – in apostolic “fearlessness” (*Acts 4:29, 31*). Give your faithful signs of hope and encouragement and give our church a perspective for the future.

With warm greetings in the community of the Christian faith,

Yours, Hans Küng – (New York Times Syndicate) © Hans Küng

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